# GET THE JOB Make a Profit Sales, Marketing, and Estimating Techniques

Joelle Steele Enterprises Lacey, Washington United States of America

Get The Job & Make A Profit: Sales, Marketing, and Estimating Techniques

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This book was originally based on a presentation by the same name and covered all the items included in that half-day presentation. I presented this information more than 100 times starting way back in 1983, and I was always modifying and updating things as they changed in the horticultural industry over the years. Eventually, the presentation became an audiocassette tape, then a CD, then a book (which was later merged with its companion book, *How to Market Your Horticultural Business*, that is now out of print), and finally this ebook.

Joelle Steele March 14, 2020

# Get the Job & Make a Profit

Sales, Marketing, & Estimating Techniques

# **MARKETING**

#### Marketing vs. Sales

Some people don't know the difference between "sales" and "marketing," so we'll begin the first part of this book by defining those terms that are so often used together in a sentence but are seldom used together as effectively in a business. One way to think of sales and marketing is like the opening and closing of a door. Marketing opens that door to a new client, and sales closes that same door once a business deal is made.

- Marketing is whatever you do to find and contact your potential customers or clients. It may consist of advertising, networking, social media, or any kind or combination of publicity-generating processes you care to exercise.
- Sales is what you do in order to actually sell your product or service to the individual or company who contacts you in response to your marketing efforts.

To be effective in sales, you need the backup of a well-designed marketing plan. The two go hand-in-hand and neither achieves much without the other. They do not stand alone as independent functions of a business. They are two closely linked and fully integrated functions which operate together to create a comprehensive, income-generating system for your company.

Marketing can be fun, but it is also serious business. It is an investment in the future of your company and you can't just approach it in a haphazard manner and then complain when it doesn't work. Even if you don't want to grow to huge proportions, you must market your business in order to preserve its present size, as you will invariably lose some clients by means of simple attrition. And, if you want to grow, you must accept that relying solely on "word of mouth" or on referrals alone will not allow you to achieve your growth in a systematic, organized way, but will in fact lead to "sales slumps."

If you are serious about marketing you have to commit yourself to it. This means that if you are a sole proprietor doing maintenance five days a week, this will be almost impossible unless you hire someone, at least part-time, to do some of the maintenance so that you can perform your marketing duties as the owner of your company.

# **Establishing Objectives**

To make your marketing efforts work you have to spend some time determining what you want to achieve, what your marketing objectives are. Do you want to get new clients? To sell new products or services to existing and new clients alike? To tap into a new market? Or perhaps you would like to expand into a new geographical territory? Timing is also important in establishing your objectives. Where do you want to be in one year, five years, ten? Do you have a clear, practical, realistic idea of what it is that you wish to achieve in the long run? It is difficult to establish marketing objectives if you don't even know what you want to do career-wise in your own business.

Establishing your marketing objectives will determine the scope of your marketing plan and marketing strategy, and will ultimately affect the level of results you actually obtain from your efforts.

#### **Setting Goals & Making A Plan**

Once you have decided on your objectives you can set all of the goals necessary to achieve those objectives. For some there is a tendency to expect immediate results from marketing efforts and therefore to set unrealistic goals. Marketing takes time as well as creativity to meet its end. One of your first goals should be to set aside a certain amount of time each week, each month, each quarter, etc., in which to pursue your marketing efforts.

Your next set of goals should include whatever you need to achieve your marketing objectives. For example, say you want to go after large commercial landscapes. You will probably need a contractor's license (check with your state or local authorities), some additional insurance, power equipment, a class or two on irrigation, etc. These will all require smaller "sub-goals" for you to set and meet.

There will be more and more goals to achieve as you become further involved in the marketing process. You will want to set some deadline dates or time frames for these goals, but how long they take will depend on you and whether you are truly committed to them. In any event, try not to over-extend yourself as that can be more damaging to your current business than if you did nothing at all.

Make your goals flexible so that they can be easily amended, as you will likely need to modify them from time to time. While you want to achieve a certain degree of flexibility, however, you should be prepared to take your goals and their deadlines seriously and not treat them casually, since a lackadaisical attitude can be detrimental to their achievement.

It is easy to get off the track when you are starting something new or when you are covering unfamiliar business territory. You may find that you begin to become disillusioned with the whole prospect of marketing when one aspect of your plan is not falling into place the way you expected it to. You might even feel like giving up altogether.

Maintaining your priorities means never losing touch with your objectives and goals. Keep the idea of marketing uppermost in your mind and try to visualize what the long range benefits of your plan will be.

In this crazy, "hurry-up-I-want-it-now" type of world we tend to lose sight of our future plans because we are too busy living for today. In business, that kind of attitude can be costly. Patience pays off; so does persistence. Marketing is not an overnight means to an end. It is an ongoing process that will change as your company changes and will become more involved and complex as your business grows.

Once you make a commitment to marketing your business you need to develop a marketing plan. Your plan will include, among other things, how to approach your target clientele, how to translate your image into everyday activities within your company, who is going to design and execute your marketing materials, when and where you are going to advertise or do direct mail, etc., and how much you are going to budget for everything over a particular period of time.

# **Choosing A Marketing Director**

In a small business where the owner wears all the hats - or most of them - it is pretty evident that he or she will be coordinating all of the marketing efforts for the company. But, if you are in a partnership or a corporation, you will probably have to appoint or elect an individual for the job of marketing director.

Selecting someone to head up your marketing efforts is an important step towards achieving your marketing goals. The person who is in charge of marketing should have some background in the subject and should have a great deal of enthu-

siasm for it, because they will be setting the pace for the entire company. If they are not totally committed and gung-ho about the process, they will not be able to promote the company's marketing image to the employees or to the existing and prospective clientele.

A marketing director must be an organized individual with a head for details. While marketing is not difficult, per se, it is rather involved and requires that many things happen at just precisely the right time, either just before or just after something else happens, or at the same time that something else is going on.

If, for example, you are opening a new sales territory, it may be that your marketing plan calls for advertising in that territory's newspaper to be going on right when you are direct mailing to the same area. This means that your marketing director must have the advertising ready to go before the publication deadlines and must have all the letters ready to go simultaneously.

Your marketing director must be able to get along with people and motivate them. This job necessitates working with a variety of people from your own employees to artists, agencies, printers, mailing houses, the post office, photographers, publishers, etc. The marketing person has to be able to stay on top of what these people are doing and be sure that all their individual deadlines are met.

If you have someone in mind for the position of marketing director don't be mislead into thinking that the burden is now removed permanently from your shoulders. As the owner of your company you must oversee that individual's activities and be sure that they perform to standard. And what happens if they leave mid-plan? Someone has to be able to step in and know what is going on. You may not have to be doing the marketing yourself, but you should have your marketing

director submit regular weekly reports advising you of exactly what is happening in that department.

#### **Brainstorming**

Your marketing strategy will be determined by a variety of considerations, the primary ones being your budget and your company's level of competence. Before you begin to assemble your marketing plan you must determine whether your company can support such a strategy. For example, if you are going to shoot for a market that is out of your immediate vicinity, you will need a website to encourage response. If you are going to do your own mass e-mailings, you will need an e-mail handler program and the addresses of prospective clients.

If you are attempting to form a particular type of image in the minds of your prospective clientele and you anticipate that many will call you, you may need to have a friendly receptionist answering your calls instead of letting calls ring through to voice mail or an answering machine. Only you can determine which you will need based upon your knowledge of the needs of your target market.

If you are planning to do a lot of promotional items throughout the year you will need to have advance knowledge of what your suppliers are going to be stocking during the times you plan to run the specials. You may have to order items in advance to be sure that you have enough of them available to fill the orders that come in.

When developing a marketing plan, get input from many different sources. The old adage of "two heads are better than one" certainly applies here. More than two heads is even better, as the different input you receive will be invaluable. Focus groups are made up of individuals ranging from professional artists and advertising executives to clients and prospective clients, secretaries, horticulturists, and the clerks in the mail

room. Each person contributes his or her viewpoints on various aspects of the marketing plan.

Plan to meet as a group for at least one to two hours. Have your marketing director lead the discussion and try to tape it if possible so that you don't miss anything that might later prove to be useful. Focus on analyzing the company first, the probable target clientele second. Then work at developing and establishing a company image after which you should discuss the various marketing tactics to be implemented.

Attempt to assemble a tentative marketing agenda with a list of preliminary goals to achieve, for example, renting a larger greenhouse space to accommodate promotional items you want to offer throughout the year.

# **Scheduling Your Marketing Activities**

A good marketing plan is designed to last at least a year and is flexible enough to accommodate any changes which may be necessitated when either your needs, or those of your target market, change.

Get out your calendar and look at the year at hand. Mark the holidays which would make likely times to run promotions. Look at the times of the year when you are busiest and enhance the slower times by beefing up your advertising efforts or doing a direct mailing. When you know that there are certain times when your company is swamped, don't schedule any additional workload such as a direct mailing/emailing, unless you are having it done by an outside service. You will want to be able to have enough people to meet the demands of your clientele and not have some of your employees tied up with a mailing when they should be manning the phones, sending bills, picking stuff up at the nursery, etc. Mark these times on your calendar.

Schedule the actual mailing (not the production of it) during your busiest time so that it will be received during your slowest time. This is one way to keep your sales from peaking and ebbing throughout the year and creating sales "slumps" which dent your cash flow and make it difficult to predict where your company is going from one minute to the next. Mark the weeks you intend to create the mailing and the weeks you are planning to send it out.

Contact all of the publications (regular and online) in which you plan to advertise and place their cut-off dates on your calendar. Make a note as to which items you are promoting in the ad, the size of the ad, the cost, etc. Then make a note on your calendar to contact the nursery in advance to verify that the items are available.

If you're going to do it yourself and print your mailing out on your office printer, make sure you have the right paper stock on hand for the job. If you are going to have artwork done for your advertisements, make notes about calling your graphic artist to be sure that he or she is available.

#### **Determining Your Marketing Budget**

There is really nothing that complicated about determining your budget once you know what you would ideally like to do. After you have scheduled everything on your calendar you can itemize everything and attach a dollar figure to it. The following are a sampling of some of the items you will probably want to include in your marketing budget:

- Printing: business cards, brochures, post cards.
- Mailing: postage, list rentals, processing fees, labor time.
- Artwork: advertisements, websites, brochures, logos, business cards, graphic artist fees.
- Office: cell phone, computer, Internet access, printer, software, forms, web hosting service, domain registration.

- Personnel: webmaster, sales people, temporary help.
- Sale items: plants, containers, miscellaneous.

# **Analyzing The General Market**

Every state, every county, every city, and every neighborhood has its own marketing personality. Some are saturated with tourist trade and therefore a significant portion of their commercial population consists of hotels, restaurants, and gift shops. Other areas may have a high percentage of manufacturers, others may be predominantly residential suburbs. In the more densely populated downtown areas of some of your larger cities you will find a preponderance of high-rise office buildings filled with corporate offices, and the offices of lawyers, accountants, and medical professionals.

To begin analyzing your general market you must look at what is in your area and attempt to define its marketing personality. You will probably find that you have a combination of different personalities from one neighborhood to the next, and therefore you will have to research more than one market before deciding on what you ultimately want to select as your target market.

# **Analyzing Existing Clientele**

If you are an existing business you can begin with analyzing your clientele. Are they corporate or residential or both? Are most of your projects large, medium, or small? Are most of your projects package deals containing design, installation, and maintenance, or do you usually get calls for maintenance of existing installations? Who are your clients? Shopping malls, large residential estates, restaurants, hotels, corporate offices?

Of your clients, which are the best – you know, the ones who don't complain constantly, who pay on time, who order the most new plants, have good access, etc.? Are they prima-

rily the corporate offices, the residential estates, the shopping malls? Where are these clients located? Are they situated in a downtown area or an outlying suburb? Are they your biggest clients or your smallest, or do they seem to fall somewhere in between? Do your best clients tend to be ones where you did the initial design and installation?

Knowing who your best clients are can help you find more just like them and avoid conducting further business with problem clients. This analysis will also point out the strengths and weaknesses of your business. For example, if most of your projects are small it is likely that most prospective clients perceive you as being capable of handling only small projects. This may not be so, but your image may contradict your abilities. On the other hand, you may only think you are capable of handling larger jobs when, if you were really honest with yourself, you would know you were not.

# **Analyzing Your Selected Market**

If you are a new business with insufficient existing clientele to perform such an analysis, or if you want to change the focus of your existing business, you can analyze the kinds of clients you have selected because you think you would like to handle them. For example, take a look around you. What projects do you see that please you and reflect your aesthetic taste and design capability? Are you turned on every time you walk through the local shopping mall or drive through a beautiful residential area? Do you get inspired when you open the latest copy of Architectural Digest? Or do office design magazines really turn your thoughts to corporate grandeur? Or did you redesign, in your mind, the horticultural environment of every restaurant and hotel you visited on your last vacation?

#### **Doing Your Homework**

Once you have an idea of what kinds of projects are available, it's time to gather some statistics about the existing and potential projects for your area. There are three different ways in which you can approach your research:

- Library documentation. Books and periodicals containing statistics on certain industries, particularly those generated by the local chambers of commerce
- Community information. Local media and Internet, including general economic trends and future commercial developments
- Field surveys. By phone, mail, or in person, with existing clientele or prospective clientele.

Once you have done your homework you will be able to weigh the results of your research and see how it affects your original ideas for marketing your business. It may confirm your initial plan or it may send you off in an entirely different, and possibly more challenging, direction.

# Researching A Specialty Market

At this point you have probably been able to determine the direction in which you wish to take your company in terms of targeting your market and leaning towards a specialty market. But, before you go off and plan your marketing strategy for that market, you will need to perform some further, more detailed research on that specific market.

If, for example, you have decided that hotels are what you are all about, it isn't enough to know what hotels are already in the area. You must visit them personally and look at them carefully. Make notes on the scope of the project and try to estimate what the dollar amounts were in the design, the installation, and the monthly maintenance. How much manpower was needed and over what period of time? Look carefully at the

plants and materials used. Do you have a source for the same items? In short, are you capable of handling similar projects now, or is this something you need to grow into?

If, as in our example, hotels are indeed what you are capable of handling, the next thing to do is find out what hotels or hotel chains may be coming to your area. Read the newspaper and visit the library again to pick up some copies of hotel trade magazines. These will tell you what is planned for your city in the future. In most cases you will have to contact them long before they break ground and this is how you find out who they are before everyone else does.

Almost every industry has its own trade publications and they are an excellent source for information about who is doing what in your community in terms of building new offices, etc. With residential clientele you may need to network with real estate agents or building contractors to find out where new projects are going up. At any rate, your research will help you decide if the market you have chosen will be able to sustain you financially.

Read up on your target clientele as individual companies and as an industry. Find out how they do business and what they require in terms of special services. Discover what problems they have that might differ from those of your other clients or which you have never encountered and will need to prepare to handle.

If you encounter potential clients who are members of a large chain, you can file away for future reference the other existing locations and future locations of their branch offices, hotels, stores, etc. They may have locations in other states, and while you may not be capable of handling them on such a widespread level now, who knows what might happen in the future as your company grows.

#### **Continuing Research**

It is not enough to research your markets one year and then never research them again. Market trends change rapidly with the advent of new technology and with economic growth or decline. In addition to the general and specialty markets changing with time, your company changes as well, and the clientele that met your needs five, ten, or twenty years ago may be completely inappropriate to your current needs. For example, one of my clients was an interiorscaper who has been in business for many years. She started out as an owner-operator doing small residential accounts and up until 2002 was still marketing herself to that same clientele, in spite of the fact that she had fifteen full-time employees and a need for larger projects to sustain her personnel expenses.

You should re-analyze your company and your markets yearly to be sure that you are always moving in the right direction towards achieving your company goals through your marketing efforts.

# **Analyzing The Competition**

Once you have uncovered that part of the general market you wish to pursue, you can begin to take a look at the competition. If there are already fifty other firms specializing in your market of choice, can you realistically expect or financially afford to break into that market with any degree of success? If the market is a big one and the fifty other firms have more business than they can handle, then perhaps you can grab your share of the market. In a fast growing industry where the demand for your services is high, you will not have trouble capturing your share. But, if your market is soft and business is slow, you will find yourself competing for a sliver of a very small pie.

#### **Determining Your Specialty**

Once you have defined a potential target market, you will need to determine whether your company is prepared for or suited to serving their needs. By determining your specialty, you will be able to match it to your target market for a smoother, more streamlined, and profitable business operation.

Every well-run business has a specialty. Some planned it that way and others just naturally fell into a specialty without even realizing they had done so. What is your specialty? In what area do you truly excel: design, installation, or maintenance? You may be competent in all three, but which one really sums up your company's greatest strength?

Are you an innovator? Were you the first on your block to offer silks and preserved foliage to your interiorscape clientele? Are you the only landscaper in town who can install computerized irrigation systems? Are you always the risk taker, testing the waters with every new product as soon as it comes out and then sitting back and watching, as years later, the competition finally jumps on the bandwagon and follows your lead? Being an innovator is a specialty in and of itself. It means that you can promote yourself as having something that no one else (or almost no one) is offering.

Are you a full-service horticultural company that offers everything from interior and exterior landscape architectural design through the design/build stages, followed up with guaranteed maintenance? Are you an interiorscape company that only installs plants with sub-irrigation containers/devices or living walls? Or maybe you specialize in leasing only?

# **Corporate Or Residential?**

To further refine your specialty you will need to determine whether you are best suited to serving corporate or residential clientele. Once again, you may be capable of serving both, but for which are you truly best suited? Remember that you are creating an image for your company that will later be reflected in print on your business cards, letterhead stationery, brochures, and advertising.

If you determine that you are best suited to corporate accounts you should now decide which specific markets within that classification you can best serve. For example, if you have a good mix of commercial projects in your area you can determine whether you want to specialize in hotels, corporate offices, retail stores or malls, restaurants, law offices, manufacturing companies, doctors offices, hospitals and medical buildings, condominiums, government institutions, etc.

Each of these industries has its own unique set of needs and operating procedures. Each has its own personality and financial portrait as an industry – some more lucrative than others. You may find that you are interested in working with one or more of these client types that are similar in nature.

#### **Establishing Your Territory**

You may think that you have now broken things down to their smallest denominator, but there is yet another specialty which must be determined and that is the geographical area in which you wish to establish yourself.

There is often a tendency to "think big" when it comes to making decisions about a sales territory. The rule of thumb here is "think practical." When you are just starting out in business you might feel desperate and want to get business wherever you can, regardless of the distance. This creates problems for your company in the long run because a small service business is not usually equipped financially to deal with having business licenses in more than one city or county, or the high cost of running a vehicle or vehicles over such

distances. Time is money, and distance means more time spent unproductively – and unbilled – the wheel.

Select a geographical territory that contains the majority of your target clientele. It may be an entire city or it may be just the downtown area or a posh residential neighborhood. It may not be the city in which you live but it may be one very close by. If you can't find such a territory for your specialty, then think about re-targeting your clientele to meet the demands of your region. You can always expand once you have established a firm client base.

#### **Establishing Your Company Image**

Before you can market your company you have to have something to market. On the surface it may appear that you are marketing plants, your maintenance service, your designs, etc., but what you are really marketing is your image, that intangible representation of what makes you and your company different from all the others.

Without a specific image, it is difficult to target your market and sell effectively. For example, if you are the sort of person who is most comfortable in shorts and a polo shirt, toting a hose or water bucket, you will likely run into difficulties trying to land a large corporate account. Even if you dress up to meet with your prospective clientele you may not be able to completely and effectively bridge the transformation from one persona to the other.

If that sounds like you, don't despair. You can still find a market for yourself. You may even be able to land some of the large corporate accounts with the help of a salesperson whose image is more compatible with the one you do not possess as an individual but which you want for your business.

As the owner of a business, you set the tone for your entire company. What you think, do, and say will spread through your business and become part of your company's image. Your appearance, attitude, and behavior with your employees, associates, and prospective customers will establish your image in the minds of everyone with whom you come in contact.

Your company must subscribe to the company image. That image must be universally accepted and followed in every branch, department, aspect, etc., of your company. If it isn't an integral part of every phase of your operation, your entire marketing plan will be jeopardized.

# **Establishing Credibility**

The most important part of your image is your credibility. To be credible you must know what you are doing. You must know your business inside and out. You must have a firm handle on design, horticulture, and business. You must know everything that is going on in your own company and in your industry, and you must be aware of new plants and plant availability, the latest technology, and current design trends.

