

# Why You Should Charge For Consultations

A consideration for implementing consulting services at your tree care company.

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Mrs. VanKamp called me to find out what was wrong with her tree. It was mid-May and she said that leaves were falling from it as if it were October. “They shouldn’t be doing that now, right?” she asked with some concern. I told her, “No, they shouldn’t be,” and thanked her for calling. I told her I’d come by tomorrow to determine what the problem was. The next day, I drove out to Mrs. VanKamp’s home and discovered she owned a large white oak located in the very center of her front yard. Just as she’d described, there were splotchy leaves scattered across the lawn. Looking up at the tree’s canopy, there would be more leaves soon to follow.

Fortunately for her, the oak only had a mild case of anthracnose, a seasonal fungal issue for white oaks in the Midwest which is rarely (if ever) fatal. I explained to Mrs. VanKamp that her tree was in no danger of dying and that the dropping of the leaves would pass when the weather warmed in another month. She was elated and grateful to hear the news. “How much do I owe you?” she asked, since it was clear that I had made the trip out there to diagnose the problem and would drive away with nothing to show for it in return. (Her oak needed no pruning and was otherwise in great health.) At the time, we didn’t charge for making “house calls,” not even for first-time callers. I remember thinking it was nice of Mrs. VanKamp to offer to pay us. I also wondered why we weren’t charging for the service call.

## **Setting the table**

Who hasn’t spent an hour — or more — with a potential client, advised them on how best to address their tree care needs and then walked away empty-handed? Part of the job, right? But there are occasions when our recommendations are given to another tree care company (without the prices attached, we hope) and they write a successful bid using our specs. Not only does all our time and labor go for naught, it’s used against us. Worse, I’ve walked the grounds with property managers, sat down with them afterward to discuss the evaluation and given them an idea of what those recommendations might cost them, only to hear, “We don’t really have a budget for that, but thank you for your time. I appreciate the advice.” You leave the site thinking, “There’s an hour — or more — of my life I’ll never get back.” It’s moments like these where we seriously think about sending them an invoice for our time.

## **Making the case**

It’s not an unreasonable idea. Over the years, you’ve acquired a wealth of knowledge. You’ve learned how to clearly communicate that knowledge to the public. You offer thorough, well-organized and scientifically sound recommendations, likely attached with your costs to deliver the prescribed services. So, are you giving your hard-earned expertise away? Probably, if you believe the statistics — few tree care companies charge for their evaluations. Plumbers charge for service calls. Electricians and cable companies do, too. So, why aren’t we?

## **Our road map to consulting**

Our company covers a large geographical area and our sales staff was spending half of its time on the road. To at least recover some of the travel expenses, we decided 25 years ago to charge a nominal fee for tree care inspections from first-time callers (only for those people located more than 20 miles away). We did so for a six-month trial period, but tree removal and pruning estimates were still

provided at no charge.

What had made us reluctant to charge for our time previously was the risk of potential clients saying no. We feared we might lose business. “The other guys don’t charge for estimates,” was the oft-heard concern.

What we quickly learned, however, was that homeowners rarely said no to the inspection fee. In fact, the fee not only eliminated the tire-kickers, but it also enhanced our credibility. We found that clients took our advice more seriously when they had to pay for it. Our close rates also increased.

With that success under our belts, we decided to start asking a fee for the more specialized consults – including those closer to home – such as tree risk assessments, tree management plans and when asked to diagnose the more complicated tree health issues. Callers, once again, rarely balked at the fee. They believed our recommendations were more credible when it came with a price tag.

Within five years, we gained enough confidence to form an entire consulting division within our company.

### **Road blocks along the way**

The idea that we might need to make our reports or proposals look more professional if we charged for them was a concern to us. We worried we might need to wrap our billable, written recommendations into some sort of glossy, photo-enhanced, more professional-looking package.

And we did find that to be true. The question then became, “Would that be so bad?”

Charging for consults did indeed cause us to upgrade how we presented our reports and proposals.

Charging for consults also caused us to be more judicious about our advice, as well as to be more aware of the pitfalls. The benefit to that wasn’t just a better work product, we also discovered our reputation improved within the community. Clientele seeking a better tree care company sought us out, and told us so.

Another hesitation was the fear that we could be held liable for providing paid advice if that advice was wrong or misunderstood. Yet, we were already being held liable for that advice, whether we charged for it or not. The perception — right or wrong — is that personnel who work at a tree care company know trees. It’s been my experience that the courts see little difference between free advice and paid advice from tradesmen.

In my opinion, the concern that should give us the most pause is, “Are we qualified to charge for our advice?”

Perhaps you shouldn’t charge a fee. If you’re not qualified to offer expert advice, then asking to be paid is inappropriate. Charging a fee isn’t a shortcut to becoming an expert. It’s one thing to be paid an inspection fee to cover travel costs. It’s quite another to be paid for the advice itself.

This is particularly true when charging for consulting services such as tree risk assessments, tree appraisals, diagnostic calls or providing expert witness testimony. Before charging for these types of consults, I strongly recommend finding some training and/or a mentor who already provides these services.

I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to seek out knowledgeable people that know the consulting ropes. As with any other business, a little wise advice at the start can save a lot of headaches down the road. An organization such as the **International Society of Arboriculture** or the **American Society of Consulting Arborists** can be of tremendous help, as can your regional trade association or university extension service.

One of the best workshops is ASCA’s Consulting Academy, which is typically a three- or four-day event that’s taught by some of the best tree consultants in the nation. If you feel you might be ready to offer some of the more involved consulting services, this workshop is a must.

By seeking out other respected consultants, you’ll have the opportunity to ask them, “How did you get started?” “How do you figure out how much to charge?” “Have you found consulting financially rewarding?” “How do you avoid the conflict of interest dilemma?”

## Talking about a conflict

The conflict of interest issue is one that needs to be addressed. When we work for a tree care company, there's an inherent conflict of interest when we charge homeowners for our recommendations and then turn around and ask them to pay us additional monies to deliver them.

There are two basic approaches to this issue. You can either:

- Charge a consulting fee only when you don't provide the recommended services, or
- Fully disclose the conflict of interest when you ask to be paid for your advice and for the services you propose.

There comes a time in the life of every tree care company when it considers charging for advice, or when employees have reached the point where they've grown tired of giving their knowledge away.

When that day arrives, I suggest:

- **Test the water first:** Do a trial run by asking for a nominal inspection fee. Establish your own distance radius or consult service you want paid for.
- **Learn the trade:** Seek the advice of other consultants. Seek out seminars, workshops and classes to hone your skills.
- **Grow into it:** Offer those consulting services you're competent at. Learn the ones you aren't competent at.

This process will make you a better arborist and your company will feel like it's been upgraded. Your community will feel the same way about you, too.