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Landscaping Commercial Spaces

Executing a project for a home and for a municipal courtyard are drastically different. Here are some tips for expanding into the commercial realm.

by Katherine Hand

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Although the process of designing and executing projects is similar in residential and commercial markets, there are important business and technical differences you should know before making the transition to commercial work.

Client Interaction

The relationship you have with the client is the biggest difference, says Paul Comstock, a landscape architect with Comstock Studio, which is a part of Calabasas, Calif.-based ValleyCrest DesignGroup. "With residential [customers] you walk meticulously hand-in-hand through a learning, growing, design process. It often consumes a lot of time," he says. "Whereas the primary focus in commercial landscaping may be on budget or on a project delivered on a timeline."

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As retired director of landscape design for Walt Disney Imagineering, Comstock has worked on a variety of commercial projects. "You're often dealing with many layers of management, accounting and legal rolled in with many types of people," he says. "You have to communicate to the layers that occur in corporate businesses."

In working on a project where multiple departments are involved, it's important to keep meticulous records of the project and the changes made along the way. Be flexible in your revisions for the sake of time and money, but hold to the standards your customers have come to expect from your company.

"I don't cut any corners," says Linda Lillie, owner of Sprigs and Twigs Landscapes in Gales Ferry, Conn. Although her business has expanded to commercial properties in the past few years, she is often outbid when commercial clients seek price over quality. "I am [often] going to be beat out by someone who puts in cheaper plants or won't amend the soil," she says.



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Sheer Size

"When we started out, we had a small truck and were doing everything by hand," says Lillie of her 10-year-old business. Now, she has the equipment to do everything by machine. This is important not only because larger areas use more resources and take longer to landscape, she says, but because the larger the building, the larger the plants need to be to scale. "You want to try to soften the angles of the building," she says. In order to do that efficiently, you need to have larger-scale equipment and manpower.


Maintenance and the Traffic Factor

Keep in mind the traffic volume the landscape will receive upon completion and the type of long-term maintenance it will require. Comstock says the primary advantage of a design-build philosophy is the ability to "marry all aspects of the design: the project estimation, cost in terms of construction and the long-term maintenance." Being upfront with the client will guarantee happiness that can be maintained over a long period of time as well as help avoid unpleasant surprises, he says.

Lillie suggests thinking ahead. "People tend to walk through the beds, so I try to provide heavy duty plants that can take being brushed up against," she says. She also suggests building simple stepping-stone or cement walkways to guide pedestrians away from fragile plants.

Parking lots are another commercial curve ball. "They usually get sanded and salted and the salt gets scraped and piled on the plants," Lillie says, noting that you need plants resistant to heavy snow and the salt that seeps into the soil.

In areas with either pedestrian or car traffic, keep in mind the final width and height of the plants you put in. "I make sure that the plants don't grow above 2-1/2 feet tall," Lillie says, "because if they do, they have to be constantly pruned so that people can see over them. They need to be low maintenance."



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Networking Strategies

For now, Lillie is growing the commercial aspect of her small business mostly through word of mouth. Comstock, who is now part of a large company, says the next step is learning to network.

Get to know people from architectural firms, government agencies, hospitals, universities and developers, all of which generate commercial work, Comstock says. In addition, pay attention to open calls for entries where you can not only submit your own proposals, but view those of others as well.

Comstock's final advice is to introduce yourself to your larger competitor. He suggests approaching them with examples of your work, and saying you'd like them to think of you if they need to hire a consultant to help execute a job. When large companies have full schedules, but don't want to alienate a client, they may call on you—putting you in an ideal networking situation.

"It shows your face to a larger company that you can use while you're growing your practice on your own," Comstock says. "If you're efficient, creative and knowledgeable, you'll learn what it takes to do large-scale commercial design."