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THE HALLMARK

RON HALL EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Ron has been in the Green Industry for 27 years. Contact him via e-mail at rhall@questex.com.

Yes, you can lessen fuel shock

For years I commuted a great distance to our editorial offices in Cleveland. I no longer make that drive. Thank goodness. As gasoline surpasses \$4 a gallon I can't afford filling up every couple of days. I can only imagine the distress fuel prices are causing those of you with more than a few service vehicles on the road.

Some companies are taking aggressive steps to control fuel costs. Rottler Pest & Lawn Solutions, St. Louis, uses technology to better manage its vehicles and fuel costs while also improving field efficiencies and reducing accidents. When Mike Rottler, company president, shared the following information at the Lawn Care Summit in Atlanta this past December many of us didn't realize how high fuel prices would be this spring, in spite of warnings. Is \$5-a-gallon gasoline in our near future? Hope not.

Consider some of the technology Rottler uses to help control fuel costs and improve safety:

▶ **Drive cam with streaming video from service vehicles.** Exceptional forces such as hard braking, swerving or collision triggers the drive cam, which records video of the critical seconds before and after the triggered event. Rottler says most accidents happen with employees who have been on

the job 12 months or less. He says the drive cam has reduced the incidence of accidents in his company. Fewer accidents mean fewer claims.

▶ **GPS with features to monitor fleet maintenance, vehicle idling and after-hours use.** It can also be used as a time clock to verify employee time sheets. Rottler adopted GPS years ago. "It's not going to solve all of your ills," says Rottler, adding it must be managed closely to be effective.

▶ **Routing software.** The system Rottler uses can be modified to route service set-ups or service orders. It also schedules around confirmed days and/or times.

▶ **Handheld devices.** These handy units provide field personnel with a tremendous amount of information when they're in the field, including valuable customer information. The devices Rottler techs use allow bar code scanning and can email invoices to customers. Because of nearly universal Wi-Fi coverage, field personnel can upload and download in the field and post to the office. Rottler says his employees like the devices.

▶ **SOTI MobiControl Software.** This program provides remote access to troubleshoot the handheld devices, which must have access via a data plan, Wi-Fi or ActiveSync. While connected, it allows you to monitor and/or control the device — and also view the connection status and battery life on each device.

Rottler recommends owners considering adopting the preceding or other new or unfamiliar technology develop a plan. Choose one or two initiatives per year, and test the technology on a small scale before rolling it out company-wide. Also, consider whether the technology matches your company's culture.

Finally, closely monitor the performance of the technology, even in the testing phase, to determine the measurable return you can confidently expect on your investment.

"The cutting edge of technology is also the bleeding edge," says Rottler.

Choose **one or two initiatives** per year, and test the technology on a **small scale** before rolling it out company-wide.

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“Even if we think we know what they want, we’re going to be quiet. It’s not about us. It’s about the client.”

— ROGER MYERS, PRESIDENT,
AMERICAN BEAUTY LANDSCAPING



Close THE DEAL

In today's economy, customers are forcing down prices, so every sale matters. Veteran contractors offer proven strategies to increase your chances of getting the job. BY **RON HALL** EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Roger Myers says it's easier to sell surrounded by fine architecture.

American Beauty Landscaping is headquartered on five wooded acres in Boardman, in far eastern Ohio. Ornamentals and attractive greenery border the 700-ft.-long drive to its office building. After parking your car, you walk a flagstone path to enter a lobby where a modern, flat-screen TV is displaying an audio-visual loop of the company's work — a collection of impressive projects featuring colorful plants, inviting hardscapes and soothing water features. The company has earned more than 130 landscape awards during its 30-year history.

"All of this helps deliver a message," says Founder and President Roger Myers of its headquarters.

Myers, who spent 17 years as a teacher (the last seven accomplished while also painstakingly building ABL), knows the value of

systems. Not surprisingly, he uses a carefully developed system to sell his company's services. ABL draws heavily on its regionally recognized reputation for excellence.

