

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

INCORPORATING LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Certifying the industry

More landscapers are becoming certified, to raise the industry standards, boost their image, and in some cases, win bids.

■ Certification of landscape professionals is gaining ground throughout the green industry.

The benefits of certification are many, say the various directors of both state and national landscape associations, and can include better pay for a certified employee and more customers for the company that advertises its workers as certified. Crew certification can also grant a company exclusive bidding rights to certain projects, which is something many in the industry want to see made a standard practice.

Certification testing brings all the land-

scaping "tools" together. It helps the professional see what kind of progress he's made, and makes sense of all the "stuff" he's learned over the years. And in an industry that's had more than its share of mavericks, certification can be a step forward in establishing uniform professional standards coast-to-coast.

A handful of state and professional landscape associations offer certification programs. In February, the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) offers its first certification exam for business management, which will be available to 50 people. The curricula includes business planning, accounting, management, health safety and human resources, production and horticulture, law, sales, marketing, communications and public relations.

Other certification programs are offered by the Irrigation Association (IA), Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS), Florida Nursery Growers

Association (FNGA), and the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

State landscape associations now offering programs include Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, Texas and Washington. The Maryland/Washington D.C./Virginia association has a program for nursery growers only, but is considering whether to copy the California plan for contractors.

The ALCA program—Gary Thornton, of Thornton Gardens, Maineville, Ohio, is one of the leaders of the ALCA certification program. He says the association wants to improve the public image of both the association and the landscaping industry. "The obvious secondary benefit," says Thornton, "is to be able to qualify a person as a professional in the minds of others in industry and potentially, to a customer."

The ALCA program focuses on persons in the owner/manager/branch manger categories. Thornton says ALCA wants to cooperate with state associations that already

Green industry certification programs

Organization	Title	Fee	Description
ALCA (703) 620-6363	Certified Landscape Professional	\$225, members	400 multiple-choice questions designed for owners, managers or branch managers.
American Landscape Horticulture Assoc. (805) 498-6916	Certified Landscape Professional	N/A	For those above the technician level; two-year certification; continuing education required.
Arizona Landscape Contractors Assoc. 602) 468-9336	Certified Landscape Professional	workshops, \$30 exam, \$60	A 12-month program covering numerous skills, including: equipment operation; plant identification; safety; chemical application regulations, pest management.
California Landscape Contractors Assoc. (916) 448-2522	Certified Landscape Technician	\$250/\$175 \$50 discount for members	Not a substitute for the state's C-27 license. Three segments: construction; maintenance; and irrigation.
International Society of Arboriculture (217) 355-9411	Certified Arborist	\$100, members \$150, non-members	Includes tree nutrition and fertilization; installation; tree biology; identification.
Texas Assoc. of Landscape Contractors (800) 832-6934	Certified Landscape Professional	\$100, members \$300, non-members	Covers 20 areas of landscaping, including plant selection, hardscaping; blueprints; landscaping for resource efficiency and environmental safety.

Note: Oregon and Washington have begun programs modeled after California's. The following states have programs for nursery certification: Arizona, Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington.

Why certify?

1. Raise industry standards of excellence.
2. Establish guidelines for achievement.
3. Award high levels of competence in the profession.
4. Improve worker performance by encouraging continuing education.
5. Increase the self-esteem of the worker, manager, branch manager or owner.

offer certification programs for crewmen and specialists. A 15-title list of suggested reading material is provided to prepare for the four to eight hour test. The test contains 400 multiple-choice questions.

Beth Palys of the Landscape Contractors Association of Maryland/Washington D.C./Virginia, is awaiting a vote from the association's members to approve a proposed certification program. Palys says the program would be patterned after those in other states, and would include a hands-on construction test.

Palys says that some of the impetus for a certification program is the prestige that comes with the title. "It's a way of rewarding employees, and is a sign of a person's advancement in the profession," says Palys.

An industry model—California's certification program is becoming a model for the industry, and has been adopted by the Oregon and Washington groups. Divided into nine areas, it includes a much-admired two-day, hands-on construction test and a three-part written exam.

Irrigation installation is broken into connecting controllers, wiring valves, mainline installation, and lateral installation.

Applicants need to have a 70 percent score, and need to pass all different field tests to become a certified landscape technician in one of those three areas.

Kim Heckes, program coordinator, says a growing number of companies are requiring their foremen and supervisors to become certified, and some municipalities have written the requirement into specifications for companies bidding on government projects.

