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Questions Contractors Should Be Prepared to Answer

by Pieter van Westervelt
Premium Aquascapes

Here are the top 10 important questions that I feel a qualified contractor should be able to answer client’s before taking the client’s hard earned money. There are dozens of articles written about questions consumers are told to ask – so read this and know the answer before they ask you!

1 – Are you licensed to work in this state?

As professional business owners it is our responsibility to not only abide by state laws, but to also know local laws governing contractors and the projects we are proposing. Some states have stiff penalties for violating laws governing contractors and the specifics of a contract. Ignorance is not an acceptable reason to violate these laws.

2 – How much experience do you have?

This unfortunately is where many a contractor falls short. If the project is larger than what you have experience building or has unique requirements beyond your skills, will you call someone in with more experience or will you ‘wing it’ and hope it all works out? It’s best at this point to reach out to your distributor or manufacturer to get the help of a seasoned pro if the project is larger or more complicated than what you are used to doing. You will then not only gain experience working side by side with an experienced professional, you will also ensure that the client gets the beautiful and properly functioning feature they deserve. Remember attending a few ‘How To Build’ days does not equal experience. Not only should you know how to install the products that you are using, you should also have knowledge in: aquatic plants, a basic understanding of fish health, fish care, and various filtration methods to serve your clients.

3 – Are you a certified contractor?

Most major manufacturers have a certification program for their products as well as certification from industry associations. You should be well trained in the products and techniques that you are using.

4 – Can you provide us a list of references and projects that we could visit?

Let’s face it. Most potential clients don’t call references and just feel too uncomfortable to be walking onto someone’s property. Use this as a great opportunity to take your potential client on a personal mini tour. You will gain much from the invested time of doing this. Arrange for them to visit three to five sites that are comparable to the project you are proposing for them and two or three sites that are on a bit larger scale than their project. When arranging the tour have a few of your existing clients available to speak to the potential client about how it was to work with you, how they felt about the install process as well as your follow up support. At this time let the potential client know that upon completion of their project you will be asking them to allow you the same privilege of bringing potential clients to visit.

5 – Do you provide any warranty on your work?

This is the time to back your workmanship up and show the confidence you have in your skills and the products you
use! Provide the client with a written workmanship warranty as well as copies of the manufacturer’s warranty, explain the process if warranty issues arise on products installed and what additional costs are involved. Fully explain what is and what is not covered under your workmanship warranty. Remember your workmanship and product warranty speaks volumes about how good your work is and the products you use are.

6 – Do you have a pond or water feature at your home?

Having a feature at your home or work location whether it’s a pond or ‘Pondless’ water feature gives you invaluable insight into the day-to-day care needed and enjoyment of having such a feature. You can’t sell a lifestyle if you’re not living it yourself.

7 – Maintenance and Upkeep—what is involved in my feature?

I cringe whenever I hear a contractor tell a potential client that there is NO maintenance. Let’s be honest here. Even the best built features have some maintenance involved. Be upfront with the client about what’s involved in properly maintaining the feature you are installing so that they get years of enjoyment out of it.

8 – Do you offer seasonal maintenance? … and what does it include?

A professional contractor will not only offer a full range of services to the client, but also see this as an opportunity to stay in touch with the client and form a lasting relationship. This is where knowledge in aquatic plant care, various filtration methods, products and fish health care comes to the forefront. The client will rightfully expect you to keep their feature looking perfect and in proper working order. If and when a problem arises, deal with it quickly and to the client’s satisfaction. You will create a ‘raving fan’ and they will sing the praises of working with you to potential clients.

9 – Does your company offer any educational seminars? (Plants, fish, etc.)

Seminars are beneficial to all. They not only provide help to your clients who have chosen to take care of their own feature after the installation but to also promote your company to the general public as well. Use either an existing client’s feature or your own feature as the location for your seminars. If you are partnered up with a retail location, hold the seminar at that location. Make sure in either case you have products that you are using on hand to sell to the attendees. If you are offering a ‘How To Build Day’ try teaming up with a nonprofit location that would benefit from having a feature installed.

10 – Where can I purchase supplies? (Fish food, bacteria, fertilizer tabs, etc.)

Reality is that not every contractor can have or wants a retail location where they can sell products. HOWEVER, it’s good customer service to ensure that the client gets what they need. This is a great opportunity to partner with an existing retail location or to find a reliable Internet source that your customers can go to for the products they need to maintain their feature.

There are many Water Feature Installers out there – some are good, some are “not so good.” By meeting these top 10 criteria, you are helping ensure your client has a great water feature experience.

