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INSIDE>>

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A Commercial
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Cover image: Mark Byrne

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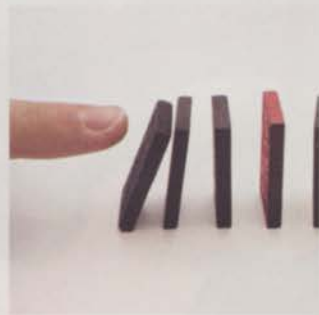
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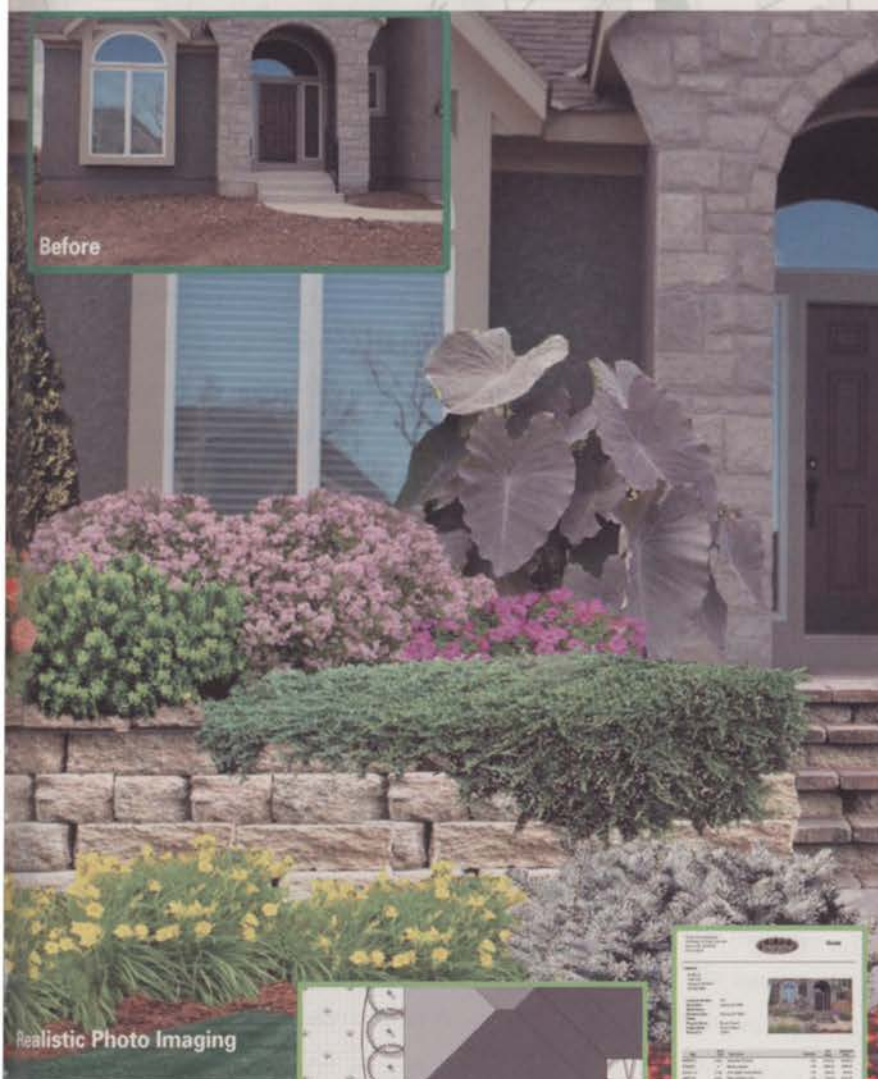
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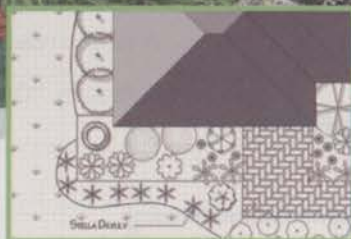


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PODCAST



Have you checked out *Lawn & Landscape's* podcasts yet? Click on the "podcast button on our Web site and check out the newest audio arrivals.

