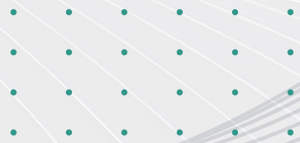




THE NEW TREE SERVICE BUYER'S JOURNEY

Why "Business as Usual" No Longer Works and How the Tree Care Industry Must Adapt to Successfully Acquire New Customers



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Executive Summary

The tree care industry is operating with a 2010 playbook while customers are living in a 2025 reality.

The residential tree care industry is at a turning point. While the market has grown to \$35.6 billion with steady 3% annual growth, a fundamental disconnect has emerged between how tree service companies operate and how modern customers actually behave throughout their buying journey.¹

Overview

Our research identifies **eight critical gaps between traditional industry thinking and modern customer behavior** that are driving a dramatic separation between market leaders and laggards. Companies that do not recognize these behavioral shifts are experiencing a predictable decline pattern and increasing pressure from consolidators leveraging scale and technology. Meanwhile, forward-thinking companies that embrace the evolved customer journey are achieving higher conversion rates, stronger customer retention, and premium pricing power.

The Key Change in Customer Behavior

The most significant finding is a shift from reactive to proactive customer behavior. By the time they make first contact, customers have already formed expectations about what work they need, potential providers, acceptable pricing, and customer service.

The shift in homeowner expectations and behaviors requires a fundamental reimagining of marketing, sales, and service delivery processes across the tree care industry.

The traditional model of waiting for the phone to ring and competing primarily on price is becoming obsolete. Instead, successful companies are building comprehensive visual portfolios, creating educational content, actively seeking social validation, adopting AI-enhanced technology, and clearly communicating transparent processes and pricing that address customer concerns before they're even expressed.

This report provides a detailed roadmap to help tree service companies understand the key shifts in customer behavior and adapt to the new buyer's journey, including specific technology investments, customer experience redesign, and relationship management strategies that leading companies are using to dominate their markets.

The window for adaptation is narrowing rapidly as market consolidation accelerates and customer expectations continue to evolve. Tree service companies that act decisively on these insights will position themselves for sustained growth and competitive advantage, while those that delay risk being left behind in an increasingly sophisticated marketplace.

¹.IBISWorld. (2024). Tree Trimming Services in the US - Market Research Report. <https://www.ibisworld.com>

The Traditional vs. New, Evolved Customer Journey

Why the old sales playbook no longer works with today's informed buyers

Understanding the Fundamental Changes in How Customers Choose Tree Service Companies

From phone calls to online research, customer behavior has shifted dramatically

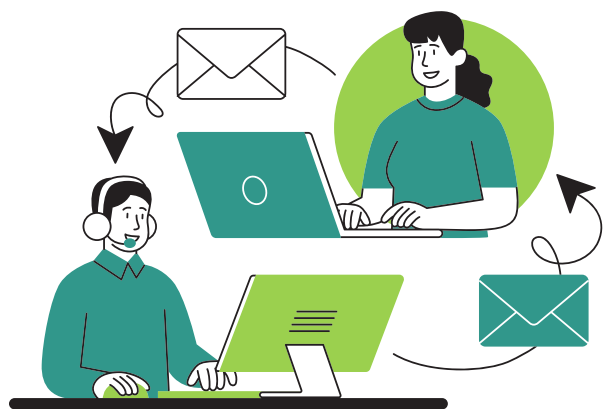
The traditional customer journey model that has guided tree care marketing and sales strategies for decades assumed a linear, predictable progression from problem identification to service completion. This model, while simple and intuitive, no longer reflects the complex, multi-channel reality of how modern customers research, evaluate, and select tree care providers.

Without a clear understanding of the new buyer's journey, companies will be unable to optimize their customer acquisition and retention strategies.

The traditional buyer journey model assumed customers would identify a tree care need, contact two or three companies for quotes, compare prices, and select the lowest bidder. This linear progression worked reasonably well in an era of limited information access and fewer service options. Customers relied heavily on Yellow Pages listings, word-of-mouth recommendations from immediate neighbors, and basic credential verification through phone conversations.

However, the digital transformation of information access and social connectivity has fundamentally altered customer behavior patterns. Modern customers operate in an information-rich

environment where they can research providers, verify credentials, compare pricing, and validate decisions through multiple channels before ever making direct contact with a company. This shift has created an "invisible research phase" that most tree care companies don't recognize or address in their marketing strategies.



The Invisible Research Phase: What Happens Before First Contact

How digital-savvy customers research and buy tree services in 2025

The most significant change in customer behavior is the emergence of an extensive research phase that occurs entirely outside the awareness or control of tree care companies. During this phase, which can last weeks or even months for planned projects, customers engage in sophisticated information gathering and validation activities that shape their eventual purchasing decisions.

The most significant change in customer behavior is the emergence of an extensive research phase that occurs entirely outside the awareness or control of tree care companies. During this phase, which can last weeks or even months for planned projects, customers engage in sophisticated information gathering and validation activities that shape their eventual purchasing decisions.

This invisible research phase means that by the time customers make first contact with tree care companies, they have already formed about 70% of their opinion about potential providers². They have identified preferred companies, established budget ranges, and developed specific questions and evaluation criteria. Companies that don't recognize this reality continue to operate as if they're introducing themselves to uninformed customers, missing opportunities to address concerns and demonstrate value.

Multi-Channel Information Gathering and Validation

The evolved customer journey involves multiple information sources and validation mechanisms that create a complex web of influences on purchasing decisions. Unlike the traditional model where customers relied primarily on direct company interactions, modern customers triangulate information from numerous sources to build confidence in their choices.

The Community Influence Factor

Modern customer decisions are increasingly influenced by community input and social validation. The traditional model assumed individual decision-making, but the evolved journey involves multiple stakeholders and community feedback mechanisms that significantly impact final choices.

Neighborhood social networks play crucial roles in provider recommendation and validation. Customers actively seek input from neighbors who have used tree care services, creating informal referral networks that operate through social media, community apps, and face-to-face interactions. These recommendations carry exceptional weight because they come from trusted sources with similar properties and circumstances.

Digital-First Research Patterns

The shift to digital-first research has created new customer expectations and evaluation criteria that many tree care companies haven't recognized or addressed. Customers now expect comprehensive information to be readily available online, responsive digital communication, and seamless integration between online research and offline service delivery.



Website quality and functionality have become primary evaluation criteria, with customers making quick judgments about company professionalism based on online presence. Mobile responsiveness, loading speed, clear service descriptions, and easy contact mechanisms are now table stakes for customer consideration. Companies with poor websites or limited online presence are often eliminated from consideration before any direct interaction occurs.

