

Gathering the team for business planning allows employees to develop a deep understanding of the company's processes, while recognizing profitability is good. The mentality is never us vs. them; it's everyone is in it together because it's everyone's plan, not the owner's plan.

COMPANY CULTURE

As with any aspect of workplace culture, this attitude toward budgeting and business planning directly impacts the way employees feel about their roles. Weed Man has seen tremendous benefits from implementing open-book management.

Other companies considering an open-book approach may have to do a gradual cultural shift. It's often a business owner's instinct to keep financials under wraps, but the benefits of inclusion far outweigh the negatives. Foremost, it allows management and ownership to align in their goals. Employees aren't just told what the company's goals are; they play an active role in setting and reaching those goals. Secondly, collective business planning with the entire management team creates a forum for challenging company discussions. Not everything is easy or enjoyable to deliberate, but sometimes a problem or part of the budget needs to come under the microscope before

it can be resolved. The company owner has the freedom to ask, "Why were there no telephone costs one month?"

After the business plan is created, the next step is to put the budget into an accounting software program and share financials with all managers. In addition to helping maintain an open-book management style, this step enables employees to understand where the business stands at all times.

Encouraging active participation in the business-planning process among all employees helps managers manage better, while fostering a culture of trust, autonomy and accountability in the workplace. **LM**

Lemcke, COO of Turf Holdings/Weed Man USA, is responsible for training and supporting Weed Man's U.S. subfranchisors. Reach her at jennifer.lemcke@weedmanusa.com.

Planning pointer

Because of the amount of thought that goes into creating such a detailed business plan, it's important for brainstorming to include a diverse group of people to develop a well-researched plan.

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WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING TO GROW MY BUSINESS?

BY JEFF KORHAN

A Talk to your customers to develop more intimate relationships with them, teach them what you know about your business and work together to create what hasn't been done. There was a time when a business could grow on the merits of quality products and service alone, but that's not nearly enough these days. In this trust economy, every business has to innovate to be relevant to the communities it serves.

There are many qualified landscape companies in every community offering consumers what they want—often at an equal or lower price. To differentiate your business, give your customers more. While you can't read their minds about what they want, you can implement practices to better understand their desires.

Develop more intimate relationships with your customers. How well do you know your customers—not

just their needs but what really influences their buying behaviors? Most of us have to admit it's not as well as when our businesses were much younger. Remember the early days when you were an aspiring entrepreneur? Recapture that freewheeling energy and excitement because that's what will fuel your growth.

Your first customers likely were friends who trusted you. Take the time to build those kinds of relationships with your current customers, meaning as friends instead of buyers. This approach honors your customers at an emotional level from which they tend to make their buying decisions. Unfortunately, when business conditions are more challenging, there's a tendency to take relationships for granted and focus on transactions—making the next sale. This shortsighted approach erodes the relationships that advanced your business to where it is today. So focus more on relationships and less on selling and marketing products. In a socially connected business environment, it's no longer about selling to buyers. It's about working together to give them more.

Teach customers what you know about your business. The more your customers know, the better they'll be able to make the correct decisions to improve their condition. There's a lot of information online. More than half of all consumers are using the web to make buying decisions, so it makes sense for your business to contribute. People are searching the web for answers, which is why you want to think about your company and provide answers. You already know the common questions and problems that never seem to go away, so use your expertise to address them.



There always will be companies taking shortcuts. In the Green Industry, poorly designed structures built without proper foundations and irrigation systems that stretch beyond capacity always will be problematic. Be the one who teaches your community better practices. But why would you want to give away your best practices? This concept is difficult for some business owners to grasp. They believe if they give away too much information customers will no longer need them. The opposite is true. When you provide enough value, your business becomes invaluable by creating a desire for more. When a teacher does his job well, he fills the classroom the next day and every day thereafter. This should be the role of all your marketing.

Viable methods for accomplishing this are:

- › email newsletters that teach instead of sell;
- › blogs that inspire by sharing relatable stories;
- › managers in the field to reconnect with customers;
- › social media channels for community engagement; and
- › periodic surveys to learn what's being discussed.

