

You're going to do *what* to my tree?

Cutting down the communication barrier between utilities and landowners with active listening

What the Utility Arborist says: "We need to prune your tree."

What the landowner hears: "We've come to kill your tree!"

Where this conversation goes next is up to the Utility Arborist. Are your crews trained to be good ambassadors of your brand?

A company's reputation can be its greatest asset or its biggest downfall. Negative customer interactions in any industry can have detrimental outcomes including scathing emails and phone calls to company managers, threats of litigation, plenty of complaining to friends, family and anyone who will listen and, in extreme circumstances, communication with the media. In the end, one unhappy customer can lead to a large group of people with a negative impression of your company – and a subsequent, and often costly, public relations campaign to repair the damage.

Thankfully, a good communication plan and trained ambassadors can help avoid these ugly scenarios altogether.

With power comes great responsibility

For power utility companies, vegetation management is necessary not only to ensure reliability of electric services, but to also comply with the North American Reliability Council (NERC) FAC-003-1 standards. But with this comes the responsibility of helping landowners understand why their trees and vegetation need to be pruned or removed.

Most landowners will have an immediate negative response to crews 'defacing' their property –at least that's usually the first impression. Many utilities choose to avoid the awkward face-to-face confrontation altogether. Much like sending a significant other a breakup e-mail, these companies leave door hangers or fliers to do their dirty work. And, even worse, others might communicate tree-trimming activities via ads in local newspapers that landowners may or may not read. By not giving the landowner a chance to ask questions and fully understand why a tree needs pruned, the process starts with a negative impression.

Rules of engagement

The first rule for communicating with this potentially volatile audience is to engage them – in person. The second rule is to send 'ambassadors' that are suited to represent your company in a positive manner, dressed appropriately and trained to speak on your behalf.

Here's a telling exercise: when you think about the person out in the field representing your company, imagine him knocking on your grandmother's door about the tree she planted 60 years ago when she first moved into her home. Are you cringing or do you feel confident he or she will treat your grandmother with the respect she deserves?

Active Listening = Effective Communication



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To best represent your brand, your ambassador should also be trained in effective communication. Since landowners will rarely have an understanding of utility vegetation management (UVM), it is important that the ambassador approach the situation with respect and understanding – employing an ‘active listening’ approach.

With active listening, also known as empathetic listening, the listener first confirms that he or she has understood the concern of the speaker by paraphrasing the information back.

Paraphrasing Example:

Customer: “I don’t understand why you guys have to trim these trees. They aren’t causing me problems and my lights rarely go out.”

Utility Arborist: “You don’t see the need to trim your trees. I understand your concern. I am a homeowner myself. To be clear, we are here to prune the trees to help ensure the reliability of the power to your home and the rest of your neighborhood ...”

If the information seems to be misunderstood, the arborist should use clarifying statements to show empathy with the landowner, such as “You’ve said so much, let me make sure I’ve got it all ...” or “Just to be clear, let me try and repeat what I think you said ...”

Perception checking, another active listening tactic, can also be used to check out assumptions of the landowner. An example might be “Let me make sure I have this straight, you planted this tree 60 years ago and it is very special to you and your family ...”

And, finally, to complete the conversation the arborist should summarize the conversation, pulling together and organizing the major ideas, facts and feelings. In the end the objective is to show the landowner primary empathy and that the arborist has an understanding of his or her experiences and feelings.

Often, by hearing their concerns repeated back to them, landowners will be able to rationalize the situation and feel as if they have been heard.

Unfortunately, active listening does not work in all situations. And your ambassador needs to be trained for these unpleasant situations as well.

Diffusing the angry customer

After exhausting all active listening tactics, the customer is still angry. As difficult as it may seem, it is important to remember that the customer is not angry at you, but the situation. Never get angry back as arguing only adds fuel to the fire.

The way to deal with an angry customer is to apologize for the specific action only and take immediate action to put it right (if possible). In many cases, the utility arborist or company ambassador has no control over the situation. In this case, the only option is to be direct about what needs to be done and, sometimes, walk away from the situation.

Preventative measures save money/headaches

Wherever power lines and customer property intersect, there is an inherent conflict of interest. Customer relations issues that result in refusals and public displays of disappointment will waste time and money.

Therefore, to augment personal conversations with landowners, utility companies should consider public relations programs that include:

- Manned call centers to answer customer questions
- Town hall meetings for wide-scale trimming projects
- Replanting programs to help customers obtain alternative trees for free or at a reduced cost

Turn “We’ve come to kill your tree!” into “We are here to ensure your safety and the reliability of your electric service,” with proactive communication and active listening. This will help elevate the company’s brand image, facilitate positive relationships with customers and reduce refusals.

SIDEBAR OPTION:

An effective pre-notification approach:

- Notifies customers when the work is to be performed
- Clearly outlines what specific work is needed
- Informs the landowner what the tree will look like and why the work is necessary
- Enables customers to ask questions
- Leaves the customer with a positive impression of the company