

MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Denise Putnam found that she was losing cold callers by giving out her price on the phone. Now, she always meets the client first.



Giving estimates in person has helped Denise Putnam's business.

COMPANY: Hands to Work Hearts to God

HEADQUARTERS: Brighton, MI

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 3

CLIENTELE: 80% residential; 20% commercial

SERVICES: 10% installation; 10% refurbishing; 80% maintenance

DENISE PUTNAM, OWNER of Hands to Work Hearts to God in metropolitan Detroit, knows she lost potential business simply by the way she handled cold calls. So she changed her whole approach.

"Whenever I got a cold call, the first thing they always wanted to know was how much I charge per hour," says Putnam. "In the beginning, I made the mistake of telling them — and I learned the hard way that I lost most of those jobs. It was all because they were turned off by the price before I could even tell them more. I have learned to tell cold callers that I don't bid jobs that way."

Putnam says callers used to be taken aback when she told them what she charged. She says the tone of the conversation would immediately change. She realized she was losing jobs with this approach.

"They were taking what I charge hourly and multiplying it by the number of hours it would take *them* to do the work," says Putnam. "But I've been doing this a long time and am very efficient. I have all the right tools and know what I'm doing. So what could possibly take a homeowner eight hours to do might only take me two. But I wasn't even getting a chance to explain that."

Today, Putnam offers to come out and see the property free of charge and says she'll write up a quote after that free consultation. "People really appreciate this, because they're basically getting a service for free when all they called for was to get a price," she says. "I walk around the property and talk to the homeowners about their concerns. Even before I get hired, I try to give potential clients a little bit of free

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information, maybe telling them a plant isn't in the right place. This gives them a little bit of free service — and even if they don't hire me, it leaves them with a positive taste of what my business is like."

This new approach has changed her business, Putnam says.

"I used to not even be able to get my foot in the door," she explains. "Potential clients would close it before I could even go out and meet them. But by not giving out prices over the

phone anymore, I'm at least now able to get on the property — and I have a better chance at getting the job.

"It's better for me to see the project and know exactly what they need done, and it's better for the homeowners, because they're getting a little bit of service and information from me without paying anything," she adds. "Of course, I don't get every job, but I get a lot more than when I was giving out prices on the phone."

Once the consultation is complete, Putnam also advises putting together a written quote — with *everything* you're including on the quote, even if it seems minute.

"Write it all out," she urges. "Whatever you're doing — pruning, trimming, installations — put it all down. And be as specific as possible. If you're going to put in five shrubs, say that, and say what size. This way, the clients can never come back and say you didn't do what was agreed upon. It also helps the clients realize everything they're getting for their money. They might not realize all the work you were going to do, and now your price might seem more worth it. Even if it's a basic service, don't assume they'll know you're doing it. You should list everything so they see the value of what they're getting. I've found that this, too, has helped me get more jobs."

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