

comes off professionally, too. There's plenty of software out on the market to help you do this. A nice touch is to present your quote to a customer in a pocket folder emblazoned with your company's logo. It doesn't take much: Just print out your company's logo on computer labels and stick the labels on the folders. You may also want to include references and photos of recent jobs in your quotation folders.

4 Follow up all quotes promptly. You have two important challenges at quotations time. You must market your quotation as a fair price for the work to be done and market your company as a dependable supplier of that service. Part of that marketing is promptly following up on quotations. You don't have to be a pest, but you must show that you want the job.

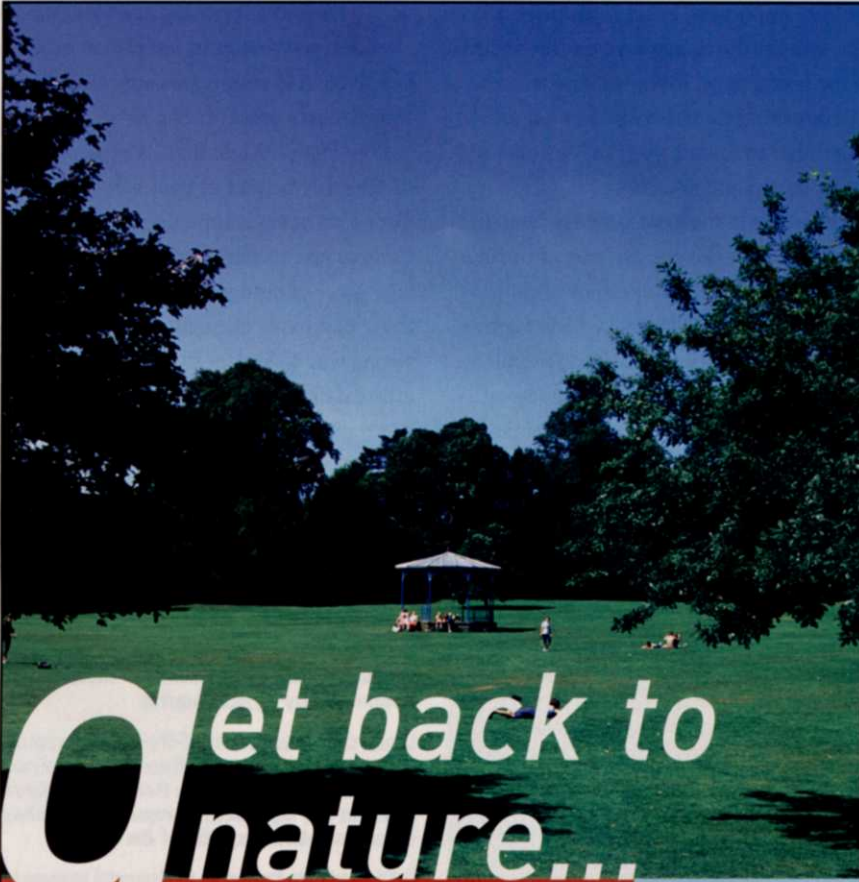
5 Promote your company with customized clothing. Investing in golf shirts, caps, sweaters, jackets, caps or other clothing for your workers that have embroidered company logos can really set your operation apart from the competition.

6 Consider a company newsletter. Promoting yourself as the local expert in your particular line of work is another effective marketing strategy. You can do this fairly inexpensively through a company newsletter that you send to existing and prospective customers. One Kansas City, MO-based lawn service and landscaping company sends out a quarterly newsletter that's chock-full of tips on proper mulching, perennial varieties, spring cleanup and many other interesting topics for homeowners.

7 Don't underestimate the power of a simple "thank you." In this age of mindless junk mail, thoughtless telemarketing and annoying e-mail blasts, a simple handwritten note goes a long way. Consider getting some "thank you" cards printed that you can send to customers to express appreciation for their business. Customer appreci-

ation is at the heart of any good business. Send a card with a discount on one of your services, or team up with a local restaurant to give your customers a free appetizer —

it's free advertising for the restaurant, and it will give your clients a nice treat for choosing you. You may also want to get customized greeting cards for the holidays.



