

# **The Guide to Services & Service Providers**

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Consumer Awareness in Landscape Lighting

Written by: Mark Carlson

5/20/2019

**The Experiential Landscape Lighting Initiative**  
[www.landscapelightinginitiative.org](http://www.landscapelightinginitiative.org)

# **Services & Service Provider Awareness**

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	Pg. 3
<b>Purpose of Guide</b>	Pg. 4
<b>Quality</b>	Pg. 5
<b>Standards &amp; Practices</b>	Pg. 6
<b>Consumer Awareness</b>	Pg. 7
<b>Contractor-Designer Awareness</b>	Pg. 11
<b>Service Provider Selection</b>	Pg. 13
<b>High-Quality Service Expectations</b>	Pg. 13
• <b>Landscape Lighting Designers</b>	Pg. 14
• <b>Landscape Lighting Contractors</b>	Pg. 18
• <b>Final Thoughts</b>	Pg. 20

# INTRODUCTION

This Guide is a professional approach to providing trade insights and simplified information to the consumer market. Currently, the lighting industry, as well as the landscape lighting trade has not properly addressed how to do this. The consumer needs access to easy-to-understand information. This aspect alone is a huge disservice to the public.

The **Experiential Landscape Lighting Initiative (ELLI)** is a consumer-friendly, educational provider, which exists to ensure the understanding and importance of good landscape lighting. Its goal is to provide information, and to provide a means to measure good from bad and right from wrong.

Unfortunately, what has been the general practice to educate the public has been poor. The current offering of educational materials is either too comprehensive or too basic and lacking necessary detail. Therefore, this leaves the consumer confused and/or misguided. The public let alone the tradesperson wants to spend extra time trying to figure it all out. This is where ELLI comes in, as a resource to all parties.

**This Guide** is part of a series of documents that provides information on **Service and Service Providers**. It should serve the consumer with a means to understand and to compare what is being offered by each service provider. This offering will allow the consumer the ability to make the best decision with regards to Quality, Experience, and Services. Additionally, it will address Costs and Concerns within the practice.

We ALL should look to “raise the bar” in this type of work. Understanding and knowing the difference will naturally do this—it will erode the base of poor performing providers, so that they either enhance their offerings or they fail. It will liken itself to the ‘Natural Selection’ process. The benefits are: 1) better lighting design, 2) performing lighting systems, and 3) better professionals.

Please visit the **Experiential Landscape Lighting Initiative (ELLI)** website for more educational content at: <https://www.landscapelightinginitiative.org>.

By Mark Carlson  
ELLI Administrator  
Owner/Lighting Designer at Avalon Lighting Design  
Orangevale, CA, USA

## PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

The primary purpose of this Guide is **to educate and inform** the public about the varying degrees of service providers within the landscape lighting trade. Unfortunately, many contractors and specifiers have taken advantage of the consumer's lack of knowledge. This guide is intended to provide insight and information, so that the consumer can avoid these problems.

The purpose of this guide is to offer enough information **to 'measure'** the landscape lighting designer, as well as the contractor of the installation services. If the consumer understands what is acceptable and what is the higher level of quality, then they can successfully maneuver between bidders. This act alone will raise the bar.

When consumers are unaware of practices and lack knowledge, they can only rely on the service provider's word. Some are trustworthy, but many are not. Are you willing to take that risk?

Service provider selection is and can be challenging. This is because so many make grand claims about their abilities. The consumer must verify who is legitimate versus who is not. Unfortunately, there is no database available on service providers. Consumers should be hesitant to trust companies like, Angie's List, Service Magic, and even the B.B.B. The reason for this is because each of the service providers listed must pay as a member—this form of approval and acceptance allows most anyone to get in. Once in, they are considered, "qualified," but you need to ask, "Qualified by who?" Most likely it's a customer service or sales rep, who has little or no experience about this trade and practice.

Note: The truth is that you will never find the 'best in the business' through these types of services—these types are busy and working through their own referral network. The majority of the providers using these services are typically new to the business, or they are looking to stay busy with anything available.

