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# Over/under billing: how to do it, and how to do it easier

Here's a tool that identifies the difference between amount billed and actual monthly costs.

by Kent Miller

■ Usually, construction projects do not start at the beginning of the month or end on the last day of the month. When construction is under way on one or more projects that cross into the next month, it is important to be able to allocate earnings on the monthly income statement accurately.

Larger projects can run for months or years before reaching completion and acceptance. Billing cycles and conditions may also vary from billing the whole project before the work is started, to no billing at all until the job is done and accepted.

Regardless of the billing techniques, the monthly income statement should indicate some earnings.

We use a program called "over/under," a simple Lotus spreadsheet that assists us in determining what amount to chart as income each month.

We begin by entering the contract amount, estimated direct costs and estimated gross profit anticipated. As the work progresses, we identify all of the costs incurred during the month through job costing. At the end of the month, those costs are plugged into "costs to date."

Using the estimated gross profit anticipated, we apply the same gross profit to the costs we incurred that month to derive our amount earned. The amount earned is compared to the amount billed and the dif-

ference is typically over-billed or under-billed.

**A simple example**—Let's use an example using simple values. A construction project has a value of \$500,000 with direct costs of \$400,000. That leaves \$100,000, or approximately 20% as a gross profit. During the first month of construction, the job incurred total costs of \$80,000. With a 20% gross profit, income for the first month would equal approximately \$100,000. If no billings were made for that month, we'd be \$100,000 under-billed. We would then add \$100,000 to our monthly income statement for that month.

If we had billed the same project \$150,000 for that month, we still would have only earned \$100,000, so we would be \$50,000 over-billed for that month. In that case, we'd reduce our monthly income statement by \$50,000.

When you have several projects on this worksheet, the total entered in "Over/Under Billed" is the result of the whole, and that amount is added to or subtracted from your monthly statement.

**Exceptions**—There are some instances when this approach will need some adjustment to accurately reflect your earnings. An example would be if you use the multiple overhead recovery system (for estimating, labor, equipment, materials), and subcontractors are marked up at varying percentages, providing an overall mark-up on

the entire project.

Assume the first \$80,000 in costs was a subcontractor you only marked up 10%: your actual earnings that month would be less than the overall mark-up. So this gives you an average mark-up over the course of the construction, and not a specific mark-up on the actual costs incurred.

Now let's assume that you're two months into the construction project when you realize it's going to take another \$50,000 in additional costs. In this instance, we would enter \$50,000 to the column "Additions to Cost," which revises our cost in the "Total Revised Cost" to \$450,000. It adjusts our "Gross Revised Percentage" to 10%. The shock comes when you have to pay back the gross profit you should not have taken in the first place.

I use this program to measure anticipated gross profits. I'm quick to identify "Additions to Cost" so I don't take profits too early and then have to pay them back. Adding costs to the "Estimated Cost to Complete" column lowers the "Percentage Gross Revised" and reduces the amount of gross profit earned each month. This is also a good column to use to provide for plant replacements and other warranty-related items that might linger before they actually become a cost to the job.

When the job is done and all the costs are in, adjustments may be necessary in the "Additions to Cost" column to have "Over/Under Billed" equal \$0 and then earn the gross profit you didn't want to take until completion. At this point, the final gross profit obtained is in the "Percentage Gross Revised" column.

Simply stated, our program assists us in identifying monthly income based on the costs we've incurred.

—Kent Miller is vice president of The Groundskeeper, an employee-owned company in Tucson, Ariz.

## Washington from page 11

Four U.S. EPA officials, two state regulators, and two legislative staff members round out the committee.

The LCPAC has met three times, most recently in Alexandria, Va., on Feb. 25-26. Meetings last 1-1/2 days.

Points aren't conceded easily. Disagreements between members sometimes, but not often, cause sharp exchanges.

Even so, most members of the committee agreed, at least broadly, on these points at the February meeting:

**Posting:** signs consistent with what most states do now, 4x5 inches and in contrasting colors. Posting at common points of entry; more than one notice may be needed in some situations.

**Notification and Registries:** open registries with limits on the number of addresses one wants to be notified about, and annual

fees to pay for the notification program. In the case of hardship the fees can be dropped. The addresses one wants to be notified about must be supplied by the person joining the registry.

EPA says it's determined to write guidelines covering posting, pre-application notification and registries. Even the development of guidelines was debated.

