

MARKET WATCH

DESIGN/BUILD

Fostering feedback

Client advisory boards provide business owners an outside perspective. *By* EMILY SCHAPPACHER

Jeffrey Scott cuts right to the chase. “Clients are always analyzing your company,” says the Green Industry consultant. “As the center of your business, they experience the good and the bad of what your company has to offer, and they have already formulated an opinion, whether you know it or not.”

To find out what these opinions are—and to glean a lot of other invaluable information at the same time—some business owners are turning to client advisory boards. Members of a client advisory board are chosen by the business owner to meet together and share their perspectives about the parts of a company that work, the parts that don’t and the parts that could be improved. The meetings can also be a

good opportunity to test new strategies, products, marketing initiatives and services on a captive audience that’s there to give honest, straightforward feedback.

Depending on a business’ goals and resources, client advisory boards can take on a variety of forms. Some meet multiple times a year, some meet only once. Some are formal affairs with many participants and others take place with three or four people over a casual lunch. Scott also describes three different ways to lead client advisory boards—one type is led by a facilitator without the business owner present, another is led by both the facilitator and the business owner, and the third is led by the business owner alone. But despite the structure, there are some key steps to follow to ensure the

meeting is an effective use of time that will benefit both the business and the client in the long run.

“A client advisory board is an idea you can execute immediately and have an immediate impact on the bottom line,” says Scott. “You get complete clarity from a sales, marketing and customer service perspective.”

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—Jeffrey Scott



CHOOSING THE RIGHT CLIENTS

One of the first steps to a successful client advisory board is choosing the right clients to participate. Glenn Bonick, owner of Bonick Landscaping in Dallas, conducted a client advisory board meeting in March. His goal was to generate as much feedback as possible, and Bonick chose six individuals that represented a thorough sampling of his client base to participate. He also made sure to choose clients he had good experiences with in the past to receive constructive criticism rather than complaints.

“You don’t want to get all males or all females, or all people from the same income bracket. A cross-section of customers tends to feed off of each other,” Bonick says. “You also don’t want it to



be a bitch session, so you don't want to bring in clients who are disgruntled. You want people who are generally pleased with the process so they will give honest, helpful feedback."

Like Bonick, many business owners strive to select a fair representation of their clientele for advisory boards—a mixture of new and old residential and commercial clients who are both men and women of diverse ages. But Scott says an even better approach is to gather the type of customer business owners want more of. By understanding what these ideal clients want and need, the company has a better chance of attracting more of them. Also, these clients typically have more interaction with various departments within the company, so they tend to have more opinions to share.

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—Glenn Bonick



"You want to target the most comprehensive clients that make you the most money," Scott says. "The clients who use the most services also see the most mistakes, such as when handoffs within the company don't work. The client often becomes the victim of that."

Bonick says his experience with the client advisory board made the good relationships he already had with the participants even better. He plans to host another advisory board in the fall, and continue to host one or two per year with different groups of people each time.

"Since the event, some have called me up just to see how I'm doing," Bonick says. "That really shocked me that people were that interested in our business and our success."

Scott agrees it's a good idea to review the list of participants and consider inviting

new clients before each board meeting. Not only will this diversity ensure fresh perspectives, but, as company strategies change over time, so may the ideal client. Depending on the goal of the advisory board, some clients may be a better fit than others at different times.

As for compensation, Scott says it's not necessary. He suggests holding the advisory board over a nice meal, ideally at a restaurant that's conveniently accessible by all participants. Holding the meeting over food tends to loosen people up and get them talking, Scott says, and the free meal is the business owner's way of thanking the clients for their participation.

"It's in the clients' interest to be there because they want you to be doing a better job," Scott says. "If they are not willing to show up or will only come for money, it indicates that you don't have a great relationship with them and you have a bigger problem."

ASKING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Another consideration for a successful client advisory board is asking the right questions to get the most useful feedback. This is when it can come in handy to have a third-party professional moderate the meeting and ask the questions the business owner may not feel comfortable asking. Scott has done this for at least 20 landscape companies and says this is when he often gets the most candid feedback and a true picture of what's really going on inside the business from the customer's point of view.

"Asking the right questions means asking the tough questions," says Scott. "Questions business owners might be embarrassed to hear the answers to."

Kevin Cryan, president of Cryan Landscape Contractors in Seekonk, Mass., hired Scott to lead a client advisory board in 2012. The information Scott obtained from the group was a "breath of fresh air" for Cryan. It reinforced things he already suspected, while shining a light on issues he never would have known about. For example, he never expected one client, a subcontractor, to say that his favorite thing

"This is another way to work on your business instead of in it."

—Kevin Cryan



about Cryan Landscape Contractors is receiving an invoice quickly so he can, in turn, bill his clients sooner. Another insight: Cryan had suspected he was too involved in the day-to-day operations of the company and that he needed to trust his employees to have more client interaction, a thought that was confirmed by the advisory board.

