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**Todd Brown
& Doug Smellage,
Lawns of Dallas**

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Ian Halperin
Plano, Texas



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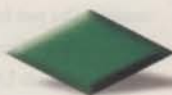
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- How We Do It: Career Fairs
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Lawn & Landscape

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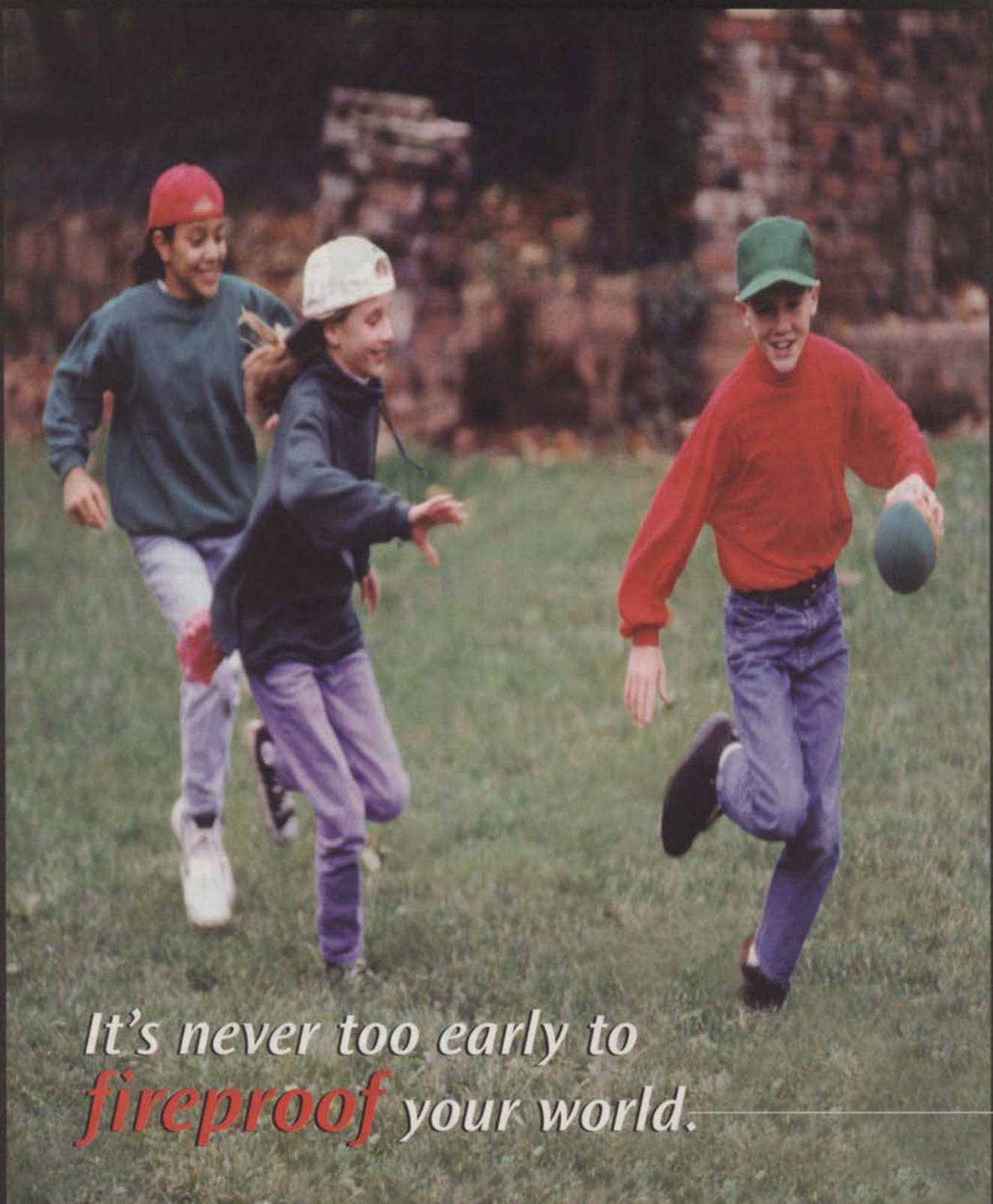
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EDITORIAL
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Drilling Down

"To each individual, the world will take on a different connotation of meaning – the importance lies in the desire to search for an answer."

– T.S. Elliot

What do your customers want?

This may seem like an overly simple question, especially for those of you who have been in business for years. After all, you've spent years generating thousands or even millions of dollars in sales, so you must know what your customers are looking for, right? Still, spending just five or 10 minutes thinking about what you're about to read may challenge you more than you expect.

I spent time with a business consultant not too long ago and we talked about the importance of knowing your customers, particularly for companies in the service industry. As I mentioned above, everyone thinks they know what their customers want. Whether they're homeowners or commercial property managers, everyone is looking for a new landscape or they want a well-maintained property, right?

But is that really what they're buying when they hire you? Maybe not.

Consider this example: A drill manufacturer could logically assert that its customers are interested in drills. That's why people buy the company's products. Sounds obvious, doesn't it? But think about why people really buy drills. Unless they're drill collectors, the drill isn't what the customer wants. Instead, he wants holes, and he buys the drill to make these holes.

Maybe this seems like simple word games to you, but the difference is significant. If a manufacturer thinks it sells drills, then its focus will be entirely different than if it thinks it sells machines that produce holes. And the customer may suffer as a result.

Now, think about your business and what you sell. If you're an install-oriented business, do you sell plants and landscape designs or do you sell outdoor entertainment and relaxation? If maintenance clients provide your income, do you sell grass-cutting services or do you sell something much more? I would argue that you actually sell time to those customers, thereby allowing them to spend their weekend in other pursuits.

Again, maybe you think none of this matters. But you're a service business. Making sure that you deliver exactly what your customers buy matters. If you don't know what the customer wants or expects, how do you deliver the service that keeps customers coming back year after year? If you don't know whether the customer is more interested in short grass or not having to do any yard work himself, how do you instruct the technicians handling that property?

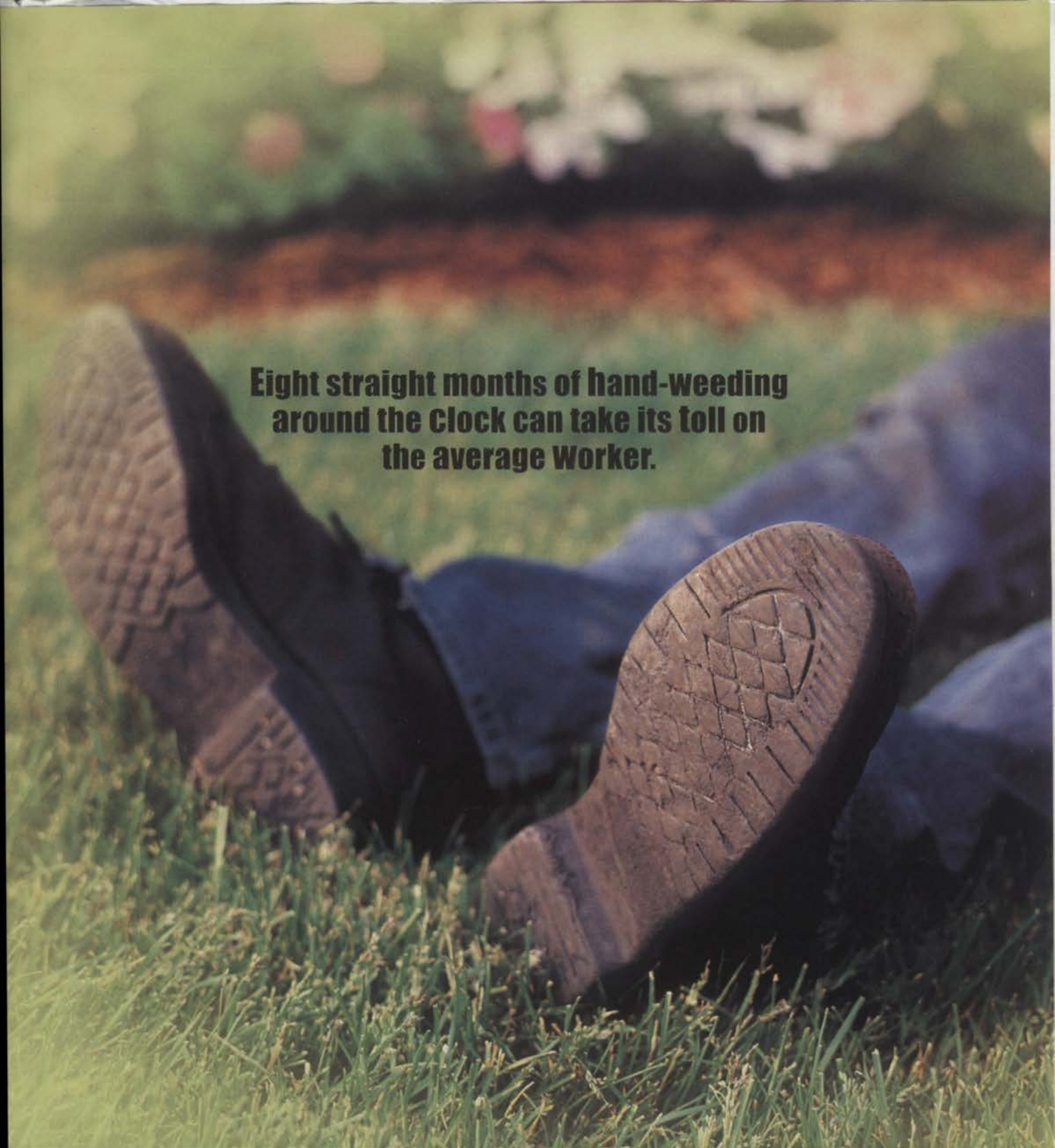
We've talked about this issue before, and I expect we'll revisit it often in the future because too many contractors lose sight of the role service plays in the landscape business. So, do yourself a favor. Spend some time thinking about what your customers really want from you and then make sure that's what you're delivering to them.

After all, who wants to wake up one day and realize that their potential customer base is limited to drill collectors?

LL

Bob West






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PART TWO

Organizational Change Strategies

EDITOR'S

NOTE: This is the second of a two-part series.

If you're left with no alternative other than cutting staff, then what? Improperly handled layoffs, poor communication, hurt feelings and economic hardship often lead ex-employees to allege discrimination based on age, sex, race or some other protected class after a job cut. Layoffs are fertile ground for legal liability, but these pointers can help reduce the risks.

LAYOFF RISKS. First, plan ahead! Do not implement a layoff without working through all of the issues. You must be prepared to address your constituents, who can include customers, the media, public markets, the remaining workforce and others who may be impacted by the loss of your employees.

Second, be prepared to prove the overall "big-picture" business need for the layoff. If your decision is challenged, you must be able to show by means of reports, financials and other various documents that the layoff was legitimate.

Third, carefully select the departments, positions and people affected. Your criterion must be job-related and consistent with the business situation. For example, if performance is the basis for the layoff in a given department, you must be able to prove (through valid performance-related documentation for all employees in the department) that you retained those individuals with better performance. Be prepared to prove your reason was nondiscriminatory.

Fourth, avoid inconsistent layoff rationale between departments. For example, if you use "performance" as the criteria in one department and "length of service" as the criteria in another department, be able to establish the business-related reason for the difference.

Fifth, be prepared to answer the "Why me?" question, especially if you retain people in the same position and department as the employee(s) selected for layoff.

Jean Seawright is president of Seawright & Associates Inc., a management consulting firm located in Winter Park, Fla. For the past 15 years, she has provided human resource management and compliance advice to employers across the country. She can be reached via e-mail at jpileggi@seawright.com or at 407/645-2433.



Sixth, address separation issues such as the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA) and other benefits, final pay and bonuses, non-compete agreements, outplacement support, severance pay, security measures and others. (Note: Severance pay is not required by law in most states.)

Remember, the same liabilities exist for seasonal layoffs, with the added concern of recalling employees. If you lay off and then recall employees at a later date, you should have a job-related, nondiscriminatory system for whom you select for recall and when.

MANAGING AFTER THE CHANGE. Don't make the mistake of waiting until after change to revive morale! With careful planning, you can reduce the trauma of an organizational restructuring.

Develop a Change Message. You should be able to capture your story of organizational change in a few succinct sentences. Senior team members must buy in to this message and promote it at all times. This message should become the cornerstone for the company's future.

Appoint a Change Leader. Appoint an employee to be a spokesperson to advocate the positive aspects and key points of the change. Don't necessarily select the person with the "cheerleader" style. Opt for the person who the employees trust – the one with credibility and longevity. This person's role is to listen to co-workers and to confidently discuss and promote positive aspects of the organizational restructuring.

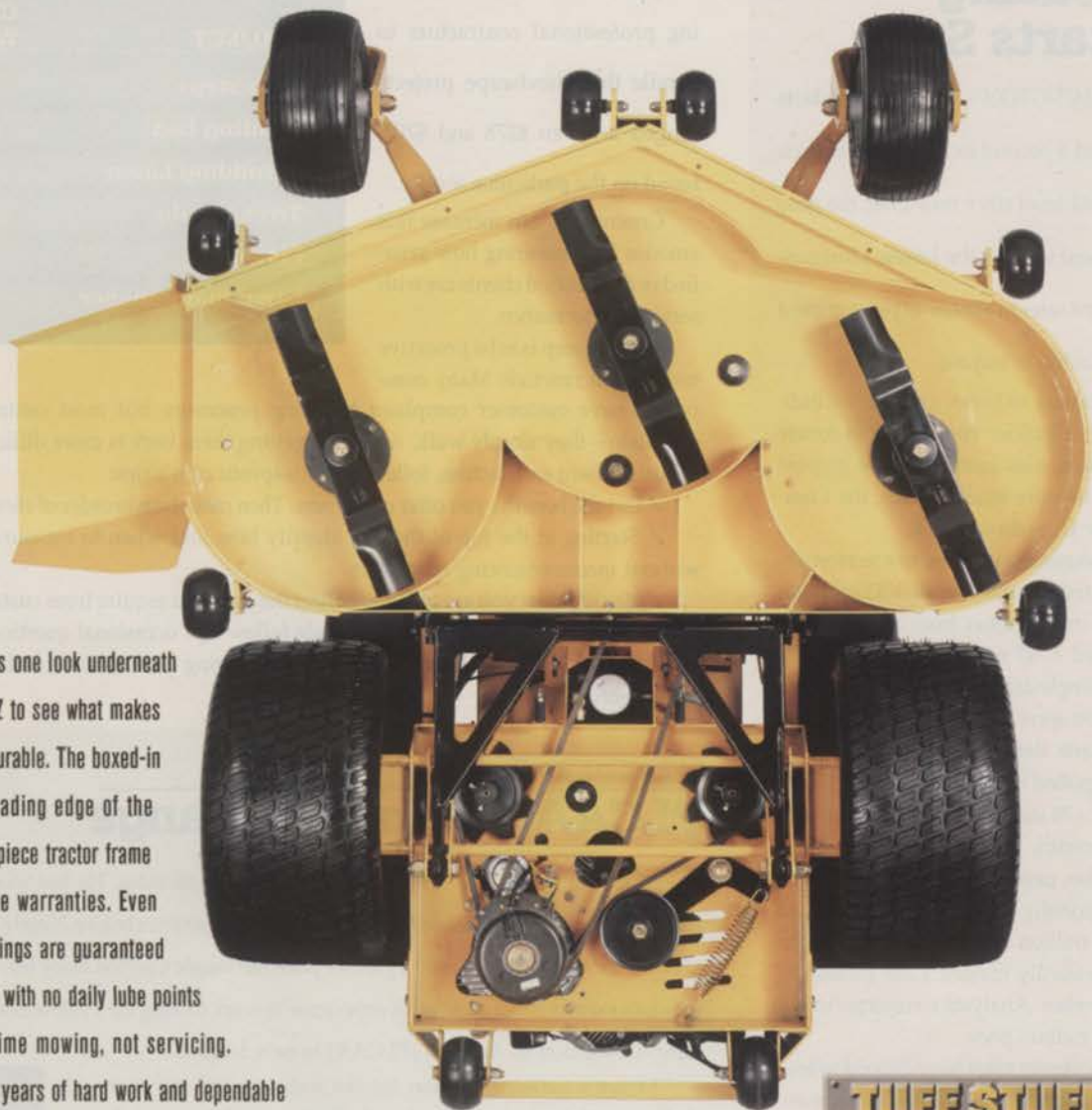
Stabilize Key Employees. Immediately after a change, senior leaders in the organization should meet with key employees to restate the company's confidence in them, the need for their talents and the vision for the organization's future. These conversations must be honest and straightforward and will help determine who's on board and who's not.

Continually Communicate. After a change, it's imperative to keep people informed. Don't allow rumors to dictate your message and don't assume people understand your intentions. Talk with employees candidly. Plan regular briefings or meetings to update people, send e-mails, forward articles and don't go into hiding.

INVEST IN SURVIVORS. Following organizational restructures, positions, duties, responsibilities, goals and expectations typically change. Involve front-line employees in redefining new boundaries and competencies and keep in mind that any performance expectations should be directly linked to the new business goals. Consider revamping commission or bonus plans to drive new revenues.

Spearheading organizational change is never simple, but a planned approach and smart execution can minimize risk and trauma and will go a long way toward driving out fear and building trust.

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USE READER SERVICE #17

Market Trends

IN THE NEWS

Housing Starts Soar

WASHINGTON - U.S. housing starts surged 5 percent in December to their highest level since mid-1986, the government said, as the lowest mortgage interest rates in almost 40 years proved irresistible to buyers.

Permits to break ground, an indicator of builder confidence in future business, also jumped to the highest level in more than 16 years, the Commerce Department said.

Housing starts rose to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.835 million units in December from an upwardly revised 1.747 million rate in November. Single-family starts were at their highest level since 1978.

Starts defied expectations of analysts polled by Reuters, who had forecast 1.678 million starts in a relatively wet month.

Also, permits leaped 8.2 percent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.880 million units in December from an upwardly revised 1.738 million in November. Analysts were expecting a 1.714 million pace.

Mortgage rates have dipped to levels not seen since 1965 and stock markets are in a three-year swoon, and this has fueled home buying and building, making the sector one of the rare bright spots in a slumping U.S. economy.

Based on an ADVO survey, the average amount clients spent hiring professional contractors to handle their landscape projects ranged between \$278 and \$703, based on the particular service.

Contractors can increase this amount by measuring how satisfied or dissatisfied clients are with service performance.

The first step is to be proactive rather than reactive. Many companies have customer complaint handling processes, but most customers do not complain - they simply walk. And then getting them back is more difficult. To better measure client satisfaction, follow www.is4profit.com's tips:

- ✓ List the benefits you offer customers. Then rank them in order of client importance.
- ✓ Starting at the top of the list, identify how and when to measure the benefits without inconveniencing customers.
- ✓ Identify how you are going to collect the data you require from customers - at the point of sale? point of delivery? post-sale follow-up? occasional questionnaire?
- ✓ Set up a process for collating and monitoring performance and taking action where needed.

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Trees/shrubs	\$507
Flowers	\$329
Lawn maintenance	\$278

Source: ADVO

BREAKING NEWS

PLCAA Embraces Change

Gary Clayton knows the lawn care industry from all sides. He has worked for industry suppliers, trade associations and lawn care operators before. Nearly 25 years of experience making the world a greener place has taught Clayton many lessons, and now he's excited about putting his experience to work driving the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) to new heights.

"I have a genuine passion for the industry and the menu of challenges this position requires," Clayton said in an exclusive interview with *Lawn & Landscape*.

Clayton is honest about the fact that PLCAA faces its share of challenges, but he has seen enough to know that these issues aren't unique to this association. "I think we're somewhere in the middle in terms of the issues we're dealing with," he noted.

It's too soon for Clayton to identify any specific goals he has for the association, but his primary initiatives aren't hard to figure out. "We want to increase the number of member companies and their awareness of the merit and value of belonging to this association," he remarked. "We have to continually present that so they see their dues are an investment in the defense and protection of the industry as well as in their business' future."

Tom Delaney spent the last four years as PLCAA's executive director before taking on the title of vice president of

(continued on page 18)



Gary Clayton



Gary Mason, Director of Housekeeping, ProPlayer Stadium

"I hate peanut shells."

Leaves and grass clippings are nothing. You want tough? Clean up the 10 tons of trash and peanut shells that 75,000 screaming fans leave behind—and do it in just 13 hours. That's what Gary Mason and his crew do every three days, more than 100 times a



year. So they rely on the BR 420C Magnum—16 of them, actually. Gary says, "They're lightweight, powerful, and run longer than any other blower." It's the best all-around blower he's used. And after 6,000 times around the stadium a year, he should know.

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Market Trends

(continued from page 16)

government affairs when Clayton joined the association, and he's confident these moves will enable PLCAA to move forward. "We always have to be ahead of the curve," Delaney explained. "We have to keep our eyes and ears open so we're not operating in a vacuum. We need to react to issues before they're a problem for our members, and that means knowing about the problems in their businesses."

Clayton spent three years in the mid to late 1980s as PLCAA's director of technical resources, and that role put him in a position to deal with a range of legislative issues. He recognizes that the number of these issues has multiplied since that time, which is why he's excited about Delaney's new role. "We recognize that legislative affairs are critical to keep on top of and now Tom can dedicate his talents in that direction," he enthused.

"When I was here almost 20 years ago, we created the legislative position because we had increasing legislative activity,"

(continued on page 20)

People

At Ferris Industries, 15-year veteran **Ron Villnave** received the 2002 Salesman of the Year award and **Tim Congdon** accepted the 2002 Distributor of the Year award on behalf of C.A.D. Co.

Donald McGrath accepted his appointment to the position of vice president of corporate communications for North America at BASF.

Also at BASF, **Stephen Briggs** was promoted to director, specialty product department. PBI/Gordon announced that **David Fearis** took on the title product specialist for non-regulated products and that **Scott Wanzor** joined the Professional Turf and Ornamental Sales Group as a sales representative.

Orbit Irrigation Products promoted **Bob Holiday** to executive vice president of quality. Finn Corp. added **Marc Bowers** to its executive team as vice president of marketing.

Paul Torrington was named vice president for Volvo Construction Equipment North America, and **Pat MacFarland** took over as chief financial officer for Volvo Construction Equipment Rents.

Walter Rieck was promoted to product manager at Prime Line.

FMC Specialty Products Business announced the addition of **John Long** as product development manager - turf & ornamental. Also, **Amy Gabrielian** and **Jim Walter** were promoted to marketing and software solutions business manager and marketing and business development manager, respectively. **Felicia Boone** joined the company as assistant product manager.

At Simplot, **Tim Kehoe** signed on as a sales representative and **John Meyer** was named national accounts manager.



Marc Bowers

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USE READER SERVICE #20

(continued from page 18)

Clayton recalled, "Those issues have all stayed around, whether they're small business issues or specific lawn care issues."

But Clayton knows that PLCAA's focus has to be broader than legislative threats for the association to best serve its members. "We just need to make sure we're listening to our members to find out what they need from us as their association," he pointed out. — Bob West

EMPLOYEE FOCUS

Termination Education

Firing people is a manager's most taxing responsibility. The importance of understanding how to discipline and terminate an employee is critical in today's maze of lawsuits and out-of-court settlements. But when should someone's employment be terminated?

Marginal employees tend to fall into one of several categories: 1) the obvious poor performer who will have virtually no chance

(continued on page 25)



L&L Book Report

Victory!

by Brian Tracy

If business is a battlefield, are you leading your company on a winning path?

Brian Tracy relates 12 military principles to the business world in *Victory! Applying the Proven Principles of Military Strategy to Achieve Greater Success in Your Business and Personal Life*. Objective, mass, maneuverability, intelligence, concerted effort, unity of command, economy — these core military values transfer quite well to today's cutthroat world, and Tom Shaner, executive director, Professional Grounds Management Society, Baltimore, Md., said reviewing these basic ideas ignited a reevaluation of his goals.

"The first principle is objective," Shaner noted. "You have to know what

your goals are — that is critical. The third principle is mass — concentrating your efforts, doing what you do best and focusing."

Shaner suggested that with many landscape companies diversifying their businesses, perhaps working through these elements will clarify whether the company is pursuing its strengths to reach its goals, or becoming scatterbrained and unfocused.

Tracy did his homework for the 304-page book, offering a civilian viewpoint to the military building blocks, along with historic battle examples that illustrate each principle. The result is a readable, entertaining selection, Shaner said, adding that he is outlining the book for his own planning purposes and reviewing some of these concepts with clients. "It's classic management, but [Tracy] has done it in a way that says, 'Here's the general's approach, now let's look at it from the business side.'" — Kristen Hampshire

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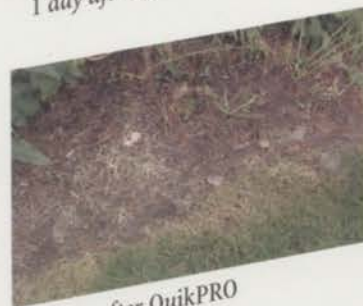
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Mattingly's MESSAGE

(continued from page 20)

of improving performance to an acceptable level, 2) the employee who more often than not performs below expectations, but surprises now and again with acceptable performance and 3) the employee who more often than not performs at an acceptable level, but too often slips back to unacceptable levels.

In the case of the first type of employee – the obvious poor performer – the decision to terminate is a relatively easy one assuming the employee's supervisor has offered enough feedback to the employee that has directed him/her to improve performance. Before actually terminating the employee, managers should make certain they follow the proper disciplinary process. Has there been adequate feedback to the employee about performance? Does the employee's file contain suitable documentation indicating clearly the specific performance issues? Did the employee clearly understand the consequences of low performance levels?

In the case of the second type of employee – the usually sub-par performer that shows flashes of hope – look for circumstances in the employee's work area that might be causing problems. Is there another employee creating problems for this employee? Has the employee been trained improperly or incompletely? Are there barriers to high performance outside the control of the employee? If so, do what is necessary to help the employee. If not, begin the disciplinary process because this employee will continue to struggle. And again ask yourself if this employee could potentially be successful in another position where the company has openings.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Every month, industry consultant Jack Mattingly will offer suggestions on key tasks for contractors to focus on. Here are his February thoughts.

To kick off another successful year, I suggest contractors set goals to improve profits by 50 percent. You can accomplish this lofty objective by following these few February to-dos:

Budget the total man-hours of each maintenance account, per function, per month. You now have the basis to track and monitor the hours for each project, each month.

✓ Review your financials and, particularly, your chart of accounts. Your accounting system should represent the method you use to estimate your costs, such as income, direct costs, indirect costs, equipment and vehicle expenses, administrative overhead and profit. Make the adjustments now in your software program.

✓ Become proficient in the software you are using. The computer can provide an abundance of information needed to manage operations. Become well trained.

✓ Eliminate the valueless. Now is the time to cut the paperwork that never leads to action. Eliminate anything wasteful. This includes trimming people whose skills or interests will not add value to your company's future. Re-engineer your systems so that the field operations have the necessary man-hours and material information provided to them on a frequent basis, preferably weekly, to manage the labor.

✓ Training and Education. Take advantage of seminars, teachers and programs by sending your people – it will be the best investment you make this time of year.

✓ Involve your employees in considering the above tips and develop a written game plan for accomplishment, including dates for completion. Then you will be on your way to reaching your new profit goal.

Jack Mattingly is a green industry consultant with Mattingly Consulting. He can be reached at 770/517-9476 or online at www.mattinglyconsulting.com.

The third type of employee needs to understand clearly that consistency in performance is required. Coaching and counseling this type of employee will generally yield positive results. But, if the employee continues to slip in terms of performance from time to time, make

it clear that the consequences of not meeting expectations consistently is termination of employment. In many cases, this type of employee simply loses focus and gets lazy in his/her work habits from time to time. Work with the employee to help him or her under-

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Market Trends

stand how to remain focused. Time management training might be in order as well.

Choosing when to terminate an employee can be tricky. But keeping marginal performers on the payroll will cost the company money and potentially cause internal problems. If a manager has coached the employee by providing sound and clear feedback along with any necessary training and has given him or her the opportunity to elevate performance, but the employee continues to struggle, both parties are usually better off by terminating the relationship.

Employees with bad attitudes will rarely turn poor performance around. Certain personality types simply do not respond well to coaching and disciplinary processes. Others want to do well, but are limited in their abilities to do the prescribed jobs. Obviously if someone is working hard to improve performance they should be given a reasonable chance to do so. But there is a definitive point when performance continues to be less than expected and management says, "enough."

(continued on page 28)

Association NEWS

The **American Nursery & Landscape Association** presented the L.C. Chadwick Educator's Award to Ellen Peffley, a professor at Texas Tech University. The award recognizes Peffley as an outstanding landscape horticulture instructor for her work at the University since 1984.

The **Southern Nursery Association** announced its Board of Directors for 2002-2003. The officers are: James Guy, president; Daniel Batson vice president and director chapter 4; Wayne Sawyer, director chapter 1; D.E. McCorkle, II, director chapter 2; William Boyd, director chapter 3; and Frank Collier, immediate past president.

The **Metro Atlanta Landscape & Turf Association** recognized Walter Reeves with the 2002 Pioneer Award. Reeves was acknowledged for his dedication to educating the community on gardening topics.

For the **Landscape Contractors Association of Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Virginia** 2003 officers are Joel Hafner, president; Deonne Wollman, vice president; David Vismara, secretary/treasurer; Mike McCartin, immediate past president. Directors for the Association are Randy Adler, David Angell, Pat Cullen, Mario Gorjon, Joseph Ketterer, Marjorie Kyriacou, George Mazur and Matt Owens.

The new board members for the **Nevada Landscape Association** are Jason Perry, president; Joe Gilbert, vice president; Tim Laskowski, secretary/treasurer; and directors Jeff Hill, Gene Balleweg, Rick Clark, John Klippenstein and Dave Mock.

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Market Trends

(continued from page 26)

INDUSTRY NEWS

Acquisition Bolsters Deere in Florida

The reach of John Deere Landscapes continues to grow – this time in Florida.

The supplier of landscape and irrigation products announced its acquisition of all 10 locations of The Treehouse, a tree and nursery stock distributor.

The 10 Treehouse locations include Boynton Beach, Ft. Myers, Kissimmee, Naples, Odessa, Parrish, Sanford, Venice, Vero Beach and Winter Garden.