A thorough knowledge of your trade will create a self-confidence within you that will be evident to everyone. It is part of being a professional, it will come across when you make a sales presentation, and it will be reflected in your work. When you have an image with a strong base of self-confidence you really have something worth marketing that will be easier to sell as a result.

It is not enough to know your trade; your employees must know it too. If you have a field employee who is not on top of what's happening in the industry, it will reflect badly on your company should his knowledge be put to the test by a client. Remember that your employees are part of your image. Any lack of credibility on their part will reflect unfavorably on the company as a whole. You must know what clients really want. No, it's not design, plants, or a maintenance service. What clients want when they hire a landscape or interiorscape firm is an enhancement of their own image. They want their indoor and outdoor environment to look beautiful, inviting, and prosperous, a reflection of themselves as individuals or as a company.

Once you have established a company image and understand what your clients want, you will need to have business cards, website, letterhead stationery, brochures, etc. But, none of those items will be worth much to you or your business if they do not adequately reflect your image and your target market.

Your image must be reflected in your printed materials, and one of the items that comes into play at this point is the selection of a business name. You may have a name that you think is appropriate, but before you use it, read on a little further and see whether that name really conveys the company image you want.

# Name & Market Compatibility

Your company name should either say what it is that you do or in some way create an image of what your company has to offer. Further, your company name should match the personality of your target market. If, for example, you are primarily a design-oriented company and you are seeking a custom residential clientele, a card with a name such as "Corporate Environments" will be incompatible with your target market. Likewise, if you are seeking large corporate accounts with a "cutesy" name like "Patty's Pretty Plants," you will miss the mark.

There are many names that you can and should create for yourself. Depending on your target market and your company image you can use certain words to conjure up the image you have selected. If you are design-oriented and are planning to market yourself to design professionals (or directly to your target clientele), names that include words such as "design," or

"creative" would be easily identifiable with the kind of image you will want to project to them.

If you are marketing yourself directly to a corporate clientele you might wish to opt for more generic words such as "environment," "botanical," "architectural," or "contracting," and more specific words such as "office," "business," or "corporate." You may just want to use your own name, such as "James Lawrence Howell & Associates."

# **Avoiding Duplication**

Avoid duplicating names that have been over-used by the horticultural industry. There's nothing wrong with them but there are already so many companies using them. Go online and check out the company names within a 100-mile radius to see who's around before you select a name already in use or similar to your choice.

To be even further on the safe side and to avoid being repetitious or hackneyed, try not to begin your company name with any of the following words, or any form thereof, if at all possible. You can use these words within your company name, but not as the first word: Biophilia, Creative, Design, Earth, Evergreen, Foliage, Green, Interiors, Growing, Horticulture, Interior, Landscape, Living, Mother (as in Mother Nature), Mr. (as in Mr. Plant, Mr. Green, etc.), Nature or Natural, Paradise, Plant (as in Plant Lady and Plant People to name only a very few of the vast number beginning with this word), Rain, Sun (as in Sunny, Sunshine, Sunrise, Sunset, etc.), and Tropical.

Remember that cutesy names that are made up like a play on words (Plant-it Earth) or alliterative names (Polly's Perfect Plants, Ed's Elegant Environments, Gary's Great Gardens) are okay for the casual, small account but do not generally cut it on the corporate level.

#### **Using Your Own Name**

The simple solution to the whole problem of name selection is to simply use your own name such as: Melody Johnson Interiorscaping, Richard J. Marshall, Inc., Crawford & Wilson Landscaping, J.C. McArthur & Associates, or The Perlman Group. It's often a lot easier to get a website domain name if you use your own name in this way.

The only time you might not want to use your own name is if it is very long or difficult to spell or pronounce. If a client can't say it correctly they probably won't be able to spell it properly either and it will be difficult for them to remember you or locate you if they do. Some people change their names slightly to overcome this obstacle. A landscape contractor named Jeff Spjortke uses his middle name "Ryan" as his last name in Jeff Ryan Landscape.

Another problem that comes with name selection is the use of your nickname, if you have one. While your friends might enjoy calling you Billy instead of Bill or William, or Kitty instead of Kathy or Katherine, or any other number of nicknames like "Sonny," "Junior," "Missy," etc., clients in most parts of the country erect psychological blocks that say "this person isn't professional," and therefore may perceive you as lacking credibility or not taking your work seriously. There is a definite stigma attached to the use of certain nicknames and if you take your work seriously you may want to avoid using yours, at least not in print.

Make your name easily identifiable wherever you use it, and it should be compatible with your company image and that of your target clientele, which should both be one in the same at this point.

# **Designing Your Company Logo**

A logo is a design or pictorial illustration which accompanies your company name on all of your printed materials and advertisements, including uniforms and vehicle signs. It can be something as simple as a unique typeface set in an unusual manner (slanted, placed at an angle, etc.), or it could be a combination of a design and name intertwined. A logo can reflect your image more so than your name alone.

Your logo must reflect the nature of your business. It isn't enough to have a leaf-style logo since many horticultural companies use similar graphics. The idea is to use a leaf in a unique manner, if you use one at all. In an industry that is already so reliant on leaves and trees for graphic appeal, you would probably do better to find something a little more unusual or different.

If you're going for a design-oriented look you can use a stylized tree, plant, flower or leaf, a graph square, or a portion of a landscape architectural rendering, to name just a few possibilities. Any of those will reflect a designer image, particularly when used in combination with a complementary type-face and a color or colors in keeping with current design trends. A landscape architect I know has a bird-of-paradise flower on her card and a landscape contractor I know has a stylized palm tree.

For a more sophisticated, tailored, corporate look you may wish to take a more conservative approach with a simple graphic presentation of the first letters of the words in your company name. One of my clients has a logo which was created by enlarging the first letter of the company name (which is also her last name) and running a line through that letter from the top of the card to the bottom. Keep your card clean and uncluttered and be sure it is printed on high quality card stock.

If your market is residential you can go in the design direction or you can opt for something more casual and old-fashioned in nature, such as an art nouveau or Victorian illustration. I have seen landscaper's cards with houses incorporated into the logos and I have seen interiorscaper's cards with similar graphics. Residential clientele varies considerably from one neighborhood to the next and you will have to gauge the overall sophistication of your particular market before you can design a logo that will adequately suit your clientele.

When dealing with a specialty market such as hotels, law offices, shopping malls, etc., you should have your logo artist design something that reflects a particular aspect of that industry. For example, I saw a card that belonged to an









Above: The evolution of a company's image.

interiorscape company that specializes in a downtown area of their city where there are large high-rise office buildings, and their logo has a city skyline on it. Another option you may wish to incorporate into your logo is your geographical location. For example, if your company is called Southwest Landscaping you might want to use cacti in some form or an appropriate southwest motif. If your company name is Alpine Interiorscapes you may wish to include a mountain. If your company is called the St. Louis Landscape Connection you may want to incorporate a local landmark such as the Gateway Arch, if you can legally do so.

If you are going to deal with a wide variety of markets, which is not recommended but which does, nevertheless, occur, you should try to stick with a neutral logo that could not be interpreted as anything in particular. This will probably mean keeping things pretty simple and pretty ordinary, but that is one of the drawbacks when you don't target a market.

# **The Design Process**

Your logo is an important investment. It has to say exactly what you want to communicate to your target market. Try designing it yourself first, just in rough draft form, using several different possible types of looks which you feel are reflective of your company image. Once you have completed these rough drafts, take them to a graphic artist, an advertising agency, or even possibly to your printer, and have them advise you further and provide you with a completed design, either like something you have designed or maybe an altogether different logo.

If you can't come up with logo ideas on your own, look for some samples of things you like online and take them to your designer. Don't ever feel that what is designed for you is carved in stone. If you don't like it, say so. Just remember that if you don't communicate to the designer your exact needs and the kind of image you want to convey, it will be difficult for the designer to anticipate your needs. The process will be lengthened and you may end up paying substantially more.

Shop around for an artist who has a track record with logos. Ask to see some of the logos they have designed. You can expect to pay anywhere from \$250 to \$1,000 or more for a logo, depending on where you are, how well-prepared you are, and what is included in the price.

An interiorscaper told me that she paid \$150.00 to an art student at a local college who designed her logo for her. A local landscaper had his done by his printer for \$225.00. Both of them were satisfied with the results and felt that they got what they were looking for, initially, that is. The down side to this is that while they were happy with the logos for their business cards, they didn't have any artwork for a websites, vehicle signs, badges, etc., and had to pay later to have those items done elsewhere.

A friend of mine who specializes in logo design remarked to me once that she had spent two weeks working on a logo which ended up being so simple that she could easily have done it in a single afternoon. The reason it took her so long was because her client could not make up his mind what he wanted, and her efforts to "read his mind" failed. The client ended up paying \$1,250 for a job which, had he been better prepared, would have only cost him about \$300.

Some things to remember: Your logo must look good on everything – business cards, letterhead, website, brochures, invoices, contracts, design plans, advertisements, vehicles, uniforms, badges, equipment, etc. When your artist designs a logo he or she should supply you with sketches showing how the logo will look on all those various applications, and should supply you with finished artwork for everything, short of the finished vehicle signs which may or may not be within the scope of their design services.

The finished product should look good in whatever colors you have selected and should also look good in black and white (if you advertise in newspapers). The logo should be eye-catching in all its forms and should allow the company name to be easily read.

#### **Corporate Colors**

Logos look decidedly different depending on the colors in which they are ultimately rendered. For example, something that looks great in maroon and grey may look hideous in salmon and olive.

When selecting a company color or colors try to stay away from greens and browns. Both are overused in the horticultural industry and neither look good when applied to uniforms because those colors are rarely flattering to the people who must wear them. And, if your employees do not look or feel attractive in their uniforms, it will be like pulling teeth to get them to wear them.

Be adventurous with color. Ask your logo artist to give you a couple of different color choices that would look good on paper and be flattering in a uniform. Remember that the colors will be used on vehicles and will need to be eye-catching too. What looks good in a uniform may not look good on the vehicle signs or letterhead and vice versa.

Color selection may seem like a simple process on the surface, but it is really much more complex when you look at the overall picture. This is just one of the many reasons why it is so important to have your logo done by a professional who understands these complexities and has had experience in dealing with them before.

#### **Using Your Logo**

Once you have your finished logo, you should use it on everything. The more places you place it the greater the name identification there will be for your company. Put it on your vehicles, your uniforms, all of your equipment, your advertisements and website, and all your printed materials. The more people see your logo the more they will remember it, and the longer they see it around, the more credible you become as a business.

Your logo should be updated regularly, preferably every year or two. When updated this frequently, the change is noticeable but is still subtle enough that recognition by your clientele and the general public remains intact. When updating, you can either change the colors or modify the look slightly to draw new attention to your company. Sometimes a logo can sort of "fade" and lose its initial impact. A re-design or color change can be a nice shot in the arm to regain some of that lost attention and attract new clientele.

When a Houston landscape contractor updated his logo, changing the basic design and color scheme after having the same logo for eight years, he was surprised at all of the calls he received from prospective clients who thought he was a brand new business. He was also very pleased to find that they were the kind of clients he had been wanting all along. His old logo just wasn't designed to attract that particular market.

Try to have your logo updated before you re-order business cards or letterhead, etc. If your business is seasonal, have the updating done before your busy season starts — you might find it is even busier with your new logo in place. And, don't think that updating your logo isn't important or that it can wait, because it can't.

# **Putting Your Image Into Print**

It would be great if your logo was all you had to worry about, but what you include along with your company name and your logo are important as well. Many companies make obvious omissions on their business cards. I have a collection of horticultural business cards with no addresses – a big oversight that positively shouts "flake."

Add to those the cards on which the phone number has been changed – by crossing the old one out and hand-writing in the new one. Or, the area code is missing. Most states have multiple area codes, and if you work in a state with several different area codes close together, yours should be included. And most cell phone providers require it.

A business card or vehicle sign or an advertisement in the phone book – all are useless if they are incomplete. Be sure that a client knows where to find you and how to contact you. Your phone number should be clearly evident everywhere, and your mailing address should be included on all of your printed materials.

If your company name is generic and doesn't explain what you actually do in and of itself, consider including a line or two that sums it up, such as, "landscape architectural design," or "interior landscape design, installation, and maintenance," or "serving downtown Rochester since 1981." This is particularly helpful, for example, when you are using your own name in the form of "Janet Forrest & Company" or "The Roger Storm Group," either of which could be the name for any number of different kinds of businesses.

#### **Printed Matter**

Even though we live in the virtual world of the 21st century, you'll still need some basic printed materials:

- Business cards. These should be printed on an attractive, sturdy stock. Don't skimp on your cards as they are often the only link between you and a prospective client you just met.
- Letterhead. You don't have to spend a fortune, but try to get a stock that has some substance to it. Remember, you will be using it for a variety of reasons, including your proposals,

contracts, and possibly your invoicing. You'll probably print everything out on your office printer, so make sure it's a good one and reliable.

- Brochures. These are optional since most of us have websites, but if you decide to use brochures too, get them done by a professional and print them on a nice heavy paper stock. Your logo should be in more than one place. The text should be drafted by you and edited or rewritten by a professional. It should include everything that's on your website.
- Website. The Internet is the place to showcase your talents for the least amount of money. Be sure your website address is easy to read on your business card because so that it can direct potential clients to the website to view your portfolio.

# **Printing**

Before you have anything printed you must determine your budget, so you will need to get some printing estimates. You will find that printing is mostly high-end photocopying these days, so the variations in prices are not as great as they once were. But, some printers, especially ones from online companies, give better pricing for business cards because they do so many of them, while another printer may specialize in brochures that are very economically priced. It pays to shop around for pricing, quality and, of course, service.

There are price breaks on certain quantities and if you can use enough of the particular item once it's printed you should try for those breaks. You can anticipate additional costs if you require any typesetting that was not done by the artist who designed your logo, business cards, letterhead, and brochures.

Have printers show you samples of their work. Before they print anything, ask if they anticipate any problems with the reproduction of your photos so that you can re-do the photos before your job goes to press. When you finally receive your

printed project, examine it closely. Look through each stack of brochures or each box of business cards to be sure you have quality throughout. Be sure photos have reproduced properly.

# Advertising

Every business, no matter how large or how small, must advertise at some time. Where and how you advertise is another story. The first step towards effective advertising is understanding it. Here's what advertising does:

- Advertising lets everyone know you're there. You can use it to simply reinforce your image, or you can use it to announce specials or specific products and services that you provide.
- Advertising can be used to develop a need for your products and services within a particular community and can thereby open the door for your salesperson by giving advance notice of your existence.
- Advertising helps create a (hopefully) favorable image of you and your company, and in some kinds of advertising, such as press releases, can help to inform and educate your prospective clientele.

What advertising doesn't do:

- Advertising cannot make people buy from you if they are not ready or if they do not need, want, or like what you have to sell.
- Advertising will not make you a professional if you are not one to begin with.
- Advertising cannot be the only thing on which you rely. You have to use other efforts in conjunction with your advertising to reinforce your image in the community. Advertising is important, but it is only one part of marketing.

• Advertising does not guarantee that once your salesperson makes a presentation that they will not blow the sale. If your salesperson does not reflect the marketing image of the company or does not behave in a professional manner with clients, then all of the great advertising in the world will not help make the sale.

For an advertisement to be effective, that is, for it to generate a response that eventually results in closed sales, it must contain a theme. What this means is that before you design or have your ad designed, you must decide just what it is that you want your advertisement to accomplish. Once you make that determination, you will know what kind of advertisement to run.

# **Types Of Advertisements**

There are different kinds of advertisements and they are used for different purposes, depending on the type of company that uses them and the place where they are to appear.

• The "image" ad. This does nothing more than keep your name in front of the public. It is the kind of ad that you see where the name of the company appears with a slogan or a few short lines saying what the business does.

Image ads are usually run in many publications month after month without being changed. Their purpose is to let everyone know that the company is still around. Do not expect to get flooded with calls when you run this kind of ad because that is not its purpose. This is not the kind of ad that should be run by anything other than a very well-established business whose reputation is known by everyone.

• The "promotional" ad. This is for those who are actively seeking new business. The ads feature specific items on sale, special new services, new business hours to better serve clientele, reply coupons, etc. If you are a new business or want to

open a new territory, promotional advertising will be what you are looking for.

Promotional advertisements must be changed frequently. They must be real "grabbers" and should be designed to get a more immediate response from your target market. They should be focused on a specific aspect of what you're selling. For example, if you are an interiorscaper who is marketing a new subirrigation device that allows you to expend less labor in the maintenance and you are therefore able to lower your rates because you have fewer plant fatalities, you can emphasize that facet of your business in your promotional ad.

If you run a promotional ad and don't get a good response don't write it off as a fault of the publication or website on which it is appearing, particularly if you know it is being seen by your target market. Just go back to the drawing board and try to discover what went wrong. Perhaps a reader survey by phone can give you some insight as to why you didn't get a better response.

• The "hybrid" ad. This is a combination of both the image and the promotional ad. It relies on small modifications to the general appearance, such as a small section that changes each month to announce the special of the month or a little discount coupon, etc. This is generally the best ad for most advertisers.

#### **Defining Your Ad**

What you have to sell is pretty much the same as every other landscape or interiorscape company – in the eyes of the reader, that is. But you know that you are different, and your advertisement must show that without excess verbiage.

It's hard to advertise a product in a service industry such as the horticultural trade. What are you going to say? That your flowers smell sweeter than those of the competition? That your leaves are greener? That your plants never get insects and never die? Selling a service is not the same as selling a product. You can't say that your service is better because it just doesn't sound credible to the client. As far as they are concerned all you do is take care of plants and do a lot of digging in the dirt. In their eyes, anybody can do that, even they could do it themselves – if they only had the time.

This means that you will have to emphasize things in your ad that accentuate the differences between you and your competition which would attract a serious client to your door. For example, you may wish to say that you are bonded, insured, licensed, certified, and a member of whatever professional affiliation you have. Or you may wish to emphasize your specialty market, or a particular product or service that you offer such as xeriscapes, fully guaranteed plants and free plant replacements, preserved or silk foliage, sod installation, drip irrigation systems, bonsai trees, etc.

#### **Advertising In Print and Online**

There are many publications and websites where you can advertise. The costs vary as do readership and demographics. Buying advertising is taking a risk on an intangible. You may get hundreds of calls or you may get a half dozen. It depends on whether the publication, website, or search engine is reaching the readers who are your likely prospective clientele and whether your advertisement is designed to attract those same individuals.

I started out working for an advertising agency, I have worked for different publications, I published my own monthly newsletter and five magazines for several years, I have had more than 25 websites since 1992, I have advertised in every media imaginable. I am also an advertising designer, so I know that when an advertiser says they didn't get a response to their ad, it's rarely because the ad wasn't reaching the target audience. It

is usually because the ad just wasn't effectively designed to attract the attention of the readers. This is particularly true when you have an advertiser who insists on running an image ad and then squawks when no one calls wanting to buy.

If your advertisement is properly designed to attract your target clientele, your next task is to select the right place to run it. This is where targeting your market plays such an important role. By knowing who you want for a client you can find out what they are most likely to read and invest your dollars there.

Before you consider the cost of the advertisement, you should first find out the publisher's or website's demographics, that is, what kinds of individuals read it, and/or the circulation, or how many receive it and where they are located.

Always think about frequency of publication. A daily will cost more but will give you good coverage. A weekly will cost less but will be read more frequently. A monthly, the most common in magazine and website publishing, will probably be most affordable, especially search engine pay-per-click campaigns that allow you to determine your budget.

# Length of Ad Run

Most advertising does not bring new business immediately, at least not in large numbers. Unfortunately, many people run an ad only once, or less than six months in a row, and they get no new calls. Not every reader reads every page of a magazine or website. Think of yourself. Do you read everything in every publication you receive every month? Can you keep up with what's new on every website's pages? Also, not everyone needs a new service when your ad just happens to be running. Six months later, after you've withdrawn your ad prematurely, they will see someone else's ad and call them instead.

Be prepared to plan your advertising campaign in advance for a period of at least one year, and keep in mind that you will be creating credibility in the eyes of those who see your ad. Towards the end of that campaign you can plan for the next year's advertising.