About the Author

Pieter van Westervelt is President of Premium Aquascapes. Pieter has been installing water features for clients for 23 years and is a Certified Aquascape Contractor as well as a member of the NJ Landscape Contractors Association. Pieter is passionate about helping clients having a great water feature experience. Pieter can be reached at www.premiumaquascapes.com for more information about his services.
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Starting a Business in a Down Economy

by Carl Petite
Columbia Water Gardens

When we started toying with the idea of opening Columbia Water Gardens, we had no idea where we were headed, much less how to open a business. If it weren’t for minor miracles, I wouldn’t be writing this article. No. I have a fantastic support team with my friends, family, and colleagues that keeps me encouraged when we have a slow day. I heard one time that it’s always best that when someone gives you something that you should pay it forward. So in that regard, I’ll try to offer some words of encouragement to those that are out there that will hopefully transform their dreams into reality.

We are by no means a giant in this hobby. In fact, we are a small family owned and operated business struggling to live the dream. We have a small store, are growing, and constantly expand our inventory. Is business ownership rewarding? You bet. Are there moments where I want to throw in the towel?

Here are my 7 keys to our success.

1. Have a foundation. I know it sounds simple, but this foundation needs to be dug deep if you’re going to weather the storms our economy sends our way. Our foundation is our website. It always was our intention to open a retail store, but we were scared of the very real possibility of failure. In our business plan, it is the website that covers the fixed operating expenses of running a storefront. We refused to open the store until we established an average net earnings that would cover all of our expenses. In sales, you are only as good as your last 90 days.

   What that means is you total your earnings over 90 days and divide that by three telling you what your real monthly sales figures are. With that number you have a real basis for improvement. So what we did is figure our expenses of running a store, and averaged that against the profits from the Internet. When we attained that goal, we set off to open a store.

2. Have a plan. I’m sure you’ve all heard “Plan your work and work your plan,” but to put that into action takes everything to the next level. It really takes vision and dedication. It is our plan to grow to a larger location and to be a “destination location,” but Rome wasn’t built in a day. Those that have built these locations have worked very hard to get there, and it’s entirely possible that to them, it’s not a destination, but a point on their individual roadmap of their success. Revisit your plan often and revise it slightly and with careful thought.
3. Relationships. One of the things that we are very proud of is the relationship we have with our customers and vendors. Success in business comes from having solid relationships. Relationships build our customer base, they extend terms when your business outgrows your receivables, and they protect you from enemy attack. I can’t stress how important our relationships are to us, and how careful we are to defend them.

4. Grow slowly. When we opened our doors it was a culture shock. We opened on literally a shoestring budget, second hand shelving, very limited supplies, and no established customer base. It takes time to grow a business, and therefore it takes time to grow an inventory. Take your time. Most customers understand that their needs are unique and are willing to wait a day or two to get the right items for their application. Let your suppliers stock your shelves at a distance. Carry the must have’s like food, medication, water clarity items, pumps, smaller filters, lights and accents, etc.

5. Solve your customer’s problems. When a customer comes into the store, they almost always have some sort of an issue. It’s not just your job to find out what that problem is, but to solve it. That’s right, solve the problem. It is your job to know the biology behind algae, the physics behind water movement, and the mechanics of stellar filtration. Knowing these will close more sales exponentially, and get you referrals.

6. Advertise outside of the box. Get involved with your community. This does mean joining a chamber of commerce, advertising on the kid’s soccer banners, sponsoring holiday events, and saying yes when a charity asks for help. We all know that social media like Facebook and MySpace will give you honorable mention when you venture towards the extraordinary. We recently attended a trade show for reptiles, birds, dogs, cats, saltwater fish, and yes, ponds. We brought over $100,000 in retail goods from top-of-the-line manufacturers and literally closed our retail store during the event. This was done from loans from our vendors getting involved, and completely wiping out our store’s inventory. Our plan? Shock and awe. Our results? Over $6,000 in retail sales over 16 hours. Not bad given that we are still seeing dividends a month later as I write this article.

7. Be a “Good Guy.” “Good Guys” don’t erode the retail market. They are real salespeople that know how to hold profit and know that there is more to the sale than price. In the road to a sale, price opposes value. The more we talk about price, the less we discuss value and value equals profit. Basically, don’t follow the fork in the road that leads to lower profits.
We are honored and privileged to be welcomed to this industry, and hope to see more of the Internet drop shippers follow our path. Consider where our hobby would be if fewer people gave up on their ponds out of frustration because of the lack of local support.

Are Internet drop shippers legitimate businesses? Definitely. They work very hard countless hours, and definitely support their customers. Are they missing the best part? Without a doubt, in my humble opinion. 