★ In 2002, Johnette Taylor, president of Roundtree Landscaping in Dallas, helped launch a professional landscaping contest at the Texas State Fair by promoting the idea to members of the Texas Nursery & Landscape Association. (Read more about Taylor on page 42). Eight companies participated the first year; today, more than 50 contractors take advantage of the opportunity to expose their work to more than

3 million attendees who visit the fair over a three-week period. Now, many companies even maintain their beds year-round. Listen to the podcast to hear Taylor talk about how the State Fair Fall Garden Exhibition got underway and the unique way she and other contractors install and maintain their beds.

★ After you read the results of our business technology survey on page 72, hear about a business technology strategy in a contractor's own words. Sal Mortilla, president of Landscaping Unlimited in Long Island, N.Y., talks about the components to a successful landscape Web site.

WHAT WORKS FOR YOU?

April is here. Do you have your accounts lined up? For those who haven't yet met their sales goals, what last-minute sales and marketing advice can you offer? Visit our Message Board and let us know what works for you.

ONLINE EXTRA

LOW-BALLING DOESN'T PAY

After you read this month's Best of the Web story, "Out Foxing the Fox," on page

112, get more insight on the issue by reading "Low-Pricing Woes," located at the bottom of the *Lawn & Landscape* homepage under the image of this month's magazine cover. Check out the other online extras in that section for a treasure trove of business-boosting information.

The busy season has arrived! Don't miss Industry Buzz April 16 when Brickman CEO Scott Brickman shares must-read marketing tips to help drive new business. Start off the season right; get the Buzz going!

For more business-building advice, plus updates on labor, emissions, water and other issues, check out Industry Buzz each Monday at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

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Tom Emerson, Professional Landscaper



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So give your John Deere dealer a call. You'll see making the switch is way easier than you think. I know I did.



JOHN DEERE

cindy code | editorial director



Be Positive About Your Industry

The 2008 national elections are still 19 months away, yet everywhere we turn – radio, TV, newspaper – the elections are being covered as if we're voting tomorrow.

Yes, the days, weeks and months go by quicker than we'd like and we'll soon be voting for the next U.S. president, along with other congressional representatives. Don't worry, this is not a political column. I'm not going to advocate for any particular party or candidate.

What I'm suggesting – if you're searching for ideas (as is often the case in a can't win candidate choice) – is that you consider our industry, the environment and the benefits our products and services mean to consumers, property managers and landscapes nationwide.

The benefits of our industry – including the products we use daily and often take for granted – are in jeopardy depending on who is voted into office. You think the last eight years were challenging? The next four plus years can make the last two terms look painless.

Most media coverage of product use in our industry has been focused at the national level; yet, it's local and state issues that each and every one of us needs to focus on. We have a number of well-qualified industry representatives at the national level who are scrutinizing bills and issues that might negatively influence our right to do business.

However, it's not so clear-cut at the state and local level. The number and complexity of issues is magnified the further away from Washington they get quite simply because the number of municipalities across the nation create numerous opportunities to slip in superfluous legislation. The odds-on-bet is that in today's tremendously busy society, no one will notice harmful edicts until it's too late.

In case you don't think this column is for you, think again. Each and every one of us needs to be concerned about what may happen in the next two to six years. But why wait? Let's unite, form a grass-roots team to work collaboratively to combat any damaging legislation designed to mitigate our business privileges.

Whether the issues relate to pesticides, water usage, plant installations, emissions issues and so on, each and every one of us can and need to make a difference.