Myers wants the sales process for his company to be as efficient as possible, and also pleasurable for clients. If all goes well, it consists of a single meeting at the client's site. This is followed by an appointment for the client to visit his offices to review and discuss the design. The payoff, of course, is a signed contract.

"We bring our clients to our office. It cuts our visits in half, so we see them just once during the bidding process, where we have a nice discussion. It also allows us to control the environment. It's quiet, and the client is surrounded by architecture," says Myers.

More than a decade ago, Myers added maintenance and snow management to his company's offerings. It was a good move, he says. Given the opportunity, he uses

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essentially the same process to sell those services, especially to larger clients. He wants them to come to his facility and see ABL's capabilities for themselves.

"We want them to see our staff and our equipment, and to understand that we will not let them down, that what they'll get from us is dependability and reliability. That's important. Buying is an emotional process," says Myers. "If you're a mall manager and your livelihood depends upon how well a contractor is taking care of that property, you need the peace of mind that comes with dependability. We educate them; that's why our service costs a little bit more."

Typically, after a discussion featuring several "thought-provoking questions" zeroing in on both the practical and emotional needs of the client, Myers says it's time for him or any of his five other designer/salespeople to shut up.

"Even if we think we know what they want, we're going to be quiet. It's not about us; it's about the client," he explains. "Sure, there will be dead air, but clients ultimately tell us what they're really looking for."

Longtime Green Industry consultant Kevin Kehoe, Kehoe & Co., Laguna Niguel, CA, describes Myers' sales technique for selling maintenance and snow management as "finding the customer's point of pain."

"Everybody knows the price points in their markets these days," Kehoe adds. "But most people are not pure price buyers because they've gotten bad surprises before. They've received poor service or unexpected change orders, and that's upset them. The good salesperson finds the customer's point of pain."

Train for success

Wayne Volz, founder and operator of Wayne's Lawn Service, Louisville, KY, says good salespeople are made, not born. Through training and practice, they learn how to find out what prospects are really looking for — apart from price, of course — and how to overcome objections.

BOOST SALES, ONE DRIP AT A TIME

Being Green Industry professionals, you're familiar with the benefits of drip irrigation. By providing a slow steady drip of water to the roots of plants, drip irrigation uses water more efficiently, often saves fertilizer and pesticide costs and, most importantly, provides clients with healthier plants.

Did you realize that you could use the same concept to market your services? The technique is called "drip marketing."

The concept is simple: Send out a stream of promotional pieces over a period of time to important sales leads, and maintain an ongoing and beneficial relationship with customers. What landscape/lawn service company owner wouldn't want to establish and maintain contact with prospects — and build loyalty among customers?

Start with a plan that fits your company's personnel, its unique culture and capabilities. Your plan doesn't have to be complicated, but it does have to be consistent and measurable. It must include a way to track the type, number and frequency of prospective contacts, and measure results in terms of sales.

Drip marketing programs use:

» **Email.** These can be pre-written or personalized. Email is a powerful relationship-building tool, which leads to sales. Once contacts grant permission, schedule a "drip" message at least weekly.

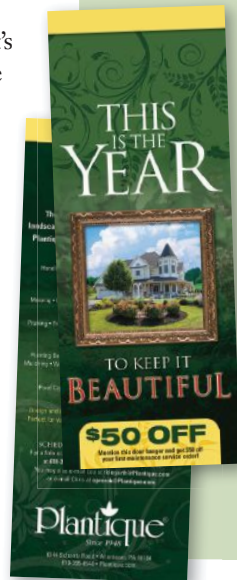
» **Direct mail.** This is more costly than email, but each drip message can be personalized.

» **Social media.** Several popular online tools allow users to time messages and send them via Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites simultaneously.

» **Customer relationship management (CRM).** CRM systems track and record every stage in the sales process for each prospective client, from initial contact to final sale. The cost and complexity of implementing a dedicated CRM system is too great for most small landscape/lawn service companies. But every company should develop some system to accurately record, track and measure the effectiveness of its correspondence, meetings and proposals against sales.