Heckes believes certification gives a contractor "an edge" when bidding projects, and says certification "shows that the person has the minimum skills to construct a landscape project and work on irrigation systems."

A veteran program—The Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association's (MNLA) certification program is entering its second decade.

Amy Frankmann, director of education for the Michigan Nursery and Landscape

Association, says certification helps to "identify the most dedicated" within the industry. The program is 11 years old.



Frankman: the 'most dedicated' become certified professionals.

Frankmann says the test had a 75 percent success rate last year, which was the highest results ever. She adds that many companies that send their people use certification as a basis for pay raises.

The Arizona Landscape Contractor Association program is designed to test basic landscape skills, according to Sharon Dewey, the association's executive director. A small part of the exam is written, 90 percent is practical and hands-on.

Dewey says certification "helps boost the individual's self-esteem, which is a plus in itself."

The xeriscape portion of the Arizona program was recently awarded the Arizona Water User's Education award for its contribution to water conservation education.

The Arizona certification program is sponsored by the University of Arizona, and endorsed by the International Society of Arboriculture. The state's extension office provides the facilities for workshops, and teaching staff. Extension members also make up the advisory board.

"Our entire program is geared toward the Arizona landscape," says Judy Alexander, president of the Arizona association and landscape superintendent at the Tucson Airport Authority. "It's main

emphasis is in the desert regions. There is some high-elevation training, but not as much as we'd like."

Although the program is still new, Alexander says early results are positive. "We know that there are individuals who have benefitted by it with salary increases," she says, "and their status and position in the company has been upgraded."

"As an industry, we have heard of only one project that has specified that it wants certified people to work on the project. "We need to educate landscape architects about who we are and what we are doing. Those are the people who will specify certified."

Defining the elements—John Gillan, marketing director for the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) says the association felt that all of its members would benefit from certification. "If nothing else," says Gillan, "it would indicate a willingness of grounds managers to define the basic elements of grounds management."

The PGMS program includes instruction on consumer protection and economic protection, as well as uniform recognition and establishment of parity.

The PGMS believes certification protects potential employers, since the employer would know that a certified grounds manager had passed a peer review as to minimum knowledge and competence.

The Texas Landscape Contractors Association—as a statewide entity—is now 10 years old, and has 175 certified members, out of a total of 335 company memberships.

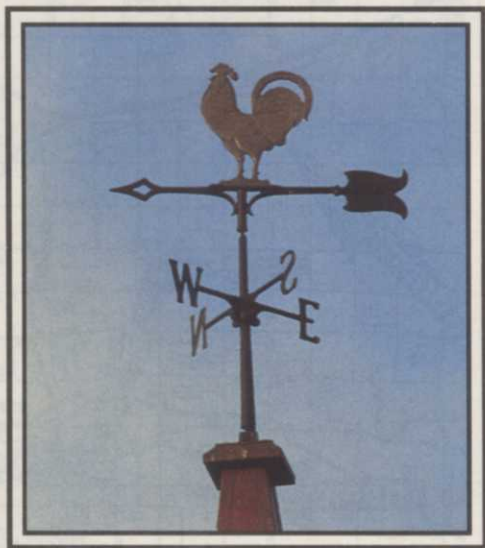


Brinkley: certification strengthens association professionalism.

"In 1988," says president-elect Larry Brinkley, "we put together a long-range plan (for the association), and that included certification. We want to 'professionalize' our businesses, and be on a higher level. During 1992 we have strived to place TALC on an even higher level of professionalism."

—Terry McIver

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Opening a branch office...

Careful planning and foresight will eliminate many of the problems posed by this type of expansion.

by Ed Wandtke

Last month, we looked at the challenges facing a company that is considering operating a business from another location. This month, we'll find out why you should consider opening a branch:

