



Targeted Marketing for Rural Practices

Understanding that word of mouth is always the best method of attracting new clients, in a rural area, what would be the next best method of pursuing new business?

I have found that driving a rural area, and stopping very often at feed stores, coffee shops and other gathering places—granges, churches, etc.—can be a good way to get my name out in desirable rural areas.

I have a flyer that hints at what I do, asks a few questions, and has a place I can tack up cards. It all sounds very much like what we did in the nineteenth century, but it really works. Bulletin boards are valuable, but so is chatting up the salesman at an equipment store in an off hour. Most of us can appreciate and even envy big iron, and as long as we do not bring credit cards, this form of advertising can be more effective than blanketing the area with those mailers.

Personally, I am not looking for a lot of business, I am looking for a few good clients. I find that the fringes of rural and suburban areas around Portland, Oregon, have plenty of golf and park areas. Sometimes casing down a municipal tree ordinance can have interesting results. I do most of this on line, but if I am driving, and see a city hall, I like to go in and see what the citizen would see, ask about trees and see where I end up in ten minutes time.

I think this response goes a long way toward also answering the last question, because the cheapest terms of advertising are the terms we set ourselves. And I do not think you are alone in looking for inexpensive ways to promote your business. Gasoline and shoe leather still work for me.

—John E. O'Shea

Doing good work and publicizing it. Pro bono work in high-profile settings can pay off, if people see or hear about it.

—Guy P. Meilleur

Working in rural areas, without the density of potential clients that come from working in neighborhoods of one house next to the other, a challenge is getting many people together to learn about your business. A great method for this is offering FREE education or information workshops/programs about tree care, sustainable landscapes, tree values, tree risks, or other topics. Partnering with a local agency, like the county Cooperative Extension office, can further your goal of getting people to come, AND, can bring some assistance with marketing your program.

You don't need to be a great speaker to do a presentation. There are free PowerPoint presentation models available about tree topics and landscape topics that you can use, and you could use some of the ISA Arboricultural bro-

chures as the basis for a presentation and as handouts.

Doing a presentation shows you are a resource, or expert, for people to consider regarding trees and landscapes. It also validates what you are presenting by having multiple people together hearing your information.

—John A. Harris, RCA #468

I find that by joining local organizations, such as the Garden Club and the Master Gardeners, by volunteering and offering my services free or at reduced fees to charitable organizations, I gain respect and people want to return the favor. Of course a small ad in the local phone book provides some calls.

—L. Herlwyn Lutz

Face to face prospecting is the next best client development method.

—Marty Shaw, RCA #470

Another method of attracting new clients in a rural area is to be involved in the community. Are there parks, common areas, schools that need some TLC? Become involved and your expertise will become evident. Write an article for the local newspaper.

—Lisa E. Smith, RCA #464

I have found the internet to be an excellent source of potential business; however, due to my rural address I am fearful that I may be turning new clients away as clients may favor consultants closer to urban hubs and centers of business. Is there any appropriate way on my web site that I can advise potential clients that travel is not an issue for me?

I would not refer to your home address as your "hub." Instead, you should advertise that you are "Serving the County Area" or "Working in your area weekly." Also, you can get a P.O. Box that is in town, or a toll-free phone number that doesn't specify what part of the county you are based. If it's obvious that travel will be required, then state it will not be a problem on your website. Refer to the actual towns you work in: "Serving all towns in the County (state): Willow Town, Elm Town, Main Town, etc."

—Lisa E. Smith, RCA #464

Putting all your address information in your website is not a requirement. Having a toll free number, or multiple local numbers for different communities in your area, can give you a feel of being nearby without any travel issues. Stating that your service area is from A to B on the website can also reduce any feeling that you are too far away. For some consultants, they do not charge for travel, or don't charge it for the first consultation, so people are more inclined to bring them out to start a project.

—John A. Harris, RCA #468

Say, "Serving Metro Urbanhub."

—Guy E. Meilleur

By offering references, potential clients may feel more confident in choosing

me over those closer but less recommended. I would want to tactfully state the minimum fee or amount of consulting time in order to make the trip worthwhile. This can be adjusted if more than one job or other business can be done on the same trip.

