

For the love of lighting

Passion breeds success for a business owner who transformed his lighting service into a full-time gig.

TOMMY HERREN HAD ALMOST thrown in the towel when he finally saw the light. He was frustrated with the direction his landscape business was headed. But he knew he loved doing landscape lighting. That's when the big idea struck. He could turn that service into a full-time career.

Herren, now "head geek" (owner) of The Lighting Geek in Antelope, CA, says he hasn't looked back since. It's what he was meant to do.

"I think the biggest thing is having a passion for your work," he says. "People see through it if you're just going through the motions to do what you can to make money. If you're truly sincere about what you're doing, and not just putting on an act, you will succeed."

STEPS TOWARD SUCCESS

Early on, Herren says, there were several manufacturers who helped him. One of the first things he recommends to other contractors starting out is to look for support.

"Find a brand you believe in, go to that sales rep and tell them you're starting this service," he suggests. "There's a lot more support in this segment than people realize."

The second step, says Herren, is to get a demo kit. "It doesn't have to be anything fancy. It could even be things you already have, such as used fixtures that need to be repaired. The power behind a demo kit is proving to a client what you can do."

Use the power of light to draw in your customers, Herren continues. "One thing I learned very early on is that it's difficult to talk about a lighting plan and get your clients to picture it in their heads the way you do, especially if it's something they've never seen before. You need to show them."

That's also why photography is such a powerful tool in the lighting industry, says Herren. He suggests purchasing a decent camera and building a portfolio of work to show new clients.



Herren reveals the finished project at night for full effect.

THE JOURNEY

Herren views the sales process as a journey, and he walks clients through the lighting possibilities. That's why he says the No. 1 mistake he's witnessed new contractors make is leaving a catalog behind.

"That's the first thing new guys do, and it's a big mistake," he says. "It's like handing someone a catalog of cars and saying 'Go pick one.' They hired you because they don't know anything about lighting, and they don't know what's best or what they want."

Also part of the journey is a successful marketing plan. Herren says too often, contractors' biggest marketing mistakes center on the fact they don't know their clients. He suggests learning the demographic you're looking to reach before making any major marketing efforts.

The first year he invested everything he made into marketing. "You can't do it by only word of mouth," he says. "Word of mouth is when you're doing a lot of work and people keep talking, but what happens when you aren't doing a lot of work anymore? I can't tell you how many people have fallen hard in these hard times because they relied on word of mouth alone."

Herren says when the job's complete, he makes a big deal out of the reveal, and that has resulted in a lot of happy clients and good referrals, too. He brings the clients outside in the dark and presses a button to light up the whole scene.

"What happens next I call the 'OMG Factor,'" says Herren. "Their yard being done perfectly is emotional for the client. That's one of my favorite moments."

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

>> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY NAME:

The Lighting Geek

HEADQUARTERS:

Antelope, CA

WHY LIGHTING?

"A film exec once said you can make a movie without actors, but you can't make it without lighting. Without lighting, you can't do anything. It's more than the icing on the cake. It's a necessity."

INITIAL INVESTMENT:

"For around \$1,500 you could have the tools — outside of marketing — to start this service. A voltmeter, wire strippers, four-in-one screwdriver, wire staples, knee pads, a good flashlight, a good headlight, and a demo kit are the must-haves to start out with."

INVESTMENT RECOUP TIME:

"The tools could be recouped in one job. But there's a lot more to growing the service."

WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT:

"It's emotional."