Search behavior analysis reveals specific patterns that companies can leverage for improved customer acquisition. "Tree service" and "tree removal" dominate search volume, with location-based searches being particularly important. Customers typically search for combinations of service type and location, such as "tree service near me" or "tree removal [city name]." Understanding these search patterns enables companies to optimize their online visibility and content strategy.

The digital research phase also includes credential verification and background checking that extends beyond basic license and insurance confirmation. Customers research company histories, look for news articles or legal issues, and verify professional certifications through official databases. This comprehensive vetting process means that companies with any negative online presence or credential gaps face significant disadvantages in customer selection processes.

New Expectations for Response Time and Communication

The evolved customer journey has created new expectations for response times and communication quality that differ significantly from traditional industry practices. Customers who have invested significant time in research expect prompt, professional responses that acknowledge their preparation and address their specific concerns.

Emergency situations continue to demand immediate response times, but planned projects now also carry expectations for rapid initial contact and quote turnaround. Customers who have completed extensive research want to move quickly through the evaluation phase. Companies that respond slowly often lose opportunities to competitors with faster communication processes.

Communication quality expectations have also evolved, with customers expecting detailed explanations of work scope, transparent pricing breakdowns, and educational information about their specific tree care needs. Generic quotes and basic service descriptions no longer meet customer expectations for companies positioning themselves as professional service providers.

The communication preferences themselves have diversified, with customers expecting multiple contact options and communication channels. While phone calls remain important for complex consultations, customers also expect email responsiveness, text message capabilities, and online scheduling options. Companies that offer only traditional communication methods may appear outdated to customers accustomed to digital convenience.

The New Customer Buyer's Journey for Tree Care Services

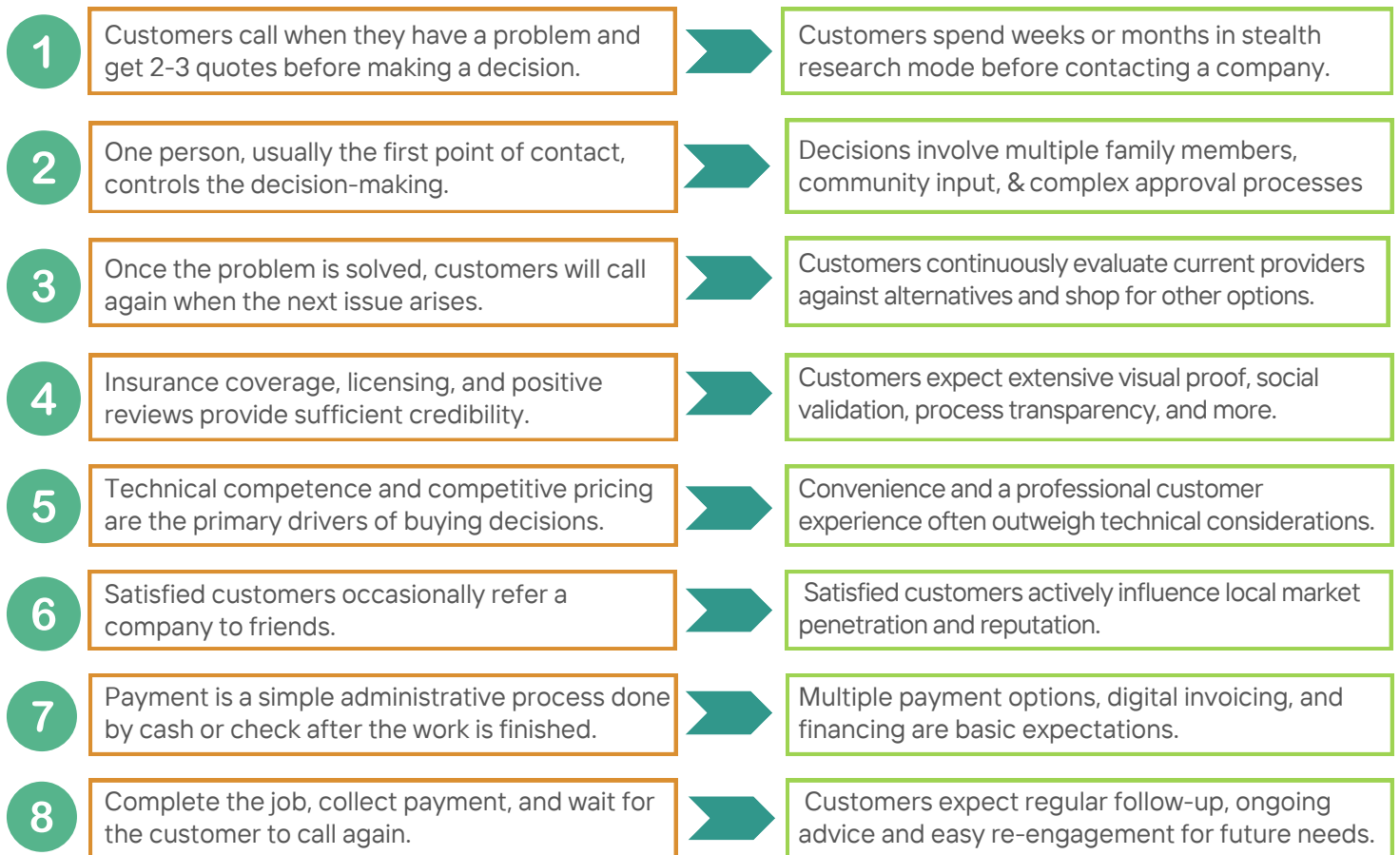
Stage in Buyer's Journey	Customer Thought Process
<p>Problem Awareness An event, such as storm damage, a neighbor's comment, or observed change in tree's appearance, triggers the customer's realization that they have a potential tree issue.</p>	<p>"I think we might have a tree problem."</p>
<p>Invisible Research Customer educates themselves and forms preliminary opinions so they understand the problem and possible solutions before calling companies</p>	<p>"I need to understand what this will cost and who's trustworthy."</p>
<p>Provider Discovery Based on online and AI searches like "best tree service near me" and community recommendations, the customer creates a shortlist of 3-5 potential companies for further evaluation</p>	<p>"Which companies in my area seem professional and reliable?"</p>
<p>Credibility Evaluation Customer validates each company's legitimacy and expertise by looking for verified insurance, licensing, and indicators of competence.</p>	<p>"Can I trust this company with my property and safety?"</p>
<p>Initial Contact When they have confidence in a company's credibility and expertise, the customer reaches out to the top choices to schedule quotes</p>	<p>"I'm ready to discuss my project with qualified professionals."</p>
<p>Consultation & Quote Customer requests an evaluation and pricing. Company assesses the project and provides a detailed proposal.</p>	<p>"What do they recommend and which is the best solution for my needs?"</p>
<p>Decision Making Customer compares quotes, evaluates options, and validates choice with family/community input</p>	<p>"Which company offers the best value, options, and experience?"</p>
<p>Pre-Service Communication & Process Customer approves project, confirms details, pays deposit (if applicable) and schedules work</p>	<p>"Are they organized, professional, and helpful in making my choice?"</p>
<p>Service Delivery Company completes tree work on the scheduled service date as specified in their proposal.</p>	<p>"Did they deliver exactly what they promised, professionally and safely?"</p>
<p>Post-Service After service completion, the customer pays the invoice, evaluates the results and experience, and may leave a review.</p>	<p>"Do they stand behind their work and care about my ongoing tree health?"</p>
<p>Ongoing Relationship Company follows up consistently with helpful information.</p>	<p>"Do I want this company to be my long-term tree care partner?"</p>