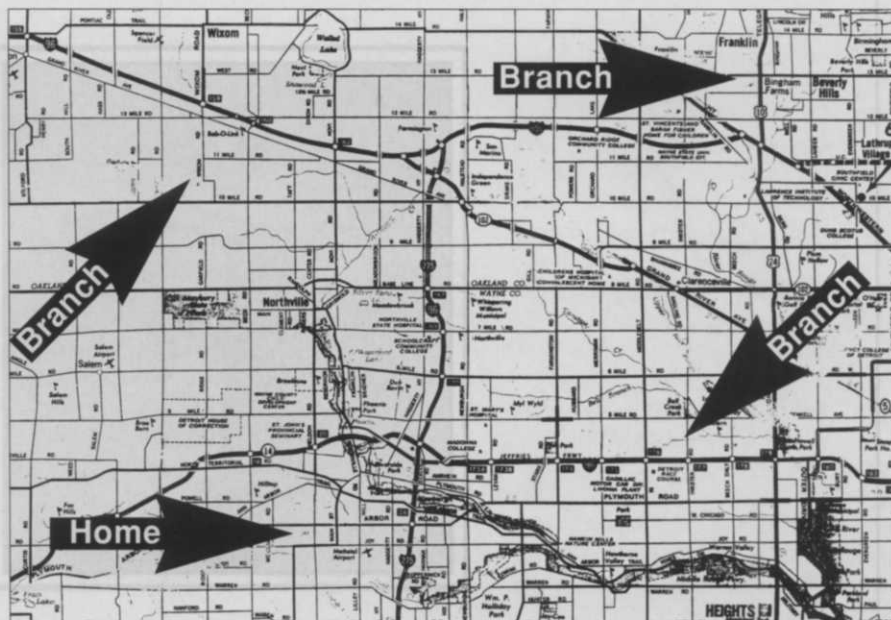
- 1) ...location, location, location...
- 2) financial considerations
- 3) operational issues, and
- 4) timing.

If business is too far from the main location, you need to determine the answers to some basic business questions.

Operational efficiency, cost savings opportunities, financial cost, customer service responsibility, and—possibly—accounting or computer operation are but some of the areas which need to be considered before the new location is chosen and opened.

Plan ahead—Often, I hear owners lament the fact that they are outgrowing the facility they have, or need to change the location because jobs are too far from their existing facility. Before opening a new branch, take the opportunity to do a market assessment: determine customer location and the most cost-efficient location to choose in order to serve those customers. In addition, you will need to find answers to the following questions:

- What size operation will initially operate out of the new location?
- What expendability should be allowed for at the new location?
- What is the market potential for the new location?
- What services will need to be available at the new location, (inventory storage, fuel, office, phones, computer, etc.)?
- Can the new location be used for both current services and future business



opportunities?

● What operational efficiencies will be achieved by opening a new branch?

By answering these questions, you will be on your way to opening a branch that will meet all current and future requirements. Anticipating growth needs for a branch location requires planning and anticipating your future expectations from the new branch.

Financial considerations—A careful review of the financial considerations of opening a branch can often determine its success or failure. Sometimes the new branch opening hinges on its financial performance to fund its existence. If this is an issue, various fixed costs will need to be covered by the business being performed at the new branch.

Questions such as these need to be answered:

- How much will fuel and other vehicle costs be reduced because of the new location?
- What will the new costs be for this additional location?
- Will the profit margin in business serviced from the new location be as good as (or better) than the other current location?

● What will the cost be to communicate and send operational and financial information to the other office?

Based on the answers to these questions, you will have some financial information to help you decide about the profitability of opening the new branch.

Operational considerations—Evaluate the methods of service delivery and customer response systems that can

BENEFITS OF HAVING A BRANCH OFFICE

1. Less travel time for employees to get to, return from, jobs.
2. Reduced vehicle and fuel costs.
3. More immediately accessible customers to assure their satisfaction with the job.
4. Chance to increase number of services offered.
5. Improved employee morale as excitement grows over possible increased individual opportunities.

be implemented at the new branch to improve customer satisfaction. The opening of a new branch is the ideal time to consider implementing new systems.

Look at how you are operating your business at your current location. This will provide opportunities for improvements.

Here are some issues which need to be looked at before opening up the new branch:

- What computer system will you choose?
- How will customer service be performed for customers at the new location?
- Who is responsible for customer service at the new branch?
- Will you offer liquid, dry or organic services from this location?

● Will you expand services beyond your old offering at this location?

● Will raw materials be drop-shipped to the branch?

● Who will handle off-loading and storage decisions when service personnel are in the field?

In answering these questions, you will need to look at the type of services which you will be offering and the experience of the personnel.

When?—The time to move into a new location is when the economics and financial benefits of a new location are very clear.

Reality has led me to suggest, though, that the off-season is the easiest time to open a new branch. Setting up a new branch during the off-season will allow flexibility in time schedules, since many employees will only be working part time.

However, opening a branch in the winter in the northern U.S. or Canada will mean that it will be idle for a few months until business really picks up in the spring. If your company can financially make it through the winter, this is the best alternative.

