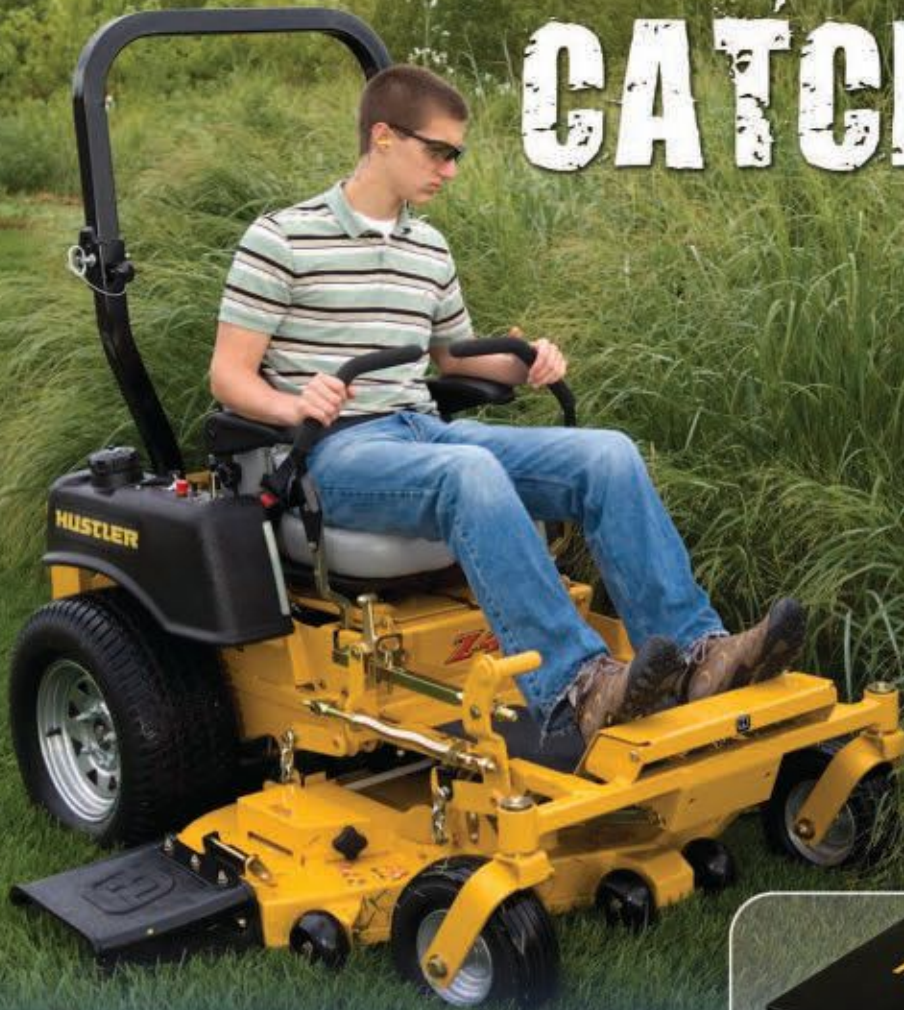


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COVER STORY

continued from page 10

Many landscapers just have to “cowboy up” — be patient and stand behind their superior service and fair pricing.

After six years together, a large industrial customer dropped Black Landscape Contracting in Mechanicsburg, PA, opting to go with a national company for a 32% savings. President Greg Black said

the national company failed to perform to expectations, and the client returned to Black Landscape within two years.

“We lost a mowing customer we had for five years to a low-baller,” says Peter Schepis, vice president of The Greenwood Group LLC, based in New Melle, MO. “The first month, the client’s lawn was mowed one and

one-half times — and they tried to charge him more! We got the customer back with a 10% increase.”

Kevin Peck, a regional manager for Gaithersburg, MD-based Brickman Group, says the company recently lost a longtime customer because of a competitor’s extremely low bid. “Within six months, the former client was all but begging us to come back at the higher price, and apologized for ever questioning what they were getting from us.”

Brad’s Lawn Service in Owensboro, KY, also lost a client to a low-baller but the business returned in short order. “That was more than 20 years ago. The customer’s been with us ever since and won’t accept bids from other landscapers,” says Owner Brad Bell.