This guide will provide the following information:

- **Defining 'Quality,'** as related to services & service providers.
- **Consumer Awareness** of the problems associated with providers in this trade practice.
- **Identifying Standards & Practices**
- **Contractor-Designer Awareness** to the expectations they.

The goal here is to provide enough information to allow the consumer to make wise decisions in selecting the service provider. This can only be done by awareness and education.

## QUALITY

Quality is a broad term and it's defined in a couple of ways:

*“The standard of something as measured against other items of a similar kind”*

*“A distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something”*

It is for this reason that we must better understand what it means in the landscape lighting realm. As we look at service or service providers, we need to ascertain how quality exists within this facet of lighting design and installation. Once this is understood, then the consumer can effectively measure between providers. The quality level of service can effectively impact the budget of a project. Therefore, the greater the experience one has, the higher the cost.

The consumer needs to pay close attention to the parameter of Experience. There are three **means to measure** quality in this parameter:

**PERFORMANCE**—Every service provider has a track record unless they are new to the business. One's track record is a point of measure in past performance. It's highly suggested that you contact some of the past references provided by these service providers. The following questions are examples to use:

- **How was it working with this provider?** Was it easy, professional, and to schedule? This last part is important, because many do not keep to schedules well.
- **Did the job cost change once the contract was signed?** This is mentioned because some are known to start the job at a lower cost only to later say that more lights are needed to fulfill the design, or that certain things were not planned for.

Note: There are always unknowns associated with landscape lighting. If they are associated with the earth work, such as, trenching, rocks/boulders, tree roots, etc., then these are more or less, acceptable. However, not knowing what's necessary to install the proposed number of lights is not acceptable.

- **Are they pleased with the design, installation, and follow-up services?** Again, this last part is important because many do not plan for follow-up services or routine maintenance.

**KNOWLEDGE**—This can be understood in a couple of ways; Education, Training, or Work experience. Schools provide a limited amount of education. There are training seminars, certifications, and on-line courses available, too. Work experience is just that, the number of years the provider has been performing the trade or profession.

Each of these experiences should be utilized for comparative purposes against the other providers.

**SKILLS**—These are the learned trade skills necessary to perform the work. This measure comes into play by understanding who has the best experience for your type of project. This is very important, because not all providers will fit every scenario.

Note: For example, if you have a property that's forested or has many trees, you would be best to hire someone who has similar types of work. If a service provider's photos only represent works done by illuminating the home's architecture, then they are likely not so familiar with this form of lighting.

There are many aspects to landscape lighting which are overlooked. Most of these include the installation of light fixtures. Some of these challenges are associated with structural elements, concrete, masonry, water features, and trees, and each of these require specialized skills for a positive outcome. If the service provider cannot prove he/she has done this type of work before, then this should be a 'red-flag' to you.

## **STANDARDS & PRACTICES**

The definition of a Standard and Practice are listed below:

***Practice***—“A method, procedure, process or rule used in a particular profession; a set of these are regarded as a Standard.”

***Standard***—“A universal or widely accepted, agreed upon, or established means of determining what something should be; a written definition, limit, or rule approved and monitored for compliance by an authoritative agency.”

Unfortunately, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) has yet to establish any standards to fully govern the landscape lighting profession. However, there are safety standards for the equipment used. Additionally, there are documents and guides that act to identify what's acceptable, 'good' practice.

Licensing is another form of statewide control over the practices used by a contractor. Unfortunately, each of the states within our country does not utilize a common set of requirements. This lack of uniform control allows the practice to do as they please. The ELLI initiative is the first effort to provide some form of control in this aspect of landscape lighting. There is an association group, the Association of Outdoor Lighting Professionals (AOLP) that provides some measure of betterment in this area, but it is still

lacking. Until a larger, highly recognized authority steps in to ensure this level of management, the Experiential Landscape Lighting Initiative will act to lead in this effort.

Please visit the ELLI website for all current Guides:

<https://www.landscapelightinginitiative.org>.

## **CONSUMER AWARENESS**

Awareness, as it applies to the consumer is knowing what's right versus what is wrong. Most consumers get taken advantage of because they do not know much about the profession or the subject matter. The following is advice on how to protect yourself against poor service providers.

