



By Daniel E. Beardslee, LS

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A Recurring Conversation

I keep having this conversation. It's like a recurring nightmare, and it goes something like this: "Dan, in my area, surveying is very, very price competitive. It's a Wal-Mart world out there and if I want to stay in business, I have to be price conscious." And I reply, "Well, if all you're going to offer is what every other surveyor is offering, you're right. But if you want to get away from price competition, you have to offer something more." "But Dan, what do I have to offer? There are some very competent surveyors here and my work is no better than theirs, really. They have GPS, and robotic equipment and they do all that stuff that I do."

Without a trace of irony, my conversation counterparts will almost certainly opine that they are the "highest priced" surveyors in the valley.

Let me make a couple of observations to set the table.

"Here" is everywhere. I have been all over the country in the last 20 years or so discussing this topic, and I get the same thing wherever I go. So don't think for minute that things are more price-competitive where you work compared to anywhere else. Most folks just assume that surveyors who simply don't price compete work in isolated markets. Not the case. Think about it. If such a fantasy market existed, wouldn't it be penetrated very quickly by those who prefer to price compete? Of course it would. Your market is just like the one where I work, and where every other surveyor works.

You can offer more than a quality survey. As a matter of fact, the quality of your survey is probably, for the most part, a non-factor. Clients, with a few exceptions, simply don't know the difference



between a good survey and a bad survey. How would they? Look at it from their perspective and you'll agree. Not that you shouldn't do an excellent job of surveying—you should, but from the clients' point of view, it's irrelevant—if your error ellipse is teeny-tiny you made an excellent boundary analysis. It simply doesn't matter to them. Your license is evidence enough, to most clients, that your work is suitable for their needs. They assume, rightly so, that your work is properly done. The point is that your perception of "quality work" is likely to be much different than that of your clients, or more importantly, client prospects.

Build a Relationship

So then, what can you offer if you're not going to offer a competitive price? How about an excellent relationship? Studies have consistently shown that consumers of professional services (services in general, for that matter) are more interested in a quality relationship as compared to a competitive price. In fact a number of these studies conclusively demonstrated

that a good number of prospects find a higher price more attractive, assuming that quality (from their perspective, not yours) is associated with price. You are, after all, selling something that the purchaser really doesn't want, but finds necessary to purchase. Harry Beckwith, the excellent commentator on marketing professional services calls this "Selling the Invisible."

I've tried explaining the concept of building relationships and deflecting the price issue in rhetorical terms with little impact, so allow me to try by example.

Let take the example of a prospect that calls and asks, "How much will it cost to subdivide my property into three parcels?" Now most of us have some experience and can probably give them a fair idea of cost right away. Don't take the bait. What you should do is first engage them in conversation and usually you will find some common ground to discuss something other than your project. Get them into your office if you can, so you can engage them one on one. In my office, being a

continued on page 54

beardslee *continued from page 52*

pretty dedicated fisherman, I have a lot of fishing paraphernalia and even mounted trophies. Many times that forms the basis for a conversation that is the start of building a relationship with the prospect right away. In your case, find whatever common ground you might have to deflect the conversation away from their immediate surveying needs and discuss something that is of interest to both of you. The idea is to get them to “like you” (like in *Catch-22*?) and relax your conversational environment. It helps to have a pleasant office, and present yourself in a professional manner.

Ascertain Needs

Next, discuss their needs and find out what range of services might best suit their needs. Let them know that your interest is in finding out what would result in their best “bang for the buck.” If you can, meet them on site to discuss their needs. There is something about being on the ground that helps solidify that relationship. You should still not be discussing price.

After you have explained the complex process of creating the subdivision, convinced them of your expertise, determined what range of services best suits their needs, and gained some sense that they are comfortable with you, you can then discuss the price issue. By this time, they should be quite aware that you are not interested in “bidding” the project, but are really interested in serving their needs. Perhaps they will still call others who *do* price compete and ask for prices, and you might lose on that basis. But in that case, if you have done your relationship-building properly, you might not want that type of client anyway. It’s been my experience that the really good clients respond very positively to this kind of personal attention, and you’ll land the job without any further discussion of how your price relates to any other.

Once you land the project, then it’s absolutely imperative that you perform. You have to do what you say you will do (including when you said you would), and you must keep building that relationship through trust and performance. Do so and your reputation as one who offers excellent service (read: excellent relationships) will grow and, we know that referrals are everything in our business.

It doesn’t matter where your practice—these are tools you can use in every market. *A*