

In the spring of '09, landscape contractors used various sales strategies. Some pushed for an absolute maximum of new sales and used every trick in the book to close. Quoting one sales manager: "Once I have them on the phone, they don't get off until they're my customer." His meaning was clear: He'd do whatever it took to make the sale. But would the sale result in a profit, or would the pressured customer, succumbing to a great deal, cancel mid-season?

For a rep on the phone compensated only to close sales, it won't matter. If, however, a business depends on keeping customers for three, four or more seasons, the sales conversation is important.

The sales chain

I believe in and teach the sales chain, which is a metaphor for the process of acquiring and keeping customers. It consists of three important links, and continuity among these links is

imperative for success.

The first link represents **marketing**. The company message is communicated accurately and effectively. The second link represents the **selling process**. Leads are converted to sales in a tightly managed system using daily goals and recognition. The final link is **service delivery**. If the service meets customer expectations, referrals abound, marketing is successful and the cycle begins again.

Focusing on the second link, sales methodology can be condensed into two basic camps. I describe the first as making contact, creating or building interest, baiting the prospect and hooking the sale. Typically, it's done with a tightly canned, well-rehearsed pitch.

The second is a more consultative approach I teach in five basic steps.

1. Use a strong, clear opener, which lets the prospect know who's calling and why. It also establishes the prospect's interest level.

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2. Identify what each prospect wants. Notice I didn't say *needs*. We buy what we want. But to provide those wants, a sales professional needs to understand what they are by asking a couple probing questions.

3. Communicate value. We accomplish this

by explaining how our service benefits each customer. A benefit isn't something we do, but *why* we do what we do. This is important to the prospect.

4. Look for a buying signal. A tie-down confirms the prospect understands how we'll provide exactly what they want. If we're successful, we'll get that buying signal.

5. Close or confirm the sale. If you have followed the process, closing will be a snap.

When sales resistance rears its head, our people are taught to handle objections as questions that haven't been answered. In reality, they're not objections.

My process for removing resistance and making the sale involves three steps:

1. Ask "why do you feel that way?" It's important to understand the prospect's motives for resisting. And even if I'm sure I already know, having the prospect repeat his or her concern sets me up to remove it.

2. Create empathy. Let the prospect know you understand and you've felt the same way. Now, there's no barrier between prospective buyer and seller.

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CONVERT LEADS TO PROFITABLE SALES

- ▶ Who has the responsibility to sell in your organization? How are they trained?
- ▶ What's your sales message? Is there continuity between the marketing message and sales follow-up?
- ▶ Are your salespeople setting accurate and reasonable expectations?
- ▶ Are you converting leads to customers at the highest possible close rate?
- ▶ Are you selling what prospects want, or is the sales objective simply to get to "yes"? — BH

3. Remove the concern with a targeted benefit that responds to it specifically. “Mr. Homeowner, think about this ...” — and provide the appropriate benefit.

Remember, many prospects will never buy, but it doesn't matter because there are plenty of potential buyers who will understand and appreciate a presentation that clearly communicates value.

Consultative selling is an effective strategy. I believe that for higher revenue sales, leading to a strong customer commitment, followed by fewer short-term cancels, it makes sound business sense for most operators.

I'm more confident than ever before that we, as a home-services industry, will continue to succeed by offering measurable, visible value to America's property owners. While we may not be able to sell everyone, there will be enough homeowners who understand that investing a small portion of their discre-

SELLING THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

Several operators reported successful sales campaigns based on selling benefits, not discounting. In those cases, customer growth increased from 20% to 30%. How was it done? The “old-fashioned way” — quality and reliability were promoted in fliers, personal visits to evaluate lawns were made in quick response to inquiries, and phone follow-up selling focused on the benefits of service versus discounts alone. — BH

tionary income in their properties will repay them — and that's a message I look forward to sending. LM

The author is the owner of Grass Roots Training/ Consulting (www.trainandkeeppeople.com) and can be reached at 614/531-4000 or hoopes@columbus.rr.com. Read his blog at www.trainingchamp.wordpress.com.

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Realize your goals in the Working Smarter Cycle

If your people are happy and productive, your business will experience success. BY JIM PALUCH

TAKE AWAY

Industry innovation starts at the people level.

Earn employee buy-in by making them part of the planning process.

Success isn't defined by size or location, but rather the happiness of customers and employees.

I WAS HOPING for earthshaking, groundbreaking, industry-making innovation when I asked for input about your experiences during the past year. I pictured Dan Jacobs and the rest of the staff debating which new idea and industry leader would end up on the front cover of the magazine. I imagined stories about the company in Idaho that learned how to cut grass merely by driving by with a laser and not even needing to get out of the truck. I imagined the San Diego lawn care company that was able to make its five applications in a season in partnership with Google Earth, reducing their labor cost to almost zero and enabling its employees to aid the community by working at senior citizen centers throughout California ... for free!

Yes that's what I was hoping for, but what I received was the same ol' thing. And that's more than OK with me.

It's the same thing we've been hearing at JP Horizons for more than two decades: The most exciting changes happening in any company, regardless of size, location or industry, always come back to one important commonality, *the people*. The stories we heard the most about this past month were about people, and how they stepped up and became more interested and involved in their companies.