Remember, once your ad disappears, the readers who were on the verge of contacting you will think that you disappeared too. You would be amazed at how quickly you will be forgotten. If the readers don't keep back issues of the publication on file and refer to them from time to time, they will not even be reminded of you again. One of the rules of thumb for advertising is "out of sight, out of mind."

# **Alternating Advertisements**

Vary your ad if you like. You don't usually have to run the exact same ad every month, although the same size each time may be a requirement, depending on the publication or website Sometimes you will find that you receive a greater response from each "new" ad that you run. As long as your ad is the same size, you probably won't get hit with a production charge when you change it. But, most of the time a publication or website will want to know in advance that you are going to change the ad, particularly if you are going to change not only the content of the ad, but its size as well. If you are receiving a frequency discount on the cost of the ad it will usually still be in effect even if you change the size or content of the ad, but to be sure, check with the publisher or webmaster first.

# **Directory Advertising**

There are many Yellow Pages-style publications and websites where you can advertise your products and services. They are one of the most reliable for contractors of all kinds. But they also tend to attract a lot of "shoppers." These are the people who call several vendors in a particular classification and are looking for the best buy. They are usually, though not

always, small clients who are in a hurry and are on a limited budget. You will also find that the directory will bring in more maintenance jobs than the design/install projects which are the real money makers in horticultural contracting businesses.

If you are only interested in small jobs, primarily maintenance only, and if you have a large territory with plenty of employees to cover it, then the directory pages might be for you. Unfortunately, the only way you will ever know whether it is a good investment or not is to try it. But, it can be costly and you are locked into a year-long contract whether you get a good response or not.

Remember that with the yellow pages you will have to compete with many other ads from companies just like yours, and you will all be located on the exact same pages. Most consumers will be drawn to the larger ads first, the smaller ones second. If you can't afford a display ad but are talked into running a line listing, you will probably receive very little response.

If you want to advertise in directories, you must determine in which ones you want your ads to appear. You may want to run in several books or on several websites, varying the size of the ad depending on the importance of each geographical region. If you want to open up a new territory, you may wish to run a large paid ad in a directory book and run smaller line ads in online directories to offset the cost.

Besides deciding in which books to run your ad, you must also decide which classification best suits you. If you are an interiorscaper you will probably want to be classified under the "plants" category. If you are a landscaper you will probably be under the landscape category. If you do both you will need to double your advertising efforts and appear in both sections, probably with small ads or free online listing if you are very budget

conscious. If you also have a wholesale nursery or a retail garden center, those classifications must be considered as well.

Directory advertising differs from magazine advertising in that it is not enough to have an attractive, eye-catching ad. In the directory pages you are competing for attention by having everything about your company outlined in the ad so that readers will call you instead of the other guy. In other publications this is not the emphasis because the readers will not be subjected to making such a decision from among so many similar advertisements all grouped together on the same pages.

## **Newspaper Advertising**

Newspapers are for locals, and almost every town has at least one paper, many with online versions. Some of those newspapers are large, cumbersome tomes that take hours to read. Your advertisement may or may not be noticed in such a publication, particularly if your ad is a small one. With large newspapers you may need to find out whether your advertisement can be placed in a particular section which is read by your target clientele — the home section for residential clients or the business section for commercial clients. Your paper may have other sections that are more appropriate for your business, such as a real estate section.

Some cities have small newspapers that go to particular neighborhoods such as downtown areas, where there is a high concentration of corporate offices and nice retail stores, or high income residential suburbs where homeowners are looking for a reputable horticulturist. They also have little specialty newspapers that cover entertainment or fitness, or that cater to the needs of retail merchants, etc.

Before placing an ad in any newspaper, read them all yourself over a period of a few weeks and see what other ads are appearing. Are there other horticultural businesses running ads on a regular basis? Are those companies similar to your own? What do their advertisements look like – small or large, plain or fancy, text only or graphics/photos? What kinds of services do they mention in their ads?

Even if it looks like this is a good place to advertise, you should still do further research into the circulation and demographics of the paper. Find out how many paid subscribers there are as opposed to newsstand sales. Find out what kinds of people read it, their income levels, their occupations, what kind of businesses they are, etc. This is valuable information for you because it will tell you whether the readers want, or can afford, your type of service.

## **Specialty Interest Publications**

Every club, association, or special interest group has its own publication, may online. It is sometimes harder to get a handle on who these members are in terms of the kinds of businesses or the occupations of the members because, as a rule, they don't keep such detailed demographics.

If you belong to a special interest group, you will know who the members are, and you can probably gauge their level of interest in your products and services on a more personal level and make your decision accordingly. The good thing about advertising in these places is that they are fairly inexpensive.

## **Trade & Industry Publications**

The horticultural industry has its share of trade publications and so does every other industry around. Finding out who reads what and if they are potential clients means making a trip to the library and doing some research in the periodicals section. You will find that the periodicals librarians are usually very helpful and will direct you to the magazines and newsletters they carry, and they will also help you locate other publications which they don't receive regularly.

Another place you can look in the library is in the reference section. There is a directory called the "National Trade & Professional Associations of the U.S." which is published by Columbia Books, Inc., Washington, DC. It has a subject index in the back that is cross-referenced to the alphabetical listings of almost 8,000 associations. Included is information about the number of members, in-house publications, websites, etc. You can write to these organizations and request rate cards, demographics, and circulation figures. In most cases they will send you a complimentary copy of their publication on request.

These industry publications can be one of the best ways to invest your advertising dollars because you will know, absolutely for a fact, that your advertisement is going to reach only the prospective clientele that you are seeking. The cost varies from industry to industry and from one publication or website to another. In general, you will receive more for your money because every dollar you spend will go right where you want it to go, unlike the directory listings where a large portion of your monthly advertising bill goes towards reaching people with whom you will probably never conduct business.

### **General Interest Publications**

These are the enormous magazines such as Sunset, People, etc. They have huge circulations and have very expensive advertising rates, even online, and especially for the average small business. They are also national and international in circulation and their high ad rates cannot justify their demographics when it comes to targeting a local market for your horticultural business.

If you have the bucks and want to invest in a year of advertising you can expect to spend in the tens of hundreds to thousands of dollars in these kinds of publications. Not for your average, local horticultural service company.

## **Classified Advertising**

Just about every publication has a classified section, and that includes online magazines or e-zines. Classified advertising is inexpensive when compared to the cost of most display ads. You are reaching the same number of readers, but whether they can find you or whether they will take the time to even read the classified sections is another story.

You can get a feel for whether the classifieds are well-read by how many similar types of advertisements appear in that section. For example, are there several businesses offering their products and services? Is there anything there except for help-wanted or personals? If there isn't, it is probably not the right place for you.

### **Throwaways**

These are the "Penny Savers," "Ad Clippers," "Ad-Visors," and "Koupon Kingdoms" that appear on your doorstep once a week or once a month, and are usually more of a contribution to the neighborhood litter pile than anything else. But people do read them. They are usually shopping for a bargain (translation: they want something for nothing). If you have a retail outlet this could be a good venue for you, but it is usually a dead end for a service-oriented business.

## **Determining Advertising Costs**

When comparing similar publications in which you plan to advertise, it is best to get a good feeling for how much it will cost you to reach your target clientele on a per person basis. You may be able to obtain this information directly from the publisher, but in most cases you will have to do a cost study on your own. You will inevitably make your decision based upon your individual budget, the number of people you want to reach, and your feelings about the publication itself.

#### Ad Placement

Where your ad appears in a publication or on a website is important. In a small publications and sites it will be easily seen wherever it appears, but in a larger publication or website with more than 50 pages, placement becomes critical. As a rule, you should be sure that you are not on the same page as another advertiser who sells the same products or services that you do. When a publisher says that advertisements are placed on a "space available" basis, they are telling you that you take your chances as far as where your ad will appear in the magazine or website, but sometimes they have internal policies that dictate that they do not place competitors on the same page.

If you have a particular spot where you want your ad to appear, you may be looking at an additional charge for "preferred placement." This means specifying that you want your ad to appear in the front of the magazine, or on a right hand side, or top of the page, or next to a particular section of the publication or website. In some cases, placement on a top, right hand page can be preferable, but the style and format of the publication or website will dictate what is right for your advertisement. You should familiarize yourself with the publication or website so that you can make a sound decision about whether or not you will want or require preferred placement of any kind.

## **Broadcast Advertising**

Television and radio air time is expensive in most areas, radio costing a little less than TV. Advertising on the airwaves is usually more than the average horticultural business can even begin to afford. But, if you have a small local channel that is not too outrageously high-priced or beyond your budget, you may want to give this media a try.

Advertising on the radio reaches far more people than the average print ad, but to be its most effective, the spot must air

frequently, and at times when the greatest number of your target clientele will be listening, primarily "drive time," those times of day when everybody is on their way to work or on their way home, or during a popular program that attracts the most listeners or, in the case of TV, the most viewers.

Drive time can also be effective with both commercial and residential markets. It reaches the commuters driving to and from work, and also reaches people who are still at home preparing breakfast or dinner.

Before, during, and immediately after news broadcasts are good times for advertising. If there are particular programs that carry demographics which are similar to those of your target clientele, those would be good times to air your spots.

Air time spots are different from printed advertisements because you must say a lot in a very short time, and the listener or viewer will hear or see your spot for those few seconds only, unlike a printed ad at which they can stare to their heart's content. Because of the cost to air these spots, and because they are so brief, you will need to hire someone to write and possibly produce the spot for you so that you will be assured that it will effect the results you desire.

If you aren't going to run the air spots longer than a month or so, it will probably not be worth the investment. The audience you reach by air is so much larger than what you will get in local print publications that you have to make this a very serious commitment. You must be prepared to spend lots of money creating the commercial to begin with, and then you will have to pay for the air time, not just once, but many times.

We are talking about what could amount to several thousands of dollars. It is for that reason that this is not recommended as a cost effective endeavor for the majority of horticultural businesses.

#### **Billboards**

In some cities, billboards are no longer seen. But, in some areas they are still an advertising staple. The cost depends on where they are located, the size of the board, etc. I am only familiar with one landscaper's experience with billboard advertising, and he said that it generated more response than anything he had ever tried previously and resulted in his company becoming more widely recognized than ever before.

Billboard advertising is not for the amateur. When you're putting an ad together that is that huge and that visible, an expert must be consulted who knows what they're doing.

## Signs

If your client gives you the okay, you should take advantage of the opportunity to erect some attractive signs saying that you are the one who is in the process of installing, or who has already installed, the landscape or the interiorscape at that site. Signs are often overlooked by horticultural companies, and yet they can be quite effective in attracting potential clients because people are just naturally interested in plants and horticulture. When they see someone installing a tree or laying sod they like to watch, and that's when they are going to see your signs.

A landscaper once told me he got more business from his on-site signs than any other form of marketing efforts that his company had tried. Of course, everyone has a different tale to tell, and how effective your signs are depends on the project itself, where the signs are located, and what the signs look like.

## **Designing Your Advertisement**

Once you have selected a publication in which you want your advertisement to appear you must come up with the advertisement itself. This is not a job for the amateur artist. Even if your computer has graphics capabilities, you should not attempt to rely solely on them to create an effective advertisement unless you, or someone who works for you, has a strong background in advertising. Otherwise, it should be handled by a professional advertising artist.

## **Researching The Competition**

Whether you are designing your ad yourself in-house or are hiring professional assistance, you should do some research before the ad design is begun. As a rule, your directory ad will probably be inappropriate for most other publications, but it might be a starting point for developing a new ad. Look at the other ads in the publications or websites where you plan to advertise. That will give you an idea of the basic style that is popular within that industry or with the general readership. Pay particularly close attention to advertisements placed by companies who are advertising products or services the same as or similar to yours. Get the basic idea of what the trends are, and try to incorporate some of them into your own advertisement without duplicating the other ads. Notice any special key words that seem appropriate to the publication's readership so that you can use similar terminology and fit in like a member of the family.

If the publication or website consists mainly of image advertisements and you really want to sell something specific, you may have a dilemma on your hands. On the one hand, this could mean that a promotional ad would be inappropriate and look out of place. On the other hand, looking out of place could draw the readers attention to it more readily than had you run an image style ad. In cases like this it is probably better to try and do a hybrid ad that is a combination of the two styles.

### **Ad Content**

Think carefully about the text of your ad. You should aim for a clean looking ad that isn't overpowered with black ink –

just the opposite of your directory-style ad. Try to be concise with your wording and use as few words as possible to say what you want your prospective clients to know. For example, instead of saying both "Serving Downtown Newhaven" and "Established 1975," try limiting it to one phrase: "Serving Downtown Newhaven Since 1975." Shorter, to the point, and considerably less space used. If you need to say more but don't have the room, consider a more severe editing job on the text, or go to a larger size ad. It is better to go bigger and have an ad that is easy to read than to try to cram everything into a very small and chaotic space.

#### **Ad Aesthetics**

Make use of graphics and photos whenever possible. A picture is worth a thousand words, remember? Pictures grab the reader's eye away from the text they're reading and focus it on the picture and its immediate surroundings — your ad. The reader might read your ad eventually, but the addition of a photo or drawing will draw their immediate attention.

Think about the possibility of adding a coupon to your advertisement, particularly if you are advertising directly to your target clientele. "A free plant with a free estimate" or "5% off all new sales with this coupon" are just a couple of examples, and you can probably think of more or better ones.

### **Promotional Ads**

Specials, promotions, introductory offers, discounts, etc., all attract new businesses. If you run the same ad in more than one publication or website and include a coupon with each, be sure that you put a code on the coupons somewhere so that you will know which publications the responses are coming from. Nowadays, it's common to have different e-mail addresses that correspond to each ad too.

Include words like "new," "limited offer," "special," "introductory offer," "discount," "free," etc. Those words are always eye-catchers, and they encourage a response.

It is always best to hire a professional to design your ads for you, but you should draft the basic idea for the artist so that he or she can have a general idea of what you want. It also helps to show the artist a copy of the publication(s) or website(s) where you plan to run the ad. When you draft your idea, keep in mind the basic components of an ad.

# **Components Of An Advertisement**

There are four main components in an advertisement. They are the individual pieces of an ad which, when aesthetically positioned in the layout of the ad, combine to attract attention.

- Headline. This draws attention to the ad. It makes the reader want to read the ad. Key words like, "new," "sale," "discount," or "grand opening," can be effective. So can a short slogan such as "our plants don't need water" (by an interiorscaper who specializes in artificial foliage), or "we love drips" (by a landscaper running a special on drip irrigation systems).
- Copy or Text. This is a brief explanation of the headline. For example, if we take the line "our plants don't need water" and try to rely on it alone to generate interest, you can be sure that about all it will generate is a lot of curiosity. When the reader can't figure out what it means he or she will simply turn the page. A few lines of text, explaining that you specialize in artificial or preserved foliage will clarify such a headline.
- Logo and Name. These absolutely must appear in your ad, no matter what. Your name identification is critical in advertising. Think about some of the ads you see in magazines or on television. Have you ever noticed how sometimes you can hum the jingle or remember a great looking picture but have no idea who is selling the product or even what the product is?

This happens when the name is minimized in the ad. Don't let that happen to you.

• Picture or Graphic. This can be a line drawing or a photo, and while it is not an absolute necessity, it is highly recommended. I say this again because it bears repeating in advertising: a picture is worth a thousand words. A picture will certainly draw further attention to your ad and will more readily convey your message than your headline or text can do all by themselves.

A good graphic artist with expertise in advertising art should be able to prepare a variety of advertisements created around the same basic ad format. These variations can be in both size and content with different target clientele in mind. Perhaps one ad is for a directory while another is for a design magazine, and another is going to a trade magazine for the hotel industry.

## **Buying Ad Space**

Advertising is sold according to its dimensions. In print ads that means that the smallest ad is going to be anywhere from 1/20 to 1/10 of a page, and then the sizes go up from about 1/8 to a full page. Online, ads are also sold in dimensions, but those dimensions are measured in pixels. An online ad that is 180px x 180px will be roughly equivalent to a print ad that is 2.25" x 2.25".

While pages can be broken into these sizes in a variety of dimensions (heights by widths), most publications and websites offer only certain specific measurements which fit alongside their text. If the text is spread across the page in three columns, the ad dimensions will be different from those of a publication that is two-column or four-column in format.

To avoid paying a production charge to the publication or website to make your ad the right size for their format, be sure that your ad is the correct size when you send it in. Remember that two 1/6 page ads in different publications may be slightly different in actual size. Get a rate card with all the dimensions for whatever publisher or website you plan to advertise with.

#### **Promotional Items**

Encouraging new business can be done by offering your existing and prospective clientele a variety of buying incentives such as "freebies," specials, and discounts, known collectively as "promotional advertising" because they promote business.

There is a significant difference between offering promotions and giving away the entire store. For example, if you are giving your interiorscape and landscape designs away at no charge, you are not offering a promotion, you are simply exercising poor business judgment. Design is a time-consuming art that is part and parcel to the business. Ditto installation labor. These are not promotional items.

A promotional item is something offered for a limited time and may cut only ever so slightly into your profit margin, but which does not damage your net worth. If you give away large numbers of manhours you will severely damage your company's cash flow and set a series of events in motion that will ultimately destroy your credit as well as your credibility.

Good examples of promotional items are the small, inexpensive, but attractive plants such as dendrobium orchids, which clients find appealing and which you can afford to buy in some quantity, once in a while only. Other freebies include some of the more traditional items such as pencils and pens with your company name imprinted on them. I would personally opt for the gift plant whenever possible, but imprinted pens do reinforce your name a little better and are infinitely cheaper.

#### Sale Items

When you aren't giving freebie plants you can offer certain items for sale for a limited time. You can offer items such as terra cotta pots or 6" pothos, or flats of annual color. You can time your sales to correspond to holidays or seasonal changes. If you have such a sale, remember that the sale price applies to the item purchased and does not apply to the labor needed to install it. Make sure that your advertising makes this distinction.

Another type of promotion that packs some incentive is item discounts which are available if your client purchases before a certain date or in a certain quantity. For example, you can say that if they purchase plants and services from you within 30 days that they will receive a certain discount, the actual amount depending upon your profit margin, of course. Once again, you have to distinguish whether labor is included or not.

#### **Direct Mail**

You may think of anything unfamiliar that finds its way into your mail box as "junk mail" or "spam," but you usually open it anyway, don't you? We're all naturally curious about what the other guy is "trying to sell us this time," so we jump at the bait and open it. We glance at it, and if it looks like something we might some day want, we file it away, usually never to be seen again.

But what about the mail you get that is directly targeted to your kind of business? Isn't that more likely to get your attention, especially if they are selling something you might actually need; if you are one of the members of their target market.

Some of the stuff you receive really is junk mail and spam, but a lot of it is well-written and well-prepared and contains information on products and services that are from reputable companies. If you can think about what things you regularly receive, which pieces of mail you keep and which pieces you

throw out almost immediately, you should get some idea of what is necessary for effective direct mail campaigns you can do yourself.

A well-written cover letter and a brochure should be included in any snail mail efforts. A postcard can be effective too. With e-mail, be sure you adhere to the United States Federal Trade Commission's CAN-SPAM Act (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing). This law, signed in 2003 and enacted in 2004, requires that you use a true e-mail address in the "from" and "to" lines, a legitimate subject line, and identification of who you are in the body of the e-mail, including your name, valid mailing address, and a link or brief instruction for how to opt out of receiving further mailings (which you must honor within ten (10) business days).

You should also find out if there are any restrictions on how many e-mails you can send within a certain period of time. For example, your website host may restrict you to 200 e-mails per hour, but your ISP may restrict you to 200 e-mails per day, so your ISP wins this one, and you are limited to 200 e-mails per day. With e-mail marketing, you can send out a few every day, every month. This helps you avoid sales slumps that occur when you market heavily for a month and then stop suddenly.

Your letters or e-mails should be brief and to the point. If you can't write well, or if you can't write promotional material, hire someone who can. Be sure that you have the contact names of the individuals at the companies you want to reach. It doesn't look very good to address your letters and e-mails to "Dear Manager" or "Dear Purchasing Agent." It really sounds so much more professional when the letter is truly personalized to include the individual's name so that your greeting reads, "Dear Ms. Marshall," instead. Mention your latest special offer or discount in your letter or e-mail. Give them a deadline by which to respond – anywhere from 30 to 60 days is good.

