



## When offering options, less is more

**Q** We spend too much time on concepts and revisions before we go to contract and get a deposit. How can we reduce our design time so that we can make a small profit on our drawings and shorten our sales cycle without compromising the quality of our work?

—Lenny Hartwell, New Traditions Landscaping, Fredericksburg, Va.

**A** First, check out my June column ([goo.gl/E9uW7](http://goo.gl/E9uW7)), where I discuss how to save time by creating an unbiddable master plan.

Believe it or not, one of the best things that you can do for yourself and your clients is to limit the amount of choices they have when it comes to their landscape designs. I know this sounds counterintuitive, but hear me out.

In landscape architecture school I was taught to provide clients with three concept plans so I could involve them in the design process, exploring different ideas and options. This process still makes sense on larger scale projects, but in the fast-paced world of landscape design/build you need to take charge of the design process quickly, keep your clients focused and reduce the amount of choices they have, not increase them.

Before you start throwing your T-squares or laptops at me, let me explain. As much as we all would like to give our clients hundreds of ideas to help them make decisions, the reality is that the more options you give someone, the harder it is for him or her to make a choice. Giving multiple options is especially unproductive in landscape design/build because our process needs momentum to succeed. Anything that slows it down, or causes the client to think too much, opens the door not just to competition, but to frustration and lack of confidence that can easily turn a motivated client into a canceled project.

When I first started in the business I always gave my clients three concepts to choose from. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and theoretic-

ally, it made sense. The problem was that clients wouldn't just pick A, B or C; invariably they would pick ideas from each plan requiring me to go back to the drawing board and come up with plan D. This would be OK if it stopped here. Unfortunately it didn't. A few weeks later I would return with plan D. After this presentation the client began to realize what I already knew—it was a bad design. Since I opened the door to “client input,” the homeowner now struggled choosing from four concepts. So after reviewing plans A, B, C and D, I would return a few weeks later with concept plans E, F, G and H. (I actually had a client that made me do so many revisions that we made it through the entire alphabet!) Oddly enough, after weeks and months of going through these revisions, what typically happens is that the clients return to your original design because they realize it's truly the best layout. Unfortunately, you have wasted so much time, the project can't start for several months, and both you and your clients have lost their initial excitement and enthusiasm.

Here's what you need to do. Take a cue from the movie “Nothing in Common” starring Tom Hanks and Jackie Gleason. Hanks' character worked for a high-powered advertising agency. In one scene he was making a pitch to potentially his biggest client, the president of a major airline. After a wonderful presentation the client looked at him, paused and said, “Do you have any other ideas?” Without missing a beat he responded, “Yes we do, but this is our best one and we're going with it.”

Sheer brilliance!

So, Lenny, that's exactly what I want you to do on your next project. Although you may have developed several different concepts, only present your favorite one.

Instead of leaving the meeting frustrated with a month's full of revisions to do, you'll leave with a signed contract and your client's confidence.

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