The following items are those in which some service providers take advantage of. In order to avoid this, the consumer should understand and protect themselves against these potential attacks:

### **UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE**

The majority of consumers are unprepared for service providers, as they do not perform any research prior to meeting with them. It would greatly benefit you to spend some time before the first meeting to research and learn. Due diligence like this will limit how much you might be taken advantage of.

The #1 reason why people are unprepared is because they say they are too busy. But, if you want to ensure the best for yourself, you must prioritize this action. See the examples below of what to look for:

- **YouTube search** on landscape lighting practices
- **Google search** on top performers in this field
- **Website search** on providers of interest
- **Yelp search** on provider referrals

These are some of the basic searches you can perform to get a better idea of who is in your market, and what is going on with the profession. The advantage in doing this allows you to compare providers by their knowledge and brand presentation. How do they rank locally, as a landscape lighting professional? What do their on-line referrals say about them?

Company presentations are another important means to evaluate each provider. Consider how organized the presentation is, as well as how confident they seem about answering on-the-spot questions. The following are some indicators to look for:

- **Do they seem organized and well prepared?** Consumers can use the following list as a starting point in this measure:

- Did they an **introduction** of themselves, their company and provide contact information?
  - Did they explain what their **competitive advantage** as compared to other providers?
  - Did they show you **examples of their work**—photos, portfolio, website, etc.?
  - Did they show you **examples of a product line** or several, in order to understand what’s proposed for the job?
  - Did they ask you fact-finding questions as to what your needs or concerns are?
  - Did they provide you with a **“next step”** in the sales process?
- **Do they seem honest & trustworthy?** Although this is difficult to assess, it’s best to go with your ‘gut-feeling’ with people. By performing advanced research, it will allow you to listen better to what and how each provider is presenting to you. One might be able to catch false claims easier, as well. The goal is to find someone you can trust, who has your best interest in mind.
  - **Do they a use high-pressure tactics?** Some providers will attempt to push you into something you are not comfortable with—these people should be avoided. You need to feel 100% comfortable with who you are working with.

### **FALSE CLAIMS & REPRESENTATIONS**

These are claims made to sway you into buying their equipment or services. Some service provides employ an added element of hype. It’s hard to prove many claims, so you are at the mercy of those presenting to you. However, your best ability to protect against these acts is by asking more detailed questions and asking to see the proof of their claims.

Some providers use other company’s photographic materials. This is theft and there is no thoughtful way of saying it differently. These images are not representative of their work. The only way to know is to ask to physically see this job site being presented.

Here are a few tips where you can better verify claims:

- **Ask to physically see the product(s)** to be used on your job. Verify model numbers on the contract.



- **Ask to visit recent and local work** they've installed. If they claim a photo is of a job in your area, then ask to go visit it and meet the customer. Get these referrals and their contact information—ensure they are real customers.
- **Ask to speak directly with past customers**, so you can evaluate how well they were treated, how well the job was installed, etc.

### **UNMET EXPECTATIONS**

The point to this matter is to ensure everything is in writing. Don't just take the word of the provider, as this can be disputed later.

These unmet expectations can be in the form of products not supplied on the job, services agreed to, who is doing the work on the project, and the acceptance of work. To avoid these issues, ensure the following:

- **Formal agreement/Written contract**—You would be surprised at how many consumers just 'trust' a service provider. Without a contract, you have no legal rights. Agreements or contracts should list the following elements for proper control:
  - **Owner & Contractor Information**—this includes names, address of job site, and all pertinent information to identify agreement parties.
  - **Scope of work**—these are the details of brands, model numbers, and quantities of the equipment to be used on the job. Also, a general description is listed as to what is to be done, where transformers are located, work zones, and more.
  - **Inclusions & Exclusions**—these provide details about what is or is not included in the project. This can pertain to products or services, as well as subcontractor work. They should list anything not listed in the scope of work.
  - **Work & Payment Schedules**—each of these needs to be identified and listed. Work schedules can be exact or approximate, based on the elements of weather or work conditions. Payments are normally set at an agreed upon completion of work.
  - **Terms & Conditions**—these can be listed in detail or not, as they can be lengthy, as something provided by an attorney. However, many
  - **Acceptance**—this is where the owner and contractor both sign and date to make the contract effective.