“We had a customer leave us who was happy with our services but was offered a lower price and wanted to save money,” says Blake Moore, president of Ferta-Lawn

continued on page 14

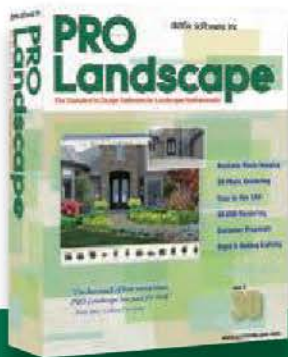


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LOST & FOUND

Following are 10 tips for regaining lost customers’ trust and business. These best practices were shared by members of The Leader’s Edge peer group for landscape professionals:

DOs

1. Do tell former clients you appreciate their business, show remorse for failing/losing them, and let them know you are ready to help if questions or problems arise — regardless of who currently manages their landscaping.
2. Do keep former customers on your mailing list — stay top of mind with them.
3. Do remain proactive on warranty issues: This is your chance to stay face-to-face and showcase your professionalism.
4. Do stay warm, open, friendly and accessible — so if they want to return, they won’t feel embarrassed.
5. Do get creative. For example, send flowers to Mrs. Smith with a note that reads, “Mr. Smith won your heart. We want to win back your trust and yard!”

MOW & BLOW

How does your **2009 maintenance customer retention** compare to 2008?

51%

The same or better

Down **1-5%**

27%

12%

Down **6-10%**

10%

Down **11% or more**

THE BOTTOM 10%

10% of landscape companies reported losing a combined average 44% of their customers in 2008.

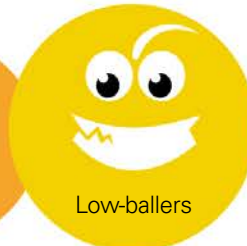
DON'Ts

1. Don't assume you know the real reasons why your clients left. Ask the decision makers what triggered the moves, and let them know their feedback is helpful.
2. Don't blame former clients or argue with their feelings or perceptions of your service. Instead, acknowledge their feelings and share their concerns.
3. Don't try to talk customers out of leaving. Instead, offer to fix any problems and refund their money. They might talk themselves out of leaving. And don't pester them if they're not ready to talk: Timing is crucial.
4. Don't trash former clients' new landscapers or their do-it-yourself work.
5. Don't overpromise to win back accounts — that might have been the problem to begin with.

— Jeffrey Scott, Green Industry consultant & The Leader's Edge peer group facilitator, 203-220-8931, www.GetTheLeadersEdge.com.

TROUBLESOME FOURSOME

What are the biggest threats to your customer retention?



Source for all infographics: September 2009 Landscape Management online survey with 249 respondents



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SWEET SERVICE SAVES

What follow are a few **examples of landscape service miscues** and how the companies righted the situations and regained their clients' trust:

› **Tree-demption** — A technician with Fullerton Grounds Maintenance in Ledgewood, NJ, applied Sevin instead of Trimec to about 100 trees dotting the landscape of a large condominium community. The company quickly informed the client of the mistake and spent the next week washing, watering, pruning and deep-root feeding the trees. Only two trees were lost; Fullerton replaced them in the fall. The condo community remains a customer.

› **Mulch A Do about Something** — Impact Landscaping in Morgantown, WV, installed 25 cu. yds. of a very acidic mulch at a high profile fitness club and it burned the delicate foliage and perennials in the beds. The landscaper identified the problem with the mulch supplier, and watered the beds daily to dilute the salinity. The company also replaced a few annuals and installed temporary irrigation hoses to keep the plants healthy. Once the situation was diffused and corrected, Impact Landscaping won the full maintenance contract for the property.

› **No Sorry Sod** — Terry Landscaping and Lawn Care in St. Louis installed sod on a yard this spring and even though the homeowner properly watered it, summer weeds quickly overtook the sod. The company replaced the sod free of charge. President Russell Terry told the pleasantly surprised client that if his name was going to be associated with the work, he wanted to be sure it looked professionally done. — *MW*

continued from page 12

in Bountiful, UT. "Before the end of the year, she returned. She wanted to know if we had a 'Prodigal Son' program for those who are sorry for leaving."

Corrective action

No-shows and poor performance also trigger the loss of customer trust and business, but these, too, are reversible.