8 Critical Gaps: The Disconnect Between Industry Practice and Customer Reality

Why most tree care companies are losing customers long before the first conversation

The tree care industry's struggle to adapt to evolved customer behavior can be attributed to eight fundamental gaps between traditional industry thinking and modern customer reality. These gaps represent not just missed opportunities, but existential threats to companies that fail to recognize and address them.

Each gap represents an area where industry assumptions no longer match customer behavior, creating friction in the customer acquisition process and reducing conversion rates for companies operating with outdated models. The cumulative effect of these gaps explains why some companies struggle with customer acquisition despite technical competence and competitive pricing, while others achieve consistent growth and premium pricing.





GAP 1. The Invisible Research Phase

Industry Assumption

Customers call when they have a problem and get 2-3 quotes before making a decision.

Current Customer Reality

Modern customers spend weeks or months in stealth research mode before ever contacting a company, using digital tools and community resources to educate themselves and form preliminary opinions.

This gap represents perhaps the most significant missed opportunity in the industry. While companies wait for phone calls and focus on quote conversion rates, customers are actively researching, comparing, and forming opinions through channels that most tree care businesses neither monitor nor influence.

The Modern Research Process

Modern customers begin their journey by using technology tools that didn't exist in the traditional model.

Customers Diagnose Problems Before Calling Companies

Google Lens usage has exploded among homeowners seeking to identify tree problems and diseases. Customers photograph concerning symptoms and receive instant identification and treatment suggestions, often leading them to research a range of treatment options and service requirements.

YouTube has become a primary educational resource, with customers watching videos about tree care techniques, problem identification, and service quality evaluation. Companies that create educational video content can influence customer perceptions during this research phase, while those without video presence miss opportunities to demonstrate expertise and build trust before direct contact occurs.

Applications like iNaturalist enable customers to identify tree and pest species and self-diagnose problems, giving them confidence in their understanding of tree care needs.

Customers often arrive at initial consultations with preconceived notions about their requirements, forcing companies to either validate or carefully redirect these assumptions rather than starting from basic education.

Neighborhood Networks Drive Provider Selection

Social media platforms have become primary research channels, with customers joining **neighborhood Facebook groups** to request recommendations and share experiences. **Nextdoor** provides hyperlocal validation of service providers, with real-time feedback from neighbors who have used specific companies. These platforms create community-driven vetting processes that carry more weight than traditional advertising or marketing messages.

These conversations usually happen entirely outside the company's awareness but have a powerful impact on customer choices.

Companies that actively monitor and participate in community discussions can influence these conversations, whereas those that ignore community channels miss critical opportunities for reputation management.

Online Sources Set (Unrealistic) Price Expectations

The research phase also includes financial preparation and expectation setting through multiple channels.

- Customers research property records to understand what previous owners paid for tree work, creating pricing benchmarks that influence their budget expectations.

- Homeowners use home improvement apps to track maintenance needs and get cost estimates, approaching tree care decisions with more financial sophistication than previous generations.

This preparation means customers often arrive with specific budget expectations and pricing benchmarks that may not reflect current market conditions or project complexity.

Companies that address pricing concerns proactively and transparently, rather than reactively, are far better positioned to close sales at realistic (and profitable) prices.

Customers Are Better Educated About Tree Care

Consumption of educational content has emerged as a significant factor in provider selection. Customers value companies that provide helpful information about tree care, seasonal maintenance needs, and problem identification. Blog posts, video content, email newsletters, and social media education demonstrate expertise while building trust and credibility.

By positioning themselves as educational resources rather than just service providers, companies gain significant advantages in customer perception and selection processes.

Impact on Customer Acquisition

By the time customers make first contact with tree care companies, they have already formed approximately 70% of their opinion about potential providers. They have identified preferred companies, established budget ranges, and developed specific evaluation criteria.

Companies that don't recognize this new reality continue to operate as if they're introducing themselves to uninformed customers, missing opportunities to address concerns and demonstrate value during the critical research phase.



GAP 2. Multiple Decision-Makers

Industry Assumption

The homeowner who first contacts the company controls the decision-making process from initial contact through final approval.

Current Customer Reality

Tree care decisions involve multiple family members, community input, and complex approval processes that extend beyond the primary contact person.

The traditional sales model assumes a single decision maker who manages the entire process independently. This assumption leads to communication strategies that focus on one person and follow-up processes that ignore other stakeholders who may influence or control final decisions.

The reality is far more complex, with multiple household members involved in research, evaluation, and the final selection of a provider. Successful customer acquisition will increasingly require recognition and management of these multiple sources of influence.

The Expanded Decision-Making Network

Family Roles Complicate Single-Contact Assumptions

Family decision-making processes typically involve distinct roles, creating communication challenges for companies that don't recognize these dynamics. Typical roles include:

1. **The Primary Researcher** - Often the spouse or partner most interested in landscaping or home maintenance, this person gathers information and conducts initial provider evaluation.
2. **The Financial Decision Maker** - The individual who controls spending authorization may differ from the researcher and have less information about the company or work to be done.
3. **The Schedule Coordinator** - This person manages household logistics and determines project timing.

Companies that communicate only with the initial contact person may miss important stakeholders who influence or control final decisions.

Successful companies adapt their communication strategies to address multiple decision makers and influence sources.

Neighbor Opinions Influence Local Reputation

Community input has become integral to the decision process, with customers seeking neighbor validation before and after making provider selections. This validation process means that a company's reputation within specific neighborhoods carries exceptional weight, and negative experiences can impact future customer acquisition in those geographic areas.

The community influence extends beyond simple recommendations to include ongoing monitoring and feedback. Neighbors observe service delivery quality, thoroughness of cleanup, and results, creating accountability mechanisms that influence provider reputation within specific geographic areas.