- **Payments based on Performance**—Many contractors work differently or by their own set of rules. This includes payment schedules and expectations as to work completion. Therefore, it is in your best interest to establish an understanding on these prior to the commencement of work.

Good and trustworthy contractors will honor a performance-based schedule. However, some operate under a poor management style and spend their money haphazardly. Then, they might ask for payments prior to the completion scheduled work. This can be upsetting to both parties. It is best to identify these types of problems in advance. Specifically ask past customers if this ever occurred with them.

- **Who is actually designing and/or installing the job?**—Most consumers assume the person you are negotiating with is the one to actually perform the work. This is normally not the case. Sometimes, the owner of the company says they'll be on-site performing the work, and yet only the lesser experienced employees are. This is a common practice. If this matters, and in many cases it should, then ask if they will be on-site to perform this work. Also, ask about how much time they intend to be on the job, if they leave it to others to perform the work. The point here is awareness and if you are comfortable with any of these scenarios.
- **Acceptance of work**—What happens if you do not think the work is acceptable? Most service providers are never asked this question, but you should want to know. Ask the provider in order to see how they might respond. Are they accommodating and willing to do whatever it takes to make you happy?

As a consumer, it should make sense that you only wish to be treated fairly and honestly. With that said, what should you expect from a service provider? The following points should give you a foundation to work with:

- A. An understanding in the **level of quality** they are providing with the materials they intend to use, as well as their services.
- B. An understanding of what the **costs** are for the proposed work. This includes providing some form of budget based off of the concept plan.
- C. An understanding of **how they will operate** while working the project. This includes providing a proposed schedule/timeline.
- D. An understanding of **how they will treat you before, during and after** the job is complete. Will they be there for you?

## COST

This is always difficult to figure, because there are many things associated with it. There are two reasons for this: 1) limited information being available, and 2) no standardized structure or format to follow. Cost is directly correlated with the elements of experience and quality.

However, when working with professional service providers, and as a **general measure to determine overall job cost**, the consumer should expect to pay between **\$200 to \$450 per light fixture**. This is a determination average based on material costs, labor, overhead, and profit. Many providers use an estimated form of this when determining a project budget.

For example, if a concept design shows 50-light fixtures on the project, then the consumer should expect to pay between \$10,000.00 to \$22,500.00 for the project to be completely installed. Obviously, this is a very broad range, and it all depends on the two elements listed above—experience and quality.

Note: This average range is associated with those contractors with experience. Many consumers might be shocked by these numbers, but this is the reality of how much things cost.

It should also be mentioned that those with excellent experience and skills are much like that of an artist. However, the perception is that this work is provided by a ‘handyman’ or ‘blue-collar’ worker. Sure, there are many who might fit this perceived notion, but these are the very one’s providing shoddy workmanship and poor products.

## **CONTRACTOR-DESIGNER AWARENESS**

To be fair, the consumer should understand what is expected by the contractor-designer. Many consumers attempt to take advantage of these people and that’s not right either. Therefore, this section of content will provide insights on how to best work with a service provider.

The goal here is to ensure a great working relationship between the consumer and service provider. The following are simple, but necessary expectations that allow the contractor and designer to operate effectively:

- **Timely Payments**—Even though this makes perfect sense (paying on time and to schedule), it’s surprising at how often the service provider is neglected in this area. Most small businesses, such as in landscape lighting, operate from job-to-job and cash flow is necessary for a smooth functioning operations. Lighting businesses cannot be expected to act as ‘the bank.’ This can provide a lot of added stress onto the businessperson.

It should be known that the contractor has the right to ‘stop’ work until payment is made. This will likely cause the contractor to move to another job and the schedule will become disrupted. It’s a losing situation for both parties. And once this occurs, the relationship sours. It’s best to avoid them.