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Circle 121

8 Create a professional-looking Web site. There are many Web site "designers" out there. You should choose a company that actually employs designers. Ask for samples of sites they've developed. Looks are very important, as are load times. Many sites will list the design firm on the bottom of the home page. If you see one you like, try contacting that firm for your site. Also, remember to update your site for each season with tips and images.

9 Be active in the local business community. Networking is also part of the marketing game, and it's important to get to know local business leaders who are active in organizations such as the Lion's Club, Chamber of Commerce and other small business organizations. Along with being a

wonderful resource for jobs, you can also work the grapevine at these meetings to learn about local market conditions, new development in the community, and ideas for running your business more profitably.

10 Look at advertising as an investment in your business, not just an expense. Relatively few contractors advertise their companies beyond placing an ad in the Yellow Pages. While that's a good start, it should only be part of your advertising plan. Too many companies think of advertising as just another expense, like buying a new piece of equipment to replace something that has broken down. That's the wrong way to look at it. Advertising helps create demand for your product and can pay for itself many times over. Think about

taking a small percentage of the profit you make on any job and putting it aside into an advertising and marketing fund.

You don't have to be a multi-million dollar company to take advantage of what marketing has to offer. The aforementioned marketing tips will help a company of any size grow and prosper. It takes an average of seven exposures for customers to remember your company's name, so try various methods to lead your company in the right direction.

— The author owns YourBiz Greetings, Overland Park, KS, and offers customized greeting cards and other marketing materials to small businesses. E-mail her at yourbizgreetings@kc.rr.com or visit her Web site at www.yourbizgreetings.com.

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Customer *sensitive* service

In a quest to increase revenues, you put on your sales hat and seek out new maintenance clients with vengeance. You call on a long list of potential clients and set up appointments. You arrive 20 minutes ahead of schedule and walk their sites with them. You prepare and present professional proposals. You do everything you can to convince them that you're different, that you're genuinely concerned about customer service.

Once your bid is accepted, you put a check mark in the "W" column and you're off to the next client. But too soon, many of the promises you made are beginning to fall by the wayside. The foreman you dedi-

cated to this job is rarely seen on site. Monthly site reports haven't been submitted. You're too busy to conduct monthly site inspections yourself, and sometimes it takes you two days to return telephone calls.

Stop! Grab the controls and start turning your organization around.

Whether you work on commercial or residential properties, your clients are looking for a contractor who will respond to all of their needs. Start being more proactive with your clients. Begin anticipating their needs before they do.

This isn't as hard as you think if you follow what I describe as QSRC&V, which stands for Quality, Service, Responsiveness, Communication and Value.

Implement QSRC&V at all levels of your organization — sales, estimating, of-

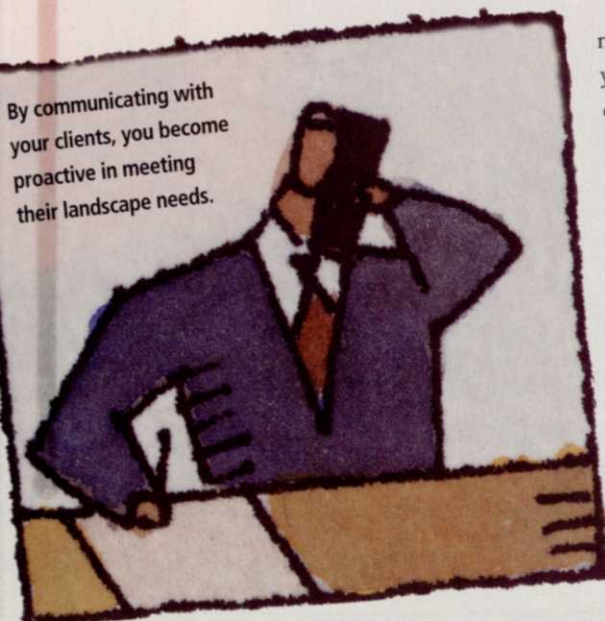
fice staff, production and shop personnel. It will elevate your organization and make your team a champion provider of customer sensitive service.

