

# TRUST IN the Process



**Clients can lose faith for various reasons, but it's possible to earn or regain their trust, says Rae Wilkinson**

“*It teaches entire trust*” — the late Gertrude Jekyll, on gardens being a great teacher.

Having been involved in creating gardens for a few decades now, I have learnt over the years the importance of trust within this work. Trust in the plants, the soil, the materials within a garden, trust in nature, trust in those we work with and trust in the design and planning process throughout. Paramount in all of this is the trust which exists between designers, contractors and clients while we are working our way through our processes, and how beneficial achieving this can be to all of us along the way.

Whichever part of the landscape service process we provide, our clients are investing not only in their landscape but in their confidence in our work. Trust therefore is an important key asset that underpins everything from engagement to retention, reputation to referrals and ultimately to truly successful progression and completion of projects.

In our industry, trust could almost be seen as the very soil in which every successful client, contractor or supplier relationship can take root.

As we know, trust generally needs to be earned by our actions and outcomes, and it is great if it is already a given, but what if a lack of it comes primarily from external factors or events which have preceded us? Many of us may have witnessed a noticeable shift in recent times in levels of suspicion from

some new clients at the start of communications or at proposal and pricing phase.

There are likely to be various factors to this, the key factor being the financial climate and a common runner-up being negative past experience, or perhaps from a lack of recent experience in working with designers and contractors.

Interestingly, in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* a study involving a comparison of distrust versus suspicion revealed that within business interactions suspicion can actually present “benefits for generating information search and attaining integrative agreements in negotiation.

So, perhaps if we reframe what we are being presented with, we can work to provide depth and clarity of

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information whilst also working on gaining the benefit of trust along the way.

Let's look at the key factors here for a better understanding of how we could look to approach this.

**Financial climate**  
There is nothing we can do about the financial climate of our times, but with costs and levels of uncertainty rising it is more important than ever to manage expectations.

We all want to create the best garden possible for our clients with optimum materials, hopefully sustainably and perhaps achieving something impressive or sublime. Unfortunately, wish lists are seldom aligned to budgets at the outset, so we need to manage this from the very first meeting by discussing budgets and expectations openly. A pricing phase is often a precursor to paring back the design as costs globally continue to rise higher and higher – so make sure this has been clearly discussed to avoid potential frustration or disappointment.

**Negative previous experience**  
Some clients have had their fingers burned in the past, perhaps by a consultant or contractor, and this colours their approach to their ventures moving forward. A lot of the work we have to do, at the start of a project particularly, is to gain trust – and this can be hard to win in these situations. Honesty, transparency and warmth are often the best things to focus on. These clients may need as much hand holding or even more than those who are new to the game.

As outlined by the likes of author Rich Diviney, there are four key attributes which can lead to trust: Competency, Consistency, Integrity and Compassion. We can focus on the areas where these sit within the work that we do to ensure we are presenting the best service we can to our clients.

**Communication**  
Communication is better than silence – let your client know what is happening every step of the way.

**Transparency**  
Be upfront about processes, timelines and costs. Clients may not like the information, but they will ultimately appreciate it.

**Consistency**  
Responses, communication and delivery of works should always be consistent. Clients like to know what they are getting.

**Honesty**  
Be truthful about what is achievable and what is required. Do what you say you are going to do, and if you can't, do something and tell them why.

**Own mistakes**  
If something hasn't happened or an error has been made, be honest and, if necessary, show that you are working on a solution. People will always appreciate and respect ownership of a mistake rather than being misled or witnessing finger pointing.

**Counting the cost**  
We've all been battling spiralling costs in the past few years amidst a very uncertain financial climate, and this has added another layer of complexity to some recent projects.

When it comes to unexpected and additional cost implications, the negative response can very quickly turn to blame or disengagement – even when everything was going well previously.

Transparency right from the start is probably the best way to move through this process – not an easy approach when you are trying to sell something, but perhaps the only way if true trust is to be established.

**Teamwork makes the dream work**  
Creating beautiful new or reimagined gardens, as we know, can involve a team of skilled and dedicated people. It goes without saying that when we can work well as a team, we can deliver the best results – so trust in this scenario is also key. Fostering good relations with those we will be working with – contractors, architects, designers, craftspeople, gardeners and suppliers – will always enable a better process and usually bring good results. For the client, seeing the team work together in an aligned way will enable their own process of trust to establish, allowing works to unfold more smoothly and hopefully avoiding additional stress. Building trust requires reliability, and showing clients that you value them as people,

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not just revenue, through consistent high-quality service and open communication will usually pave the way for a better outcome for the project and potentially an even happier client.



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