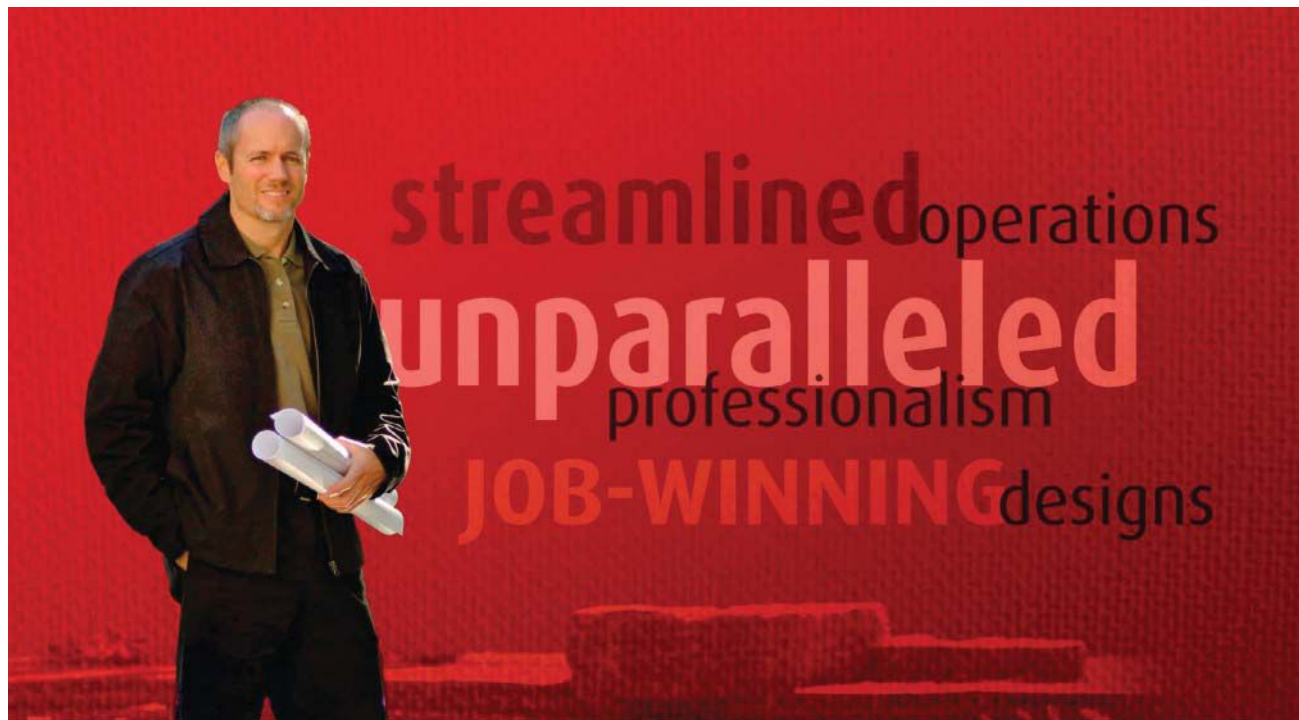
Consumers are addicted to searching online because people, by nature, are curious. Learn to feed that curiosity to align them closely with your business. After that, you'll have their undivided attention to accomplish something special.

Collaborate with your customers to create what hasn't been done.

Small business owners often think they have to be experts, but your customers are the experts of what they want. That's why it's important to ask questions and share stories to help them understand how your business can be a solution. My favorite questions are the ones customers are afraid to ask, such as those about price. It's an opportunity to share how cost-cutting measures that reduce prices often undermine the integrity of projects. Answering these questions acknowledges you understand your business and your clients' mindset.

Traditional selling can be demoralizing work with many dead ends, but building relationships results in favorable returns. You may not know when that will happen, so persist. This lesson applies to social media marketing. You have to prime the pump continuously until it delivers the expected result. When you help customers achieve what they've only imagined, you've progressed from a transaction-based to relationship-based business. This is the secret for growing a business in the trust economy. **LMI**

Korban is a small business marketing trainer, coach and author of Built-In Social: Essential Social Marketing Practices for Every Small Business. Reach him via jeffkorban.com.