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About the Author

Carl Petite, Columbia Water Gardens is family owned and operated by the Petite family - Carl, Michelle, Zack and Ian. Our retail store is located in San Jacinto, Ca., and we have over 14 warehouses that we distribute from nationwide. Carl brings over 20 years of professional management experience in retail sales, and is a hands on hobbyist with his koi pond of over 12,000 gallons with a strong knowledge and expertise in water chemistry and clarity. We have a full service website that is constantly updated with new product and competitive prices.

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Retro-fitting of Old Ponds:
Not Glamorous, But Profitable.

by Dave A Jones
The Pond Professional

Let’s focus on one particular area that I have seen many using lately (including myself) to maintain profitability and keeping busy while others are dropping like flies: the maybe not so glamorous job of retro-fitting older ponds.

The one inevitable fact of life is change. Adapting to changing economic and business trends is a must for survival in the free enterprise system of America. How many “specialty” stores do you see go out of business every year? There is a reason the Wal-Marts and other diverse big box stores are thriving while “specialty” stores are collapsing in ever increasing numbers in our current economic climate.

“Retro-fitting, refurbishing, resurrecting from the dead,” these are all terms that I have used to lock in a lead to get a bid in. And it works. There are an amazing number of existing ponds that are in dire need of work. Ponds done by DIY’rs are a huge target market. We’ve done $16,000 worth of retro’s on two ponds in the last month. One was a complete re-do, down to bare dirt and back up again with new equipment. The second was a retro fit with 21st century equipment. The end result is that our company has made the customers of both features ecstatic.

The one fantastic plus in these scenarios: I didn’t have to sell them on the “pond” aspect of the project or lifestyle. They already love their pond. They already wanted to keep their pond lifestyle. All I had to do was show them how; with equipment and design alterations I can enhance their pleasure and pond experience. Talk about a slam-dunk! And another huge plus? Most of the time there is an existing landscape theme to work around. Granted, you need to take some extra precautions during construction, but when done, the project has a “been there forever look” that a lot of new installations don’t have.

Have you looked at some of those old ponds? Old PVC liners cracked into shreds, pumps using enough power to cause a three block brown-out with undersized piping, non-existent or under-sized filters, tree roots grown over the side of a liner that would make an Indian blanket look small. These and many more scenarios don’t need to be a travesty; they’re a prime opportunity to turn lemons into lemonade and a stalled market into a boom for your business.
Energy savings and ease of maintenance are the two biggest sellers. Let’s face it, some pond equipment, or the lack thereof, has made a lot of ponds a nightmare to maintain, and people STILL love their ponds. With a wide open industry to browse from, the discriminating contractor can lay his hands on equipment that can literally make any aspect of the pond hobby a breeze compared to the equipment, or lack thereof, that was available a decade ago.

DAVE’S PHILOSOPHY AND INSIGHT:
A well-designed water feature not only has to look good, it has to function smoothly and efficiently. Keeping maintenance to a bare minimum is a prerequisite of top-notch design and equipment and is a plus to customers that can only be truly appreciated if you’ve had experience with other jury-rigged designs and systems.

Energy savings has to be the number one, most frequently used sales tool that I use in selling a retro-fit job. How many of you have given any thought to the amount of power and dollars that old submersible or pool pump is sucking out of your customer’s pocketbook every month? Well, more and more of your potential customers are thinking exactly that. Be their knight in shining armor and learn the math on power consumption and see how easy it is to sell a $12-$1500 pump retro-fit in a heartbeat. And the scary thing is… They’ll save that amount of electricity in just a year or two. Talk about a no-brainer. They can’t sign the contract fast enough.

By the way, why aren’t you all doing the same thing with NEW installs? I am. Be “Resource Smart” and land more jobs. You want an un-beatable edge? Show the customer how YOUR system will save them several hundred dollars per year on their power bill over your competitions’. Another Slam Dunk!!!
The old pump in the pond setup, many times with the “milk crate” filter firmly wrapped around it like an octopus that is literally impossible to get at to clean or service, is probably one of the most common setups I see with clients that have contacted me for an upgrade. Whoever thought that combo up obviously never tried to clean one. The sigh of relief from customers after this abomination is removed from their pond and replaced with either a skimmer and/or bottom drain setup has to be heard to be appreciated.

Now don’t get me wrong. Many DIY’rs go with the equipment recommended to them by the local “Pond” shop. And since they have no baseline of knowledge on the product, their purchases are usually based on a small budget as well. How many “Pond” shop personnel actually go in the field and actually have experience with the equipment? Try… next to none. So the same junk continues to get sold to the trusting consumers time after time and year after year. If these retailers ever got educated about truly good equipment and how to show and justify to the consumer its worth, they would be up-selling literally every customer.