Cryan also was pleased to hear that his clients notice and appreciate the different ways his company supports the local community, like sponsoring tee-ball teams and golf tournaments, and working with United Way, the Rotary Club and the YMCA.

"That's not why we do it, but sometimes you think you don't get any credit for community involvement," Cryan says. "So it was cool that the customers actually mentioned it, know we are involved and that they like that."

Both Bonick and Cryan say they invested just a few hours of time and less than \$1,500 for a client advisory board meeting, including the consultant fee and the meal. And they agree it was an inexpensive investment for the information they gleaned. Both men also agree the benefits have since infiltrated their companies, allowing them to provide better direction and leadership for their employees and better service and experiences for all of their customers.

"This is another way to work on your business instead of in it," Cryan says. "A lot of owners struggle with taking time to work on their business because they are busy putting out fires. But you have to work on your business to prevent those fires in the first place."

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

MAINTENANCE

A 'fair' shot at a second chance

How Fairhaven Lawn Care, a social enterprise business, turns the homeless into skilled, productive employees. *By JONATHAN KATZ*

In 2008, Fairhaven Lawn Care began operating in central Ohio with a modest goal to serve about a dozen customers. Today, the company provides landscape maintenance services to approximately 45 customers. But Fairhaven isn't your typical landscape success story. Based in Lancaster, Ohio, about 30 miles southeast of Columbus, Fairhaven is a social enterprise business launched by Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio to help its homeless clients.

The company currently employs a crew of five workers from the agency's shelter. Fairhaven is the brainchild of Eddie Rapp, director of the company and Lutheran Social Services. Rapp decided that instead of using outside contractors to manage landscaping services for Lutheran Social Services' properties, he would hire clients to do the work.

"We're kind of building their lives back up, but at the same time producing a product and a business," Rapp says.

Fairhaven is a for-profit business under the umbrella of the nonprofit agency. This means any profits are invested back into the agency's nonprofit programs. After Rapp decided to start the company, he hired an experienced landscape professional to supervise and train the staff. Prospective employees endure multiple rounds of interviews and background checks before they're hired. Once they're hired, the company spends 10 to 20 hours training each employee on all pieces of equipment, Rapp says.

While the company's challenges are somewhat unique, the basic tenets of success remain the same: present an appealing image with a strong marketing message and quality service.

"The perception of homeless people is not good, so the first two-and-a-half years we were trying to prove ourselves," Rapp recalls. "After a while, people would drive by a property and see our truck and trailer and say, 'Wow, that looks great.' Plus, there's the selling point of this business being a way to give back."

Performing a charitable service without requesting donations is another selling point for the company, Rapp says. People don't have to wonder where their money is going. "A lot of people are hesitant to donate to charities," Rapp says. "They want to know where their \$100 is going. We can tell them that if they don't want to donate \$100, then hire us."

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About 80 percent of Fairhaven's customers are commercial properties. The remaining sites are residential properties.

THE SCREENING PROCESS

The employees who work on these properties come from various backgrounds. Some Fairhaven Lawn Care workers are former factory employees who were laid off during the recession. Other crew members are younger employees with limited job skills. Many Lutheran Social Services clients struggle with drug and mental health problems as well.

The company interviews all applicants from the Lutheran Social Services homeless shelter. The process serves the dual purpose of teaching the program clients interviewing skills while assessing their qualifications. Clients who pass the initial interview earn a follow-up meeting. Once they receive a job offer, Fairhaven conducts a final interview and

then performs a background check and drug testing, Rapp says. "We run it as an official business, and part of the rationale behind that is we want employees to hopefully in six months or so leave and go to a better job, and we want to teach them the skills."

Lutheran Social Services continues to work with clients who don't get the job so they can improve interviewing skills, resumes or other job search skills for future employment.

AN EARLY START

Employees who make the cut will start working for Fairhaven as early as late February or the beginning of March. Unlike traditional landscape contractors in its area that typically begin working



Fairhaven Lawn Care is a for-profit landscape maintenance business under the umbrella of a nonprofit agency.

in April, Fairhaven starts earlier to ease new employees into the rigorous work environment. The new hires may work 10 to 20 hours the first few months before progressing to a full 40- to 50-hour workweek.

During the training process, workers learn how to operate zero-turn mowers, trimmers, edgers and equipment. They also learn how to trim shrubs and identify perennials and annuals. At the same time, the company teaches employees many basic life skills, such as managing their finances after they're paid.

Fairhaven employees may work for the company for up to a year before they're expected to find work elsewhere. About 10 to 15 former Fairhaven employees have moved on to larger landscape companies. Two ex-employees returned to school to earn turf management degrees. Fairhaven even has referred employees to competing landscape contractors, Rapp says.

