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Let's *not* re-enact 'Lord of the Flies'

Ever read "Lord of the Flies," or seen one of the two flicks based on the novel? I only ask because some within the Green Industry have forgotten the book's golden message.

In the allegorical novel by Nobel Prize-winning author William Golding, a group of British school-boys descend into savagery after being marooned on a deserted island. It's a lesson on the scary de-evolution that occurs when we allow our God-given basic survival instincts to go awry.

It appears some among us are re-enacting "Lord of the Flies." In a recent online survey conducted by *Landscape Management*, "lowball bids" tied "the recession" as contractors' top threats. One of these threats we can do something about. I'll give you a hint: It's *not* the economy.

We must band together and refuse to participate in the markdown madness infecting lawn care, landscape maintenance, design/build and irrigation contractors. Margins are tight enough. After paying direct costs, and general and administrative expenses, 10% profit actually is considered a good

margin for many in our business.

Whether you're a national company, a regional player or a one-man mowing operation started last summer after you were laid off, there's zero margin for mindless markdowns.

When working on bids, remember: Price is important, but it's not *everything*. In fact, several studies have shown price isn't even the No. 1 thing on most consumers' minds when selecting landscape contractors.

A lot has changed, but world-class service still rules in 2010. Ensure all of your proposals look professional: Include rock-solid testimonials with captivating before-and-after site photographs, and tailor each pitch to the prospect's stated and observed service needs.

Of course, we can't honestly blame all of our pricing problems on lowballing competitors. Some of us do a fine job undermining ourselves. Whether it's out of fear, greed, inexperience and/or ignorance, too many in our industry are undervaluing and underselling themselves — and it could haunt us for years.

There's more than enough business out there for the taking. We need to give consumers 101 reasons to *not* do it themselves when it comes to maintaining their lawns and landscapes. We also need to sell and deliver true value, and start charging appropriately for it, on every job — for everyone's sake.

There's margin for markup, even in this economy. Think about it: Some coffee shops pay less than 5 cents for the beans they use to make one cup of java, but they charge consumers up to 100 times that, and most of us don't blink an eye. It's time for us to wake up, get off the island and *sell* the coffee.

The alternative, "Lord of the Flies — Landscape Edition," is no way to live. Any business we win today based solely, or even primarily, on price can be lost just as quickly tomorrow to another lowballer. As famous writer Stanislaw Lem once said, "Cannibals prefer those who have no spines."

To win in the long term, our industry must **think outside the 'low price' box.**



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