Print out your snail mail on good quality paper with a good quality printer. If you don't have the skill or the equipment to do this, consider having an outside marketing service such as a mailing house perform the direct mailing for you. This may be preferable anyway if you have a lot of letters to do.

#### **Brochures**

Your brochures should be accompanied by a letter even if the brochures themselves are self-explanatory. If you want to include specials and promotions to get the recipient to respond to your mailing, the letter will be a necessity.

On the other hand, some companies have a brochure created specifically for a particular mailing or e-mailing and it includes all of the special offers that you could possibly want to hear about, and they include a postage-paid response coupon as well. Brochures of this variety can easily be self-mailers which will save you money in snail mail postage, envelopes, and handling.

### Newsletters

Newsletters make great e-mailers. They are usually interesting to read and they keep your name in front of your existing clients and your prospective clientele as well. They are relatively simple to produce with so many publishing programs available. And, there are companies that create newsletters just for certain industries to use as promotional pieces to send to their clients.

Newsletters are usually produced as PDFs and are not published more frequently than bi-monthly or quarterly. They can be delivered as attachments to e-mails sent to subscribers, or they can be created in HTML and inserted in the body of the e-mail, or you can send a link to the latest newsletter that the recipient can download at your website.

Your newsletter should include a very short article about a horticultural topic, written at a level suitable for the amateur horticulturist. You should also include some things about your company – new territories you've just opened, new projects recently completed, awards you have received, awards you have given employees, promotions you have given your employees, new technology your company is implementing and, of course, a little something here and there about what you do and where, when, and how you do it.

Since you will probably send your newsletter to existing and prospective clients, it is a good idea to offer special items at a discount. For example, you might want to offer flats of bedding plants at 20% off or 5' dracaenas at 30% off, etc. Those percentages may be more or less than what you would actually offer.

## **Flyers**

Flyers are tacky. When they do work they usually attract the wrong clientele. They usually end up in the garbage can. That's usually where they belong in the first place. You can make an inexpensive three-panel, two-fold brochure for about the same cost.

## **Timing**

When you mail or e-mail something, think about the time at which you are sending it. Unless you are mailing a holiday promotion, try to avoid mailing anything between about November 10 and January 5. You will rarely get a decent response for non-holiday items during that time period because people are so busy and don't have the time to pay attention to anything beyond the pieces of mail they are actually expecting.

If the weather is worse than usual, use that time to produce your marketing pieces, but don't drop them in the mail box until the sky clears up. It has been proven time and again that people will spend more money and be open to new ideas on a much wider level when the sun shines — unless you are a roofing contractor!

If you are looking for design/install projects you will find most of them during the spring and summer when people have relocated or remodeled. If you are looking for maintenance only you will find that most of your takeover accounts will appear in the late winter/early spring and again in the late summer/early fall. This varies from one geographical location to another, and you should try to get a good feel for what these trends are like in your area and for your company, because they will provide a time-frame in which to schedule your marketing efforts.

## **Frequency**

If you are doing mailings or e-mailings as part of a marketing campaign rather than a one-shot promotional effort, you will need to mail more than once to each recipient. The first mailing establishes the need for your service. The second should follow in three to four weeks and explain your services in detail. The third should follow in another three to four weeks and be an offer to do business.

You may only send two letters or e-mails, combining the explanation of your service and your offer to do business in the second one, but whether you send two or three pieces, you must follow up with a personal call to complete the direct mail marketing process.

## Response

When direct mail or e-mail is used to sell products, the response rate can be as high as 4%. When selling a service, the response is impossible to gauge. It can be as low as ½% for a

poorly-produced or poorly-targeted mailing, to a high of 2%. People cannot "send away" for a service the way they can a product. Because of this, when using direct mail or e-mail to advertise your service business, you must follow it up with phone solicitations during the two to five weeks following receipt of the mailing. If this is done correctly, it has the potential to result in between 25% and 35% acceptance of offers to make a presentation.

## **Mailing Lists**

All the letters and brochures in the world won't do you any good if you don't have a way to reach your target market. You have two choices here: 1) you can create your own mailing list, or 2) you can rent a mailing list.

If you create your own mailing list, you will be in for a very long and sometimes painful process. Finding the names and addresses of your target market can be extremely time consuming and is practically a full-time job in and of itself, even if you're just looking for e-mail addresses online. Renting addresses will allow you to easily target a residential neighborhood or particular industry in your area if you don't have time to create a list yourself. Unfortunately, either way you do it, the information is always a little out of date, and with purchased lists there are lots of errors in the addresses because they are often scanned from telephone books. You can expect at least a 15% return as undeliverable, but it is a starting point and you can build from there.

On the other hand, if you can find a mailing house that already has a current list for your target market, you're in business! Renting a mailing list costs anywhere from \$50 to \$500 per thousand names, depending on how large the list is and how closely-defined your target market is. For example, if you are looking to rent the names and addresses of the residents of

a particular area whose income is over a certain dollar amount, or if you are looking for a list of only those companies with gross sales over a certain amount, or with a particular number of employees, the mailing house may charge you a little bit more for the additional sorting they must do to provide you with that specific portion of the list.

There may be other charges in addition to the list rental, such as mailing labels for snail mail. Contact several mailing houses for quotes.

## **Mail Processing**

You probably won't want to do this yourself. It can be very time-consuming. I recommend doing it a little every week, whether its snail mail or e-mail, so that you are not so over-whelmed with the effort. But, if you really don't feel up to the challenge, hire a mailing house or mail marketer to do it for you. They will do snail mail and e-mail mailings for a fee.

## **Determining Your Budget**

There's no doubt about it: direct snail mail can be very costly, which is why it must be done correctly in every way. The items which you will need to consider in terms of cost are as follows: printing of your letterhead stationery, envelopes, and brochures, labor involved in printing letters on the letterhead, wear and tear on your computer printer, labor to assemble the mailing, list rental fees, mail house additional fees if applicable, and last but not least, postage.

With postage, you can certainly save if you mail bulk rate. In order to mail bulk you need a bulk permit, you may need to take a class in bulk mail processing (offered free by the Post Office), and you must have a minimum mailing of 200 pieces. Your envelopes must have a pre-printed bulk rate logo where the stamp is usually placed.

In general, these days it is really more cost-effective to do you direct mail by e-mail. Yes, a lot of it will just meet with a finger hitting the delete key, but many people do read it, so it is worth the effort.

#### **Public Relations**

Public relations, or PR, is one of the easiest, most enjoyable, and least expensive ways to promote and market your business. It includes networking with people in your community, in your industry, and in associated or affiliated industries. Public relations means doing a little public speaking, writing or appearing in articles, and submitting press releases about your company's activities.

To be effective at good public relations doesn't mean that you have to be an extremely outgoing and gregarious type. You do need to be a "people person" in some ways because you will be meeting lots of people, and you will need to be able to build a rapid rapport with them. You will be in the public eye, but you don't have to be a one-person marching band to attract the positive kind of attention that will benefit your company in the long run.

## **Networking**

The word "networking" became a catch word in the 1980s, and it is still a well-accepted and effective marketing activity today, although a lot of it is now done online. Networking refers to the deliberate or accidental socializing that we all do with our friends, business associates, and industry peers, which may or may not lead to new business, but which may result in expanded and increased knowledge of our industry, our products and services, and business in general. There are many ways to network:

• Structured networking groups. These consist of selected individuals from various industries who meet on a scheduled basis for the sole purpose of expanding their businesses. These groups are usually organized in geographical areas and have specific rules and regulations for the manner in which your services are presented and the way in which referrals are made.

In structured groups you usually have a lunch or dinner together and afterwards each individual gets up and gives a very brief, 30-second "commercial" about themselves and their products or services. There is usually a speaker, frequently someone from within the group, who shares in-depth information about their products and services. When all of this is over, everyone exchanges business cards, bulk-style, and from then on when any of them encounters someone who needs the services of one of their fellow networking acquaintances, they pass that person's card along with their recommendation. Because one of them has referred the other to a potential client, the chances of them actually becoming a client are excellent.

- Non-structured networking groups. These are more casual and there is less emphasis on getting new business immediately. There are more different ways of networking in an unstructured atmosphere and there are no limitations on the kinds of groups you can join to expand your circle of acquaintances.
- Volunteer activities are good sources of professional acquaintances. There are many of these ranging from hospitals, schools, public broadcasting stations, drug rehab centers, facilities for the disabled, elderly, and homeless, and the list goes on and on. But, if you go into a volunteer activity with the sole intention of increasing your business you will be sadly disappointed and you will, in all probability, alienate the very people with whom you want to form close alliances.

There is only one reason to volunteer your time and energy to an organization or activity, and that is because you want to do a good service for humanity and support a worthwhile cause. In short, you are there to help others. If you are only there to catch the glory and make friends, you would be better off joining another kind of special interest group, because volunteer organizations spell "work." If you aren't available to sit on committees and actually "do" anything, you will become dead weight, and your presence, or lack thereof, will be less than appreciated by the other members. You will create a very negative public relations image for yourself and for your business.

- Service clubs like Lions, Rotary, Quota, Knights of Columbus, etc., are volunteer, and you should follow that guideline if you decide to become a member. It's not that you won't ever benefit on a business level from your membership in such organizations, it's just that you can't join these groups with that as your sole purpose. You must be ready to dedicate yourself to the cause at hand.
- Special interest groups (SIG's) such as ski clubs, travel coops, collectors clubs, etc., are fun. They also consist of a wide variety of members from diverse backgrounds. Some may be prospective clients, some may lead you to prospective clients, and some may just turn out to be good friends. Once again, don't join just to increase business. Join to have a good time. If your business benefits from the connections you make that's great; if you never get a job lead that's okay too.
- Networking within your own industry. This allows you to meet your peers in a non-competitive neutral group where your purpose is to learn and improve yourselves and become more professional as an industry. Your common goal of improving your industry also results in self-improvement.

Networking with other horticulturists can lead to joint ventures, partnerships, mergers, and buyouts. By learning about your fellow industry members and the ways in which they conduct their businesses, you can refer business to each other.

For example, say you've been attending your local trade association meetings regularly and you know that Long Stem Tropicals services a particular residential suburb that is not in your geographical market. The next time a prospective client calls you from that area you don't have to coldly turn them away. Instead you can thank them for contacting you and say that while you don't service their area you can recommend them to someone who does, and give them Long Stem's number and a person to contact. Long Stem will probably get the job because they were "referred" by you. Referrals tend to pack a lot of weight.

• Networking within another industry. This is a good way to learn about another profession. If you want to work with the people in that industry, either as clients or as associates, discovering how they do what they do and what their needs and problems are will enable you to be of greater service to them if they become clients, and a better partner to them if they become associates.

All design professionals have associations you can join as an associate, affiliate, or allied trade. When you attend their meetings you'll hear what's happening and meet the members, some with whom you will probably find a shared specialty area of interest. For example, if you are an interiorscaper with hotels as your target market, you may meet an interior designer who shares that same market. A professional association is born!

If, continuing with hotels as our example, you join a hotel industry trade association you will have an opportunity to understand what is going on in that industry, what new hotels are coming to your area, who is managing them, who the developers are, who the architects, designers, landscape architects, and general contractors are, and you will know what the market is like. For example, are hotels flush with cash? Are they investing heavily in the horticultural environments of their new and existing establishments? Are there some hotel chains that

are upgrading their hotels by remodeling and possibly re-landscaping the grounds and the interiors?

Since you are meeting with other industry professionals in a casual atmosphere there is no pressure to work together or to get a particular individual as a client. If it happens that you "click" with an architect or landscape architect who is doing a large residence that's great, but even if nothing happens at a meeting or at several meetings, you've still met a lot of nice people and learned something about that particular profession.

• Online social networking. This is one of the most popular ways to meet people from all over the world who share your interests. You simply upload a personal or company profile on the social networking site of your choice and then participate in discussion groups on subject matter that is of interest to you or that you initiate in order to learn more about that subject. Most of the social networking websites are free, so this is an easy way to get connected.

## **Public Speaking**

When the topic is horticultural in content it is easy to find rapt listeners. And what better way to let interested parties know about a topic that you know so well. They will have an expert right there and can ask all their questions about why their Ficus trees lose leaves and how come the bulbs they planted didn't shoot through. At the same time that you are educating them, they will be educating you with their questions and concerns. And, you will be educating the public not only on horticulture, but on your particular industry as well. That ought to give them a better idea of why you charge so much!

There are speaker bureaus in most cities and if you can't find one, just call some local clubs and organizations and offer to give a presentation. Don't expect to get paid for this. These are usually freebies, but some groups do pay a small honorarium.

Other places that need speakers are college extension programs and continuing adult education classes. They might not want you for a full term but may want you to speak as a guest lecturer. This is the perfect opportunity to educate the people who might eventually decide to make a career in horticulture. If you do a lot of interviewing for employees, you know how many job candidates have been misled into thinking that horticultural positions are laid-back, mellow kinds of jobs. Here's your chance to lay that myth to rest once and for all.

If you have found a way around a particularly difficult problem in your business, or if you have some specialized knowledge about new technology or design, you may want to address the members of your own industry to pass along your helpful hints. Helping your peers is a way of elevating the professionalism of an entire industry. When an industry is professional as a whole, credibility for the individuals who work in it is raised as well. You can think of it as an investment in the future of your profession.

If you are feeling particularly industrious you might want to start a horticultural speakers bureau in your area. You could then put on seminars and workshops of your own or could market your group to all of the organizations in your area. This is one way to let the public know what you're all about.

### **Civic Involvement**

Civic involvement is similar to volunteer work except that you are working with government institutions. There is a lot of "politicking" and the bureaucracy can be tedious. From a purely contributory standpoint, you will be helping achieve a better community environment. From a business standpoint, the movers and shakers of your community are involved in these kinds of activities, and they are some of the most important and influential people you would care to know.

### **Awards Programs**

Whether they are industry programs or community "contests," awards can give you some credibility in the eyes of prospective clients. Participate in as many of these as you can whenever you have a project that you think is really special. Once you win one, you can begin to mention that you are an award-winning company in your advertisements, direct mail, cover letters, brochures, etc.

### **Donations**

Everybody is always so anxious to make tax deductible donations, but there is really only one reason to make a donation, and that is because you want to contribute to something worthwhile. Unfortunately, many small businesses overextend themselves and try to donate more of their time and materials than they can really afford because they have undertaken a charity job that is beyond their capabilities.

If you come across a potential charity project that is beyond your means financially, or for which you are lacking the manpower to complete it properly, consider doing the design specs yourself and then contacting some of your fellow horticulturists and requesting that they donate a plant or plants or a container or two, etc., to the degree to which they are capable of donating. To make it a little easier, you can tag the plants at one particular nursery and have the individual contributors pay for their plant(s) and leave it tagged as part of your order so that they will all be delivered at once. It is likely that your nursery will also donate something to the cause as well or give you a more generous discount.

For labor, you may wish to calculate the total manhours needed and then schedule the installation by "borrowing" help from some of the contributors for an hour or two, or even an entire day, depending on their regular work schedules. If it looks like breaking up somebody's work week is going to be impossible, you may want to do the installation on a weekend if the client and everyone involved are agreeable.

#### **Press Releases**

If your company has done something important – made a significant donation, won a prestigious award, implemented a novel piece of new technology, merged with another company, or scored a brilliant coup by being awarded a very desirable project, send out a press release. Let everybody know what you're doing at all times.

Make up a media list to which you can e-mail your press releases not more often than once every two months. Send your releases to your clients, prospective clients, business associates, trade publications (yours and allied trades), and any place else you can think of.

Press releases are a bit like free advertising. They are usually run on a space available basis by most publications, but once they run you have the attention of an entire industry or community. They will never take the place of a regular display advertisement, but they certainly fill in the gaps and help saturate the media with your name.

# **Appearing In Articles**

One of the best kinds of free press comes from having someone write an article about you. In addition to the exposure you will receive, you will have it to copy as an attachment to your presentation to prospective clients, either along with your proposals or as part of your direct mail efforts.

If you don't know a freelance writer you can always look at some similar articles in various publications and see who wrote them and find out if they are available. A freelance writer is going to be looking for something about you that is novel, different. They have to sell this article to a publisher and there has to be something there to interest the editor. So put on your thinking cap, and try to see if there is something about you and what you do that is unique and of interest to the public.

## **Biographies**

If you are going to teach or speak you will need to approach the institution for whom you want to perform these services, with a good letter of introduction and a biography.

A professional biography is not supposed to be your life history as in "I was born in Toledo on a chilly February morning ..." It is merely a few short paragraphs, never more than one page long, outlining what you do for a living, how long you've been doing it, what professional designations you possess, any awards you have won, associations to which you belong, and your occupation prior to your present career.

If you were not born to write, draft the bio yourself and then find someone who does know how to write who can edit your bio and put the finishing touches on it. There is nothing worse than someone writing their own biography and misspelling words or using bad grammar. Professional writers have enough problems getting things down in proper English!

## **Writing Articles**

An excellent way to get publicity for yourself and for your industry is to write articles about it. Once again, if you can't write it yourself, draft it and have a professional writer, or someone who has a talent for writing, rewrite it for you.

Whether you write for the general public or for your own industry, write about what you know. If you know design, write about design. If you know about insects and insect control, write about that. If your specialty is computerized invoicing, write about it.

When you write an informative piece for one of your industry's trade publications, address a specific topic, with a description of a specific problem, and a pose a possible solution(s). Avoid opinion pieces unless you are submitting a letter to the editor. They usually serve little purpose unless they have a proposed solution. Otherwise they are nothing more than the ravings of someone who appears to have an ax to grind or simply wants to get something off his chest.

If you have a topic that would be of interest to an allied trade, such as ways in which your two industries could work better together, try submitting your article to their trade publication or association publication, since most of them have magazines or newsletters that they publish regularly.

Articles about the horticultural industry and about plants and horticulture in general, can be of interest to the general public, and who better to write them than someone who really knows and lives the topic. This is an excellent format in which to educate the public, and probably some of your target clientele. Give them some tips about how to hire someone in your line of work. Advise them on what licenses and certifications are legally required. Let them know the importance of hiring a reputable, fully insured, legitimate business.

Before you write or submit your article to any publication, you should query them by letter as to whether they have need of such a piece or not. They may have someone else already in the process of writing an article on the same topic that you are proposing. But, they may have another topic that you are capable of covering instead. They will also be able to give you their writers' guidelines stating the kind of article format they prefer and what their deadlines are, etc.

## Following Up

It's not unusual for a company to go into a marketing campaign completely gung-ho and then find out that they are unable to follow up on all the potential new business that suddenly comes their way. If you are going to take your marketing efforts seriously, you have to take your follow-up efforts equally seriously.

It takes a while to see the results of all your marketing efforts. If you have devised a solid marketing plan and have been following it carefully, you will eventually find that you will be receiving more calls and inquiries than previously. In order to determine those marketing efforts which are most successful, you will have to find out to what your target market best responds.

## **Tracking Responses**

Tracking responses means that whenever you receive an inquiry, whether written, over the phone, or in person, you will need to ask the individual where they heard about your company. That information is then taken and put into a tally format, or into your computer in the form of an Excel database field that is coded to tell you who responded to what. For example, the computer field could be called "source" and the codes could be something like: "Y" for Yellow Pages, "M" for direct mail, "T" for trade show, "A" for association, and so forth. You can make the tracking even more detailed by stating which trade show, or which mailing, or which directory, etc.

Through tracking responses, you will find that every target clientele has its own favorite media. Once you know what that is, you can emphasize your image in that format to encourage further new business. This also allows you to invest your marketing dollars into strategies that really work.

Geographical regions prompt different responses from prospective clientele. These regions could be as disparate as night and day from one coast to the other, one state to another, and one part of the city to another. This geographical response pattern will encourage you to focus on those areas where you are most likely to establish a solid client base. To track responses by area, tally manually, or use your computer to create a database with coded fields that you can fill in or mark as active.

# **Responding To Phone Inquiries**

Marketing efforts are not limited to the company owner. Anyone who answers the phone and comes in contact with a prospective client is now playing the marketing/public relations game, and they need to know how to play it well. Whether you have a receptionist, an answering service, an answering machine, or voice mail, they must all sound professional, cheerful, and ready to serve! Since this is the era of the phone, people just don't write away as often for information on a product or service, unless its by e-mail which, by the way, you should answer daily, if not several times daily.