Adult Children Influence Major Tree Work Decisions

The approval process often involves consultation with adult children, particularly for elderly homeowners who are making significant decisions regarding tree care. These family consultations can introduce new evaluation criteria and delay decision timelines, requiring companies to adapt their follow-up processes and communication strategies to accommodate multiple stakeholders and extended decision periods.

Multiple Arborist Consultations Are Standard Practice

Professional validation seeking has increased, with customers sometimes consulting multiple certified arborists before making major tree removal decisions. This trend toward professional validation creates opportunities for companies with strong credentials and consultation capabilities, while challenging those that compete primarily on price or convenience.

Companies that understand and leverage complex family and community dynamics can build strong local market positions by investing in community relationship building and systematic reputation management. Those who ignore community relationships may struggle despite technical competence.



GAP 3. Continuous Shopping Mindset

Industry Assumption

Customers have a problem, get quotes, hire someone, and consider the problem solved until the next issue arises.

Current Customer Reality

Modern customers are always shopping, continuously evaluating their current providers against alternatives and maintaining awareness of competitive options.

The traditional transactional model assumes customer loyalty based on the satisfactory completion of service. Once a job is finished successfully, companies expect customers to contact them for future needs without ongoing relationship maintenance. This assumption overlooks the reality that customer loyalty has become increasingly fragile and must be continually earned.

Persistent Comparison Behaviors

Screenshot Culture Creates Ongoing Price Pressure

Screenshot culture has emerged as customers routinely capture and save quotes, estimates, and pricing information for future reference and comparison. These saved comparisons create ongoing competitive pressure, as customers can easily evaluate new providers against previous experiences and pricing.

Companies that provide detailed, professional documentation gain an advantage in these comparisons, while those with basic or unclear quotes may be at a disadvantage.

Social Media Monitoring Exposes Customers to Competitors

Social media monitoring has made customers aware of competitive offerings and promotional activities in real-time. Customers follow multiple tree care companies on social media platforms, exposing them to alternative providers and creating continuous comparison opportunities.

Companies with strong social media presence can maintain customer awareness and preference, while those without social engagement become invisible between service interactions.

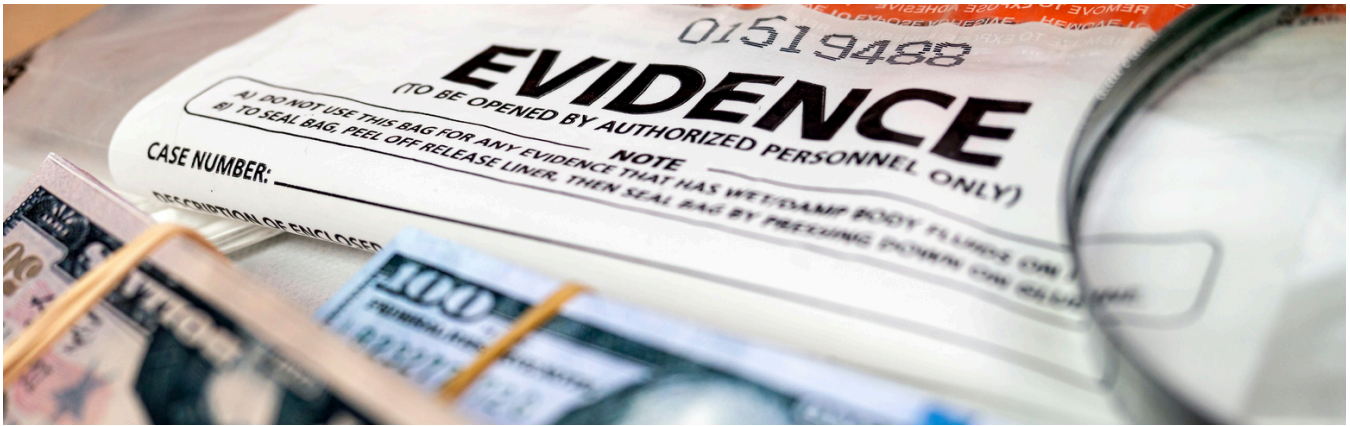
Home Improvement Apps Drive Systematic Cost Tracking

Home improvement apps enable homeowners to systematically track property maintenance needs, receive cost estimates, and perform price benchmarking, thereby creating ongoing awareness of service requirements and establishing pricing expectations. This systematic approach to home maintenance means customers are always planning future projects and evaluating provider options.

Continuous Review & Feedback Monitoring Restarts Shopping Cycles

The continuous shopping mindset includes ongoing validation through community discussions and review monitoring. Customers regularly check reviews and community feedback about their chosen providers, and negative experiences or better alternatives can quickly prompt them to restart the shopping process.

Consistent service quality and proactive communication are baseline customer expectations for all service providers and necessary areas of focus to retain customer preference in an environment of continuous competitive evaluation.



GAP 4. Comprehensive Proof is Expected

Industry Assumption

Insurance coverage, licensing, and positive reviews provide sufficient credibility for customer selection.

Current Customer Reality

Today's customers expect comprehensive proof stacks that include visual evidence, social validation, process transparency, value justification, and demonstrated authority.

Traditional credibility models focused on basic professional requirements, including proper licensing, insurance coverage, and a general reputation. While these elements remain important, they now represent minimum qualifications rather than differentiating factors. Customers expect much more comprehensive evidence of capability and professionalism before making selection decisions.

Comprehensive Credibility Requirements

Visual Portfolios Are Selection Prerequisites

Visual validation has become increasingly important as customers expect to see examples of work quality before making a commitment. Company websites, social media profiles, and review platforms offer opportunities to showcase visual portfolios, but many tree care companies fail to capitalize on these channels effectively.

Customers specifically look for images and videos showing:

- before-and-after photos,
- process documentation, and
- teams-in-action.

This visual evidence helps customers understand work quality, the professionalism of a company's process, and the typical results to expect.

Investing in systematic photo documentation and portfolio development creates significant advantages, while those with limited visual evidence appear less professional regardless of actual capability.

Review (and Owner Response) Quality and Recency Matter

Online review platforms serve as primary validation mechanisms; however, customers have become increasingly sophisticated in their review analysis. They now expect to see:

- Detailed testimonials with specific project information
- Video reviews and photo documentation of results
- Company responses to both positive and negative feedback
- Recent, relevant reviews that demonstrate ongoing service quality

The quality and recency of social proof often matter more than quantity, requiring companies to actively manage and generate ongoing customer feedback.

Google Reviews have the strongest influence, but customers also check Better Business Bureau ratings, Angie's List profiles, and industry-specific platforms for a comprehensive evaluation of providers.