Fortunately for us contractors, from a profit stand point, it would appear that it remains up to us, the in-the-field experts, to break this cycle and get truly good and user friendly equipment into the hands of the abused consumers. Those who tend to constantly forget: We are a disposable/discretionary income industry. If we don’t prove our worth every day on every job, WE are disposable as well. Carve that on a stone and plant it on a Himalayan mountain top and DON’T forget it.

I’ve got to say, I am somewhat disturbed by not bringing many new consumers into the pond hobby and experience. That truly is the future of our industry. I do, however, know that if we don’t keep the consumers the industry currently does have, we are dead as an industry. Our business model initially was to build NEW ponds and offer service and maintenance services after the sale. That worked great 10 to 12 years ago. The pond industry has been slowly but surely evolving over the last 7 to 8 years. Those that saw it coming evolved with it; those that didn’t have fallen by the wayside.

As a brief related side note:
The International Professional Pond Contractors Association (IPPCA) was formed 6 1/2 years ago with the initial core principle of having a group of pre-screened and qualified Pond professionals available to consumers to find in their local market area off the easy to use IPPCA.com website data base. See www.IPPCA.com. This is still the Association’s core web presence. The fact that the initial entity has by default evolved into the Pond and Waterscape Industry’s Trade Association with a Mission Statement of: “To Promote, Protect and Advance the Pond and Waterscape Industry” was a natural fit.

That evolution has not prevented the IPPCA from maintaining and growing its membership base while supplying more and more consumers with high quality contractors to do their pond work. Contractor members have the additional advantage of getting solid leads and many mainstream professional grade products at discounted prices. Active Corporate members have seen a boost in contractor loyalty. The IPPCA also hosts a once a year educational event to Pond Industry Professionals, called INFO TANZA™, see www.INFO TANZA.com where four days of industry wide information and hands on training is available to those who attend.
In closing, the truly great thing about knowing your trade and the multitude of equipment available out there, leaves you a revenue stream to tap into that remains profitable and is literally untapped. With literally all advertising entities out there begging for your money, why not try a different angle and take advantage of the often overlooked retro-fit market? It may not be glamorous, but it beats the heck out of saying “Hi, my name is Dave, welcome to Home Depot, how may I help you today.”

About the Author

Dave Jones has been a pond contractor for over 40 years and is ranked in the top 100 installers in the nation with multiple manufacturers. Dave is currently the only Certified Professional Pond Contractor (CPPC) and Internationally Certified Master Pond Contractor (CMPC) in the State of Georgia. He is also one of the founders and is a member of the International Professional Pond Contractors Association (IPPCA - www.ippca.com).

Dave is rapidly becoming known as one of the Pond Industry’s premier water feature designers, installers and consultants, having received many national and international awards for his work.

Dave frequently is a guest speaker at educational seminars to fellow professionals in the industry and hobbyist groups. His articles have been published in dozens of pond, water garden and fish magazines.

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Here are the top four winning Waterlilies:

- **Wanvisa** – Best New Hardy Waterlily and Best New Waterlily 2010
  Nopchai Chansilpa, Thailand

- **Bimini Twist** – Best New Tropical and 2nd Best New Waterlily 2010
  Florida Aquatics, United States

- **Maeploi** – Best New Nightblooming Waterlily 2010
  Sompon Janjungerm, Thailand

- **Siam Pink** – Best New Inter Subgeneric Waterlily
  Pairat Songpanich, Thailand

The contest was held at Sarah P. Duke Gardens at Duke University under the care of Horticulturist Tamara Kilbane. Tamara and her staff grew out all of the contest entries and Tamara took the contest photos that were used for the online judging.

The Judging Panel consisted of 11 selected individuals that have years of experience with the genus *Nymphaea*.

**Kit Knotts** - Water Gardeners International
**Jim Purcell** - Oregon Aquatics
**Kelly Billing** - Maryland Aquatic Nurseries
**Richard Sacher** - American Aquatic Nurseries
**Barbara Davies** – Flora Bella
**Farley See** – Moore Water Gardens
**Deb Spencer** – Water’s Edge Gardens
**Tim Jennings** – Longwood Gardens
**Stu Schuck** – Charleston Aquatic Nurseries
**John Loggins** – Lone Star Aquatic Nursery
**Dr. Huang Ghozen** – Chinese Waterlily World

Tamara Kilbane took all lily photos. Noriyuki Kato took the photo of Nopchai accepting his award from the IWGS President Jim Purcell.

Anyone that is interested in entering the 2011 IWGS New Waterlily Contest can contact Mike Swize, mike@nelsonwatergardens.com for more information.
Wanvisa – Best New Hardy Waterlily and Best New Waterlily 2010
Nopchai Chansilpa, Thailand

Bimini Twist – Best New Tropical and 2nd Best New Waterlily 2010
Florida Aquatics, Unites States

Maeploi – Best New Nightblooming Waterlily 2010
Sompon Janjungerm, Thailand

Siam Pink – Best New Inter Subgeneric Waterlily
Pairat Songpanich, Thailand
So you discover you have some scaleless koi in your inventory. Selling them will be easier if you can point out some of the common features they share, when compared to other koi. First let’s define this variety as separate words Doitsu and Sanke.