One admonition to the company that is short of space now: do not wait until next year to expand into a larger facility. A branch office or a satellite operation can be the most cost-efficient and effective solution to your problem.

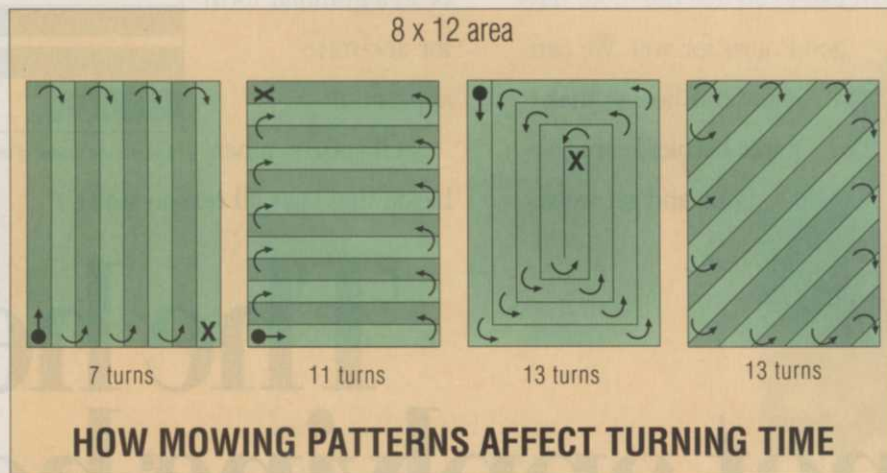
Ask your employees to help make the decision to expand and get them involved in making the new location successful.

Overwhelmed?—Opening a new branch is a traumatic time. People moving, equipment being re-assigned, routes being changed, customers being serviced by new technicians—all seem to overwhelm most owners.

Don't let the pressures caused by small details get to you. Make the new branch opening an exciting time for your business. Someone is being promoted; you can try something new at this location; and there will be a renewed excitement because everyone will be watching the new branch's performance. Take advantage of this excitement and pass its emotional high to everyone—employees and customers alike.

Make this event an uplifting experience for the company, and your profits and employee morale will thrive.

—The author is a principle at Wandtke & Associates Management Consultants, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231. For more information, phone (614) 891-3111.



Mowing patterns can make some difference

Besides speed, mowing patterns can help you control the beauty of an area, or the safety with which you're mowing.

■ There is an art, some say, to mowing grass. If you're in it for the money, here are some considerations:

● **Speed.** Use the pattern that will result in the fewest turns and longest straight stretches. A good example is a typical rectangular area measuring 8x12 units. If you mow lengthwise, you need only seven half-turns of the mower. However, if you mow crosswise, it'll take 11 half-turns. Mowing inward from the perimeter will require 13 quarter-turns while mowing horizontally requires 13 half-turns (see illustration).

● **Beauty.** If you're in one of the lucky few states that can still bag clippings without worrying about paying for their disposal, there's no problem. Or if you're using a mulching attachment or blade, there won't be any unsightly clippings either. But if not, you'll want to discharge clippings away from sidewalks, driveways and buildings.

● **Mulching.** If your mower is un-equipped for mulching yet you want to mulch as many clippings as possible, travel in a clockwise direction with right-hand discharges. If it's a left-hand discharge, you'll want to go counter-clockwise so you're mowing the clippings over and over again.

● **Safety.** Watch where you're discharging clippings. Avoid discharging them into pedestrian traffic.

"There's no way I can mow without people being around," says Tim Glover of Westerville (Ohio) Schools, who has 24 different locations, including two high school stadiums and middle school athletic fields. So he tries to balance mulching and safety. He uses three basic patterns for his side-discharge front-deck mowers:

1) When the grass is not extra high, I get the best appearance by going around the outside of an area, moving inward, blowing the discharge inward until it is mulched up.

2) When the grass is extra high (or wet), I start at the center of the area, moving outward, blowing the discharge inward. I try to avoid blowing outward for safety to people and cars, and to keep discharge off walks and roads.

3) With an odd-shaped area, I may save time by going back and forth, moving from one side of the area to the other.

—Any other mowing suggestions? Get your ideas in print by calling LM editors Jerry, Terry or Ron at (216) 826-2830, faxing us at (216) 891-2675 or writing LM, 7500 Old Oak Blvd., Cleveland, OH 44130.