How can you get involved? Be aware, be prepared to act, make it personal, be professional and tell your story. This is the message that Stacey Pine, grassroots manager for the Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment, promotes at national and regional meetings. Her message recommends that we:

- Follow stories in the local paper or on radio about policy proposals or activist activity related to pesticide and fertilizer use. Know what's going on in the communities where you live and work. Local politics move quickly so it's important to stay up to date.
- Remember to vote and to show up for local government meetings. Your personal involvement is essential to the political process, especially at the grassroots level where you have the most power to impact politics.
- Engage competitors, family and friends to help challenge false or misleading claims about products made in public forums or in the media.
- Become known to community leaders and policy makers as a business operator and citizen. It's not so easy to policy makers to needlessly ban products when they know and trust the people using and depending on them.
- And, perhaps most importantly, commit to keeping current in your profession, especially about innovations in the tools and practices you use.

Let us know what concerns are cropping up in the cities in which you conduct business. In many cases, we represent many spectrums of the landscape industry, but when it comes down to our right to conduct business, we're all on the same team. **LL**

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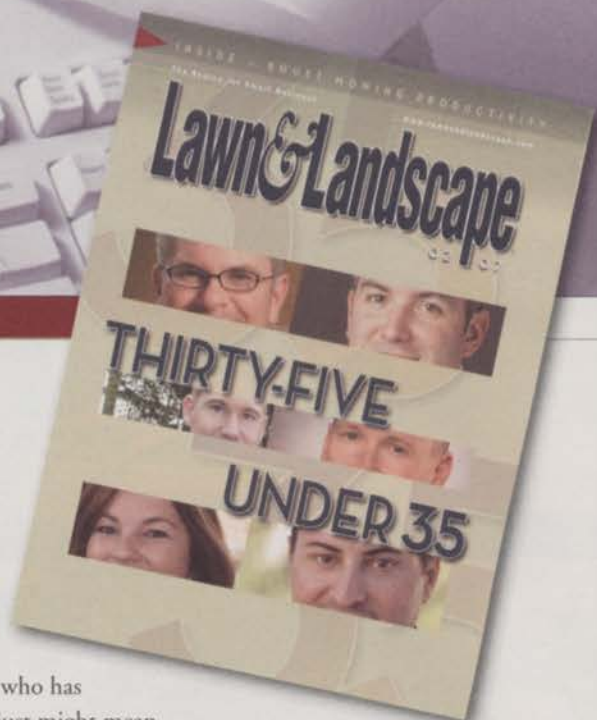
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April



Dear Editor,

What a refreshing look at the future of our industry in your report "Thirty-five Under 35" in the February 2007 issue of *Lawn & Landscape*. As you know, this concept is applied in many cities across many different business lines, but having a glimpse of the future of the green industry was really exciting. The dedication, motivation and awareness of those listed toward the specifics that make individuals and teams successful was great. It is also a great reminder for all of us that no matter how good you think you are there is someone out there who has dedicated themselves toward getting their share of the industry, which just might mean your customer, so beware. If you are an old guard industry veteran and you are tired and just going through the motions, watch out, someone is taking your low hanging fruit and will eventually service customers quicker, better and with the passion you once had. What a great wake up call. The future is bright!

Keeping the green side up,
Thomas Tolkacz
President
Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care
Denver, Colo.

Dear Editor,

Jim Huston's Benchmarking Your Business column, "Planning 'Good Things,'" in the February 2007 issue of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine caught my eye because of Phillip Crosby's name at the beginning. I attended Crosby's quality college in Florida back in the early 1990s and respect his philosophy. Thanks for the article.

Sincerely,
Al McIntosh
Operations Manager
Berns Landscaping
Monroe, Ohio



Dear Editor,

I read Jim Huston's Benchmarking Your Business column "Planning 'Good Things'" in the February 2007 issue of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine, and it was very good. I also saw Jim Huston speak once in Virginia Beach at the Horticultural Conference and purchased his books, which have helped me understand the mathematics of the landscape business. I am a designer.