This purchase brings the total number of Florida-based John Deere Landscapes locations to 40. And the industry supplier sees the acquisition as a step in the right direction with added customer accessibility to supplies and services.

Also, to oversee grower relationships and manage forward planning for nursery operations, John Deere welcomed Treehouse Founder Bill Robinson to its executive team. – Ali Anderson

BUSINESS BASICS

Systemize the Debt Collection Process

Past due or non-paying accounts play havoc with landscape contractors' cash flows.

One solution – not recommended – that many businesses adopt is: Forget about it. They call it, "a cost of doing business." The collection effort may be too time-consuming, too frustrating or too infuriating, and it is often time wasted – time that could be spent on winning new accounts and performing quality services. The way contractors see it is they did the work, supplied the goods and now they should get paid for it.

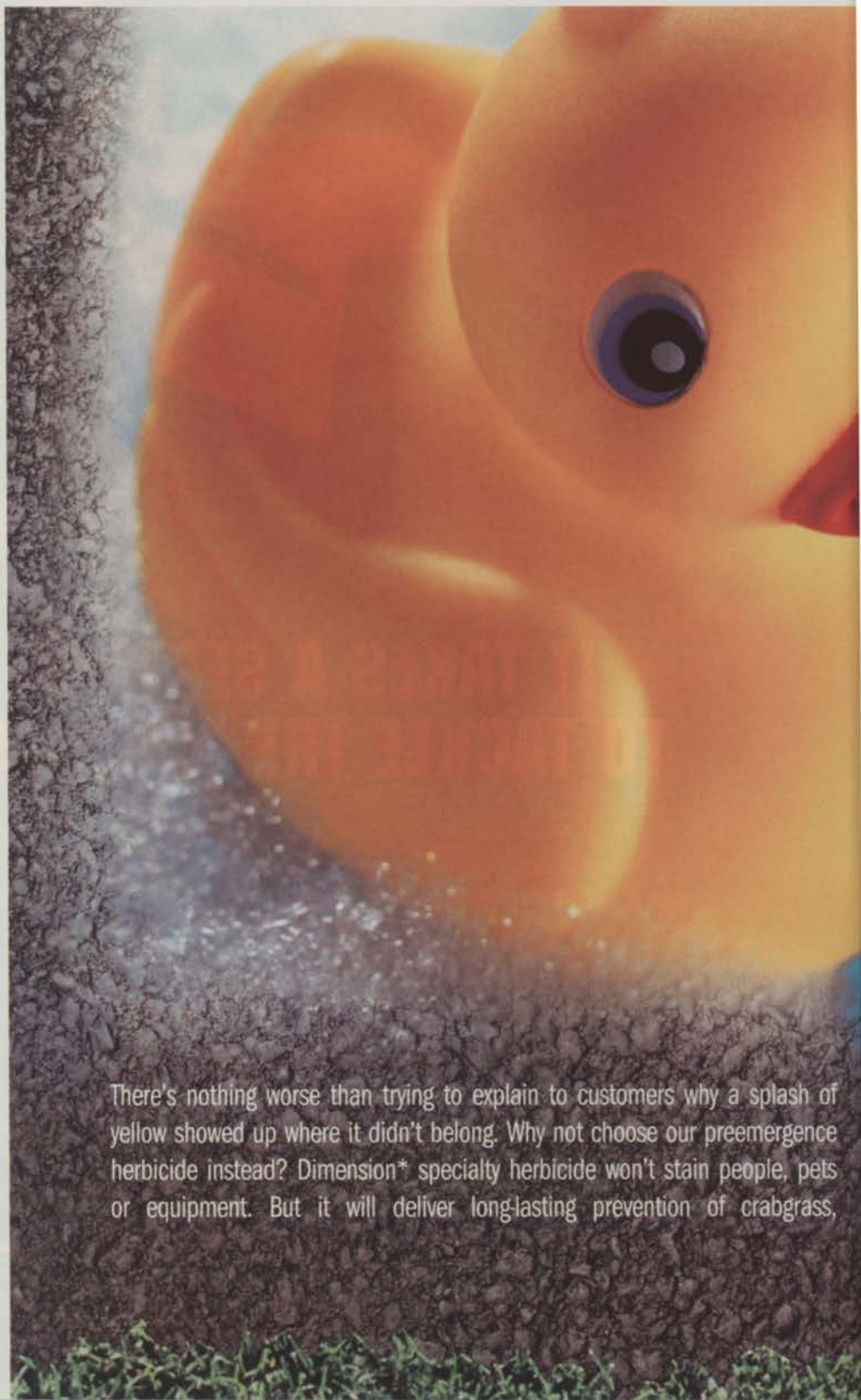
Still, collections is part of the job, so how can contractors collect payments quickly and efficiently? One way, of course, is hire the services of a collection agency and pay them to handle the headaches. If that doesn't sound like a good solution, The Business Start Page (www.bspage.com) offered these ideas to make collections easier:

✓ Prepare a plan – a system for collecting money owed a company. By developing a regular routine so that collections become a

part of the cash management process, fewer accounts will fall past due. Also, once collections steps are systemized in a clear and precise fashion, someone can be taught to follow them and manage the task.

✓ Bill customers promptly. Send an invoice immediately after performing a service or customers will treat bills with a similar lack of urgency. Bills promptly submitted are usually promptly paid.

✓ Produce a detailed invoice that includes information pertinent to clients. Ask customers what information they want on invoices – for example, delivery address if different from office address, job site number, order and delivery dates, purchase order number, etc. By including data that makes processing the invoice easier, it will get through the system and to the check-writing person sooner.



There's nothing worse than trying to explain to customers why a splash of yellow showed up where it didn't belong. Why not choose our preemergence herbicide instead? Dimension* specialty herbicide won't stain people, pets or equipment. But it will deliver long-lasting prevention of crabgrass,

✓ Send invoices to the right addresses. Some companies have several addresses, and getting the post transferred to the right office can delay payment and provide opportunity for lost mail. Mark the envelope "Do Not Forward, Address Correction Requested." That way the postal service will return envelopes to contractors with new addresses in the event their customers have moved.

On the WEB

Knight Enterprises -

www.knightlawncare.com

Lawn & Shrub -

www.lawnandshrub.com

Louisiana State University

Entomology AgCenter -

www.lsu.edu/departments/entomology/index.shtml

Ditch Witch -

www.ditchwitch.com

Earth Graphics -

www.earthg.com

To announce a new Web site, e-mail nwisnews@lawnandlandscape.com.

IN THE NEWS

Market Watch

Last year wasn't a good year to be an individual investor in the stock market. Nor was 2002 a great time to be a publicly traded company, given that the Dow Jones dropped roughly 15 percent. But some companies fared better, including a few well-known green industry firms. Here's a brief run-down of how some companies' stocks performed in a tough year.

John Deere (DE) - John Deere's stock remained strong, climbing approximately 10 percent in 2002. Still, the year was anything but calm for this multi-billion-dollar company, which saw its stock range from \$37.50 a share to a high point of \$51.60, which it hit in November.

ServiceMaster (SVM) - The parent company of TruGreen-ChemLawn has seen its stock struggle for the last few years, and 2002 wasn't any different. The stock opened above the \$13 mark, but it fell below \$9 a share in October before climbing back over \$11 a share to close out the year.

Toro (TTC) - Toro opened the year at less than \$50 a share, but it peaked at more than \$68 a share before closing out the year in the mid-\$60s. Growth years of better than 30 percent can't be expected every year, but Toro's stock is holding steady in the low \$60s as of press time.

Lesco (LSCO) - After starting the year around \$9 a share, the price dropped to the \$7 mark before Michael DiMino replaced Bill Foley as the new CEO. From that point, the stock steadily climbed over the \$12 mark, ultimately finishing the year at \$14 a share.

Caterpillar (CAT) - This is another stock that felt the market's ups and downs last year, sliding from nearly \$60 last spring to less than \$34 in October. Ultimately, Caterpillar's stock finished the year at \$47 a share.



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Southeast Regional Conference, Suffern, N.Y.
Contact: 518/783-1229.

FEB. 24-28 34th Annual International Erosion
Control Association Conference & Expo, Las Vegas,
Nev. Contact: 970/879-3010.

FEB. 25-26 Designing an Efficient Landscape
Irrigation System Workshop, Davis, Calif. Contact:
800/752-0881 or aginfo@unexmail.ucdavis.edu.

FEB. 25-27 Western Pennsylvania Turf Conference
& Trade Show, Monroeville, Penn. Contact: 724/295-
5400 or tbettle@alltel.net.

FEB. 26-28 Turfgrass Producers International
Midwinter Conference, Birmingham, England. Contact:
800/405-8873 or cgriffith@TurfGrassSod.org.

FEB. 26 New Jersey Landscape 2003, Secaucus,
N.J. Contact: 201/664-6310.

FEB. 26-MARCH 1 Southern California Plant
Tour Days, San Diego and Riverside counties, Calif.
Contact: 760/431-2572 or flowerandplant@nctimes.net.

MARCH 3-7 Virginia Turfgrass Council Short
Course, Charlottesville, N.C. Contact: 540/942-8873 or
thetvc@cfw.com.

MARCH 4-5 The Colorado Association of Lawn
Care Professionals' 15th Annual Spring Training
Conference, Aurora, Colo. Contact: 303/850-7587.

MARCH 5-6 Michigan Green Industry
Association's 16th Annual Trade Show & Convention,
Novi, Mich. Contact: 800/354-6352 or
dandrews@landscape.org.

MARCH 6 Texas Commission on Environmental
Quality workshops, Terrell, Texas. Contact:
512/239-6774.

MARCH 7-8 CLIP Training Classes, Atlanta, Ga.
Contact: 800/635-8485 or craigp@clip.com.

MARCH 10 New York State Turfgrass Association
Western Regional Conference, Buffalo, N.Y.
Contact: 518/783-1229.

MARCH 12-13 Landscape Industry Show, Long
Beach, Calif. Contact: 800/448-2522 or hq@clca.org.

MARCH 12-13 16th Turf & Irrigation
Conference, Milwaukee, Wis. Contact:
262/786-3301 ext. 243.

MARCH 13-16 ALCA Student Career Days,
Raymond, Miss. Contact: 800/395-2522.

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Imagine the Potential

Challenges associated with landscape design frustrate many a contractor, but PRO Landscape software changes all of that.

TECHNOLOGY. That's a powerful word that conjures up a broad range of reactions in people's minds. Of course, most people quickly envision a computer, and for obvious reasons based on the workplace revolution that has taken place over the past two decades.

As common as computers have become, you'd be hard pressed to find a successful business in the country today that didn't rely heavily on this machine filled with wires, chips, RAM and so much more. At the same time, there's a surprising number of landscape companies that remain reluctant to embrace the opportunities and efficiencies technology can deliver. For whatever reason—cost, confusion, complacency—these businesses continue operating like they always have, or maybe they have given in to the trend and set up a computer in the office, but they know they don't maximize its power.

Perhaps there's never been a better or easier time than now for landscape professionals to welcome technology into their businesses thanks to the latest advancements in landscape design and imaging software from Drafix Software. This 8-year-old company in Kansas City, Mo., is already well known thanks to its design software called PRO Landscape. But as the software's popularity has climbed, the company has worked with its customers to enhance the product, and the latest version of this powerful technology is receiving rave reviews.

HARDWARE REQUIREMENTS

SOFTWARE certainly doesn't work by itself, but PRO Landscape minimizes the computer requirements needed to produce these high-quality designs. Contractors who purchase the software should also have a digital camera or a scanner, access to email or a color printer to produce the rendering for customers and, of course, a computer with:

- Pentium or Athlon processor
- 32 MB RAM
- 150 MB hard disk space
- Windows XP, 2000, Me, NT 4.0 or 98

THE BASICS. The mission behind the software is to simplify and expedite the landscape design process for the designer while also providing a tool that makes this process more of a sales opportunity. PRO Landscape accomplishes this through the combined use of computer-aided design and imaging that work in unison to produce professional-quality work with a whole new twist.

The new twist is the life-like image of the potential client's property, complete with a new landscape. Designers simply create this image by taking a photograph of



the client's house with a camera and putting that image into their computer system to serve as the foundation for the design.

Once the design is completed with the use of more than 3,500 photo-quality plant and hardscape images in the PRO Landscape database, the contractor has a plan to offer the client, including plant growth projections, shadows, various perspectives and lighting. This means no more dog-eared various pages in plant books or trying to get homeowners to envision how different trees and shrubs would look in front of their house. The imaging software shows them how it would look on their own property.

"For most contractors using imaging software, this computer-generated visual is the hook that closes the sale," according to Pete Lord, president. Of course, customers are still interested in talking about price, which is easy to do since the PRO Landscape software creates an automatic estimate based on the image the clients are looking at. Once a company inputs its own prices for labor and various plant materials, the software does the rest of the work.

And, for those companies that send crews out to handle installations with a graphic rendering of the plan, the software can produce a two-dimensional computer-aided drawing of the proposed landscape, including all plant placements, the irrigation system and even various hardscapes that are included.



PRO Landscape's imaging software gives contractors the ability to quickly turn a digital photograph (inset) into a full-color landscape plan that will close sales.

CAN WE **HELP YOU?**

ONE of the most intimidating obstacles that new software buyers have to overcome is the notion of how confusing the software will be to learn and how time consuming this educational process will be. Drafix Software recognized this concern and committed to providing its users with the necessary support free of charge. This multi-faceted support includes a product manual, an online help system and a multimedia tutorial CD complete with 65 lessons featuring text and video instruction. "We also offer free technical support for as long as a user owns PRO Landscape," added Pete Lord, president.

WHY BUY IT? If you've done any sort of new landscape installation or enhancement in the last few years, you know how to design a landscape. So why should you take the time to learn how to do the same thing with computer software?

First, one of the biggest sales obstacles is differentiating yourself from the competition in customers' minds. An easy way to achieve this distinction is to use tools other companies don't use, such as design software. If you make a presentation to a homeowner for a \$20,000 installation, there's a good chance another contractor will make a similar presentation to your potential customer. If you both come in with paper-and-pencil plans and photo books, then the design and the price become the keys. But if you make a

presentation using a laptop computer or color printout that shows this individual a color image of their home with your design, that competitor becomes a non-factor in the process and you establish your company as a professional organization that does quality work.

Another benefit is the upselling potential the software offers. People considering a sizeable investment in their yard want to significantly enhance their property's appearance. Contractors using PRO Landscape indicate that once homeowners see the impact that various landscape features can have on their own property via the imaging capabilities, they become much less budget conscious and

much more interested in getting the most dramatic landscape.

Finally, there's the productivity payoff. Contractors experienced with the product report they can produce five times as many designs with the software as they can by hand. And don't forget that changes can be made to a digital file without having to start from scratch, whereas making changes to a design on paper may mean recreating the entire plan. For contractors who have lamented that they have more business than they can handle or they don't have time to return all of the calls they get from potential customers, this means money in their pockets. That's the power of technology.

GETTING BETTER **WITH AGE**

CONTINUOUS improvement represents a primary challenge for any product supplier, and Drafix Software is no different. Since it has been selling PRO Landscape to contractors for eight years, the company has been able to make enhancements based on feedback from the thousands of landscape designers who use the product.

"We've worked hard to make the product easier to use," explained Pete Lord, president. "For example, we've

streamlined frequently used steps. Features like selecting a plant, manipulating size and perspective, and navigating around the user interface have all been improved.

"We also heard from many of our users who were not using the Planner module because of their unfamiliarity with computer-aided design," Lord continued. "We spent much of our efforts in the last version making the CAD module much more user friendly without compromising its power."

A Series of Solutions

Five different landscape contractors talk about how PRO Landscape has boosted sales, helped customer service and saved them time.

SOLUTION #1

Handle Design Yourself

Joe Vitale tells it like it is. The president of Vitale Landscape & Drainage Contractors Inc., Roselle Park, N.J., is a third-generation landscape contractor, so he understands the industry. And one thing he has decided through his decades of experience is that outside landscape architects make the design/build process more trouble than it's usually worth.

"Landscape architects are pretty scarce in New Jersey, and the good ones are real busy working for the big firms," he explained. "I've only got about five to seven employees, so I was relying on landscape architects to work for me on a free-agent basis, and there's some real downsides to that. Plus, I couldn't find an architect who I wanted to hire and could afford at my size."

That's why he decided to take matters into his own hands and handle his design work with PRO Landscape even though he's "no Bill Gates," as he puts it, when it comes to working with computers. Now, he's using the software primarily with residential clients, which represent about 75 percent of the company's business. These jobs, which typically cost \$7,000 to \$10,000, start with Vitale providing the customer an estimate and either a hand



drawing or a computer rendering of the property depending on what the customer is willing to pay for.

"We charge for all of our designs, and we charge more for the drawings because they take three times as long to do as the images on the computer," related Vitale.

In particular, he prefers using the software on properties without any existing landscape. "If you're working with an image of a house with a landscape, you have to take the time to remove the current plants before you can put in your design," he pointed out, adding that very large properties can be a challenge if you can't get the entire property in the photo. "But once you do the design and show it to the clients in the color and splendor of full bloom, they love it."

For Vitale, the money and headaches he has saved by taking landscape architects out of the equation have paid for the software, but he has also been pleasantly surprised by how well PRO Landscape has boosted his sales. "If a client is indecisive, the image of their property with a new landscape will put them over the top," he maintained.

SOLUTION #2

Save Time

DEAN RICCI represents the typical landscape contractor in many regards. "I'm an owner, designer, sales and production manager all rolled up in one," he explained with a laugh. His business, Ricci's Landscape Management Inc. in Hebron, Ind., generates half of its revenue from its construction business, and much of that includes custom design work such as patios, brick walls and planting arrangements that separates Ricci's from its competition in the market.

The company's jobs range anywhere from \$4,000 to \$25,000, and as with any design-focused company, sales are largely

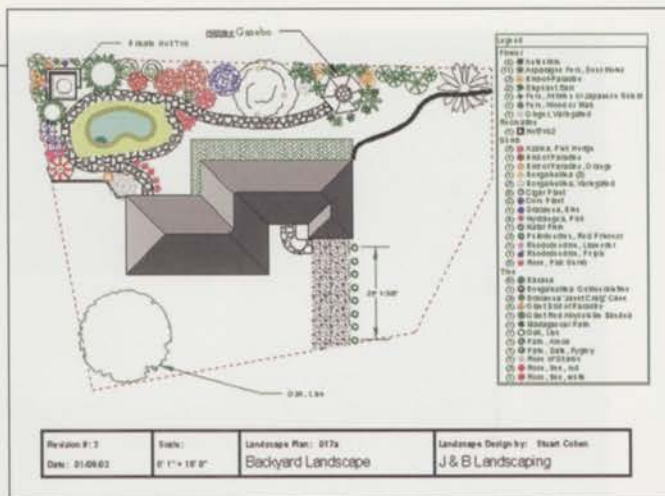
a function of the number of designs the company puts in front of customers. "When I did designs by hand, one design would take all day to complete with the estimating, and during busy periods when there are five or six designs to do, I couldn't get them all done in a timely fashion," he admitted.

Adding to the problem was the fact that clients always have changes to make to the first or second design. "We were looking to cut down on the design time when we started looking at this software, and that includes cutting down on the time spent modifying our designs," Ricci noted. "Clients always have some little or major change to make, and if the design

is saved on the computer it's like changing a Word document on the computer vs. having to retype the entire thing on a word processor. Now we can make changes in minutes with PRO Landscape instead of erasing and redrawing as much as the whole plan."

Ricci terms himself a "mediocre draftsman," but he still considers the two-dimensional CAD drawings important because they are what he gives to his foreman who will oversee the

installation. "I can do one or two drawings a day by hand, but now I can do four or five a day on the computer," he pointed out. (continued on page 6)



SOLUTION #3

Improve Customer Communications

Debbie Kiebler is a visual person. She prefers pictures instead of words, and she has little trouble envisioning a scene as someone describes it to her. But, the truth is, her customers at BR&D Landscape Inc., Franktown, Colo., don't have her visual talents. As a result, Kiebler often found herself struggling to help them understand the concept she had in her mind for their property.

"I had been working with customers on a small scale for years trying to convey ideas of what they might do with their yard, and I found the need to do something more visual," explained the co-owner and vice president of this firm focusing on the high-end, custom residential market. "You can flag or paint a smaller area, but I may have a picture in my head for a property, and conveying that to other people is difficult."

Selling homeowners a high-end landscape is difficult enough in today's economy, so the last thing a salesperson or designer needs is the added challenge of not being

able to get the customer to envision the finished product. Kiebler had been using a different CAD program when she purchased PRO Landscape for its three-dimensional imaging capabilities. "Then I realized that PRO Landscape's CAD was more sophisticated, so now I have an integrated two-dimensional drawing and a three-dimensional image to show someone how I would landscape their yard," she noted. "People really find these images very helpful. They need something more than spray paint on their grass if they're going to spend money on a landscape."

In addition, Kiebler considers the images to be particularly valuable on more difficult sales. "The image has a 'whiz bang' sort of effect on people," she noted, adding that imagine is also helpful when selling to new home construction where people struggle to visual anything other than dirt surrounding their house. "That's what puts them over the edge."

Kiebler, who does the majority of designs for the company, spends 90 minutes with the client talking about their needs and wants for the property before starting on the design itself. As a result, she appreciates anything that saves her time, such as the materials takeoff capabilities of the software. "That component makes our job real simple because now I can tell our crew how much edging to use and how many square feet of material they will need for the patio, for example," she remarked. "We do that all right off the design because the design is done to scale and we just have to plug in the multipliers to get the numbers."

"If we need to change a patio, for example, we can do that without starting all over, and then the software automatically gives me a new estimate for materials and prices based on the changes," she enthused.



Save Time (continued from page 5)

This increased productivity means more sales. "That really speeds up sales because we're getting the drawings or images in front of customers so much more quickly, plus they're impressed by our quick turnaround."

Now that he has completed his second full year working with the software, Ricci has a thorough understanding of what works best for him. One particular feature he appreciates is the ability to add his own digital images to the plant library that comes with the program. "That's usually a winter project for me because PRO Landscape can't cover every plant I'm going to use even though there are plenty in the library," he explained. "I make my own files of plants I use the most, like 'Dean's perennials list,' and that helps speed up the process."

Obviously, Ricci likes the software for its CAD capabilities, but he's not blind to the power of imaging either. And while certain types of jobs may be better suited than others for creating a digital image, he makes this decision based on how responsive the clients seems to be to the proposal. "I use the imaging when I think I've got a hard sale or I've got a customer who really can't read the plans," he said. "And those images really sell for me—it probably doubled my closing ratio in the first year. In fact, this year we raised our prices and our closing ratio didn't go down at all."

Today, he can't imagine running his business without PRO Landscape. "I'd never go back to the old way of drafting by hand," he asserted. "I'm just glad most of my competitors don't use this program or else I'd have a tougher time selling jobs."

SOLUTION #4

Boost Your Closing Percentage

UNFORTUNATELY, putting together a design and a proposal only to have it rejected by the customer who favors a competitor's pitch is a reality of the landscape industry. But Craig Adamson considers time his most valuable commodity, so he's not particularly interested in investing countless hours in a design only to lose the sale.

At the same time, the owner of Cutting Edge Landscape Maintenance, Rockford, Ill., wants to grow his company from its current annual sales mark of \$500,000, and he knows that increasing the amount of design/build work his company does is one way to make that happen. "PRO Landscape's imaging has really boosted our landscape sales because people can see what it looks like and you can literally make changes right in front of them," explained Adamson. "What the customers want is to see a picture, and this gives that to them."

Adamson also gets excited about how the software influences customers' perception of his company. "I used to draw everything by hand, and then I'd be competing against three or four other contractors who all seemed to have digital images," he recalled. "I'd lose every single time because they all looked so much more professional."

Now Cutting Edge Landscape Maintenance enjoys the same professional perception, and Adamson similarly appreciates being able to generate more designs and proposals than ever before. "I can do a design from scratch in 30 minutes with PRO Landscape, and I'm not a computer person," he commented.

As for the impact on the success of his proposals, the change has been dramatic and obvious. "I used to get the job on about 20 percent of the designs I would do, and some of them would take a week to do at night after dinner and working all day," he observed. "Now, I'm getting about twice as many jobs and the software has improved my life at home because I can get the images done so quickly and I can spend more time with my kids and my wife after dinner."

Adamson noted that potential customers are also impressed by the fact that he presents them with a complete pricing breakdown that has been produced via computer, and that makes the ensuing conversations easier as well. "Since the entire proposal is off the computer and seems more professional, I've noticed that customers don't seem as inclined to try and negotiate my price down," he added.

Adamson has put together proposals complete with digital images for a range of customers, and he sees benefits with all of them. "We do a lot of work for condominiums, and now I can use the image to show the entire board what we're proposing instead of trying to get them all to understand," he said. "And homeowners always ask, 'My house can really look like that?'"

"If someone is looking for a way to make more sales, this is the way to do it," Adamson affirmed, adding that he probably could've done his first design after spending an hour teaching himself how to use the software.

PRO Landscape Proposal

File Tools Help

Customer Information

Name: John Galt State: MO
 Address: 105 E. 5th Street Zip Code: 64106-4114
 City: Kansas City Phone: 816 555-4123
 Salesperson: Lisa Tax Exempt: ☐ Yes ☒ No Date: 01/21/02
 Exp. Date: 02/21/02

Option Defaults ☐ Deliver ☒ Install ☐ Guarantee **Comments**

SKU	Category	Description	Quantity	U	I	G	Price	New
GR0130	Grass Sod	Imp. English	40				1.00	
TRE 001	Tree D	Made. Lorine	2				250.00	
SHR173	Shrub BE	Adonis Pink	3				60.00	
SHR176	Shrub BE	Holly Blue Princess	2				60.00	
SHR183	Shrub E	Corona Orange 2	1				60.00	
SHR145	Shrub CE	Juniper Blue Chip	3				40.00	
FLD100	Flower Perennial	Madia Francon	20				12.00	
FLD100	Flower Perennial	Coronilla Mountain	6				12.00	
TRE 186	Tree D	Birds Rose Chang	1				250.00	

Quote #: 1001 Tax Rate: 7.1 % Taxable: 2471.00 Exempt: 0.00 Tax: 175.44 Total: 2646.44 Calculate

SOLUTION #5

Light Up Your Sales

"IT DOESN'T matter if you're doing \$30 million or \$100,000 in sales because PRO Landscape is quick, fast and it closes deals."

Chris Walter, president, Computerized Landscape Design, has seen the light. As a result, a great many homeowners in and around Liberty, Mo., appreciate landscape lighting as well, and they're hiring Walter to install their lighting after the images generated via Pro Landscape show them what a little illumination can do for their property.

"I do all aspects of landscaping," related Walter, adding that his average job runs between \$5,000 and \$10,000. "One job might be the front of the house and a paver patio in the back, while another client might have us install some trees in front and on the side of the house along with a fish pond in the back. But one thing that almost all of my jobs have is lighting. I love to install lighting because I've found that it's one of the easiest and most profitable parts of landscaping, and my clients love what it does for their properties."

Of course, Walter rarely sells his clients a second or third lighting system, so they don't actually realize how dramatic the impact of lighting can be until he shows them a four-color image of their property using the lighting tool on PRO Landscape. "The software shows you the lights before they exist, just like it does with the plants, but it also has a lighting feature that simulates how the property will look at night with the lighting on," Walter explained. "Most people obviously just call me for landscaping, but I always make sure to produce an extra image of their property with lighting in place because the odds are that they'll buy it if they see it."

"The key is that the software really personalizes the whole design for the client," he continued. "They see their house with their yard, and they'll buy that if you can get close to their price range."

Contractors who haven't experienced the dramatic effect that imaging software can have on potential clients'

decisions by convincing them to spend more than they originally budgeted should talk to Walter. "I've had instances where I've presented clients with a range of designs that go beyond what they were planning to do and they've ended up spending as much as four times their original budget by phasing the project in over time," he commented.

While he appreciates the estimate and CAD capabilities, PRO Landscape is all about the power of the imaging as far as Walter is concerned. "If I give the average homeowner a plan looking down on their house with all of these circles for a burning bush here and a Norway spruce there, they don't understand what I'm proposing," he noted. "But the image gets a real 'wow!' from them."

Walter's clients also appreciate how the software changes the entire design process and lets them become involved. "It can be hard to get an appointment with some people because everyone is so busy, but if I can show you what you want on the spot, you'll buy from me nine times out of 10," he predicted, comparing the software to cellular phones in terms of the productivity benefits both technologies offer his business. "So I travel with the laptop, put the printer in the back of the truck and the client and I will sit on the front porch and design the landscape together in an hour or hour and a half. Then, the client has two or three images of what I can do for them along with an estimate. Meanwhile, other contractors spend the meeting jotting ideas and measurements down on a legal pad and the client won't see anything for at least a week."

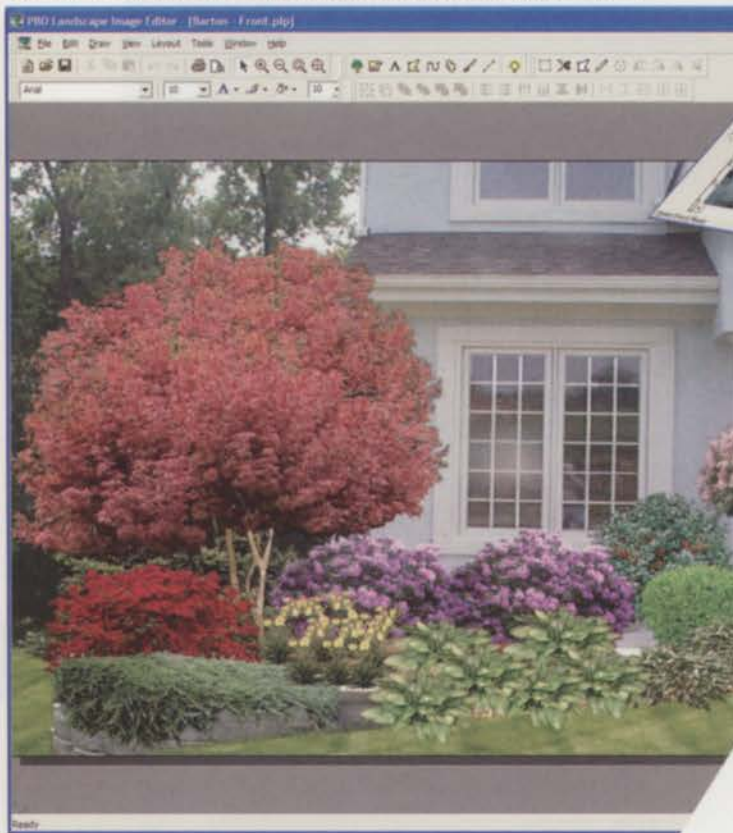
Of course, not all jobs are this easy to design, but this self-taught designer estimated he uses this approach with half of his jobs—those up to about \$7,000 in size because the larger jobs require a CAD and multiple images due to their size and complexity. "It really closes sales," Walter promised.