**Doitsu** refers to the scalation, or in this case lack of. *Doitsu* means scaleless or in some cases, scaleless body, but rows of oversized scales on the top and side of the koi.

They are not as common, but you will find that most koi varieties are available as *doitsu*. It is not exclusive to Sanke.

One advantage of *doitsu* is the sharpness, *kiwa*, of the pattern.

**Sanke** is pronounced sawn-kay. It is a white koi with red patches like a Kohaku and black spots on the upper half of the body. Black stripes occasionally are seen on the pectoral fins or tail. Sanke generally do not have black on the face.

Another more formal name for Sanke that you will often hear is Taisho Sanke. They are also part of the classification - Gosanke. Gosanke includes the varieties Kohaku, Sanke and Showa.

Doitsu Sanke are very striking with their smooth scaleless skin. The red and black markings will jump out at you. You are looking for lacquer-like black, bright white skin and balanced red patches.

Quickly here is one negative and one positive point of each of these koi.

1. N. - Black on the face  
   P. - Good body conformation
2. N. - Too much red on the face  
   P. - Nice white tail break
3. N. - black markings speckled and look more like a Showa (bands of black)  
   P. - Interesting red pattern - like a lightening bolt

Sanke and Showa can often look very similar, so if in doubt ask the dealer or breeder you are buying the koi from.

Thank you to Shawn McHenry, Mystic Koi and Water Gardens, Upland, California for providing these pictures. www.mystickoi.com
Even in the most challenging economic conditions, some businesses continue to maintain—even increase—their sales volume. How? By employing smart strategies that attract customers, build loyalty, and take advantage of new opportunities. Here are some tips that can help your business beat the odds and boost revenues.

Go Where the Business Is

If your traditional product or service lines aren’t doing well, it may be time to adapt or even abandon them. Look at what customers are buying and adapt to fit the new realities. Consider the following questions:

- What products or services can be made more attractive—by repackaging, enhancing, or even simplifying?
- How can you provide real savings or greater value?

Keep in mind that virtually any business can find opportunities to help customers save money. For example, a heating and cooling contractor can consider offering insulation services, solar panel installation, or energy-efficient appliances that drive down a customer’s monthly energy costs.

Ramp Up Your Service

When other businesses are cutting back, it’s an opportunity to increase customer service. There’s no better way to win their loyalty and encourage them to recommend your business to friends, family and others.

Master the basics and exceed customer expectations. Return phone calls as quickly as possible. Confirm appointments and show up on time. If a customer has an issue, respond with an answer or solution as promised. Keep a log of all your appointments or calls to help you stay on track.

Contact existing and prospective customers. Offer them value-added services and special “perks” while discussing their needs. Your conversations will almost certainly yield new chances to help them meet their current challenges.

Use Information to Build Trust

Reduce the “information gap” that stands between you and your customers. Share information with your customers freely; it can help build a stronger bond with them that can lead to higher sales. Here are a few examples:

- **Educate**: Make it easy for customers to learn about your products or services, so that they can make an informed choice. Follow the example of the electronics store that trains sales staff to be product “experts” with the skills to help customers choose the right product and train them on its use.
- **Share and Compare**: Are the advantages of your product or service easily quantified? Consider following the example of a major insurance company that allows customers to easily compare its rates with those of its competitors.

Make Your Customers Feel Welcome

Review your sales process. Does it make your customers feel that you value their business? Here are some factors to consider in improving your customer’s sales experience:

- **Simplify**: Examine your purchasing process. If your purchasing process is complex, consider streamlining it to make it faster and easier.
- **Align**: Ensure that your company’s interests are aligned with those of its customers. For example, if your commission-based pricing leads customers to think that you are driving up their costs, change to a simple fee-for-services method.

Follow the Stimulus Money

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) invests in projects that help modernize our nation’s infrastructure, enhance energy independence, expand educational opportunities, preserve and improve affordable health care, and protect those in greatest need. For businesses, that means a wealth of opportunities to secure contracts, loans, and grants. Additional information is available at www.recovery.gov.

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Question

I was told that during the winter, you do NOT want your air line to go all the way to the bottom of your pond, for it may super cool the water. Half way was what I was told. True?