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HOW DO I AVOID COMPETING ON PRICE?

BY JULIE GUEST

A You send one of your employees to give a potential customer a quote. He thanks him for coming but says he'll think about it. In less than half an hour, you receive a call saying he has found someone who'll do the exact same job for less. Unless you're willing to sharpen your pencil, you just lost the job. How many times has this situation happened to you?

We all know price warfare doesn't just occur with prospective customers. Jobs you've had for years can be pulled away from you suddenly—all because the customer was contacted by a competitor who was hungrier and more desperate for his business than you were.

COMPETING ON PRICE IS ENTIRELY OPTIONAL, AS LONG AS YOU HAVE THE PROPER MARKETING AND MESSAGING IN PLACE. NOT ALL BUYERS ARE DRIVEN BY PRICE. IN FACT, THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE AREN'T DRIVEN BY PRICE.

When one of your customers asks you to lower your price, you're in a pickle. Do you price match that lower quote and leave them with the bad taste in their mouth that they've been overpaying all those years? Or do you try to justify your higher price and hope the strength of your relationship will win them over? The real truth is you don't ever want to get into these price negotiations in the first place because it puts you in a lose-lose situation. You're going to lose precious revenue or a job.

Here's the great news: Competing on price is entirely optional, as long as you have the proper marketing and messaging in place. Not all buyers are driven by price. In fact, the majority of people aren't driven by price. If they were, Wal-Mart would likely

be a hundred times bigger than it is and companies such as Apple, which charges \$3,000 for a new computer, wouldn't exist.

The simple and game-changing fact for your business is people only revert to buying on price when they have no other information available. There's a segment of the market that only buys on price. It doesn't matter how good you say your services are or how great the quality of your workmanship is, they're never going to choose your company because you're a smidge more expensive than the other guy. Frankly, you don't want these bottom feeders as your clients anyway. They're usually the most demanding customers, the least appreciative and the least likely to refer your services. Let the other guys in your market provide services to the extremely price-sensitive crowd. They can slash their prices and fight among each other to see who's most desperate for business.

In almost any industry, the bottom feeders account for 40 percent of the market. The rest of the market, which accounts for more than half, can afford and will pay more for your services, if you can provide them compelling reasons to. This is why having the right marketing becomes so important. But don't make the mistake of thinking you can just hike your prices and expect to achieve a similar result. You must have a solid marketing program to back it up. Here's how to do it in three easy steps:



1 Find something uniquely yours, something your business does better than your competitors that can create a distinct competitive advantage. An example of this is Domino's Pizza's original tagline: "Fresh, hot pizza in 30 minutes or less, or it's free."

2 Educate your customers and prospective customers about why your services are better than the competition. Help them make an informed decision about who to choose. Create a special report, booklet or mini magazine that explains this. Educated customers make the best customers, and they're the kind who will happily pay more for your services.

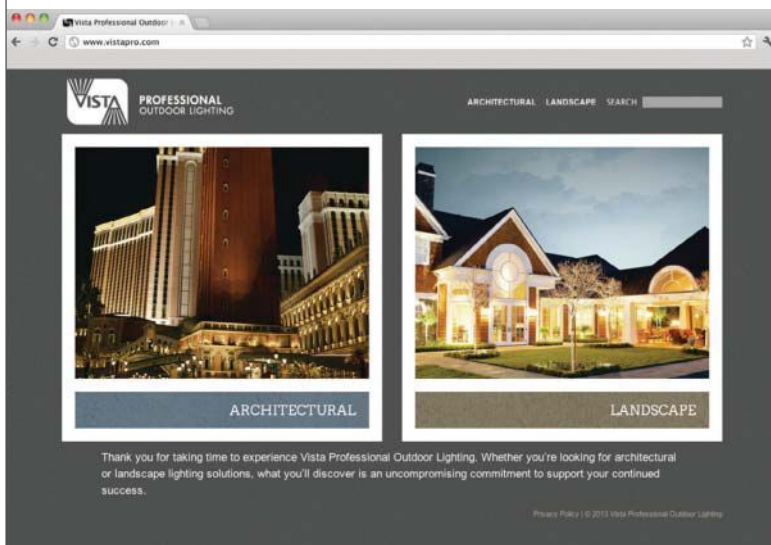
3 Take your key messaging in your special report or mini magazine and integrate it across all your marketing efforts. Eliminate any of your old marketing that refers to price and help your customers recognize your value. Don't forget to use direct mail, display ads, street signs, flyers and your website with this important messaging. Your website is the most important because it's where people will look and judge your value first.