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"PRO Landscape not only saved my time, but as importantly, my customer's time!" -Dean Ricci, Jr., President, Ricci's Landscape Management, Inc.

"PRO Landscape makes it easy for my customers to visualize their landscape design." -Robin Freeman, President, Freeman Landscape, Inc.

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What Are You Waiting For?

Nursery Market Report

NEW PERENNIALS

Perk Up Your Landscape

Perennials remain the darlings of landscape plantings, and the heightened interest in these long-lived plants keeps a steady stream of introductions coming. The California-based Anthony Tesselaar International debuts the Lily of the Nile 'Snowstorm' and re-launches its My Favorite series of perennial mums to meet the steady demand for perennials.



My Favorite Perennial Mum series includes five new colors for spring 2003. Choose from White, Coral, Twilight Pink, Yellow Quill and Autumn Red. Photo: Anthony Tesselaar International

Lily of the Nile 'Snowstorm' is a new agapanthus, and My Favorite Perennial Mums provide fall blooms in a bush or hedge form year after year.

Here is more on each of these selections.

MY FAVORITE PERENNIAL MUM SERIES

Growth Chart

SPRING - The mum will emerge in similar fashion to perennials like hostas or lilies. By June, the mum will achieve "plant presence" but will still be on the small side. In moderate to warmer regions, the mum will bloom in spring. If it does, cut back the bush by $\frac{1}{3}$ after flowers have faded to ensure repeat bloom in fall.

SUMMER - By July, the mums will present a nice mounded form, fully filled in with green foliage. By August, they will reach their full size for the season and new buds will form.

By the second season, mums planted 2 to 3 feet apart in full sun will merge to create a gently undulated mounded hedge or border effect.

FALL - My Favorite Perennial Mums, at full size for that season, burst into bloom, full-tilt.

WINTER - In the South, My Favorite Mums will be evergreen. Cut back bush to $\frac{1}{3}$ to ensure new blooms in spring. In the North, My Favorite Perennial Mums are herbaceous plants that will die back over the winter. Cut back frost-wilted foliage for a tidier look over winter or do this the next spring before growth begins.

SUBSEQUENT SEASONS - My Favorite Perennial Mums are true perennials. Under normal landscape conditions, they will return and increase in size for many seasons with minimal care. - Ali Cybulski

LILY OF THE NILE 'SNOWSTORM.' Lily of the Nile, also known by the botanical name agapanthus, is increasingly popular with landscape contractors for its easy-care nature, crisp, exotic look and long-lasting flowers. With a name derived from the flurries of white florets that ride in umbels atop sturdy, 24-inch stems, each umbel of this plant is comprised of up to 50 tubular white florets.

This agapanthus flowers, on average, 70 days per season, producing an abundance of brilliant white blooms. When mature, this vigorous plant bears up to 100 umbels per plant per season for a mass of long-lasting blooms.

Dense leaves are arranged in a tuft or cluster. Each leaf is narrow and strap-like, measuring, on average, $14\frac{1}{2}$ inches long by $\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide.

Snowstorm grows to a compact 27 to 30 inches, a preferred height for landscapes and container plantings. It typically blooms late spring to midsummer with spot flowering through late summer and fall. Hardy in U.S. Department of Agriculture zones 9 to 11, Snowstorm perennializes readily in warmer climate zones.

This compact plant grows in most light conditions. It needs full sun for best flowering performance, but it will flower in reduced numbers in partial shade. It is naturally disease-resistant and excels in commercial landscaping applications, borders and containers.

Nursery Market Report

Generally, Snowstorm is a low-maintenance plant. While regular watering and feeding are required for peak performance, the plant can survive with minimal water after it is established, making it well suited to landscape plantings in drier areas of the country. The thick, moisture-retentive foliage of Lily of the Nile also makes it an excellent addition to fire-retardant borders.

Snowstorm tolerates a range of soils from sand to clay and needs watered well to establish. But once established in the landscape, agapanthus tolerate both wet and dry conditions.

Space plants 2 feet apart for landscape borders and promote initial growth by providing high-nitrogen fertilizer, but once established, use a flowering plant formula high in

potassium to encourage flowering. Pruning and pinching are not required, but dead flower stems must be removed after flowering.

Plants will perform best if they are watered and fed regularly, but once established, Snowstorm will flower readily with minimal care.

Agapanthus are not prone to disease in the landscape and attract no major pests. But be aware that snails and slugs may cause slight damage.



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MY FAVORITE PERENNIAL MUMS.

These mums, which attract butterflies, including Monarchs, are mounded masses of flowers that return year after year, ultimately growing up to 30 inches high and 50 inches across on some varieties. They are available in five colors, including yellow, pink, white, coral and red.

Picture mums as shrubs or as hedges – these mums aren't disposable pots of fall color. These are true perennial mums that will come back and increase in size annually, requiring minimal care. They sport uniformity in shape, flower abundance and flowering habit.

Bred to be exceptionally cold hardy, all My Favorite Perennial Mums thrive in climate zones as cold as USDA zone 3b and Canadian equivalents. Their cold hardiness has been proved in sustained winter poundings of -30F in Central Minnesota. But they also can be grown successfully in warm climates up to USDA zone 9.

The My Favorite Perennial Mum series was bred by Neil Anderson, Peter Asher and Esther Gesick of the University of Minnesota's



Lily of the Nile 'Snowstorm' features clusters of white florets that bloom up to 70 days per season. The plant grows to a compact 27 to 30 inches, perfect for container plantings. Photo: Anthony Tesselaar International

Nursery Market Report

lawnandlandscape.com

See the Online Extras part of our Web site for technical notes on various mums.

Department of Horticultural Science. The team developed and tested this special class of perennial mums for more than 10 years at four University of Minnesota trial sites as far north as Grand Rapids, Minn.

While starting out in size much like other mums, by the second growing season, the difference is clear—they are large. With their compact, mounded shape and durable branching, these mums hold their shape while offering an even canopy of up to 5,000 blooms by year three during a four- to five-week fall bloom season.

For perennial performance, plant in the landscape and not in containers.

In areas subject to alternating thaws and freezes, routine mulching helps prevent ground heaves. And for peak performance, full sun is best—six hours or more per day. In areas of intense, dry heat, such as Phoenix, Ariz., filtered mid-day sun is more appropriate.

My Favorite Mums thrive in a variety of soil types, as long as drainage is good. For optimal performance, plant mums in well-drained soil that also is rich in organics.

Water as needed and plant 2 to 3 feet apart to create a continuous hedge-like effect. Plant 4 feet apart to maintain the outlines of the individual bush.

My Favorite Perennial Mums can generally tolerate being planted closer together than is optimal. But if crowding occurs or a new location is desired, they can be transplanted with little trauma to the plant, though with their hefty root structure, transplanting can be a chore. The best time to transplant is early spring, before growth gets underway.

Applying fertilizer will improve plant performance. Use a liquid plant food—a flowering plant formula—and apply every three to four weeks. With a three- or four-month, slow-release plant food, apply twice per season and supplement with occasional application of liquid plant food.

These mums do not need to be pinched. As self-branching mums, subsequent pinching can actually reduce the eventual

size of this plant. The plant also does not require deadheading.

In the north, cut off dead stems and foliage in winter or early spring. And in the south, cut foliage back to 1/3 in late winter to encourage spring bloom and again after spring bloom to encourage a second bloom season in fall.

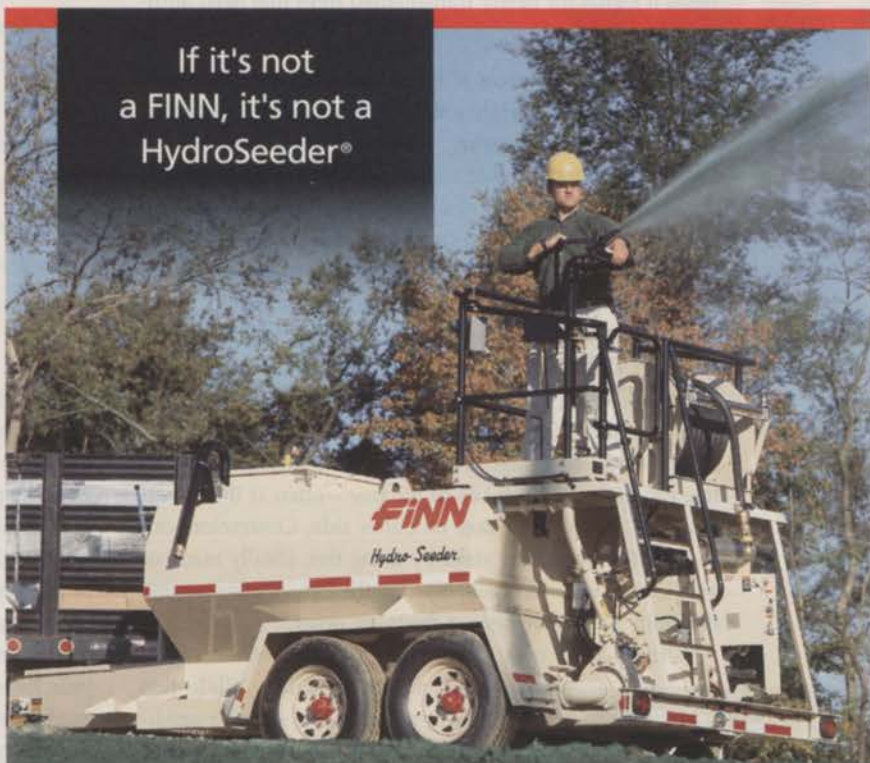
My Favorite Perennial Mums will bloom

four to five weeks each fall, depending on local weather conditions.

For more information on obtaining these plants, contact your local grower or wholesaler. — Ali Cybulski **LL**

The author is Contributing Editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at acybulski@lawnandlandscape.com.

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TREE BRACING TECHNIQUES

Stable Staking

While staking or guying every tree is unnecessary, sometimes it's vital for newly transplanted trees that need additional support to thrive.

For instance, in areas of high prevailing winds, staking helps keep a plant upright until it securely roots itself. Stakes also act as barriers to entry, protecting trees from mowers and other equipment that could cause root or trunk injury. Additionally, a number of clients request staked trees because they like the braced-tree appearance.

For these reasons, contractors must learn proper staking methods to ensure they perform this task correctly.

Contractors can support most trees up to 3 inches in diameter with two stakes that are the same diameter as the tree trunk. Place the stakes in line with the prevailing wind direction and drive them 18 inches into undisturbed soil. Stakes should be as high as is practical to provide additional tree protection. Attach ties to the tree – often at the lowest branch – and to the stakes on either side. Contractors can connect the tree to the stake by using ties, ideally made of plastic – not wire – to avoid injuring the tree. Allow for some flexibility and movement at the tying point.

Setting screw eyes into a tree trunk is another way to attach ties to stakes. While this may appear to be severe punishment for the tree, the injury associated with this type of attachment is actually relatively minor.

Contractors can support trees up to 5 inches in trunk diameter with guy wires attached to stakes, spaced at 120-degree angles. Fasten wires to the tree in the same manners already discussed, although with guying all attachment points should be at least 6 inches apart. Attachments should be as high in the tree as practical and certainly at or above the lowest branches. Again, tie guy wires to stakes driven 18 inches into undisturbed soil. The axis of the stake should be in line with the axis of the pull on the guy wire.

Contractors should guy wire trees more than 5 inches in diameter the same way they guy wire



Staking can aid tree stabilization for one growing season in windy climates and help get newly transplanted trees off to a healthy start. Photo: L&L Staff

GROWTH PATTERNS

4 Reasons to Stake

If done properly, staking newly planted trees provides stability until the tree can support itself, but not all trees require cables or braces. Here are four situations where transplanted trees may require staking.

1. They have abnormally small root systems that cannot physically support the larger, above-ground growth (stem and leaves).
2. The stem bends excessively when not supported.
3. The planting site is very windy and trees will be uprooted if they are not supported.
4. There's a good chance that vandals will uproot or damage unprotected trees.

trees 3 to 5 inches in diameter, except they should anchor the guy wires to the soil with the use of earth anchors or deadmen. Again, the axis of the earth anchor must be in line with the pull or stress on the guy wire.

For safety reasons, always hang flags or plastic streamers from the wire when guying trees so they are more visible to passers-by.

Always remove guy wires or stakes after one growing season and prior to the initiation of growth the following year. Even this short of a period can cause girdling if a plant establishes rapidly. Leaving guy wires on longer will almost invariably result in girdling, which can destroy the tree's most vital membranes – the layers that conduct water and minerals from the roots to the leaves and return the food produced by the leaves to the rest of the tree.

The one exception to this rule is if contractors attached guy wires to the tree with screw eyes. Don't remove screw eyes from the tree, but cut off the exposed head and allow the tree to overgrow the shank.

Remember, in research measuring the effect of rigid supports on staked trees, unstaked trees were found to have greater trunk diameter than their staked counterparts. Unstaked trees also had greater trunk taper, meaning that the trunks increased in diameter more rapidly and developed larger root systems. Also, the installed price of trees may increase from 15 to 30 percent because of staking, so explain to the clients the cost of the procedure weighed against the benefits. Though staking helps in some situations, it is not without risk to the plants themselves and should be monitored closely. – T. Davis Sydnor

The author is professor, College of Food Agriculture & Environmental Science, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.



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JOHN DEERE

On

Paper

A "Fleet"ing Glance

Like many other entrepreneurs, Stan McDaniel had to do a little bit of everything when his company, Healthy Lawns and Shrubs, Little Rock, Ark., started out. That meant not only keeping track of a growing staff, but also an increased amount of company service vehicles.

With a burgeoning vehicle fleet, he had to monitor basic upkeep, track gasoline use, check vehicle appearance and schedule repairs. To aid him in this task, he created a form to embrace all fleet maintenance aspects.

"We needed to see what condition the vehicles were in all of the time," McDaniel said. "So the technicians use this form on the trucks each time they fill up."

The form has a space for a little bit of everything. The top section, made for fuel transactions, tracks gas stations visited, fuel types and amounts used, and total fuel cost. Also included is a space for other upkeep checks such as fluid levels, tire air levels and exterior conditions.

McDaniel also left space on the form for the techni-

cians to leave any notes for needed mechanic checks or possible repairs. Then when he reviews the forms, he schedules any required maintenance.

Although his employees do not like taking the time to fill out the forms, McDaniel said they are a big help in keeping track of not only the vehicles, but also his technicians' habits. "I can really tell how well they take care of the trucks and trailers," he explained. "If they aren't keeping them clean, I know."

This system enabled McDaniel to manage vehicle maintenance when he had only a couple of trucks and to grow his fleet to nearly 30 trucks today. Now, McDaniel employs mechanics to perform regular service checks.

"I think this form works great for a company with just a few trucks that doesn't have a regular mechanic to help them." — Mandy Jenkins

The author is Contributing Editor to Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached through mwisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com.

VEHICLE SERVICE REPORT					
TIME STARTED a.m. p.m.		Circle or check box or fill in blanks		TIME FINISHED a.m. p.m.	
Mobil # _____	Ser. Per. _____	Date ____/____/____	Milage _____		
Station: TREK	MANN	OTHER	People Present _____	Fuel Used: PRE	REG DIS
AMT. IN VEHICLE \$ _____	AMT. IN GAS CANS \$ _____	ENGINE OIL OK ADDED	TRANS. FLUID OK ADDED	BRAKE FLUID OK ADDED	POWER STR. OK ADDED
BATTERY WATER OK ADDED	RADIATOR WATER OK ADDED	WASHER-WIPER FLUID OK ADDED	BELTS INSPECTED OK ADDED	EXTERIOR CLEANLINESS CLEAN FILMED DIRTY	INTERIOR DEBRIS CLEAN EMPTIED
DASH BOARD VINYL AREAS CLEAN WIPED DOWN SOILED	TIRE PRESSURE LOOKED OK CHECKED LBS.	WIPER BLADES GOOD REPLACED	GAS CAP PUT BACK ON WIND SHIELD CLEANED TRAILER TIRES - LOOKED OK TRAILER CONDITION - CLEAN CHECKED _____ LBS. FILMED SOILED		
Attention Mechanic, Please: Repair Look At Order Adjust Vehicle # _____					

On Paper highlights contractors' business forms. To view additional such documents, visit the Business Tools section at www.lawnandlandscape.com. If you have a form you think contractors would benefit from, contact Nicole Wisniewski at mwisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com or 800/456-0707.

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USE READER SERVICE #32

Cover Story

by Nicole Wisniewski

Stepping STONE

*Building
a solid team
and boosting
commercial
work enabled
Lawns of
Dallas to jump
start growth.*

*Todd Brown (left) and Doug
Smellage, Lawns of Dallas
Photo: Ian Halperin*

One step usually leads to another. Doug Smellage used this philosophy when he started Lawns of Dallas in 1982.

Initially, standing on the bottom rung of business, he performed every role – owner, foreman, crew member and mechanic. As the company grew and Smellage added a few dependable people, he was able to relieve some responsibilities and fine-tune his focus, sprinting up the steps of stability and growth.

"Because I was wearing so many hats in the beginning, I was in motion all of the time," Smellage explained. "Then, three years into it when I was running six to seven crews, I knew I had to have other quality people to help me. Then I got past five years and accumulated more dependable employees who stayed with me and helped me get over the \$1-million mark. I learned to delegate better and then \$2 million was easier to accomplish. Next, I stopped focusing on the day-to-day and started focusing on the future."

Keeping an eye on the steps ahead boosted Lawns of Dallas' growth. But three years ago, the full-service residential and commercial maintenance company reached a plateau – a step that posed a challenging climb. So Smellage made some changes to push his business to the next level.

COMMERCIAL CONCERNS. By 1995, Lawns of Dallas reached \$2 million in revenue. Then for four years, the company lingered in this range during a refocusing stage after acquiring a new facility. Lawns of Dallas maintained a 60-percent residential/40-percent commercial business mix since its inception and saw no reason to change ... until Smellage hired Todd Brown to help add more commercial maintenance work, boost growth and lighten his load.

"I'm a firm believer in delegating responsibilities," Smellage said, explaining his reasoning for bringing in Brown to help handle day-to-day duties. "I call it my rubber band theory. If you take a rubber band and extend it as far as you can, it's either going to break or snap back at you. If you break it, you've gone too far too fast and need to start over. But if it snaps back at you, you now know how far you can take it. In the same essence, you are constantly learning

how much you can delegate and how far you can stretch a person to learn and grow. And even though people are going to fail, like the rubber band snapping back and hurting you, they will learn from those mistakes and become stronger."

To become a better delegator, Smellage said he had to be willing to work with people through their growth and accept that mistakes were going to be made along the way. "People typically won't accept responsibility because they are afraid of failure," he explained. "So instead of getting disappointed with people when they made mistakes, I would let them make the mistake and then we'd sit down and talk about what went wrong and what they could do to improve for the next time around. I had to build up tolerance as an owner to do this, but it helped me build a team of people who were no longer afraid to step up and take on additional responsibilities because they knew I would help them through it."

The first step in boosting commercial work was hiring a professional salesperson to focus on this business area.

To find the work, the dedicated salesperson attends a monthly Building Owners and Managers Association luncheon, as well as an International Facility Managers Association monthly dinner. Both events host some of the company's clients, so attendance is mandatory.

The company added commercial work slowly as not to grow beyond its ability to handle the additional clients. At the same time, it eliminated unprofitable jobs or those that didn't fit the company's niche to refocus efforts on new work. "We decided that we wanted customers

LAWNS OF DALLAS

HEADQUARTERS:

Dallas, Texas

FOUNDED: 1982

2002 REVENUE: \$3.9 million

2003 PROJECTED REVENUE:

\$4.4 million

2004 PROJECTED REVENUE:

\$5 million

SERVICE MIX: 60 percent

maintenance, 40 percent renovation, seasonal color, irrigation, lawn and tree care

CLIENT MIX:

60 percent commercial,

40 percent residential

EMPLOYEES: 140 seasonal,

95 year-round. Eighty percent of the company's employees are Hispanic.

GROWTH HISTORY

1995: \$2 million

1996: \$2.1 million

1997: \$2.4 million

1998: \$2.7 million

1999: \$3.2 million

2000: \$3.4 million

2001: \$3.6 million

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USE READER SERVICE #33

Cover Story

who thought full-service landscape maintenance was important," Brown commented. "We don't want quick mowing jobs. We want to manage clients' entire landscapes and have clients that utilize the bulk of our services. So, we eliminated clients who weren't interested in full service and slow paying clients when we went through our contract renewal process two years ago. Price increases naturally weeded out most of these types of clients."

Lawns of Dallas' typical residential and commercial job includes mowing, edging, pruning, weed control, basic fertilization, preemergent and postemergent herbicide treatments for turf and beds and monthly or twice monthly irrigation system inspections. Irrigation maintenance services are a must for all clients since only a handful of them are without an irrigation system in the hot, dry Texas weather. "Managing this resource is important because the City of Dallas Water Department implements new water regulations all the time," Brown said, adding that to handle the work, the company employs three licensed irrigators. "All systems must have rain and freeze sensors, for instance, and there cannot be overspray on any sidewalks or curbs. Also, most people want the soil around their homes and buildings to stay moist because the soil around here cracks easily once it dries and is known to negatively affect home and building foundations. So, on average, clients want a monthly inspection, but in the summer most of our commercial clients ask to receive twice monthly irrigation evaluations."

Irrigation system check reports help the company track zones and standard problems on a client's system, including broken heads, clogged nozzles, etc. When agreeing to the service, clients preauthorize a certain dollar amount for repairs. When the repair cost exceeds this number, the form is faxed to the client for approval. "It not only serves as a maintenance checklist, but also as a proposal to recommend needed repairs and then some optional changes and services—for instance, moving a spray head to a better location for better turf coverage," Brown said.

Another fairly typical client request is seasonal color. With his experience in Atlanta, Brown said he saw some exquisite seasonal color displays and wanted to bring that idea to Dallas. "I didn't see a lot of great seasonal color happening here, so we started our Ever Bloom program about two years ago," he said. In addition to two, three or four color changes a year, clients receive regular bed maintenance to maintain the color, manage insects and diseases, deadhead and replace plants when necessary. (For more information, see *Bloom Time* on page 52.)

STRUCTURAL SWITCH. Nearly three years ago, two people managed nine or 10 crews and customers in each Lawns of Dallas division. The arrangement left clients requiring additional attention and crews without adequate training.

Forming an account management structure fixed the problem. Now, each division has its own operations manager and account manager—the same two people as before, but this time each has a specific focus. The operations manager handles scheduling, training, quality control and other operations issues, while the account manager is the front-line communicator who connects with clients, builds relationships and sells additional services. This way, someone constantly focuses on sales and someone else embraces scheduling as his

(continued on page 52)

Walker Owners

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Exquisite Lawns,
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Gypsum, Colorado

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Travis Keen Lawn Service,
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Cover Story

(continued from page 52)

or her sole responsibility. Occasionally, operations and account managers will help each other when selling new jobs. For instance, if a client is more concerned with understanding some of the more technical aspects of how irrigation systems are maintained, the operations manager will join the client and account manager to explain the details.

The company employs one account manager for residential work and four account managers for commercial clients. The amount of work each account manager is given depends on job size and client needs, each handling between \$500,000 and \$800,000 worth of work. "Some clients need daily feedback while

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USE READER SERVICE #35

Two years ago, Lawns of Dallas decided to boost its seasonal color service by forming dedicated crews who intensely manage the plants throughout the year.

The Ever Bloom program starts with the design – landscape designers plan the color change outs. Next, three- to four-person crews prepare the soil, install the plant material and add decorative mulch. Then, these crews return to the site regularly to maintain the color. Clients typically sign up for two-, three- or four-color change outs during the year to coordinate their color with the seasons.

At peak season, the company uses 12 to 13 employees for this work. The color is sold as an enhancement and, to eliminate the need to resell the color every year, the service is rolled into a client's regular contract the next year if he or she is interested in doing it again.

"At first, we were nervous about rolling this work into the maintenance contract because we thought we wouldn't get the sale if the contract had too many items in it," explained Todd Brown, the company's general manager. "But clients have responded well to it. I think they feel more nickel-and-dimed if we keep selling services separately. Plus, if they agree to a whole annual package at one time, they don't have to worry about it the rest of the year." – Nicole Wisniewski

Bloom Time

others don't even want to hear from us at all," Brown pointed out. "And one customer may have 18 to 20 small properties that are easier to handle for one account manager while another client may have a large landscape and many services that need constant supervision and contact."

For example, to better inform one commercial client who craves more communication, the account manager attaches digital photos to daily e-mail updates for the property manager, showing pictures of the crews in action, freshly mowed turf, newly planted beds, irrigation inspection results, etc. The site, which has 100 acres of turf and requests approximately 100,000 pots of color annu-

(continued on page 54)

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USE READER SERVICE #36

Cover Story

(continued from page 52)

ally, keeps the account manager busy. "We're looking into [sending e-mails with digital photos] to more of our clients who like regular feedback," Brown enthused. "This property manager loves to know what's going on since he doesn't always see the crews on a certain area of the property every day, and the e-mail is also something he has been able to send to his bosses when they wanted feedback on how the color was looking or how the maintenance was coming along."

As general manager, Brown hires account and operations managers. When looking for people to fill account management positions, Brown looks for communicators and people pleasers before seeking employees with prior landscape knowledge. Two or three Lawns of Dallas employees conduct interviews so that more than one person meets with candidates and can share their insights.

The company attends college career fairs twice a year to interview and build relationships with potential interns and new hires.



The Lawns of Dallas management team includes account and operations managers, office staff and others who handle key business responsibilities. Photo: Ian Halperin

Brown prefers that new college graduates gain practical industry experience during internships before he brings them on as full-time employees. "They are more appealing to us if they have worked two to three consecutive summers and done some internships and learned about the industry a little

bit and got their hands dirty," he explained. "Those types of people tend to start off at a higher rung of the ladder with better salaries and benefits vs. those who don't have the on-the-job experience and need to familiarize themselves with landscape work."

(continued on page 56)



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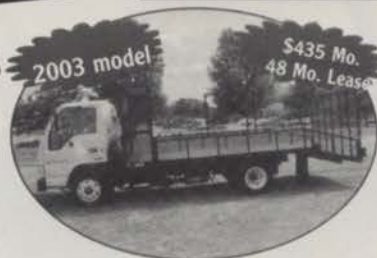
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How does being a part of U.S. Lawns help contractors grow their businesses?

Hutcheson: We start out working with the franchisees early in the sales process. We've identified a market niche through our 15 years of experience with more than 100 franchisees. There are certain properties we know are more conducive to how we conduct our business. Then we tele-survey (where we're trying to learn about them and not sell to them) those people looking for answers to certain questions to help prequalify them. We get the relationship to a point and then hand it off to the franchisee so that they can get their hands around the customer's concerns and identify exactly what the customer wants and make sure we deliver the good value proposition.

In addition, we have a series of direct mail programs that we put into place in the spring and fall for various services and we offer sales newsletters to build the relationship.

We also have proprietary contact management software so the franchisee manages the whole process along with help from our staff.

How do you help franchisees manage their businesses?

Hutcheson: The primary tools

we provide are the facilitators we have out in the field helping the franchisees implement the systems, and they're located in every region of the country we're in. That way we can be intimate with our customer — the franchisee. These facilitators set us apart from being a consultant or an association.

People in the system tell us that it works because of the support they get having this person available to them.

Plus, specialists such as our CPA, who does nothing but provide business management support to create a budget, sales action plan and business management plan, back up the franchisee.

In addition, we've gathered a lot of numbers, so we know what the trials and tribulations are, we can anticipate them and tell the franchisee when they need to conserve cash or spend more aggressively.



Ken Hutcheson

them into the USL systems. We continue that training onsite through various training modules we have. We also have an annual conference and regional conferences as well. Because of the market density we have developed, we are able to

take training on the road to the franchisees and get the information deeper into their companies. The facilitator also delivers components as individual franchisees need them, so this isn't just cookie cutter where we're overwhelming the franchisee.

What does the typical U.S. Lawns franchise look like?

Hutcheson: We have three phases of franchises with each

franchise being classified based on their time in our system, their business volume and business maturity. Ideally they move through that phasing in three to five years and go from \$0, zero time with us and no systems to \$750,000 to \$1.5 million. Customers are 100 percent commercial, and we like to see each franchise serving 45 to 65 customers to reach that revenue target.

They will have built a team including an operations manager, an office person and several foremen. The franchisee should own the facility or have one that really works well, and he should spend his time working with customers and the operations manager, but not being out in the field himself.

Now, he has created a sustainable business that isn't dependent on his day-to-day presence, and that's an issue in this industry. If your business depends on you physically, then you are exposed.



What training does U.S. Lawns provide?

Hutcheson: New franchisees start with a week in our new Florida headquarters to totally immerse

Cover Story

(continued from page 54)

To clarify job titles and roles, Lawns of Dallas is currently formalizing everyone's tasks and putting processes on paper. The descriptions will go into a manual so current and new employees have guidelines to follow. "The biggest employee problems come from misunderstandings regarding roles and goals," Brown said. "When it's all in writing it becomes clear."

When the company finishes the manual – probably in spring 2003 – new personnel evaluations will follow, using the responsibility lists as a basis for pointing out strengths, weaknesses and training needs.

To stay abreast of current company endeavors, Brown meets with all the operations managers at 10 a.m. on Tuesdays. "I see my position as an air traffic controller," he explained. "Every operations manager is focused on their area of responsibility and that's what they should do, but this meeting gives us a chance to get it all coordinated. We focus on planning, the bigger picture and redirecting priorities when necessary."

CULTURAL CARES. Eighty percent of Lawns of Dallas' employees are Hispanic. Having a mix of cultures in the company means being open to employee needs is crucial.