Plantique keeps its name in front of clients and prospects with a range of colorful reminders.

Finally, realize that drip marketing won't work without personal follow-up. — RH



Regular specials keep customers tuned into Wayne's Lawn Service.

"There are a whole lot of people out there making tall grass short, more and more competitors every day," says Volz, who picked up valuable sales skills from his father, a professional salesman who peddled automotive parts over a six-state region.

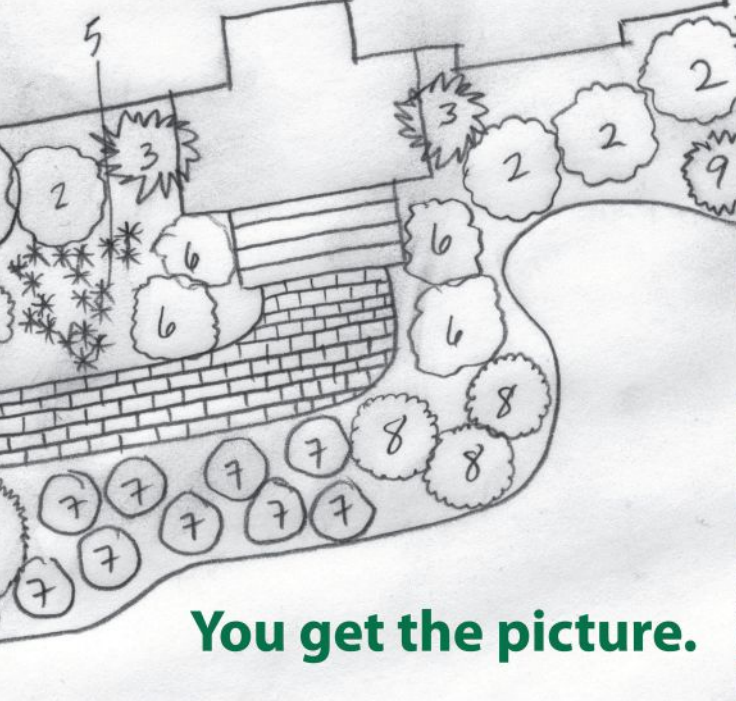
"He would sit me down and I would have to sell him my services," recalls Volz. "He came back with every reason in the world why he shouldn't buy my services. It created a real love-hate relationship

with my father at the time, but I love him for it now. It prepared me to sell, whether I'm sitting in a boardroom talking to an industrial account or talking to the lady of the house in her driveway."

Volz preaches the power of role-playing in building sales skills.

"The first thing you should go over is, 'Tell me three to five reasons why somebody should hire you over the competition,'" he suggests. "You might

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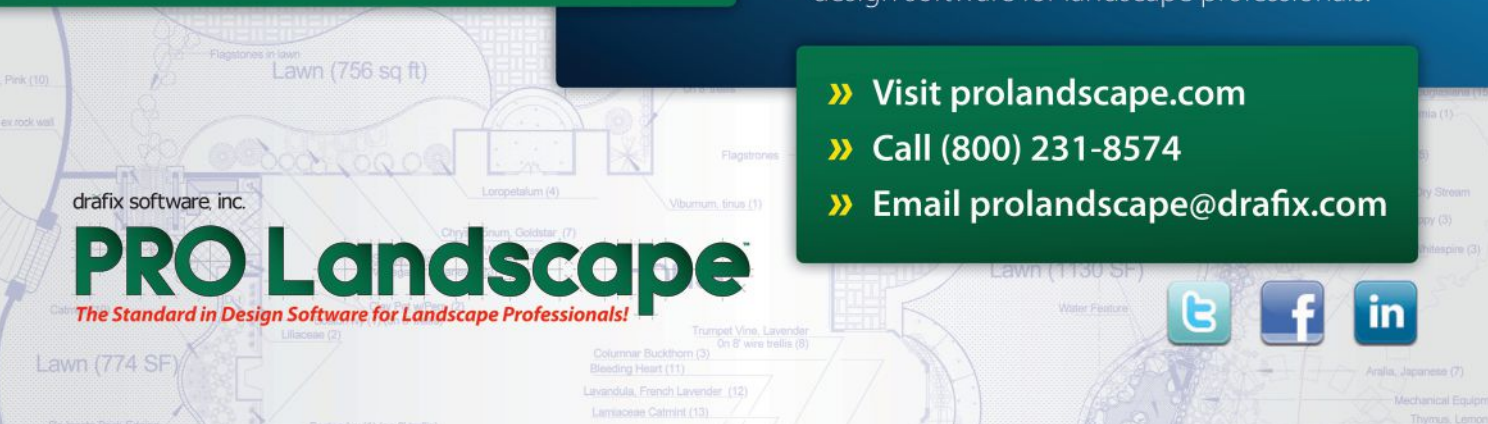
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be surprised how many people have to think a long time to answer that.”