"EPA's issuance of guidelines signals there is a problem, at least a consensus by this group that there is a perceived problem," said Chevron's Chase.

Public Citizen's Patti Goldman, took the opposite view. She said the EPA shouldn't be drafting guidelines but rather lawn care regulations.

February's meeting of the LCPAC meeting may have been its last. It's charter expires this spring.

—Ron Hall

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# Stress value and need when you have to raise prices.

If your prices don't yield the earnings you might normally expect, you should consider raising them. But will your customers pay more?



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■ If your prices don't yield the earnings you might normally expect, you should consider raising them. But will your customers pay more? According to most lawn care and landscape companies, the answer is "yes," but only if you use sensible strategies. Here are some hints:

**1) Base your prices on the value and need for your services.**

Many landscapers concentrate on working for two-income families because they easily accept higher prices just to keep up appearances. They also have the money to pay more for such work, but not the time or energy to do it for themselves. Senior citizens whose incomes are more than comfortable will also accept higher prices for similar reasons.

**2) Check competitors' prices** for work that is comparable to yours. You can easily do this by reviewing these companies' ads. You might also use the phone and give the impression that you are a prospect. Ask what is charged for such services. Other questions might include:

- How experienced are your employees?
- Do you use modern equipment?
- Do you offer any free extra services or premiums?

Strike an average price for each type of work based on the answers, then compare these figures and features with your own.

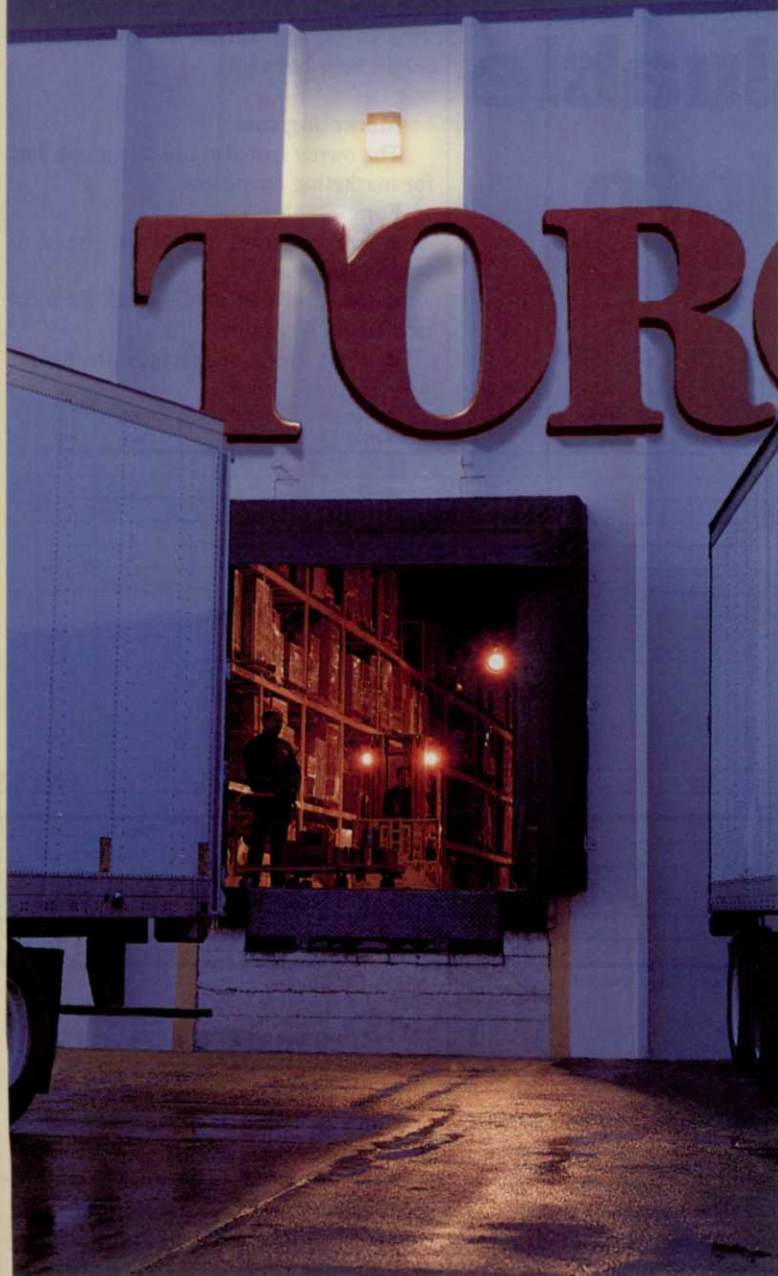
Now, if you feel that you must charge more, let the customer know why by pointing out the extras which you offer but competitors don't—such as the use of more modern technology or more experienced employees. If need be, name the competitors.