First, to improve communication, the company reimburses Hispanic and American employees who study English and Spanish.

Paying close attention to cultural concerns is also important, Brown said. "At one point, we decided to cut the hour lunch to a 30-minute lunch so we could have more planning time during the afternoon," he explained. "But we realized that our Hispanic employees like to have a hot lunch everyday – lunch is important in their community. By the time it takes them to go someplace and microwave their lunch, 30 minutes have gone by and they don't have any time to relax. So, we decided to go back to a one-hour lunch."

Also embracing the Hispanic culture at work, a quarterly employee cookout features salsa and goat – a Hispanic delicacy – in addition to chicken and hamburgers.

lawnandlandscape.com

Visit the February 2003 issue online to see this company's irrigation inspection form.

To keep all employees updated on horticulture basics, the company holds 30-minute training sessions monthly, following a calendar of topics that are seasonally appropriate, such as fall color in October. "For the session, we try to get out front of the office and actually go through the process of how to correctly prepare the beds and install the plants," Brown pointed out. "The ultimate goal is to have everyone cross-trained in all areas of the business because we realize that they may not want to be in their current area forever and we want them to grow and be able to move to another division if they want."

At each session's end, managers randomly quiz employees on training topics, awarding relevant prizes, such as safety goggles or work gloves, to people with the right answers.

(continued on page 161)

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Wes Hadsell shares tips inspired by his business motto: 'Ask and you shall receive.'

During class, students raise their hands and ask questions – that's the way the process works. Educators encourage inquiries, and youths, being new to history, math, English and the rest, seek answers until each end-of-the-day bell rings.

But, when pupils graduate and find jobs, they stop asking questions. They use the knowledge they've obtained to do their daily work and answer queries that come across their desks. Then they go home and let their children request the replies. For some reason, getting older means becoming the teacher rather than the student.

However, asking questions – no matter how silly, simple or serious – is what Wes Hadsell, managing member, HadcoServices, Bartlesville, Okla., credits as the main reason

his company is blossoming. "Many of the things I've learned have come from people who were happy to share their ideas," Hadsell said, "and it hasn't cost me anything but having the courage to ask."

SCHOOL DAYS. When Hadsell attended college in the early 1980s, his goal was to become a high school history teacher and a football coach, so he graduated with a degree in history and political science in 1983.

But he realized before that – in 1980 – that many of the teachers he knew had summer jobs to supplement their incomes. As a result, he started mowing lawns in the summer. One old lawn mower turned into better equipment and a truck and, soon, he employed college friends to help him take care of his growing residential client base.

Early challenges included understanding business basics. But Hadsell wasn't afraid to ask for help. He approached his local small business administration, made up of retired executives who tutored him. "They told me to become active with the Chamber of Commerce and join the Rotary Club because the members are movers and shakers in the community," Hadsell said. "They also gave me sales pointers and tips on acquiring financial help and following business procedures."

(continued on page 60)



Wes Hadsell holds the national merit award for environmental improvement he recently won. Photo: HadcoServices

HadcoServices

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USE READER SERVICE #41

First Look

(continued from page 58)

Quick TIP

HadcoServices only hires foremen who have experience servicing equipment instead of relying on dealers for most repairs.

"That way, if something breaks down in the field, they don't have to waste time coming back to the shop to get it fixed or get a replacement piece of equipment," explained company Managing Member Wes Hadsell. "Plus, because they are more accountable for their own equipment, they ensure their crews take much better care of it."

I built valuable relationships without spending a dime on the free business training."

Hadsell also took landscape design and plant identification classes at the local community college to boost his horticulture knowledge. But some pruning and planting techniques came from free lessons with the local nursery from which Hadsell bought supplies. "I just asked them if I was performing the proper practices and they gave me a whole tutorial," he explained.

Bringing in experts is how he continued to perfect his services, and how he operates today. For instance, to ensure his trucks and trailers were loaded appropriately, had complete working safety features and were in the right condition to drive without being ticketed or fined by the police, Hadsell called the local highway patrol and asked them if they would come to the office and check out his equipment. "An officer came, inspected my equipment and gave me the Oklahoma Vehicle Compliant Laws book," he remarked. "I would rather ask someone how to do it than have them stop one of my vehicles and fine the company for something I didn't know in the first place. Now, I have the book that the highway patrol relies on to fine unsafe and improperly loaded vehicles and trailers, so I'm one step ahead."

Since HadcoServices initially operated out of a tool shed in Hadsell's backyard, he also needed training room when he started hiring employees. He asked one of his large commercial clients if he could utilize their training and conference room—complete with general training videos. They were more than happy to

(continued on page 62)

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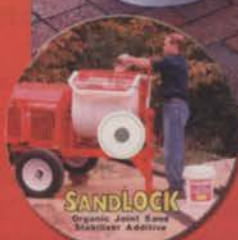
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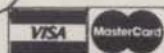
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(continued from page 60)

Fifty percent of HadcoServices' 15 to 20 full-
and part-time employees are Hispanic.

Photo: HadcoServices

oblige, supplying HadcoServices' employees with the room and coffee when needed and inviting them to their own safety meetings, such as CPR or fire extinguisher training, at no charge. Along those same lines, Hadsell also asks local tech schools to conduct mock OSHA audits at his company to make sure he's following standards.

BROADENING HORIZONS. After about four years of business, HadcoServices crept into the commercial market through a few apartment complex clients. "Being in a small community we definitely had some challenges," Hadsell said. "We're 40 miles from Tulsa—the only near large city—and so we're sort of in the middle of nowhere. And we had to find some way to grow our business."

For HadcoServices, the answer was commercial clients, including schools, hospitals, industrial sites and corporate centers. The appeal was not only year-round equal payments, but also accounts that chose all-inclusive agreements vs. just bits and pieces of a full-service landscape maintenance program. "In the early 1980s, no one company offered all services," Hadsell said. "So we started doing that for our clients and it made us appealing to them—it made us grow more rapidly."

The first four years of business brought steady 10-percent growth, Hadsell said, but adding commercial work brought growth peaks. "We grew leaps and bounds after that—40 to 50 percent a year," he said. "And we went from three to 10 employees over night."

Since the new jobs were large and required only a few additional employees and added time on these sites to get the work done, HadcoServices didn't experience too many growing pains. High growth leveled

(continued on page 64)

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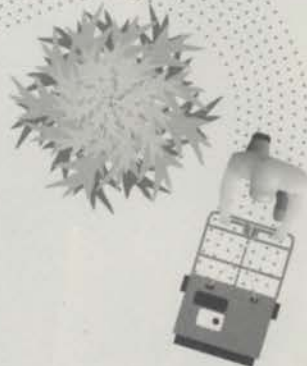
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USE READER SERVICE #47

First Look

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out in the past five years due to the small market area, keeping the company just under the \$1-million mark.

HadcoServices employs 15 to 20 full-time and part-time workers and approximately 50 percent of them are Hispanic. Hadsell started using Hispanic employees seven years ago, but only realized three years ago that he had to do a better job of making sure they were legal employees vs. just relying on the documentation they provided. Now, one of his long-time Hispanic employees helps bring workers in through the H2B program to prevent risky run-ins with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. These employees work from mid-February to mid-December.

To ease their transition here, Hadsell uses his relationship with a client who heads a Salvation Army store to supply Hispanic workers with some new clothes and shoes. "That way, they have something to wear to church on Sunday or to relax in vs. just their work clothes," Hadsell pointed out. Each employee also receives 11 sets of uniforms for two weeks worth of work and two hats. So, when one week's worth is being washed, employees have a clean set for the next week and an extra hat in case theirs becomes dirty. HadcoServices pays for half the cost of the uniform cleaning service weekly, which amounts to about \$4 a week and comes directly out of their checks.

To welcome the new culture to the company, HadcoServices has a party once a year where Mexican cuisine highlights the menu, complete with various salsa and guacamole dips and handmade tortilla chips.

Also, since there are events in Oklahoma that don't happen in Mexico, such as snowstorms, Hadsell will take photos of his Hispanic workers mowing or standing in the snow so they can show their families.

Now that Hadsell has built a solid company and continues to retain quality employees, he plans to learn how to delegate better. "I used to have this tendency to oversee every job and this feeling like it could never be done as well as I could do it," he said. "But I'm slowly learning to let go and accept that other people can get the job done even if they do it differently." **LL**

The author is Managing Editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at nwisniewski@lawnandlandscape.com.

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WO #10941

Reducing Downtime

by Ali Anderson

Seasoned contractors
offer sound advice
for cutting the costly
waste out of employee
time sheets.



DOWNTIME Adds Up

If time is money, then downtime can wipe out profits for any company. And in the green industry – where most companies bill customers by the clock – wasting time can prove especially detrimental to the bottom line.

Obviously, there are a handful of common time-related struggles associated with running an effective green business: getting crews out in the morning, keeping them focused while on the job, holding lunch breaks to a healthy minimum and scheduling jobs within reasonable driving distances.

These daily struggles – although seemingly innocent – can add up to some serious downtime.

Put simply, downtime is time lost when production stops – most notably during setup for an operation or when making repairs. The term can refer to seconds wasted by crew members arriving late in the morning, minutes lost in heavy traffic or hours racked up by those who always seem to lag behind. Sound familiar? Lost time, figured into time sheets and paychecks, generally equals lost profits.

Do the math.

Recognizing that minutes can add up to millions, how can landscape contractors cash in their downtime for some real-time bucks? Perhaps it's time to heed the advice of industry professionals and pick up a few jewels of time-saving wisdom.

BEAT THE BUZZER. First, contractors should consider how to unearth and embrace productivity through organizing and structuring maintenance crews. Although setup varies throughout the industry, many contractors agree that crews of two or three are best at competing with the clock.

"In general, the smaller the crew, the more efficient," explained Mike Lueders, owner, Lueders Cos., Needham, Mass. "As long as they can handle the job, we like to keep our crews

(continued on page 68)

Money-making minutes are often wasted by landscape crews as they struggle to quickly and efficiently prepare for a day's work. Time spent loading equipment, receiving last-minute instructions and waiting for latecomers can contribute to downtime and, consequently, a downturn in profits.

Photo: Jim Karageorge



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Reducing Downtime

(continued from page 66)

small. We make sure the work is not too physically demanding or demoralizing."

Lueders' theory is that two-man crews, in particular, make for decreased overlap in job responsibilities and less time spent dawdling.

"Actually, a one-man crew is the most efficient – as long as the workload is not too much," he noted, pointing to the reality that

most jobs require more than a single worker because of strenuous lifting and loading. "Even having two on a job can create downtime. By the time two men show up, chat about the workload and get ready to go, they've burned some serious time."

Lueders determines crew sizes based on

(continued on page 70)

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Getting crews out of the gate each morning can be pure chaos – with employees rolling in late, final instructions filtering through the ranks and equipment being loaded at the last minute. Such morning downtime can be a nuisance, but it doesn't have to be. Make smart plans to save time and money.

The following are a few suggestions from experienced minds in the industry:

- ✓ Have two-minute debriefing sessions each night with crews before they head home. Discuss unfinished projects, equipment problems and special materials needed for future jobs. Such meetings can save time by encouraging crews to think ahead.
 - ✓ Require employees to purchase their own tool sets. That way, each gets familiar with his own gear and will take more responsibility for lost or broken hardware.
 - ✓ Adopt a storage system that allows crew members to leave their toolboxes on company trucks or trailers. This will eliminate time spent digging around for tools and minutes wasted driving home to retrieve forgotten gear.
 - ✓ If necessary, purchase new equipment to avoid constant, time-squelching breakdowns.
 - ✓ Consider buying vehicles that are roomy enough to handle excess equipment and debris. This will allow more flexibility and reduce time spent unloading and loading machinery.
 - ✓ Rely on crew leaders to ensure trucks are loaded correctly and promptly. Decide if loading in the mornings or evenings works best for your operations. Then make it happen with planned, posted procedures.
 - ✓ Have crew trucks parked strategically so they don't get stuck in a bottleneck while trying to get out of the gate each morning.
 - ✓ Stockpile lawn clippings and debris for one week or more. Don't spend time each day cleaning them out of trucks.
 - ✓ Initiate a small bonus pool based on time budgeted for each job. For jobs completed on time (and, thus, within budget), add money to the assigned crew's bonus. For time lost on jobs, take away from that bonus. This allows managers to reinforce the importance of time management without impacting salaries.
- Alf Anderson

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Reducing Downtime

(continued from page 68)

man-hours required to complete jobs. For instance, one worker could be trusted to do a job requiring only six to eight hours of labor. But for jobs requiring 70 to 80 hours of labor, a two-man crew is the best fit.

Lueders generally plans a few weeks ahead, making specific schedules for each crew. Not only does this system ease confusion and headaches caused by possible overbooking, it also allows crew members to look ahead and be ready for future assignments.

As an additional precaution against lost time, many contractors organize their crews in a hierarchy of authority and responsibility, with designated account managers, foremen, crew leaders and crew members. This setup maintains efficiency by keeping crews in check and allowing supervisors to perform their specialized jobs.

Tom Heaviland, owner, Heaviland Enterprises, Vista, Calif., insisted that two- and three-person crews—composed of the hierarchical basics of a crew leader and assistants—

work best for his maintenance business.

"With larger crews [of four or more people], the leader spends more time supervising and less on production," he explained. "With a smaller, three-man crew, everyone works."

Heaviland likes to think of crew size in terms of sales. His company aims for a monthly revenue of \$4,000 per employee, so keeping a minimal number of workers on any given site is key. Generally this means sending time-saving trios to most maintenance jobs, which include pruning, weeding, etc., and up to five men for mowing jobs.

Jeff Rieger, grounds management division manager, Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping, Portland, Ore., also sees the cash value of three-man crews. He organizes his crews based on a principle he learned years ago. "Once you increase size over three men, you begin to lose efficiency," he asserted. "The foreman begins to spend more time supervising and

less time doing the efficient, highly trained work that he is best at."

Consequently, Dennis' Seven Dees has either two or three workers on its residential maintenance crews and three on its commercial maintenance crews.

LOAD UP WITHOUT KILLING TIME.

Do crews load trucks in the morning right before heading out to their first job sites? Or do they load equipment the night before? Simple question, but some contractors insist the answer may mean minutes—and money—in the end.

Loading some equipment into trucks ahead of time, specifically at the end of the day rather than in the morning, is recommended by many.

"All hand-held equipment is left in the truck," said Bob Grover, president, Pacific Landscape Management, Hillsboro, Ore., explaining the procedures at his 30-employee

(continued on page 72)

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USE READER SERVICE #53

Reducing Downtime

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operation. "The equipment on the trailers is removed each night and serviced by the maintenance crews."

Grover strongly recommended preparing for the coming day by leaving toolboxes and smaller items aboard trucks at night. This, he insisted, will cut time lost in "the morning lag" that often puts crews behind before they even hit the road. Doing so has reduced his crews' morning loads to 10 minutes.

Dennis' Seven Dees loads some of its equipment at night as well. Specifically, Rieger shared, large mowers are loaded onto trucks each night by a facility crew. Foremen have crews load smaller equipment and fertilizer while they take care of other administrative duties.

"We also encourage our foremen to prepare in the evening for the next morning," Rieger added. "Better yet, prepare tonight for next week's visit."

In contrast, Heaviland's crews have more success with morning loads. "Trucks are loaded in the morning, and it is the crews' responsibility," he noted. "The managers make sure the crews have the right equipment for the job - and make sure it is in good operating condition."

Quick TIP

Employees who tinker around the shop before hopping in their trucks contribute to costly downtime. To speed up their morning exits, Jeff Rieger, grounds maintenance division manager, Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping, Portland, Ore., came up with a simple solution: "We have a set start time every day that starts promptly with stretching - a safety practice we implemented years ago to help us up and get us to all think about safety," he explained.

ity," he noted. "The managers make sure the crews have the right equipment for the job - and make sure it is in good operating condition."

TRIM TRAVEL. Although expenses can be spared by reducing time wasted in the shop, lost minutes are often racked up on the road as well.

"Travel time is our biggest downtime," Grover noted, referring to the minutes spent by crews in traffic or en route from one job to another. Like most lawn companies, his operation accepts jobs within a broad region, which can mean miles of travel for his crews.

But Grover has found a pleasing solution to the dilemma: scheduling each crew within a tight territory. Although such areas can range in size from one mile to more than a dozen, smart routing is a must for Grover. He explained that, while drawing simple routing circles for each crew is not always feasible because of varying route density, he tries to maximize crews' time by assigning them to jobs in bordering neighborhoods.

This approach saves minutes because a crew learns its defined area well and can eventually navigate throughout the design-

(continued on page 74)



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USE READER SERVICE #56

Reducing Downtime

(continued from page 72)

nated territory without written directions.

Heaviland assigns his crews to jobs within 5 to 10 miles of each other as well, a strategy that keeps their daily driving time under 45 minutes. "We schedule our routes tightly to reduce drive time," he described. "Crews generally work within a defined geographic region. In case they need to make an unexpected stop, they are close and familiar with

the property."

Another clock-stopping option, according to Grover, comes in the form of written instructions. With this system, crews whose job locations for the coming day may require unique instructions are given the appropriate directions at night before closing shop. These may include maps and detailed driving directions for new sites.

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"The same maintenance crews generally tend to the same projects each day and week," Grover added. "They are given the details of their jobs the night before to avoid adding extra confusion and downtime to the morning. If there are special instructions, they are given out the night before."

REWARD TIMELY ACTION. Regardless of what tactics are implemented to squeeze costly downtime out of employees, workers' efforts are largely tied to motivation. Thus, finding the right incentives can push them to be on time and work efficiently.

Some contractors use reward programs or employee bonuses for notable performances, while others simply expect crews to be motivated on their own.

Periodically, Heaviland uses a little reinforcement to get crews excited about being on time. He shows up to the office with coffee and donuts, waiting at the gate for the first crew to pull out.

"We [the winning crew and I] sit and have 'treats' while the others drive past," he explained. "I also give each one a \$5 bill for lunch. I take the crew's picture and then post it by the time clock for everyone to see that afternoon. It is fun and when done regularly can have a positive impact."

Through this simple reward system, Heaviland has seen improvements in his crew members' attitudes about being on time.

Grover, however, finds that "gimmicky" incentive programs require too much time and are not truly effective. Instead, he focuses on motivating through praise and pressure. Striking a balance between the two, he shared, is the best motivation he has found.

"We try to build a culture where we praise those who are doing a good job, getting out on time, working hard and producing quality work," he stated. "And we put the pressure on those who don't live up to the standard. That pressure does wonders." ■

The author is Assistant Editor - Internet for Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at aanderson@lawnandlandscape.com.

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USE READER SERVICE #59

Spring Fertilization

by Lauren Spiers

Approaching spring fertilization the right way means finding the right process and often going back to basics.

Spring has sprung, the grass is riz', I wonder where the fertilizer is?

Maybe that isn't how the poem really goes, but it is what homeowners tend to ask when their lawns don't green-up right away in the spring. To help maintain healthy turf, lawn care operators make fertilization their top priority, and with the beginning of the year comes the beginning of the application cycle.

Even in round one of a fertilizer program, the overall goal should be top of mind. Doug Hague, president, Lawn Classics, Findlay, Ohio, believes that one goal of spring fertilization should be integrated pest management (IPM).

Currently on the tips of many tongues in the lawn care industry, IPM is an often misunderstood concept, Hague feels. "Most people think it means no pesticides at all," he said. "Not true. Pesticides are still important in IPM, but you want to get the lawn to a point where you're not having to use as many pesticides, to protect against insects and things of that nature."

Many lawn care operators find it easier to have different formulations of granular fertilizer available, rather than tank-mix extra liquids.

Photo: L&L Staff

At Ever Green, Troy, Ohio, President Joe Duncan agrees that using pesticides to eliminate turf problems over time is a part of good fertilization. "Healthy turf fights off pests," he reasoned. "The healthier the turf, the less chance you have that pesticides and fungicides will need to be put down."

Duncan's key words are "healthy turf," which is exactly what spring fertilization provides. A thick, lush lawn that results from proper fertilization at the right time of year shades out weeds and minimizes disease, drought and insect impact.

To gain the upper-hand over turfgrass pests, contractors must first find fertilization products and application strategies appropriate to their clients' needs and to their area of the country.

GREEN GENES. As with any living organism, there is always the contest between nature and nurture. Turfgrass plants also grow based on their genetics, said Ray Buckwalter, product manager, Lebanon Turf Products, Lebanon, Pa. "A turfgrass plant is programmed to do certain things genetically through the year," he noted. When it's well fed in the fall, Buckwalter explained, "most of the time in the spring – even if you don't do anything – the grass greens up and grows great because in the wintertime it hasn't been really damaged or stressed."

This genetic predisposition doesn't mean that lawns can be left to their own devices. "You've got to feed the baby," Duncan asserted. "Plants need nutrients – the health of the turf just depends on how much you want to put down and the quality." Just like a parent cares for a child, a lawn care operator must learn when to nur-

(continued on page 78)



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Spring Fertilization

(continued from page 76)

ture the grass with the right amount of fertilizer, and when to let nature take over in the plant's life cycle.

Determining the right amount of fertilizer involves several different factors, including knowing turf varieties. Duncan and Hague deal with cool-season turf, and for grasses in this category, (bluegrass, rye or fescues), Buckwalter recommends applying a "booster shot" of fertilizer in the spring – no more than 1 pound per 1,000 square feet of slow-release nitrogen over two applications – to keep the plant from working too hard as the weather gets warmer.

"If you look at a cool-season turfgrass plant, in the fall you're gaining roots and in the winter there's little metabolic activity," he explained. "Later into the spring, you start to lose roots as the weather gets warmer and as moisture stress becomes more prevalent." Applying just enough material to keep grasses from reaching too deep into the soil and pulling from their reserves keeps turf

healthy without promoting excess growth.

Warm-season turf reacts differently. Bob Staib, a consultant for Nu-Gro Technologies, Grand Rapids, Mich., mentioned that grasses

usually try to go with between 3 and 4 pounds of nitrogen for the year, and a lot of it depends on the weather. If we get a lot of dry weather, we'll back off the nitrogen and adjust with potash," he said.

Williams uses granular materials suspended in water for a portion of his fertilizer applications and suggested that "you can do two or three things at one time if you apply a liquid." The slow-release blend, which differs depending on the type of grass, is tank-mixed

before the crews head to their sites and includes herbicides and insecticides to kill several pests with one spray.

At Senske Lawn and Tree Care, Kennewick, Wash., Vice President Dan Warehime's crews work in a similar fashion, using liquid products in two of their six

(continued on page 82)

"You've got to feed the baby.

Plants need nutrients – the health

of the turf just depends on how

much you want to put down and

the quality." – Joe Duncan

like St. Augustine, centipede and bahiagrass "do poorly with too much nitrogen [and] should be fertilized in mid- to late spring with ½ to 1 pound of soluble fertilizer per 1,000 square feet."

Joe Williams, president, Lawn Master, Pensacola, Fla., follows this recommendation in his fertilizer applications. "We nor-

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Spring Fertilization

(continued from page 78)

yearly applications. This frequency is lower than previous years when several liquid applications were used to combat weed-prone turf in their area. "It's hot and dry in the summer though," Warehime noted, "which is why we've gone to granular applications. It's safer to apply on cool-season turfgrass when it's 95 to 100 degrees outside."

Duncan agreed, stating, "fertilizers are very salt-oriented and you can cause some burning with liquid whereas granular is difficult to burn." Also, granular fertilizers settle at the roots where many contractors prefer that the plant absorb nutrients, rather than through the leaves. But even more important than how the grass gets its feedings is what it's being fed in the first place.

ANALYZE THIS. Adding nitrogen to a lawn via fertilization is the most obvious way to appease color-minded clients, but this may not be advisable if the ultimate goal is a healthy lawn.

Nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are the building blocks of fertilizer and understanding the function of each element is vital to the health of turfgrass plants. Ray Buckwalter, product manager, Lebanon Turf Products, Lebanon, Pa., provided this information for a quick review:

N – Nitrogen is a critical part of the photosynthesis process because it generates chlorophyll in the turfgrass plant. Chlorophyll helps turn energy from sunlight into food for the plant – but don't let it feast too much. While good for color, too much nitrogen causes excess growth and can leave grass susceptible to pests and diseases.

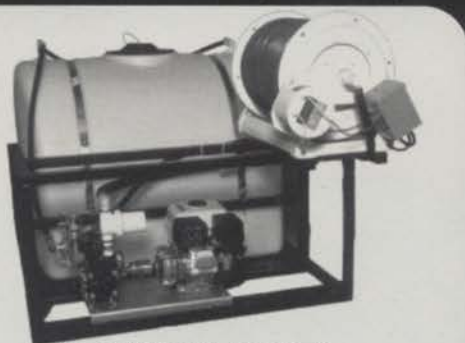
P – Phosphorus is important in starter fertilizers because it promotes growth in the roots and, therefore, the rest of the turfgrass plant. Because it is highly insoluble, phosphorus is difficult for seedlings with microscopic roots to reach, so boosting rates is often necessary.

K – Potassium keeps turfgrass healthy by helping the plant develop stress resistance. In addition to building resistance against drought and cold in all types of grasses, potassium encourages structural stability as well and for that reason, is very important in athletic turf.

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"We don't do a lot of nitrogen in the spring because we don't want a lot of flush growth," commented Duncan. "The grass is going to green up on its own." This mindset is encouraged by manufacturers who insist that spring fertilization should focus on helping the plant recover from the winter rather than waking it up right away. Think of the situation as waking up to the smell of breakfast cooking instead of a blaring alarm clock.

For spring fertilization, "do not be in a hurry to fertilize at the first sign of spring," Staib cautioned. "Spring is a good time to apply potassium, so use a fertilizer with a high third number such as 12-4-8, 21-7-14 or even 20-0-20."

"One of the dangers of excessive spring nitrogen is that it can cause a lot of disease problems," added Buckwalter. "Things like leaf spot are actually encouraged by excessive nitrogen because the fungal organism likes nitrogen." He also warned that too much nitrogen can cause flush growth which actually inflates the plant's established cells

like balloons. When this happens, the cell walls become very thin and therefore more vulnerable to fungal pathogens that wouldn't otherwise be able to invade the plant.

David Whetsel, president, Lawn Tech Corporation, Prosper, Texas, takes fertilizer analysis into account during every application in his program. In the spring, Whetsel won't kick the nitrogen element up until later in the application cycle, and uses a higher potassium level during later applications as well. "Usually we use a 20-0-20 fertilizer to get a high potassium level and make the plant more winter hardy," he said. "It helps with spring green-up the next year," he explained.

The number of different fertilizer analyses a company will use over the course of a year is another reason some contractors prefer one form of material over another. "You can adjust your program a little easier with granular than you can with liquid," Hague reasoned, adding that while liquid products

come in numerous analyses, loading an extra bag of granular fertilizer on a truck is often easier than bringing another tank of liquid fertilizer.

When determining the best analysis to use, manufacturers advise testing the soil. "There are a lot of things you can learn from a soil test and the spring is actually a better time to fine-tune your application," Buckwalter suggested.

Granted, for companies with several hundred customers, testing each lawn would be impractical, but random sampling in different neighborhoods or on large properties can show trends in pH and NPK levels and help adjust the mix.

ALL IN THE TIMING. Along with a fine-tuned analysis, properly-timed spring fertilizer applications ensure that lawns thrive without too much stress. The window for applying the first round of fertilizer generally falls around the beginning of March for

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Spring Fertilization

both cool- and warm-season turf areas. But with numerous lawns to treat and some clients who only want spring applications, timing gets tricky.

"It's a bit of a juggling act," Hague described. "You have to figure out how to get all those done in roughly a six-week span. You end up overlapping one application with another and everything works out."

Manufacturers advise using controlled-release fertilizers to extend the spring fertilization window. Microbially activated products work especially well because as the temperature and moisture levels rise and fall, these products tend to release and stop, preventing excessive nitrogen or leaching. First-round applications can begin earlier with these products because microbes won't break down the molecules until the temperature rises.

Planning schedules long in advance can also ease timing issues. "We do prepay," Whetsel said. "We usually send [forms] out

around the first of December to get customers to renew [their contracts], and we offer them a discount if they do re-sign." Using this technique, Whetsel's crews begin their applications with prepaid clients who sign up for service during the winter. Customers who sign up late or only request a single application are treated as quickly as possible, but may end up beginning the cycle with round two.

This method helps guarantee steady business, Duncan noted. "[With prepayment] I'm locked in and I know where I am, and it gives customers an excuse - when they get calls from telemarketers they can say, 'I've already paid for my service for next year,'" he said, noting that as a result, a high percentage of his clients have been with him for 10 years or longer.

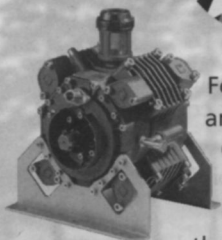
Contractors also build their client bases by offering discounts by re-signing, and Whetsel also signs on many new customers as a result of his referral program. "We offer

clients \$6 off for each referral that they give us, once the referral signs up. If they resign they get 10 percent off, plus if they add three or four referrals, they get \$6 off for each of those too," he raved.

Offering discounts like this can be highly beneficial, and pricing services to make money is essential in any business endeavor. For fertilization applications, many companies base their pricing structure on square footage and charge a set fee per application. This way, customers who just want two applications only pay for two applications rather than a pro-rated fee.

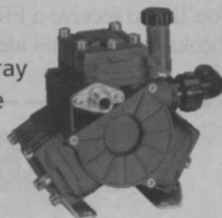
Maintaining competitive but effective pricing strategies is just one more step in the spring fertilization process. With the right prices, the right products, and the right process, lawn care operators can make the grass greener on both sides of every fence. **LL**

The author is Assistant Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lspiers@lawnandlandscape.com.