Even though Wayne’s Lawn Service long ago passed the point where Volz could be involved in every aspect of its operation, he’s been hesitant to add a “full-time salesperson.” Instead, at about the \$300,000 mark, he took aside several crew leaders and trained them to price services.

“It’s easier to find people who are capable and can do the work and run a crew than to do sales,” says Volz, who, after founding his company 32 years ago,

still sells along with his son, Kyle, and his business partner and brother, Corky.

Price vs. value

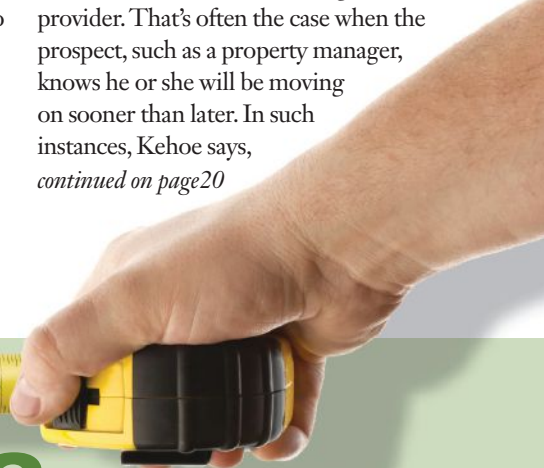
Volz says his company’s message to prospects is always the same: its ability to create customer value.

“It took us almost nine years to realize that the person who hires you because you’re the lowest price will fire you for the same reason,” he says. “Sometimes we hear customers say, ‘You’re too high.’ And we respond, ‘Compared to what?’ And if they say,

‘compared to everyone else I’ve talked to,’ it’s probably not a good fit for us.”

Kehoe agrees that not every sale is worth pursuing, especially if lowest price is the sole criterion for selecting a service provider. That’s often the case when the prospect, such as a property manager, knows he or she will be moving on sooner than later. In such instances, Kehoe says,

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MAKE YOUR **MARKETING** MEASURE UP

Today’s economic conditions — the lack of new home construction, rising product costs and \$4-a-gallon gasoline — have raised the stakes for acquiring and retaining lawn care customers. With fewer new developments to target, companies are targeting competitors’ clients with special offers and, in some cases, lower prices. This is hardly new, but the competition is becoming more fierce.

For these reasons and others, Joe Kucik, owner of a \$2.5-million-plus Scotts Lawn Care franchise headquartered in Lansing, MI, says marketing and sales now take on greater importance than ever before. In fact, he says that owners must mesh them with the other business management functions to reduce costs and increase customer contacts to remain competitive.

In addition to running the lawn care franchise, Kucik is also president of Real Green, a total business management software system for lawn care, so you would hardly expect him to say otherwise. But you can’t argue with the success that he and other industry-specific software users are experiencing. These software packages are enabling owners to better identify, contact and entice prospects with special offers in a timely and cost-efficient way. In addition to Real Green, there are at least six other popular business management software packages for lawn care, probably more. In addition to typical functions, such as billing and routing, some offer strong marketing components.