If you still need convincing the majority of people don't buy on price, take a look around your home. What

have you bought recently that commanded a premium price—a brand-new TV, truck, piece of fishing or hunting equipment? Now think about what made you decide to buy that. It was the marketing. **LM**

Guest is a copywriter, author, speaker and founding partner of Blazing Copy, a full-service marketing agency based in Ann Arbor, Mich. Reach her or download a free copy of "Marketing 007—Stealth Marketing For Business Owners" via JulieGuest.tv/bizbook.

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Planning pointer

Take your key messaging in your special report or mini magazine and integrate it across all your marketing efforts. Eliminate any of your old marketing that refers to price and help your customers recognize your value.

Q HOW DO I MARKET TO PRODUCE A RAINFALL OF LEADS?

BY JONATHAN GOLDHILL

A To produce a rainfall of leads in the landscaping business, reengineer your mindset about marketing first; otherwise, you'll never consistently produce enough high-quality leads to grow. Until marketing becomes a process in your business, adding new customers always will be a problem. When marketing becomes a process, it will cease to be a problem because marketing, prospecting and selling aren't any different from accounting, bookkeeping, designing, installing, mowing or providing maintenance services. Each requires a process or a systematic approach to executing it. To produce a virtual rainfall of prospective customers, think like a marketer.

Stop thinking you're a landscaper. If you think you're in the landscaping business, hit yourself over the head with a shovel. Think like a marketer and seller of landscape services. You're in the sales and marketing business. The service you market, sell and deliver is landscaping.

Marketing is like politicking, so start campaigning. Too many small-business owners market haphazardly. Their marketing is event driven or a short-run campaign. Strategize like you're running a political campaign, only this campaign has no end date, unless you want to go dark during the offseason. Effective marketing requires the mindset of a political strategist. Test, measure and evaluate.

Marketing is much more analytical than you think. Management theorists agree you can't manage what you don't measure. If you want to produce a rainfall of leads, experiment, measure and when successful, add water. Your successful marketing programs



should be treated like a sponge. Expand them by spending more, adding more geographical coverage and trying other marketing channels. Above all, measure what's working and what's not by asking your customers when they first call how they heard about you or by putting telephone-tracking software on your pay-per-click and organic search web pages. It's all about return on investment.

Plug the holes in your bucket. It's difficult to expand your business if you're losing customers. Calculate

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your attrition rate (the number of customers you lost the past 12 months) and set a goal to reduce that rate by half. Landscape contractors lose customers usually because of poor service relative to price, lack of communication with customers or both. As the old AT&T commercial and slogan read, “Reach out and touch someone.” Don’t let your customers get away. Call, survey or visit them more.

Think outside the box. If you’re going to grow larger, faster or be more profitable, think outside the box. Like the Apple slogan says, “Think different.” Peter Drucker, the father of modern management said, “Marketing and innovation produce results. All the rest are costs.” If everyone is doing the same thing and communicating the same message, it’s difficult to determine how to stand out.

When landscape contractors are asked what sets them apart from everyone else, their answers are typically vague. Fewer than one in eight people say something different or infectiously exciting. It may not be true that the other seven don’t have something exciting to say, perhaps they just haven’t honed in on their marketing message with any real differentiation. That’s why contractors should identify and define what’s unique about their business and then embed that message into all their marketing.

Never the pest, always the “welcome guest.” Salespeople calling on commercial accounts are usually trying to determine how to get past gatekeepers. I’m often asked to answer that question when speaking to salespeople, but I avoid answering it because it’s the wrong question. Instead, salespeople should be asking: “How can I get sought after and invited in by decision makers?” The answer is to engineer a situation in which you’re invited and welcomed as

an expert. Marketing campaigns that let prospects know you can fix their problems will open up conversations with them more easily.