Process Transparency Reduces Customer Anxiety

Customers expect a transparent explanation of work methods, safety protocols, and project management approaches. Customers want to understand how companies operate, what to expect during service delivery, and how potential problems will be handled. This transparency fosters confidence and alleviates concerns about service quality and property protection.

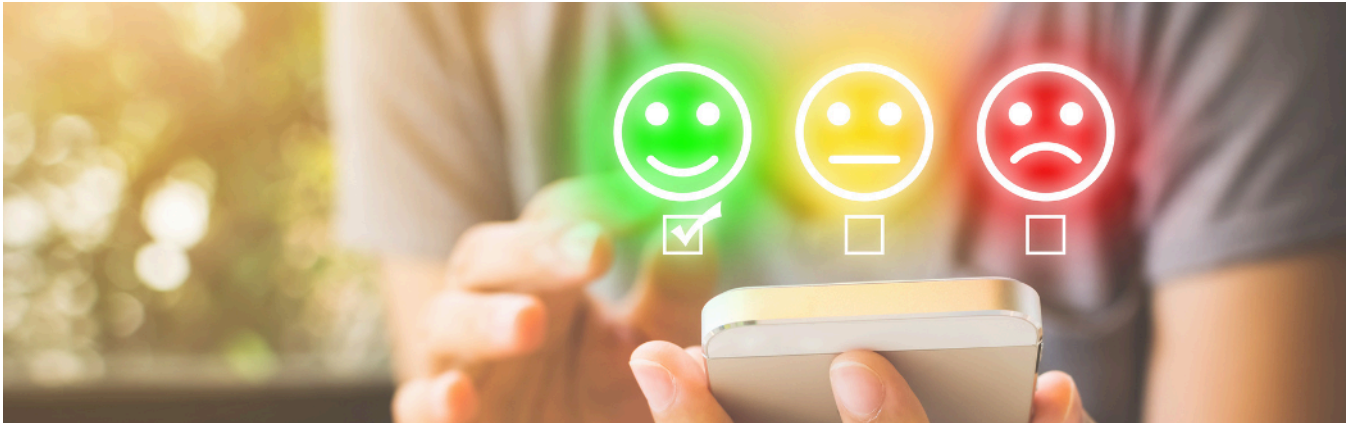
Value Education Allows for Premium Pricing

Value proof requires a clear explanation of why specific approaches or pricing represent good value compared to alternatives. Customers need help understanding the differences between certified arborists and general tree workers or landscapers, between industry-specific equipment and basic tools, and between comprehensive service and minimal approaches.

Expert Positioning Differentiates Beyond Service Delivery

Professional certifications, educational content, and industry involvement demonstrate expertise beyond basic service delivery. Customers increasingly value providers who position themselves as educational resources and industry experts rather than just service vendors.

Companies that excel at explaining their processes and value can command premium pricing through enhanced customer confidence and understanding, while those that compete primarily on price struggle to differentiate their offerings.



GAP 5. Evaluating the Total Experience

Industry Assumption

Customers prioritize technical competence and competitive pricing, with service quality being the primary criterion for evaluation.

Current Customer Reality

Customers evaluate the entire experience, from initial information gathering through post-service follow-up, with convenience and professionalism often outweighing technical considerations.

The traditional value proposition focused on technical competence and competitive pricing. Companies assumed that demonstrating tree care expertise and offering reasonable prices would be sufficient for customer acquisition and retention. This assumption ignores the reality that customers now evaluate service providers based on total experience quality rather than just technical outcomes.

Total Experience Evaluation Criteria

Website Quality Eliminates Companies Before Contact

Customers expect easy access to comprehensive service information, pricing guidelines, and company background. Websites that require phone calls for basic information or companies without a clear online presence create friction that eliminates them from consideration, regardless of technical capability.

Response Speed Trumps Technical Expertise

Response time and communication quality have a significant impact on customer selection decisions. Customers who have invested time in research expect prompt, professional responses that acknowledge their preparation and address specific concerns.

Companies with slow response times or generic communication approaches lose opportunities to competitors with more responsive customer service.

Scheduling Flexibility Overrides Price Considerations

Scheduling convenience has become increasingly important, as customers expect flexible appointment options, reliable timing, and professional communication regarding schedule changes.

The traditional approach of providing wide time windows and uncertain scheduling can create customer frustration that may override technical competence considerations.

Payment Options Influence Provider Selection

Payment experience represents a growing differentiation opportunity. Customers expect multiple payment options, transparent invoicing, and convenient transaction processing.

Advisory Services Create Competitive Differentiation

The post-service experience includes follow-up communication, maintenance recommendations, and ongoing relationship development.

Customers increasingly expect providers to act as advisors rather than just service vendors, providing ongoing value through education and proactive communication about future needs.

Companies that still operate with cash-only or check-only payment systems appear outdated to customers accustomed to the convenience of digital payments.



GAP 6. Referrals: Influential Community Content That Drives Business

Industry Assumption

Satisfied customers may occasionally refer friends, representing a nice bonus to primary marketing efforts.

Current Customer Reality

Satisfied customers are active content creators and community influencers whose advocacy can significantly impact local market penetration and reputation.

The traditional referral model treated customer recommendations as passive, occasional occurrences that happened naturally when friends or neighbors asked for provider suggestions. This model underestimates both the frequency and impact of modern customer advocacy, as well as the systematic approaches required to generate and leverage customer-generated content.

Customer-Generated Marketing Impact

Social Media Posts Generate - or Prevent - Referrals

Social media content creation has transformed satisfied customers into active marketers for their chosen providers. Customers routinely post before-and-after photos on Facebook, Instagram, and neighborhood apps like Nextdoor, creating visual testimonials that reach hundreds of community members. These posts often generate immediate inquiries, creating marketing value that far exceeds traditional advertising approaches.

Single Experiences Influence Dozens of Potential Customers

Community networks have made individual customer experiences more impactful, with community influence extending well beyond simple recommendations. Neighbors observe the service delivery quality, thoroughness of cleanup, and results, creating accountability mechanisms that influence the provider's reputation within specific

geographic areas. A single positive or negative experience can influence dozens of potential customers through social media sharing, neighborhood discussions, and interactions on community apps.

Active Review Management Has Become an Operational Necessity

Review generation and management has become a systematic requirement rather than a passive hope. Customers expect to be asked for reviews and feedback, and companies that don't actively manage this process miss opportunities for ongoing marketing content creation.

Referral Programs Leverage Customer Advocacy

Referral program sophistication has increased among leading companies, with systematic tracking, meaningful incentives, and proactive promotion replacing informal, occasional requests for referrals.