Kucik himself has owned and sold “four or five” lawn care companies over the course of a career starting in the 1970s. He says that getting to customers first and selling them on the first contact is the most cost-efficient way to sign them up. He calls it “one-step sales,” a technique his company uses for an 80% close rate.

“People want things done easily,” says Kucik. “We tell them this is what it costs and this is the special offer we have for you today, and we’ll have somebody out on your property tomorrow.”

He says his company can do that confidently because of the huge database it has developed (and continues to add to) on customers and prospects, and their properties. This includes information from aerial photography, which it uses to measure properties online. This greatly speeds the estimating and proposal-generating process, which is key to selling customers on first contact.

“We’re coming up with new ways to use these tools every day,” says Kucik.

Even so, his company still also uses traditional marketing and sales techniques, including direct mail with follow-up calls, and offering financial incentives for technicians who refer clients that sign-up for a year’s service.

Kucik’s Scotts franchise tracks and measures the financial cost of every marketing initiative against sales. The days of “shotgun” marketing are over, or soon will be, he says, because owners can’t afford to guess at the effectiveness of their marketing efforts.

“In three or four years, everybody will be doing it this way,” he says of his company’s sophisticated and technology-aided approach to marketing and sales.

Long gone are the early days when a homeowner, envying a neighbor’s green, weed-free lawn, would chase a ChemLawn truck seeking service. (Yes, that wasn’t uncommon in the industry’s early days.) Today, to remain competitive in lawn care, owners require a marketing plan — relying upon both technology and boots-on-the-ground field technicians — to deliver measureable sales results.



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COVER STORY

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“power has shifted to the customer.”

Nevertheless, price, as important as it is, too often dominates sales presentations.

“Good salespeople are not just quoting numbers. Good salespeople are qualifying to fit,” says Kehoe. “They’re not selling landscapes, they’re discussing the customer’s business, their budgets and finding out what the customer is trying to accomplish — maybe improve occupancy rates, get higher rents or something else.”

Once a salesperson establishes a dialogue based on customer needs, his or her role becomes more collaborative and consultative.

But don’t dawdle, says Kehoe. If it’s a small job, give the customer a deal and close the sale: “Why bring work back to the office and complicate your life?”

While a bigger contract may (and often does) require more work, such as estimating and a second meeting, the faster you get back to the client, the better chance of making the sale. In other words, get there first, and get back to them promptly.

(Editor’s Note: For more on closing the sale on-site, see Kehoe’s column this month on page 22.)

Selling multiple services

Michael McShane began working full-time at Plantique in 1978. Today, he’s president and CEO of the landscaping

company that was founded in Allentown, PA, in 1948, and that serves the Lehigh Valley and northeast Pennsylvania. Plantique, like most other diversified landscape companies, has different people and procedures for selling maintenance and design/build. Obviously, says McShane, you want build jobs to become ongoing management.

All of Plantique’s landscape architects and designers who sell projects possess academic degrees and are experienced. Once they design and sell a project, it’s handed over to one of the company’s three primary design/build supervisors. The supervisors, each with more than 20 years’ experience, schedule the work and — barring any major design changes — it’s their job to complete it.

“We try to give areas of responsibilities to match the strengths of the people we have,” says McShane.

The company’s maintenance salespeople, one of whom came up the ranks and another formerly with a national company, develop the property management regimen and scheduling for each customer. While they maintain customer relations, their primary responsibility is to sell.

“Everybody in the Lehigh Valley knows who Plantique is. We’ve been around for more than 60 years,” says McShane. “What we have to fight constantly is that we have a reputation for being expensive. Our job is to communicate to the public that the reason why we charge what we charge is because we do it right.”

McShane says this includes emphasizing the intangibles Plantique provides that other companies may not.

For example, the firm tells customers what its guarantee and warranty mean. That it has its own nursery. That its designers have both education and experience.

“We use all of this and more in promoting our brand, and attempting to create separation from the competition,” says McShane. LM

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“We must communicate the reason why we charge what we charge is because we do it right.”

— MIKE McSHANE, PRESIDENT,
PLANTIQUE