Thank you,
Robin Williams
Virginia certified horticulturist and
certified project manager
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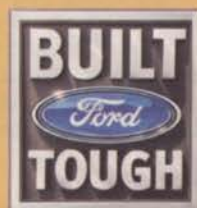
A blue Ford Super Duty pickup truck is shown from the front quarter view, parked on a paved surface. Behind the truck is a massive, multi-tiered stack of cement bags. The bags are brown and white, with the words "PORTLAND CEMENT" printed on them. The truck's chrome grille, headlights, and Ford logo are prominent. The scene is set in a construction or industrial environment.

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BOLDMOVES



Five Easy (Mis)Steps

I am baffled by the things companies do to lose clients. Now I can't imagine anyone intentionally setting out to ruin a business; it's just that their actions – or in many instances, their inactions – turn clients away and, over time, erode the health and longevity of their business. Here are five easy missteps you'll want to avoid making.

1. FAIL TO ADDRESS COMPLAINTS.

No matter how well run your company is, you will encounter a dissatisfied client. Make certain you have a system in place for responding to these situations when they arise. As your company's leader, it falls to you to know about every complaint. Ultimately, taking care of your clients is your responsibility. And once an issue has been satisfactorily resolved, call the client to personally thank him or her for choosing your company and for remaining patient while you fixed the problem. Ultimately, customer service comes down to how you make your clients feel each time they interact with your company.

2. BE DIFFICULT. Suppose I call your company about getting my yard landscaped. Would you answer the phone before the third ring? How long would it take to send a team member to my property? Would I feel as if my job – no matter its size – is important to you? The way a successful company answers these questions is obvious. Make your company exceedingly easy – a pleasure, even – to do business with.

3. NEGLECT CLIENTS. Who you most often neglect may surprise you. They are the clients who never complain, who are a joy to work for and who keep their accounts current. Ironical, but nonetheless true. We neglect our best clients by failing to let them know how much

we appreciate their business. Then, after years of taking them for granted, they are wooed away by a contractor who showers them with attention. We're left scratching our heads, thinking about what we should have done to let them know they were important. Make a list of your top clients and another list of actions to take care of them. Begin with a personal visit or a handwritten note at least once a year thanking them for their business. In return, for a small investment of time, you'll reap tremendous rewards.

4. USE TOO MUCH JARGON. No matter how interesting you find your work, your clients care more about your ability to save them time, improve the appearance of their landscapes and increase the values of their properties. For example, I've seen many proposals that list only the plants' botanical names. Unless your client is a botanist, always list the common names. Always remember who your clients are and speak to them in their language. Make certain your desire to impress your clients is not in reality intimidating or turning them off.

5. DON'T TRAIN YOUR FRONT-LINE PEOPLE. Your front-line team will, in fact, spend far more time with your clients than you will. It is imperative that they not only know how to perform the landscaping tasks required, but also that they know how to deliver superior customer service. Focus on teaching them how to handle difficult and dissatisfied individuals, as well as ways to go the extra mile for clients. Draw up a training plan that focuses on delivering superior customer service and follow it.

Spring is a great time to distinguish yourself from the competition by making sure you don't get off on the wrong foot with these five easy (mis)steps. **LL**

marty grunder

is a speaker, consultant and author, as well as owner of Grunder Landscaping Co., Miamisburg, Ohio. Reach him at 866/478-6337, landscapesales@gie.net or via www.martygrunder.com.



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Fair or Fair Market Value?

Individuals often question whether a cost in a bid or a price for a job is fair.

"Is it fair to charge \$4,500 for a 300-square-foot brick patio?" Put another way, "Is it fair to charge \$4,500 for this patio installed in rural Pennsylvania but \$6,000 to install it for a homeowner in downtown Manhattan?"

What is fair, or the concept of fairness, is a pretty subjective and slippery idea. Like beauty, it is in the eye of the beholder.

When it comes to estimating costs, bidding work and pricing services, I try to wipe out the very idea of what is fair. It has no place in a free and open market. You could argue that I'm being ruthless and capitalistic, and you may be right. But hear me out.

