

Service relief

Jerry McKay sheds light on how hiring a lighting service tech freed his team from the burden of service calls. *By SARAH PFLEDDERER*

When eight landscape lighting professionals gathered for The Lighting Summit 2014, hosted by McKay Landscape Lighting Jan. 22-23 in Omaha, Neb., their conversations went beyond manufacturer preferences and installation methods.

In fact, the conference touched on none of that. Somewhere between the peer-to-peer networking, chatter about marketing techniques and a tour of McKay's facility and projects, Jerry McKay brought up a topic that prompted every head to nod in agreement.

"Service sometimes gets in the way of your business," the owner of McKay Landscape Lighting said, and recalled when it was worst for his company.

It was 17 years ago, when McKay Landscape Lighting was a \$250,000 company and had two two-man crews.

"We got so many service calls in the early days," McKay said. His employees struggled to keep up on installations and existing customers were disgruntled with slow response times.

McKay's solution: Delegate the service jobs to a single person, a service tech.



McKay Landscape Lighting has two service techs on staff.

Now a \$1 million to \$2 million company with two service techs, McKay said the company's service department reels in 25 percent of its annual revenue.

PREPARING FOR THE HIRE

As with any move that will grow a company, there are costs associated with forming a tech position. McKay said he looked at it as "creating another profit center."

Thorough planning, he adds, is key to onboarding a service tech.

Before hiring, map out a job description that addresses what that person will be doing in their downtime, such as taking inventory, cleaning the shop or doing small installs and upgrades, because they won't be busy with service calls 40 hours per week at first—that will come later, McKay said.

In terms of investing in the position, McKay purchased a new truck, toolboxes, a ladder rack and a surplus of lighting supplies—bulbs, wires, transformers, etc.—to fill the vehicle.

"It's gotta be like Noah's ark," McKay said. "He's gotta have a couple of everything."

It's equally important to equip techs with information, he said. Give them access to job histories, such as notes on the original install, any add-ons and past service calls. McKay's techs have netbooks that allow them to log in remotely to access customers' job histories.

THE IDEAL CANDIDATE

Hiring a service tech is "an art," McKay

The Ticker: DESIGN/BUILD

The **American Society of Landscape Architects** unveiled findings from its 2014 Residential Landscape Architecture Trends Survey, which showed lighting, low-maintenance landscapes and native plants to be in demand. The category of gardens and landscaped spaces received a 94 percent rating as somewhat or very popular.

Outdoor living spaces were second most popular at 92 percent. Visit ow.ly/ubWwX for the full results.

John Deere debuted its 4 Family of compact utility tractors. The units, with Final Tier 4 engines, will hit dealerships in April.



Lighting professionals exchange their companies' marketing materials at The Lighting Summit 2014.

said. Their mindset is everything and it must strike a balance between being detail orientated and quick.

Not all installers, for example, are good for service because of their extreme attention to detail. They may want to check every fixture on a project, but that's not what the customer called them for, McKay said.

On the other hand, a service tech must be meticulous enough to real-ize offsets in a system that need to be addressed, such as if a timer is incorrect.

Service techs must be focused on fixing only the problem they're called for but have the communication skills to suggest other enhancements to clients, McKay adds.

"You want that person within your business to have good people skills," he said. "It's hard to have a service tech that doesn't speak well in front of clients."

KNOWING WHEN TO MAKE THE JUMP

McKay said most business owners will know inherently when it's time to boost their service department by adding a tech. Typically, he says, it's when clients are dissatisfied or service calls are slowing down your installation processes.

One of the most difficult parts of that decision is overcoming the financial nervousness of adding a new position, McKay said. But business owners must realize service is a make-it-

or break-it component of any business, he said.

"Without it, you wouldn't have a business," he said. "Either you embrace it and make a good ROI or it will sink your business."

For some perspective, McKay

returned to the bullet point that service calls make up a quarter of his company's revenue. That cash flow alone is twice the annual revenue of the landscape company he sold in 1998.

"That's a pretty strong ROI statement," McKay said.



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