



PROFITING FROM DESIGN

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When do you disclose design fees?

Q Do you tell clients on the initial phone call that you charge a design fee for your drawings or do you wait until you meet with them?

A My short answer is yes and no. How's that for hedging?

When a client initially calls I use a screening process to determine if he or she is a good fit for me and my company. In other words, I don't just get the name, address and phone number and set up an appointment without doing my due diligence. This means I need to find out what the word "landscape" means to the person before I decide if it makes sense to meet. As many of you know "landscape" means many different things. That's why it's so important to screen customers and find out what their definitions are. Do they want landscape maintenance or landscape construction; hardscaping or plantings; lawn care or a complete property overhaul?

If the caller meets my criteria and sounds like he or she is a solid design/build prospect I'll set up an appointment at his or her home. I have no desire to discuss design fees on the phone because my goal is to have a face-to-face meeting. Prematurely discussing design fees allows the caller to say "thanks but no thanks."

I believe we should provide qualified clients with complimentary one-hour meetings at their homes with no strings attached. This meeting is your opportunity to show them who you are, what you can do for them and why they should work with you instead of your competitors. Regardless of how much money you've spent on marketing and advertising to create a company image, there's still nothing like an in-person meeting. If done correctly, these meetings will give the homeowners the confidence and assurances to decide your company is the right fit for them.

Therefore, if you discuss design fees on the phone or use them as a qualifier, you're going to lose the opportunity to get in front of many good clients. There are two reasons for this. First, since your prospects

have very little time invested in you it's easy for them to hang up once they hear "design fee," especially when many companies are telling them their designs are free. Secondly, landscape plans come in all shapes and sizes—from notepad sketches to computer generated, color-rendered master plans. If you can't set a meeting to show them the type of quality plans you provide, they'll assume a plan is a plan and you'll be just the same as everyone else. On the other hand, if you do meet with them, you can show them a sample drawing from another project to help them understand why they need a design and why there's a cost associated with it—unless you're the notepad-design guy. Then you're on your own.

OK, this all sounds great, but what if a customer directly asks you on the phone if you charge a design fee? Worry not. Here's a little trade secret to help you with those prequalified customers who ask about design fees as their way of qualifying you, possibly deciding right then and there they don't want to meet. Honesty is still your best policy, but there's nothing wrong with spinning your response a little bit.

When a prospect asks simply say, "Yes, there is, but there's no cost for me to come out and meet with you to discuss your project." What you've done is taken away the fear of being obligated to hire you at that first meeting. If you want to pour it on a little thicker, explain the reason there's no charge for the initial consultation is it's important customers feel comfortable with whomever they decide to work with, whether it's you or another company.

Finally, I give you the "yes" explanation to your question. Always discuss design fees with unqualified customers who are not a good fit for your company. If you just know a caller is going to be a complete waste of your time, this is where you use the design fee as a way to essentially scare them off as opposed to telling them they don't have enough money. In the sales world we just say they've been "successfully eliminated."

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.