# The Receptionist

If you have a real live receptionist or secretary answering your phones, be sure that he or she is fully trained in taking a message properly. It is really amazing how many people cannot take a decent message to save their souls! A good message-taker will get the first and last name, spelled properly, the company name, the phone number with area code, the best time to reach the caller, the reason for the call, and in the case of first-time callers, the referral source (magazine ad, an existing client, article in the paper, Yellow Pages, etc.).

In addition to taking a message, a receptionist needs to be able to answer at least the most basic questions that a caller could ask about your territory serviced, how long it takes to get someone out for an estimate, if there is a minimum charge for maintenance, if you charge for estimates, if you do residential, etc. The receptionist should also be able to field the calls that come in from people who want to know why their Ficus tree is shedding, etc., and to be able to soothe the agitated client, or prospective client, whose lawn is "dead."

#### **Cell Phones**

A few rules about phones in general. Answer your phone only when you can talk. Return your calls as soon as you are available to talk. Dictate a professional message so that when you can't answer, the caller will be assured they got the right business. Make sure everyone in your company has an inexpensive company cell phone. Make sure they also have Bluetooth activated and can use their cells hands-free when driving.

## Following Up

When calls come in requesting estimates or asking for information about your company, who is in charge of making sure that the estimate is given, that a brochure is sent, etc.? And who follows up after that to find out what the reaction was to a proposal or a brochure, etc.?

Once a call is received and you have taken the first step towards meeting the prospective client, there is a tendency to "drop the ball" and go on to other endeavors. Since most sales are made after the fifth call, it is important that follow-up be performed with some sort of structure and regularity.

If a prospective client is assigned to a particular salesperson, that salesperson should keep track of when the original call came in, when information was sent to the caller, when an estimate was given, when the first follow up call was made, the second, third, and so on. There should be a schedule that is

followed which states how long to wait between calls and then the calls should be calendared immediately so that they won't later be "forgotten."

## **Marketing to Intermediaries**

Intermediaries are individuals or companies that are closely linked to, yet outside of, the horticultural service part of the industry. Examples of intermediaries are design professionals such as landscape architects, architects, and interior designers. Other intermediaries would be developers, realtors, and general contractors. Marketing to intermediaries means selling your services to or through another individual or company rather than directly to the end user, the actual client who will benefit from having the horticultural services you provide.

Working with an intermediary may mean nothing more than receiving referrals from that individual. It can also mean that you will be contracting with the intermediary to perform services for their client. There are, of course, other variations in the working arrangements, but the bottom line is that you will be networking with the intermediaries to expand your client base.

There are many companies that rely solely on referrals from intermediaries. They find that they get some of their best clients this way. In cases where they are working with design professionals, they have more creative opportunities come their way. And, in working with developers, realtors, or contractors, they can usually get their foot in the door in time for all those elusive "big" jobs where the horticultural bids are awarded long before the ground is broken.

Design professionals, developers, and contractors usually have their own specialty markets, so you will have to use the same basic strategy in isolating your specialty market, but will then have to seek out the intermediaries who service the same clientele.

If you are marketing yourself to an intermediary market such as interior designers, landscape architects, building contractors, real estate developers, or architects, you will need to find the publications that they read so that you can advertise your availability.

Advertising for anyone but the end user will require some customization of your advertisement to attract these people to you. Remember, they will not be using your services directly, but will merely be referring business to you or sub-contracting your services for the benefit of their client. You will need to cater to their needs first, their client's second, and hopefully, they both will want the same thing.

The main items you will want to emphasize in your advertising will be your professional designations such as licenses, certificates, memberships, insurance, bonding, geographical territory, and specialty market(s).

If you are directing your efforts to design professionals you will need to have an ad that reflects current design trends and your own individual style. If you are shooting for contractors and developers you will need a corporate look that indicates "big business."

Response time lags considerably when marketing indirectly to intermediaries. It does pay off, and usually quite well, if you can stick it out long enough to reap the rewards.

If you have tried advertising in intermediary publications before without success, you may wish to re-examine your advertisement to be sure that it reflects what the intermediary is seeking, revise it, and then run it again for at least a year or more. Running for a long period will allow you to establish credibility in the eyes of the reader, in this case the intermediary.

### **Networking to Intermediaries**

Advertising is not the only way to market your services to intermediaries. Networking within their trade associations will give you the opportunity to meet with design professionals, contractors, realtors, etc., in such a way that you can learn about who they are and what they do.

The beauty of networking in this way is that you can take your time in meeting the various individuals. There is no rush to do business, so this is a non-threatening atmosphere in which to discover common interests and develop a professional rapport based on mutual ethics and a shared specialty market.

When networking with people from another industry you should pay close attention to the terminology that they use. You will wish to incorporate their vocabulary into your own so that communication is clear and barriers are broken down that would otherwise inhibit understanding.

### **Marketing To Your Own Industry**

There has been a long-growing trend of horticultural service businesses inventing new products and services for their own industry. There is also a trend for them to become wholesale suppliers of goods to their industry, in other words, they are selling to their peers, the "competition."

You go about marketing goods and services to your own industry in the same way that you would market them for any other industry. The only difference is that your credibility is a lot higher to start with because people know that you are already in the business and that you are manufacturing something because you realized that there was a need for it industry- wide. They also realize that you have probably experimented with your product by using it in your own company first and finding it to be a viable item.

Whenever you start a new business or introduce a new product or service, you can go one of two ways: 1) you can take it very slowly and just try one avenue of approaching your prospective buyers, or 2) you can saturate the market with advertising and literature about your product followed up by hitting the "trade show trail."

The second option is the best if you can afford it, because it will provide you with rapid growth and wider acceptance in a more immediate time frame. If you have doubts about your product or are inadequately capitalized on your new venture, you should probably go with the first option and play it cautious.

You should remember that whenever you introduce a new product or service anywhere, it is important that you find several ways to keep both the product name and your company name in front of your target clientele with as much consistency and regularity as possible. You should bombard the industry publications with press releases and do as much direct mail and in-person demonstrations as possible. You will find that advertising is a must and you should be prepared to invest in a minimum of one to two years of continually running ads in all of your trade publications.

If you are worried about how your fellow industry members will feel about buying from the competition, think again. The only people who will refuse to buy from their peers are people who are very naive about business and who are completely lacking in self-confidence about their own occupations. These people seldom find success in life because they are always so jealous and worried about what everyone else is doing that they don't spend enough time getting their own affairs in order. Consider yourself lucky that they don't want to buy from you because they will probably not be financially able to pay their bills on time, if at all.

### **Product Marketing**

Marketing a product is often easier than marketing a service. With a service there is always room for doubt as to whether there is a need for it, and it can be difficult for a client to determine the difference between one service and the next because service is subjective, or in some eyes, intangible. With a product, you can show a picture of it and everyone immediately makes a mental note of what it looks like and reads further to discover its use.

For example, when you see a picture of a drip irrigation system in an advertisement you make an easy identification of what the product is and what it does. If, on the other hand, you see a picture of a hook-like device with a plastic handle, an item unlike anything you have ever seen before, you will inevitably read further to find out what it is. Such is the nature of human curiosity.

Whether your product is completely new and unique or whether it is simply a new variation on an old theme, it will be much easier to market than your horticultural services. The adage of "a picture is worth a thousand words" will apply very effectively in this instance.

## **Researching Your Market**

Even though you may think you know your own industry, you should still research your market more closely to find out what is going on in the rest of the state or country so that you can make a logical determination as to who needs your product, how much they will be willing to pay for it, how many items you will actually be able to sell, and over what period of time you will likely sell them.

When marketing to your own industry you may be surprised to find out how little you know about it as a whole. A client of mine told me that when he first brought his product onto the interior landscape market he thought the industry was much bigger than it really was. He was basing his thinking on the fact that he lives in a medium-sized metropolitan area where there were about 60 other interiorscape firms doing business. He assumed that all metropolitan areas had similar and larger arenas of competition, and he had therefore estimated his market to be over 18,000 interiorscape firms nationwide, or almost three times the actual number.

You must research the kinds of companies in your industry who will use the product and discover which will buy and which won't. If your product is a high ticket item that can be afforded only by the big companies, then your market has just been reduced significantly. The horticultural industry consists primarily of small businesses, many of which are owner-operators who are just getting by. Unless they can't live without your product, they won't buy it.

Will your product be purchased as a single unit for an entire company, or will it be purchased in quantity for use by various employees of the firm? This is very important because the difference in the size of the market can increase ten-fold or more if the item is to be used by techs as opposed to administrative staff.

The next question is whether your product will need to be replenished or replaced regularly. If you sell items such as gloves, clippers, aprons, uniforms, etc., they will need to be replenished as they wear out, are stolen, lost, or damaged. With containers, irrigation systems, artificial foliage, and other similar items which will be sold to the horticulturist's clients, you will be looking at ongoing sales and considerable room for expansion of the product line. And if you sell to the consumer market, there's no end to the number of sales you might make.

#### **Trade Shows**

To get a new product off to a rolling start, you should definitely hit the trade shows. Booth costs vary according to the show and the expected turnout. If you travel out of your geographical area, you will also have to pay for transportation (for you and the booth), lodging, and meals.

Trade shows give buyers a chance to actually see your product and ask you questions about it. You can demonstrate its uses and applications and show your full line of styles, colors, sizes, etc. For the brand new, unknown product, a trade show is a necessity because the movers and shakers of any industry always attend. You might not reach the majority of your industry this way (less than 3% of landscapers and 1% of interiorscapers attend their trade shows), but you will encounter the buying representatives of companies that are financially able to buy and mentally interested in trying new products that will somehow benefit their business.

One year of trade shows is sufficient to launch a new product if you combine your trade show efforts with direct mailings throughout that same year. You can probably target the mailings to reach the geographical areas surrounding the trade shows about three weeks before each show. Be sure to let them know you're coming to their area and invite them to visit your booth.

### Marketing Tips for the Home-Based Business

When you have an office in the home, there are some things that you must attend to which will allow you to maintain credibility and avoid the stigma that is, even to this day, still attached to the home-based business. In other ways, your marketing efforts will be pretty much the same as for any horticultural service business.

#### The Phone

Nothing sounds worse than calling a "business" and having

to listen to somebody's 3-year old child gurgling and giggling. It's cute to Mommy and Daddy, but it signals a complete lack of professionalism to the caller who was expecting voice mail at the very least.

Have at least two lines, one for business and one for home. This is true even if you live alone. That way you can let your voice mail pick up at night and on weekends while you only answer your home phone. This is important because if clients can reach you any time, day or night, they will do just that, and you will find that you have no privacy. In addition, when you have two lines you can always answer the business line with a professional greeting, and just say a simple "hello" when answering the personal line.

As someone who grew up in a home-based business, has owned four of them, and has consulted to numerous clients in and out of the horticultural industry, I assure you that privacy is important, and personal and professional lives should be kept separate, even though you may live them both under the same roof.

Always have your business phone listed so that clients can find you in the phone book if they have heard of you but can't find your business card, brochure, etc. Have your home line unlisted so that you can give it out only to your friends and relatives and not risk having clients find it because they know your name and the town you live in.

## **Mailing Addresses**

Unless you want clients coming to your house looking for you, you should get a post office box or separate mailing address to use on all of your correspondence and printed matter. This is also helpful since you may want to move, and having a separate mailing address would prevent you from having to have everything reprinted just because you bought a

new house six blocks away from the old one or moved your business out of your home.

When you have your home address on everything it is usually a dead giveaway that you work out of your home, and there are a few people, some of whom will be your prospective clients, who still believe that a legitimate business cannot be run out of a person's home. So if you live at 123 Logan Lane and everybody knows that Logan Lane is in a residential area, you may be putting out some negative imaging without even realizing it. This could be even more so if Logan Lane is in a less than fashionable neighborhood.

# **Working With Advertising Agencies**

Because you can't be expected to know all of the ins and outs of marketing, you will need to rely on experts, trained professionals who can direct and channel your efforts and translate your wants and needs into an effective marketing campaign. You will find a qualified group of such trained professionals at your friendly neighborhood advertising agency. Their fully-qualified staff (which could be just one person if it is an owner-operator firm) will work with you to write, produce, and place your ads. Depending on the size and experience of the agency, they may be able to design your logo for you and help translate your company image into viable marketing tools.

Whether you decide to hire an agency or do your ads yourself is up to you, and how successful you are at it will depend on such variables as your creative skill and expertise; your ability to run InDesign, QuarkXPress, Photoshop, and other graphic design software; your knowledge of the advertising media in general; your time restrictions; your budget; and the amount of advertising you plan to do. If, for example, you are a small- to medium-sized business with as many as five office employees, you may be able to rely on them to create a few small ads for a very limited number of publications. You may need a little outside help such as a graphic artist or someone who has the necessary software and a high quality scanner or laser printer, but your cost and effort would be minimized.

# **Agency Compensation**

In the old days, agencies - often called "creative services' - billed you for the publication's cost of an advertisement, less a 15% discount allowed by the publication to agencies. Agencies can't make it on the 15% discount these days, and you may have to pay for the production costs separately, in addition to the 15% the agency will still receive.

Since there are no hard, fast rules about how an agency is compensated, you may find that some charge flat fees rather than commissions. In some cases, you may be hiring them to produce the ads but will handle the placement yourself.

## **Selecting An Agency**

Like any kind of company with whom you intend to do business, you should shop around and find out who does what and how. Find out how they charge, their area of expertise, their time frames, etc. Ask to see their portfolios, particularly samples of work they have done for similar types of businesses.

Every agency, save for the very biggest, will probably have some specialties and some significant limitations. Does the agency you are thinking of using have any knowledge of the horticultural service industry? How about knowledge of marketing service businesses in general? If the agency has many years of experience with marketing computers or restaurants you might have to keep looking.

Whenever you are entering into a potentially long-term working relationship you should also consider the personal rapport between the two of you. Think about how they treated you when you first contacted them. Their work may be excellent, but were they courteous and helpful? Did they explain to you specifically how much they charge and what is included in that cost? It is not unusual for some of the less professional agencies to "fudge" on answers, particularly those relating to costs and fees. Be smart and get details.

### Communication

Once you hire an ad agency, you will be working primarily with your account executive. This individual will be the main person with whom you are in contact, and you must insure that you can communicate effectively with this person because they will be coordinating your entire program. If you don't make your goals, objectives, time frame, etc., very clear to the account executive, your entire ad campaign may be unsuccessful.

If at any time you feel that the ads being produced by the agency are not in keeping with the image you wish to convey, you should speak up before the ads are placed. It may mean that your limited knowledge of advertising is showing, or it could more likely mean that you did not communicate yourself accurately or adequately when you expressed your marketing objectives. With the latter, it will probably mean that additional, in-depth discussion is warranted, and then back to the drawing board.

# **SALES**

Many people are intimidated by the very thought of sales. Their palms sweat, their knees shake, and they find themselves at a complete loss for words. This is partly because so many of us are accustomed to thinking of salespeople within the context of the fast-talking used car salesman who tries to high pressure us into buying something we don't really want or need, and probably can't afford even if we did. As a result, many salespeople try to emulate those poor excuses for role models, thinking their approach holds the key to making sales.

On the other hand, there are a lot of people who believe that the product or service should speak for itself; that no salesperson is necessary if the product is really good. That's true, in part, but if your clients were just buying plants they could go directly to a nursery and pick them out for themselves, bypassing you altogether. But, they don't. That's because what you sell is a service that includes plants and other related materials and accessories. That service is a part of public relations and public relations means just what it says: relationships with the public – people to be exact. And, coincidentally, that is exactly what you are selling. People. Your staff. Yourself to be even more precise. And, what could be easier than selling the one thing in all the world that you know better than anybody else – YOU. As soon as you try to let your plants and products sell themselves, the sales process becomes very, very difficult, if not impossible.

Well, if selling yourself is so incredibly easy, why are some people sooooo good at sales while others find it impossible to get new clients and close deals? Very simple. They are good because they have an effective marketing plan and have mastered the art of sales.

#### **Basic Sales Review**

What are sales techniques? Let's start by looking at what they are not. Sales techniques are not price cutting. Sales techniques are not expensive freebies or promotional items. Sales techniques are not product substitutions. Sales techniques are not fancy lunches. Sales techniques are not high-pressure, phony-baloney sales pitches.

Sales techniques are the systematic approach to achieving sales goals. They include, for the most part, intangible things such as attitude. Here are some of the basic do's and don't's that can make an immediate difference in your presentation:

- Talk with a smile on your face even when you're on the phone. Even the crabbiest person loves to do business with a genuinely happy, positive person. In sales, attitude is everything.
- Speak clearly in person, on the phone, and when leaving a voice mail message. If they can't understand you, they aren't going to buy. If you have a very heavy foreign accent, or if you have bad diction, mispronounce a lot of words, etc., take some English classes that are specifically designed to help you improve your speech.
- Speak slowly especially if you're on the phone, because it is very hard to understand people who run their mouth like a high-speed motor instead of a moderated, understandable tone.
- ◆ Know your stuff inside and out your business, your products, your client's needs, your company's lead times for

delivery, your bargaining range (how high and how low you can go and still make money). Knowing what you're doing builds confidence, and confidence sells.

- Be prepared by arriving for your sales appointments with everything you could possibly need, and carry it all in a neat bag or briefcase or a laptop computer. No messy armfuls of loose books and papers that make you look like an accident waiting to happen.
- Be persistent statistically, most sales are closed after the fifth call. Be tactful when you call to follow up. Don't get pushy, just briefly check back with the client to remind them that you're still around and interested in working with them.
- Use proper forms of address until you are invited to use a first name. It sounds old-fashioned, but say "Mr." Hunter and "Ms." Wilson, not Jerry or Alice, until they ask you to do so.
- Be punctual and be brief don't waste the client's time or your own for that matter. Be respectful of other people's schedules. Always arrive on time and say what you have to say without getting repetitious. If you must be late, call and tell the potential client to see if they would prefer that you reschedule. Don't just walk in late with some hare-brained excuse for why you didn't make it.
- Shake hands when you first meet and when you part company. Men: no bone crushers; women: no limp hands. Think of a handshake as a hand "hug" and firmly squeeze the other person's hand, giving it one shake and then letting go.
- ◆ Listen and pay attention to what your prospective client really wants. Let them do most of the talking. Don't interrupt them. Take notes if you like and then ask questions or comment when they are finished speaking.
- ◆ Dress the part dress for business. You are going to talk business, not dig up the yard. You don't need to wear a suit,

although it sure helps in the corporate world. Try to match the wardrobe of the client whenever possible. As a rule of thumb, men should wear, at the very least, a sports jacket; and women should wear a dress or pants suit. In any event, be clean and well-groomed and avoid trendy clothing, not so much because it will offend someone, but because it can be distracting.

- It's not what you say that counts but how you say it. Try not to whine, whisper, overreact, etc. Avoid fidgeting and squirming when you speak. Try out your sales presentation on a friend and ask them to be brutally honest about your manner of speaking. Tape yourself and listen critically to your own presentation. If you can videotape it, all the better.
- Never ask the potential client for a budget it's the mark of an amateur. All clients do have a budget whether they want to admit it or not, but there are other more effective ways to get this information which will be covered shortly.
- Avoid flattery especially of the insincere variety. Don't compliment someone or someone's home or office unless it really rates a compliment. Within the context of a sales presentation flattery usually ends up sounding phony and almost any potential client will see it as a crude attempt to win them over. In general, don't flatter at all.
- ◆ Keep your personal problems to yourself leave them at home where they belong. They are not appropriate in the workplace and they send up a red flag to potential clients which says you may be a problem yourself.
- ◆ Don't make sales calls when you're ill or even when you're just not feeling up to par. Not even on the phone. Simply reschedule your sales calls with a brief and non-dramatic apology, no elaborate excuses.
- ◆ Avoid off-color jokes or offensive language both are out of place in any business setting.

#### Sales Tools

There are four items which are great for sales presentations: business cards, brochures, and a portfolio. Since business cards are what most people automatically get when they start their business, we will concentrate instead on the portfolio.

You don't have a portfolio? Not to worry. You can still create one. The idea behind a portfolio is not just to showcase your work, but to demonstrate what different plants and planting schemes are available. It's a means of giving your client the opportunity to see just how great a room or a yard can look and to help the client express their preferences.

It is also helpful to include some brochures of containers, lawn furnishings, masonry, and other items for the prospective client to evaluate. By hearing what the client likes you can design with their tastes in mind.

