

LEARNING TO SAY NO

DAVID T BINKS



While it's important to keep customers happy, says **David T Binks**, you also have to find a healthy work-life balance – and that means not pandering to their every whim

A couple of years ago, I carried out a site survey in typically inclement British weather – trudging around in the pouring rain with a level in one hand and a tape measure in the other – to ensure that the client I was hoping to work for received an in-depth and thorough quotation. Once complete, the client was informed that I was done surveying their garden, to which they bluntly replied: “So when will I get your quote?”. A tad beleaguered, I told them that it would take seven to 10 days, as it was a detailed build on a sloping site; given the customer's response, I worried for a moment that I'd inadvertently asked to sleep with his wife. With a look of disbelief, he replied: “If you can't start next week, we'll use the contractor who looked at the job this morning.” We politely parted company.

Once I'd dried out in the car on the way back to the office, I started to question that old adage, ‘the customer's always right’. The problem that we now face is the Amazon culture – not the athletic female warrior tribe, but the modern

reality dictating that, at the touch of a button, people can get their hands on pretty much anything they want within 24 hours. This mindset has now permeated every facet of modern life, and landscaping is no exception. Couple this with customers who increasingly know the cost of everything and the value of nothing, and you have the perfect conditions for the contract from hell.

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As an industry we need to start re-educating clients so they realise that, while value for money is one thing, using an established, reputable company means they are getting added value on their project. They are employing the services of an expert in their field, with an in-depth knowledge of landscaping and construction.

I'm not saying we should go about our business in a belligerent manner, but part of undertaking a large external works project is about managing a client's expectations. A project is now as much about the client's experience during the build as it is about the end product. This all goes back to the ‘added value’ notion. When employing the services of a BALI- or APL-registered landscaper, a

customer will be paying a bit more than if they were using the services of a man and van – but they get so much more bang for their buck. They get a company that has been vetted by an external organisation to ensure that it is capable of carrying out work to extremely high standards, that there are quality management procedures in place, and that the company's management systems and structures are sustainable.

Customers have the reassurance that you will deliver a project in a timely fashion and not just disappear when the going gets tough, that your staff will be polite and courteous, that the site will be left clean and tidy at the end of each day, and that you will attend regular site meetings to discuss progress. So, how do we redress the balance and stop being so beholden to our clients, without disrupting the status quo?

We need to learn to say no sometimes – it's not a swear-word. Being a ‘yes’ person gets you so far, but generally involves keeping everybody happy except for yourself. Stop answering calls late into the evening and stop replying to emails at 11pm – this sort of thing reinforces an unhealthy client-contractor relationship and sets a precedent for the entirety of your project. In that sort of a relationship, all it takes is for you not to respond to one late-night email, and the client thinks you've lost interest. As a contractor, you need to set the parameters and the rules of engagement in a bid to ‘de-Amazon’ the way you operate. These small changes will pay dividends across the board, and go a long way towards creating a healthier work-life balance.

ABOUT DAVID T BINKS

David T Binks is managing director of Cheshire-based Landstruction, which was set up in 2010 and now has 30 employees. It has won Gold medals at RHS Chelsea and RHS Tatton Park. David also launched the Big Hedge Co., which supplies and installs mature hedging and topiary nationwide.
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