Tim Glover: uses three types of mowing patterns

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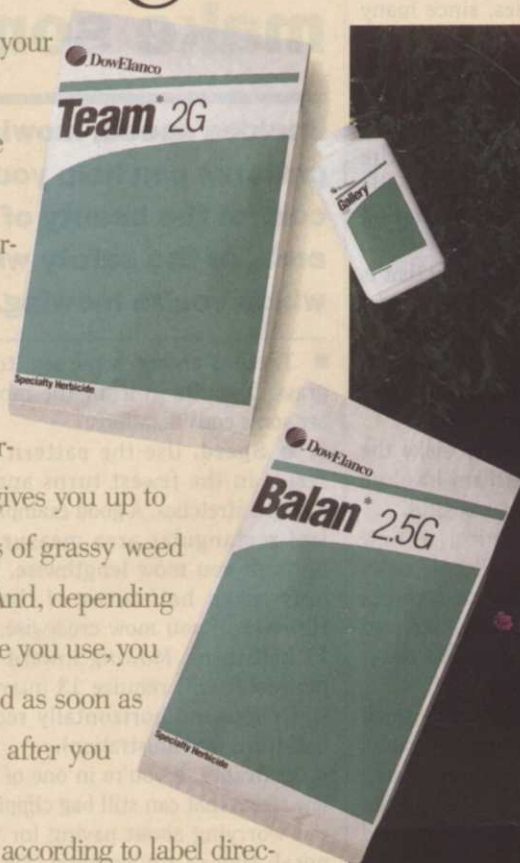
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for people interested in



Taking responsibility for your own destiny

'If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything,' says Virginia Turf Conference lecturer.

■ To be successful, you must create your own reality, says Dr. Richard Harshberger of Virginia Polytechnic University: "You will never get any more than you expect."

Winners expect to win, and success thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, he further notes.

Harshberger defines success as "the progressive realization of a worthwhile

the aura of failure dominate your outlook; but when disaster strikes, try to learn from it and not make the same mistake again.

This is a matter of growth. Consider the toddler who must fall down time and time again before he learns to walk. Consider the expansion baseball team that must first win a few games, then play .500 ball, then make the playoffs—a process taking years at the least—before it wins the World Series.

2) "If you want something, you have to give up something else. It's always a matter of priorities."

Although there are widespread concepts of what exactly defines success, we each define it for ourselves. For one person, success might mean working 18 hours a day to make \$250,000 a year and thus being able to provide for a family. But for another person, it might be making 1/10th of that, yet having the spare time to devote to actual family activities.

3) "Remember that success is a journey, not a destination. The minute you get where you want to be, you're dead."

Goal-setting is an on-going process. When you meet your first set of goals, establish another, reachable set. Then again, and again. Adopting this philosophy, you may never be able to claim

you're wholly successful, but you'll be able to look back with pride at your accomplishments.

4) "Competition is a negative concept: you try to beat somebody to the punch. But success is a win-win proposition: it's finding a new way of doing things."

Harshberger says you shouldn't nec-

Eight steps to success

- 1) Create your own reality.
- 2) When something bad happens, find out what you can salvage.
- 3) Don't hesitate to make trade-offs in pursuit of your goals.
- 4) Make it a journey, not a destination.
- 5) Find a new way of doing things.
- 6) See yourself succeeding at whatever it is you want to do.
- 7) Be respected, fair, honest, above-board.
- 8) Get involved emotionally.



Harshberger: Imagine yourself as a success in all you do

dream or goal.

"The goal should be out of reach, but not out of sight," he says.

Here are proven methods you can use to climb your way to success, no matter what your job description or duties:

1) "Whenever something bad happens, find out what you can salvage." Harshberger says that you shouldn't let

essarily set your sights on just competing, but on succeeding. And there's a big difference.

5) "Envision success. See yourself succeeding at whatever it is you want to do."

High achievers mentally picture ideas that are goal-oriented, much like the professional golfer envisions his next shot hitting the green, bounding toward the pin and ultimately rolling into the cup.

Use your imagination. See it happen.

6) "Don't worry about being liked, be respected. Be fair, honest, above-board."

The old sports adage "Nice guys finish last" might not be wholly true, but it does contain an element of truth. Don't run a popularity contest, Harshberger contends: "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

By striving to be fair and honest with those around you, you'll win their respect and allegiance.