Here’s the “welcome guest” process briefly: 1). Provide information that grabs their attention, raises their interest level and presells the value of the appointment. 2). Only schedule an appointment after you’ve gained mind-share. This changes the entire sales process if successfully implemented and religiously adhered to. Your time isn’t wasted, administrative time is replaced with valuable face time, closing rates increase and you can

be more selective about who becomes your client.

A similar approach for landscape companies selling to residential accounts is a “pardon our dirt” or “pardon our trucks” letter. This type of mailing, sent to residents in neighborhoods where the company does work, invites neighbors to call the company if the dirt or trucks are in their way. It’s a low-cost method that creates awareness and can land new appointments and new customers.

Be discovered online. It’s unbelievable how bad some company’s websites are. When people look for lawn care or landscape services, there’s a solid chance they’re going to search for you online, in the local newspaper or the Yellow Pages. With more people jettisoning the Yellow Pages for the Internet, contractors have to be savvy about online marketing, making their website easily searchable and frequently found. By focusing on this strategy, contractors can rapidly multiply the number of leads streaming into their business every month. If you want to be discovered online, find a reputable or trustworthy marketing company to help you.

Use testimonials to get referrals and add octane to your marketing. Testimonials provide a powerful asset in your marketing tool kit. When your customers tell others about the benefits of choosing your company, it makes your sales and marketing efforts more effective. Gather testimonials from customers, and leverage the power of testimonials to get other customers.

The bottom line is that selling is the lifeblood of any business. Along with a properly sustained marketing program, your opportunities for success are much improved. **LM**

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Planning
pointer

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Goldhill, head coach of The Goldhill Group, provides strategic business, marketing and sales coaching to owners, managers and salespeople of growing companies in the Green Industry. Reach him or download his free e-book, “The Six Silver Bullets to Growing Any Business Fast,” at TheGoldhillGroup.com.

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WHAT SHOULD BE PART OF MY **BRANDING** REPOSITORY?

BY LARA MOFFAT

A One of the more frequent questions I hear is, “What *really* should be a part of a marketing plan?” Effective branding and marketing starts with a communications strategy suitable to a company’s business model. Only after distinguishing a business’s culture, clientele and services, can a company develop a fitting communications strategy—and one including messaging, content and platforms (traditional or digital).

Another question I frequently receive is, “What’s the difference between marketing and branding?” Marketing is tactical, a process identifying target consumers, effectively communicating with said audience and initially retaining them. Branding is strategic. It expresses characteristics, values and attributes that create engagement, loyalty and referrals. I advocate brand marketing focusing on communicating the brand message to drive awareness and encourage engagement.

So what should be a part of a branding repository? A repository is a collection of content, including copy (verbal and written) and imagery.

Depending on the medium, a communication may be timeless or have a shelf life. Once you’ve created effective content, file it where it’s easily retrievable. Don’t be afraid to

revisit past campaigns. Just because imagery is outdated doesn’t mean the message is irrelevant. The following are components of a rich branding repository.

CONSISTENT MESSAGING

First, define your personality. Specify the services you offer, the demographic of your target audience, what differentiates your company and what matters to you as a professional. Being as specific as possible enables you to create messaging that resonates with and engages prospects, clients and industry colleagues. Remember, though, people buy a service based on the benefits of the service, not because of the service. Consistent and clear communications that place the consumers’ needs first will keep you top of mind and build brand loyalty.

Complementary collateral. Your letterhead, business cards, proposals and contracts need to be complementary. The look and feel of each must have a unified appearance because it reflects the professional nature of your business and, in some cases, is a deal breaker for whether you’re awarded the project. Beyond appearance, especially in legally binding forms, review them for consistent copy.

Professional promotional materials. Invest in quality graphic design and professional printing. Just because you know how to use a desktop publishing program doesn’t mean you should. Your office printer is fine for certain applications, but a professional printer is the best option. As with complementary collateral, professional promotional materials often sway a prospect.

Interactive website. A website is a company’s online communications specialist, though many sites remain