Q is for quality

Most people equate quality with the completion of a job according to the specifications. True enough, but other elements figure into the concept of quality as well. To understand them, remember another acronym, CARA — Consistency, Authority, Responsibility and Accountability. (See sidebar on page 49.)

S is for service

Crew performance in the field is the most obvious part of customer service, but there are other parts, including the manner in which a receptionist answers the phone, the style the accounting department uses when making a collection call, checking with clients to see how things are going, and keeping appointments that you've made.



Every company needs a client assurance policy that states the company's objective to customer service. This policy must be something that employees can and will implement — clear, concise and understandable by everyone on your team. Here are some items to include in your policy:

- ▶ Dedicated on-site management personnel
- ▶ Annual client survey
- ▶ Client seminars
- ▶ Return telephone calls the same day received
- ▶ Assign a specific contact person in the office to handle clients

Remember, it's easier and more cost-effective to service an existing client than it is to replace them or look for new prospects. Also, never forget that commercial property managers as well as residential clients talk among themselves about the contractors they use. If they don't like your service, others will hear about it. Track your renewal ratios — they'll tell you a lot.

R is for responsive

Is it enough just to provide acceptable services to clients? In today's competitive marketplace, probably not.

Today, customers expect contractors to be more proactive, to have policies and procedures in place, to not only perform contracted services reliably and on schedule but also educate them about other service opportunities.

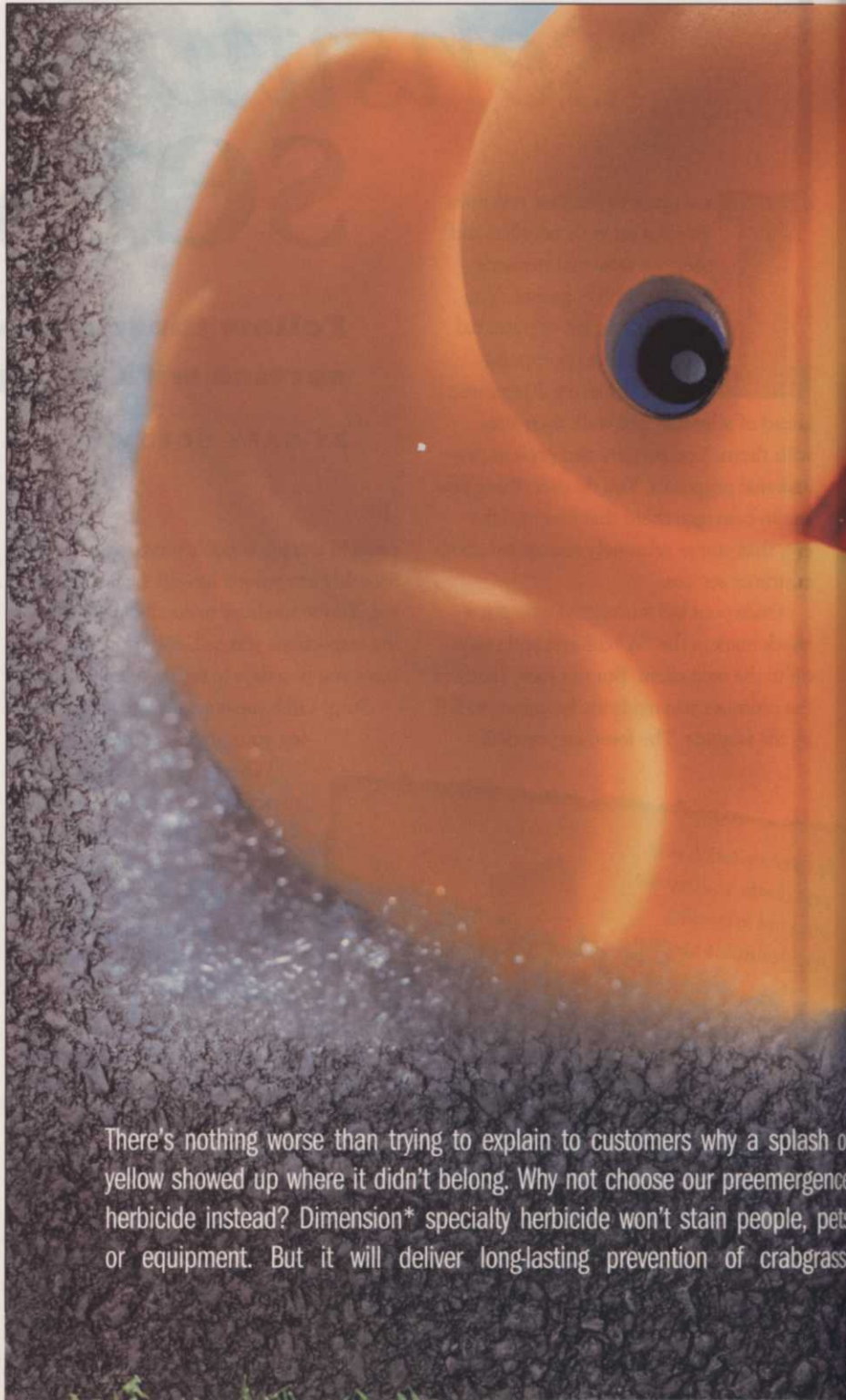
When you're hired to work on a property, your objective is to keep your team focused on the task at hand. However, you need to be able to point out to your clients other areas where you can help them.