Finally: "The secret of success is very simple: get involved emotionally," Harshberger concludes. "We have imagination. We must learn to use it. Fantasize, daydream and win."

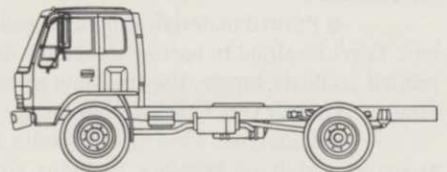
—Jerry Roche

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Circle No. 105 on Reader Inquiry Card

Business suggestions range from customer satisfaction, to promotion, to performance

■ The National Association for the Self-Employed (NASE) is an organization serving the needs of small businesses in America, providing services and benefits to help its members be more competitive. Its membership is more than 275,000.

Here are some business hints from the NASE on various small business-related subjects:

Promoting your business

Just as you would not go on a sales call with your shoes unpolished, be sure your business image isn't unpolished either. To improve your business, several marketing tools are available:

- Printed materials should be well-designed and consistent. Don't be afraid to borrow ideas from other companies. Keep printed products simple. Use the same paper stock for all printed products, so their very look becomes recognizable as yours.

- Logotypes identify companies and can be as simple as using a stylized typeface for your company name on all printed materials mailed to prospective clients.

- Box advertising in the local Yellow Pages should be different from your competitors and well-designed.

- Advertising creates an image and stimulates sales. The "tone" and context of the ad should reflect the personality and culture of your company.

Improving performance

Employee reviews reinforce good work habits and act as guidelines for job improvement. Not only is a job review a "yardstick" of work accomplished, but can protect an employer against unlawful dismissal litigation. Here are some ways to ensure successful employee performance reviews:

- Tell employees they are going a great job, if such is the case. If employees feel unappreciated, they'll leave. And it's too late to retain a good employee after they have accepted another position.

- Base reviews on specific job functions. When you hire someone, job responsibilities should be outlined in writing.

- Review employees at least once a year.
- Make employee goals measurable.
- Don't downgrade people because they fall down in one aspect of their jobs.

- Don't ignore poor performance. Let employees know where they need to improve.

- Evaluate for the entire time since the last review, not just recent efforts.

- Use reviews for two-way communication. Not only is the review a rating tool, but should be a planning device to map out a growth plan for an employee.

Satisfying customers

If you want to maintain customer loyalty, you have to handle complaints properly. Bennie Thayer, NASE chairman of the board, says you must handle complaints quickly and effectively. Otherwise, you run the risk of losing a customer and word-of-mouth recommendations to potential customers. Here are other tips:

- Handle the problem yourself, now. Don't try to pass it off to someone else.

- Make sure you understand the problem completely and restate it positively. Don't imply the customer is exaggerating or wrong.

- Take full responsibility for the problem. And remember: The customer's always right.

- Don't ever say "It's not our policy," or "Sorry, there's just nothing I can do."

- If the problem can't be resolved, give something of equal or greater value as a substitute. Often, this will show that you really value the customer's business.

- Be friendly, no matter how provoked you are. Even the hottest-tempered customer will cool off and may wind up your greatest ally.

—For information on joining the National Association for the Self-Employed, write NASE Member Services, P.O. Box 612067, DFW Airport, TX 75261-2067 or phone toll-free (800) 232-6273.

Small business survival in a slow period

■ Small businesses may be the hardest hit during an economic slowdown because of tight credit and the inability to buy in quantity.

The NASE has this advice:

- Don't skimp on service and quality by being understaffed. Your options include part-timers and consultants. Check the "Opportunities Wanted" ads in local newspapers or turn to local schools and universities.

- Cut personal spending. Simple solutions can make a difference.

- Meet with your staff weekly to exchange ideas on increasing productivity and reducing costs. Create an incentive for

Don't be afraid to pull out all stops and work more hours during selling season, NASE says.

top suggestions and a team spirit for survival.

- Be prepared to "pull out the stops" during peak times for your service. Don't be afraid to work more hours during a selling season or around holidays.

- Remain close to existing clientele.

Telephone your contacts and find out about developments in their business that could lead to new opportunities or help you avoid unpleasant surprises.

- Carve out more time for pursuing new business. With spending slowing down, new business referrals are harder to get. It's time to go after new business aggressively by networking with industry and community groups. If this is not your strong point, seek information from those that do it well.

- Analyze cash flow. Know where you'll stand in three months. Is there room for improvement by boosting collection of accounts receivable or reducing inventory?