

Garden customers who haven't a clue – quoting for work in general

First impressions count. If you listen to them and your intuition you can save yourself a lot of trouble. People do not realise how much they give themselves away over the phone.

I had a response to my advertisement about four days ago. The customer lived near me and needed his hedge cut. He was a bit abrupt on the phone and not very friendly. Nevertheless, I went round as I normally do.

He told me that due to a gall bladder operation he was unable to function as he normally did. He needed hedges cut but also a lot of cleaning of paving stones and also two large lawns to be mown. Fortunately, I'm good in all those three areas so after discussion with him in detail I sent him a quote for £500 which I reckon would cover the couple of days work involved plus getting rid of the material.

He wrote back to me saying that this was "far too much" and said that he wanted to see a breakdown of costs. In my 30 years of gardening I have never been asked for a cost breakdown because most of my jobs are small like this one. I wrote back telling him so. I also mentioned that I did not think he had gone for a quote in the recent past if at all because he clearly had no idea how much things cost these days. That would probably have annoyed him but then he was annoyed anyway so same difference as they say.

He concluded his letter by saying that perhaps he needed "a general gardener", probably in his mind someone with a fork who will work for £10 an hour. These people disappeared decades ago and modern gardeners are people who have to make money and pay their mortgage like anyone else. He's going to

discover that if he hires say three different people to do the three elements he is going to end up paying far more. Sometimes, people have to learn lessons the hard way and this is a good example of that.

Did we waste each other's time? It is in the nature of quoting that there is no guarantee that you will get on with somebody and they with you for whatever reason. It may be that the person is unpleasant and insular and does not know or has never learned how to make business relationships. It may be that the potential client was too proud to admit they needed help. In this case, the person concerned clearly prided himself on doing all his own work, a type of DIY chap. The operation which he had had short time before had clearly taken the wind out of his sails.

A few years ago, I would have apologised for the price but now I know that if a person is unrealistic or unpleasant, the energies are going to go wrong and the job will inevitably end up by being incomplete and unsatisfactory for both parties.

My advice to anyone quoting for anything is that you need to incorporate the following:

Time taken to do the work itself

the time taken to learn the work including courses

the cost of buying the equipment and maintaining it

a travel allowance. If it takes you half an hour to get to someone then it takes half an hour to get back and that's an hour that has to be accounted for in some way.

an allowance for not working 52 weeks a year but having a holiday and not working hand to mouth.

NB Self-employed people enjoy no benefits. It is a very stark world. Some allowance should be made for this. As the golden rule, if you are not saving money then you are losing money. Don't forget unforeseen problems such as accidents, illnesses and family situations which may prevent you from functioning. It is not intelligent to drive yourself into the ground.

So, if you're working for say £10 or £15 an hour you will probably effectively be working for less than the national minimum wage. The sad fact of the matter is that unless you look after yourself, no one else is going to do it for you. In my experience, there are more people who make problems for themselves by undercharging than overcharging. If you want to maintain your integrity, state what you will do, provide credentials and discussion if necessary, agree a price, complete the job, ask people if they are happy with it. If they are then take the money if not then make reparations.

As an added difficulty, the new VAT rules mean that you have to get your accounting software in a certain order and as I write, many people will be suffering because they neglected to get the instruments in place before the requirement came in a few days ago. Thank the Lord I'm not in this category.