- **Timely Decisions**—It’s important to make decisions in a timely manner, so that job progress is not held up. Again, good contractors are busy and there are jobs waiting in line to complete. If there is excessive down-time on the job due to an unresolved decision, then this can cause tension with the contractor. They may choose to move on to another job until matters are decided.

Another way to think of this is to consider how you might feel if you were told your job wasn’t starting on time, due to delays from another job. Would you be happy with this? Consideration is important by all parties.

- **Distractions**—These are mentioned because it correlates to the time management of the job. Typically, service providers estimate a certain number of hours to complete the proposed work. If a consumer spends excessive time with the contractor, chit-chatting about things not associated with the work, then it becomes more of a distraction. These types of interruptions can eat away at the time allotted for work. This is not meant that you should be unsociable, rather it should mean to provide respectful consideration to the service provider. He/she needs to ensure a measure of profitability on the job.
- **Change Orders**—These are in the form of a written acceptance to the changes made to the original contract. Many times, the contractor will only provide a verbal acceptance without any formal documentation. This can be bad for both parties, because there is no legal recourse should one of the parties change their mind at a later time. Each party should sign and date this acceptance, as well as the agreed upon cost for this change. It’s a simple process and it saves ruining the relationship.
- **Job Site Conditions**—The job site needs to be safe, secure and free from hazards. If the contractor must ensure this at their own time and expense, then the consumer needs to be prepared to pay for it. This act should not be considered a negative, rather a consideration to ensure safety to those working on the site.

Additionally, this is an added piece of protection to the consumer against any claims against your homeowner’s insurance. Ideally, the consumer should make the service provider aware of all potential hazards related to the site.

Other considerations should include the provisions and access to drinking water and restroom facilities. These are human health concerns, and it’s something one should expect. If the consumer chooses not to provide these services, then the contractor has the right to charge for these necessities while working on the project.

## SERVICE PROVIDER SELECTION

Herein lies one of the biggest challenges a consumer must face. There are no standards or expectations to follow. To date, the ELLI website is the most up-to-date effort for this establishment.

Service provider selection can be daunting, so ELLI has constructed a means to identify parameters in which are measurable against all providers. It will breakdown experience and skill set, so that a relative value can be understood by the consumer:

- Years, as a licensed contractor or designer
- Years in business
- Type of business (landscape lighting only or a mixed trade operation)
- Size of company
- Company structure (corporation, partnership/LLC, or sole-proprietorship)
- Other licenses and certifications
- Industry-related awards
- Peer recognition
- College degree and/or educational background
- Other accolades—publications, books, public speaking, and teaching
- Standing at State Contractor’s Board—license, bonds, and insurance

The ELLI website has another important and more detailed document called, “**The Standards for the Landscape Lighting Designer.**” This resource can be utilized for either a designer or contractor.

Please visit the ELLI website for all current Guides:

<https://www.landscape-lighting-initiative.org>.

Contractor designation, licensing and control are provide by many states, and should be assessed as well. The consumer should check with the Department of Consumer Affairs, which usually governs contractor affairs.

Insurance is another measure for service providers. Do they have the required types to operate legally? At a minimum, a general liability policy should be in place to protect against any property damage. Workman’s compensation insurance is another. All consumers should be aware of what is required in their state before hiring any service provider.

## HIGH-QUALITY SERVICE EXPECTATIONS

There are several key attributes or abilities that are provided by high-quality service providers. The following information has been provided to identify what you should expect from these companies. This guide separates the Lighting Designer from the

Lighting Contractor, because they act to control different aspects of the complete project. It should be noted that some service providers act in a dual function role where they perform both roles.

You will likely find that dual functioning providers are some of the best services available. It is a distinct advantage when you can work with one of these types of businesses. However, 'experience' is still the key measure here. Just because they might serve in both roles, doesn't necessarily mean they have the right experience level. The following will identify these differences.

### **Landscape Lighting Designers**

The design component of landscape lighting is the most important aspect of the trade practice. There are several reasons for this, but to simplify matters one only has to understand the time investment required to master this art-form. Most anyone can master the installation processes required to establish a landscape lighting system, but it takes years of study, as well as hands-on practice to perfect the best lighting effects.

