The RFP Process: Don’t Settle for the Status Quo

Peter Bodenheimer

Do you find yourself spending hours upon hours replying to landscaper requests for quotes and pricing from their customers? I have a feeling you might and that you’ve probably come to the point of accepting that it’s just a part of the job. However, I suspect you also sometimes find yourself frustrated because the tedious efforts you’ve invested go unrewarded when far too often you’re not winning those jobs.

On average, we see that growers reply to thousands of requests for pricing (RFP) a year. In the busiest seasons, that might mean 400 to 500 RFP replies a month. And if you’re a nursery that commercial landscapers contact for plant material, and are bidding competitively, you’re probably only winning 15% to 30% of the price requests. That’s enough to discourage even the most industrious folks in our business.

Let’s spend some time digging deeper into the current process, but also look at why this kind of inefficiency doesn’t have to be part of your business.

A look at the all-too-familiar, traditional RFP process

Here’s how most of us operate now: buyers or landscapers send over an RFP to the nursery. This may come in the form of a list, diagram or schedule, and it may be sent via fax, email or in some more sophisticated cases, Microsoft Excel. Alternatively, some landscapers prefer to call the nursery directly to talk through each item over the phone. In most cases, landscapers start by reaching out to someone who’s already in their network and aren’t shopping around for new growers.

So what are the issues with what most have come to accept as the industry standard?

1. The first problem is that, as a grower, you often don’t know if it’s a bid or a real job that the landscaper already has a contract in hand for. Frequently, it’s only a bid, not a job won, and the landscaper is trying to determine the cost to bid. That means a lot of time gets invested in opportunities that may never actually come to fruition.

2. This leads us to the huge challenge of consistency. Growers have to field different types of requests via different types of media (Excel, emails, PDFs, etc.). Storing the quotes is extremely labor intensive, and every
time a staff member has to manually enter information, there’s a chance for mistakes, which make keeping records properly all but impossible. Similarly, when the information is shared back to the buyer, they also have to manually store the quotes back into whatever tracking system they use. The flow of information is messy, hard to track and time consuming. More often than we’d like to admit, we see growers forget the quotes they gave and then are unable to dig up the information.

3. Too often a landscaper will present an entire list despite the fact that the nursery doesn’t grow all of the items.

4. Sometimes we see the worst-case scenario of all: A landscaper may use the nursery for preliminary pricing, but if and when they land the bid, they go to another nursery and actually buy the material elsewhere. Wasted effort and time.

5. Pricing out individual items can also be a huge headache. For example, does a nursery have an existing relationship with a buyer where they need to offer a discount? Trying to dig up the pricing on the fly can be a nightmare. Nurseries want to be transparent and accurate, so this can get in the way.

So how can we convert more quotes into actual buyers and eliminate these challenges? That’s a question we’re all left asking.

Less headache, more success
It’s time for both nurseries and landscapers to integrate a better process—one that will save time, reduce errors, improve accuracy, remove miscommunication and frustrations, and ultimately position a business for more wins and more growth.

One suggestion I have is looking to utilize a technology or platform that will eliminate the current obstacles of the RFP process for both those pricing-out material and those reviewing pricing. Just as with running a nursery, it’s not just about how well a tool works, but how well it works with all of the other tools you need to use. Unlike with in-the-field tools and technology, the industry as a whole hasn’t always been up for embracing new tools and processes for running the back office and it’s time for that to change.

In the May issue of GrowerTalks, Jen Zurko’s Inside Look column opened up with an interesting perspective on putting skepticism and cynicism aside. We too often experience those sentiments in this industry—particularly when it comes to trying new technologies. While healthy skepticism can be useful at times in avoiding distractions, too much will inevitably interfere with efficiently operating and scaling your business.

So if you’re looking to grow your nursery business by reaching new customers, or simply make your existing business run that much more smoothly, it’s worth spending the time to evaluate whether some of the software platforms designed specifically for the horticulture industry are right for you. In the case of the RFP process, we encourage nurseries to not only think about the way it’s been done, but to also consider how it could be and should be done as the first step in creating a more fertile environment for your business to grow or blossom as you see fit. GT

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