



Getting Paid

Actually, the hardest thing for most trimmers to catch isn't a recalcitrant horse. Instead, it is that little three-by-six inch piece of paper known as a check. It is not that horse owners dislike the idea of parting with their money, for annually they are more than likely to part with hundreds of dollars for the latest in saddle pads, vitamins, and the equine version of psychoanalysis. But somehow they hate handing it over to someone who charges like a doctor, smells like a ferret, and shows up nearly as often as the milkman. So naturally trimming bills are eaten by the dog, flushed down the toilet, or lost in the vast purgatory of the U.S. postal system. And well, when things disappear, they naturally cease to be annoying; at least to the horse owner.

Part of the problem can be found floating in that vast ocean of priorities - the kind that horse owners develop shortly after the horse moves in. At the top of the list comes a new Hermes saddle. Then comes the vet bill, the hay bill, the shavings bill, Tuffy's vitamins, having the septic tank pumped, surgery on the cat, fake fingernails, a new aerobic suit, and finally trimmer. But that is up to the fifteenth of the month. Anything after that is automatically deferred until the first of the following month, as too much check writing could lead to arthritic wrists - a condition that is bound to cut into the golf swing. Besides, trimmers have other clients, and they probably paid this month. Didn't they?

A negative cash flow has a profound influence on all aspects of a trimmer's life. It means fewer trips to the chiropractor, less chrome on the new truck, postponing that root canal operation for a while, and the disappointing fact that broken parts will actually have to be fixed instead of replaced. All of these may contribute to the notion that having your own business is a lot like having a porcupine sleep on your bed. Everything's fine until you roll over. Most trimming businesses fall into two main categories: The cash-and-dash system, and the thirty-day account. The cash-and-dash system leaves little to the imagination. The horse is trimmed, the owner chased down and cornered and with a little intimidating body language, the bill is paid. The thirty-day account system is not quite as direct. While it has a certain degree of sophisticated elegance to its operation, people invariably confuse its concept with something that the Easter bunny left behind. And it certainly wasn't the egg.

Thirty-day accounts are usually the result of favorable circumstances. As a trimmer's business develops over time, more and more large or commercial accounts are absorbed. These usually involve breeding farms or show barns, and most are run approximately the same as any other business. They demand credit, expect privileges, and from a standpoint of productivity for either party in the relationship, easily have a legitimate claim to those needs. And too, most bookkeepers are trained to write checks only on the first day of a month. It has something to do with their religion.

Clients at these establishments generally belong to the same faith. The only difference is that they skip the check writing part altogether. And of course, the richer the client, the slower the process - a concept that has very little to do with wealth by itself. It is instead a by-product of wealth. Rich people



simply fail to notice the finer points of poverty.

Bills that never get paid are usually in a different class. Most are the result of poor organization, bad communication, unexpected results, shattered expectations, or lame horses. All of which may have something to do with the trimmer or absolutely nothing to do with the trimmer. But they all affect the trimmer.

The first word in billing is organization. Records must be accurate, legible, up to date and available. This means that your business is now mature enough in its development for the "attaché case." It need not be so fancy that someone could mistake it for Steven Spielberg's, but it should be large enough to hold an alphabetized index, statements and envelopes, a few pens and a box of band-aids. All invoices should be made in duplicate, and outstanding copies filed in the case, which can easily travel from vehicle to office to farm. Statements can either be mailed, or left directly at the barns, with copies easily accessible for discussion or review.

Outstanding accounts should experience such a review every thirty days, and if necessary re-billed with the appropriate additional charges. State laws both restrict and allow finance charges or fees on all indebtedness carried past thirty days. The same interest and fees that a trimmer pays for a gold card may also be attached to a trimming bill. Unfortunately though, most are confined to 0.1% per month or, on an average shoeing bill of \$75.00, no more than \$.75 per month. This is hardly enough to warrant the stamp on the envelope. This has led many businessmen to abandon finance charges in favor of less restrictive "late fees," which may easily be levied at five to ten percent of the original bill. These tend to speed the collection process along, while discouraging the client from "borrowing money from the trimmer." Seventy-five cents a month on a seventy five dollar loan is cheap by any standard, and should offer the equity that is equivalent to the credit habits of the individual. And if it is steep enough, it will rarely need to be used more than once.

No account should be allowed to linger quietly more than three months. It certainly should not be serviced after three months regardless of its size or importance, as any lack in promptness or responsibility is a signal of trouble. And as any sailor can tell you, it is better to get off a ship as it is sinking rather than after it has already sunk.

Once an account does hit bottom you can contract the services of a good collection agency. While the idea that the horse world is too small, or the debt too meager, collection still offers a valid resource for recovering a legitimate debt from a legitimate debtor. And the fact that they are a horse owner should have little to do with the decision. Most collection agencies operate on a system of gentle intimidation. Unlike years past, many states have put strict limits on the amount and type of coercion that most agencies may employ. Big hairy guys named Bruno that specialize in limb removal have been replaced by well-lit offices full of computers and phones. These agencies also supply their customers with well-organized, informative portfolios that are designed to speed the process along. These kits also contain items and infor-



mation that may help to eliminate collection proceedings by putting the tools of intimidation into the hands of the trimmer. And many of these last-ditch gimmicks do finally open someone's wallet, which naturally adds confidence to a trimmer ability to ultimately get paid.

But remember to follow the rules. Accounts should be billed at each thirty-day period. Once the three-month period has been reached, a "Notice of Collection" should be attached to a statement or sent as a cover letter along with the overdue bill. The letter or statement should be sent to the client by registered mail, with a return-receipt card attached. It should also contain a two-week ultimatum on collection proceedings. It may seem like a case of courtesy overkill, but the courts have proven over and over that even criminals and deadbeats have rights. And without acknowledging or acting in accordance with those rights, the entire collection process is jeopardized. As a general rule, collection agencies will take one-half of your outstanding bill for their services, and will go as far as taking the client to court. They are also very strict in their rules. Once an account has been assigned to collection, the trimmer is out of the picture. Even if the client repents and decides to pay up in order to save their credit rating, they are already in the hands of the wolves. It is then up to them to come to some sort of settlement with the agency.

Most cases are solved prior to entering the judicial system, and in fact are best solved before reaching that point. While the trimmer may be absolutely correct in his or her demand for payment, a courtroom will shift the emphasis on proof to the trimmer. In cases of poor paperwork, disputed services, or a varying opinion on the results of the job, a trimmer may suddenly find himself on the wrong side of the discussion. Be prepared to win the case, but also be very prepared to lose it.

Lastly, make every effort to avoid these situations by maintaining concise, accurate accounts, open and courteous relations with clients, and a good grasp of the necessary intuition needed to avoid the type of people that chronically abuse the system. And when those attributes fail you then get a good agency, because the only thing you may collect in the end is a little satisfaction. And you are at least entitled to that.

U
N
O
A
L
L
A
V
O
L
T
A
—
O
N
E
A
T
I
M
E