The above statements are not meant to devalue the installation process, rather it's meant as a form of respect to the study of lighting design. It is for this reason why seasoned lighting designers can obtain a higher level of pay for their efforts.

Of those tasks and studies that provide the greatest value to the lighting designer, they are as follows:

- Understanding of Light & Shadow
- Understanding of Mood & Emotion
- Understanding of Nature

Many landscape lighting designers have experience with nature or plantings, some better than others, but the other two categories (light & shadow and mood & emotion), very few have experience with. These are the areas that many seasoned professionals will gain advanced training in.

Landscape lighting designers must possess the driving element of passion in order to follow this path. They should strive to learn more and to dig deeper into thought about how one's mood is affected by lighting applications. However, many stop short of these aspirations, due to being overwhelmed by the workload of daily activities.

What are the advantages of understanding the emotional aspects of light? First and foremost, it allows the lighting designer to effectively describe these experiences to a customer. One must 'feel' it, in order to effectively provide it. Those who have direct, personal experiences are usually the best at applying it.

Note: Not to be sexist, but women typically understand and relate to this design approach better than men. Women are generally more creative, and they express

thought through emotion. On the contrary, most men are more analytical and/or logical in thought. This is mentioned because it is usually easier to convey the importance of how the space will feel to a woman versus a man.

The following list identifies what is or should be expected from a high-quality service. Again, these elements will allow the consumer to measure between lighting designers. For example, each point can identify expertise or a lack thereof. Consider this during the selection process:

1. **Portfolio of Work**—This is a graphic or photographic representation of one's work. They should be highly professional with excellent quality images. This graphic presentation can be in the form of photographs or digital images on one's website. There should be a sampling of varied works that the designer has designed. There are many elements involved in landscape lighting—water features, statuary, garden art, structures, hardscape elements, etc.

Images should emotionally impact the viewer in a positive way. Does the viewer say, 'wow!' or 'I love it!?' Not every photo will provide this reaction, but it's helpful to be moved. If the images confuse your thoughts, and/or provide your mind with questions, then they are likely to represent a weak design.

This is the first opportunity to determine one's experience level. As an added opportunity to measure their quality and ability, ask to physically visit one of these job sites. This will likely surprise the designer, and it will be very telling of how legitimate the project is. If they attempt to dissuade you from visiting the site, then find out why. This measure will provide insight to who you are dealing with.

2. **Developed Lighting Designs**—This is another significant detail to measure experience and lighting designers. You will find a gamut of design types, because there is no exacting standard established. Those with experience will have the better design presentation to offer. Some might offer a quick sketching, some a very detailed plan that's to scale, and others might not offer any design. The takeaway here is that professional designers will provide professional designs. If not, then this could be a 'red-flag' towards experience.

Note: Some contractors say they don't do design work, as this is all done in the field during the installation. Be very careful of these types. There are exceptions to this, as I know of one, who is one of the best in the nation who doesn't provide a design with their service. If they don't provide this service, then use other experience measures to compare this with.

Lighting designs can be in two different formats: 1) **Relative-scale drawings**, (also known as, 'Not-to-scale') or 2) **Scaled drawings**. Either are acceptable in the landscape lighting practice. The reason for this is because we are dealing with

approximate measurements where exact dimensions are not a requirement. Relative positioning and distance is all that is necessary. The advantage of this is that relative-scaled drawings are less costly to provide versus scaled drawings.

Most landscape lighting designs are diagrammatic, as they only show where materials are located relevant to hardscaping and structures. The important elements of these plans are the work zones, structure locations, large plantings, and anything required to be illuminated.

Note: It's important to provide enough information so that the consumer can understand what is proposed. Drawing symbols, colors and line types each help to explain what's going on. If the designs are too busy (detailed), then it makes consumer understanding more of a challenge.

Landscape lighting designers should provide the consumer with an As-Built plan upon the completion of the job. The As-Built plan identifies where the equipment is located, 'as built.' However, many do not. It should be a measure of who is more professional in this trade.