In the business process, we want to eliminate mystery and subjectivity. Over the last 200 years, Wall Street and our financial markets have sought to eliminate wild fluctuations in the marketplace and replace them with stability and predictability. Given all of the complex forces, the supply-demand issues, the questionable motives of some; the marketplace has the concept of fair market value (FMV) to cut through all of this mumbo-jumbo.

Whenever I hear the nebulous term, fair, I quickly replace it with fair market value. I don't know what fair is. However, fair market value is something I can wrap my arms around. It rescues us from our subjectivity and forces us to face the reality of the marketplace.

Barron's Dictionary of Business Terms defines fair market value as a "price at which an asset or service passes from a willing seller to a willing buyer. It is assumed that both buyer and seller are rational and have a reasonable knowledge of relevant facts."

THREE FMV PRICE BREAKS. There are three fair market value price breaks, or benchmarks, every entrepreneur, estimator and manager should thoroughly understand.

- **Wholesale price:** This is the price at which a supplier or vendor buys their products from a grower or manufacturer. For example, a grower sells a plant to a nursery for \$5.

- **Re-wholesale or list price:** This is the price that a contractor pays a supplier or vendor for their supplies. A re-wholesale vendor will normally mark up their costs 30 to 60 percent to cover their handling, general and administrative costs and net profit. They will normally charge a contractor \$6.50 to \$8 for the plant that costs them \$5.

- **Retail price:** This is the price a homeowner or the general public pays for a service or product. A retail nursery or vendor will normally mark up their costs 100 percent or more when selling materials to a homeowner. They would generally charge the homeowner \$10 or more for a plant that costs them \$5.

These price breaks aren't fair market value because they're fair, they're fair because they are fair market value. There's a big difference. They reflect reasonable costs and profit margins.

Should a landscape contractor charge more for the patio installed in Manhattan? Absolutely! Not just because clients there can afford it, but because the cost of doing business there is much higher. If the client doesn't want to pay the price, then they can shop around for a better one or do without the patio.

It has nothing to do with what is fair. It has everything to do with what is fair market value. **LE**

jim huston

The author is president of J.R. Huston Enterprises, a Denver-based green industry consulting firm. Reach him at 800/451-5588, benchmarking@gie.net or via www.jrhuston.biz.

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USE READER SERVICE # 18



Incentive Compensation

Most landscape companies want to manage their compensation programs more effectively and develop incentive plans that reward solid performers. These firms have figured out that sharing financial success with employees is a wise practice. They know that, if executed correctly, these plans help people become more interested in their company's financial results.

However, a poorly designed, communicated or implemented incentive plan is worse than having no plan at all. For example, some companies opt for a totally discretionary incentive plan. If the company is doing well and the owner is feeling generous, he or she distributes a specified amount of money to certain employees. The owners feel good because it is an opportunity to share some of the company's financial success with the employees who believe they have contributed to it.

However, the employees, while happy to receive the money, often wonder how the amount was determined and what they did to earn it. Sometimes this lack of connection between one's contribution and the level of reward one receives takes a bad turn. "Gee, how did the owner decide on what my share of the incentive should be? Maybe, it should have been a little more."

Suddenly, the owner's best intentions have been misinterpreted. When this occurs, many owners regret their actions and swear this will be the last time they do anything like this for their employees. In short, everyone loses and it doesn't have to be this way.

Discretionary incentive plans are fine, but they have limitations. The biggest drawback is there are no performance standards against which employees can track their progress and they have no way of knowing how they are doing.

Our philosophy for incentive plans is straightforward: Get the biggest bang for your buck out of your plan and take sufficient time to think through one of the toughest plan design questions around: "What do I want this plan to help me achieve?"

In addition to this philosophy, there are some guidelines to consider before initiating an incentive plan at your landscape company.

- Incentive plans should be driven by clearly defined and measurable results, not activities.
- Results should be linked to the level of success the company hopes to achieve.
- Thought should be given to linking the performance of the participants in the plan in such a way that they must function as a team if they are to achieve the highest possible level of payouts the plan offers. This prevents one department from succeeding at the expense of another department or functional area.
- Companies considering incentive plans must have accurate financial information upon which results are calculated.
- Regular meetings with participants should be conducted to share information that helps them track their performance against the results they hope to achieve.
- The plan should encourage and reward "stretch" levels of performance versus rewarding minimally acceptable levels of results.

