

# MARKETING THE ARBORIST'S EXPERTISE: A CLASSROOM PROJECT

by M. A. L. Smith

**Abstract.** A three-phase classroom project designed to highlight the exceptional marketing needs of the tree care industry is described. This project is an integral part of the Arboriculture course at the University of Illinois, and has helped students entering the profession to anticipate and prepare for the inherent challenges of a service-oriented horticultural industry.

**Résumé.** Un projet d'étude en trois phases désigné à démontrer les besoins exceptionnels de marketing de l'industrie arboricole est décrit. Ce projet est une partie intégrante du cours d'arboriculture de l'Université de l'Illinois et a aidé les étudiants s'orientant vers l'arboriculture à anticiper et à se préparer aux défis inhérents d'une entreprise horticole.

University, junior college, and internship programs provide excellent practical and scientific training for students entering the field of arboriculture. However, it is not enough for a professional arborist to only *acquire* the requisite skills and technical knowledge; he must also know how to *market* his expertise to potential clients (1,4). A substantial component of every arborist's job demands marketing. Communicating and promoting the value of arboriculture and urban forestry are essential to his survival (8). Key marketing objectives include: identifying a clientele, tailoring arboricultural services, creating a professional image, developing promotional campaigns, and crafting advertisements which appeal to the arboricultural market.

Because arboriculture is not always regarded with the same esteem as other professions, the public sometimes fails to acknowledge an arborist's authority as an expert (2, 6). Consequently, when a client demands maintenance service that is inconsistent with sound horticultural practices (3), misinterprets job specifications, or disagrees with a diagnosis, an arborist is confronted with unique marketing and communication challenges. In these instances, an arborist must develop the ability to calmly and professionally resolve customer conflicts, without compromising standards. Each of these foregoing marketing concerns are addressed in a 3-phase classroom project entitled "Marketing the arborist's exper-

tise", offered with the Arboriculture course in the University of Illinois Horticulture Department. The project encompasses a total of 12 in-class hours, including scheduled time for student oral presentations.

## Phase 1 - The Marketing Plan

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**Market analysis.** Small group teams (3-4 students) are given responsibility for choosing a target market, and planning a small arborist's business to serve that clientele. Pertinent information about the targeted community (demographics, mean income levels, expected competition) is collected by consulting a local chamber of commerce, small business administration, telephone directory, and area realtors. Students have the option of choosing a target market in the local area, which allows them to visit and survey the community to assess the potential demand for arbor-related services. Information about municipal arboriculture programs is also obtained, to help estimate community emphasis on tree planting and maintenance. Market research of this type is essential preparation in actual practice for any entrepreneur planning to initiate a new business enterprise (4, 7), and the resources mentioned are particularly relevant to the arboriculture industry.

**Market strategy.** Based on information accumulated during the market analysis, student groups design a marketing strategy to reflect the needs of the targeted customers. Decisions about services and products to be offered, business location, pricing structure, and company name, logo, image, and philosophy (4) are included in the planned program. For example, if the business intends to serve mostly clients in older, established communities, an emphasis on major tree work may be planned. If communities with substantial new housing developments are targeted during a market analysis, the business may opt to specialize in new landscape planting services.

Communities with active municipal tree care programs (5) are expected to have clients who are potentially more aware of and receptive to services of a commercial arborist. Students attempt to fill any observed voids in landscape plant service left by current area competition (7), and outline a proposed approach for recruiting new clients.

When phase one is completed, each student group presents a synopsis of the market analysis results to the remainder of the class, and justifies the resultant marketing strategy they have developed. This oral report simulates a formal presentation to potential investors in the enterprise. Subsequent verbal critiques from peers engaged in the same project help to direct plans for the remainder of the exercise.

### **Phase II - Practicing Customer Relations**

Although the standard techniques of the skilled arborist (pruning method, planting season, spray formulations) are based on scientific principles, they are sometimes incompatible with customer demands (2, 3). Dogmatic refusal of service or an over-emphasis on consumer education can alienate a client, but on the other hand, concession to incorrect practices can result in a loss of professional reputation. In the second phase of the project, student groups anticipate and analyze inevitable client-professional conflicts in the service-oriented arboriculture industry. Group members predict typical conflict situations, list alternative methods for resolving them, and describe the expected result in each case. Students then stage a demonstration of one of these problem-solving ideas for the class.