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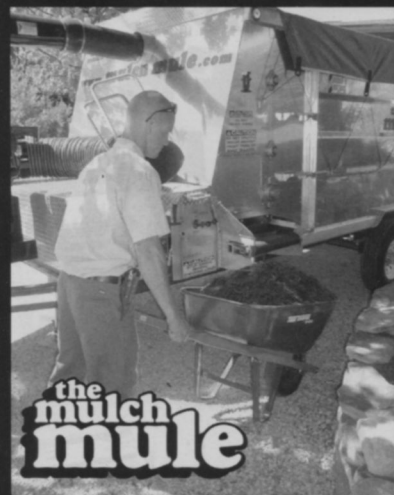
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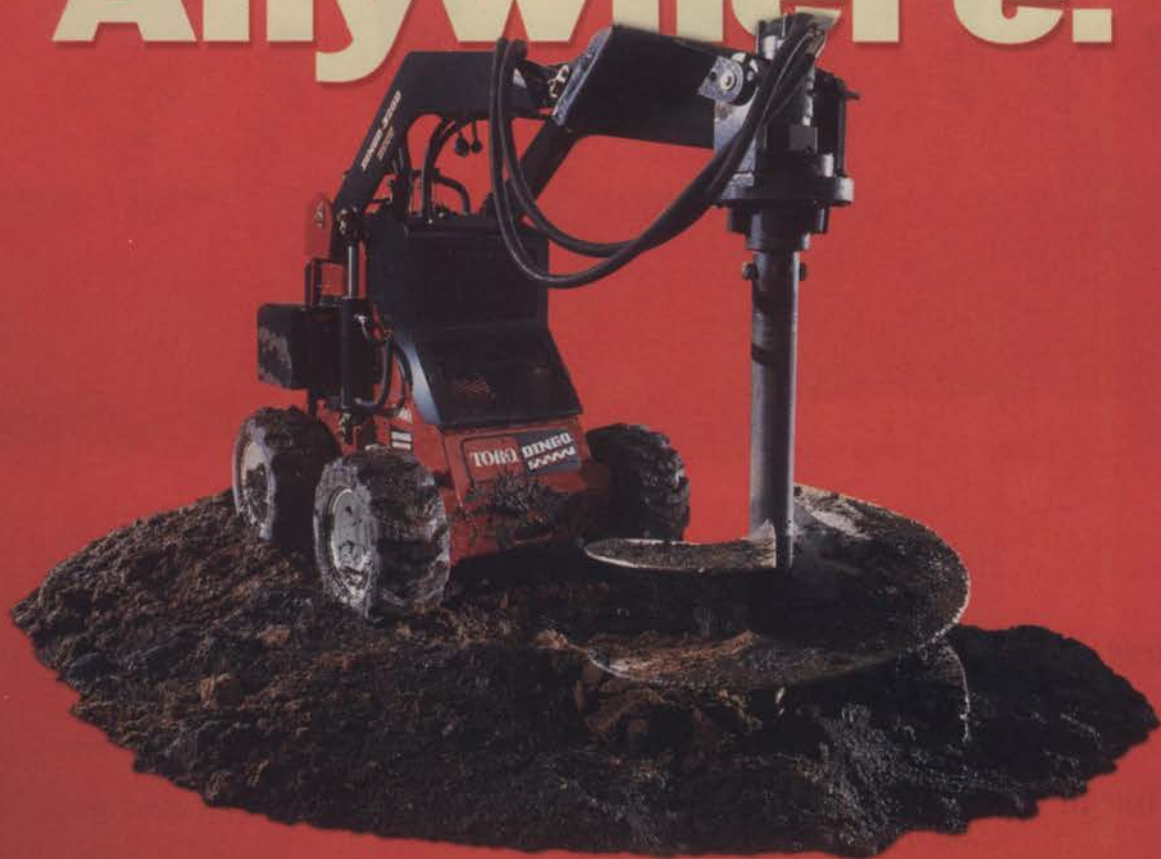
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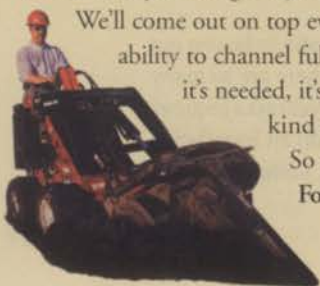
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USE READER SERVICE #68

by Enloe Wilson

Pricing SMART

Cost
awareness
should
be step one in
pricing
irrigation
installations.

"To thine own self be true."

Shakespeare's musing boasts universal value – even in the landscape industry.

While many contractors understandably look to the market to set installation prices, a better point of reference lies closer to home, successful managers suggest.

To begin, "contractors need to take the time to sit down and do research to find out how much it costs *them* to install an irrigation system," advised Drew Buss, owner, Precision Rain Lawn Irrigation, Lincoln, Neb.

Once those personal costs are determined, and some awareness of certain price-related factors is established, all else, he suggested, falls in line.

LOW PRICE: ALWAYS BEST? Buss, who launched Precision Rain in 1998, said many firms commit financial suicide with regard to ill-conceived pricing strategies. While some simply set markups too high to compete with other local landscape contractors, he said, others effectively "price themselves into bankruptcy," figuring that if competitors can sell 20 installation jobs at \$1,500 each, they'll remain ahead of the curve by selling far more than a comparable 80 systems at \$375 a pop.

Though an extreme example, the logic behind this form of irrigation pricing is unfortunately all-too-common among contractors, Buss suggested. And the industry overall – not just those sorely mismanaged companies that soon lose their shirts – pays for it.

"While most contractors might consider a decent sales ratio to be one out of three bid jobs, I get about one out of eight, because there are so many 'low ballers' in this area," Buss illustrated. Pointing out that Nebraska requires no licensure for contractors – "Anyone with a shovel can do an installation

(continued on page 88)



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USE READER SERVICE #69

Pricing Irrigation Installations

(continued from page 86)

here," he joked – Buss explained that clients often opt to do business with operations that pay little respect to the pricing principles, thinking they are saving money. Corrective and maintenance-related expenses resulting from inferior services and installation quality hit them later, he said, resulting in lowered industry opinions.

A 15-year irrigation veteran, Steven Flury, president, Atlantic Irrigation Co., Gambrills, Md., sees the same problem, estimating that about 10 percent of Atlantic's maintenance business stems from repair calls from disgruntled clients who've worked with other contractors based on low price.

"So many clients – especially commercial – [think] 'the lower, the better,'" Flury said, referring to price.

The philosophy often catches up to them in the end, he held, because "it turns out that those companies that constantly undersell are usually the ones that don't, or can't, come back to fix what they've done."

NO REGRETS. Buss' margin-based costing formula is simple, but comprehensive, and apology-free.

"It turns out that those
companies that
constantly undersell
are usually the ones that
don't, or can't, come back
to fix what they've done." –
Steve Flury

"It starts with a simple establishment of time and material costs," he said. "I multiply time by fixed operating expenses per hour to cover overhead. I then add in parts and 20 percent to cover my profit margin."

Easy enough. But Buss reminds that, while fundamental, this costing approach should be far-reaching. "When I consider labor, for example, I think not just about wages, but taxes. When I consider overhead, I also calculate vehicle costs and my own pay. That's important, and many contractors overlook little things like that," he pointed out.

And, importantly, he sees no need to be sorry for profit. "A lot of companies don't understand profit, overhead costs, etc.," Buss said. "They think that getting a job for little or no profit is better than not working at all. But there's nothing wrong with [making money]. It's why we are here."

Brian Peace, president, Automatic Sprinkler Controls, Van Nuys, Calif., reminded that when accessing jobs, contractors should recognize each site as unique.

"We don't just go into all jobs thinking, 'It

(continued on page 90)

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Pricing Irrigation Installations

(continued from page 88)

Regional Prices

EQUIPMENT	LOCATION			
	SOUTHEAST	MIDWEST	EAST	WEST
ELECTRONIC CONTROLLERS				
6-zone	\$200	\$300	\$275	\$250-300
12-zone	\$400	\$400	\$349	\$400-500
24-zone	\$800	\$500	\$650	\$600-1500
ELECTRIC VALVES				
1-inch	\$30/valve	\$30/valve	\$75/valve	\$79/valve
2-inch	\$55/valve	\$40/valve	\$150/valve	\$150/valve
3-inch	\$100/valve	\$40/valve	\$250/valve	\$240/valve
HEADS (prices include piping to head)				
4-inch spray heads	\$50/head	\$40-65/head	\$35/head	\$25-90/head
6-inch spray heads	\$60/head	\$40-65/head	\$50/head	\$50-75/head
Rotors	\$100/head	\$60-85/head	\$60/head	\$45-80/head
MAINLINE				
1 1/2-inch	\$2.50/foot	\$2/foot	\$2/foot	\$2.50/foot
2-inch	\$3-3.50/foot	\$2.50/foot	\$3/foot	\$3.25/foot
3-inch	\$5-6/foot	\$3/foot	\$5/foot	\$4.25/foot
4-inch	\$6/foot	\$3.50/foot	\$6/foot	\$6/foot
RAIN SENSORS (required in some areas)				
	\$125	\$125-175	\$120-170	\$150
	\$500 (computer-controlled)		\$500 (computer-controlled)	
TOTAL JOB EXAMPLE				
For a commercial job with: 20 rotors, 150 spray heads, one 15-zone controller, 15 1-inch electric valves, 1,200 feet of 1 1/4-inch Schedule 40 mainline, and 3,000 feet of 1-inch Class 200 lateral lines, the job would cost:				
	\$10,000-13,000	\$10,000-11,000	\$13,392	\$14,000

Lawn & Landscape interviewed contractors from around the United States to gauge regional irrigation pricing differences. These representative estimates, which include material and labor for new installations only, are based on the most typical specifications encountered in each area and do not reflect variable specifications and component selections that often cause significant price swings (i.e. depth of piping, backfill requirements, type of valve/sprinkler/timer/sensor, manifold configurations, etc.). While varied climate conditions affect maintenance pricing, installation is influenced more directly by labor costs, according to several sources, effecting somewhat higher comparative pricing along the coasts.

was \$200 to install a valve for the last job, so it'll be \$200 this time," he said, mentioning that because each property has its own peculiarities – soil types, terrain, slopes – it is more effective to leave pricing open to unique variables that present themselves at a given job instead of relying on parts and yard dimension pricing.

In breaking down pricing, parts costs are often the first and easiest to determine.

"Each contractor negotiates a distribution price for parts with their supplier," said Buss. After designing a system for a given property, a contractor can simply price to recover those needed component costs plus any markup they deem appropriate.

"Markup is not an arbitrary number," said Buss, explaining that contractors should familiarize themselves with what level of revenue can cover material (and other) costs

and sustain a healthy profit margin.

"Most larger companies would do well at a 6- to 10-percent margin per year," he said. "As a means to approach that level, I've calculated that Precision Rain's per-installation margin should be at about 20 percent."

Regarding projected time and labor, Peace said a contractor can – and must – rely on precedent set by past jobs. "You have to have a history established [whereby] you can know

the capacity of a crew," he said. Their efficiencies with odd specifications—work done around fences, wiring or plumbing lines, or in difficult soil conditions, for example—should be noted, approximating the ease or difficulty of an installation and resulting in a reasonable estimate of time and price.

"As a rule, we tend to bid very conservatively," Peace continued. "As a job progresses and we see that we have, for some reason, quoted a much too high estimate, we can lower those costs to a client, and of course they're happy. If we are able to work under budget simply by maximizing our efficiencies, though, we obviously work that to our advantage."

MAKING THE SALE. Once costs are determined, pitching the sale to installation clients doesn't have to be difficult or riddled with painful concessions, managers shared. Be firm, but creative, they advise.

Though he never arbitrarily lowers the price of a system to appease a hard sell, Buss said attaching value-added deals or services has historically worked well for both sides.

"I do things like a half-price upgrade to sprinklers that may otherwise retail at an additional \$100 each," he said. Other times, he added, he might occasionally add on free services, like winterizations, which cost little or nothing to absorb.

Peace added it's important not to "chase" a bid. While he may occasionally offer some discount with sizable commercial jobs where there is more leverage to adjust price without undercutting costs, he hardly makes it a common practice. "Once you begin to do that, a client will expect you to undersell yourself with every new service," he warned.

But above all other strategies, Flury reminded that a track record of good work remains the best tool in justifying a bid price and ultimately securing a sale. "If we happen to have a higher caliber system component than a competitor, we point it out to the client in our pricing," he said. "Nowadays, though, parts are very similar, with often little difference between quality and cost to the end-user. What we really sell is reliable, professional and comfortable service." ■

The author is Associate Editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at ewilson@lawnandlandscape.com.



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Decks & Patios

by Enloe Wilson

Contractors
find a new
boon as
passions
for custom
decks and
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grow.

Saturday, an hour past dusk. Midwinter.

Few things are as sublime as friendly faces, good conversation and a smooth lager while soaking away the week's stresses in the velvet swirl of a backyard hot tub. Concentric redwood octagons stretch in all directions; soft amber lights wash an overhead Clematis-crested pergola; and, absorbing the picturesque calm of the snowy scape, a rogue flake tingling your brow, you can't help but grin at the notion – "It's freezing out there... but it's sooooo nice in here."

In recent years the residential deck or patio has become more of a deity than a simple construction add-on. This new favorite space joins the ranks of the kitchen and bathroom in adding indispensable appeal and amenity to a property and rocketing its market value. Yet decks and patios offer something interior rooms can't: They bring the outside in (or vice versa), appealing to both the sense of shelter and the proverbial "call of the wild."

BIG BUSINESS. According to *Remodeling* magazine, about 30 million American homes have decks, and about 3 million decks are built each year. With those numbers growing, decks and patios spell big business for landscape contractors, who find clients increasingly requesting these recreational spaces as part of their overall landscaping jobs.

Just ask James Faltz, owner, Faltz Landscaping, Anchorage, Ala. "With decks and patios, we can never keep up with demand," he shared. "That portion of the business has grown about 30 percent per year, and no matter how many people I hire for it, I never have enough."

Faltz suggested he sells many deck and patio installations as wise real estate investments. "The biggest motivator for demand, I find, is an additional 'room,'" Faltz said. "The average home in my area is about \$300,000, and for constructions of that caliber, owners feel the accompanying decks or patios just aren't big enough." Offering a 76-percent return on investment upon resale, according to *Remodeling*, custom hardscapes offer additional living square-footage, boosting a home's appeal and property value, Faltz said.

But increased resale value is just one of many things decks and patios offer. Dave Lindsay, co-owner of Lindsay-Wright Co., Columbus, Ohio, said custom hardscapes serve an impor-

(continued on page 96)



Custom hardscapes add beauty, function and value to properties. Photos: Faltz Landscaping.

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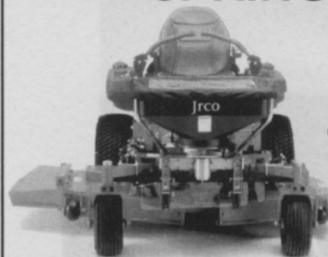


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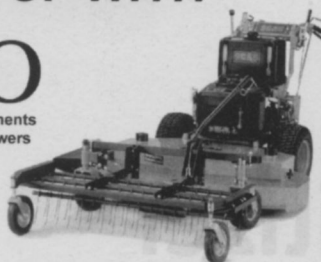
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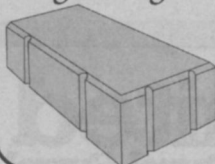
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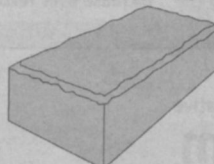


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USE READER SERVICE #76

Decks & Patios

(continued from page 94)

tant role in his creative service mix, being both functional and aesthetic units unto themselves and mechanisms through which the rest of a landscape project can be enjoyed.

"We essentially ask customers, 'How do you want to use the outdoors?'" Lindsay said. "If they just want to watch the birds through their window, that's fine. But if they want to actually get out there, sit, eat, truly enjoy the workings of the landscape, then adding a deck or patio is really the only option to truly complete the job."

As of November 2002, Lindsay's operation had installed about 110 residential brick patios and 38 decks in the past construction season alone. At 50,000 to 60,000 square feet of total brick paving and an average \$4,000 to \$6,000 per project, remarked Lindsay, "there's no doubt about it - [2000 was] my best year ever."

Within their mix of services, Faltz and Lindsay reported that in-house construction is generally more cost-effective and creatively sound than subcontracting.

"It's just more economical to construct a hardscape ourselves as part of an existing project," Lindsay said. "While we're there, with holes dug and equipment set up, it saves time and money just to do it ourselves rather than waiting for another crew to come out and finish."

What's more, added Faltz, "the work fits in better with the overall scheme if we do it. We like to apply landscape and soft components as part of a deck before we even build, so it works for us. If you hire separate companies to install a deck, a landscape, a patio, somewhere those things usually aren't going to work together from a single project standpoint."

DESIGN & FEATURES. Designwise, some contractors, like Derek Stuj, owner, Rainbow of Magnolia Landscaping, Seattle, Wash., prefer letting clients lead. With a company philosophy that a landscape is an idealized, humanized outdoor space, he holds that an individual client's dream is most important for a job. "Mostly they tell me what they want - what they like, and I fit it with the style of the house and their financial terms," he said.

Other contractors have found success with alternative inspirational starting points for

(continued on page 98)

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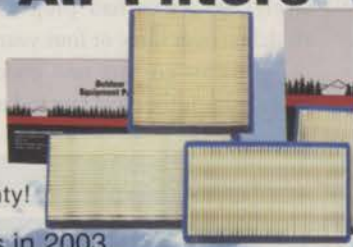
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USE READER SERVICE #80

Decks & Patios

(continued from page 96)

deck and patio design. "Usually, it's me," joked Lindsay-Wright's chief designer Patrick Beam. An artist at heart, Beam crafts a deck or patio design as a mere element of an overall landscape statement – an approach to which clients have been remarkably receptive, bolstering Lindsay-Wright's deck and patio activity and its long-term landscaping installation business overall.

"What we find is that clients go for the complete scope of things – decks, for example, with combination brick pavings, elevation changes, retaining walls, etc. We're geared to working with clients [comprehensively], so we've had projects that have stretched over three or four years," he said.

As patios go, Stuj said good, old-fashioned brick is the most favored material. "It

"The biggest thing this past year [in hardscape design]," Lindsay added, "has been tumbled wall products." Mechanically handled to impart an aged look to paving and wall surfaces, tumbled products debuted about five years ago, and demand is mushrooming among landscape customers who opt for the classic antiqued look.

For decking, though many property owners recognize the benefits of newer synthetics – no rotting, molded-in color and superior strength – cedar, redwood and pine remain the "Big 3" favorites, said Lindsay. He held that slow development of accessories – fasteners, decorative trimmings, etc. – hinder demand for man-made materials, and predicted that as those product lines extend, they will claim increasingly higher shares of the decking market.

Recent innovations in that area have been heartening, suggested Deck Industry Association Administrator Mike Owens. With about 10 percent of the market now belong-

(continued on page 100)

According to *Remodeling* magazine, about

30 million American homes have decks, and about **3 million decks** are built each year.

"I can go out and draw a picture of a patio, or I can recreate an entire yard. Most times, I don't even ask about a budget," Beam said. Upon seeing a plan of how their dream yards would look one, two or even three seasons down the road, clients often are more than eager to accept a bid.

lasts the longest, especially in the moist [Pacific Northwest] climate" – about 50 years, compared to the 30- to 40-year lifespan of other popular materials like flagstone or bluestone. And with the minimal need of a periodic pressure washing, brick is easy and affordable to maintain, Stuj said.

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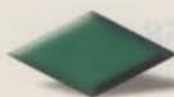
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Decks & Patios

(continued from page 98)

ing to synthetic construction, according to his rough estimate, "landscapers really need to be educated about what's going on with new materials," he said. "Where just a few years ago, the choices were pretty much treated redwood and cedar, now there are probably 60 to 70 manufacturers out there offering alternative material choices."

At the drawing board, both Stuj and

"more bang for the buck" (a radial stretch of patio or deck, though beautiful, can be significantly more expensive to engineer than a comparable linear measure), plant beds surrounding an angular construction can be deeper, affording more installation freedom, Beam said.

Stuj, Beam and Lindsay all find that as property owners become more passionate

are popular features to top off a project, adding illumination and mood, Beam said.

"And if any area is growing, he added, "it's water features – fountain, ponds, anything that might provide white noise. Hot tubs are going in more and more, or at least accommodations for them. They could be a 'phase 3' addition, but as long as we know they're planned for the future, we can build for them."

"People want function as well as enjoyment, and [in many ways] a deck or patio is more useful than even the [living room]." – Derek Stuj

Beam generally keep their patio and deck contours clean and angular. Aesthetics drive the decision for Stuj, who chooses to echo the historic Craftsman Bungalow and Seattle Box architectural styles of his region. For Beam, cost and function are the prime motivators. Aside from getting

about their outdoor spaces, their design demands become more sophisticated. Custom features like arbors, pergolas, and gazebos are hot items now, especially in new developments where trees are absent, depleting privacy and shade.

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BETTER BUILDING. Equal in importance to design is the proper installation of decking or patio components. Where the former is fun, engaging and limited only by the inspiration of clients, attention to the latter is absolutely necessary to bring their imagined joys to reality.

"Sometimes contractors spend so much time on design that they fall short on proper installation," Lindsay suggested. That mistake causes headaches and unnecessarily

(continued on page 102)

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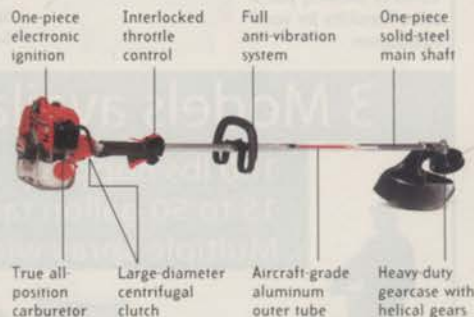


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Decks & Patios

(continued from page 100)

spent money a few years down the road.

Lindsay, a 30-year landscaping veteran who conducts clinics showcasing proper hardscape installation methods, reminds that quality begins with a solid foundation. For patio bedding, "we advise using 100-percent limestone for a higher compaction rate," he pointed out. The material, recommended by the Ohio Department of Transportation for use on state roadways, is more expensive than gravel stocks typically used by contractors, he said, but offers a higher compression rate, ensuring stability.

Crews lay the crushed substrate 2 to 3 inches deep, saturate it with water and compact it at a rate of 3,600 pounds per square inch. Afterwards, they tamp and screed a concrete layer with care to ensure proper leveling, Lindsay said.

Lindsay's crews finish off projects by laying precision-cut brick pavers within a pre-measured border of below-grade edge restraints and compacting the finished area to achieve a flat, even surface.

The process is exacting, following standards of both the International Concrete Pavement Institute and the American Society for Testing and Materials. But the use of proper equipment, materials and compacting measures is vital, Lindsay stressed.

Where decks are concerned, their structural complexities require extensive hands-on experience and utmost attention to detail throughout the building process, Faltz said, highlighting certain points of construction that require special attention.

Again, foundation is key. "Here in Anchorage, our ground freezes from 3 to 4 feet deep, so our regional code calls for a minimum footing of 5 feet," Faltz explained. He reminded that contractors should be cognizant of their own regional freezing depths, soil types and building codes before beginning any construction.

Lindsay reminded that landscape contractors must do their homework amid all the technical complexity and develop-

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Check this article in the February issue online for additional information on custom hardscapes.

ments around decks and patios.

He advised contractors who would enter the decking and patio markets to consult building associations and local zoning departments to learn certification, standards and licensure requirements. "We tell our crews to adhere to even the strictest standards," he said.

In following a single, most-valuable rule of thumb in crafting a quality deck or patio, contractors might find wealth in one of Lindsay's philosophies: "Make building decisions as if [you're] building for [your] mom's house." **LL**

The author is Associate Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at ewilson@lawnandlandscape.com.

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Sensory Gardens

by Lauren Spiers

Clients may not ask for them by name, but sensory gardens can turn any landscape project into a suburban oasis.

Your clients can stop going to therapy now. Tell them to leave the self-help books on the shelf and forget about uncomfortable yoga poses – unless they'd like to take up the lotus position in the landscape you're designing.

It may not be a widely-recognized term or even something that clients realize they're asking for, but landscape architects weave the concept of sensory gardens into nearly every design they plan and install. In these serene and often inspiring backyard getaways, homeowners are able to get in touch with their senses without leaving the comforts of home.

"Every landscape we design creates feelings and emotions that appeal to the senses," noted Brian Zimmerman, landscape architect, Lied's, Sussex, Wis. And even though most homeowners don't specifically ask for plants or flowers that stimulate the senses, every finished product does so on its own. Individual elements like a swath of lavender or a blooming Viburnum obviously appeal to the senses of sight and smell,

The patients at Legacy Health System hospitals, Portland, Ore., use all five senses to take advantage of the healing properties of fresh air, flowers and gardening.
Photo: Legacy Health System



A Sense of Wonder

but when they are part of a larger picture that incorporates hardscaping, water features and herbs, a landscape affects each of the five senses, subtly but significantly.

Rachel Johansen, owner, Rachel's Gardens, Davis, Ill., employs the senses in all of the gardens she creates. "One of my clients had me laughing," she recalled, "because it took them two years to realize there were seven different shades of green in his garden and all different textures."

Johansen makes sure to mix medium and fine textures to create a softness and movement in the garden. "'Fine' would be a lady fern or something that has a very delicate texture to it, contrasted against a 'bold' Hosta or something like a pulmonaria, or the hard leaf of a bergenia," she clarified. Even when using plants of a single color, simply varying the sizes and shapes of the leaves occupies the senses in an exercise of feeling both the plant textures and garden movement as a whole.

OMMMM. Creating a landscape that effectively inspires the senses involves more than just some attractive, fragrant flowers. "The key to doing good landscape architecture [is] getting the form and function to mix with the desire of the client and make

it work," remarked Quillon Orta, a member of the design/build team at Landmark Landscapes, Arden, N.C. In this sense, making a design both an aesthetically pleasing and functional work of art envelops the entire idea of designing for the senses. When a client can enjoy some of their own ideas, they become a part of the process – which can be a sensory adventure itself.

"I'm finding nowadays that I'm working more with homeowners who want to get in and work hands-on with me," mentioned Johansen who always approaches projects open to working side-by-side with her clients.

Zimmerman also acknowledged that clients whose design ideas fall into the sensory category are often the same people who enjoy working in their yards. "People who know what it's like to smell a bed of hyacinth are more likely to appreciate the process and the final project," he said.

As with any design, combining artistic and aesthetic elements on the part of the architect with the needs and wants of the client is the best way to achieve pleasing results. "The overall composition, the form, the function, is more important than individual elements," explained Kevin O'Brien, landscape designer, Lifestyle Landscaping, North Ridgeville, Ohio. This frame of mind is important not only when designing retreats for homeowners, but also in situations where there are greater impacts on the individuals using the gardens.

"I see horticulture, gardening and nature-related activities as excellent tools to help learners, patients, clients and the general public," commented Teresia Hazen, registered horticulture therapist, Legacy Health System, Portland, Ore. Under Hazen's direction, the therapy gardens at Emanuel Children's Hospital and Good Samaritan Hospital provide places where patients can heal physically and psychologically.

The senses are infinitely important in this garden, where the children can actively feel the texture of the dirt while they plant and harvest in the warmer months; enjoy the taste of the salads they produce with plants from the vegetable garden; and take in the warmth of the sun and scent of the flowers that bloom all year long. Hazen insisted that landscape contractors can use therapeutic elements in the residential market as well, and noted that children are not the only people who benefit from such an experience.

"The aging population particularly needs this assistance in their 60s so that they may continue with adapted forms of gardening in their 70s, 80s, 90s and 100s," Hazen enthused. Legacy Health System's Healing Garden at Good Samaritan Hospital is open to patients of all ages – even those confined to beds – and promotes rehabilitation for stroke victims, orthopedic patients and anyone else who can benefit from working with the plants or simply getting a breath of fresh air.

But functionality and therapy don't always have to come in the form of a hands-on garden. Clients who feel they would benefit from a quiet meditation nook or open field can also be introduced to the breadth and depth of sensory gardens. Orta shared that the teams at Landmark Landscapes enjoy installing water features to drown out the outside world.

"A waterfall or water feature can really take you out of suburbia," he explained. A meditation nook Orta previously worked on incorporated tall Italian cypress, a weeping Japanese maple and plants and foliage that appealed to the homeowners. Additionally,

(continued on page 108)



Weaving

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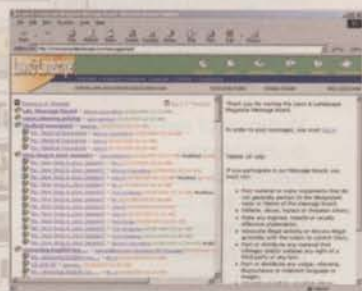
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Sensory Gardens

(continued from page 108)

Customers may not request sensory elements in their gardens, but Katie Bloome, public relations manager at Monrovia, Asuza, Calif., explains that, "gardening is just inherently [sensory] because of all the color and fragrance

and texture." If a client asks for sensory elements in their landscaping project – or even if they don't, the following plants and hundreds of others can be strategically placed to offer everything from eye-popping color to palate-pleasing flavor. – Lauren Spiers

PURPOSE	COMMON NAME	BOTANICAL NAME	ZONES	DESCRIPTION
Butterfly Attractors	Butterfly Blue	<i>Scabiosa columbaria</i>	3-8	Intricate Dutch blue flowers, blooms June to October
	Pincushion Flower	'Butterfly Blue'		
	Butterfly Weed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	4-9	Red buds with orange flowers attract Monarch butterflies
	Magnus Purple Coneflower	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i> 'Magnus'	4-9	Bold six-inch magenta-rose flowers with horizontal petals
Tropical Plants	White Catawba	<i>Rhododendron catawbiense</i>	4-8	Large, dense evergreen shrub with a multitude of white flowers
	Rhododendron	'Album (H-1)'		
	Saint Paul Verbena	<i>Verbena peruviana</i> 'Saint Paul'	6-11	Ground-hugging mats covered with dense clusters of hot-pink blooms
	Ivory Tower Yucca	<i>Yucca filamentosa</i> 'Ivory Tower'	4-9	Sword-like green leaves topped with spikes of green-tinged ivory blossoms
Fragrant	Sago Palm	<i>Cycas revoluta</i>	9-11	Slow-growing palm-like plant can be 8 feet with a 3- to 6-foot spread
	Shrimp Plant	<i>Justica brandegeana</i>	9-11	Coppery-bronze bracts enclose white tubular flowers
	Everblooming Gardenia	<i>Gardenia jasminoides</i> 'Veitchii'	8-11	Multitude of sweet-smelling, white double-blossoms
	Korean Spice Viburnum	<i>Viburnum carlesii</i>	4-8	Bunches of light pink, spicy-scented flowers fade to white
Edible	Satinwood	<i>Murraya paniculata</i>	9-11	Evergreen shrub with white bell-shaped flowers that give off an orange-blossom scent
	Stephan Jasmine	<i>Jasminum x stephanense</i>	7-11	Clusters of fragrant pink flowers form in summer
	Creeping Wintergreen	<i>Gaultheria procumbens</i>	3-8	Creeping groundcover turns reddish in cold weather, edible fruit
	Catawba Grape	<i>Vitis labrusca</i> 'Catawba'	4-8	Medium clusters of purplish-red berries have a distinctive flavor
	Kent Beauty Oregano	<i>Origanum rotundifolium</i> 'Kent Beauty'	7-10	Ornamental oregano with pink flowers doubles as an Italian seasoning
	Canby Red Raspberry	<i>Rubus idaeus</i> 'Canby Red'	4-8	Small white flowers are followed by red berries on two-year-old canes

Sensi-ble Plants

the gurgling sounds from a waterfall-style feature drifted in to bring calm into the homeowners' tense suburban lives.

