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THE SOCRATIC METHOD

Jeffrey Scott's Leader's Edge peer group process borrows heavily from the Socratic method — the process of instruction using guided questioning to lead the "student," or in this case, the business owner, to enlightenment.

Below is an abridged version of the peer group process facilitated by Scott earlier this year. John Rennels, owner of A Plus Lawn and Landscape, Lawrenceburg, KY, presented his issue to the group: How to attract, qualify and retain an excellent, well-qualified landscape designer. He currently contracts with a landscape architect on a project-by-project basis.

Instead of offering outright solutions, the following dialogue took place in the peer review group:

Rennels: We started as a maintenance company, and we're just now getting into design/build and

construction. A lot of the issues related to that — I don't know what I don't know.

Dave Wright (president, Wright Landscape Services, Bloomingdale, Ontario, Canada): Are you looking for someone who is as strong as this person, or do you want somebody who can grow with your company and become a designer that fits your company?

Rennels: The projects we're going to be doing, at least starting off, are not going to be of the caliber of what he is capable of doing. So, no, I don't expect it to be someone as strong. I expect it to be someone strong enough to handle the size of projects and the kinds of projects that we're doing.

Craig Kopfmann (president, Green Acres Landscape & Design, Monroe, CT): John, do you have any design experience yourself?

Rennels: None. I couldn't draw myself out of a wet paper bag.

Matt Kulp (owner, Showcase Group, New Holland, PA): John, what current design/build revenue do you have?

Rennels: Probably less than \$15,000, \$20,000 — it's in its infancy, and that depends on what you consider "design/build/construction." The projects we're working on would safely fit into that.

Kulp: Let me rephrase that. How much revenue would you need for a designer?

Rennels: I'm not sure I'm following the question. Are you asking where you want it to go?

Kulp: How much revenue is currently there to feed a designer who would be on staff?

Rennels: I would say, "none," pretty much. I was planning on floating that person for a period. The nice thing, this current relationship, we've got the guys who can do the installs. I'm hoping to build that revenue using this current sub relationship to where I don't have to float this person when I bring him on.

Scott: Let me throw my question in: What's your 2009 projection?

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Rennels: I don't have one for design/build.

Scott: What's your guess?

Rennels: If we were able to hit \$50,000 in the first year with that, I would be tickled. That's purely a guess.

The above conversation took place in April. It turns out Rennels' guess was a pretty good one. He has continued the relationship with the landscape architect.

"He's not an employee of ours," Rennels says. "Thankfully, the relationship has gone very, very well. He is one of the premier architects in Lexington (the largest city close to Lawrenceburg)."

Rennels estimates the company has done about \$55,000 in design/build revenue year-to-date, "but for us, that's a big deal. We've got our feet wet; we've learned a lot. We've refined our process." — DJ

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ness dwindle with the economy.

After detailing the situation, each member of the group asks a question, without adding any advice. This has a dual purpose: It helps the business owner understand all aspects of the issue and starts him on the path to a solution.

"Sometimes, you realize the issue on the table is not the real issue," Scott says. "Sometimes, he's hiding it on purpose because he doesn't want to deal with it. He's happy when he finally shares it, but at the moment he doesn't really want to deal with it."

Peer groups can cover many issues from work-family balance to every business detail.

"Just having that soundboard there for getting ideas and listening to experiences is really beneficial," adds Kulp. "It's hard sometimes to get in an environment where you can really think things through and evaluate them unbiased when you're in your own company." LM

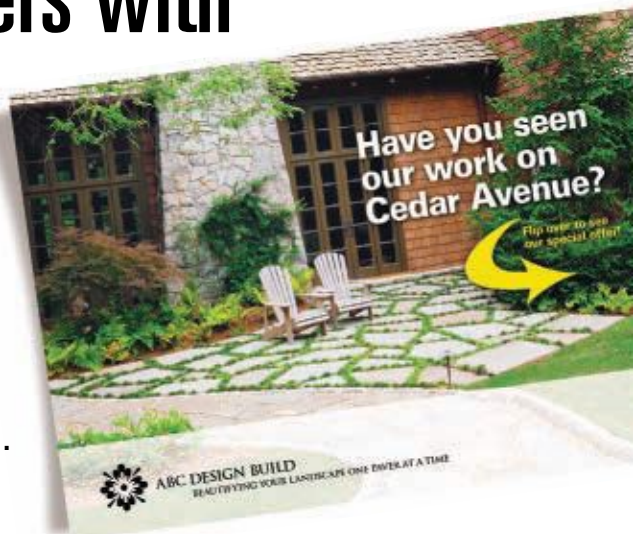


Allow us to highlight a few reasons why you're about to become more profitable...

Reach customers with low-tech, too

Direct mail can still be a viable way to connect with current and prospective accounts, even in the Internet age.

BY JOE SHOONER



TAKE AWAY

Target within your demographic and market for better response.

Use new technologies to customize your piece for each recipient.

Door hangers can be cheaper than mailed pieces, yet still effective.