Unfortunately, many tree care companies still operate without formal referral programs, missing opportunities to leverage their most valuable marketing asset: advocacy by satisfied customers.

Customers Become Informal Consultants for Their Networks

Customers have become unofficial consultants for their networks, sharing pricing information, provider recommendations, and service quality assessments. This informal consulting role means exceptional customer experiences can generate ongoing marketing value through repeated recommendations and community influence.

The timing, method, and follow-up frequency for requesting reviews significantly impact both the quantity and quality of customer-generated content. A single, impersonal request is no longer sufficient.

Potential customers **will** find the information they want, whether that's from the service provider, a neighbor, or an online platform. Companies that fail to control that narrative will find customers have unrealistic price and timing expectations, misperceptions about tree work, and a lower opinion of the company's value and expertise.



GAP 7. Payment Experience Revolution

Industry Assumption

Customers prefer to pay after work is complete, typically with cash or check, with payment processing being a simple administrative function.

Current Customer Reality

Today's customers expect multiple payment options, transparent payment terms, digital invoicing, financing availability, and convenient transaction processing as part of their overall service evaluation.

The traditional payment model assumed that customers would be satisfied with basic payment options and post-service billing. This assumption ignores the reality that payment experience has become a significant factor in customer satisfaction and provider selection, particularly for larger projects that strain household budgets.

Modern Payment Expectations

Multiple Payment Options Are Now A Customer Requirement

Payment option diversity has become a customer expectation, with modern consumers accustomed to choosing from multiple payment methods for all service transactions. Credit card processing, ACH transfers, digital wallets, and financing options are now considered standard rather than premium services.

Upfront Payment Clarity Builds Project Approval Confidence

Transparent payment terms and upfront pricing discussions have become essential for customer confidence and project approval. Customers want to understand payment schedules, deposit requirements, and final payment timing before work begins. This transparency reduces anxiety and builds trust, while unclear payment terms create customer concerns that can delay or prevent project approval.

Digital Invoicing Sets Professional Service Expectations

Digital invoicing with photo documentation has emerged as a professional standard that customers increasingly expect. Digital invoices that include before-and-after photos and detailed work descriptions create a positive impression and facilitate easy record-keeping.

In contrast, traditional paper invoicing appears less professional and creates inconvenience for customers who manage their finances digitally.

Financing Options Capture Projects That Exceed Immediate Budgets

Financing availability has become particularly important for larger tree care projects that may exceed immediate household budgets.

Companies that offer financing options can capture projects that might otherwise be delayed or cancelled due to budget constraints. This capability is especially valuable for emergency services where insurance coverage may be delayed or insufficient.

Systematic and Immediate Financial Documentation Influences Satisfaction

Payment confirmation and receipt systems that provide immediate transaction verification and digital record keeping align with customer expectations for professional service delivery.

Companies that provide systematic payment documentation and confirmation create a positive final impression, which influences customer satisfaction and the likelihood of a referral.

Credit card processing, ACH transfers, digital wallets, and financing options are now considered standard services.

Companies that offer only cash or check payments appear outdated and create inconvenience that influences customer selection decisions.



GAP 8. Ongoing Relationship Expectations

Industry Assumption

Complete the job, collect payment, and wait for the customer to contact the company again when they have another need.

Current Customer Reality

Customers increasingly expect ongoing advisory relationships with follow-up on tree health, maintenance recommendations, seasonal reminders, and easy re-engagement for future needs.

The traditional service model treated each project as a discrete transaction with minimal ongoing relationship maintenance. Companies focused on project completion and payment collection, assuming that satisfied customers would naturally return for future needs. This transactional approach ignores the reality that customers now expect ongoing value and relationship development from their service providers.

Advisory Relationship Development

Customers Want Partners, Not Just Service Providers

Advisory relationship expectations have emerged as customers seek providers who can help them understand and manage their tree care needs over time. Rather than just executing specific projects, customers want providers who can educate them about tree health, recommend preventive maintenance, and help them plan for future needs. This advisory role creates stronger customer relationships and higher lifetime value.

Seasonal Communication is the Expected Standard

Proactive communication about seasonal needs and maintenance opportunities has become a customer expectation rather than an intrusive sales tactic. Customers appreciate reminders about optimal timing for pruning, fertilization, and other maintenance activities.

Post-Service Care Drives Referrals

Follow-up on tree health and project outcomes demonstrates ongoing care and professionalism that customers value highly. Simple follow-up calls or emails to check on tree recovery, answer questions, and address concerns create positive impressions that influence customer satisfaction and referral likelihood. This follow-up also provides opportunities to identify and address any service quality issues before they become major problems.

Streamlined Re-Engagement Systems Create Competitive Advantage

Easy re-engagement systems that maintain customer information and preferences facilitate future service requests and create convenience that customers appreciate. Companies that remember customer preferences, property details, and service history can provide more efficient and personalized service for repeat customers.

This systematic approach to customer relationship management creates competitive advantages and higher customer retention rates for companies that embrace the processes and technology required to implement it.

Educational Content Builds Advisory Relationships

The ongoing relationship expectation includes educational content and seasonal advice that helps customers better understand and care for their trees.

Strategic Implications

These eight gaps collectively represent a fundamental shift in customer expectations that requires systematic adaptation on the part of tree service companies, rather than merely making incremental adjustments. Companies that continue operating with traditional assumptions will find themselves increasingly disadvantaged in customer acquisition and retention, while those that address these gaps systematically can achieve sustainable competitive advantages.

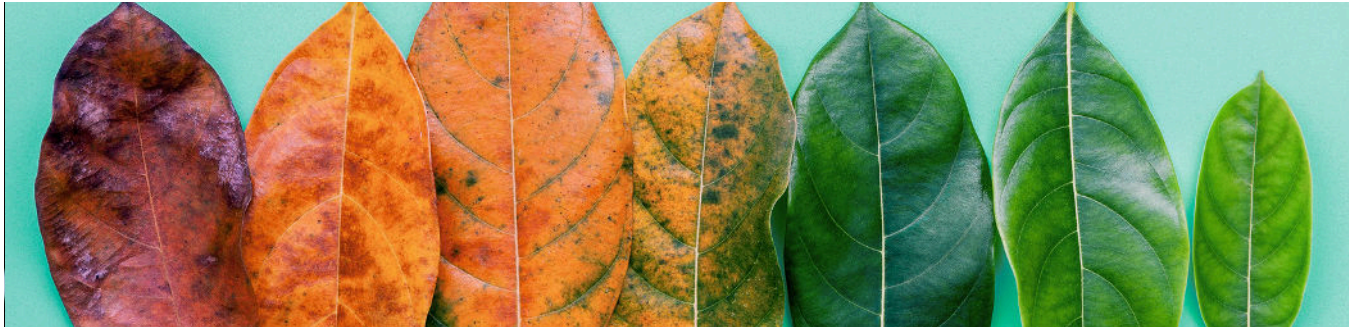
The evidence suggests that market consolidation will accelerate as performance differences between adaptive and traditional companies become more pronounced. Companies that recognize and address these gaps will position themselves for growth and potential acquisition opportunities, while those that resist adaptation may be forced out of business.