Mike

Answer

Hi,

There is a lot of misinformation on this aspect of aeration in a pond during the winter. Most of this information has been created by what people think should be done. Then it self-perpetuates because ”it makes sense” to the unknowing. The idea gets incorporated into the mainstream literature without giving it a second thought. This concept may be true in very large ponds but not in backyard water gardens and Koi ponds.

I have carried out some experiments of where I placed the aeration point in a pond. The pond water temperature was the same at the bottom of the pond no matter where I place the aeration point as long it was in the center of the pond. This occurs for a very simple reason: water that is aerated from mid-column (half way down into the water) creates a plume of water welling up from that point. This water goes to the top and then circulates to the sides of the pond and then to the BOTTOM. In our relatively small bodies of water any circulation ends up circulating the whole pond unless you have dead zones (inlets, coves and the like will create these). I WANT the whole pond circulated – I do not want any dead zones.

As for "super cooling" the water: the water gets very cold no matter what. In my experiments the water will get to 32.1°F on the bottom of a 5.5’ pond in a typical aerated Midwestern Koi pond in the middle of winter without ANY loss of fish. I have lost fish when I have failed to add aeration on a timely basis. In this instance I did not get my aeration going until after a layer of ice had developed. I learned 20 some years ago to have aeration going as soon as the water starts to cool. For that matter, I now have aeration going year round. This is in addition to my waterfall/stream pumps. I need to say that these waterfall/stream pumps are shut down when heavy freezing occurs. I do this because it is way to risky. I do not want the stream to ice dam and overflow the sides. This can occur after a power outage where everything freezes or a chunk of ice breaks free in the stream and creates the ice dam.

I did say that I want to make sure that aeration is going as soon as the water starts to cool. If you start heavy aeration after the ice is already formed then you can possibly super cool a pond. The temperature can go from a relatively balmy 39°F to 32°F in a few minutes. This is pure conjecture on my part because I do not want to do this and jeopardize my fish or any of my clients’ fish.

I like to think of our ponds in a couple of different ways. First, a 3’ deep un-aerated pond that has a foot of ice on top of it – what do you think the temperature is of the water on the bottom? Remember the ice is only 2’ away from the bottom. You bet it is so close the temperature of the ice (32°F) that you could not tell the difference. Remember this is without any aeration. I have seen 2’ deep 1000 gal. aerated ponds that have 18” of ice except where the aeration is and the calico shubunkin goldfish survive it in great shape. I would not want Koi in this situation only because there isn’t any space for them to swim.

Second, Midwestern streams in winter have heavy ice on them except where there is fast flowing water and the water is then exposed to the air. The entire stream water temperature is the same throughout the water column. All of our fish survive these conditions very well, even Carp. We all know where Koi were developed. Even though Koi are a distant relative of Carp I maintain that they are as hardy.

Please refer to the article that I wrote for POND Trade Magazine for more specifics – Overwintering Koi Under Thick Ice September/October 2009. (http://bit.ly/co7sRY)

I am working on some more info about overwintering fish under heavy icing conditions. Please stay tuned.

All in all – place that aeration point on the bottom of your pond, in the center.

Jamie Beyer
Midwest Waterscapes
Boone, IA
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Recently I moved. I moved out of a big, new house. My 'new' house is a bit different. Smaller, more conservative, and everything needs updating and fixing. It is a big change from where I was, but, I like it. We are ripping out carpet, installing hardwood floors, updating lighting & plumbing fixtures, and generally rolling up our sleeves to make this new house our home.

Change. Just like death and taxes it is an inevitable part of life. As a country, everyone has faced change in the last few years. More and more people are scaling back and rolling up their sleeves. They are driving their cars a bit longer before trading them in, taking fewer trips to the mall, choosing tents over hotels for family vacations, cooking family dinners instead of eating at fancy restaurants, and generally keeping a tighter hold on their wallets than they did in the previous decade. Indeed, most average American households have faced the current economy by changing their life style and how they spend their money.

The landscape industry has been hard hit by this change. While we try to sell maintenance, homeowners are pulling out their lawnmowers. While we try to sell landscape design, they are making trips to the nursery. While we are trying to sell patios, they are going to the local stone center to take a DIY class to install their own. This all means WE have to change, too.

This is the time of year when it is best to start planning for the new year ahead. Developing a marketing plan should be a large part of that. Your marketing and sales techniques may also need a change. A fresh approach to how you promote your business, the services you offer, and a new understanding of your customers will help.

Put yourself in their shoes. Think about what their needs are and how their lives have changed. Here is some food for thought in preparing your new marketing plan:

1. DISCOUNT SHOP – More and more people are hitting up the discount stores like Wal-Mart to save money where they can and to get greater value for their money. When it comes to choosing a contractor to complete a project, it is no surprise that homeowners are shopping the same way that they shop for food and household items. Coupons and money mailers are worth investigating. People are paying more attention to when they show up in their mailboxes. More importantly, once you are in front of them and have the opportunity to sell them on your services, it is a good idea to add value to what you do. Free or upgraded plants, materials, or future services are often a good way to help close a deal. Remember though that the first impression matters. Make whatever marketing you produce professional and informative, both print and online.