—L. Herlwyn Lutz

Internet advertising is very cost effective. If travel is not an issue for you or if it does not add cost to your client, it is not necessarily required to identify your own location in your web site or web advertising.

—Marty Shaw, RCA #470

I have recently transitioned to full-time consulting and have maintained only a few clients in my area due to the sparse population and limited interest in ornamental horticulture. Would it be better for me to simply ignore promoting my services in the local rural area and target urban and suburban areas?

If there are a worthwhile number of potential clients—people who own trees and are able to invest in reports about them—in the rural area, yes. Consulting arborists can help even the arborphobe. For instance, check to see if a utility is condemning land—those landowners need to know what their trees are worth. Sell the benefits of trees to the non-gardeners.

—Guy E. Meilleur

You never know where your next best client lives. It could be next door. Targeting urban centers, specific cities in your service region, or a new subdivision, can be done by stating them on your website as being areas you are available to work in. Having a long list of cities may not be useful, but stating cities that are on the outreaches of how far you want to travel implies that

any locations within that area you will also work in.

—John A. Harris, RCA #468

Although you may not be technically targeting your local area clients, you should never give up serving local area clients. They may "fill in the gaps" of your schedule. You may decide not to pursue targeting that work, but instead, just appreciate when those jobs come along. I would recommend putting more of your energies toward developing clients in the urban/suburban areas, which may take more time to get started, but may have a bigger payoff. You can easily tap out your local rural market in a few years, but an urban area may continue to have work to support your career for decades.

—Lisa E. Smith, RCA #464

I intentionally relocated near a larger metropolitan area because there are more prospective clients there. If you are serious about consulting, you might want to consider relocating.

—Marty Shaw, RCA #470

I have been contacted by a few consulting expert "brokers" which would, for a fee, include my business on their internet site. Would such a service provide value to my business, which is some distance from any metropolitan area?

These services can bring potential clients to you that you may not hear about on your own, but many times these clients are not local. Some consultants will work in multiple states, or nationwide, or internationally, so you need to decide how far out you feel confident to go. There are also free websites that are looking for experts in different fields to add to their stable that they list, and some of these have a great track record

with legal firms, insurance companies, and others.

In the end, if you are not getting enough business marketing yourself, getting others involved that can market you would be valuable. Be careful to know how they are marketing you, and what they list you as available to do, because it is not always within how you want to be marketed, or what you can do.

—John A. Harris, RCA #468

Not likely. Do these sites reach enough of the audience you want, often enough and in the right way? The good ones offer a money-back guarantee.

—Guy E. Meilleur

It depends. Some questions to ask the broker are: What type of work do they broker? Also, do they charge an up front fee? Or, do they charge when you receive the work? I would not recommend going with a broker who charges you up front to be on their site. Also, I would inspect their site for positioning, professionalism and if they are a recognized and credible organization?

Some brokers may use you as a sub-contractor. That can be challenging if they put you in a legally compromising scenario, when portions of the project are out of your control.

—Lisa E. Smith, RCA #464

As long as the client is willing to pay, why not?

—Marty Shaw, RCA #470

I have found these to be a complete waste of money, as was the National Yellow Pages.

—L. Herlwyn Lutz

With the economy being what it is, are there any effective ways I could promote my little country consulting business that would be either free or at minimal cost?

Writing articles is one of the best, lowest-cost ways to become well known. You can also become involved in local tree boards and civic organizations for little or no cost. It would also serve you well to do face to face visits with local tree companies, landscape designers, landscape architects and those who make tree policies.

—Marty Shaw, RCA #470

“The Economy” is not a huge factor for skilled entrepreneurs who can tell a tree tale. Do good work and publicize it. Pro bono work in high-profile settings can pay off.

—Guy E. Meilleur

Contact local environmental groups, nonprofits, and/or cities to offer to speak on tree and landscape topics. This gets you in front of people, shows you know what you know, and can bring you potential clients.

—John A. Harris, RCA #468 🌿

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