3. **References**—Although you would expect every service provider to provide references, some do not. Again, this is another means to measure one's professionalism. References should be readily available and local. Additionally, they should allow the consumer to speak directly with these past customers. This opportunity allows one to measure credibility and proof of work experiences.
4. **Material Samples**—Most lighting designers & contractors provide samples in their presentation. It's a realistic expectation and it shows the quality of materials being used. Please refer to the **Guide to Materials & Products** at the ELLI website for additional information.
5. **Thoughtful Listening**—An experienced provider will spend 50% or more of their time "listening" to what you tell them. Good listeners have the ability to extract additional, key information, which can better serve you. If a service provider goes into an aggressive "sales pitch", and spends most of their time talking, then this should be a 'red-flag'.

The point here is that experienced providers use fact-finding questions and listen more than they speak. A good and effective designer will reiterate your thoughts and comments during the conceptual plan presentation.

6. **Understanding the Design**—Good lighting designers will ensure the design intent is understood. There are cases where the customer just can't visualize or understand what is to be provided. However, good designers will have the ability to assure understanding in some form or another.



There are a few ways in which a lighting design can be understood:

- **Graphic Presentation**—Graphic presentations are the normal standard for identifying where landscape lighting equipment is located on a lighting plan. As explained earlier, they can use drawing symbols, colors, colored dots, and the like to represent light fixtures. These presentations are the easiest form to share with customers and they are usually understood.

Some lighting designers prefer to work with some form of digital drawing and experience. These are very interesting and can be fun, but the designer must have the technical ability to operate such presentations. Regardless of graphic type, it all comes down to being able to effectively communicate designs with the consumer. Good, experienced lighting designers will ensure this understanding without any further requirements.

- **Site Walk-through**—This tends to be the best method associated with true understanding for the consumer. A designer will walk the property with you and identify areas to be illuminated and describe why the lighting should be where it is. Those with more experience will describe how you will feel in these spaces, and why he/she is designing for this effect.
- **Lighting Demonstration**—A lighting demonstration (demo) is a set of temporary lights set up to display how an area will look at night. This is the most realistic application for the consumer to experience, but it's also very time consuming. Most seasoned professionals will not provide this type of service unless they are paid. Although, it seems to be common for new lighting designers to provide this as a free service—to sell the job.

Note: If a provider is willing to provide you a free lighting demo, then that's good for you. It gives you a chance to learn more about lighting and to evaluate their skills. Just know that any light added to darkness will add some form of impact.

There are tell-tale signs of those providers with minimal experience. The following can be measures of this:

- **Do they use only up lights and path lights?**—These are the most common light fixtures used by practitioners. If these are the only fixture types displayed, then it's likely they have lesser skills and experience.

- **Do they utilize downlighting?**—Downlighting is initiated from above, in trees or on structure. They are aimed towards the ground. The better service providers utilize downlighting regularly. Many of the entry and mid-level practitioners don't use it is because it takes more time and experience to install. In terms of skills, it experience to properly locate fixtures from these positions.
- **Do they primarily illuminate only the home?**—This can be an indicator that the provider has limited experience. Homes and structures need the landscaping to be illuminated so that there's good composition. Grant it, there are properties which have very little landscaping, so this could be the exception. However, those that choose to highlight only the home are not as skilled in this trade.
- **Do they utilize only one light per tree (medium to large)?**—This is yet another sign of an immature provider. Generally, one light fixture will not effectively provide the desired illumination of these specimens. Good and experienced designers will know better.
- **Do they illuminate everything the same way?**—There are some providers who learn a basic lighting application and just stick with it no matter the scene. This is the case usually with those of lesser experience. It seems to be a matter of production over design—the provider's crew has been trained in this method and that's it.

There are many variations to lighting application, and especially so when working with varied plant materials. Good, experienced designers will utilize a variety of applications to provide mood.

There are occasions when an experienced lighting designer might wish to use a demo-type presentation. These are called, 'mock-ups,' and they are used to determine which lighting applications are best. You will find this with difficult elements in the landscape--water features, statuary, art-forms, and custom structures. It's very important to capture the right mood with these objects.