The best way to describe this process of improvement brought about by people can be

understood in the Working Smarter Cycle, which focuses on achieving a better quality of life. For a company, this may mean improved profitability. For an owner, it may mean a healthy balance sheet that allows the company to be purchased by the employees one day, thus creating opportunity for everyone. For the employee, it simply may mean being able to provide the current needs and future security for their deserving families.

The steps of the Working Smarter Cycle, starting in reverse order from quality of life, illustrate that happy customers come next. These are supported by efficient processes, which are made possible through a culture of trust in the company, which can only come from ... you guessed it ... people.

I become inspired when I read examples such as:

› The folks at Perm-O-Green Lawn Care, headquartered in Wichita Falls, TX, say, "This type of thinking and communicating is new to our team. It's great to watch everyone growing outside their comfort zones."

› Rochester, IN-based Sellers Landscaping, Lawn & Irrigation is challenging its team to look at how they can work smarter in their positions. The result is an incredible list of

MONTHLY CHALLENGE

Discuss the Working Smarter Cycle with your leaders, and discuss what might keep a company from helping to grow people.

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GOOD THINGS

»» COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT



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WORKING SMARTER



"THE MOST EXCITING CHANGES HAPPENING IN ANY COMPANY, REGARDLESS OF SIZE, LOCATION OR INDUSTRY, ALWAYS COME BACK TO ONE IMPORTANT COMMONALITY, THE PEOPLE"

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ideas that — if everyone commits to accepting personal responsibility and follow-through — could save the company incredible amounts of money that would benefit everyone.

► At Skinners Nurseries' corporate offices in Jacksonville, FL, the barriers that often result from people being on different floors or departments have melted away. Meeting each week and looking for ideas to work smarter helps them communicate more openly and productively. This creates a willingness to support one another, which, in turn, helps everyone to better serve the customer.

If the aforementioned companies continue in the direction they've started and intentionally move through the Working Smarter Cycle patiently, they'll be serving the happy customers every company needs to provide the quality of life every individual in this country deserves. **LMI**

The author is president of JP Horizons Inc. Visit www.jp horizons.com.



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Take 9 steps to teach managers to think like owners

Training managers to make decisions like a business owner is easy, essential and can provide more benefits than you may think.

BY JONATHAN GOLDHILL

TAKE AWAY

With trained managers in place, owners can quit obsessing about their businesses in their personal lives.

Owners should focus on the big picture for their company's growth strategies; managers should be able to shoulder the day-to-day responsibilities.

Make sure you equip managers with the training, authority and resources to make such an arrangement work.

WHAT WOULD your business and life be like if you took a four-week-long, guilt-free vacation where you didn't check in with your office? What would it be like to return from vacation to find that everything operated smoothly without you?

While it may be difficult to believe, it's possible.

Your main goal as a landscape business owner should be to design and shape a business that serves you and works independently from you. You want a business that will run on autopilot and continue to generate revenue continuously despite your absence. When you take a vacation, you should be able to feel guilt-free about leaving your business in the hands of your managers. But to accomplish this, your managers must have an owner's mentality.

As a business owner, it's your responsibility to think about the big picture. You should be focused on your company's purpose, direction, strategy, structure, systems, people, goals and accountability processes. Meanwhile, your managers should be focused on the day-to-day result areas: planning, organizing, staffing, supervising, delegating, measuring and reporting.

How do you get managers to think and act like owners? From my observation during the past 25 years working with thousands of small businesses — including landscape contractors — owners and managers can become more effective leaders by following these nine steps:

1 Regularly face reality. Observe what is and isn't working in your business. Have the courage to change what needs to be changed, while developing the wisdom to know what's unchangeable.

Design and shape your business so that it both serves you and works independently from you.

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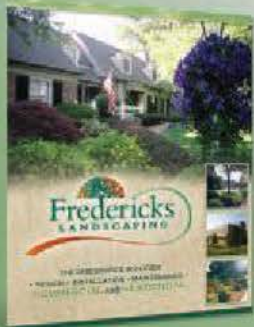
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2 Define and clarify your vision, goals and direction. Share your goals with your managers and take control the entire time, from execution through completion.

3 Manage your key resources. Manage your time, staff and money wisely. Effective stewardship of time, labor and capital enable you to leverage your most vital resources and grow faster than competitors.

4 Provide educational opportunities. Learn and implement strategic and systematic approaches in each of the functional areas of business (sales and marketing, for example), and share this information with others in the company. It's vital to share information with managers to facilitate better decision-making.

5 Implement systems. Well-run businesses have processes for everything. Accounting has a process, selling has a process, etc. Have managers learn and participate in installing these processes within the company.



6 Be a strong financial steward. Improve your understanding of your company's financial statements. Know your ratios — and those of your competitors. Increase the financial literacy of your managers, because they need to understand the key performance drivers in your business. Put an incentive program together so employees can share in the bottom line.

7 Hold individuals accountable. As Thomas Edison once said, "Vision without execution is hallucination." Likewise, having goals and making decisions without holding people accountable undermines management effectiveness. Provide frequent feedback to keep everyone on course and motivated to do better.

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