DIRECT mail continues to be an effective method for Green Industry companies to reach prospective customers for several reasons:

1. People are accustomed to receiving buying opportunities through the mail;
2. The costs associated with using the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) are still a relative bargain; and most importantly...
3. Every prospect has a mailing address.

Start with a list

The single most important element of a direct mailing campaign is the list. It's very important to thoroughly research and target your mailing. Online list brokers such as AccuData allow registered users to run list counts based on geography and a host of demographic selections.

Before you begin running counts, though, define your ideal customer. Review your customer data, figure out the Zip codes where you have good market share already, and then define home value, income and age parameters for your average clients.

Be cautious in trying to target an area or demographic that you don't currently serve.

You will have much better results if you focus on the areas where you already work and the demographics that already buy from you.

A mailer that works

The mailing piece you send will have a significant impact on the cost and return on investment (ROI) for your campaign. Historically, sales letters have outperformed brochure and postcard mailings. However, because Green Industry services are inherently visual, they lend themselves to full-color photographic mailers.

The USPS continues to increase postage rates and tighten restrictions for folded pieces like brochures. Consequently, oversized postcards have gained in popularity. They are efficient to print and address, and still qualify for letter-rate postage.

Speaking of postage, research shows that recipients are more receptive to envelope mailers with a first-class stamp attached. Of course, this isn't always a practical option considering the extra cost and time needed compared to a presort mailing.

Your mailing piece needs to convince the reader to respond to you. Direct mail experts recommend that you make a compelling offer to motivate your prospects. When making an

offer, try to empathize with your prospects. What will get them to act? Is it cash, a percentage discount or additional free services? Unless a prospect has some idea what a project will likely cost, cash and percentage discounts don't carry much weight.

Consider their triggers and think about making offers that bundle your services together, like a year of tree/shrub fertilization following a landscape installation, or installation of some annual flowers with a maintenance contract. These are both offers that make your primary service look more valuable — and will keep customers thinking about you after their initial purchase is complete.

Don't make junk!

For as long as I can remember, I've been excited to see what comes in the mail. However, many consumers begrudge marketers for sending junk mail, making them less likely to

“CONSIDER THEIR TRIGGERS AND THINK ABOUT MAKING OFFERS THAT BUNDLE YOUR SERVICES TOGETHER, LIKE A YEAR OF TREE/SHRUB FERTILIZATION FOLLOWING A LANDSCAPE INSTALLATION.”

respond to your mailing piece. In fact, response rates for a single mailing to a new prospect list will average between just 0.5% and 1%.

One way to increase recipient interest is to include variable data in your mailing. Variable data printing (VDP) can be thought of as a full-color mail merge. Today's VDP programs make use of digital printing technology to marry data and design during the printing process. The result is a mailing piece that can be fully customized for each recipient on your mailing list. The potential uses for this are limited only by the data you have on hand.



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For example, say you have recently completed and photographed five installation projects. You generate a radius list to target the neighbors of each of these clients. You mail to a list of 500 homes, but change the photo and headline depending on which home is the one to which the recipient lives closest. Your headline may read "Have You Seen Our Work on Cedar Avenue?" or "Landscaping <Neighborhood>'s Finest Homes Since 1990" and feature the project nearest the recipient's address. This results in a piece with real stopping power.

To close the loop on this method, the use of a personalized URL (PURL) gives the recipient a personalized Web address to visit for more information. The PURL (joeshooner.yourlandscapeco.com, for instance) should lead to a landing page with a summary of the information the prospect will want to know before contacting you, as well as a form for responding.

Marketers making good use of PURL technology report a 33% to 100% increase in response rates. However, if there isn't any relevant information on the landing page, and you aren't saving the prospect time and energy, it will appear very gimmicky.

In summary...

The costs for any mailing project are going to fluctuate dramatically depending on the size of the list, the format of the piece, the postage rate you achieve, and the number of times you mail. The use of VDP and PURL technology will drive up your cost per piece, but ideally you will mail far fewer pieces to a highly targeted list, thus increasing your ROI. **LM**

The author is an account executive with Focal Point Communications in Cincinnati. Contact him at 800/525-6999 or joeshooner@growpro.com, or visit www.growpro.com.