If you don't have photos of your own projects, you can make a sample portfolio from the numerous home and garden magazines. Carefully clip out the pictures and mount them on black paper under sheet protectors in a portfolio binder, or else scan them and put them in a virtual portfolio on your laptop computer — whichever works best for you. One interior landscaper told me that she puts the plant pictures in order of their light requirements with the low-light ones first and the higher-light ones last. She does this so that she can mark a spot in the portfolio and tell the prospective client that their environment can support all the plants up to that point. An outdoor portfolio can be put in order by plant types or even by water requirements if xeriscape is an option you offer in your area.

You can also put your container and furniture brochures into the portfolio, mounting or scanning them. You don't necessarily have to show the manufacturer's name or any of the pricing, just the styles and colors available. Brochures are an often overlooked sales and marketing tool in the horticultural industry and this is a shame. Most people are intimidated by the costs involved, but brochures do not have to be expensive. In fact, a simple 8-1/2" x 11" sheet folded twice with printing on two sides is not an expensive production at all. If you're on a really tight budget, keep it very simple without any graphics or photos. If possible, make them so that when they are folded there is a place for your return address and a place for the mailing address and a stamp. This makes them self-mailers, one of the reasons why brochures are so versatile. You can use them in a mailing and you can leave them with a prospective client after you have made your presentation. It's like leaving something of your presentation behind for the client to consider in your absence.

# **Making & Scheduling Appointments**

When it's time to set an appointment for an estimate, try whenever possible to make that appointment with the person who is in a position to make a final decision. The exceptions to this are entirely up to you and only you can weigh the potential value of the job and the odds of getting it.

Remember, if your prospective client is meeting with several other companies, your chances of getting the job will be diminished regardless of anything you say or do simply because with more contractors involved there is the very real possibility that the client is merely shopping for the best price, not necessarily the best plants, design, or service.

Make appointments on days and times that are convenient for the potential client first, for yourself second. If you are still performing your own maintenance you may need to reschedule one or two of your accounts to make an appointment at a time required by the prospective client. If the prospect is flexible you may be able to schedule your meeting for a day when you don't have any mainte-

nance. That is certainly the most efficient way to do this as you could potentially schedule several estimates for the same day and be dressed up for the occasion.

If at all possible, try to see if you can walk the site before you meet with the prospective client. This is not always possible, but when it is it gives you the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the site and "get ideas" based on the light, soil, etc. In addition, people love to talk, and a secretary or receptionist for a tour guide can give you added insights into the company and the person with whom you are going to meet.

#### The Presentation

If you are meeting in a conference area or other neutral area, try to seat yourself next to the client rather than sitting across the table. This eliminates the barrier which a desk or table creates and also allows you to both look at the portfolio together. Greet your prospective client with a warm hello, a smile, and a handshake. Once the amenities are covered, go over the portfolio together, letting the client look and drawing their attention to plants and materials that will do well on their site.

Remember that when you are in a sales meeting you are on a fact-finding mission. Don't tell the client what you plan to do or what they cannot have. Tell them instead what will work best and what will look good. If they ask for Ficus trees or Boston ferns in a windowless office, or if they request full-sun plants in a totally shaded area, do not overreact and emphatically say "NO. THOSE WILL NEVER GROW WELL HERE. THEY NEED MORE LIGHT AND... etc., etc." Instead, calmly and casually explain that the light levels are a little too low for the plant they want and suggest some more suitable alternatives that have a similar look. Saying "no" to a prospective client is one of the surest ways to blow a presentation.

As you both look through the portfolio, you should be creating a ballpark estimate in your head. When the prospective client says that they want a real lush look and 36" box trees, add on the necessary dollars to your original, less flamboyant estimate. If the client says that new hardscape for the patio is not in the budget or that creating an atrium-like setting in the lobby is outside of the budget, deduct a few more dollars as necessary from your ballpark estimate. Remember that these are rough calculations, so you don't have to drag out a calculator to get an exact amount at this time.

# **Talking Turkey**

After the portfolio's been covered, you're ready to talk business. Earlier I said not to ask for a budget. Now I'll tell you why. Every business has a ceiling price they are willing to pay for your services, but they don't usually give it out or even admit to having one. You don't need to know their budget to give an estimate. You already know what the client wants because you just spent time reviewing his needs and wants. The ball is now in your court. You are the one who has the dollars and cents information. You know how much their installation should cost. So, tell the client that you estimate the installation to run approximately "x" number of dollars, give or take ten percent (or whatever percentage you think best reflects the potential change). Or you can estimate a dollar range.

You might think you should add "how does that sound?" or "does that meet with your budget?" etc. On the contrary, you are going to wait and watch for the potential client's response. And don't expect it to necessarily be a verbal one. Look for the expression on their face: they may look away from you suddenly, show a surprised expression, a look of relief, etc. Their response will dictate whether they want you or not and whether you should continue with the meeting.

If the client seems unsure, you may want to stay silent and wait for them to reveal more. If they don't say more you can begin to clear your portfolio from the table. This will usually elicit a response. If they say it's higher than what they expected, you have three options:

- Offer to adjust the sizes and types of plant or hardscape materials to bring the price down.
- Call it a day and leave.
- Sell them your design the preferred option which, when handled properly, almost always results in getting the job.

## **Selling The Design**

To sell your design requires that you educate your client on the "apples-to-apples" versus "apples-to-oranges" bidding process. You must also explain, briefly, why plant prices can vary so greatly from company to company when no formal design exists. Encourage your prospective client to consider a design to ensure that what they really want is what they will receive bids on. Let a client know that you can do a design based on any budget they dictate. We don't talk budget until we talk design.

Now this design is not free. Your prospective client is going to pay for this. And the client should pay for it because it is going to involve a lot of work on your part and you should never work for free. Never use a "free" design as a promotional gimmick to get a job. You will waste a lot of valuable time in doing so and there will be little reward for your efforts. In addition, giving away design services damages the industry as a whole because it sends a message to clients everywhere that design isn't worth anything. Why? Because it's free. If it had any value, you'd be charging for it.

How much you charge for your design will depend on how much time you put into the effort and what format you use to present it - a detailed plant list by area, a floor plan, a master plan, a set of sketches, etc.

If the prospective client just says, "give me something in writing," you can decide whether you want to pursue the project further. I prefer to get a yes, or at least a very definite maybe, before I ever take the time to crank out a detailed proposal. Usually for people who are non-committal, I explain that I do not give detailed estimates because they constitute, to a large degree, my design, and therefore, I will give them a flat figure in writing and then I do so on a pre-printed checklist form which states that I am insured, licensed, etc., and what my costs include: all offices on the third floor, back yard and patio only, plants only, plants and all other materials, sales tax, labor to install, plant leasing fee, weekly maintenance charges, etc. I give it all to them right there on the spot. If they eventually take my price, I install only up to that price and nothing else.

Price cutting and low-balling can only hurt you as a business by preventing you from making a good profit, squeezing your cash flow, and eventually sinking you into debt. As an industry, these desperate tactics only create an image in the minds of the public that says horticultural companies work cheap. If you want to be nothing more than a door-to-door retailer, then you can forget about calling yourself an interior or exterior landscaper because those contractors provide services with plants. Since services are made up of labor, they constitute sales which make very little money. So where do you make your money? You make it in the markup of your plants and other materials.

### **Closing The Deal**

If your potential client thinks your ballpark estimate sounds okay, they will either say so directly or indirectly. Look for those signals that say you've got the job, like: "How soon can you bring the plants?" "Are you going to be here to supervise?" "How soon can we have the contract?" "What do we do to get the ball rolling?"

Now you can help close the deal by confirming one or more of those questions by saying, "We can have everything in by Friday," "I'm going to the nursery tomorrow and I can pick up everything you need," "I can bring the contract by tomorrow morning for your signature," "I can get the ball rolling immediately with a deposit of \$200" (or approximately ten percent of the ballpark estimate), or "I'd like very much to work with you and we can most definitely handle this job."

If your prospective client has now committed, preferably with a deposit check, thank them for their time and ask if it would be all right for you to take (another) look around the site to firm up the design details. Shake hands, pick up your things, and make your final walk-thru.

Barring a weekend or holiday, you should deliver the paper-work (the contract) to your prospective client within twenty-four hours and you should make an appointment to bring it by for a signature and deposit if you didn't already get the latter. When you come by, be sure you are suitably dressed – don't show up in your grubbies! That's a sure way to lose a job at the last minute.

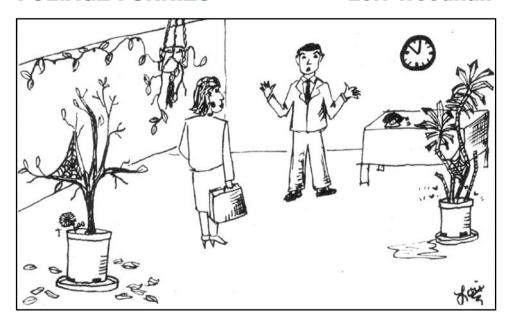
When you've got the signed contract and check in hand, tell your prospective client exactly when the installation will start – give a time, not just a date. Ask if it fits into their schedule, and it if doesn't, ask what time would be more convenient. Thank the client for their time, shake hands, and leave.

The rest is up to you, but you should show up at the installation on time, and totally prepared with everything you could possibly need to ensure that you client gets the best project possible.

It takes more than practice to make this sales process work. You need to overcome the desperation many contractors feel during a presentation. If you learn only one thing from this book, I hope it will be how to say "no" to apples-to-oranges bidding and low-balling. It takes a lot of individual contractors changing their attitudes and their bad business habits to turn an entire industry around and make it profitable for everyone.

#### **FOLIAGE FUNNIES**

#### **Lori Woodhall**



"But your bid is three times what we're paying now!"

# MAKE A PROFIT

Many contractors find the processes of bidding, estimating, and assembling of proposals to be the hardest part of conducting business. They often complain that they are frequently undercut by the competition. What these contractors have in common is that they are all stuck in the apples-to-oranges bidding syndrome. Their problems, which arise from trying to make competitive estimates based on dissimilar specifications of their own creation, make a perfect case for working from completed and client-approved designs as the most viable solution to getting a job and making a profit.

For years, interior and exterior landscapers alike have responded to client's demands for free, written estimates complete with detailed, time-consuming designs. In most cases these designs are given away under the premises of a "promotional" item used in order to get the job. That same philosophy is often used by the most desperate contractors who give away plants at wholesale "to get the maintenance" or bid the maintenance low to "get their foot in the door." These careless and non-business-like estimation practices create a variety of problems for the individual contractor as well as for the industry as a whole.

Tactics such as "price cutting" and "low balling" are no substitute for practical sales techniques. Professional salespeople do not drop their prices to get a job. They recognize, and use, the numerous non-money-based sales tactics at their disposal. And, they utilizes those tactics before they even begin to talk dollars and cents.

Before talking budgets or assembling detailed proposals, contractors should be aware of the following three things which directly affect their image and their profit-making ability:

- Learning to say "no" to projects for which the firm is not suited, prepared for, or in any way capable of executing.
- Using ballpark estimates on-site to determine a client's budget so that when a proposal or written design is prepared it will meet with the budget or investment price of the client without the need to play guessing games.
- Selling designs which allow the contractor to play a significant role in satisfying the aesthetic tastes of the client while simultaneously answering their budgetary requirements. This last item also allows interior and exterior landscapers alike to truly exercise design skills rather than being a door-to-door retailer. It also allows them to be paid for all the time that goes into building a proposal/design. The client then has the opportunity to take the design and get truly competitive bids -- an immediate solution to the apples-to-oranges bidding syndrome about which everyone complains.

It is ineffective to teach any contractor a battery of formulas for marking up plants, lease payments, guarantees, etc., if they are going to indiscriminately give away free, detailed estimates -- a.k.a. designs. When any job is underbid, installed at rock-bottom prices, or given away altogether, it's hard for a client to believe that they are receiving anything of real value (i.e., skilled, professional services). You get what you pay for, remember? The price makes it appear that there is little time, overhead, and expense involved in managing a horticultural business.

Since an industry's members are solely responsible for establishing their industry's image, that image must not be affected by weak sales and marketing strategies, technical incompetency, or inappropriate job costing. All contractors must learn to sell and market efficiently, provide well-trained technical services, and formulate comprehensive estimates based on approved design specifications.

## **How Much To Charge**

Among the questions I am most frequently asked is "how much should I charge?" Unfortunately, how much you charge depends entirely upon the way in which your business is structured. If you are a sole proprietorship with no employees, operating out of your house or apartment, your pricing structure will vary significantly from an incorporated concern with two or more employees operating out of an office with a greenhouse and company vehicles. The catch to this is that if you are one of the "little guys" who plans on growing, it is very important that you think like the big guys and run your business in much the same way that they do.

I often hear owner/operators say, "I just want to stay real small with a few good accounts." Why? Why take on the responsibilities of a business if you don't want to expand? Being an owner-operator is extremely difficult in the long run and it leaves you with very little flexibility. For example, what happens if you want to take a vacation, or become ill, possibly even disabled? What happens if you just get burned out on maintenance? Sure you can hire someone to take over the maintenance for you, but can you afford them? And for how long? Especially if you have been structuring your pricing according to only your own needs. And the biggest problem with being an owner/operator forever is that you are limiting your ability to make money. A maintenance route alone can usually not be more than 25-30 billable hours in any given

week because of all the non-billable drive time. What happens if you want to do an installation? How do you get your maintenance route done too?

Think ahead. Think about the economy, inflation, recessions, increases in overhead, insurance, potential losses, possible cancellations, wanting to buy a house, a boat, travel, sending the kids to college, etc.

There are only a few sure ways to make a significant profit in this business: design, installation, plant sales, leasing (interior), and retail sales (garden centers)

If you've been relying strictly on maintenance for your livelihood, listen to this: if you were to charge \$45 per manhour, you would only break even paying a technician \$15.00 per hour! That's because labor rates consist of the employee's salary, employer tax contributions including matching of social security taxes, unemployment insurance, disability insurance, workers compensation insurance, and all expenses related to the performance of that employee's duties including, but not limited to, vehicle payments, fuel, repairs, chemicals, tools, supplies & equipment, plant replacement costs, training expense, supervisory time and expense, and clerical administration of payroll and other employee-related expenses such as paid holidays, paid vacations, paid sick leave, profit-sharing, retirement programs, etc. Raising your rate every year won't help much either because all the other costs that make up the hourly rates will go up as well.

You could eventually get to the size where all of these items are actually necessary and potentially affordable to you. But no matter what you charge and pay per manhour, the only real money you'll make is by selling designs and installations, the real money-makers.

So, if you think you want to stay small, think again – and think smart. Many companies start out thinking small, find out

they have to grow in order to survive, and are then forced to face the "agony" of trying to change their entire method of operation in order to do so, usually losing many of their clients in the process.

There are no hard, fast rules for bidding and estimating in any industry. One of the most important things you can do for yourself is to make yourself a series of checklists to remind yourself of all the factors involved in a project. Such a list should include items to remember in assembling an estimate. For example, some items could be water access and irrigation, window tinting, controlled watering containers, elevator access, security access, parking costs or validations, non-guaranteed existing plants, possible replacements, initial cleanups, seasonal color/annuals, tree trimming, pest control, etc. You can photocopy this list and take a copy on each estimate appointment. Leave plenty of room on it for a plant count and/or a detailed description of the job site for use in calculating maintenance time allotments.

#### **Retail Price Lists**

When making estimates, it is best to work from your own retail price list based on average wholesale costs from your usual suppliers. That price list can be based on unit pricing by size (ideal but not always realistic) or it can be based on individual items if unit pricing is not reliable.

Whatever you decide, the prices should be marked up sufficiently to make your company profitable. With price lists, not every plant will end up being marked up exactly the same percentage every time. For example, if the retail price of a plant is \$80.00, based on a \$45.00 wholesale cost, and that plant cannot be located (when you need it) for less than \$58.00, the retail price would remain the same but the profit margin would be decreased by \$13.00. This doesn't mean that there will always be a loss. This process often works just the opposite.

For instance, if the same plant is found on sale or is available in a quantity discount pricing situation, for only \$37.50, the profit would be increased by \$7.50 per plant. The larger the project, the more opportunity for such variances in individual plant profits.

The main purpose of a retail price list is to allow you to calculate "ballpark" estimates, quickly and on-site, based on real prices. Ballpark estimates should be given for installations, maintenance, and lease rates (if you're an interiorscaper who leases plants and containers). The client must know what he or she is getting into. So, it's your responsibility to:

- find out if the client wants to purchase or lease, and be able to explain the difference
- find out if the client wants an outside maintenance service or prefers an in-house staff
- explain and educate the client, in detail, on all costs, including "hidden" ones like projected losses and how they are handled under an outside maintenance contract with guaranteed replacement and what they would cost in an in-house situation with no guarantees.
- include everything in an estimate figure for installations and for maintenance which should include allowances to cover unforeseen problems such as construction delays, last minute design changes, equipment failures, additional nursery trips, bad weather, or employee illness.

If you almost always buy your six-foot ficus benjaminas from Jan's Nursery because they look the best even though they are the most expensive, then it would be more practical to build the retail figures based on Jan's wholesale prices. If you usually buy from Bobby's Tree Farm but might possibly have to buy from Jan's Nursery on occasion, it may still be most logical to use the highest priced tree as a starting point so that

the company won't be shorted if it has to buy at Jan's. At any rate, those are decisions only you can make and the person responsible for assembling the price list can expect to spend quite a bit of time in the process.

Retail price lists can, and should, be very broad. They may include all of the sizes of ficus that are in the same range of say, 6 to 7 feet tall into one lump amount that is the average of the three or five or ten nurseries at which the company usually shops. At the most frequented nursery, the most common varieties of 6' "trees" may be around the same price with the exceptions of rhapis or other high-ticket items. However it is accomplished, the important thing is coming up with some workable figures.

Once a price list is completed for nursery stock, one can then be assembled for containers and any other items you sell. For interior landscapers, this may be streamlined further by including the price of the container with the price of the plant, adding labor for prep, delivery, installation, etc., sphagnum moss or chips, a saucer/liner and cork mat, for a final complete/installed unit price.

There are other prices to be considered in formulating a price list. For instance, whether or not unit pricing is chosen, labor charges must be determined for various types of work: design, prep, elevator waiting time, driving time, installation, delivery, etc. Establishing an hourly rate that has some "flex" to it will allow you to charge slightly different rates for different labor tasks. For instance, a company may decide to charge less per hour for a project nearby where their crew will spend all day in the installation process without any major amount of travel time to and from the site. A company may also develop hourly rates for administrative and design labor if those services are not included in an all-inclusive labor rate.

Another option is establishing three (or more) different price levels within your price list to accommodate your absolute lowest prices, medium range prices, and highest prices. This can help you bid projects according to the project itself and how much you want or need to make on that particular job. With a local project, one which is rather simple in nature, you might choose to use the lowest pricing structure. With a more complex project a little outside of your territory, the highest pricing structure may be more appropriate.

All of these things are only suggestions and ideas which can be developed and tailored to suit your company's needs. You can probably think up many little tricks and strategies that can significantly simplify and streamline the estimation process. The important thing is having something from which to work as a basis for the process.

Price lists should be updated every six months or yearly. They should be adjusted when suppliers raise (or lower) their prices or when your company raises or lowers its rates. And, don't forget to allow for sales commissions whether or not a sales staff exists. Pricing should be structured to include such anticipated future personnel additions.

Once you are accustomed to using a checklist and retail price list, ballpark estimates become much easier. Using the ballpark estimate will immediately help eliminate the apples-tooranges bidding syndrome by giving you an opportunity to establish a premise for the discussion of a budget on the spot rather than just sending a proposal and hoping for the best.

### **Estimate Checklists**

In order to avoid any omissions that might affect the profitability of a project, it is helpful to have an estimate checklist of all the "little" things and some of the not so little things that should be included in an estimate.

For example, an interiorscapers might want to include some of the following: decorative moss and chips, plastic saucers, staging material, stakes, twist ties, extra soil, B-1, and gravel. If plants are not unit priced then labor expenses should be included for delivery and prep, installation, service, supervisory, and administrative. Omitting costs of pest control, transplanting, seasonal rotations, etc., spell potential long term losses or potential additional and possibly unexpected charges for the client. Either way, this can be the beginning of the end of a potentially profitable business relationship.