**3) Sell your professionalism instead of your price** by stressing any (true) advantageous factors which your company possesses (such as how long it's been in business) and showing the written testimonials of satisfied customers.

Other ploys can be equally successful. One landscape contractor takes prospective clients for short drives in the neighborhood and points out the lawns and grounds of those for whom he has worked for many years. You can also

*continued on page 62*

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■ Want to develop a powerful information-gathering tool for your business at surprisingly low cost?

Implement a system to track and analyze all in-coming telephone calls to your business. These calls, particularly those from customers, are a treasure of data for the owner of any lawn care or landscape maintenance business.

**Not popular, yet**

Not everyone's already doing this. Only a half dozen or so lawn care business people, out of an audience of about 150 at a PLCAA educational session this past November, admitted they routinely log information they receive from in-coming phone calls.

This really surprised session leader Dr. Scott Mason, who described data coming from customer phone contacts as one of several information sources that allows a small company to compete with the big guys.

Mason is with Walker Research, a consulting firm headquartered in Indianapolis.

"If you collect and monitor data on

# Phone logs: cheap but valuable info

✓ may increase their business with your company as you offer new or expanded services.

✓ may recommend your company to others.

The flip side is that customers can, as easily, dump your services and/or bad-mouth your company to family and friends. That is, if you don't have a system to record, analyze and respond to their questions, complaints or concerns.

But by maintaining an accurate and regularly reviewed telephone log, business owners can respond to customers on a more timely and personal basis. They can resolve complaints and answer service calls, and retain customers that might have been lost.

**Marketing tool**

The owner can also use telephone data for marketing purposes.

For example:

- Are contract renewals ahead or behind last year?
- On what day of the week do most new business inquiries in?
- What kinds of services are people

Date	Init	Caller -- Name / Address	Phone	Customer Prospect Other	Action	Action Date	Init

Action Date:	Action by:	Comment:	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
Follow-up Date:	Confirmed by:	Comment:	
Date:	Name:	Phone:	New Customer <input type="checkbox"/>
Taken by:	Address:		Old Customer <input type="checkbox"/>
Action to be Taken:			Prospect <input type="checkbox"/>
			Vendor <input type="checkbox"/>
			Other <input type="checkbox"/>
Action Date:	Action by:	Comment:	
Follow-up Date:	Confirmed by:	Comment:	

transactions, you'll be well ahead of competitors," says Mason.

**Listen!**

Concentrate on listening to your current customers first.

"Most of tomorrow's business comes from retaining today's customers," says Mason. Today's customers:

✓ can continue to do business with you. (Retaining a current customer is more cost effective than generating a new one.)

**Two styles of phone logs are shown above. One is simpler, and could be used by almost any kind of business. The second is more customized and allows room for more comments about follow-up actions and a line to confirm that the customer is satisfied.**

being referred to by customers? Basic bean counting—particularly when it comes to customer information—is often overlooked or under-estimated by the small business owner.

"Somebody at your phone should record every call that's coming in, who called, when it came in, and all the information that you think you're going to need," says Mason.

—Ron Hall

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# Is your irrigation system operating at top efficiency?

**As a major user of water, the green industry is in the spotlight. Save money—and our resources—by checking out your irrigation system.**

■ If you or your department are under pressure from your superiors to cut costs, one of the ways might be taking a thorough look at your irrigation system and either recommending changes or consulting an irrigation designer.

"An irrigation system that is designed and installed correctly can save substantial amounts of money during the operational life of the system," says Kurt Hall of Water Management Specialists, Houston, Tex. "In most cases, the additional cost it would take to make the system water- and cost-efficient are returned in less than a year."

For instance, just using a triangular head pattern instead of a rectangular one is saving the city of Houston \$751.16 per month (see tables).

Many irrigation systems are installed without any consideration for the operations costs, Hall contends. Some of the reasons for this sad commentary on water conservation include:

- lack of design skill or knowledge;
- lack of the basic understanding of the relationship between plants and water;
- designing to a pre-conceived irrigation

budget;

- lack of familiarity with new techniques and products;
- not designing to the "big picture" (establishing precipitation rates, and irrigation schedules developed for the design);
- designing to installation cost instead of long-term and operational costs.