### **Landscape Lighting Contractors**

The installation component of landscape lighting is equally as important to the lighting design. It requires a special set of skills to effectively accomplish. Even with the best designs, if the lighting equipment is poorly installed and not correctly aimed, then what

good is it? The consumer needs to ensure they select the best that they can afford in this realm.

Additionally, all installation work should be under some form of legal agreement. This is for each party's protection. An agreement or contract will legally bind both parties. The following are measures to compare contractors:

- **Trade Experience**—This relates to the number of years he/she has performing this type of work. Look to their experiences—training, certifications, education, previous jobs, etc. Certifications and licenses can be researched and verified.
- **Track Record**—As a consumer, you will want to best understand who you are dealing with. You should utilize referrals and searches on the internet to determine this. This can be a Google search on the business, and it can be through social media sites--Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., as they will show some sort of track record. Yelp is another great tool to verify businesses, and it will provide consumer references. Each of these can be very beneficial.
- **Referrals**—Always ask for referrals and follow up with these past customers. Ask questions about their experience on the job and if they have continued services being utilized.
- **Consumer Experiences**—Are they easy and pleasant to work with? Some contractors are known to be 'hot-heads,' and they are not pleasant to work with. Fortunate for this trade practice, most of the good, experienced providers have great customer service, as well as relationships with customers.
- **Dependability & Trustworthiness**—The only way to identify these traits is by asking previous customers or by having direct knowledge of this service provider.
- **Future Services/Maintenance**—This is one of the most important aspects of a contractor. Every consumer should be concerned with if they will be around once the job is finalized/completed. Those providers who prioritize this aspect of the project are the one's you want to work with. Landscape lighting systems will always need maintenance, whether it's in the form of annual cleanings, repairs, additions or deletions. Someone with experience should be doing this.

There are few other considerations to make when selecting the right contractor and these relate to business practice. The following practices can cause concern:

- **Time Management**—Usually this is a concern if there are delays on the job. It's truly up to the contractor to ensure profitability, but this lack of skill can impact you. Do you have a deadline or schedule to meet? If so, you would benefit most by asking previous customers as to how this company managed time. And if scheduling is not a concern, you still do not want to have the job extended beyond a reasonable amount of time.

- **Accounting/Record Keeping**—There is only reason why this might be of importance to the consumer, and this relates to the accounting of materials or labor (time). This would be required on a Time & Materials type of job, otherwise it's probably not necessary. Again, the consumer can ask previous customers about their experiences.
- **Warranties & Workmanship**—These guarantees are provided by both the contractor and the manufacturer, depending on what is being covered. Most contracts provide this information. If not, then this could be a concern which needs to be understood. And unless you have this in written form, you have no recourse.
- **Business Longevity**—The only importance of this fact is to understand how long a service provider has been in business, and whether it has been at this same location. There are some contractors that jump around, due to poor track records or the need to start fresh. Those which are permanently located in the community are your safest and best bet for solid performance.

Landscape lighting is a specialized type of business. Once you invest into a company to design and install the work, you will should desire to have them take care of it (own it) for its life. It is here that the best service providers build excellent, long-lasting relationships, much like friendships.

Good, experienced contractors make “service” a priority and you can easily find this information on one’s website. Those providers who do not offer much content on this topic should be considered a, ‘red-flag.’

## **Final Thoughts**

There are three important elements of a landscape lighting system: 1) Design/design intent, 2) Installation of the lighting system, and 3) Future services/maintenance of these systems. The consumer should not compromise on any of these elements, as anyone of these that is lacking will hurt the overall effectiveness of a positive outcome.

Professional landscape lighting is costly—it’s an investment. Yes, this can be a deterrent to many, but it needs to be properly understood that it is not meant to only be a Do-It-Yourself project. Excellent designs can provide many positive benefits, including health. It is and should be treated as an art, because it realistically is.

If the consumer understands this, they have the power to raise the bar on the profession, so that they provide better. This is the common goal. Currently, there are many unsatisfied consumers out there that have had bad experiences with unprofessional providers. Education and understanding are the key to correcting this.