2. GO SMALLER – It is part of human nature, and how we are socialized, to go bigger. That is why we can super-size our sodas & fries. It seems logical to concentrate on selling the products and services that will yield the biggest return in the shortest amount of time. On the other hand, we have seen the rise of the ‘Value Menu’ and the Dollar Menu. Sure it is less food (which is really a good thing), but it makes getting something we want, that we may not normally be able to afford, attainable. Now is the time to focus on smaller, entry level projects. You can develop your own ‘Dollar Menu’ that includes entry level or basic design, installation, or services with all carte options.

3. EAT AT HOME – When you have a family, eating out can add up very quickly. For my family of five I can count on spending at least $25 dollars even for fast food. If you are selling the outdoor kitchen spaces, you can also sell the idea of eating OUT side. Grilling is often a fast and easy way to cook a tasty dinner that is often much healthier than eating out. To add value to those sales, you can throw in an outdoor party complete with burgers & hot dogs or just a gift card to a local grocery store for free groceries. You can even do a cost comparison: The average cost for a family of 4 to eat out is $x.xx and the average cost of a similar dinner is $x.xx. Think of how much you are saving!

4. FAMILY TIME – More and more, people are staying home and spending more time together. Netflix has become a consumer favorite because it is too expensive to go out. Playing games at home has once again become a great past-time for families. Designing areas that encourage entertaining at home or family time is also a great selling point. Many people are including outdoor telecommunications & movie screens to their living spaces. Think of packages that include a game area – seating and table space perfectly sized for board and card games. The important thing here is to get to know your customers, their interests, and understand how they will get the most use of their new outdoors.

5. VACATION TIME – Everyone needs a vacation, it’s just that not everyone can afford a vacation any more. For the couple or family that enjoys the beach, include a beach area in their water feature or in their landscape. If they enjoy sports, think of an area that has volleyball, bocce ball, or a putting green. If they like to camp, a great area for a tent and firepit may be in order. For those who enjoy world travel, more exotic areas may want to be explored. Want to add some value? For the beach, sand buckets with sunscreen, nice towels, and a beach umbrella are a nice touch. For camping, a campfire kit complete with hot dog sticks and s’more supplies are fun. Again, the important thing to keep in mind is taking the time to listen to your customers and find out what interests they have and how they will enjoy the great outdoors.

6. DO IT YOURSELF – There is a reason why so many people are opting for this course of action. Simply put, it is cheaper. But we all know how valuable our time is, too. If you have a professional edge and approach to your design (artistic renderings that go beyond a computer program), then you may
be able to implement that into your services. Giving people the option to use your services and install their landscape themselves is a great way to increase your service offerings and still gain new clients. Like a menu of options, you can offer certain services along the way such as assistance in choosing plant materials or stone and grading. The more options they have, the more likely they are to use you. Additionally, if you price your installation services reasonably and you have clearly defined the benefits of working with you, they may find it is well worth it to have a professional see the project through.

7. OUT WITH THE OLD – Many homeowners have opted for updating or renovating their current homes as opposed to buying a new home. The housing market is a large part of the reason why, as is the fact that it is a more economically beneficial option. It is easy to spot the homeowner is working with what they have: they are constantly on the way to a Home Depot or Lowes, their dumpster is always full, and they look exhausted. Without a doubt, it is a hard job to fix up a home but it does add long term value. Being able to sell those updates to an outdoor area or landscape is also important. Recently while house hunting, and driving through more neighborhoods than I care to count, I was struck by how many homes I didn’t even want to go in because they lacked curb appeal. Additionally, I was left wondering how many homeowners were content with the boring landscape package the builder gave them that left them looking like every other cookie-cutter home on the block. Being able to show the benefits and differences between a well landscaped yard and a non-descript yard or unlandscaped yard, is important in increasing your own value. Also, once homeowners have increased their curb appeal, it will make selling the home much easier once the market turns around.

8. ADDING ON SPACE – One thing many homeowners wish for is added functional space. Covered patios & screenedin porches with fireplaces and televisions are gaining popularity. For those who want to tackle an addition on their home or an extra living space, the process of designing, planning, and construction can be daunting. Then there is the extra hassle of obtaining permits and dealing with building supplies and deliveries. A great service to consider is Project Management. For example, when finishing an addition to my home I knew there were areas I wanted to tackle on my own to save money and that there were some areas where I would be over my head or I lacked experience and knowledge for the outcome I wanted. After a long search, I found someone who was willing to oversee the project, allow me to work on what I wanted to on my schedule, and brought in other professionals (or did the work himself) to finish the job. In the end, I estimate my savings at around $20,000. The other thing to consider is being able to design functional living space and storage space. An outdoor shed doesn’t have to look like a shed and can even have a small studio or office in front so that it looks like an extension of the home. Tying these elements together into a functional landscape design is important, too.

