

MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Knowing when to pursue a lead and when to back down has been beneficial for a New Jersey landscape business owner.

DREWE SCHOENHOLTZ, OWNER of The Green Scene in Hopewell,

NJ, says there's a delicate balance between sizing people up incorrectly and what he calls "chasing the wind." Finding that balance has come with years of experience in the business. But early in his career, it lost him some jobs — and valuable time.

"One of the biggest mistakes I made in my younger years was not giving clients a fair shake or the opportunity to find out what they want. I wrote them off over the phone," admits Schoenholtz. "That can happen when you've had a few bad experiences. It sours you moving forward, and you become wary of wasting your time on jobs that aren't going to work out. You think you know what people are going to say, and that you can tell who is or isn't going to be willing to spend money. But I've learned it's not quite that simple."

Over the years, Schoenholtz says, some of the clients he expected to be low-budget ended up being some of his best. So he has learned not to judge too quickly.

Still, Schoenholtz says he's wasted time pursuing jobs that never came to fruition.

"Even today, I get a lot of calls from out of town,"

says Schoenholtz. "I used to hop in my car and drive to the lead as soon as I could. I've learned how to get a sense of what the job entails over the phone. While you never want to write off a job too quickly, you can also get a sense of whether it's worth pursuing."

Schoenholtz has learned from experience when to give potential clients a chance and when to walk away. "I've learned to ask some very important screening questions during our initial phone conversation," he explains. "I always ask, 'What are you looking to do?' 'What is your time frame?' and 'What is your budget?' I didn't used to ask this up front, and I still find that most people don't want to talk about their budget on the phone. But I always explain that I'm just trying to get the best sense of what they want to accomplish. When someone is very reluctant to share details, it may be a warning sign the job isn't worth pursuing."

Many landscape business owners believe they have to chase hard after leads, but Schoenholtz has learned that his time is better spent pursuing jobs that are viable. "I've learned not to waste my time chasing the wind," he says. "Time is money. It's best to get a sense

up front whether a job is worth that chase."

But that's not to say Schoenholtz wouldn't accept smaller jobs. Early on, he learned a valuable lesson.

Schoenholtz used to go door-to-door looking for work. A client he secured that way asked him to do a small tree removal project. "We agreed that I would do it on a certain date for \$200," remembers Schoenholtz. "I showed up when I said I would, and charged the amount I originally set. The client was impressed. He said most people don't show up when they say they will, don't do the work they set out to do, and then charge more in the end."

The client then inquired about a small job of planting some bushes. Again, Schoenholtz showed up when he said he would, performed the job, and charged what he'd said he would charge.

"The client then told me that those first two jobs were an interview and he was ready to give me my real job," recalls Schoenholtz. "It was an \$85,000 job. This was more than 30 years ago, so that was a really big job. It was the perfect example of not writing a job off too soon."

Over the years, Schoenholtz says, "I've tried to keep that lesson with me as I look for the right balance in pursuing leads."

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



Drewe Schoenholtz learned early on not to judge potential clients too quickly.

COMPANY: The Green Scene

HEADQUARTERS: Hopewell, NJ

YEAR FOUNDED: 1974

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 14

SERVICE BREAKDOWN: 50% garden construction (hardscaping, walls, walkways, pergolas, etc.); 35% landscaping; 10% trees; 5% koi ponds

CLIENT BREAKDOWN: 80% residential; 10% commercial; 10% industrial