

BY JUDY GUIDO / GUEST COLUMNIST

The company that understands market research
develops a competitive advantage.



Relief is spelled r-e-s-e-a-r-c-h

To run a successful landscape or lawn service company, you must know what your customers want. This knowledge drives your business; it's the base upon which you grow and build.

The company that understands market research develops a competitive advantage, especially in the Green Industry where so little market research is conducted. There are two types of market research: primary, original research that currently doesn't exist, and secondary, existing research that may or may not be accessible to the public.

Any company with a desire to know more about customers' needs and wants should perform market research. Different methodologies include surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews for examples. Each offers valuable information when properly used.

Before beginning the process, however, consider working with someone who has experience in gathering customer/market data. While the process is not rocket science, it does require someone with experience in properly designing, collecting and interpreting it. Understanding what the data is saying — so that it can be used strategically — is critical to the process.

There are many sources available for secondary research that has already been collected and is available to you:

Government patents — This data discloses potential technological information.

Competitors' annual reports — If the company is publicly traded, the SEC requires that they post their annual report. Annual reports will usually divulge research and development, technological and strategic plans.

Competitors' employment ads — These

may suggest a geographic, technological or marketing direction.

Professional associations — Keep informed of the many resources available from groups such as ALCA, ANLA, PLCAA and HRI (Horticultural Research Institute). Also check your local and state associations.

Government agencies — Under the 1966 Freedom of Information Act, federal agencies must provide requested documents to tax paying citizens. Did you know a listing of all landscape contractors in your state is available by calling your State Department of Economic Development?

Newspaper and magazine reports — A number of Green Industry business magazines regularly highlight trends and identify the industry players.

Remember that market research focuses on understanding customers. It's therefore essential that marketing research be:

- ▶ systematic, planned, well organized and with a definable goal,
- ▶ objective and free of bias, and
- ▶ useful and decision-based.

Too many people are confused about research, and too few take full advantage of the marketing information it can provide. Decide what problem you'd like to solve, or which opportunity you'd like to accept, and hire someone to help and finish your research. The sooner you complete your project, the sooner you can improve your competitive advantage and gain a more lucrative share of your market.

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Your research action plan

- ▶ Formulate the problem or the opportunity you'd like to seize
- ▶ Determine information needs and sources
- ▶ Select the research technique and the research professional
- ▶ Design the sample
- ▶ Process and analyze the data