9. TRENDY – Often when a homeowner is ready to update or remodel they realize it is because their home is looking dated. When they begin their search for their new look, they browse through magazines and books and search online for current design trends. I’m often amazed at how little landscape designers discount interior design trends. It is important to be able to tie in the inside with the outside, and vice versa. Unless
you are in a condo or townhouse with no property to maintain, landscape is an extension of the home. For example, sitting at a window in a particular room, you can extend the color scheme to the view taking that palate to the plantings outside. Additionally, if you are creating a patio or deck space, it can be valuable to offer furniture & accessory options (pots & planters included for seasonal color). Having a designer that you work with is helpful, but today there are many options in outdoor materials that can be used to create a living space that is current, comfortable, and consistent with the landscape you have designed.

10. PHASES – Recently while house hunting we had a real estate agent who continually went over the budget that was set. She did not last long. These days most people don’t have $30,000 or more to spend on their landscaping. Make sure you understand their budget going into the project and don’t exceed it. If their grand plans for their outdoors is more than their budget allows, instead of pushing to make that money right away, be honest with them and propose the work be done in stages and set up a realistic timeline. People don’t like pushy. They really don’t like being pushed to spend more money than they have. You can assume that it is a project they can easily afford because of the size of the home or the cars in the driveway (and I hear professionals say that ALL the time) and it is, I’m sorry to say, just plain stupid to assume that. Unless you have access to their bank accounts and credit card debt (one of which may be zero and the other astronomical, and most likely not in the way you think it is), you can’t assume what anyone can afford. Your best bet is to take the approach that you are working for this person, working within their parameters, and building a working relationship that will be beneficial to you in the long run. Pushing a project may just push you out the door and cost you a job that could have been beneficial to you in the long run both financially and in terms of referrals.

In planning for the next year, if there is one word that you should keep in mind when planning your marketing and sales techniques: it is VALUE. Whether it is your knowledge, your skills, or your services, showing your value to your customers and how you can add value to their own lives or homes is very important – it is what the average American is focused on in this economy. This may require changing how you’ve done business in the past, what services you offer, or how you approach sales, but as long as you take a hard look at your business and make changes that are in-line with what makes sense for you and the direction you would like to go, then you may find (as it often is) change is a very good thing.

About the Author

Pam Greiner founded The Green Pen five years ago as the result of a passion for gardening and the environment. Focused on providing online, and off, marketing solutions, our active client list includes several contractors, retailers, and distributors across the country. Our advice is regularly sought by many other contractors and businesses in the Green Industry, as well as other industries. Our services have included developing a variety of marketing materials for our clients including brochures, newsletters, as well as logo design, branding initiatives, and Web design & development. Additionally, we help our clients develop cost-effective marketing and e-marketing plans.

Pam can be reached at pam@thegreenpen.com or 215-313-0183
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To celebrate their 40th anniversary EasyPro Pond Products/Stoney Creek Fisheries (Grant, MI) hosted a multi-day open house event July 22 – 24, 2010. Nearly 600 customers attended the event from states and provinces across North America, including Alberta, California, South Carolina, Connecticut, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Iowa and all the Great Lakes states to name a few.

Attendees were busy with daily seminars and trade show exhibits from some of the best in the industry. Seminar highlights included “Marketing and Advertising Strategies” by Nanette Winowieki of The Pond Place (Milford, MI), “Building Beautiful Water Features: Tips from a Pro!” presented by Eric Triplett of The Pond Digger (Yucaipa, CA), and “Techniques for Sizing and Seaming Pond Liners” by Bill Johnson of Firestone Specialty Products (Indianapolis, IN). Johnson reported, “This was one of the best seminars that I have the opportunity to lead. The questions and participation of the attendees were fantastic.”

Along with the daily seminars the EasyPro trade show exhibition also included other industry leading manufacturers including Aqua Ultraviolet, Bio Safe Systems, Firestone Specialty Products, Kasco Marine, Matala, Microbe-Lift, Pondmaster, and others.

The EasyPro lighting display area along with new “rainwater containment” and “Fire and Water” systems were a big hit.

Another notable event was the Thursday night pig roast that even a few rain showers could not dampen. The festivities ended Saturday evening with a surprise party for the retiring company founders, Steve and LeAnn Ouwinga.

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