Magic occurs when people make the connection between what they can earn and the level of control they have over making those results happen. It's even more amazing when they start sharing resources and making things happen as a team. Suddenly, the owner isn't the only one, "who cares about things around here."

Do these plans work?

You bet they do. **LL**

larry fish

is president of GreenSearch, a human resource consulting organization. He can be reached at 888/375-7787, peoplesmarts@gie.net or via www.greensearch.com. PeopleSmarts® is a registered trademark of GreenSearch.

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Mythbuster: Spring Core Aeration

For years lawn care specialists believed they should avoid spring aeration because soil disruption from the aerator tines would negate the annual preemergent application.

The truth, though, is if a lawn needs core aeration prior to the beginning of the new season, the benefits far outweigh any disadvantages. The tines will disrupt a minimal portion of the preemergent barrier and negligible weed breakthrough, at best, could occur. If soil disturbance is a concern, aerating can be performed after the preemergent application. However, hectic spring schedules do not always make this feasible.

Remember, the best defense against weeds is a healthy thick lawn and core aeration will help promote overall health by moving oxygen, nutrients and moisture down where it needs to be. Avoiding spring aeration (when needed) predisposes a lawn to a season of stress, pest problems and customer dissatisfaction.

WHY CORE AERATE? Many factors lead to stressful growing conditions.

Soil compaction reduces plant root growth and leads to turf decline. Weak, thin turf is more susceptible to pest problems such as weeds, insects and disease. Compacted soil or thick thatch prevents nutrients, water, oxygen and certain pesticides from reaching the root zone. Heavy traffic physically reduces pore space in the soil structure, which then decreases available oxygen to the root system. The end result is weak roots and thin turf.

On the contrary, a thick healthy lawn is more stress resistant, recovers more easily to pest pressure and needs less pesticides applied throughout the season.

ADVANTAGES. There are a number of advantages contractors would communicate

to their clients as to why spring aeration is a solid component of a smart lawn care strategy. These include:

- Turf recovers more easily from mechanical stress due to vigorous plant growth;
- Relieves soil compaction;
- Reduces thatch build up (¼ inch—moderate; ½ inch—excessive);
- Promotes beneficial microbial activity in the soil;
- Improves water, oxygen and nutrient movement in the soil;
- Stimulates early spring root growth for overall health and vigor;
- Assists surface drainage;
- When seeding, aids with soil-to-seed contact;
- Improves overall efficacy of fertilizer and control products.

SELLING IS THE EASY PART. Highly compacted or heavy thatch areas may require both spring and fall aerations until conditions improve. Selling spring aeration can be done by physically showing the customers stressful areas in the lawn, such as compacted areas, thatch layers in excess of ¼ inch and thin turf areas.

It is best to use a soil probe to show the customer areas of compaction or to examine thatch layers. If the customer is not home, a core sample can be left on a door hanger to explain your visit.

This type of customer interaction helps educate the customer and builds a stronger working relationship. Once you have explained the overall benefit of core aeration it will be easier for you to fit this service in their future annual programs.

Generally, for lawns in good condition, a single annual aeration will maintain acceptable compaction and thatch levels. Until that time, though, spring core aeration is a win-win opportunity for you and your customers. **LL**

j.b. toorish and brian kelley

are part of LESCO's Tech Services Department. They can be reached at fromthefield@gie.net or at 800/321-5325 ext. 3150 to answer technical questions.

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what's the deal?

The Big Boxes

The editors of *Lawn & Landscape* and *Commercial Dealer* magazines believe ongoing dialogue between contractors and commercial dealers is essential. Each month, one contractor and one commercial dealer will address a question or issue posed by the editors.