"I accidentally stood up a prospect who was a referral and, as a result, I didn't get the job," says Calvin Craig, owner of Calvin Craig Landscaping in Sacramento, CA. "But after I brought her flowers and told her how embarrassed I was, she hired us."

When it rains it pours, especially for Daily Rain in Dexter, MI.

"We had a technician miss not one but two scheduled service appointments with the same client two days in a row," says President Jerry Boquette. "Our

continued on page 16

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WEAKEST LINK

Most landscapers say their **design/build/installation** customers are the most likely to cancel services.

NOT EASY COME ... BUT EASY GO

With annual customer loss averaging more than 10%, a typical landscape company theoretically could need to replace all of this year's customers within a decade.

LAWN RANGERS

How does your **2009 lawn care customer retention** compare to last year?



56% The same or better



22% Down 1-5%



13% Down 6-10%



9% Down 11% or more

ON THE REBOUND

27% of landscape companies are predicting their customer retention to *increase* in 2009.

> 9 percentage points is the average projected climb of these forecasted fortunate few.



Source for all infographics: September 2009 Landscape Management online survey with 249 respondents

TIME IS MONEY

How long does it take you to follow up with lost customers?

We call the same day they stop service. **43%**

Within one week **25%**

Within one month **8%**

Several months or longer **4%**

We just let them go. **20%**



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COVER STORY

continued from page 14

tech was held up on previous jobs and forgot to warn the client of his delay.

“Eventually, we did make it out on that second day, later that evening, and we did not charge for our \$95 service. The customer appreciated the non-charge and is a paying customer, today.”

Mayday’s Lawn and Pest in Winter Park, FL, was calling “mayday, mayday,” after one of its clients canceled services across four properties because of poor performance. CEO Jason May’s make-good included hiring a new landscape crew and personally being on-site for service delivery six weeks straight.

“An employee’s poor work and attitude lost us an account,” says James Van Eenwyk, president of Grandpa’s Nursery & Gardens in Sodus, NY. “We fired him and through communication — an apology and a personal promise to exceed their expectations — we won back the account on a trial basis. We still have them

as a client today.”

Craig might have been able to smooth over his *faux pas* with flowers, but not everyone is as fortunate. Flowers were the problem — not the solution — for James E. Coffey & Son Landscape Contractors in Laconia, NH.

“One customer caught a few of our employees throwing fallen rhododendron flowers at each other for more than a half-hour,” says Owner James Coffey. “The client called me and told the employees to leave the property.”

Coffey says he spoke with his crew and quickly visited the client to apologize face-to-face for his associates’ actions.

“I then put myself on that crew, which was a group of good people who just ‘had a moment,’” Coffey notes. “I stayed on the crew until the customer, whom I had

“One customer complained we weren’t removing enough leaves from her yard, but a camera later revealed a neighbor was dumping leaves in her yard just minutes after we left.”

— PAUL E. ANDERSON, OWNER OF JACKSONVILLE, FL-BASED PEA GREEN LAWN & HOME MAINTENANCE

done business with for nine years, again felt comfortable with our crew.”

Frequently, corralling straying customers “brings you both full circle,” concludes Coffey, noting the once-distressed customer relationship healed so well that the client and landscape crew eventually shared “a special moment.”

“A year after ‘the incident,’ while popping in on our same landscape crew at the same residence, I saw the customer throw the first rhododendron flower,” Coffey adds. “We all laughed, and that was that.” **LM**

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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S



THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author is the owner-manager of Kehoe & Co. Contact him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

Where to invest in 2010

The common thread in conversations with business owners is the perception that it gets harder every year just to get back to the same place. Next year will be another challenging year.

This is not pessimism; rather it is an acceptance of reality. The facts are housing and unemployment will be a drag on spending at least into 2011. And facts, as they say, are stubborn things. No amount of false hope and rah-rah changes that. The supply/demand equation remains tilted in the customer's favor, and the current political and lending climates are clearly unhelpful to small business owners.

Ninety-five percent of the companies I know will make less money this year. They are being realistic about next year and adjusting their investment strategies accordingly. They are investing in two primary areas: sales to generate revenues, and computer systems to reduce labor expense.

Investment in sales

A significant opportunity exists to pick up new business in 2010. Call it the "boomerang" effect. Many customers who contracted with the "low price guy" are not happy now, and they are willing to

pay a little more — although not a lot more — for improved quality and reliability.

