

# LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

## THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE



Stuck in the middle between designer and client, **Robert Webber** finds himself increasingly frustrated by those not willing to give credit where it's due

So, RHS Chelsea is over and anyone who has been involved will undoubtedly be sitting back and counting the cost. It's an expensive business to be involved as a contractor at Chelsea, but worth the effort if success comes your way.

This is now our busiest time of the year. Back to back scheduled commissions and longer, lighter days mean our workload increases by 100% compared to the winter months. Being busy brings a whole new set of pressures to any small business.

I didn't want to rant about anything this month but I find myself stuck in the middle of designers and clients at the moment. Issues caused by one word: specification. I've spent the last four weeks costing ten projects that have had no specification. All of these projects have been over £100k build for the landscapers and approximately £15-20k lighting build for us. We haven't won any of them, despite writing a full lighting specification, designing the infrastructure for the client, mocking up lighting effects and advising the

landscapers on possible conduit positions. I've found that either the designer or the client has 'taken' our expertise and design and gone elsewhere, using other contractors to install to our design and cost from our specification.

I don't feel hard done by, but it's such a disrespect when we do everything for the designer to make them look good and bring out the best in their design for them to virtually 'steal' our expertise. I'm now caught in two minds whether or not to charge for our quotes, which sounds ridiculous. There is an easy solution. Either pay us to write a specification

“ EITHER PAY US TO WRITE A SPECIFICATION FOR YOU OR WRITE ONE YOURSELF SO THAT ALL CONTRACTORS HAVE A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD TO COST BY ”

for you or write one yourself so that all contractors have a level playing field to cost by. Maybe our 'design process' can help you?

More often than not, the client wants lighting but doesn't know where to start. Obviously we help them by gaining an understanding of how they use their garden, and this information formulates the basis of our solution. Different clients have completely differing needs, there is rarely a 'one size fits all' solution.

The next area to tackle is budget. Over the last ten years I could count on one hand the number of designers who have actually given us a budget in their brief. Don't be scared to talk to the client about money, after all it's possibly the biggest decision factor. Unrealistic expectation regarding costs is the only reason

we ever lose a commission.

To help clients, we talk about similar projects and show example images, revealing actual charges for those projects so there is no illusion as to what a properly designed and installed lighting scheme costs. Then we cover different manufacturers and lighting effects and fittings. In our experience we have found that there isn't one manufacturer that makes a perfect range of light fittings across all external disciplines and effects. Our challenge is keeping symmetry between quality, LED colour and longevity of enjoyment.

From those key areas of a discussion we can formulate a competitive design solution. We can simply mark up a plan and present these back to the client giving detailed costs for each area so they fully understand how the overall figure adds up.

We always include one year's maintenance so virtually any failure of a lamp or damaged cable can be rectified for the client during the first year.

David Dodd wrote a fantastic article a few months ago in Pro Landscaper, commenting on how to share the praise that you get with all of those involved in building the garden. So together, let's make the process seamless and enjoyable for all. It's such a small world, building and maintaining gardens at the highest level. Relationships and working together is key. This should set our industry apart because we love what we do and are committed to keeping our standards far above all others.

### ABOUT ROBERT WEBBER

Robert Webber is the founder of Scenic Lighting, a specialist exterior lighting company based in Berkshire. He designs and installs garden lighting throughout the UK and internationally. Robert can be contacted on [rob@sceniclighting.com](mailto:rob@sceniclighting.com) or via his mobile on 07766 051000. [www.sceniclighting.com](http://www.sceniclighting.com)