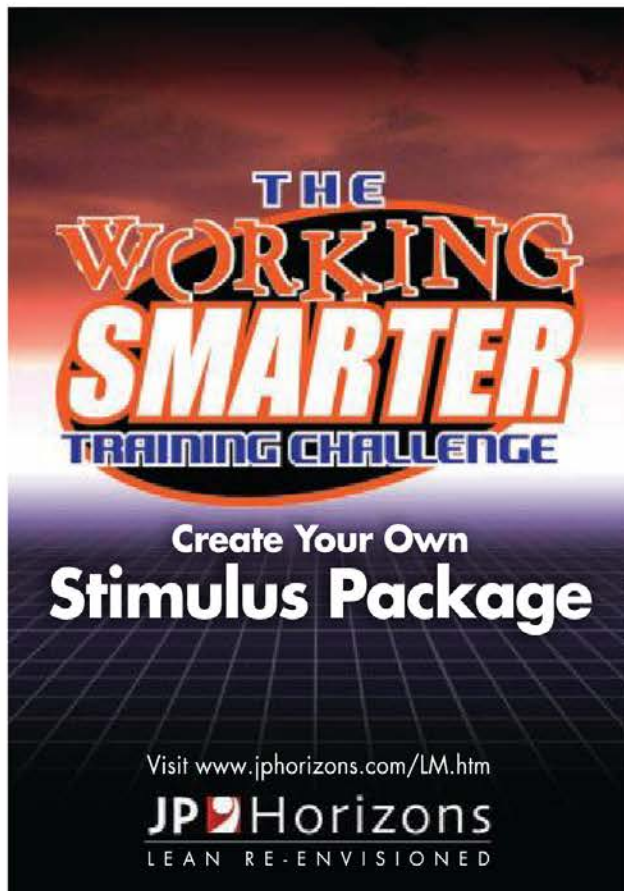
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TAKE AWAY

Gauge the effectiveness of your marketing message by the level of response you receive to different marketing initiatives.

Discounts alone won't give the results you're looking for.

To close the sale, explain benefits and value — and address the customer's specific concerns.

Nail the sale

Successfully selling lawn service requires the process be well thought out. Then, an appropriate strategy must be crafted and executed rigorously every day. **BY BILL HOOPES**

WHEW! WHAT a year it's been — challenging for all with many mixed outcomes. In fact, generalizing about results could be misleading.

Instead, I felt compelled to confirm my observations by talking to a group of successful, veteran landscape contractors, folks with records of accomplishment throughout the years. I was interested to learn how they performed during the '09 selling season.

After an admittedly random series of conversations, it was apparent results varied significantly, from modestly successful to awful. What made the difference? I learned there wasn't one lone identifiable success factor. Still, I can confirm that, in most cases, the sales process was extremely important.

During my 25 years as a Green Industry

trainer and consultant, I've encountered only a few truly *great* marketing/sales companies. It's not that Green Industry operators are incapable of great selling; it's just that, as is often the case with technical- or production-oriented folks, selling isn't typically a core skill. It must be learned. In fact, I view selling as a process, a combination of lead-generation activities and personal follow-ups.

Begin with marketing

Did you go to market efficiently? There's no doubt gathering pros-

pect addresses, lawn sizes and phone numbers electronically is highly efficient. Did you take advantage of the latest techniques and tools?

According to my data, direct-mail response declined. For some, it declined significantly. Successful operators I contacted didn't depend on mail. They used multiple tactics to generate leads. Examples include energetic reselling of previous customers, neighborhood canvassing, block leading and driveway marketing.

Was your message effective? Did you change your focus significantly in response to the economy? If so, did it result in enough high quality leads? Some services reduced their emphasis on quality, promoting discounts alone. But while everyone wants a deal, discounting as a singular strategy didn't deliver the results most expected.

There's no best strategy for every lawn service. The way a company sells should reflect the company philosophy and deliver what the public has been led to expect. For some larger services focused on fast, lower-profit growth, discounting may be the only choice for maximizing sales. But no one should conclude that, bad economy or not, you must discount heavily to sell lawn service. This past spring, I observed a significantly different picture.

It's been my experience that, when price is the determining factor in making a sale, the first-year cancel rate for those discounted sales is higher. A competitor will come along, offer a lower price and take the customer. If a company has the ability to outsell the cancel rate, perhaps price off selling provides a sustainable

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model. But for the majority of small to mid-sized services, lifetime value is key. Businesses with limited marketing budgets — and without the ability or inclination to conduct large sales campaigns — need to keep their customers.

Sales based on providing what the customer wants at a fair price versus simply cutting the price and pressuring the customer all season long for added revenue delivers lower cancellations and consistently higher lifetime values.

Making the sale

The main goal for landscape contractors in '09 was the same as any year: to maximize profitable sales. For companies with large, full-time sales teams, the spring sales goal is only the first phase of a year-long campaign. For smaller companies with only part-time salespeople, spring sales must provide the bulk of annual revenue. Regardless of who sells, leads must be tightly managed for a maximum close rate.

ARE YOU GENERATING ENOUGH GOOD LEADS?

- ▶ Did your 2009 marketing message match the company philosophy and image? Was the marketing focus on quality and outstanding service, or did you attempt to switch to deal maker in response to anticipated sales resistance? Or did you make a significant change in emphasis this last season, possibly confusing prospects about what you stand for?
- ▶ Did you use modern, cutting-edge tactics to generate maximum leads from high-responding prospect groups? Marketing techniques are changing. What was effective 10 years ago is no longer making it happen. Are you current?
- ▶ Did your marketing strategy target new sales, upsell current customers, resell past customers and go after leads that never closed? Selling across the customer spectrum turned out to be meaningful last spring. — BH



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