Guest lectures throughout the semester by both commercial and municipal arborists reinforce the importance of customer relations skills in the profession, with relevant anecdotes about typical conflict incidents encountered on the job. In recent classes, student demonstrations have featured: an irate "client" who disliked the results of a contracted pruning job; an arbor crew unable to collect on an outstanding bill; and a tree owner who was convinced that a blow torch is a faster solution to Fireblight than chemical sprays or resistant cultivars. Conflicting viewpoints might be resolved through minor professional concessions,

or countered with logical, effective arguments that convince clients to accept sound professional advice.

### **Phase III—Promotion and Advertisement of Arboriculture**

Advertisements and promotions reflecting the group market plan defined in phase I (including the selected company name and logo) are produced as the final project assignment. Students design a yellow pages advertisement and two other advertisements (radio text, direct mail flyer, or other), with emphasis on neat, professional graphics and logical ideas for attracting the targeted market. One promotional presentation, which may entail a lecture to a local club, donation and installation of new trees for a park, or an Arbor Day demonstration for area schools, is also prepared. The latter assignment represents an opportunity to demonstrate professional expertise and generate favorable publicity, without direct monetary cost to the arborist's business (4, 6). Consumer education materials (direct mail flyers, facts sheets, or demonstrations) are usually included as a proposed way to circumvent some of the problems anticipated in phase II.

Student accomplishments in phase III of this project have been recognized and rewarded by the Illinois Arborist's Association; memberships in both the IAA and ISA have been presented to individuals submitting outstanding advertisements and promotional ideas.

### **Conclusions**

Marketing must be mastered not only by the private arborist (to garner and retain clients) but also by public level arborists and urban foresters (to win approval for proposed budgets, present effective lectures, or gain support for new programs). The project described improves student proficiency in these crucial skills, while focusing special attention on the unique marketing demands of the tree service industry.

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## CUSTOMER RELATIONS IN UTILITY RIGHT-OF-WAY MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Duke Power Company serves nearly one and one half million customers in the Piedmont area of the Carolinas. Duke's service area covers approximately 20,000 square miles and is served through more than 60,000 miles of distribution line. The Distribution Right-of-Way Maintenance operation requires the full-time services of approximately 200 contract tree crews from six different contractors. This represents a tremendous number of dollars, but on the positive side, it represents an unbelievable opportunity in the area of customer contacts. Duke Power recognizes this opportunity and intends to take advantage of the situation in order to maximize good customer relations and service.

**Résumé.** La compagnie Duke Power dessert près de un million et demi de clients dans la région Piedmont des Carolines. La région de service de cette compagnie couvre approximativement 20,000 milles carrés et est servie par plus de 60,000 milles de lignes de distribution. Le Service d'entretien des lignes de distribution nécessite les services à temps plein de près 200 équipes contractuelles rattachées à six différents contracteurs. Ceci représente une quantité importante de dollars, mais d'un autre côté, cela représente une opportunité incroyable pour établir des contacts avec les clients. La compagnie Duke Power reconnaît cette opportunité et cherche à tirer avantage de cette situation de manière à maximiser les bonnes relations publiques et le bon travail professionnel.

The electric utility industry was unlike almost every other type of business for many years, in that, instead of charging more for their product as the years went by, they charged less. These rate decreases continued until the early 1970s. When fuel and inflation rates skyrocketed, utilities began experiencing the need for rate increases rather than decreases. Needless to say, this change was not welcomed by customers, and unfortunately the utilities found themselves helpless in reversing the trend of increasing costs.

Duke Power over the years has prided itself in accomplishing tasks both efficiently and with the highest level of integrity. Duke is the only investor-owned utility which designs and builds its own generating plants. The results of this policy have been very favorable. Duke Power has the reputation of building plants of the highest quality for the most economical prices. The quality and efficiency can best be exhibited by noting some of the

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