Because a tight, quiet space does not epitomize escape for every client, Zimmerman creates wildflower plantings on properties where the client's idea of freedom from the daily grind is a wide-open field. He warned though, "prairies are not an instant-gratification type of event. It can take three to five years for a wildflower or meadow feature to mature, so clients really have to be patient." But good things come to those who wait, and an established meadow offers many sensory elements. Buzzing bees, flitting butterflies and

knee-high flowers and grasses waving in the breeze are just a few of the aspects patient clients can enjoy.

BUT DOES IT SMELL NICE? Convincing a client of the eventual beauty and comfort a design will bring usually isn't difficult, but in the realm of sensory gardens, ensuring that clients thoroughly understand the impact of the elements involved is trickier.

"Seeing something is usually better," remarked Katie Bloome, public relations manager, Monrovia, Asuza, Calif. "A lot of our customers will come and tour the nurseries with their sales representatives," she said,

"[and] if they're not sure about a plant, we'll get a sample out to them."

As far as in-person visits go, Orta commented that one client he worked with had difficulty envisioning how a water feature would work in his landscape. To solve this problem, the team had the client come up to North Carolina from Atlanta and spent two days visiting previous clients to view their water features. "Then he said, 'Well, I'm excited, let's do it,'" Orta remembered, noting that the time spent was well worth it.

Designers are acutely aware of how important it is for customers to envision a project

(continued on page 110)

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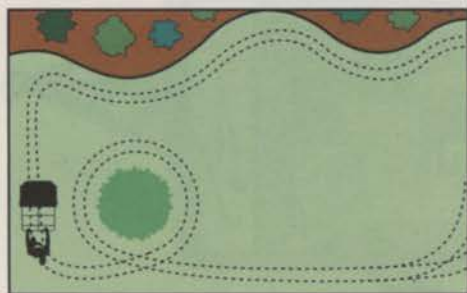
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USE READER SERVICE #90

Sensory Gardens

(continued from page 108)

before beginning any installation, and the trick seems to be in the language. "The most important thing is the way you describe things," O'Brien explained. "When you're sitting down with a two-dimensional plan trying to describe a three-dimensional space, the words you choose and how you present it conjure up an image for them."

For sensory designs, those dimensions may number more than three if scent, flavor, or texture are considered. "Sometimes samples are helpful," he continued, "but it's really the words you choose. You can say things like 'the sweet vanilla scent of Viburnum.' If you use common words, they're more likely to relate to that."

Zimmerman agreed. "What's really important is to listen to what [your clients] are looking for and to be descriptive," he explained. Rather than simply showing a picture of a Korean Spice Viburnum, for instance, Zimmerman would tell his clients that the plant has the scent of cloves, which

gives a better idea of what to expect when it comes time for planting.

Really, creating a landscape that will stimulate the senses year-round is an ultimate goal of sensory design. Zimmerman described that a simple tree such as a white flowering crab can stimulate all of the senses over the course of a year. "The flowers smell great," he said, "there's fall color from the leaves, and they are fruit-bearing trees so in the fall you've got birds eating the fruit." Additionally, when the leaves fall come wintertime, the remaining skeleton of branches creates a visually appealing texture against a cold or snowy sky.

With an idea of how to employ the senses in landscape designs, marketing the service is the final hurdle. "I have business cards that get passed around," Johansen said. "I did some marketing last year in the local newspapers, but I find that my best [marketing] is just referrals." Other contractors agree and insist that because clients do not specifically request

sensory gardens, incorporating sensory elements one project at a time is easier.

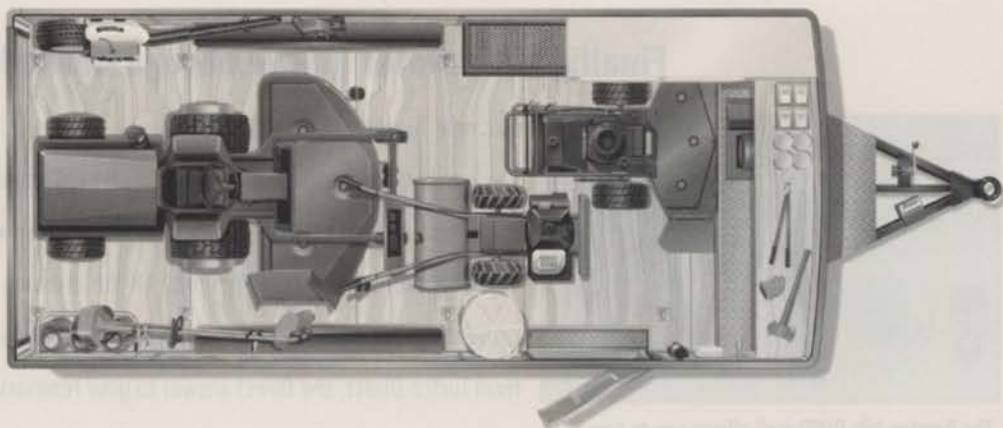
"If someone has a specific goal in mind, that usually comes from the client," noted Zimmerman, "but 'sensory garden' is not a term a client will really pick up on." He also mentioned that if a contractor chose to specialize in designing for the senses, they may end up backed into a corner if they don't offer other gardening services.

"Because gardens in general are for the senses, I don't think people necessarily seek out a sensory garden," Bloome explained. Still, she observed, "everybody wants what they can't have," so marketing the ability to install water features or acquire tropical plants or those that attract wildlife can certainly boost interest in a company while soothing city-weary clients. ■

The author is Assistant Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lspeiers@lawnandlandscape.com



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Deicing

by Lauren Spiers

Treating salt with liquid deicers can increase efficiency and save money over time. Photos:

(Right) Four Seasons Landscaping, (Below) TrynEx.



From liquid to granular, when it comes to ice management, there is a lot more to consider than just the weather report.

"Just get rid of it" is the phrase many clients use when they see ice on their lots. Thanks to a plethora of ice removal products, the thought of ice doesn't have to send a shiver down snow contractors' spines.

The whys behind incorporating ice management into a snow removal business are obvious – the whats get tricky. "What we're trying to do is keep vehicles on their intended paths or keep people on their feet," explained Rick Kier, president, Pro Scapes, Jamesville, N.Y. "Those are going to be totally different objectives depending on what area we're in." For instance, keeping cars on the road is always important, but in a parking lot keeping people safe is a higher priority. Also, thoroughly clearing roadways may be more im-

portant in low-snowfall cities like Cincinnati, than in Syracuse, N.Y., which may get 20 snow events in a winter. Kier emphasized the necessity of knowing the norms and expectations in a particular market.

From rock salt to stronger chemical compounds, deicing product offer a range of materials to meet these expectations and eliminate ice.

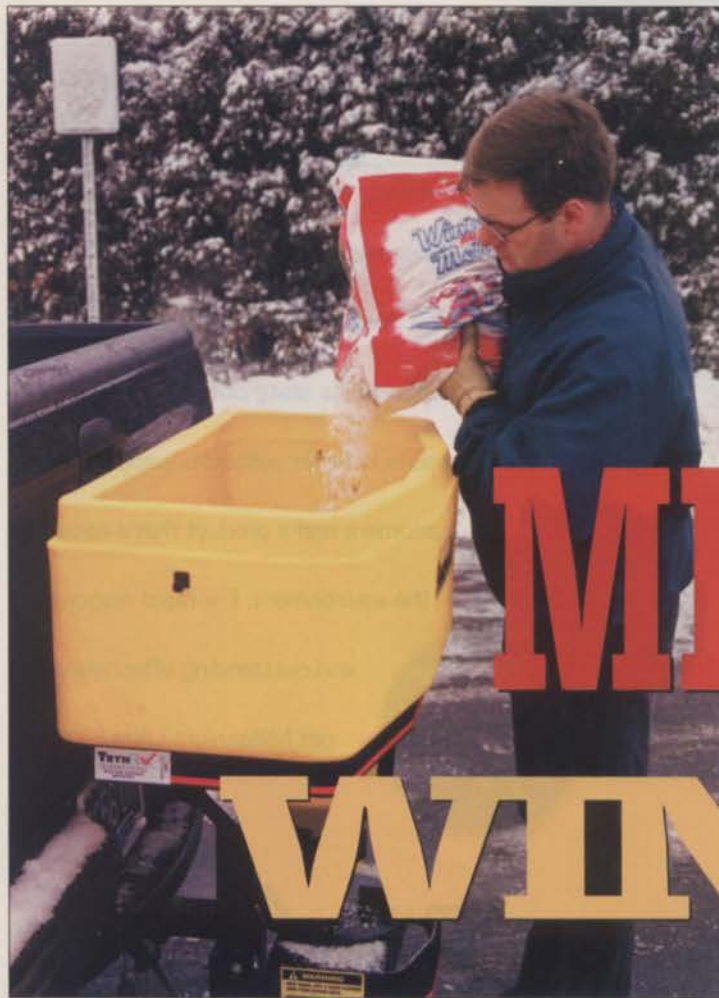
LIQUID COOL. Many liquid products – specifically liquid magnesium chloride – are gaining popularity, especially for anti-icing. Don Oster, product manager, North American Salt, Overland Park, Kan., explained that if the weather forecasts predict snow or ice, the area of concern can be pre-wetted with liquid days in advance. "When the snow or ice arrives, it will start melting immediately, which also helps prevent the bonding of snow or ice to the surface," he said.

Oster added that if a storm dissipates or blows over, liquid products will remain on the ground until the next precipitation. And yet another benefit is that less granular material on the ground in the winter means less clean-up in the spring.

"Most [contractors] want to use liquids for anti-icing to start out with, but they're happy to find that they can also use them as deicers," enthused Rob Greene, regional manager, Glacial Technologies, Malvern, Ohio.

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(continued on page 114)



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Deicing

(continued from page 112)

since liquid products take up less space than granular materials. Greene explained that depending on the application rate, fewer than 40 gallons of liquid anti-icer can do the work of hundreds of pounds of salt. Also, considering the salt shortage of previous winters, using liquid products provides another option when deicing staples are in short supply.

Bob St. Jacques, president, Four Seasons Landscaping, Windsor, Conn., explained that liquid products cost less than some contractors believe. "The equipment's inexpensive," he reasoned, "and you can use the spray tanks during the rest of the season on landscape projects for watering and so forth." St. Jacques uses a straight liquid magnesium chloride product for anti-icing and mixes the liquid with rock salt "to make the salt super potent" for deicing.

Recent mild winters left behind an overabundance of rock salt, but liquid products can also work well as pre-wetters for stockpiles. "The nice thing about the treated salt

from an anti-icing standpoint," commented Chris James, president, Chris James Landscaping, Midland Park, N.J., "is that because it's treated with a liquid, it's somewhat like a spreader-sticker, so you don't have as much bounce and scatter." Additionally, pre-wetting granular products can lower the melting temperature by several degrees and inhibit chloride leaching, making the combination less damaging.

While liquid or liquid-treated products usually cost more than granular deicers upfront, manufacturers maintain that using them can save money in the long run. As technical service manager for the Dow Chemical Co., Joe Althouse stated, "anti-icing with liquid forms of deicers is a growing technique for large areas and roadways because it lowers total costs by minimizing plowing runs and deicer usage." Also, granular products treated with non-corrosive liquids reduce corrosion on truck beds, saving money on equipment maintenance.

OLD FAITHFUL. Before liquid products were discovered and developed, snow contractors relied on straight rock salt for their deicing jobs – but manufacturers have made strides with this old standby.

Current granular products on the market include rock salt; magnesium, calcium and potassium chlorides; and combinations of these. Depending on the area of the country, some contractors still deal only with solid deicing products. For instance, Kier's territory borders Lake Ontario and is subject to unpredictable lake effect snows. With some properties getting several inches of snow and others staying snow- and ice-free, Kier and others in this situation may waste time and material by attempting to pretreat in such erratic weather conditions.

Considering this, Keir stands by his granular products. "We've used regular rock salt, we've used sand mixed with calcium chloride, sand mixed with salt, and we used magnesium

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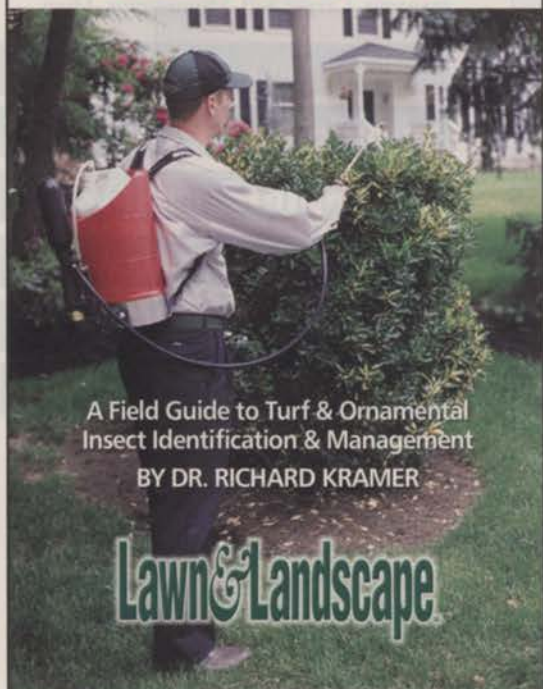
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THLHSAD

Deicing

(continued from page 114)

chloride on the sidewalks where we're concerned about interior tracking," he outlined. "It's more convenient the way we're set up."

Likewise, Dave Clemons, landscape operations manager, Nature Works Landscape Services, Walpole, Mass., has yet to use liquids on the properties he manages. "The liquid just hasn't been asked for," he ex-

plained, pointing out that while some liquid products may be better for the environment, salt is safe if the right amount is put down. Manufacturers agree and developed several less damaging chloride products.

Oster described magnesium chloride products as "growing by leaps and bounds in the landscape market," and said that in

parking lot areas, rock salt is still a staple from a cost standpoint. Althouse noted contractors' tendencies to use calcium chloride in pellet form on pedestrian walkways, but both maintained that the choice of which product to use is based on several different variables, and each product will work well in different situations.

"You have to look at what your application is and what your weather conditions might be, and then decide what you're going to use," urged Ramona Bennett, marketing manager, Cargill Salt, Minneapolis, Minn.

**"I don't think a snow
management program
is complete unless you
have good ice control, be it
anti-icing or deicing,
built into it." – Chris James**

Veteran contractors echoed this necessity by outlining which important pieces of information to record before practicing any anti-icing or deicing techniques. Some contractors have even created detailed book-keeping systems for these statistics.

"I have a log book I designed for us," said Clemons, who logs arrival and departure times from the shop, loading site and the property as well as the conditions of the property and any materials applied. Similarly, Kier uses several sources including satellites and the Internet to get accurate readings of weather conditions and records the type of accumulated snow (wet or powdery), and any substitute drivers or extra equipment needed.

Additionally, James noted that ground temperature is something quite important and often overlooked. "We monitor ground temperature because if the ground temperature isn't below freezing, you're not going to have a freeze," he said. "People should focus more on the surface temperature when they talk about ice and snow accumulation than they do air temperature." James' rule of thumb is that a storm must have an 80-percent chance or better of accumulating ice

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Deicing

(continued from page 116)

or snow with ground temperatures consistently below freezing to justify performing anti-icing services.

Recording all this information results in an outline that helps determine the right product to use for effective ice removal.

COVER THE SPREAD. Another important step for contractors is creating a pricing structure for their deicing services. "We've got pricing all over," said St. Jacques. "Some people pay by the season, some people pay by the storm. Some we charge to deice by the gallon, by the application, by the ton, by the yard. We're trying to standardize, but a lot of times you're stuck with what the customer's used to or it's dictated by corporate policy."

Clemons' team is in a similar phase of creating consistency. "We're trying to do a study over the next couple of years to see what the best pricing for us would be," he mentioned. Currently, Nature Works ap-

To determine what to charge for anti-icing and deicing services, contractors must consider two important factors: what it costs to provide the service, and the kind of results their clients

expect. Rick Kier, president, Pro Scapes, Jamesville, N.Y., always considers the former in his pricing and has developed a unique system to determine the latter.

"We're looking to achieve about \$175 per hour from our clients," said Kier, who uses this rate to calculate per-occurrence snow and ice removal jobs and multiplies the hourly rate by the average number of snow events to



Rick Kier

arrive at a seasonal rate. Kier cautions that Pro Scape's numbers won't work for every snow removal company and suggests that contractors study their market to determine the best rates. He acknowledges though, that "your first reaction to the hourly rate is that it's

really high, but you have to remember that 90 percent of the cost of being in the snow and ice removal business has nothing to do with actually doing the work." Everything from equipment maintenance to insurance to training crews costs money, and for Kier balancing the cost of 15 trucks and more than 20 crewmembers with the right hourly rate is necessary.

On the administrative end of things, Kier provides each client with a sand/salt

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agreement indicating six levels of service from which the client can choose. With the highest level of service, clients are provided with "sanding and/or salting almost every time snow plowing is performed as a preventive measure against accidents and injuries," and sanding/salting is only withheld if a full thaw is forecast. On the other end of the spectrum, clients requesting minimum service receive sand/salt services only if Pro Scapes is called by an authorized representative of the property and deicing products are only applied where necessary.

By recognizing the importance of overhead and out-of-pocket costs as well as what their clients need and want when it comes to ice management, Rick Kier and his crewmembers at Pro Scapes are able to meet clients' needs effectively and profitably. — Lauren Spiers

proximates prices by measuring each property, comparing sizes and levels of difficulty, figuring in the cost of labor and materials and referring to previous years' prices.

Kier also recognizes that each client is different from the next and has every homeowner or property manager sign a sand/salt agreement. The agreement outlines the amount of service provided — based on six incremental levels of service — and names any other people on the property who are qualified to request service when needed.

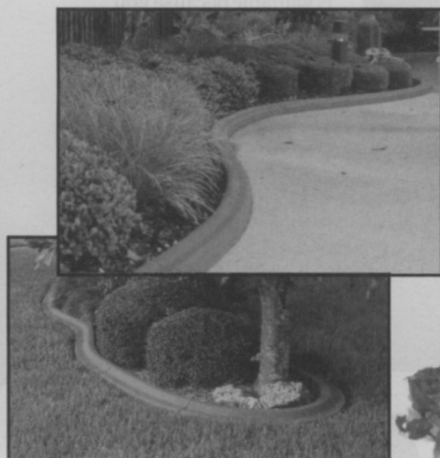
Also important is the actual cost of the materials being spread. Rock salt is by far the least expensive product available. Depending on the region, salt can cost about \$45 per ton delivered, and buying in bulk can save money. On the other hand, Greene noted that liquid products can cost less than \$1 per gallon, and while Oster acknowledged that products like magnesium chloride can be expensive (as much as three times the cost of rock salt), its strength and efficiency make up for its cost.

When shopping for a product, Althouse recommended that contractors look for documented results regarding a product's performance, rather than simply going by the label or name brand. "A contractor's business success depends on his or her ability to handle the maximum number of customers in the shortest amount of time," he added, suggesting that rather than sacrifice quality for speed, contractors should choose an ice melting product that will work effectively over a wide range of temperatures.

Similarly, James cautioned against selling any type of anti-icing or deicing service as a cure-all. "Sometimes you need to do both, sometimes you need to do multiple [passes]," he said. "I don't think a snow management program is complete unless you have good ice control, be it anti-icing or deicing, built into it." **LL**

The author is Assistant Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lspiers@lawnandlandscape.com.

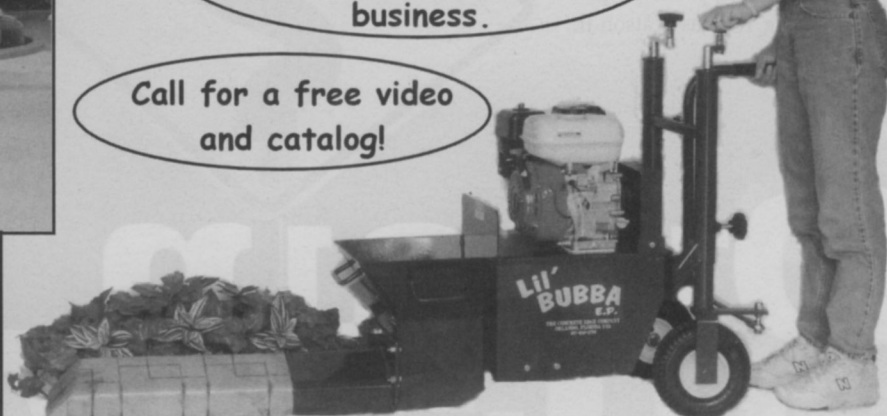
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Constructing Business Plans

by Kristen Hampshire

The business planning process is a wake-up call for owners who haven't designed a clear direction for their companies

Close your eyes. Picture your company five years from now. What do you see? Do you dream in color?

Do you bill multi-million-dollar clients – park your truck among a fleet of 50? Do you see monogrammed logos, your name splashed on billboards, your fliers wallpapering neighborhoods?

Do you wake up wondering “What next?”

Do you have a plan to make all this happen – to turn these sleepy reveries into business realities?

The stakes are high in the business game, and entrepreneurs without business strategies surrender these dreams to a rough playing field, where profit, potential and people take a beating.

“A lot of people don’t do strategic planning at all,” admitted Ken Hochkeppel, president, Enterprise Analysis, Centreville, Va. “But would you go onto the football field without a game plan? Would you take a road trip without looking at a map? Why would you run a business without having a plan? It is your livelihood and the livelihood of all your people.”

Of course, a business strategy entails more than a messy sketch or a wadded up to-do list, though it certainly may start there. A solid plan culminates financial histories and soul-searching exercises. It includes goals, initiatives, priorities and action plans.

“If you want to be a big company tomorrow, you have to start acting like one today,” Hochkeppel said, quoting Thomas Watson Jr.,

former CEO of technology giant IBM. But before contractors can “think big,” they must start small.

SET THE SCENE. Productive strategic sessions need the right time, place and people to cultivate a creative, open forum for assessment and ideas. Don’t plan on meeting with a few employees in the staff break room or fitting in these draining meetings during high season. Step back.

Drake Snodgrass spent a week on the Oregon coast sorting out his strategy. “You get off alone or to a place that is comfortable and cozy, and you get the mindset of, ‘I’m not coming back until I do this. This is going to happen,’” said the president of Drake’s 7 Dees Landscaping, Portland, Ore.

For Snodgrass, the impetus of his planning was his people. Employees’ questions and interest in where the business was headed forced him to put pen to paper. “My people were saying, ‘We need you to give us a clear vision,’” Snodgrass said. “I think an owner has to take that as an extremely high-priority responsibility to do that, especially if a group of employees are saying that they need that. It’s easy to say, ‘Just follow me, we’ll get there,’ but if an owner is hearing that he ought to take a week off and figure it out...”

Owners identify their potential and consider possibilities during the business planning process. This brainstorming lends them foresight to make decisions when opportunity knocks. “Putting it down in writing is valuable because you can see it all – you can

(continued on page 122)



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Constructing Business Plans

(continued from page 120)

see that you've covered all the bases, really analyzed the business, put it in writing," Hochkeppel stressed.

Hochkeppel offered the following guidelines as framework.

- **Vision Statement** – How do you visualize your business?
- **Present Position Statement** – Summarize your business evaluation. Include market, industry, political and economical factors.
- **Company Mission** – Why does the business exist?
- **Historical Perspective** – What are your company's key milestones and financial performance records?
- **SWOT Analysis** – Identify your company's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.
- **5-Year Plan** – Outline your objectives, focus on growth plans and predict organizational changes.
- **Strategic Initiatives** – Plot out these tasks over the five-year period and assign each goal to an individual in the organization. Next, target a timeframe for completion. Don't forget to follow up on the progress until the task is "checked off."

And once owners fill in these blanks, they can more easily make big-impact decisions. For example, if you interviewed the perfect employee, do you have a position for a new hire? If a branch office opportunity opens up, are you certain you want to explore the multi-location route?

"A business plan gives owners comfort in making these decisions," Hochkeppel pointed out. "It prepares them by going through the thinking process and how things could unfold. So, when a situation faces them, it's like, 'Hey, I already thought about this.'"

To approach the business planning "drawing board" with a clean slate and a clear mind, Linda Novy holds her think tank outside the office, noting that a retreat with managers offers a new environment and fresh perspective.

"Companies need to reinvent themselves at a minimum of every other year," figured Novy, CEO of Gardeners' Guild, San Rafael, Calif. "Look at market trends, look at where the company is, what the

market is, what is driving you, what your passion is, and what is feeling good and not feeling good. You have to stop and have a very safe environment where people can give their input."

A get-away approach appeals to many company leaders, who admit that office tension doesn't foster the peripheral thinking strategic planning requires. Hochkeppel calls it the "30,000-foot elevation," and said it's especially important for small business owners wearing many hats to step back from their companies. "It's tough for a guy who is running the ship to get at an elevation where he can look down on (the organization) from a new perspective," he remarked.

Who an owner includes in discussion also contributes to the atmosphere.

Novy conducts one-on-one conversations with employees before the planning process, drawing feedback from a variety of sources on "what is motivating people and what is bothering people." She plans a retreat with her executive board and recommends companies without this model involve their accountants and bankers.

Next, she turns to key managers. "All of those layers of outside review have made us a better company," she attested. "You need internal input to make sure people can be inspired and drive and share that vision and own that vision, and then you want the outside input to make sure you are grounded in a business and market reality."

Snodgrass visualizes this involvement in tiers. He gathers his own thoughts before involving key managers and financial consultants in the process.

Next, he turns to supervisors and foremen and, finally, he puts the plan in front of the company at a meeting, welcoming feedback and ideas.

And, of course, as in anything, timing is key. "You have to gather a lot of information and blend it into a vision that is elegant, inspiring, passionate and that people can relate to and get excited about," Novy illustrated. "By the time you hit winter, everyone is really tired, we've just been through the growing season and then I think it is appropriate to plan).

"You want the new plan to incubate over the winter season as you do training and planning," she continued. "Just like the plants, when the spring comes, our garden is designed and ready to move in a new direction."

PICTURE THIS. Snodgrass imagines himself walking across a tightrope strung between two, 20-story buildings. He asks himself, "What is in my life that I would cross this line to the other side to get?"

Relationships, family, business – core values surface during this drill, he noted. "You really have to have a handle on your personal life, and then you can build your business plan," he figured. "It's a really personal thing."

Tightropes aside, this assessment is often referred to as a SWOT analysis – identifying the company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. "You take a look at your company, you pick yourself apart, you see where you need to work and where you are good," Snodgrass summed up.

Hochkeppel recommends that owners reflect on what milestones, systems and strengths got them to their present point in business, and what qualities and capital will drive them to the next level. Conduct a brutally honest appraisal.

"The idea is to get out there and really think about how you are doing business and try to bust the paradigm," he emphasized, adding that he focuses on the weaknesses and opportunities. "The idea is to overcome them and make changes that make those weaknesses go away. Seize the opportunities and protect against the threats. The SWOT analysis is there for the purpose of defining actions."

Mark Clark seriously considers the "threats" portion of the analysis so he can conduct a market evaluation and determine potential growth areas. Surviving in an area with "The Big Three" requires outlining a clear, concise customer target plan, he remarked. "What unique opportunities can you offer to the marketplace that are not generic?" asked Clark, president of Clark Landscape Group, Monroe, N.C. "What niche can you fill that may give you a distinct advantage in profit, market and competition? You might have to refocus marketing

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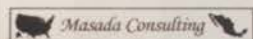
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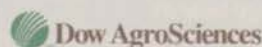
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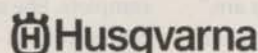
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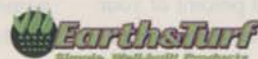
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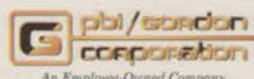
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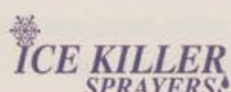
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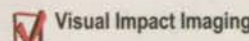
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Constructing Business Plans

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on things that competitors aren't targeting."

Besides carving a competitive strategy, a SWOT analysis takes owners back into "dream mode" where they can visualize what opportunities their strengths will afford them as their businesses grow.

Novy asks her department managers to "really think big." She encourages everyone to share their ideal department setup. "You have to just take the lid off and go there," she said of the process, adding that these brainstorming sessions produce a wish-list foundation for a more realistic plan. "You may not be able to afford it all and then, in our case, we said, 'We want that, how can we do that with half the budget? How do we get there without spending all of those dollars?'"

This is where the second analytical player surfaces: historic financial reports. Take a look at your labor hours. If your total company payroll costs lean toward 40 percent of your sales rather than 60 percent – and most companies fall into this 20-point range – you are running a "lean machine," Hochkeppel noted.

Look at your growth over the last five years. If you notice an 8- to 15-percent increase, perhaps you could approach sales more aggressively, Hochkeppel suggested. Compile your profit-and-loss statements and convert them into charts that portray your sales and company growth. Then call your banker and accountant.

"One of the exercises I like to go through is to take the best performance of each overhead category and the best performance of the gross margin and add them together from a percentage standpoint," Hochkeppel said. "You can see the best, and that might represent 12½-percent profitability, which identifies your potential."

Meshing the financial perspective with the SWOT analysis during strategic planning captures a comprehensive company picture. Defining your goals without a financial outlook can spell failure for your plan. In other words, you can't drive cross-country without gas money.

Novy knows this now.

