

When the Customer Isn't Always Right by Mark Chisholm

In the world of tree care, you are always getting curve balls thrown at you. One particularly difficult scenario is an adamant client that wants something improper done. How you choose to handle this situation can either make you or break you.

If you are in charge of a tree crew, you know that time is money, and balancing efficiency with customer service is challenging. You need to manage the crew, get the ball rolling and still find time to provide "face time" for the client. When you arrive at a location with a specific work order in your hand, and the home owner expresses a desire for work that conflicts with your order, you may have to take a position that might cause conflict. And the ticking clock keeps piling on more stress!

Determining What Your Client Really Wants

The most common request that I hear is when a client wants too large of a live section of a tree removed or they want a healthy tree reduced (topped). This usually involves a tree or part of a tree extending over a house, pool or other structure. To deal with this problem I first start by evaluating why they want this to be performed. Are they unaware of what it will do to their tree's health? Do they feel threatened by the tree or section? Or do they believe that they should try to get more for their money and cutting more of their tree is a better value?

Educate on Tree Health

The first situation is the easiest in my opinion. If your approach is one of genuine desire to enlighten your client, they are usually receptive and the result is beneficial to all involved. What I find is many people just don't know that a large lead being removed or reducing a tree can cause future problems, not to mention future costs. Once they are made aware of this, they make the obvious choice; and you become the trusted source of knowledge and gain credibility as a byproduct.

Take Safety Concerns Seriously

Dealing with a client who feels threatened by their tree takes more careful footing. If you see no real threats, go down the list of the most common risks with them and check them off as you go. This will help them to understand what would be clinically considered a risk and convey to them that you are addressing their concerns with proper amount of effort. Sometimes a compromise between what they want and what you feel is best for the tree is a good solution. Lightening the end weight of a

long limb and or cabling could be an alternative that leaves the tree in a better form and the client more confident.

Maintain Your Integrity

The client that believes that they are being charged "by the pound" is typically the most difficult. If you approach them with the same steps as the above, they may believe that you are conning them to help you reduce your work load. I, for one, believe that you need to be creative and charming in this case. Try your best to diffuse the situation with proven facts and genuine care for their best interests. If that doesn't do the job, you might need to be prepared to walk away or do what they ask and compromise your integrity. I would prefer to run rather than walk away in this case.

As a crew leader, your job requires you to balance efficiency and productivity with customer service and quality tree care. To do this right takes a patient and knowledgeable leader that is willing to do what's in the best interests of the client and their trees. Stick to your beliefs and you should come to the right conclusions. Just remember that your actions are remembered by the client, the crew, and *especially* the tree.



Mark Chisholm is a two-time International Tree Climbing Champion and is certified by the state of New Jersey and the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). As a third generation arborist, Chisholm conducts educational seminars nationwide on behalf of STIHL Inc.

Learn more about Mark at treebuzz.com

"If you dismiss their concern with a smirk and condescending attitude, you no longer command their true attention or trust. Instead, ask a few more key questions to help you to dig to the root of their concern."