Other employees have taken jobs at large retail outlets, such as Home Depot and Lowe's, or supervisory positions at restaurants, such as Subway. As for the company's overall success, Rapp says Fairhaven has made just enough to recoup its capital investments. In the next two years, he expects to be more profitable. But the company's goal is to serve a greater purpose that looks far beyond profitability, Rapp notes.

"Being a social enterprise, our goal is to employ as many of our clients as we can," Rapp says. "We don't want to lose money, but we're not in it to be a huge, booming business. If we can employ our clients and teach them the skills they need and move them on, that's our ultimate social goal."

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.



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LAWN/TREE CARE

Grub talk

The BugDoc answers readers' grub questions. *By DAVE SHETLAR, PH.D.*

Editor's note: In July, Dave "the BugDoc" Shetlar, Ph.D., addressed preventive and curative grub control in a webinar presented by Landscape Management and sponsored by Valent Professional Products. Here's a bit of Q&A between Shetlar and participants on this hot topic.

Q In Zone 9 do we really need to be concerned with grubs?
—participant from South Carolina

A Say what? Some of the worst grub damage I've seen has been in Texas and Florida. In these cases, not only were the grubs damaging the turf but the armadillos and hogs were tilling the turf. Yes, I've seen some pretty "good" grub infestations on Hilton Head Island, but where mole crickets were being controlled, the grubs had a difficult time surviving. On a couple of golf courses, it wasn't the actual grub damage, but the animal digging that was the problem.

Q How typical is it to get grubs in shaded areas?
—participant from Illinois

A Entomologists often have stated that shaded turf is less at risk for grub infestations. However, no one told the grubs this! If you have dense turf with lots of organic matter, there will be a grub that "appreciates" this habitat. We are seeing Oriental beetles and Asiatic garden beetle grubs in some pretty dense shade.

Q How do you recommend dealing with recurring grub problems?
—participant from New York

A Mike Villani, Ph.D., did some studies back in the 1990s where crews surveyed white grub infestation in the Syracuse, N.Y., area. What they found was simple: If you had a damaging grub population last year, you would be at an approximate 80 percent chance of repeating it the following year.

I highly recommend keeping records of insect activity. Post a big map of your operating area and have your specialists put in a colored pin for each time they find a grub, billbug or chinch bug problem. Soon, you will see clusters of these pins in certain neighborhoods. These would be the neighborhoods that you would concentrate on selling preventive treatments.

Shetlar is associate professor of landscape entomology at Ohio State.

» WEB EXTRA

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IRRIGATION

Decoding irrigation certifications

Determine which credentials may be good additions for your business.

By MIKE TEMPLE, CGIA, CIC, CID, CLIA, CLWM

For a professional landscape contractor looking to expand, one strategy is to earn a professional certification.

With so many choices, it's often difficult to determine which certifications are right for you. For example, the Irrigation Association's (IA's) Select Certified program offers four certification programs designed specifically for landscape professionals: certified irrigation contractor, certified landscape irrigation auditor, certified golf irrigation auditor and certified landscape water manager. There's also the certified irrigation system designer. Let's decode these options:

Certified irrigation contractor (CIC):

The CIC is targeted to business owners and managers who install and operate irrigation systems. CICs must demonstrate knowledge of hydraulics, precipitation rates, distribution uniformity, sprinkler spacing, controller operation and safety requirements. They also must show a general understanding of irrigation plans and specifications and business basics.

Certified landscape irrigation auditor (CLIA) and certified golf irrigation auditor (CGIA):

The CLIA and CGIA certifications are intended for those involved in collecting site data, making maintenance recommendations and performing minor repairs to quantify turf irrigation water use on landscapes and golf courses. CLIAs and CGIAs determine irrigation uniformity and efficiency and develop basic irrigation schedules.

Certified landscape water manager (CLWM):

The CLWM certification is designed for those who manage the

irrigation system.

This program builds on the skills learned in the CLIA and CGIA programs and details how to fine-tune the irrigation schedule to apply the optimum amount of water to the landscape without over watering. It also covers the financial impacts of system improvements to evaluate the benefits of water usage reduction versus the cost of the system improvements.



Mike Temple

Certified irrigation designer (CID):

CID certification offers a more advanced level of certification and goes into greater detail on all aspects of irrigation system design. Topics covered include sprinkler/pump selection, calculation of water windows, sizing of water supplies and system hydraulics.

On top of the existing programs, IA is developing a new entry-level certified irrigation technician (CIT) program, which addresses the basics of irrigation system maintenance and troubleshooting. Exams for the new CIT program will be available for the first time at the 2013 Irrigation Show & Education Conference, which takes place Nov. 4-8, in Austin, Texas. Computer-based testing will be available beginning Dec. 1. **LM**

Temple is owner of Irrigation Innovations in Waxhaw, N.C., and serves as chair of the Irrigation Association certification board.