This month's question: Is there value in shopping at big-box stores?

From Alan Worcester, general manager,
Worcester's, North Ridgeville, Ohio:

"There is an old saying that goes something like this, 'You get what you pay for.' This saying no longer applies to shopping at a big-box store – at least, not when it comes to lawn and landscape power equipment. When you consider buying equipment from a dealer, you get the following advantages:

1. Knowledgeable sales people to help you choose the right product the first time;
2. Product support after the sale;
3. A large stock of parts and accessories;
4. Factory trained service technicians;
5. Fast service;
6. Loaner equipment while your unit is in for service.

"In reality, when you buy from a big-box store you do not get what you pay for. In many cases, you get less than what you paid for since you receive none of these advantages. With the above advantages you would think the big-box stores would be considerably lower in price. However, in most cases the independent dealer sells at the same price as the box store. So why would you buy any product from a box store that you depend on. Would you buy your work trucks from a store that had no parts, knowledgeable employees or service support? The answer is a definite no.

"Choice, or rather lack of choice, is another issue customers will encounter at the big-box stores. They carry select models as compared to a full line. And many times the models they carry are of reduced quality and durability. As well, the brands they carry are not the top-quality commercial brands most contractors want. It's all about quality. If quality and value are important to you, you need to shop where you can get the complete package. In most cases, that will be at your lawn and landscape power equipment dealer."

From Rob Brown, president and
co-owner of Agave Environmental
Contracting, Glendale, Ariz.:

"We rely on big-box stores only in times of emergencies or as a last resort. For small stuff, such as trimmers or materials, we might use Home Depot, where we have an account. In some remote areas, we may have an account at a hardware store or two that aren't a national or regional chain.

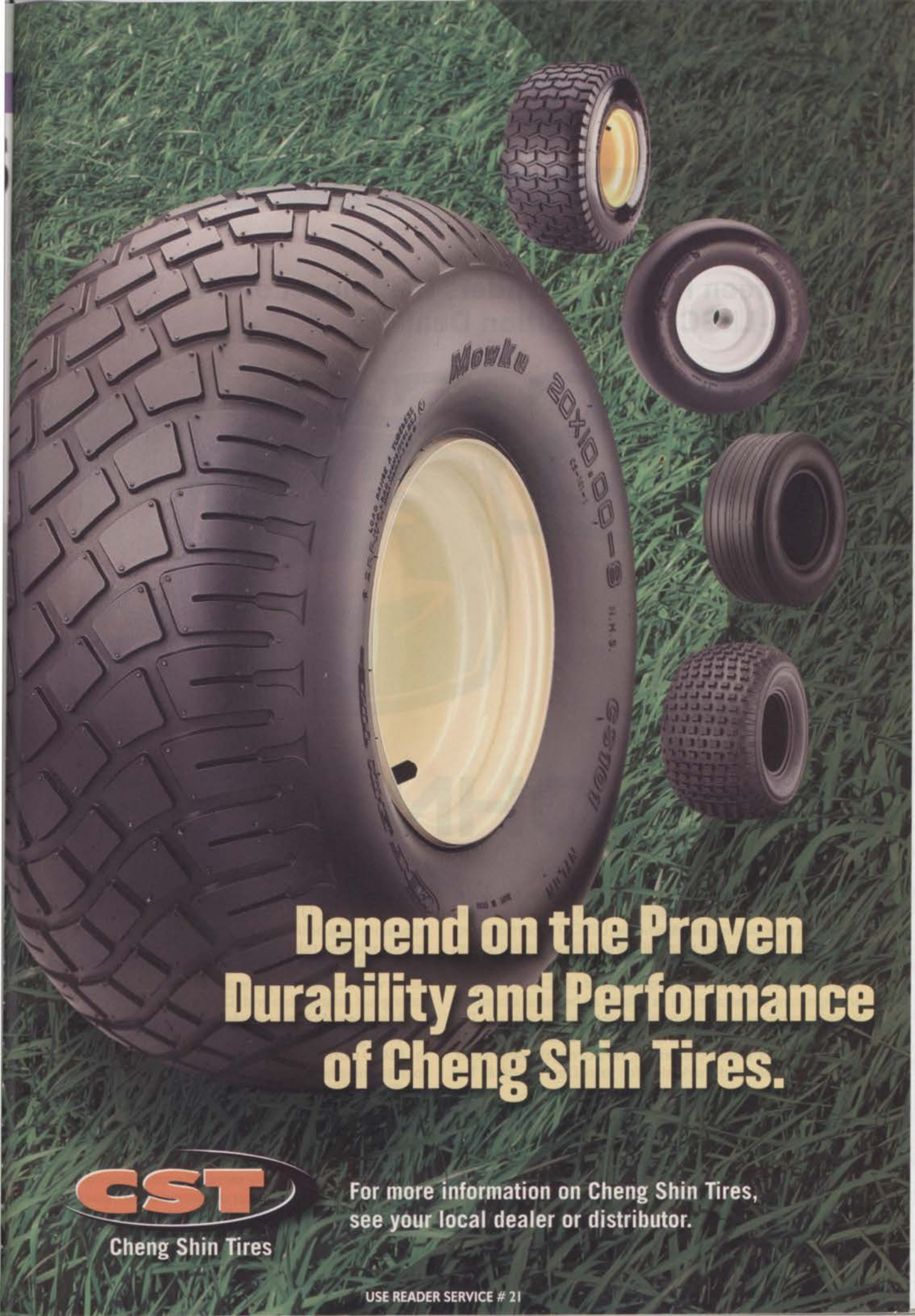
"But as far as the big-box stores, Home Depot is the main one we shop at. I'd hate to tell you what we spend at Home Depot – it's way too much," he says, chuckling. "We try to get most of our materials shipped to our job locations by the suppliers unless there's some type of emergency, which is usually because somebody forgot something.

