

AVOIDING THE NURSERY-CUSTOMER WAR

or more aptly
**KEEPING THE BATTLES DOWN TO ONLY CUSTOMERS YOU
 REALLY DON'T WANT TO DEAL WITH ANYWAY**

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*You must have all heard the following complaints from your customer 30% of
 your root systems are not acceptable. All my trees are turning brown.*

Half of my transplants are "J" rooted coming out of the bag.

*Your trees broke bud before they went into the ground. They heated up
 in your van.*

Your wimpy plugs won't stand up after planting.

*Those transplants you sent have roots so long we have to jam them in the
 ground.*

*I ordered 100 M trees, how come I only received 89.6 M? Our
 plugs are bare-roots by the time we plant them.*

*I ordered my trees to be grown at 30 per square foot. How come the
 nursery sows them at 50?*

and last but not least

My trees are all dead; I want my money back.

These are all very bad comments, but the worst kind of response is silence. Your customers have their trees grown somewhere else, and all you know is that they didn't order any seedlings from you for the last 2 years or that their orders have been very small lately.

The normal response to the above arrows shot at you by the customer is to ignore them. You know what all your problems are. THERE ARE ONE THOUSAND WAYS TO KILL A TREE, BUT YOU ONLY HAVE TO DO IT ONCE. You may tell these archers that you know what the problem is and that you will do better next time.

A more exciting response to these archers is to throw spears at them. You may be able to kill a tree, but you also know one thousand ways that the customer can do it too:

Tearing the seedlings out of their wrapping.

Storing and transporting the seedlings in the elements.

Packing bags too tight.

Death stomping the seedlings after planting.

Ripping off excess roots.

"J" rooting.

Planting in rotten wood.

Planting in wet spots.

Planting too deep.

Planting too shallow.

I recently was at a nurserymen's meeting that included a field trip. At one of the stops, the area forester paused at an 8-month-old plantation that did not look too good. His trees, which should be Douglas-fir, looked like yellow fir or red fir. Twenty nurserymen, more aptly called "Defenders of the Faith", poured out of the bus and proceeded to find the causes.

Here is one planted too deep.

I found one planted too shallow.

See that scar on the side of that tree, that's from the deadly Death Stomp.

I still wonder what that forester was thinking as he watched us conclude within 50 feet of the road on that steep, rocky, west slope that it was all his fault.

Here we are, locked in deadly combat with our customers, and we probably don't even know it. Can it be avoided? I think it can, but it really hurts. To avoid conflict, someone at your nursery will have to suffer severe withdrawal pains. For 2 to 5 days a month, someone will have to give up the one thing he really needs:

His desk.

His job.

His crew.

You may feel that the above items need you, but I think that sometimes we need them even more. You should do this withdrawal during a time when you feel you really cannot. The best time for this withdrawal will probably be during your lifting or sowing season. Impossible! No way! I have heard these words from myself, but it can be done with some surprising results.

First, schedule well in advance the days that you will be gone. Think of your withdrawal days as a vacation. We all know how well we work just before vacation. We

become more efficient, and that work that has been piling up either isn't needed any more and is thrown in the garbage or you get it done.

Second, find the number two person on your crew and put him in charge for the days you will be gone. There is a real danger here. It is the danger we fear the most. While you are gone your crew will set production records, and when you get back they will be so tired they will only work for you at three-quarter speed.

Now that we have scheduled our withdrawal, what do we do? We go out to the planting site and stand by proudly as they plant your super trees. The first thing you will notice is that your trees don't look as big in the brush as they did on the packing line. You will mumble to yourself that those borderline trees that were packed to reach your quota really shouldn't be here. Those big luscious root systems are not much good when they cannot be planted properly. This is quite humbling, but it is necessary.

Talk over with the local forester the problems you both have and discuss solutions. Now you have a feel for the forester's problems, and you can let the forester know some of the nursery's. Discuss planting techniques that you feel need correcting. You will get better with this as you visit more sites. Each forester and crew has strong points and weak areas. They are usually not the same. Pass on information you have gathered from your previous visits.

The main thing is to show an interest. Look at the trees as they are planted and again a month or two later. Your return visit to the planting site will probably be a first for the forester. If the trees are in poor shape now, it will be the result of poor planting, storage, or growing and not the standard reason of drought. The forester is more likely to remember a recent frost now than in a year's time. Between the two of you the problem may be identified and hopefully corrected the following year.

Now I would like to answer those complaints I told you about earlier. Someone from the nursery went to the planting sites within a week of the call or on a regularly scheduled visit.

Thirty percent of the root systems were not acceptable on one lot out of five. It was also a small lot that was associated with poor seed.

Some of the trees were brown and were the result of a van freezing at the nursery. Also I discovered a root system problem in the field that related to poor quality control at the nursery.

Some of the trees did break bud, but not from poor storage. The lot number with the problem was lifted late.

The root systems were too long and needed better pruning.

We try to explain that falldown in the nursery is similar to field survival.

Some of the plugs were bare-root, but after they were growing for a year the survival was good. We did find that the inspector was paying the contractor for planting trees they were throwing away. Also the crew was stealing and reselling 1000-3000 trees a day.

The trees did die because of a grass killer that works well with bare-root but kills plug seedlings.

Finally, we get to "Those Wimpy Plugs". This forester doesn't like me or my trees, and I don't like him very much either. Maybe someone else could grow him a better tree, anyway.