"Up until five years ago, I had a disconnected approach," she described. "I would sit down and write a business plan and the budget didn't necessarily reflect the plan." Three elements define her planning process: vision, strategy and budgeting. "You want your budget to reflect what is your business

plan. There can't be a disconnect there, or it won't work."

HERE AND NOW. After staring into the looking glass – evaluating the company financially and holistically – owners must shift their attention to the crystal ball. Visualize the operation five years from now, from structure to sales, and what path the team will travel.

Hochkeppel suggests reverting to the playbook. Chart the infrastructure, note overlapping roles, and draft potential positions

"If you want to be a *big company tomorrow*, you have to start acting like one today." — Thomas Watson Jr.

to set up the company for a winning game.

"Draw an organizational chart with no names in it and see what the positions are," Hochkeppel noted. "Then, see who fits into what spot and put employees into positions where they will have the greatest value."

"You have to be honest with yourself," he added. "If you have double reporting, that's what you want to see." Ironing out wrinkles in operations might top the owners strategic initiative list in this case.

Clark considers future leaders – who will manage the new crew if the company grows?

"If I have two crews that are maxxed out and we are going through the transition of building a third crew, who will be the next person to step up and lead it?" he asked, noting that he always looks for managerial understudies when creating his business

plan. After all, they will drive the plan to fruition, he figures.

And formulating attainable goals is key, reminded Gerry McCarthy, president, Mac's Landscaping, Stoneham, Mass. After assessing their businesses, owners know where they stand in their markets and they should establish growth targets and strategic objectives that align with their capabilities.

"I don't want to reach for a goal I can't achieve, and I know I can only reach certain goals each year," McCarthy admitted.

This is why Novy prioritizes her "dream

list" into bite-sized portions that her management team can realistically commit to and complete. She suggests picking three to five concentrations – production or sales, for example. Novy will target operational efficiencies and agility this year. "You can't get overwhelmed," she said. "I've gotten into that track where I have so many initiatives that people get discouraged. It defeats people."

These initiatives form the skeleton of a five-year plan that owners work through with their employees, constantly reviewing, tweaking and updating, Snodgrass said. "The best thing we ever did was build a five-year plan, and that started with a vision and redoing the vision and the mission statement, redoing the objectives and the strategies to meet those objectives, redoing the tactics to accomplish the strategies – that was a watershed."

Clearly, a significant portion of executing a plan is revising it – changing it to meet a constantly evolving company and economic environment. Owners can't afford to press the snooze button on planning and long-range thinking. The strategic business plan is a recurring dream, and one that owners revisit daily. It is also a commitment.

"To put your plan on paper gives you a benchmark to reach," Clark reasoned. "If you do not have it on paper, it is easily forgotten. If it is on paper it is black and white, and you either hit your goals or you didn't and if you didn't, then why not?"

The author is a Contributing Editor to Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at khamphshire@lawnandlandscape.com.

Zero in on these six focus points during your strategic planning, suggested Ken Hochkeppel, president, Enterprise Analysis, Centreville, Va.

1. Finances
2. Business processes
3. Operations
4. Market
5. Human resources
6. Company culture

Super **6**

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FEBRUARY.03

Client Relationships

by Matt Shooner

Boost growth and client retention with relationship marketing.

The landscape industry is a sales-driven, front-end loaded market. Getting business in the front door has historically been more important than building relationships with current customers or tending the back door as clients leave.

Also, growing companies, by their nature, become less personal. The constant push for sales and production and the challenges of getting and keeping enough staff often overshadow the "bigger picture" of client care.

These are some of the most powerful reasons why contractors should consider adopting a relationship-marketing program to electrify performance in their current markets.

Relationship marketing utilizes human and technological resources to make contacts more personal, active and productive. Increased client contact, including quality control phone calls, personalized letters or frequent up-sell opportunities, can enable contractors to retain clients longer, sell more services and receive more referrals.

To ensure longevity and consistent growth over time, contractors must construct a solid foundation for protecting customer relationships. An effective model consists of five key elements: goals and benchmarks, processes, buy-in, measurement and payoff.

GOALS & BENCHMARKS. Think of this part of the process as looking at a map and pinpointing a destination (goals), then deciding which mode of transportation to use to get there (the benchmarks).

For starters, consider all of the critical touch points that exist between contractors and clients. Setting goals to improve these contacts can boost sales. Some key areas where contractors build customer relationships include:

- ✓ Phone contact
- ✓ Pre-sale contact
- ✓ Production contact
- ✓ Post-production contact
- ✓ Service call contact
- ✓ Quality control contact
- ✓ Billing contact
- ✓ Up-selling and cross-selling contact
- ✓ Renewal contact
- ✓ Client appreciation contact
- ✓ Cancellation/dissatisfaction contact
- ✓ Contact with former clients

To help contractors reach goals, they need benchmarks — figures that help contractors track whether or not they are meeting goals. Here are some key benchmarks contractors should watch:

Get PERSONAL

- ✓ Increase sales closing percentage
- ✓ Increase size of average sale
- ✓ Increase average annual revenue per client
- ✓ Increase average referrals per client
- ✓ Increase number of contacts per client
- ✓ Increase total number of contacts per client
- ✓ Decrease average time to deliver estimates by (hours/days)
- ✓ Decrease average time to respond to service calls by (hours/days)
- ✓ Decrease customer turnover/loss
- ✓ Decrease average service calls per job or application
- ✓ Decrease average days to collect payments

Collect all the data on each of these benchmark areas. In addition, gather these figures: client turnover rate, service call response and total average client contacts made within the past 12 months.

Also, sometimes reviewing benchmarks helps determine more realistic goals. When setting objectives, break them down into 6-, 12- and 24-month goals.

SETTING PROCESSES. As soon as contractors measure current company status and put goals in place, they need to create processes to execute plans and measure progress.

Following are specific processes through which contractors can reach their goals.

Average Time to Deliver Estimates. As the average time taken to deliver bids decreases, prospects will consider a company more alert and "on the ball" than its competition. To decrease average estimate delivery time, try these tactics:

- ✓ Time-stamp (in and out) every inquiry received, and measure in hours or days how long each salesperson takes to deliver an estimate.
- ✓ Publish measurement results in the sales office. Highlight the shortest turnaround times and the salespeople who provided them. This emphasizes the importance of quick estimate delivery and enables staff members to track their progress and remain aware of their performance levels.
- ✓ Track the sales closing percentage.
- ✓ Beyond basic sales training, impress upon the sales staff the need to follow up with each estimate personally and in a timely manner. Set up a 24- or 36-hour deadline for personal follow up, and devise a system for measuring performance. For companies with relatively few (but large) quotes, this can be



done on a board on the sales office wall. For high-volume companies (like lawn care), it might make more sense to computerize the sales system and use barcodes to track each estimate through the sales process.

- ✓ Make sure each estimate is personalized and easy to understand. Train everyone who gives estimates on how to explain each service or product in the clearest light possible. Carefully reviewing estimates can help a supervisor fine-tune each salesperson's approach while making all estimates more consistent. For complex proposals, a personal presentation or at least a prompt follow-up call can dispel any confusion.

- ✓ Develop a long-term view. Record every detail of every estimate in a prospect database for future use. By capturing and using this information on an ongoing basis, contractors can tap into a goldmine of new business instead of having the data sit in an "unsold" or "partially sold" file.

- ✓ Bear in mind that the accuracy, creativity and appeal of sales collateral pieces delivered with estimates can largely shape a prospect's opinion of a company. If sales materials are of high quality, the prospect will assume that a company's work will be of that same caliber.

Size of Average Sale. Upselling is an easy way to build on an existing client relationship. Increasing awareness of services and company confidence is key here.

Encourage the sales staff to upsell additional services whenever possible. For example, one salesperson might call a client and say, "Our technician noticed that some of your ornamentals are showing signs of insect damage. Did you know that we offer insect control for trees and shrubs?" In this scenario, the contractor strengthens the client relationship because he or she knows exactly what the customer's needs are.

Focus tightly on the demographics that best fit the "ideal" client. Determine which zip codes fit these parameters and put mar-

keting and advertising dollars into them. A contractor should take every opportunity to reinforce his or her company as the "best choice" for services offered, especially in target market areas. The more concentrated the work, the more familiar and accepted a contractor will be as the primary service provider within his or her key demographic.

Train the sales staff to sell value, dependability and results rather

than price. Also, make sure they're "aiming high" on every estimate. In other words, let all prospects know what the ideals for their properties are, even if that's not what they think they want. Explain all of the services or products that would benefit them. Sales people can always "back off" or pare down what clients actually order, but unless they make the possibilities clear, clients won't be able to envision them, much less order them.

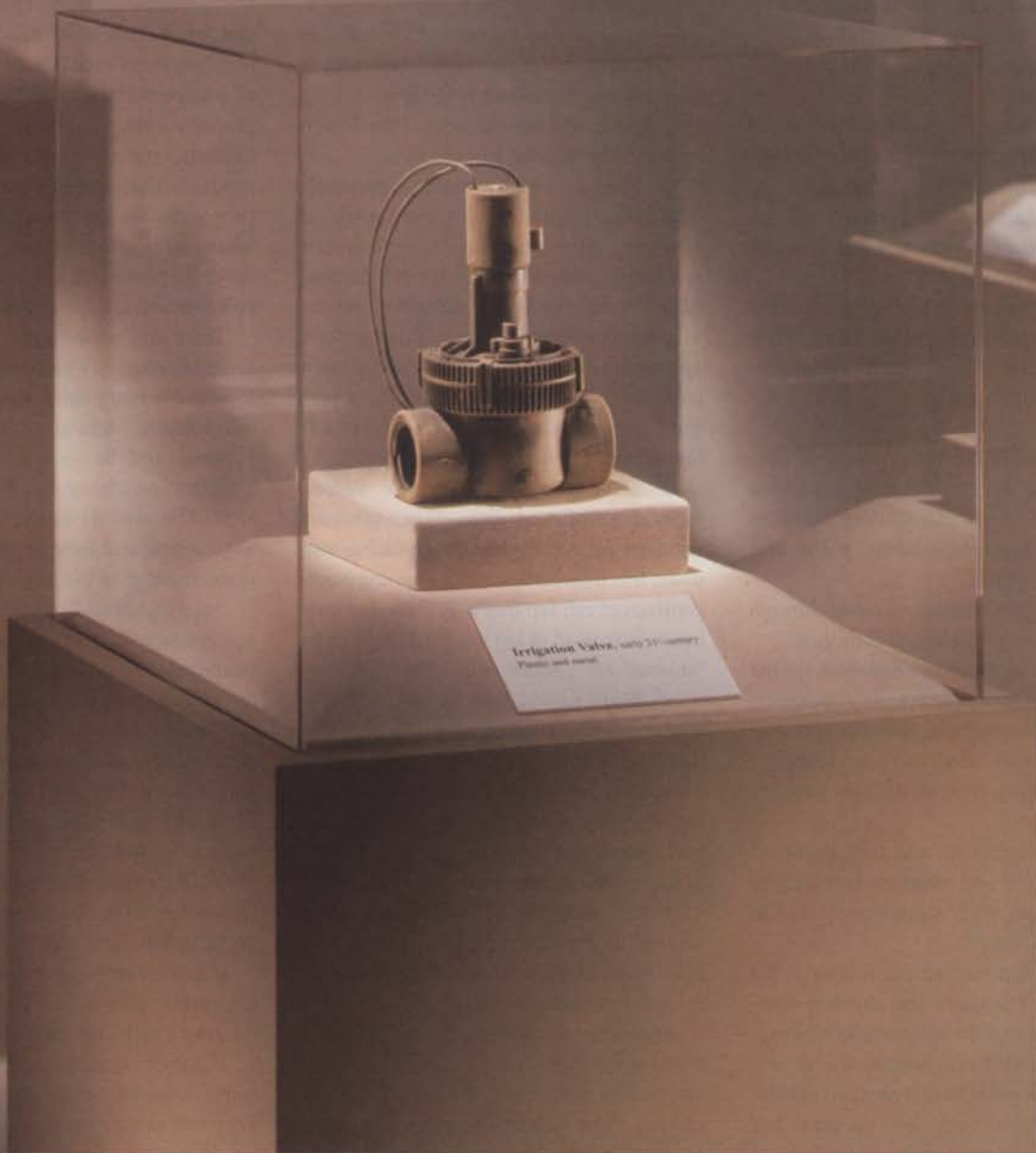
Track and review every sale, and track every salesperson's performance. Create enthusiasm among sales staff with friendly competitions. Make sales training an endless process, and be sure to conduct "post mortems" on bids or jobs that don't materialize. This will let everybody know what went wrong and how to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Average Annual Revenue per Client. Average revenue is firmly grounded in client relationships, and those relationships grow out of careful and systematic communication. By using both general, seasonal appeals and personalized offers (based on the data collected for each client), contractors can easily realize an increase in average sales. Ideas include:

- ✓ Use a customer newsletter to convey seasonal needs and invite customers (or prospects) to learn and order more.
- ✓ Leave doorhangers at homes surrounding current clients. Invite neighbors to call for prices, estimates or more information.
- ✓ Jumbo postcard mailings promoting a single seasonal service also are successful. They may or may not include a special offer, but getting the timing right is important. Consider sending postcards at the beginning of a scheduling period for a particular service with a "priority scheduling" offer.
- ✓ Go back to client files and make personalized offers for services that were quoted but not sold. Attach Bonus Bucks to 8½-by-11-inch sales letters to encourage sales.

(continued on page 131)

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But it won't be to fix it.**



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(continued from page 129)

Client Relationships

✓ Make personal phone calls to clients who received offers or who ordered a particular service at the same time last year. A simple suggestion or reminder is often all it takes to make the sale.

Average Referrals per Client. Existing clients can serve as one of the best and least expensive ways to increase a client base. Satisfied customers are generally happy to share their good choices with neighbors, co-workers and friends. Plus, referrals are almost always easier to sell because of the endorsement the client has already given. Add an organized system of incentives to boost this avenue of growth, such as:

✓ Establish incentives for clients who refer future customers. Promote this offer through every client contact.

✓ Include a referral coupon in each company newsletter.

✓ When making quality control phone calls to customers after completing work, ask if they know of anybody else who needs landscape services.

Number of Annual Contacts per Client. Whether it's a newsletter, a holiday card, a personalized letter, a phone call or a face-to-face visit, customers appreciate the extra effort. The goal is to increase the number and quality of the contacts in order to improve and deepen client relationships and loyalty over time. Try these techniques:

✓ A new customer welcome program helps kick off quality client contacts. A thank-you card signed by the owner is a great first step. Coupons or offers for additional services are other ways to build relationships.

✓ Create a customer-centered quality control program. Follow up every installation and service call with a personal phone conversation to determine the customer's satisfaction level. If a client indicates dissatisfaction or a need for improvement in any area, act on it immediately.

✓ Try to schedule inspections and/or service calls when people are going to be home. Simply scheduling stops later in the day or on Saturday guarantees an increased level of personal contact.

✓ Measure the number of contacts and track the change over time. Quantity matters, as well as quality. Although harder to measure, willingness to help and friendly attitudes also will boost contact quality.

Average Time to Respond to Service Calls. A service call indicates problems, even though they may only exist in the minds of clients. Quick turnaround goes a long way toward reassuring clients. Implement a time-stamping rule and a maximum response time (that can be tracked), and salespeople will place fewer service calls on the back burner.

Average Service Calls per Job or Application. Though always "getting it done right the first time" would be great, repeat visits are a fact of life. However, with a little measurement and extra effort, contractors can gradually reduce service calls or turn them into sales opportunities with these tips:

✓ Train. A good training program teaches service technicians to anticipate and avoid those situations that call for unnecessary repeat visits. Until they are fully trained,

(continued on page 161)

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1. **Goals and Benchmarks.** Establish measurable business areas that mesh with customer contact points and track them to gauge success in improving client relationships.
2. **Processes.** Develop daily routines that staff can follow to improve in each area, and determine how to capture measurable data to verify success.
3. **Buy-in.** Convince and teach employees that building client relationships helps them grow their careers and show them how to do it. Also, incorporate the process into the marketing plan so that prospects and clients can see the company's vision and learn how it will benefit them.
4. **Measurement.** Starting with benchmark points, consistently measure and gauge company progress.
5. **Payoff.** Openly acknowledge and reward staff members who perform well, and re-train those who don't. — Matt Shooner

5 Keys to Better Client Relationships

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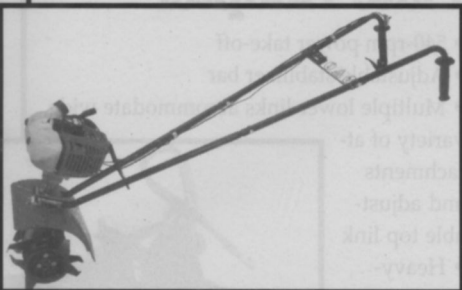


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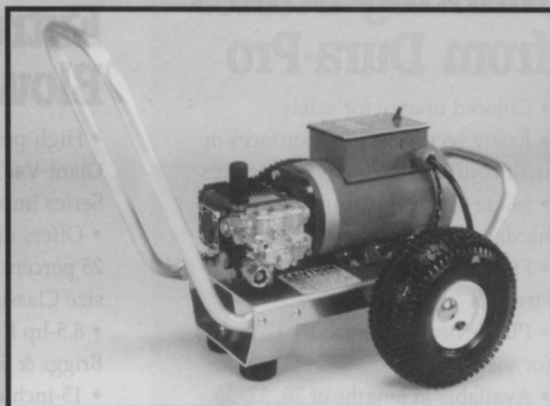
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Products

Pressure Pro Electric-powered Pressure Washers

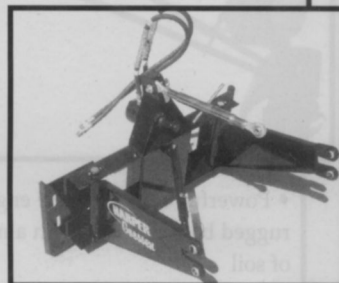
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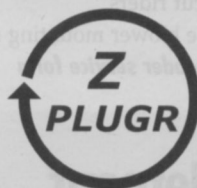


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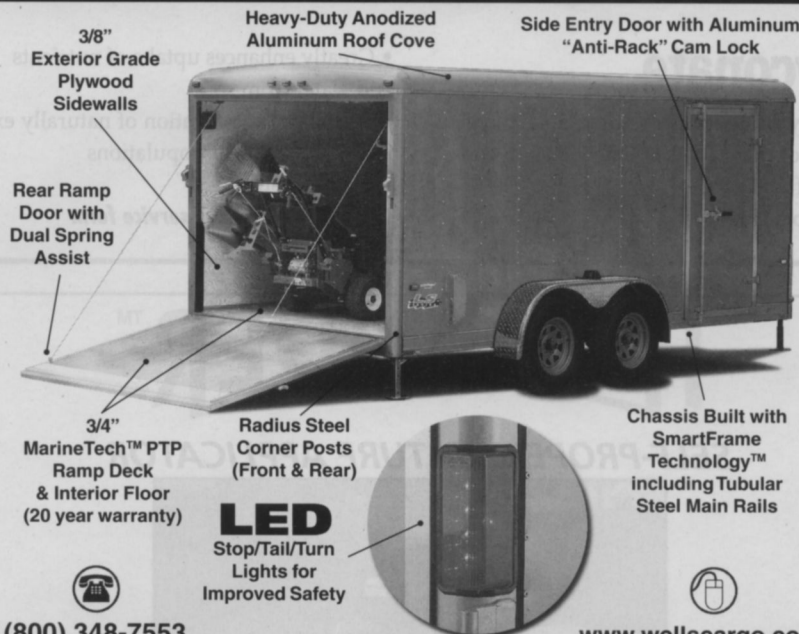
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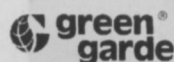
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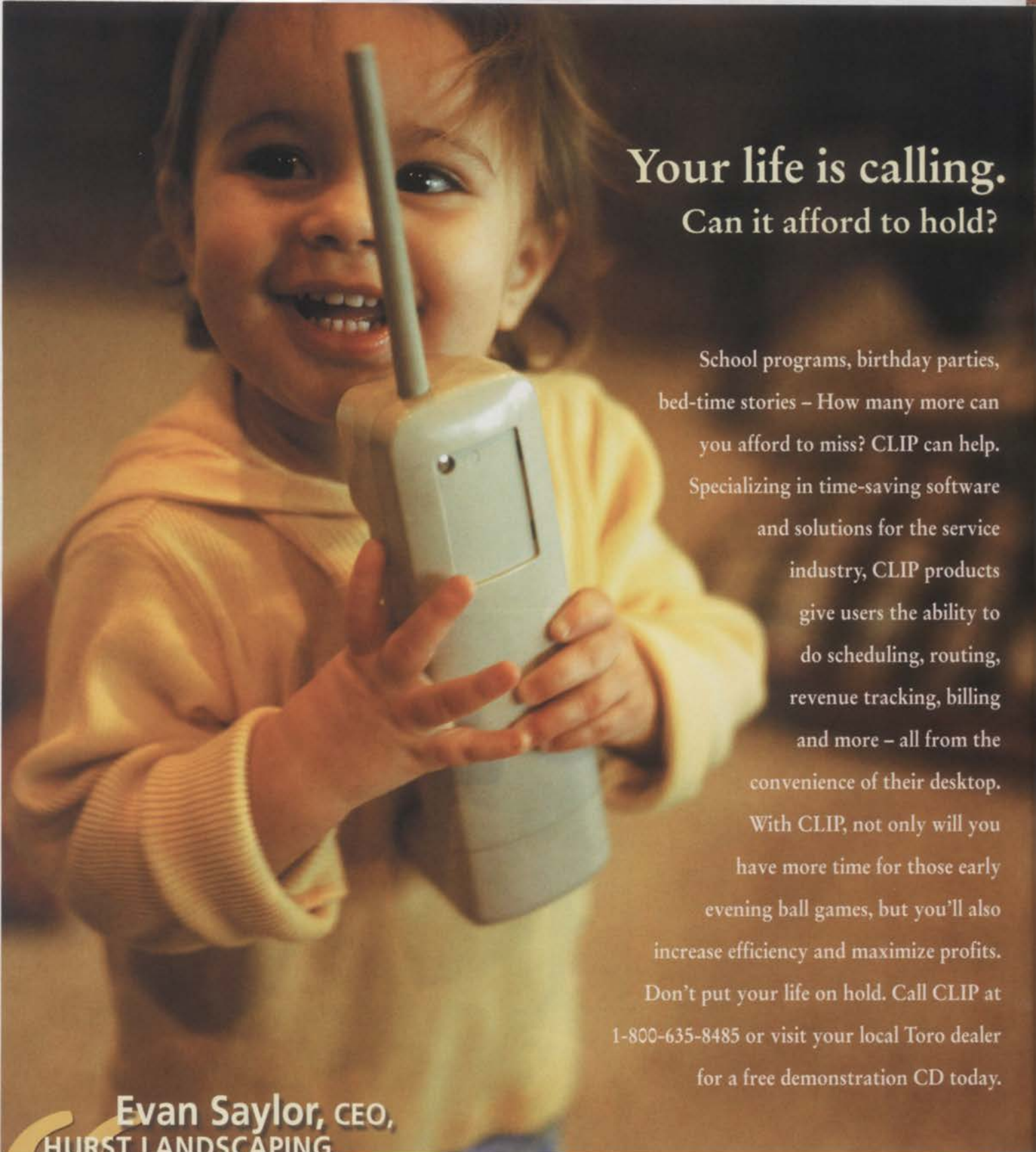
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*Software adds
facility and
functionality to
the landscape
planning process.*

*By Enloe
Wilson*



*Multiple software
components allow design/
build companies to toggle
between
CAD
blueprinting,
photorealistic
imagery and
immediate job
costing.*

Photo: Drafrix

If thought precedes substance, then a good plan precedes the execution of a good job. Design software manufacturers know that the well-charted approach saves design/build contractors time – and, therefore, money – and the latest iterations of their products are poised at making landscapers' jobs flow smoother, quicker and with maximum creative control.

Peter Lord, president of Kansas City, Mo.-based Drafrix Software, said manufacturers often begin the software design process with a mind on consumers' two most-asked questions: "How good is its imaging?" and "How easy is the product to use?"

EYE CANDY. Contractors want superior graphics, so software manufacturers focus on improving the visual capacity of their products, Lord said.

"There are lots of new graphic technologies out there now," he pointed out, mentioning the ability to enter a digital or scanned photo of a jobsite and then integrate it with new design components as perhaps the "latest, greatest" function of the current generation of software. Application design

companies are capitalizing on that photorealistic technology – which has quickly become standard – and are putting stock in improving this function, which enables a contractor to sell an increasingly real and tangible vision of a finished job.

Chris Walter, president, Cole's Creek Nursery, Liberty, Mo., has been a design software aficionado since "the early days" of 1983. Since that time, he agreed, the greatest area of software advancement has been imagery.

"It's where we make our sales," Walter suggested. "It's so real. I can walk onto a jobsite and see a client's property surrounded by dirt. I can capture that image and, in an instant, start to plug in the trees or shrubs of their choice." Clients are sold on the instantaneous and photorealistic view of their imagined landscapes, he said, adding that the capability to incorporate custom materials is an option which software providers are wise to develop.

In that direction, some design software and plant database packages boast an editable cache of nearly 10,000 plant species, providing graphic representations and important references to design/build data ranging from prime growth conditions to indigenous climate zones to seasonal features. Other packages include irrigation placement utilities and

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functions that visually approximate a locale's lighting at a determined geographical location and time of day to aid in plant and lighting component installation.

To complement that level of aesthetic planning, one of the latest graphic features of some packages include variable rendering modes that, with a few clicks of a mouse, enable a user to toggle between 2-dimensional photorealistic pictures of a landscape and assorted "hand-rendered" styles—line drawings or pastel and watercolor renderings.

"People [still often want] a more hand-drawn look," Lord explained, "and some designers have taken the [computer-aided design] drawings and added pastels and watercolors." Variable rendering modes alleviate the added work while allowing designers to prepare presentations that will appeal to clients' sense of the artistic even before the first hole is dug, he said.

BOLSTERING UTILITY. Eagle Point Software President Lonnie Fawver and Technical Consultant Will Haugen pointed out that for all the good provided by the artistic bells and whistles that adorn design software, those same extras can easily overwhelm and hinder users more than help them.

"[Contractors often argue], 'I can draw a plan faster than any computer can generate one,'" said Haugen. "That's probably true—

even [for a user who is] highly proficient with an application." But while the upfront swiftness and familiarity of old-fashioned designing holds some merit, there's a certain degree of professionalism and added value that goes along with the software-based approach, Fawver argued.

Haugen said that aside from challenges encountered in the initial planning stage, perhaps the real pressure of a contractor's job comes amid trying to reconcile unseen last-

ware providers are always improving integration of those components, Haugen said.

Other estimating features enable contractors to effectively add variables such as delivery, labor and taxables to determine pricing, as well as additional percentages to sustain a comfortable profit margin.

Still, newer extras that would add functionality to design software involve innovative new uses for existing technologies.

According to Lord, research is underway

"I know there are some jobs we wouldn't have gotten if we had just gone in with hand-drawn blue-prints." — Jeremy Eck.

minute changes to that plan with allotted time and budgetary constraints. The ripple effects of even a minor alteration might take days or weeks to chart with a hand-drawn plan—a 4-inch irrigation mainline instead of a 3-inch, for example. But the ease and virtual immediacy of changing variables in a design application more than justifies the time required to develop proficiency with the software, he held.

To increase utility, some features facilitate not only easier design, but costing. Quantity takeoff functions—either en suite or via links to a separate, compatible spreadsheet software—allow a user the means to quickly calculate the number of a given items or sub-assembly needed to complete a job (all necessary items for tree planting, for example).

Unit labels and quantities are flowed and reflowed in the software estimator based on changes made in the design stage, and soft-

toward employing Global Positioning System (GPS) technology—currently used by other industries to locate geographic points for routing, safety and wireless communication—for jobsite mapping. "A crewmember could stand in the corners of a plot and send those sets of coordinates," Lord illustrated. Satellite uplinks would plot those points, resulting in an instantaneously drawn map from which planning and design could go forth, he said.

Lord projected GPS use by landscape designers to be about two years away pending technological improvements. Such cutting-edge developments, though, suggest the high level of technical prowess landscape contractors are quickly rushing toward, he suggested. And providers of those technologies are scrambling to claim their place in the market.

EASE OF USE. Yet amid all the embellishments—current and future—Haugen stressed another point of primary importance: user friendliness. "Your software can do everything in the world, but if it's not easy to use, it can't do anything for you," he said. To facilitate the use of design software, manufacturers craft products for accessibility to both the experienced landscape architect and the new designer.

"To be honest, no one uses about 25 to 30 percent of CAD functions," Haugen said. "We're pretty much putting the focus on easy site planning with modular planting and installation. All you need to know are the



Colorful new rendering styles add life to 2-D CAD blueprints (above). The integration of actual property photos (far left) with computer-generated landscape designs (near left) offer clients and contractors alike the gift of foresight. Photos: Eagle Point (above), Drafrix (left)

basics of CAD, really." The rest, he said, is pretty much drag-and-drop.

Software companies also are supplying instructional videos and technical support via phone or e-mail as well as real-time training opportunities, Lord said.

INVESTMENT INSIGHTS. Though prices do fluctuate from year to year with new upgrades and extended features, the general price range for a professional landscape design software package lies between \$1,000 and \$3,000 based on features, said Ryan Sutton, Drafix director of sales and marketing. Contractors should be careful in selecting those packages that serve their specific needs, he added.

Jeremy Eck, president, Spruce It Up, Springfield, Ill., speculated that one of the greatest deterrents to contractors making the conversion from pen-and-ink drafting to electronic is cost, but he reminded that some software manufacturers offer package deals

and discounts to some purchasers based on their user profiles. A current landscape management student at Ozarks Technical Community College, Eck acquired his company's designware at a discounted price, he said.

To further curb costs, some applications are available in standard form with "lite" versions and periodic upgrades available at fractional costs. Other software is available in wholly customizable modular packages, with users able to piece together only those application components that they will need.

"Pick-and-choose" packages are handy for design/build companies that rely on one software feature but generally forego another, Haugen said. Eck, for example, reported that while he heavily uses his software's 2-D photorealistic image function to prepare presentations for clients, he generally still opts to hand-draw actual working blueprints. A more customizable selection of components may be a cost-effective future option, he said.