Make an investment in a pricing model that enables you to win this business while still making gross profit. At the same time, investing in additional sales staff is a good idea. In many cases, the actual hire may be in operations or administration, freeing up the owner to focus on sales.

The days of selling by simply answering the phone are over. You must prospect more, bid more and employ what might be long-dormant selling skills to succeed. Investments in pricing and "feet on the street" are producing solid returns for many business owners already.

Although investments in Web sites, advertising and collateral material are always good ideas, they do not seem to be producing equal results.

Investment in systems

Another significant opportunity exists to reduce field and non-field labor expenses. Several companies I work with have invested in software that helps them manage in real time, thus minimizing the entry and manipulation of estimates, work orders and purchases. The goal is to enable the same number of people to handle greater workloads more efficiently.

This produces a "reduction in overhead" relative to revenue that has at least two virtuous effects:

1. It allows you to reallocate money away from "dead overhead" and redirect it to your sales effort.
2. It reduces your per-hour overhead recovery rate, allowing you to reduce prices in your pricing model — thus allowing you to safely work at a lower gross margin.

These investments go hand in hand, and are integral to recreating the way you will need to do business next year. Given the economic realities, it is best to get started now with these investments or risk falling behind. If you under-invest, the perception that it is getting harder to get back to the same place will unfortunately become your reality.

If you under-invest (in sales and systems), the perception that it is **getting harder to get back to the same place** will unfortunately become your reality.

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TRENCHERS

Compact Power Inc. →

The Boxer 118 trencher features an 18-hp, air-cooled Kohler Command Pro gasoline engine, with a chain speed of 280 feet per minute. The dirt cup tooth chain is made of high carbon steel with frosted carbide tips. Available in 24- and 36-in. lengths, the unit is complemented by a standard discharge auger, which simultaneously pushes the dirt away — allowing for a clean cut trench and consistent trenching speeds across a variety of soils. The 1,652-lb., rubber tracked trencher produces just 2.9 psi, and produces a trench width range of 4 to 8 in. BoxerEquipment.com or 800/476-9673

Toro

The Toro TRX-15 and TRX-19 tracked, walk-behind trenchers boast traction, maneuverability and zero-turn ease of operation, even on rough terrain. They feature user-friendly controls and four-cycle, V-twin engines. A large oil reservoir helps maintain low engine temperature and prolong engine life, and a large, dual-element KAI air cleaner improves airflow, performance and engine wear. Toro.com/TRX or 800/DIG-TORO



Ventrac ↑

The KY400 Trencher is capable of trenching up to 40 in. deep with a 5.5-in.-wide cut. It is designed with dual Push-N-Pull cylinders to assure positive boom control for digging, boom lift and transport. The terminator/cup combo chain offers car-



bide cutting tips for cutting performance in a variety of soil conditions. Digging teeth bolt onto the chain for easy replacement. Ventrac.com or 866/VENTRAC

Barreto Manufacturing

Because of its large footprint, the tracks of the new 2324TK Track Trencher are less invasive on the landscape. Cross-trenching is made simple — and by combining tracks with additional weight, the ability to keep the trench straight is greatly improved. The 2324TK features an ergonomic, single-handed control and up to 48 in. trenching depth. BarretoMfg.com or 800/525-7348

Brown Products Inc.

In addition to its Trench-Master line, Brown's Model F991H BedEdger provides trenching capability, too. Featuring a 9-hp Honda engine and steerable wheels, the unit trenches up to 9 in. deep and 2 in. wide. Interchangeable rotors provide versatility for landscaping or trenching operations. BrownProducts.com or 800/897-3726



For the Edge Inc.

The TRENCH'N edge Trencher has developed a new method of installing Sub-surface Drip Irrigation (SDI) and Waste Water Dispersion (WWD) systems that decrease installation cost and clean-up labor. SDI also eliminates the overspray onto sidewalks, streets and driveways that have now been restricted by California and Texas. The "blade-in-a-blade" technology is an option on all of the company's irrigation trenchers, which will install both conventional irrigation and

SDI/WWD systems all in one unit. This blade will also allow for the installation of low-voltage lighting, cable TV, dog fencing and silt fence. TrenchNEdge.com or 651/777-7923

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