

# Keep 'em Coming Back

High customer retention is an important component of a company with true longevity.

CUSTOMER SERVICE		Date
Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Good	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Average	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Poor	<input type="checkbox"/>	



For most interiorscapers, there's nothing like a great relationship with a client. Knowing what to expect and when to expect it while working with your regular accounts takes some of the stress out of day-to-day business. But that kind of relationship doesn't just happen overnight. Interiorscapers have to work hard to earn the trust of their clients and to prove to them that they won't get better service anywhere else.

Customer retention is something the interiorscape industry seems to have a good grasp on. According to 2006 *Interior Landscape Business* research, interiorscape companies had a customer retention rate of 90 percent in 2006, up a little more than 1 percent from 2005. The number of accounts served increased 30 percent to an average of 167 accounts per business, and 68 per-

cent of interiorscapers are expecting an average 23 percent increase in the number of accounts their businesses serve in 2007.

Based on the research, an average of only 4 percent of interiorscape companies' annual revenue is spent on marketing and advertising, so it seems that most companies' clients are in it for the long haul.

Joanne Young, president of Greenery Office Interiors in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has been in the interiorscape industry for more than 30 years. Still serving multiple accounts that have been with her since the beginning, as well as working with 16- and 10-year veteran employees, Young knows a thing or two about how to keep clients – and employees – coming back for more. Here she shares her expertise with *ILB*.

**ILB:What are the most important characteristics customers look for when choosing a company to work with?**

**JY:** People look for a professional company that can give them quality products and services. I have found that having strong references and a great-looking portfolio is an impressive way to show a potential client that you're good at what you do.

The company's employees are the most visual way of showing professionalism. Are they in uniform? Are the uniforms clean and pressed? Do they have identification? Are they well-groomed, polite, interesting and knowledgeable? Do they knock on doors instead of barge in, are they careful not to spill water and drop dirt on the floor? Do they have the tools to do the job or are they just walking around with a buck-

et? Do your vehicles look good? Are they clean? In all, are they acting like a walking advertisement?

Interiorscapers also should have affiliations with professional organizations. Whether it is PLANET, PAW, PIA, CIPA or another state association, this shows that the company is committed to being professional. Belonging to an organization encourages the company to attend conferences, have its employees certified and enter award and safety programs. When these things happen, not only does the company feel proud of its accomplishments, but it can share them with its clients.

**ILB: What are the top reasons customers change whom they do business with?**

**JY:** It's pretty common sense, but if people decide to no longer to business with you, it's because they're unhappy with the service or the quality of the product you gave them.

Some things that concern clients and should be avoided if possible is sending a different technician every week, sending technicians who appear sloppy or unprofessional and sending technicians who waste too much time trying to be "chummy" with clients. Another downfall is having poor communication skills, such as telling a client that a plant will be replaced and then it never happens.

If these types of things do happen, you can make it up to your clients by following through with what you promised. We promise excellent customer service and trained and knowledgeable employees. Also, sometimes a nice flowering plant will heal a simple wound. But if it is a major problem, do your best to correct whatever the problem is and make sure it doesn't happen again.

**ILB: How can interiorscapers make sure their clients come back to them?**

**JY:** Good communication with a client is very important. By communicating with them, you can ensure you're providing them with the standards of service and high-quality product they want and expect.

Greenery has a dedicated customer service representative. It is her job to visit or call our present clients. She assists with additional plants and when the client is moving to a new location. We also try to send out a few news bulletins throughout the year. I think monthly newsletters are great if you have the time and resources.

**ILB: What are some ways to win a client back if you loose them?**

**JY:** If you find a way to keep that client up-to-date with your latest awards and recognitions, they'll see that you can do quality work that outshines other companies.

A company can put all of its accomplishments on its Web site, which serves as a reminder of all the good things they are doing. I am finding that more and more potential clients are



checking out Web sites, so it is important to make this kind of information available. If a potential client checks out two different interiorscape company Web sites, they're more likely to choose the company that has won several awards for their work in the industry and participates in the community than one that doesn't.

**ILB: What is a realistic customer retention goal most companies should strive for?**

**JY:** I think the minimum should be two times the period of the lease they initially sign up for. But, ideally it would be forever!

Greenery's retention rate is close to 95 percent. I can't remember a job we have lost because of poor service. If we have lost a job in the last 10 years, it is because a client has had budget cuts. We manage to keep our clients by providing what we promise – great plants, great service and great people.

**ILB: What are some ways interiorscape companies can maintain and/or improve customer retention?**

**JY:** Maintaining or improving customer retention is all about customer service. A happy client really has no reason to look elsewhere. If you provide them with great service and great plants it should be relatively simple to keep them around.

Most companies in Calgary are not allowed to accept gifts, so we really have not spent money on promotional type items. But everyone loves plants, in particular, flowering plants. A simple 4" Kalanchoe or Gerbera daisy will bring a smile to any client's face. If we have some on hand and a replacement plant is going out anyway, we'll send it along as a gift. Including a lovely thank you card (always have cards on hand) is always a great idea. Also, Calgary is a very popular spot for golf tournaments and charitable events, and we always encourage our clients to ask us for door prizes. It is a very small thing to do but it is always well received.

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**ILB: Where does customer retention start? With the receptionist? Upon the first client meeting?**

**JY:** Customer retention starts with everyone in the business. All people associated with the account have an opinion about your company that will be heard. The more people within the account that like your services the better, because the stronger the relationship with the client, the longer the partnership will last.

**ILB: Are there any tools or training available to help improve customer retention?**

**JY:** We hold biweekly meetings to discuss how we can improve our company and we also use tips we find in industry magazines as guidelines and tools. However, we feel that communication within the company proves to be the most valuable tool. We utilize the talents of existing staff to pass on to the newer staff so we're all on the same page as to what our goals are.

I feel strongly that staff meetings play an important role in keeping a company in check. We use them for education and training, but it is very important to keep your employees on top of what is happening in the company and in the industry.

By sharing awards and events with your employees, not only do they feel proud to be affiliated with the company, but they can then share the information with your clients. It gives them a topic of conversation when they are on the job.

**ILB: Is there any correlation between employee turnover and customer retention?**

**JY:** Most definitely. An employee that enjoys his or her job will lead to great-looking plants, which leads to happy customers. We have become the employer of choice here in Calgary, and

our employees say that our education, training and support set us apart from our competitors.

**ILB: How can a business owner react to a client who is too demanding without losing the account?**



**JY:** These types of situations have to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and, depending on the demands, it is sometimes worth it to just walk away from the account. In most cases, proper communication and good customer service can prevent these situations. However, if a project is beyond our normal scope of service, and there is a concern that our high-quality work would be compromised, it's best to just say no. It's wise to only take on jobs we know we can do properly, and, of course, profit from! ☺

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