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MARKETING TREE MAINTENANCE CONTRACTS¹

by Ted Collins

My experience with commercial arborists on a local, state, and national level reveals that we are generally unaware of three critical factors in marketing tree maintenance contracts. These factors are: 1) knowing your market area, 2) knowing the right message and image, 3) getting the message and image to the consumer effectively and economically.

Knowing your market area. This means understanding the geographics and economics of the town, county, or state you service. At Ted Collins Tree and Landscape we concentrate on four or five towns in the eastern suburbs of Rochester, New York. These are the towns with the largest homes and lawns and the most trees. We purposely located our business there. Eighty percent of our volume is realized from customers within 10 miles of our headquarters. We intentionally ignore the other fourteen towns. More on that later.

A detailed map of our county shows some 33 bridges crossing the Genesee River which runs North and South through Rochester. To venture westward from our eastern suburb base, crossing these bridges at peak times to attempt to serve the less affluent residing there would be financial suicide. An exception, of course, is the occasional

profitable contract where the distant customer will pay our rates plus travel time.

Knowing the right message and image. A recent survey by the Ohio State Chapter of I.S.A. asked respondents why they chose arboriculture or related fields as their profession. The overwhelming response was "love of trees and the outdoors." Why then, don't we demonstrate that love? Why do we demonstrate our noisy equipment? Why do we feature our spray rigs, chain saws, and chippers in our advertising? I believe the reason is that we have fallen into the trap of demonstrating to "each other," not to the consumer. The buyer does not want to see a cow butchered in order to enjoy a good steak. Venison is a superior, delectable gourmet treat, but the idea of chasing, shooting, and dragging a deer out of the woods and parading it through the streets on top of a car is not marketing it correctly.

I believe the correct marketing approach concerns beauty, shade, flowers, fruit, shelter, and privacy. Any other function such as soil erosion, enframing of a pleasant scene, or tree recognition should also be featured in your promotion. Age of a tree is an example. Guardian Tree Service has photographs of two large trees on the back of their envelopes with these clever words

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Milwaukee in August of 1985.

under them, "Two of our Oldest Patients." Don Blair's T-shirts with trees and red hearts and the slogan "Trees and People Need Each Other" are dynamite promotion. No chain saws, no spray rigs—just love—"love of trees and the outdoors!"

Equally as important as tree function is tree value. The best kept secret in horticulture is "The Guide for Establishing Values of Trees and Other Plants." This Guide, used with care and enthusiasm, will measure their value, and will make you look professional better than any single document I know of. The Council of Tree and Landscape appraisers will soon release a companion piece titled "Manual for Plant Appraisers" that may prove to be the best one-two punch since Joe Louis. Be sure that you own both.

And finally, get your message and image across by being up-beat and enthusiastic at all times. Use happy, smiling people in your photos, slides, and ads. We use cartoons showing happy smiling trees. One cartoon is an exception. It shows an unhappy tree being choked by a girdling root.

Getting the message and image to the consumer effectively and economically. The key word here is *Consumer*. Try hard to remember that you are not dealing with other arborists. You need *Public Relations*, not arborist relations. One definition of public relations is "Doing Good and Getting Credit for It." Most of us do good and work hard in the pursuit of tree health and protection, but sadly we don't get credit for it. Why not? Because we either don't know how or don't have time. The solution is really simple—hire someone else to do it. I hire a public relations man and we have breakfast or dinner together at least twice a

week. Why not? I meet with my cantankerous mechanic at least five times a week. My public relations man sees that I get credit for my love of trees and the other good things I do. It's great for my ego!

As stated earlier, we know our market area and we "rifle" our advertising in those targeted affluent communities. We do not "shotgun" it over the whole area in daily newspapers covering nineteen towns and more. We prefer weekly newspapers published for the few towns we service. We discipline ourselves with such far-reaching things as the Yellow Pages. We do participate in such apple-pie and motherhood things as Arbor Day, but only close to home. We give Garden Club talks, donate to charities, and contribute to auctions, but rarely if the recipient is over 10-15 miles away.

We don't use a newsletter approach yet. But when we do, we will copy Larry Hall's. Denne Goldstein, Al Shigo, and I were judges last year in the Freeman Parr Memorial Award for the best newsletter. Some firm with the unlikely, unwieldy name of "Archibald Enoch Price. The Care of Trees, Inc." by Larry Hall scored very high in that contest. The reason it did, I believe, is that it promoted his love of trees and the outdoors; it did so enthusiastically, happily, and educationally.

And that, my friends, is how to market tree maintenance contracts.

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Abstract

CRIFE, ROBERT E. 1985. **Lightning protection for trees.** *Arbor Age* 5(1): 12-14, 16, 18, 20.

For years it has been common practice to protect historic trees from damage or utter destruction by nature's most awesome foe—lightning. Trees are struck because they are better conductors of electricity than the air. Arborists and tree expert firms, rather than lightning protection installation companies, have been responsible for installing most of the systems in old, historic landmark trees. The degree of harm to an unprotected tree depends on several factors. These include the voltage, amperage, and duration of the lightning flash—along with the tree's age, health, and vulnerability to injury. Other factors are the ability of the tree species to recover, plus the subsequent treatment provided by the arborist.