



CUSTOMER SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

To stay ahead of the curve, companies are making a stronger push to build on their customer foundation.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

When consumers are struggling to pay the bills, convincing them to pony up for services they view as extra is not easy. So instead of striving to attract new clients, landscape companies are working harder to solidify their current client base, relying on customer satisfaction to keep their cash flowing. Some companies, like these, have retained as much as 76% to 100% of their clients over the last year. Here's why.

FACE TIME

"It's easier to keep a customer than to go out and find another one," says Russell Simpler, managing partner at Smith Lawn and Tree, Fort Worth, TX. Simpler says he's made a larger effort in 2011 to visit job sites weekly or monthly.

"The more you show your face and the more you have a relationship with someone, the less likely it is they're going to switch, even if someone offers a better price," he explains.

John Newman, president of Classic Landscapes Inc., Hampton, GA, also puts in monthly face time with clients. "You can't manage a property if you don't visit it," he says. "We all realize the economy's tight. Let's make sure we don't



take our existing clients for granted.” Newman’s efforts are paying off, so much so that he expects his revenue to double this year.

Curtis Depner, president and chief executive officer of Landscape Services and Management (LSM), Richmond, IL, says he stays ahead of the competition by being aggressive.

If you can retain customers, Depner says, “It’s a lot less work going forward.” Communicating with his customers and ensuring their satisfaction is most important of all to him, he says. “You don’t want to give anybody any reason to have something bad to say about the company. Because then it’s hard to gain that new customer.”

DETAIL-ORIENTED

That’s why Newman has paid more attention to details in the last year. “In our market there aren’t other businesses that approach residential the way we do — with such detail,” he says. “Others don’t have a staff with as much training. It’s because of the relationships that we’ve been able to make with our clients that they’ve stuck with us.”

At Newman’s Classic, where 75% of the client base is residential, about 70% of the company’s focus is on design/build projects. And customers care just as much about value as they do detail, even if that means paying more.

“Are we the cheapest? No,” says Newman, but “as far as the people in our market, we’re the best value. We provide a little more detail on the front end as far as the designs are concerned.”

That may mean something as simple as installing plants that require less pruning than those provided by other companies, he says.

For Simpler at Smith Lawn and Tree, being on time and delivering on his promises are most important. Relationship building is always at the fore of his mind, he says.

Simpler also puts a premium on consistency, putting the same workers on the same properties week in and week out. It helps his business, he says, “because you just know the ins and outs of everything about it. And it shows.”

VERSATILITY HELPS

Grandville, MI-based Summit Landscape Management President Michael Verhulst is very optimistic about business this year, expecting his company’s 2011 revenue to be between \$2.5 mil-

lion and \$4.9 million. Large-scale commercial clients such as hospitals, universities and automotive companies constitute about 70% of the business.

Clients’ demands for innovation, sustainable design and professionalism — and Summit’s ability to meet them — enable Summit to remain competitive, Verhulst says.

“Whether it’s low-impact development, sustainable designs, native plants, energy conservation, or fuel alternatives, we want to be the company that can always be that one phone call,” he says.

“There is not one service that our clients require that I do not have an expert on my staff in place to handle,” he continues. “I can’t be the expert on everything, but I can be through my staff, and our clients love that.”

Because many of Summit’s clients are striving to become more sustainable, Summit is “growing greener every day,” Verhulst says. By installing LED lighting and water-conserving features, the company provides clients with services that have long-term benefits, maximizing their return on investment.

“We’re so diverse with our services, there are very few services we don’t provide,” Verhulst says.

Given the poor state of the economy and the rise of lowball bidders, retaining customers is more challenging than ever, Verhulst asserts. He has met that challenge head on by becoming more creative. That may mean anything from reducing fertilizer treatments so customers can save money, to using more affordable products. His company, for instance, saves people money by using fertilizers that last up to 28 weeks with one application.

WORDS OF WISDOM

For companies who didn’t have a high customer retention rate this year, Simpler advises, “Do what you say you’re going to do and follow through with that. Every customer I know does not like surprises at the end.”

Newman has some advice of his own: “Personally champion taking care of the customers.” And if you can’t do it, he says, find someone who can.

Newman’s company is having the best year it’s ever had, he says. “I think people are becoming more cautiously optimistic overall. I guess if everybody would quit listening to the news, we’d all be in better shape. Just get out and live life and move forward.” **LM**