Some other things that can be included on a checklist are: design considerations such as tree heights and view obstructions, drainage, water sources and irrigation systems, lighting, color schemes, and priority areas; plant materials (live, artificial, color rotation); containers and accessories (trellises, birdbaths, hangers, staging material, mats, saucers, stakes, twist ties); contract labor (masonry, plumbing, lighting, electrical, pool, pond); design time; and, maintenance details such as water access, parking, limitations on access time, pruning and trimming, projected replacements, guarantees, pest control, etc.

Since all companies are different, the rule of thumb is, if you think you might ever sell it, need it, encounter it, or offer it as a service, include it on the checklist. Better safe than sorry.

#### **Guarantee Schedules**

Guarantees are calculated on several variables. Commercial projects in high-traffic areas get littered and battered. Restaurant interiors are drafty, cool, greasy, and easily battered too. Plants in shopping malls have greater losses in their heavily trafficked food courts than in their near-empty department store ends. Homes with children and pets don't fare much better indoors or out. Individual plants also affect guarantees. If you sell weak or undeveloped plants, they are more vulnerable to damage from

heat and contact with people. And, if you consistently install healthy plants in too-hot windows or near splashing water, they will likely suffer. You must determine the risks based on your experience with individual projects of various kinds.

The process of calculating guarantees can be simplified by creating a guarantee schedule in chart form which lists plants down the left hand column of the page with the risks across the top. The risks can be called low, medium, and high light; high, moderate, and minimal risk; or even the projected life expectancy of the plant in terms of years -- especially useful to interiorscapers. The higher the risk the higher the replacement rate. And we're talking replacement rates, not replacement costs. Rates are based on projected losses over a stated period. Costs are the actual amount expensed when a plant is replaced (i.e., the plant price and the labor to install it). Most guarantee calculations are based on installation costs on a per plant basis which is distributed over the projected life of a specific plant.

If it is determined that it costs \$16.95 in materials and labor to replace a 6" aglaonema, that is the replacement cost. Then the plant's projected life span is determined under different conditions. If it can be expected to appear healthy and aesthetically pleasing in a high risk area for one year, divide \$16.95 by 12 months to get a replacement guarantee rate of \$1.41. In a moderate risk environment where it may live for three years divide by 36 months to get a rate of forty-seven cents. In a low risk environment where it may survive for five years, divide by 60 months to get twenty-eight cents. If there are more than one 6" aglaonema, multiply the number of plants by the rate and add it to the monthly service fee. That is how you create the schedule. Your figures will not be the same as mine which are purely fictitious and for the purpose of illustration of a method only.

### Bids, Estimates, Proposals

Once you have your checklist, price list, and guarantee schedule in hand, you are ready to prepare an estimate, bid, or proposal. But, before we discuss these further, it is important to define some terms. Many contractors use these terms interchangeably, but bids, estimates, and proposals are very different things. They have different meanings:

- Bids are quoted dollar amounts calculated on design specifications. They result in an all-inclusive price for an installation
- Estimates are rough, ballpark figures formulated without specifications to determine client budgets and the feasibility of a project
- Proposals are formal offers, based on design specifications and client budgets, and include a contract

Another important word which must be defined is "profit." It is important to understand what profit is, especially if your company is a small "Mom & Pop" operation or a sole proprietorship. The money small business owners make which they then use to live on, pay rent or a mortgage, and put food on the table should never be confused with profit. Profit is what is left *after* all those living expenses are deducted. Even sole proprietors are considered as employees of that business when determining profits. And, don't forget, sales commissions are expenses as well and they must be accounted for in your pricing.

## **Charging for Design**

When I teach design sales the first question that inevitably comes up is, "How much do you charge for a design?", "What do you include in a design?", and, "What format should the design take?" We'll start with the latter two questions as they determine the answer to the first.

Designs should include detailed specifications such as: plant name, (botanical and common name both), height, breadth or canopy size, number of plants per bed or per pot, pot or container dimensions, etc. These specifications should always take the form of a list, but should ideally be augmented by a drawing if the job is of a size and scope that such detail is necessary to insure the proper execution of the project.

As for how much to charge, interior and exterior landscapers have always created these designs preparatory to estimation, so they should know how long it takes them to do it. The time spent, times whatever hourly rate is appropriate for the individual company, is how much you charge. Or, if you want to include the cost of a design in a completed project price, you may wish to determine a sliding scale of design fees derived from percentages that are reflective of the actual hours estimated to complete designs of varying sizes and scopes.

The important thing is that the design fee must cover all the expense that goes into preparing the design. This includes phone calls or visits to nurseries to obtain information on unusual specimens, calls to suppliers to locate specific pots or containers, time spent walking and re-walking job sites, meetings with other design professionals working on the same project, administrative time spent in writing, typing specs, and drawing (if applicable) the preliminary and final specifications.

### **Estimation - Installation**

With installations as with maintenance it is important to be thorough. Once again, use a checklist approach and mark down everything you could possibly need: vehicles, heavy equipment, containers, soil, bark, topdressing, saucers, protective mats, dollies/hand-trucks, stakes, twist-ties, and personnel – including any specialty subcontractors. Don't leave out anything. The more thorough your checklist, the less likely you

are to have to "absorb" a cost later. Remember that all those seemingly little items can really add up over the space of a year and you could be "absorbing" a big chunk of your profits. And, don't forget costing out the labor. Include everything from the time you spend designing, to ordering and selecting plants and materials, to the pickup and delivery fees, the preparation (staging) on site, the installation itself, and any administrative costs.

How much you mark up your plants depends on how much you want to make on the job and whether your net justifies the job. For example, if you do a job that grossed \$5,500 and your net profit is only \$200 and it took an entire day to do the job, then you missed the boat. You should ideally make a profit equivalent to at least 1/5 (preferably 2/5) of the total project price. So, on a \$5,500 job you should be shooting for a profit of at least \$1,100. A \$200 profit simply isn't worth the effort.

The markup on plants and materials varies considerably depending on your clientele, your individual business structure, and what the market will bear in your geographical area. Large metropolitan areas generally have the highest markups. Markups on containers vary according to the same criteria as do plants, plus the consideration of the manufacturer's suggested retail price and the availability of those containers in the retail sector. After all, if they can buy it in a store for less, why bother buying from you?

#### **Short Term Rentals**

These interior landscape rentals are calculated according to the length of the rental, the cost of the plants and the type of plants required, and, of course, the cost of installing and removing everything. The labor costs are the same as for an installation with the addition of the removal costs. If the risk of damage is high (plants are going to be in a windy area or in full sun or in a place where they may be easily damaged), the rental price should reflect that. If the containers requested are not stock items this must also be included in the price.

There are rentals and then there are rentals. Short term can mean anything from one day, (for a wedding) to three months (for a model home). As with regular installations the environments and plants will all vary and there is no right or wrong way to achieve the correct rental rate. The main thing is to be sure to include all costs and to charge enough to make a profit.

#### **Color and Seasonal Rotation**

Whether you are an interior or exterior landscapers, color and seasonal plantings are often part of the maintenance service. Many interiorscapers have flowers on some or all of their service accounts, and most outdoor landscapes have beds designated for annuals. Color rotation is usually charged as plants plus a markup plus labor - a simple installation. With some companies the cost is included in with the maintenance, but this is not an ideal method. It is all right to present a monthly figure to a client as long as the contractor keeps a breakdown of that record in the file. Otherwise it could be difficult to adjust that rate over time. If long-lasting flowering plants such as bromeliads are used every other month indoors, the price may still be monthly rather than every other month for the purposes of bookkeeping.

#### **Cut Flower Service**

This interior landscape service can work similarly to color rotation, but is often considerably more expensive, particularly in the case of lavish arrangements, holiday displays, or high-ticket items such as orchids. Remember to mark up the flowers and charge for all the necessary labor: trips to the local wholesale flower market, special supplies and equipment, preparation and arrangement, and design and delivery.

When included in the monthly rate, cut flowers must be carefully priced. If readily available flowers are used (e.g., roses, mums), then the price will not vary as much as if you go for more exotic bulbs or imports which have substantial fluctuations in price according to their seasonal availability and source (often from overseas).

## **Estimating Large Projects/Installations**

Most contractors are intimidated by the idea of estimating their first large project such as a mall, a corporate headquarters, a hotel, etc. Even experienced contractors have been known to "forget" to include some of the very things that they normally consider routine during the estimation process. This usually happens when they become overwhelmed by the enormity of the job. In these cases, using the checklist will help jog memories about details that might otherwise be overlooked in the confusion.

Large projects are just a series of small projects at a single site. To make this more evident and to simplify the estimation process, break a large job down into more manageable sizes to create individual estimates which can later be combined for a total price. The projects can be broken down according to whatever works best for each individual project. For example, in a mall you may want to break the project down by geographical areas: a food court, northeast wing, fountain court, third level south, etc. For a hotel you may break it down by west parking area, front courtyard, restaurant patio area, pool area, etc.

In jobs where there are lots of free-standing planters in combination with built-in planter beds and regular planting beds, you may want to separate the three and cost them in accordance with their specifications. You can also further break projects down according to plant groups (vines, shrubs, trees, sod) or plant sizes (8", 10", 6', 36" boxed, flats, etc.).

With large projects it is important to carefully formulate guarantees based on individual plant environments. While it's easy to use simplistic formulas when costing small jobs (and sometimes get away with it), large projects, such as shopping malls and hotels, have higher risk factors, particularly in areas such as food courts and parking areas where the plant abuse level is so high. Your easy-to-use guarantee formula might not adequately cover losses in such an area, and that's where a flexible guarantee schedule comes in so handy.

When dealing with lots of items, doublecheck your calculations and be sure that a mathematical error does not go unnoticed. Always exercise caution when dealing with dollars and cents.

### **Bidding on Specifications**

Bidding "on spec" is usually quite easy. Unfortunately, while the process is simple, many contractors find this to be more difficult than creating their own design. This is understandable since specifications come in many forms. Some plans are complete and easy to understand while others can be one's worst nightmare come true. Plans often contain oversights and omissions, contain discrepancies between drawings and plant lists, and frequently, in the case of interiorscapes designed by landscape architects, contain plants and materials inappropriate for indoor use or that are not maintainable indoors.

When a contractor looks at plans and sees these incongruities, there is often a temptation to re-design and replace items which seem inappropriate for any reason, or to call the designer and try to get them to change the specifications. This is not how the bidding process works.

When bidding on specifications, stick to the plan as designed. Calculate all pricing based on the specifications only. If any changes which you would ideally like to make will result in an increase in the contract price, the proposal's cover letter should

include a paragraph stating that if awarded the bid it will be installed as per specification, however, recommended changes, if made, would result in an increase of "x" amount of dollars. If the proposed changes do not exceed the contract price, including a paragraph on the price change is optional.

Recommendations for changes should be made tactfully so as not to imply incompetence on the part of the designer or bad judgment on the part of the client for hiring that designer in the first place. In addition, the reason for the change should be very brief and non-specific. For example, to explain a price change resulting from a change in several different items, a simple statement such as follows may be used:

ABC Company will install your project as per design specifications, however, we would additionally like to recommend some substitutions which we feel would maintain the original design integrity while increasing the health and longevity of your [landscape, interior landscape] and reducing your long-term maintenance costs. These changes would result in an overall [increase, decrease] in installation fees of \$2,445.63.

This type of statement is not too lengthy and does not contain long lists of proposed changes which would be meaningless to the client anyway. It also does not detail the specific changes which might be offensive to an overly-sensitive designer. You have not imposed your will on the client by demanding the changes be made and you have recognized that they may not want to make the changes and that you will accommodate them nevertheless.

One of the problems with bidding on specification is that many small companies are not capable of bidding competitively price-wise on these larger projects. Most clients dump the highest and lowest bids and then look at what is left over. The range in price can be significant and the remaining lowest bidder is usually selected. When contractors complain that the

company awarded the bid couldn't possibly be making a profit, they may or may not be correct. What usually happens is that contractors who bid regularly on large jobs buy directly from growers, often from out of state, who give them substantial quantity discounts because of the consistency and size of their orders. A small company will unlikely be able to match those discounted prices because they normally buy plants from local wholesale distributorships, or "middlemen," who buy from those same growers and then mark up the prices for resale to interiorscape contractors. These small businesses often lack not only the connections to these growers, but also have no track record or credentials (e.g., Dunn & Bradstreet) to establish such credit.

#### **Estimation - Maintenance**

The most frequent estimate we're confronted with is for maintenance of existing and/or new plant materials. The main principles are the same, whether you're working indoors or outdoors: water, grooming, pest control, etc. When the plants are older and more mature, we allow more time per visit for transplanting or pruning. So, why do we have so many problems bidding on maintenance? The answer: we aren't thorough. That's one reason the checklist is so helpful, so necessary.

To give a thorough estimate, you need to think ahead, and not just from week to week. Many contractors lose accounts when "extra charges" for transplanting, insect control, and refurbishments become excessive. After all, you're supposed to be maintaining the client's interior or exterior landscape and that means doing whatever is necessary to keep everything alive and healthy. Be sure you include these factors in your estimates. Replacing an old plant or tree is not always an option. Most of the time you just have to keep it alive.

The basis of a good estimate is anchored in the time allotment. If you are intimidated by the thought of allotting time for the care of 25, 100, or 1,000 plants, or 1/8, 1/4, or one acre, there are formulas you can use to simplify the process.

Some years ago, I performed some time and motion studies for interior landscape maintenance, and I have since discovered that this basic amount of time per plant per visit (which includes everything short of major transplanting) holds true. My figures were confirmed by several interiorscapers who used similar calculations with great success. I have not done the same kind of studies for exterior landscapers, but my guess, based on my experience as a gardener and as the manager and later owner of an exterior landscape business, is that they would also result in a per plant amount that is suitable for use outdoors.

My figures were basically two to three minutes per indoor plant, and that time allotment is designed to include the time spent getting to the plant, removing scissors and clippers from holsters, filling water buckets or pressurized watering devices, hauling trash away, etc. That can be increased or decreased according to all the environmental factors influencing the account, whether or not you use subirrigation, etc. For example if you have ten plants, two of which are marginatas in a hot window, you can hypothetically say eight plants at two-and-a-half minutes each and two plants at three-and-a-half minutes each for a total time allotment of twenty-seven minutes per visit. You can of course, round that off to thirty minutes and multiply that figure times your maintenance rate broken down into a per minute rate.

If you have an hourly rate of \$45 per hour, your rate for a thirty minute visit would be \$22.50. To that you can add any extras such as parking fees or extra travel time outside your regular area, etc. To get your monthly rate, multiply the weekly

rate times 52 weeks in the year to get a yearly rate which you then divide by 12 to get your monthly rate, and round it off.

On the whole, I am opposed to making a half-hour stop for \$22.50 because it is simply not cost effective unless you have at least two or more other stops in the same building or in the same neighborhood on the same day. For all other accounts, I recommend establishing a minimum stop charge equivalent to your hourly rate. This doesn't mean you can't do a half hour account, only that you make money when you do it. Remember, the smaller the job in this business, the less money you make per hour, because it all gets eaten up in the biggest of money wasters – travel time, the time when you are not making any money at all, but you are still spending money in vehicle expenses and employee wages and benefits.

Many contractors claim that estimating maintenance is a not a problem for them. They insist that they know how long it takes to do every little thing and that they always make money on maintenance. A closer study of individual companies of all sizes indicates that this may not be the case. Most companies err considerably in maintenance estimation. This usually occurs when the hourly rate is not adhered to or when there are no standard schedules for calculating maintenance time allotments and pricing.

Errors in maintenance calculations may be apparent to a service person. For example, an interior maintenance technician may immediately realize that he or she must water two hundred plants in three hours each week and would have enough time if the small, hot, mite-infested, mealy-ridden atrium was in better shape. Other errors may not become evident until an project is older and plants in the better lit areas have become rootbound or aesthetically marginal, and they all need more attention than is evidenced by the weekly maintenance time allotment. This happens outdoors as well when

small plants reach maturity and vines are now presenting a maintenance problem, more pruning is necessary, etc. And, as if all this isn't enough, many contractors simply fail to raise their rates regularly or to evaluate their service accounts to make adjustments for increases or decreases in time or rate.

An hourly rate should include all the overhead expenses including, but not limited to, insurance, vehicles, salaries, taxes, and supplies. If a company is a sole-proprietorship, care should be taken to establish a rate that includes projected future employee salaries. Charging a low rate because there are no employees can result in loss of accounts at a future date when salaries must be paid and client rates cannot be raised sufficiently to accommodate the salaries.

What is included in a maintenance rate must also be determined. Is it to be all inclusive? That is, does it include pest control, transplanting, pruning, rotations, etc., or are they to be charged as additional services at the time they are rendered? Some companies state that their maintenance is guaranteed without charging for the guarantee. This can ultimately lead to substantial losses if plants die as a result of employee negligence or incompetency. An occasional small plant here and there is one thing, but if a service person kills a 36" boxed caryota or a matched specimen rhapis, this could be an expensive replacement, particularly for a small business.

Like the retail price lists mentioned previously for installation, maintenance services can be scheduled and charted accordingly. Per plant service costs can be determined by using time and motion studies for different aspects of plant care, (e.g., watering, grooming, trimming, etc.). Plants can then be put into table form with charges for their maintenance under different conditions: high, medium, and low light, or ideal, good, and poor locations. Other terms may be used and there is no law that says only three such conditions are needed. Some compa-

nies may require a category for plants in planter beds, hanging plants, trees vs. shrubs, plantings in difficult to access areas, etc., in addition to the environmental factors.

Evaluate your maintenance routes regularly to make sure that you are maximizing the maintenance time and minimizing the travel time. I have revised maintenance routes for efficiency and profit for several companies over the years and, in one instance, I reduced travel time by 65% overall — the complete elimination of seven routes. This resulted in the reduction of the labor force by 25% — nine people.

## **Estimation - Leasing (Interior Landscape)**

When it comes to leasing there have been many different formulas used but only one or two are actually sensible and economically sound. I once took a survey in which I spoke to thirty different interior landscape companies to find out how they calculated their lease rates. Out of all those companies, only five were using the same method. The others used similar methods, but all in all, there was really only one that stands alone as being the most complete. This method was not used most frequently, but the companies using it were making solid profits on their leasing and were financially stable with strong, healthy growth patterns. You can use this method as a guideline to developing a formula that works for you.

This method is illustrated on the next pae. The way it works is: Mark up the wholesale cost of the plants by 100 percent (double the cost); take the wholesale cost of materials and mark them up by 50 percent; add sales tax (required in most states on leases of this kind), installation labor, and your projected (estimated) guaranteed replacement costs. Divide the total by twelve (for the monthly rate for a one-year period even if the lease is for twenty-four months), and round it off. Now, add your monthly maintenance fee to that rate.

You may wish to reduce the markup if you have a two-year contract, but if you don't mark up at all, you won't start making a profit until the second year, barring any major replacements. Variations on this formula include charging for the installation labor up front, charging deposits of first and last month. using a sliding scale of payments in a declining balance manner over the first three years, and offering buyouts after the first year in amounts ranging from \$500 to \$1,000.

<b>Example: Leasing</b>		
Plants \$1,000 x 100% =	\$ 2,000	
Materials \$500 + 50% =	\$	<b>750</b>
Subtotal	\$ 2,750	
Sales tax		179
Guarantee	250	
Labor		400
Total	\$ 3,579	
Monthly lease payment (divide \$3,579 by 12)	\$	298
Monthly maintenance	\$	125
Total monthly charge	\$	425

When you lease, you are leasing your own property, your own assets. They are depreciating in value for the most part and their initial cash value could have earned you money had you invested it elsewhere. So, waiting to get a return on your "depreciating" investment is not good business, particularly if you had to finance the purchase through a bank or through your nursery. You must find a way to earn the investment return you miss out on while your "cash" is sitting in a hot office building being nibbled away at by mites.

With guarantees, there are no cut-and-dry formulas either. You can use a percentage of the wholesale cost of plants based on your average projected yearly loss. In other words, if you are running at a loss of 17% per year, you can use that percentage times the wholesale cost of the plants in your installation. Some companies use a sliding scale with flat rates for certain increments of the wholesale plant costs. For example, say \$5 per month for up to \$500 wholesale, then \$10 per month for \$500 to \$1,000 wholesale, then \$15 per month for \$1,000 to \$1,500 wholesale, etc.

