

## Providing service above self

### Houston Landscapes Unlimited

Dean Carpenter, president and CEO  
**LOCATION** Sugar Land, Texas **ESTABLISHED** 1983 **EMPLOYEES** 130 **2010 REVENUES** \$10 million range **CUSTOMERS** 95% commercial; 5% residential **SERVICES** landscape design, installation, maintenance, irrigation, insect disease control

You're dining out at a restaurant and have an exceptional experience. The waiter is efficient and friendly. The food is delivered and you get exactly what the menu promised. The atmosphere is warm, the prices are right. And to top it off, the server completes your meal by giving you a free dessert. "That is the type of service we deliver to clients, except for rather than food that makes their tummies happy, we deliver beautification: flowers, color, detail," says Dean Carpenter, president and CEO, Houston Landscapes Unlimited, Sugar Land, Texas.

As for the free dessert? That's the personal touch that Carpenter provides in the form of a personal visit to each client's property. And that's also what drives customer retention at Houston Landscapes.

"We have a lot of layers of people in the organization who oversee the work we do," Carpenter says, noting how supervisors, account managers, foremen and the operations manager are responsible for quality control and a stringent inspection involving a checklist ensures that each property meets Houston Landscapes Unlimited standards.

"When clients see me come out to the job, or I got into their office to say hello, they are like, 'I can't believe you are here.'" Carpenter says. Customers just aren't used to the personal touch the company provides. "In this world we live in with email and Twitter and everything else, customers want the human element. They want to know that someone really cares about them."

That's why Carpenter applies his

Rotary Club motto to his landscaping business: Service Above Self. "The way I operate my business is to show my customers that we are going beyond the call of duty for them, and everything else falls into place," he says.

Exceeding expectations means understanding what clients really want. And getting that look, hearing the tone of someone's voice – these non-verbal and attitude cues can tell an entirely different story than feedback in an email or conversation by phone.

Carpenter shares how one client visit resulted in a complete color change-out. "I said to the property manager, 'Don't those flowers look great?'" he says. "And she said, 'Yeah, if you like yellow. I don't like that color, and no one asked me.'"

Carpenter asked her what color she preferred, and she wanted hot pink. "I said, 'OK, we'll have those replaced,'" he says. "The next day, we went out and replaced them and when I called back to ask her how she liked her flowers, she said, 'You are great.'"

This type of customer service goes a long way toward securing long-term contracts – especially when clients are in price shopping mode. Most of Carpenter's contracts are annual, and they renew at different times throughout the 12-month season. (Landscaping is always "in season" in Houston, Carpenter notes.)



Carpenter

### QUICK TIPS

**Be seen.** Get out of the office. Show clients that you personally care how their landscapes look. "Showing customers that you care about them by being seen out there on your projects is important," Carpenter says.

**Know who's boss.** Carpenter says every one of his customers is his "boss" because it's his job to fulfill their expectations.

**Fix it fast.** When you make a mistake, rush to provide a solution. "Worry about the dollars and cents later," Carpenter says. "Don't get caught up in, 'Who is going to pay for this?' Just make it right."

Because Carpenter stays close to his clients, he knows if they are under budgetary stress. And a lot of commercial clients these days are. "We look back at our records to see from a labor and expense standpoint how much we spent on the account," Carpenter says on finding a way to meet clients' financial expectations. Sometimes, he can afford to give a client a discount. In the meantime, however, he and his team focus on educating clients about the value of continuing their investment in landscaping.

Houston Landscapes Unlimited has built its reputation on caring about customers, and that, Carpenter says, is what makes the difference come renewal time. Retention rate is 80-90 percent. "Word is getting out that we take care of our clients better than our competitors, so it is getting easier for us to retain clients," he says. **L&L**

The author is a frequent contributor to *Lawn & Landscape*.



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