If your company has a policy of reviewing properties on a monthly basis, that's great. These regular property reviews almost always generate more "good" in the form of extra work because they strengthen your image as a professional.

C is for communication

With e-mail and cell phones, there's no reason why contractors can't communicate regularly with clients. Surprisingly, one of the biggest complaints by homeowners and

property managers remains their inability to get in touch with their contractor — often the same person who, during negotiations, assured the client that they'd be accessible anytime day or night.



There's nothing worse than trying to explain to customers why a splash of yellow showed up where it didn't belong. Why not choose our preemergence herbicide instead? Dimension* specialty herbicide won't stain people, pets or equipment. But it will deliver long-lasting prevention of crabgrass

CARA about your clients

When you're ready to put the idea of "quality" into practice at your company, remember the acronym CARA, which stands for Consistency, Authority, Responsibility, and Accountability. Let's break it down:

► Follow consistent best practices. You can do this only after you develop and implement standard operating proce-

dures at all levels of your company.

► Give appropriate authority to team members to perform their tasks once they understand your consistent policies and procedures.

► Hold your staff responsible to carry out the policies and procedures of your company.

► Hold employees accountable for the success of your company and for providing the quality of service that clients demand.

— GG

Whether you're a one-man operation or you have several employees, how you communicate with your clients profoundly affects your company's success. Every company must have a policy about returning



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calls or other correspondence, preferably the same every day, if possible. You may not be able to answer a specific question or make a commitment when returning the call, but your prompt response gives clients confidence that you recognize their needs.

If you don't have a receptionist in your office, use voice mail on your office and cell phones and check it regularly. Don't let messages pile up because you'll be less likely to return them.

V is for value

Clients view value as getting what was paid for and, in many cases, a little bit more. That doesn't necessarily mean planting an extra tree or cutting the lawn three additional times. Often, "the little bit more" is an intangible benefit, perhaps an issue related to quality, service, responsiveness or prompt communication. These items don't receive a specific dollar value on the bid sheet, but they carry weight with clients.

Being customer service sensitive is a culture that permeates every level of an organization. Companies that adopt this concept have more dedicated and committed team members and achieve greater profits through client retention. **LM**

— *The author has over 20 years of experience in management in numerous industries, including landscaping and maintenance. He is a past Regional Operations Manager of TruGreen Landcare Corp. He can be reached at gmanaf@msn.com.*



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