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The process of bidding and estimating is not for the novice. It is a complex system of closely related items which are dependent on each other and on the sales ability of the contractor. It is simply not enough to know what to charge, but rather how to sell. And, while it may appear on the surface that slashing prices is a sure way to get a job, there are more effective and profitable ways to get a job by using sophisticated sales techniques and encouraging clients to purchase design services.

Business is business. No matter what the industry or trade, the idea behind a business is to make money, or at the very least, not to lose it. This is accomplished by following traditional rules of the game, creating new and innovative methods and procedures to accommodate unique trades, and by constantly and consistently evaluating the business and seeking new ways to make it more efficient and more profitable.

#### **Contracts**

You cannot do business without a contract. Relying on verbal contracts is unprofessional and foolhardy. Don't be intimidated or overwhelmed by a legal document filled with a lot of mumbo-jumbo that you can't understand. Not all

contracts are written that way nowadays. A contract is just an agreement between two parties – the contractor and the client. It spells out what the responsibilities are for each so that they both understand what their respective roles are in the transaction. That's all there is to it. And while you do need the services of a lawyer, a contract doesn't have to cost you the proverbial arm and leg.

When you consult a lawyer about your contracts, save yourself a bundle by first drafting the contract yourself, jotting down every single item you can think of that you want to be included in the agreement. Write it up the way you think makes the most sense. Then give that document to your lawyer and let him/her read it and make suggestions or rewrite certain paragraphs to make sure they are not ambiguous or wholly inaccurate. Let your attorney suggest ways in which you can improve on the terms, etc., so that you are fully protected should there ever be a dispute with a client. Remember that what applies to you generally applies to the client, and vice versa. For example, if you are allowed to take legal action to enforce the contract and can recover attorneys fees from your client, the client can do the same. This is not always stated, but it is true regardless. Ask your attorney for further clarification of this should you require it.

Never make the mistake of using someone else's contract for your own, especially in this industry. I once took about forty-five different interiorscape contracts to a lawyer friend of mine who specialized in contract law. He informed me that only three were what he termed "legitimate" and enforceable, and that would actually protect the contractor.

## Q & A

At the end of every Get The Job & Make A Profit presentation, I always devoted at least an hour to Q&A. After having presented this seminar over 100 times, I have fielded numerous questions about sales, marketing, bidding, and estimating techniques. And I have used to receive questions on the Q&A advice column on my horticultural website, www.greenindustrypublications.com. The following are among the most frequently asked questions. My answers are designed to give the broadest response to what are often very general questions from all over the world.

Q. The company I have just started working for has a prepared sales pitch that we are all expected to use. It sounds very phony and artificial and makes me feel like a fast-talking used car salesperson. Is this aggressive, uniform approach successful in sales?

A. In my opinion, it is doubtful, particularly if you are forced to say things that do not "match" with your personality or make you feel uncomfortable. That usually results in a projection of uncertainty that can make your prospective client ill at ease and cause you to lose the sale. Successful sales techniques are ones that are unique to the individual making the presentation. Most people can see right through a pre-planned sales pitch and are usually "turned off." Selling means selling your own confidence in the service or products you represent, and this is best done by developing your own "natural" sales pitch and individual style.

## Q. I once heard that most sales are made after the fifth call, so I have tried to be persistent, but most people seem very put off with all my calls. How often are you supposed to call and is there something specific I should say?

A. A casual inquiry saying you are still interested and asking if they have made a decision is sufficient. How often you call should be determined by what the prospective client's response is to each call. If your party is out of town, find out when they are expected back and call again the day after they arrive. If they are there but say they aren't ready yet, let them know that you don't want to bother them with your calls and could they give you some idea as to when they might be making a decision. If they tell you they are not interested, see if you can find out why — is it you they aren't interested in or did they already hire someone for the job? If they already hired someone don't be rude and hang up like some salespeople do. It's not businesslike to burn your bridges. Instead, thank them for their time and let them know that if they need you in the future that you will be glad to accommodate them.

### Q. What constitutes a proper dress code for salespeople?

A. It depends to some degree on your individual type of clientele and the part of the country in which you are located. In general, I recommend matching the sales wardrobe to that of the prospective client. This usually means, at the very least, a sport jacket and tie for men, and comparable attire for women. There are always some exceptions, but there are some definite no-no's regardless of where you are: no raggedy jeans or tees, no sweats, no spaghetti strap dresses, no bare midriffs or plunging necklines, no bare legs, and no mini-shorts.

Q. We have been thinking of advertising in the Yellow Pages and in a local weekly newspaper supplement. How much can we expect to pay for advertising and how do we know what size ad to run, etc.? We have never advertised

## before and have always relied on word of mouth, but that doesn't seem to be working for us lately.

A. The cost of advertising varies from one publication to another. The size of the ad will be determined in part by how much room you need to establish what you are all about, and by the actual cost of the different ad sizes. Determine your monthly budget and weigh that against the potential business you may derive from each publication. Try to determine if your prospective customers will look for you in the Yellow Pages or in the supplement. See where your competition is advertising. Page placement is also a consideration as is frequency. Most publications offer discounts for extended runs of a week, three months, six months, etc. Another cost to consider is that of artwork. It always pays to hire professionals and have your ad done by a marketing specialist. It's a good investment and will assure that your company image is reflected in your advertising.

#### Q. What factors determine the effectiveness of an ad?

A. There are five main ones and they are as follows: content, design, placement, frequency and circulation. Content includes sales items, specials, coupons, location, service area, hours of business, and any special services that set you apart from others in your trade. Design should be pleasing to the eye, easy to read, eye-catching, interesting. Placement should be in a spot where it will be seen by the most people, usually the right hand page on the outside edge. Frequency refers to how often the ad appears. Running regularly and frequently assures the best exposure. Experts say it takes about six months minimum to start getting a good response. Circulation refers to the readers. Wherever you decided to advertise you will want to know how many readers there are and where they are located.

- Q. I never know how much to pay a salesperson. Salary less draw against commission, salary plus commission, or commission only? I've talked to other employers and they all pay their salespeople differently.
- A. There is no hard and fast rule that says how much or in what way you should pay a salesperson. You should attempt to outline exactly what you expect of that person, how much their time is worth to you, what your current profit margin is, how payment of a percentage will impact the profit margin, and just generally how much you can afford to pay someone during the initial stages while they are getting in the swing of your business and learning how you like things done. You should also determine sales goals for them so that you can calculate overrides on commissions when they exceed those goals.
- Q. We had a logo designed five years ago. When people have seen the same logo for five years is it wise to change it and wait for them to get used to the new look all over again? Won't I risk losing business if they can't readily identify me?
- A. When your logo is updated, it should not vary so drastically as to be unrecognizable. It should just look a little more current from the standpoint of design trends. Re-evaluate your logo every two years so that changes can be subtle but effective. Discuss your concerns with the artist who will be revising the logo so that he/she doesn't get carried away in creating the updated version.
- Q. We still get a lot of our business from the Yellow Pages. It's getting close to time to renew the ads and I'd like to change the advertisement. What can we do to insure that people will want to call us instead of the dozen or so other companies in the book or online?

- A. Assuming that you are having the ad professionally done, you might want to try a larger ad. That in itself will command greater attention. Also try to get placement in an outside upper corner of the page, right hand page being preferable.
- Q. My business seems to be "seasonal." From January through March I have very little business and the same is true from September to November. Is there anything I can do to avoid this? I'm extremely busy the other times.
- A. Slumps are not uncommon in any industry, but some of them, sales slumps in particular, can be avoided. Examine the manner in which you plan your sales strategy. If you are exerting all of your efforts during a two or three month period and are then coasting as the business comes in, you may find that after all the new business is past you are in a slump again. Try to continue actively selling and marketing your services on a regular basis, perhaps using tracking sheets to keep on top of how many calls you have made, how many proposals you have sent, etc., so that you can see how you are doing and where you are going.
- Q. My salesperson started out great and brought in lots of new business, but in the past few months he seems to be sitting down on the job. This is a small company, sales are down, and he doesn't seem to be motivated. I don't know what to do to get his motor going again. Suggestions?
- A. In a small business, it's important that salespeople have established sales goals that are increased over time. If your salesperson has no or low sales goals, establish new or higher ones, maybe with an additional override when the goals are exceeded. Salespeople can also become stagnant if paid ongoing commissions on maintenance or if they receive base salaries that are too high.

- Q. When I meet with a prospective client for the first time I am always at a loss for words. Are there any good opening lines that I can use to break the ice?
- A. I usually start asking questions the minute I arrive. I ask them to tell me what the company does, how long they have been in their present location, etc. If those kinds of questions do not apply, I may get desperate enough to mention the weather, but as a rule of thumb, I just talk to a prospective client the same way I would talk to anyone I am meeting for the first time.
- Q. I have always worn bright colors, but one of my employers recently suggested that these may not be good for sales and has suggested that I tone down my wardrobe. I feel very drab and dull in conservative colors. Do bright colors really have a detrimental effect on closing a sale?
- A. I do not know that bright colors can have a detrimental effect but I have always felt that it paid to err on the conservative side color-wise. For example, I might wear a grey dress with a bright red scarf, but never a red dress. I am sure that this varies from one person to the other and, in the long run, I think it is important to feel comfortable in what you wear, since that affects your self-confidence, which is so important in successful sales. If your employer wants you to tone down, maybe you are just too flashy for the company image. I would find out specifically how much toning down they want you to do before you change your wardrobe too drastically.
- Q. I have always set a \$50K minimum on the jobs I wanted to take, but lately I feel like I should set an even lower minimum because of the recessive economy. What is the lowest I can go without losing money on little nickel and dime installations and maintenance?

A. It depends on what you call nickel and dime jobs. \$50K is a pretty high minimum for most companies. Even a \$10K project would hardly be considered a nickel and dime job. You won't even lose money on a \$5K job if it is bid and executed properly. And recessive economies don't last forever. What goes down must come up!

## Q. What do potential commercial clients want to hear and/or see when approached by a contractor?

A. They usually want a track record and references. They want a professional who is properly licensed and insured. They also want some proof that you have the resources necessary to complete a job in a thorough and timely manner.

## Q. My partner and I disagree about what to include in our brochure. I want something very comprehensive and she just wants something pretty. We are both willing to compromise on the essentials. What are they?

- A. Since you want someone to read it, having a pretty brochure is nice. As for being comprehensive, it boils down to a matter of how much is too much. Brochures aren't meant to tell the whole story; they're just a table of contents, so to speak. Include your company name in at least three places, make sure your phone number is large and highly visible, state your credentials, outline your services, and indicate the geographical areas and demographics of the clientele you service. Everything else is just icing on the cake.
- Q. For years I have always brought brochures with me on sales calls. My partner thinks I should bring a portfolio of our work instead because the brochures do not really show what we do as explicitly as do photographs of our projects. What is your opinion?

A. I personally like using both. The portfolio makes for a great visual presentation and the brochure is something you can leave behind so that prospective clients have something to refresh their memories of you when you're gone. If I had to choose between the two, I would opt for the portfolio, but I think you would be more successful using it in conjunction with a brochure.

## Q. I would like to assemble a presentation portfolio of some of my design projects and maintenance accounts. I am not very good at taking pictures and my budget is tight. What should I expect to invest in this project?

A. You can expect to spend anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 (more or less), for a high quality, professionally produced portfolio. The price varies depending on what the economy is like in your area. Film and processing can be quite expensive as are enlargements, but the main factor is the labor of the photographer. You can keep the costs down somewhat by being very selective about which projects to shoot, having everything ready for the photographer before the shoot, deciding in advance which aspects of a project you wish to capture on film, and by letting the photographer know in advance what the lighting conditions are at various times of the day at each project. To get additional mileage for your dollar, have the photographer shoot some black and white shots to use in print advertising.

### Q. How long should a sales presentation last?

A. Depends on the project. I have given sales presentations that lasted fifteen minutes and others that lasted an hour or more. The main idea is to say what you have to say in an orderly fashion while finding out what the client wants and needs. The more skilled you are at making these presentations, the faster they go and the more deals you will close in the process.

- Q. We have four company names for each of our divisions. We would like to consolidate them all into one name to cut down on paperwork (four different letterheads, business cards, invoices, checks, etc.), but we are concerned about the possibility of losing business in the process. Will customers think we have changed hands if the name changes? What can we do to pick a name that applies to all our different divisions?
- A. Some customers may think you have changed hands but it is unlikely that you will actually lose any business as a result. You might want to consider using one company name that links the four divisions together and then list the divisions on the same letterhead, invoices, etc. As for selecting a name, try brainstorming with your employees. How about giving a bonus for the best name?
- Q. What really works these days? Is telemarketing dead? What about cold-calling and networking? With the economy so dead in my area, I am getting desperate to find some answers.
- A. Telemarketing thrives, but don't ask me why! It is so intrusive and it rarely reaches the decision makers. Cold-calling works for some companies and networking still continues to be the most effective avenue for sales leads. Everything works to some degree and an organized sales and marketing strategy should incorporate a little of everything. What works best is what works for you in your part of the world. Trial and error should teach you what you are best at and what produces the most business for you. What you might need to do now is not change what you are doing, but simply do more of it with additional marketing efforts such as direct mail or a new networking group.

## Q. Is there an organized way to go about canvassing for new business? I seem to happen on things occasionally and I would like to try something more systematic or reliable.

A. How about picking a certain geographical area each week and driving through it for a few minutes, looking at what's new there, and making notes of who to call. Or, you might want to scrutinize the newspapers every day and see who is doing what in your city and contacting any newly licensed businesses, or city planners and landscape architects who are mentioned in conjunction with a proposed project.

## Q. I get calls from residential and commercial prospects, but I almost always get the residential accounts and can't seem to land the commercial ones. Do they require significantly different sales techniques?

A. Yes, they do require different sales techniques. You may look just right for a residential job and be too casual in dress or behavior for a business. Also, homeowners tend to prefer smaller, more personalized services, while businesses tend to gravitate towards medium- to large-sized contracting firms. These are not hard, fast rules, just tendencies that you may wish to keep in mind when you make your presentations. Being a small company is no reason to avoid commercial accounts. Just try to conduct yourself like a business person and give a professional presentation.

## Q. Is it okay to ask a former prospective client why you didn't get the job? I want to improve my sales and estimating efforts but it's hard to do that when I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

A. You can ask them. Some will probably tell you where you went wrong. But, remember that just because a client chose someone else does not mean you did anything wrong per se. Everyone is looking for something different and much of what

happens in a sales transaction is based on the mutual rapport established between the salesperson and the client. Changing what you do to please the "one who got away" may be the very thing that ends up turning off another prospective client to you entirely.

- Q. Last year we started our Christmas sales push in early November. Apparently it was not early enough and there was a mad last minute rush to get poinsettias and other holiday plants ordered, and we ended up not having enough for our last minute shoppers. How early can you approach a client for holiday items? I'd like to start in early October but I don't know if they'll even want to be thinking about ordering that far ahead.
- A. I always used to start taking Christmas tree and poinsettia orders in October. It did seem a little premature, but on the other hand, we rarely ran out of materials that way. We didn't have much of a choice since our Christmas tree person handselected trees for our residential clients and he had to plan far in advance for his trips to the mountains. Since we were calling to take orders for trees, we just ended up taking orders for other holiday plants at the same time. Some clients were a little surprised, but they were, on the whole, very cooperative.
- Q. I have never written a sales letter before. I usually just submit a proposal after a prospective client calls me from my Yellow Pages ad. What should I say in such a letter when I want to approach a business instead of vice versa?
- A. Sales letters are for introducing your company. Put the letter on printed letterhead stationery with all the information about where to reach you. Make sure your spelling and grammar are correct. Hire a writer or editor to help you write it, if necessary. Keep it brief. Just tell them what you do, how long you've been doing it, and mention whatever you do that is unique to your industry. Experience speaks volumes.

- Q. I have recently started my own business after working for another contractor for seven years. I am finding it difficult to get clients. I have sent out approximately 100 sales letters and no one has responded. I am worried about investing any more money. Is it unethical for me to write to former clients from when I was servicing them for another company? What should I do?
- A. Definitely do not contact clients of your former employer. It is unethical because you would be using confidential information, also known as "trade secrets," by contacting them. Follow up on your sales letters and send out even more. Define the kinds of clients you want and look for ways to reach them. Use attractive business cards and letterhead, and be sure your sales letter is well-written. If you look like you know what you are doing you will be more likely to be hired. Find clients through design professionals, developers, and other contractors. Expand your circle of business acquaintances by joining networking groups and by letting everyone know what you do. Take out an ad in the Yellow Pages and go door to door if necessary. Leave no stone unturned in looking for clients. That's what contractors do, not only to get started, but to stay in business
- Q. How much time and effort do most small businesses spend in the bidding process? I was recently asked to submit a bid for a project which would have taken about 4 hours of calculations. I do not feel comfortable about spending so much time with no guarantee I'll get the job.
- A. Some industries require more time and effort in the bidding process due to the nature of the project being bid, and sometimes a lack of internal organization is to blame. For example, I once helped a salesperson prepare a bid which would have taken half the time had his price lists and labor tables been current, complete, and legible.

## Q. I can't seem to compete with other bidders for the same job. I am always a lot higher and I am rarely awarded the job.

A. Start by being more selective about your clients. You have to know your market and know how much people are willing to pay for your services. You don't have to bid on everything that comes along. If you have to bid really low just to get a job at the sacrifice of a profit, then why bid the job in the first place? There are other avenues to explore for getting jobs and they include networking with allied industries and trades who will bypass the bidding process and use your services. It takes some practice and has a long-term reward. If you are bidding high because your costs are high, you should examine why the costs are higher and see if you can reduce them. Many companies come in low on bids because they buy supplies in bulk and get quantity discounts. Perhaps you can do the same.

# Q. I am a one-person business, and I don't know if I'm charging the right amount for my services. Is there a quick and easy formula I can use to determine if I'm in the right ballpark?

A. There really is no quick, easy formula to determine how much to charge. The way in which you set the rates for your company must be predicated upon your overhead, your profit margin based on where you want your business to go financially, and on the market in your area. The latter should not be used as a sole determinant in any case, but rather as a partial guideline to help you gauge your potential share of the available market. If you are not charging enough to accommodate future growth and the addition of employees then perhaps your fee structure is inadequate and you do need to charge more. You should hire a professional accountant to assist you in making this very important decision.

- Q. What procedure should be used to calculate the increase in monthly service charges to keep up with increased costs and inflation each year? Is there a particular formula or method used to calculate the increase? How should a client be approached about an increase?
- A. If you plan to increase your service charges each year, it should be stipulated in your contract and it should be roughly equivalent to the cost of living. Your accountant can help you determine exactly what the increase should be based on the needs of your business. It is not uncommon for a business to be losing money on a service account and raise the rate only to find that they are still losing money. I recommend a regular evaluation of all service accounts a month or two before a contract is due to reach term. In that way you will be able to determine whether you wish to keep the account at all, exactly how much you need to raise it, or how much you feel is an acceptable raise. Before you raise the rate, you should give your client 30 days written notice of the proposed change.
- Q. What is the going percentage markup on plants and materials? Is it different for each or do you just lump them both together and tack on a profit?
- A. There is no standard markup on plants and materials other than those which some wholesalers state on their price lists as "suggested retail" prices. You can price plants separately from hard goods or you can lump them together. It makes no difference how you do it as long as you price for profit and maintain your competitive price range.
- Q. We are trying to determine whether it makes a difference which contractor submits his/her estimate first or last. Is the first one in a sure loser or does it matter?
- A. Some salespeople swear that the first estimate received is doomed because it is long forgotten by the time the others

arrive. I have also heard that the last one in is similarly doomed because the client is now in a greater hurry and hasn't enough time to examine it thoroughly. In reality, the award of a project depends on a lot more than what time your estimate arrives. How your sales presentation went is important as is the appearance and completeness of your proposal/estimate package.

- Q. I am new to this business and I would like to know if there is a certain format you can use to bid on an existing job to make it look professional. The mall in my area is up for bid, and I would really like to get the job.
- A. Every company is different as far as how they present their bids and proposals and there is no specific format that should be followed. In general, bids should always be presented in a standard business format with a cover letter on your company letterhead and a detailed cost breakdown for the project along with an itemization of services to be provided for those costs. If you do not have good typing skills, have your bid typed by someone who does. Proof it carefully, be sure you submit it on time, to the right person, and that you follow up.