Understanding these gaps provides a framework for strategic planning and aids in prioritizing investments. By evaluating their current practices against these evolved customer expectations, companies can identify the most critical areas for improvement and develop systematic approaches to create competitive advantage.

Providing valuable, systematic, and seasonal information through newsletters, social media, or direct communication helps maintain customer awareness and trust while positioning companies as trusted advisors (rather than just service vendors), creating stronger customer loyalty and higher lifetime value.

Strategic Recommendations: Adapting to the New Customer Journey

How leading companies are closing the gaps and winning more customers



Digital Transformation Priorities

The foundation of successful adaptation to evolved customer behavior lies in comprehensive digital transformation that addresses customer needs throughout their research and decision-making process. Digital presence is no longer optional but essential for customer acquisition and competitive positioning in the modern marketplace.



Website development and optimization must prioritize mobile responsiveness, fast loading speeds, and comprehensive information accessibility. Today's customers demand detailed service descriptions, pricing guidelines, credential verification, and portfolio examples without having to make phone calls or fill out forms. Websites must function as 24/7 sales representatives, addressing common questions while building confidence in company professionalism.

Search engine optimization strategies must target local search terms and location-based queries that drive tree service discovery. "Tree service near me," "tree removal [city name]," and "arborist [location]" represent the highest-value search phrases for customer acquisition. Companies that develop content strategies around these search patterns, while providing educational value, demonstrate expertise and build customer trust.

Social media presence should prioritize visual content, educational information, and community engagement over promotional messaging. Before-and-after photos, process videos, and seasonal care tips create valuable content that influences customers during their research phase. Community engagement through local Facebook groups and Nextdoor participation enables companies to influence online discussions about recommended tree care providers and establish a local reputation.

Online review management requires a systematic approach to review generation, response, and reputation monitoring. Companies should:

- implement automated review request systems,
- respond professionally to **all** reviews, and
- monitor their online reputation across multiple platforms.

The quality and recency of reviews often matters more than quantity, requiring ongoing attention to customer experience and feedback generation.

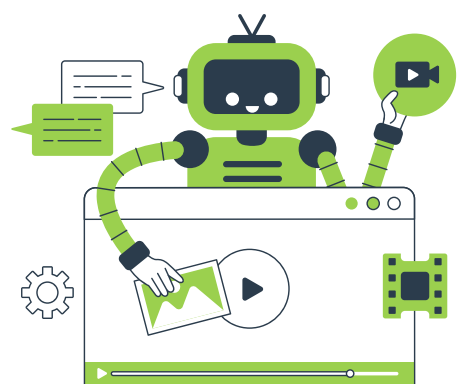
Digital communication systems should include:

- email marketing,
- text messaging capabilities, and
- automated follow-up sequences.

These systems enable companies to maintain customer engagement throughout extended decision timelines while providing ongoing value through educational content and seasonal reminders.

AI Optimization and Discovery

Get Found First: How AI-Powered Optimization Puts You Ahead of Competitors Still Playing the Old Marketing Game



AI platforms like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini, along with Google's AI Overviews, prioritize companies with a comprehensive and authoritative online presence, as well as consistent information across multiple platforms.

To do this effectively, companies should ensure their business information, services, credentials, and customer reviews appear consistently across their Google Business Profile(s), industry directories, professional association listings, local organizations' membership directories, and their website.

Creating detailed, educational content that answers common tree care questions positions companies as authoritative sources that AI systems reference when making recommendations.

Companies should also focus on earning mentions in local news articles, industry publications, and community websites, as AI platforms often reference these trusted sources when suggesting local service providers. Regular publication of expert content on tree care topics, safety practices, and seasonal maintenance helps establish an authoritative digital footprint that AI systems use to evaluate and recommend businesses to potential customers.

Customer Experience Redesign

The Total Experience Revolution:
How Convenience and Professionalism Now Outweigh Technical Expertise in Customer Selection Decisions



Comprehensive customer experience mapping is the starting point for identifying every customer touchpoint, from initial awareness through post-service follow-up. Systematic improvements, such as those described below, can then be designed to consistently exceed customer expectations at every stage of the new buyer's journey.

Response time optimization for initial inquiries should target same-day responses for all customer contacts, with automated acknowledgment systems providing immediate confirmation of inquiry receipt. Customers who have invested time in research expect prompt responses that acknowledge their preparation and address their specific concerns.

Quote development processes should provide detailed explanations of pricing factors, work scope, and value propositions, rather than simply listing total costs. Educational quotes that help customers understand the complexity and value of professional tree care create competitive advantages over companies that compete primarily on price.

Scheduling systems should offer flexible appointment options, reliable timing, and proactive communication about any changes or delays.

Online scheduling capabilities provide customer convenience while reducing administrative overhead for companies. Clear communication about arrival times and project duration helps customers plan their schedules and reduces anxiety about service delivery.

Communication protocols throughout service delivery should include project updates, photo documentation, and educational information about the work being performed. Customers appreciate understanding what work is being done and why, creating opportunities for companies to demonstrate expertise while building confidence in service quality.

Payment processing should offer multiple options, including credit cards, ACH transfers, digital wallets, and financing for larger projects. Modern customers expect convenient payment options and may select providers based on the available payment methods.

Digital invoicing with photo documentation creates professional impressions while facilitating easy record-keeping.

Technology Integration Strategies

Close the Digital Divide by Addressing the Technology Gaps Separating Market Leaders from Laggards



Post-service follow-up should include quality verification, maintenance recommendations, and ongoing relationship development, rather than just confirming project completion. This follow-up creates opportunities for additional services while demonstrating ongoing care and professionalism that influences customer satisfaction and referral likelihood.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems can systematically track customer interactions, preferences, and service history, directly improving service quality and strengthening relationships. Integrating these systems with scheduling, communication, and billing platforms enables seamless customer experiences that set companies apart.

Automated communication systems handle routine tasks, like appointment confirmations, service reminders, and follow-up requests while freeing staff to focus on more complex interactions. Companies that utilize smart automation maintain consistent communication without overburdening resources, enabling teams to focus on high-value customer relationships.