Still, contractors who've moved to soft-

ware-based design seem content in their return on investment. "I initially thought that the price of software just wasn't worth it," said Eck, who made the switch just last year. "But after using it, I can see that it's greatly grown my business." Clients, he said, seem to appreciate the professionalism of a contractor who is aware of technology and shows some prowess with it. That edge is difficult to put a price on.

Walter agrees. "When personal computers first came out, I was doing about \$250,000 in annual work," he said. "That increased to \$500,000 when I started using software to help in design. With advances in technology, I'm now easily at \$1 million. If I can double, then quadruple my sales like that, I'd be happy to invest a good \$50,000 in software a year, let alone \$1,300." **LL**

The author is Associate Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at ewilson@lawnandlandscape.com.

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Contractors find software applications are reliable friends in setting job price tags.

by Enloe Wilson



Ask any contractor: Pricing a job is not exactly the most gratifying part of the business. Chances are few people equate the thrill of setting in place a living, thriving greenscape with the drudgery of calculating sub-assemblies, taxables and overhead. Still, the estimating step is necessary, truly being the stage at which one makes or breaks the profitability of a contract.

Luckily, where contractors once spent hours upon hours manually placing a value on each element of a job, software now exists to aid in the process, and each new generation of these applications brings heightened ease to the estimator's task.

HOW WELL DOES IT KNOW YOU? For years, estimators made due with a generic software applications to aid in the estimating process. Spreadsheets, run-of-the-mill word processors and any number of accounting packages managed everything from invoices to financial formulas. Yet albeit sufficient, few users considered the options ideal, offering little in the way of industry-specific support or integration from one set of information to the next. Green industry-specific software presented a solution.

Todd Coleman, controller, Bonick Landscaping, Dallas, Texas, said his company has utilized industry-specific estimat-

ing software for about 10 years, opting against the "generic method," because of a need for added functionality.

He cited the popular sub-assembly function, which enables the calculation of grouped costs at a keystroke, as one of the key features that sold him on his current software package. "We've predetermined what labor, parts, time, unit quantities and margins are necessary for many given jobs, and sub-assemblies help to rid the repetition of entering those fields over and over," Coleman said.

William Akehurst, vice president, Akehurst Landscape Service, Joppa, Md., mentioned another favorite. "A major plus is the ability to utilize downloadable vendor information and integrate it into [our software database] for immediate pricing upgrade and inventory information."

Akehurst recalled the dark days of logging supplier unit prices by hand. The whole affair greatly slowed the bidding process, he said – a crippling handicap in the cut-throat race to secure a job. Now, with software that can accommodate an electronic download of the latest vendor pricing and parts availability – updated yearly, monthly, even weekly in some cases – bidding time has decreased to minutes, and in real-time, on-the-spot inventory logging allows estimates to be made on-site without a trip to the office.

With such functions, industry-specific estimating software offers a familiarity with the contracting business that users find invaluable, said Nannette Fohs, vice president, Include Software, Glen Burnie, Md. She mentioned other features – like compatibility with design programs for instant costing, and relevant job calculation variables, like yard square footage and ground slope – that bring added value to some applications.

One of the more curious new software features, "hidden" item functions, enable users to calculate and re-distribute the cost of some job components that a potential client might question. Dave Tucker, president, Clip Software, Ijamsville, Md., pointed out, "If you have certain travel expenses, or a particularly difficult customer, for instance, the hidden function allows you to take those added costs and redistribute them

Good with NUMBERS



Check Online Extras for helpful tips on selecting estimating software.

evenly among other factors like man-hours without the client knowing."

Always on the minds of competitive software designers, these pricing features vie for contractors' attention by delivering state-of-the-art pricing control.

While cutting-edge new functions are pointed at delivering maximum estimating control, other operations are geared toward aiding the entire job cycle, Tucker said, explaining that all the phases go hand-in-hand.

"Too often, initial estimating is done and no efficiencies are set and monitored," Tucker suggested. "But the most important part of pricing a job is checking afterwards to see if you've done what you thought you were going to do." To that end, a good estimating application should actually follow a contractor throughout the circular job process, from initial pricing, through the proposal stage, job ordering, invoicing, post-job cost recap-ping and back to initial estimating for the next job, he held.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW IT?

Paul Jackson, president, Alocet, Toronto, suggested that equally important to the familiarity software has with the nuances of a user's business is the familiarity a user has with the software. Under that notion, he mentioned prospective buyers might consider not totally abandoning their trusty, old generic accounting applications, but simply adding components to them to personalize their use.

Some manufacturers offer add-on modules with features relevant to landscape contractors. Because they work in conjunction with existing software, Jackson said the corollary modules enable users to benefit from industry-specific features while maintaining familiarity – and therefore efficiencies – with older applications.

"The problem is the old accounting systems are often incompatible with the newer, industry-specific software," Jackson said. This glitch means added time and headaches updating data in both programs to match one another. Modular add-ons to existing ac-

counting software can enable users to immediately flow existing information from one operation to the next, he said.

As with any purchase, Jackson stressed the need for product research, mentioning that a company should ultimately use the solution that feels most comfortable.

With a litany of tutorials, classes and technical supports, manufacturers are ensuring that users don't have to be technological geniuses to benefit from their products, "but [contractors] do have to understand business principles and what software can offer to fulfill them," Fohs said. "In the end, [they] have to bend software to their company's structure, not the other way around." **LL**

The author is Associate Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at ewilson@lawnandlandscape.com.

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By Enloe
Wilson

So maybe the average contractor is no Ansel Adams, but increasing numbers of design/build landscape contractors are finding that digital cameras are indispensable tools in trumpeting and improving their services to new and existing clients.

Since the first commercial digital camera surfaced in 1991 to the tune of \$20,000, according to the Consumer Electronics Association, the latest breed of digital camera arrives at a significantly friendlier cost and with lots more bells and whistles. And while some contractors are a little shy to jump on the digital bandwagon, others couldn't be more thrilled to point and shoot.

DIVERSE USES. "We went to digital cameras about two years ago, and it's been great," said Terry Wallace, chief executive officer and marketing director, Wallace Landscape Associates, Kennett Square, Pa. "The convenience of filmless imagery has helped so much with time and money saved not having to constantly drive to drop off film for developing, for example."

Wallace's company, which operates with two cameras, divides their use between initial jobsite photos and later snapshots of ongoing work.

The former serves to ease the estimating and planning of a project, Wallace explained. "When surveyors go out and measure and inspect a grounds for the first time, they'll snap photos that designers will later refer to for things like landscape specifications."

The latter offers a graphical detail of the landscaping process for later maintenance reference and a source for portfolio pieces for selling new jobs.

The mix works well, shared Wallace, with crisp, colorful photos availing personnel a new tool to sell the company's professionalism. And given their broad uses, conveniences and minimal instruction requirements, digital cameras are well worth the investment, she said.

"They are simple to use," agreed Stephen Corrigan, president, Mountain View Landscapes, Chicopee, Mass., adding that the new software available to treat photos for a number of purposes helps improve a digital camera's cost-effectiveness. Corrigan, who also employs digital cameras both to estimate and chronicle ongoing work for reference and marketing purposes, uses his company's photos to prepare electronic slideshows for prospective clients. In addition to being a cost-effective and aesthetically appealing way to display work and complement printed materials, the use of the new technology bolsters the company's image, he suggested, setting them somewhat apart from competition in the minds of prospective clients.

Digital cameras are also handy in retaining happy clients after the sale. Commercial enhancement specialist Perco, New Haven, Conn., has counted digital cameras among the most used tools in its maintenance arsenal for about 18 months, said President Paul Perotti. The technology, remarkably helpful in client retention, offers a number of superior benefits to past measures, he said.

With administration and work crews housed in separate locations, "we started using digital cameras initially as a means to communicate better about existing jobs," he reported. "Often, there needs to be constant communication between a foreman and account manager, and sometimes it would take quite a while to have messages relayed between the two."

In the past, Perco employed hand-drawn or reproduced blueprint laminates of job sites that were exchanged via mail, Perotti said. That traditional strategy, while it worked fairly well, had its drawbacks — mailing, and then awaiting a response in hopes of not having to mail further correspondence, for example.

"Now, if there is a problem at a property such as a nutrient deficiency," he communicated, "the foreman can take a





As technology progresses, landscape contractors are increasingly relying on digital imagery to document their work for both functional and artistic purposes. Photo: Landscape Techniques

other ways, Perotti said. Personnel no longer have to contend with poorly rendered or ill-interpreted drawings, he explained, so quick understanding and input is easier to come by. What's more, a photo enables crews to bypass communication glitches between English- and Spanish-speaking workers.

Perotti added that although the latest dip in the economy sees Perco utilizing its digital imagery technology most prominently to push retention of current clients through maintenance and enhancement, his company does make some use of the cameras for other purposes—including some fun ways to simultaneously boost corporate image and morale.

"We like to use photos on our Web site and for our scrapbook," Perotti said. "We started a quarterly photo contest to see who can come up with the best picture—we give out a \$100 prize—and some of the results have been great."

By using employee-snapped images on its Web site, Perco produces friendly competition while reserving the services of their more expensive professional photographer for larger bids and presentational projects.

Perotti said another use for digital cameras is displaying electronic photos of good and bad work during training sessions—and new uses are always surfacing. "This year," he mentioned, "we'll implement feedback reports to clients with 'before-and-after' shots of job sites to show the progress we've made." The graphic reports, which will be e-mailed to clients, will allow a more contrasting glance at the results of work than real-time, and will be accompanied with written or drawn future enhancement suggestions.

ON TECHNOLOGY. As developments progress, new iterations of digital cameras are appearing more affordable, adorned with more attractive features and increasingly user-friendly. A veteran user of the digital camera, having stocked them among his cache since 1996, Corrigan predicted such new developments will win over more landscape contractors. He advised new buyers to be aware of the functions and features they'll most need from a camera.

One major point: "Make sure your camera has a large-enough memory," he advised. "Our first camera could hold only 12 to 20 photos at a time. To clear space, you'd have to download them or completely delete them and start over." A newer camera owned by Mountain View Landscapes holds up to 80 pictures or 15 seconds of video—also useful for presentation purposes, he said.

Other frills new buyers might look for to maximize their camera's use include high image resolution, digital zoom, a rechargeable power source and broad software compatibility, added Perotti.

Just over a decade after its release in the commercial market, the digital camera has transformed from the one-trick toy of the discriminating—not to mention well-heeled—photo elite to a broad-based and versatile tool of the increasingly techno-savvy public. And, as with the Palm Pilot, members of the green industry are among those welcoming its use—gradually, yet certainly, and with satisfying results. **LL**

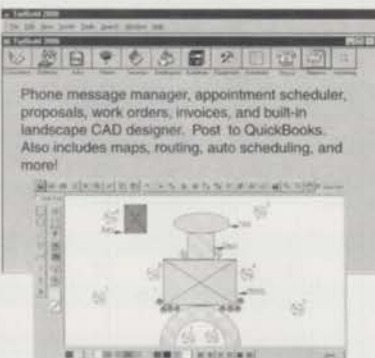
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Alocet	LM Software	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Alocet	QXpress	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Arbor Computer Systems	Arbor Office	X	X				X	X	X	X		X	X
ArborSoftWorx	ArborSoftWorx	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
CTI	GPS Vehicle Tracker									X	X		
CLIP - Sensible Software	CLIP Lite	X	X	X				X	X	X		X	
CLIP - Sensible Software	QuickCLIP	X	X	X				X	X	X		X	
CLIP - Sensible Software	Visual CLIP Classic	X	X	X				X	X	X		X	
CLIP - Sensible Software	Visual CLIP Pro	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	X
CLIP - Sensible Software	BidRight	X	X	X	X			X					
CompuScapes	CompuScapes	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	
DataScapes LLC	DataScope				X		X						
Design Imaging Group	DesignWare	X			X		X	X					
Ditech Software	Gopher 2003 - Billing & Scheduling Software	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Drafix Software	PRO Landscape			X	X	X	X	X					
Eagle Point	LANDCADD			X	X	X	X						
FMC Specialty Products	SmartBiz TM	X							X	X			X
Garden Graphics	DynaSCAPE	X	X	X	X	X		X					
Garden Graphics	Iris	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X
Hunter Industries	Irrigation Design Tools CD			X		X							
Hunter Industries	Irrigation System Design Calculator			X		X							
Include Software	Asset	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	X
LandPro Systems	LandPro Systems	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			
Locarta Technologies	Locarta 2020	X	X	X	X						X		
Marathon Data Systems	RoutePoint	X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X
Nemetschek North America	VentorWorks LANDMARK				X	X							
Performance Software Technologies	Route Rite Legend Software	X	X	X				X	X	X	X		
Phoenix Solutions	Service Tracking System	X		X	X				X	X			X
Phoenix Solutions	Versys	X		X	X			X	X	X		X	X
Phoenix Solutions	Pro-Quotes	X		X	X			X					X
Phoenix Solutions	Human Resource System	X		X	X								X
Phoenix Solutions	Project Manager	X		X	X							X	X
Paser Systems	Phototrek	X	X	X	X		X						X
Practical Solutions	The Service Solution	X		X	X			X	X	X		X	
Quest Solutions	Quest Earthwork			X	X			X				X	
RND Signs	LawnLore Software	X		X									
Real Green Systems	Lawn & Pest Assistant III	X	X	X				X	X	X			X
SLICE Technologies	SLICEplus	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Soft 3D	Soft 3D Plan				X	X	X	X	X			X	
Software Republic	RainCAD 7.5			X	X	X		X					
Software Republic	EcoCAD 5.0		X		X	X		X					
Software Republic	RainCAD Suite 7.5		X	X	X	X		X					
Software Republic	Photoscapes 1.0		X		X		X						
Software Republic	Irricalc 3.0			X	X								
Tree Management Systems	TurfGold Software	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X
UDS Green Industry Software	Active Applications		X		X			X	X			X	X
Vanguard Computer Systems	Camelot Software		X					X	X	X	X		
Vanderkooi & Associates	MORS Budgeting System	X	X	X	X			X		X	X		
Vista Professional	Night Vision				X		X						
Visual Impact Imaging	Earthscapes		X	X	X	X	X	X				X	
WiredTime.com	WiredTime Express	X	X	X	X				X		X	X	X
WiredTime.com	ScanTracor	X	X	X	X						X		X

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X	X	X	Windows 95, 98, 2000, ME, XP	Links to QuickBooks	877/529-6659	www.alocet.com
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X	X		Windows 95 or higher	Links to QuickBooks, Peachtree, Great Plains	800/635-8485	www.clip.com
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			Windows		800/678-6565	www.eaglepoint.com
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			Windows	Automatically calculates irrigation system design capacity, working pressure	800/733-2823	www.hunterindustries.com
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			Windows	Shows user how a landscape will look with Vista low-voltage lighting	800/766-8478	www.vistapro.com
			Windows 98, 2000, ME, NT, XP	Includes plant and hardscape library, plant care and selector, and training CD	330/665-9080	www.visualimpactimaging.com
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			Windows	Wireless equipment tracking	519/570-3225	www.wiredtime.com

HOW WE DO IT

CD-ROM PRESENTATIONS

at Paseo Stoneworks

Three years ago we wanted to differentiate ourselves from our competitors. A major part of our new approach entailed developing a cost-effective, cutting-edge presentation collateral. We came up with the idea of a CD-ROM slideshow presentation.

Having considered a traditional Web site, we decided that while more than 99 percent of our target market has computer access, their overall numbers were too small to render the measure cost-effective. We recognized the CD-ROM approach offered the same benefits of a boundless electronic reach while being less expensive to produce and maintain, and better suited to highly targeted – and therefore more efficient – distribution. Other advantages were varied:

- We could hand the CD-ROM out to potential clients at meetings and other networking opportunities.
- Leaving the CD-ROM with prospective clients would enable them to revisit information at their leisure and permit decision-makers to review our material.
- Existing clients' projects could circulate widely via the CD-ROM, bolstering both the customer's pride and interest from other potential clients.

Once we decided to go with the idea, we tackled logistics, gathering a self-extracting slide show application (alleviating clients' needs to have similar applications present on their own computers), a writable CD, a CD burner, a CD labeling kit, quality packaging envelopes, a digital camera (we could also use a high-quality scanner) and an extensive job photo portfolio.

We strung together seven specialized successions of photos – for pavers, patios, steps, retaining walls, raised patios, driveways

and "before-and-after" shots. And to drive home the necessary "wow" factor of our presentation, we added background music.

Finally, we included our company logo and phone number on each slide and set them for viewing increments of approximately four seconds, which we learned was the necessary time to feed a viewer's recall memory.


Costs for the project are minimal, with the greatest expenses being a digital camera and CD burner. Fortunately, we already owned both, but grades of each now start at less than \$100. A camera is recommended over a scanner because many variables involved in scanning photographs can negatively effect the quality of an image. For a self-extracting slideshow, we use software available online for less than \$20. A 10-pack of writable CDs costs a nominal \$10, and a labeling kit retails for about \$20.

The project lends numerous opportunities to really "jazz up" a company's profile. Aside from the slideshow itself, CDs are now available in many different shapes, and a CD labeling kit allows us to print whatever attractive graphics we want on our label.

A quality CD envelope, available in all types of materials and sizes, completes the package. We use protective Tyvek ones with windows, allowing clients to view the label.

We consider the CD-ROM an ever-evolving work in progress, painlessly updating it once a year during winter months. Currently on version 3.0, our third year, I look back at the original version and see how far we already have progressed.

Clients whose projects make the disc for the first time receive one in the mail, and we steer the presentations in the direction we want the company to grow. If we want to do more raised patios, for example, we really feature and highlight those jobs in our presentation. We have found we really do sell what we show.

In all, after the initial material purchases, we can copy, envelope and pass on our own digital presentation at any given time for under \$1 per unit – and the time to copy a CD-ROM is all of about 2½ minutes. The tool has been instrumental in helping us conquer our initial goal – setting ourselves apart from the competition. – *Rex Mann* 

The author is special projects manager, Paseo Stoneworks & Design, Flagstaff, Ariz., and can be contacted at 928/774-6949.

CD-ROM SALES PRESENTATION TIPS

1. Use the CD-ROM as a joint business card/portfolio. Its technical merit will impress potential clients and set you apart from competitors.
2. Show off clients' jobs in the CD-ROM presentation and furnish each with a copy. They often will recirculate it, increasing your visibility and theirs.
3. Include your logo and contact information on each slide.
4. Create several specialized slideshows to highlight specific services.
5. Take full advantage of music, catchy graphics and new technologies to maximize impact.

A Picture Is Worth...

How much do idle crews cost you?



"Boss, we have a problem..."

Tell your crew to...

Point-Click-Send

"Roger, that. Group them here..."

Mark right on the screen...

Review-Write-Send Back



1. Point at what you question
2. Click to take a photo
3. Send via wireless module

1. Review remote site in color
2. Write instructions on photo
3. Send back to crew

Get idle crews back to work in minutes—even when you're miles away.

PHOTOTREK™ wireless imaging lets you view multiple sites at once!

No more lost hours as crews wait while you drive...and the clock keeps ticking.

No more costly overruns.

No more guesswork via phone as you try to "picture in your mind" what a crew member is trying to explain.

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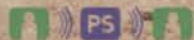
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Mobile Staff Solutions That Pay™

USE READER SERVICE #407

BEFORE QXPRESS

Your crews do an additional job for a customer. They write a note about it on the back of their work sheet. You don't look there. Looks like this one is FREE.



There was another post-it note here. It fell off the board, stuck to Jimmy's shoe and is now outside in the mud...No aeration for Mr. Jones.

Mrs. Smith has complained 3 times about her grass being cut too short. Tomorrow she will complain again. Did anybody read the 'Complaints' section?

Your crews leave for the day without checking the 'Rescheduled' folder. Oops, Maybe tomorrow.

AFTER QXPRESS



designed for
QuickBooks® 
See system requirements for version information

▶ MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE DESIGNED FOR QUICKBOOKS.

QXpress is management software specifically designed to work with QuickBooks®. QXpress gives QuickBooks users a complete management system by adding **scheduling, job costing and batch invoicing** capabilities to their existing accounting software.

QXpress and QuickBooks share the same database. This means that the first time you open QXpress, your customers, employees, items and classes are already entered for you - **there is no data entry required**. Therefore, QXpress can be completely set-up to manage your company in a matter of hours.

QXpress' integration with QuickBooks also **eliminates double-entry** of information. When you enter new customers, invoices or job cost information into QXpress, the same information is automatically updated in QuickBooks.

QXpress will provide your company with the added automation and organization that you need to be more efficient and, therefore, more profitable. By creating your daily work lists, providing you with better profitability analysis tools and reducing invoicing time by up to 80%, QXpress is a must-have for companies interested in improving their bottom-line.

Organize. Don't agonize. Get QXpress today!

For more information visit www.qxpress.com or call 1.877.529.6659.

SnowEx Receiver Mount

- New receiver mount for SnowEx's 1075 Pivot Pro tailgate spreader
- Provides a quick, easy-to-use attachment option
- Designed to mount on a class III receiver hitch
- Bolts onto bumper, requiring no holes to be drilled into truck bed or tailgate
- Reduces wear and tear on the receiving vehicle
- Two pins positioned on each side of the receiver mount for spreader stability
- Tailgate spreader can hold up to 10.75 cubic feet of material

Circle 222 on reader service form

WeatherMiser Rain Sensor Device

- Detects an increase in relative humidity, which typically precedes a rainfall
- Attaches to the irrigation controller to keep it from turning on the sprinklers until the humidity drops back below the trigger level
- Employs a temperature sensor, which works with the humidity sensor to disengage the sprinklers when the dew point or near-freezing temperatures are reached

Circle 223 on reader service form

Wright Walk-behind/Sulky Mower

- New Velke Mower can be operated as a walk-behind for tight spaces or paired with Velke Pro-1 or X-2 sulkies
- Engineered to use company's Grass Gobbler, Grass Gobbler Turbo 10 and Leaf Gobbler catchers
- Easy-to-operate control handles
- 36-inch and 48-inch decks

Circle 224 on reader service form



PowerTrac Power Dumper Attachment

- Connects to tractor for easy transportation of materials to job sites
- Contains mounting brackets to store buckets while moving trailer
- Features release bar and manual release lever for easy unloading

Circle 225 on reader service form



Sno-Way Skid-Steer Plow

- Predator straight-blade plow designed for skid-steer loaders
- Available for a variety of small (with 50 hp or less) and large (with 110 hp) skid-steer loaders
- Plow widths from 6 to 10 feet
- Blade height up to 32 inches
- High-strength steel components
- Lexan or steel moldboards are replaceable and interchangeable
- Equipped with robust, control-released springs for safe blade-tripping action
- Flex-force frame design

Circle 226 on reader service form

Copper Tiki Pathlight

- Low-voltage landscape lighting
- Unique design is hand spun from heavy gauge copper
- Individually crafted with clean lines
- Underside is coated white for superior reflection
- For use with: Bi-Pin, 10-, 20- or 35-watt bulbs
- Solid copper stem with super stake and connector included
- Lifetime warranty

Circle 227 on reader service form

ArborGold Software 11.0

- Manages customers from initial phone call to creating a proposal, scheduling, invoicing and receiving payments
- Features phone-messaging center and appointment scheduler
- Includes built-in landscape CAD designer
- New e-mail features allow communication instantly with all customers
- Optional QuickBooks posting
- 100-percent synchronizable database version for laptops and handheld PCs
- Includes basics of auto-scheduling, routing and mapping with MapPoint
- Includes features for job costing and chemical usage reports

Circle 228 on reader service form



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AM Leonard	www.amleo.com	74	57	Power Equipment Parts	www.oregonoeq.com	97	
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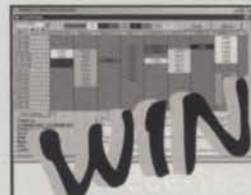
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Cover Story

(continued from page 56)

In addition, Thursday morning mandatory safety meetings provide quick tidbits on topics, such as proper lifting techniques, appropriate clothing for hot days, trailer safety, etc. The company's safety manager, who is also the operations manager of the landscape installation division, runs the sessions. Employees who don't attend are given warnings. "Most employees make sure to attend—they don't want to get hurt either and know safety is a priority for us," Brown explained.

While encouraging employees to attend safety meetings may take a few tries, only one warning is given in the field. After that, employees who don't respect safety rules don't last very long with the company. All employees, whether they are foremen or crew members, have the power to stop a job in the field if it's not being performed safely. "This type of work isn't worth getting hurt over," Brown said.

Once Lawns of Dallas recruits and trains employees, keeping them around becomes important. In addition to honoring two employees monthly with Employee of the Month awards, where they receive a certificate and cash gift of \$50, the company holds a monthly birthday celebration at the end of each training meeting to honor those employees who've had birthdays with a group cake.

When reflecting on employee relations, Brown said one of the company's strengths is that it employs many diverse personalities. However, he learned quickly that pushing everyone to have the same goals and strengths isn't always the best motivational solution. "My old management philosophy was to figure out how to strengthen people and rid them of their weaknesses," he said. "What I've found is it's easier to manage people toward their strengths and figure out ways to get around their weaknesses."

"In the future one of my goals is to have opportunities for the employees to have a percentage of ownership in the company or one day to even buy me out," Smellage added. "The highest compliment to me would be if the people who helped build this company would one day still have the passion to continue it without me."

The author is Managing Editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at nwisnews@lawnandlandscape.com.

Client Relationships

(continued from page 114)

a supervisor or foreman should check each staff member's work daily.

✓ Develop profiles of clients' likes and dislikes. Field staff can then use these profiles to ensure that jobs are more likely to meet or exceed clients' expectations.

Customer Turnover/Loss. Do everything possible to hold onto clients. Don't wait until it's too late to respond and the damage is done. Reducing customer "churn" is worth every cent. Try these solutions:

✓ Implement a quality control program to strengthen the client/company bond and help to reduce dissatisfaction.

✓ Personal contacts are a must when customers indicate the desire to cancel. Contact these clients immediately to ascertain what went wrong and what, if anything, can be done to reverse their decision.

✓ If best efforts to save the customer fail, send them an apology and a follow-up appeal by mail, signed by the owner. Try to include a personalized, "we want you back" message. Keep their contact information in a database and try to resell them later in the season and again next year.

Average Days to Collect Payments. Late payments often indicate either a lack of communication about payment terms or a dissatisfied customer. Contractors should look at how and when they explain their terms. Then, they should review how all of their other relationship-building systems are working. As a rule, satisfied customers who understand the terms will pay on time.

Though some of these benchmarks and processes may seem obvious, they can have a profoundly positive affect on client relationships when all of them are implemented. The more contractors keep in touch, the stronger their client relationships will be. And the stronger the relationships, the better the bottom line. **LL**

The author is president, Focal Point Communications, Cincinnati, Ohio, and can be reached at 800/525-6999 or mshooner@growpro.com.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part series on improving client relationships. In part two, the author will highlight how to encourage employees to buy-in to the benchmarks owners set and how landscape contractors can incorporate their new relationship-building goals into their marketing plans.

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Career Fairs at Wood River Evergreens

Atracting talented, diverse and dedicated employees to Wood River Evergreens (WRE) is key to supporting our company's vision for growth. One successful recruiting tool we use is the "WRE Job Fair."

Creating an on-site job fair takes a bit of energy and coordination, but the advantages are many. In brief, here's how we do it:

Set Objectives and Develop a Plan. The objective of the WRE Job Fair is to open the doors of our company to the local community. The other managers and I develop a plan for the event, which involves coordinating em-

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Check the Online Extras part of our Web site for more ideas about running a job fair.

ployee schedules to determine the best day and time for the fair (usually on a Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.) and organizing work crews to spruce up our 4-acre, three-building property.

The fair is a great motivator to clean offices, equipment, vehicles and grounds, and because we hold the event in February, we all get to enjoy a freshly organized workplace at the beginning of a new season.

Promote the Fair. We promote the WRE Job Fair in classifieds and display advertisements in local newspapers. The ads position the job fair as an opportunity for visitors to tour our site, meet the WRE team and obtain information about our company. We prominently display the date, time and location of the event along with our phone number in bold type. Promoting the fact that we have refreshments also implies a casual, "no pressure" atmosphere.

We advertise the same message with fliers in retail stores and the agricultural department of the University

of Rhode Island. We also post the event on the state Department of Labor and Training Web site, a free service, and encourage each employee to bring one other person to our event.

Organize the Content. To support the Job Fair's objective of "opening our doors," we assign our division managers and some of their staff to oversee workstations that become part of a company tour. Workstations include our landscape design, construction, maintenance, carpentry, nursery and administrative divisions.

The primary benefit of the tour is the opportunity for visitors and employees to interact in a casual, friendly environment. Visitors can ask questions about jobs they are interested in, and our staff asks the visitors questions to assess personalities and work experience. Visitors also learn about all our products and services as well as our brand message via folders containing company brochures and other information.

Assess the Results. After the job fair, we assess resumes and work histories, selecting the best candidates for open positions. We carefully match each prospect's qualifications to the detailed job descriptions we developed.

By asking attendees where they read about the Job Fair, we determine which advertisement generated the highest number of turnouts, and we also determine which activities worked logistically and which didn't. Issues we look at here include the range of available information, questions asked that we couldn't answer and the flow of visitor traffic.

Schedule Interviews. The managers schedule interviews with key candidates days after the job fair. During this meeting, managers outline pay scales and benefits relative to specific job positions. We keep resumes and work histories of candidates that we don't hire on file for future use.

Our total investment each year runs just over \$1,200, including media (\$600 for a 2-column-by-4-inch display ad for four days in three local newspapers), labor (roughly \$400-\$500 paid for Saturday time-and-a-half work, although most staffers volunteer their time), information folders (about \$75 for 30), fliers and refreshments.

We typically average 25 to 30 attendees and add eight to 10 qualified resumes to our files. — Linda Martel

The author is marketing director for Wood River Evergreens, Hope Valley, R.I., and can be reached at 800/967-8733.

5 Job Fair Tips

1. Plan around employee schedules to maximize fair help and attendance.
2. If held on site, make sure the property is clean and organized.
3. Take advantage of local media to announce the event. Be sure to assess which media outlets are most efficient.
4. Compose a team to organize fair information and activities.
5. Schedule interviews quickly after the fair, and keep a file of possible future hires.

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