"The underlying reasons for poor irrigation design," Hall says, "can be broken down into lack of knowledge, skill and training; and profit motivation. When these two are combined, the results can be horrific."

1) Is the system designed for the application? There is no such thing as one size fits all.

2) Have the components been teamed efficiently? Make sure sprinkler heads, for instance, are fitted into the design just for easier maintenance.

3) Are manufacturer's specifications followed? The manufacturer knows much more about its own products than even the irrigation designer/contractor.

4) Would more heads with a more conservative design be more efficient? A poorly designed system will always cost you extra.

5) Are borders respected? Spraying over concrete and other borders just to reduce the number of heads in the design costs more money than proper design.

6) Are water shut-off devices and moisture sensors part of the design?

These devices will easily pay for themselves over a very short period of time, Hall says. Their installation cost is minor.



**Hall: save 35-45% on water bills.**

7) Have you calculated irrigation schedules? "A very conservative dollars savings amount that can be attributed to irrigation schedules is 35-45 percent of the monthly average water bill," Hall contends.

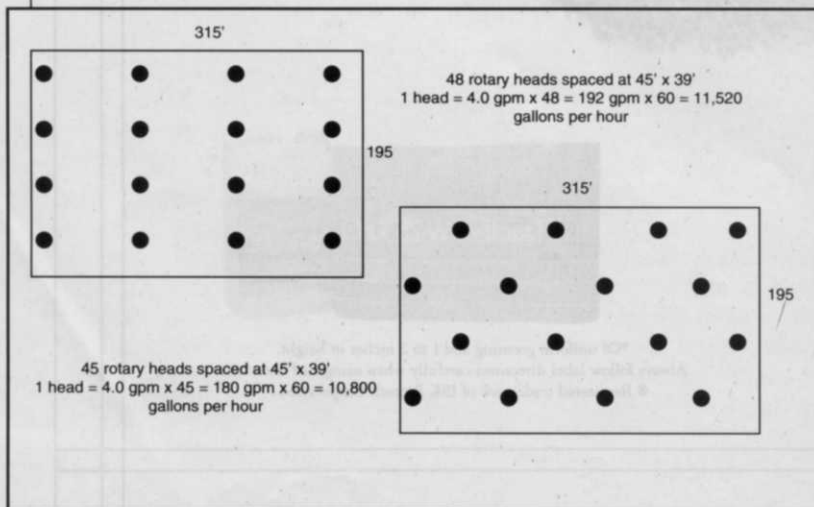
"It would take volumes to list all of the wrong things that are done. However, here are the biggest problems:

- Head placement that has been "guessed" or "eye-balled."
- Shrubbery zones mixed with turf zones.
- Spray heads mixed with rotary heads.
- Schedules that have not been calculated for the design; for instance, 30 minutes for rotors and 15 minutes for spray."

Water is a scarce and valuable resource. If you have any doubts as to the efficiency of your system, the money you spend now could result in multiple savings over the next few years.

Hall gave a presentation on "Designing for Irrigation Efficiency," from which this article is taken, at the Irrigation Association's annual International Exposition & Technical Conference in New Orleans late last year.

—Jerry Roche



Design Efficiency -VS- Operational Efficiency					
Note: Head Spacing and Pressure Constant @ 45' x 39' @ 40 PSI					
Note: Data derived from Hunter Industries Profiles Software					
Style	Drain	Wettest	Precip. Rate	Sched. Coef.	
Square	.10	.34	.20	2.05	
Triangular	.12	.29	.20	1.64	
				.41	
Water Cost Value: .0046 per Gal. (Irrigate Rate; Water Only/No Sewage) 1					
Water Cost and Gallonage to Apply 6" of Water during the month of July 2					
Source: (1) City of Houston 10/27/92 (2) Texas Water Dev. Board					
Style	Hrs	GPH (Heads)	TTL Gal	Water \$	TTL Month \$
Square	42.3	11,520	487,296	.0046	\$2,241.56
Triangular	30.0	10,800	324	.0046	\$1,490.40
			163,296		\$ 751.16
This savings possible by designing the system to peak efficiency and utilizing industry available software. Additional savings possible due to correct irrigation scheduling.					



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