Mobile applications for field teams provide real-time updates, photo documentation, and instant communication, which builds customer confidence. Professional mobile tools not only create stronger impressions but also streamline operations and increase service transparency.

Drone technology provides significant advantages in property assessments and marketing. Drones enable safer and more thorough evaluations while generating compelling visual content that elevates marketing efforts above those of competitors still relying on traditional methods.

Digital documentation systems transform service delivery by capturing comprehensive before-and-after photos, detailed work procedures, and complete customer communications. This systematic approach strengthens quality control, enhances satisfaction, and provides legal protection while enabling better customer service for future interactions.

Financial management integration should connect scheduling, billing, and payment processing systems to reduce administrative overhead while improving cash flow management. Integrated systems enable better business intelligence and decision-making while reducing operational complexity.

Service Diversification and Specialization

Escape the Price Race: How
Smart Companies Use Service
Specialization to Command
Premium Pricing



Plant Health Care (PHC) program development creates ongoing revenue streams and stronger customer relationships through systematic tree health monitoring and treatment. PHC programs require an initial investment in training and equipment, but they generate higher customer lifetime value and retention rates.

Emergency response capabilities enable companies to command premium pricing during high-demand periods while building customer relationships that extend to planned maintenance services. Emergency response requires investment in equipment and personnel, but it also creates significant competitive advantages.

Specialized services, such as cabling, bracing, and root work, create differentiation opportunities and premium pricing potential. These services require specialized training and equipment but address customer needs that general tree services cannot meet.

Maintenance program packages that bundle multiple services and touchpoints create predictable revenue streams while providing customer convenience and value. Annual contracts reduce acquisition costs, improve cash flow predictability, and increase retention rates significantly.

Consultation and advisory services that help customers understand and plan their tree care needs create additional revenue opportunities while positioning companies as trusted experts rather than just service vendors. Companies providing educational services build stronger relationships and create natural opportunities for ongoing sales of services.

Seasonal service packages that address specific timing needs and customer planning cycles create marketing opportunities while optimizing capacity utilization. Companies offering winter removal, spring preparation, and fall cleanup programs can better manage demand fluctuations while meeting the natural needs of their customers.

Relationship Management Systems

Turn Customers Into Community Advocates by Building Systematic Referral Machines in the Social Media Age



Systematic customer communication programs should provide ongoing value through educational content, seasonal reminders, and maintenance recommendations rather than just promotional messaging and sales pitches. Companies that maintain regular, valuable contact stay top-of-mind, creating natural opportunities for additional services.

Referral programs with meaningful incentives and systematic tracking dramatically increase customer acquisition. Companies offering substantial rewards with organized promotion and follow-up protocols see significant growth from satisfied customer advocacy.

Customer segmentation enables the development of customized approaches for different client types. Companies that recognize the distinct needs of residential, commercial, and emergency customers achieve better results across all segments.

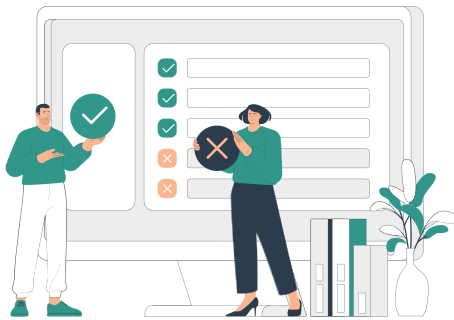
Lifetime value optimization through cross-selling, upselling, and retention programs creates sustainable competitive advantages and improved profitability. Companies that focus on long-term customer value, rather than individual transactions, consistently outperform those that prioritize transactions.

Community engagement strategies that position companies as local experts and community members create relationship advantages that extend beyond individual customer interactions. Participation in local events, educational seminars, and community organizations helps build a strong reputation and generate referral opportunities.

Customer feedback systems that capture satisfaction data and improvement suggestions enable continuous service enhancement while demonstrating customer care. Companies systematically collecting and responding to feedback create deeper engagement while gaining actionable intelligence for service enhancement.

Professional Development and Certification

Build Credibility in a Trust Crisis: Why Professional Standards Are Your Best Defense Against the Low-Cost, Uninsured, and Unlicensed Providers



ISA Certified Arborist certification for key personnel establishes immediate credibility and enables premium market positioning. Certified arborists demonstrate professional commitment while delivering technical expertise that directly improves service quality and builds customer confidence.

Safety training programs that surpass industry minimums create distinct competitive advantages while reducing liability risks and insurance costs. Companies implementing comprehensive safety protocols demonstrate professionalism while protecting both employees and customers from potential hazards.

Investing in continuing education keeps companies current with emerging techniques, advances in equipment, and industry developments. Companies that prioritize ongoing education demonstrate a professional commitment, gaining competitive advantages through superior service quality and enhanced customer confidence.

Industry association participation opens up networking opportunities, provides educational resources, and enhances credibility, which directly supports business development. Companies actively engaging with TCIA, ISA, and local or state associations build valuable professional connections while accessing continuous learning opportunities.

Customer service training ensures all customer-facing personnel deliver consistent, professional interactions that build confidence and satisfaction. Companies implementing systematic training in communication, problem-solving, and customer relations gain competitive advantages through superior customer experiences.

Business management education for owners and managers drives better strategic decision-making and operational efficiency. Professional development in marketing, finance, and operations management directly improves business performance and unlocks growth potential.

Conclusion: The Future of Tree Care Customer Acquisition

Adaptation is no longer optional. Tree service companies that make the necessary changes to create a customer acquisition system that works in 2025 and beyond will thrive in the evolving market and position themselves for long-term success. Those that don't, will be left behind.

The tree care industry has reached a turning point where customer expectations have evolved far beyond what most companies deliver. The eight critical gaps identified in this analysis—from the invisible research phase to ongoing relationship management—reveal exactly where the industry must evolve to survive. Companies that systematically address these fundamental shifts in customer behavior will operate in a completely different competitive landscape than those still relying on outdated assumptions.

Market consolidation will accelerate as performance gaps widen between adaptive and traditional companies. Private equity investment and roll-up strategies are already targeting this fragmented market, creating intensifying competitive pressure. Companies that adapt successfully can either compete effectively with larger operators or position themselves as attractive acquisition targets. Those that fail to adapt risk being forced out of the market.

The window for adaptation is narrowing rapidly. Early adopters of customer experience excellence and digital transformation are establishing market positions that will be difficult to overcome. While the investment required for successful transformation is significant, it is achievable and delivers strong ROI potential from improved customer acquisition, retention, and lifetime value.

Tree care companies must choose between leading this change or being left behind by it—the time for incremental change has passed.