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STRIKING BALANCE.

In Nassau County, Long Island, N.Y., Greg Bashaw has a less formal word-of-mouth program, but doesn't avoid discussing it with his customers. But the CEO of Fairway Landscape Snow Management says there's a careful balance between promoting a referral program and appearing to buy off a client.

While Bashaw, who says about 25 percent of his new business comes from referrals, will reward customers who refer his company, he keeps that aspect of the program low key, maybe by sending his customer a gift certificate at Christmas. He also doesn't give his customers a script. "We don't give them a list of things to say," he says. "I'd rather it be true and honest."

Another of Bashaw's policies is to not include the referral program in his con-

tracts. "You write something in there, the first thing people ask themselves is why couldn't the contract be lower in the first place," he says.

Aside from putting the company's logo and contact information on the sides of its trucks, word of mouth is the only form of marketing Bashaw does. More traditional forms of advertising, including print and broadcast, don't specifically target the commercial customers he's looking for.

REFERRAL GOLD MINE.

Tim Johnson uses a different technique to gain referrals. About a year and a half ago, Johnson, the owner of West Michigan Home and Lawn Care, joined the Grand Rapids chapter of the business networking group BNI (www.bni.com). The invitation-only group meets weekly to discuss busi-

ness development, and serves as a gold mine for referrals.

The group of about 20 businesses – there's one per sector – agree to refer other members in discussions with friends and clients. The only requirement is members attend the weekly seminars and pay dues of \$350 per year and \$50 per quarter. The investment, Johnson says, is well worth it.

"It pays for itself within the first minute you're in the group," he says. "I'd say we probably do \$150,000 per month in business just from the BNI group."

Johnson, who was invited by the printing company he works with, says BNI referrals are high quality. "✱"

Craig Gaines is a frequent contributor to Snow Magazine.

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