"We don't pick up much of our plant material at all at big-box stores. That allows us to save on transportation costs.

"Unfortunately, shopping at Home Depot tends to become a habit for employees who like to leave the jobsite and go there. There's an attraction there. Our job is to try to make sure they don't do it very much."

say what's on your mind

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Mergers & Acquisitions

The Green Industry Ponders the Impact of the Deere-LESCO Acquisition Deal

LESCO



JOHN DEERE

Industry suppliers and contractors continue to ponder Deere's proposed acquisition of LESCO and how it will impact their businesses. Meanwhile, LESCO's board of directors is preparing for a special shareholders meeting to vote on the agreement. At press time, this date had not been set.

Deere's proposed acquisition of LESCO represents an important undertaking in its efforts to become a business partner to professional lawn and landscape contractors. The deal means more resources and an expanded portfolio of goods and services for Deere customers, says Gregg Breningmeyer, director of sales and marketing for John Deere Golf & Turf One Source.

Because the Deere/LESCO transaction isn't finalized, top management at both companies could not reveal either company's future plans. It is clear, though, that LESCO and its 332 service centers and 125 stores-on-wheels will be folded under the John Deere Landscapes (JDL) umbrella.

Nationwide, suppliers and contractors viewed the news as a positive move as LESCO struggled with sales and distri-

bution over the last two years. Paul Wolbert, vice president of marketing at U.S. Lawns, says, overall, he considers the acquisition as a positive step. "From our corporate side, we've got outstanding relationships with both of those companies," he says. "Both bring something to the party. It wouldn't work if either was lacking in any one area." Wolbert says the company has a good relationship with Deere, as well.

However, Wolbert wonders how the companies will work out the logistical issues. For instance, will Deere sell its products in LESCO stores? Working as one, Deere and LESCO will need to determine how to best distribute products.

JDL has 300 locations across the United States and management at Deere indicated the site overlap is not significant. JDL is a distributor of irrigation, nursery stock, outdoor lighting and landscape supplies primarily to the installation and new construction markets. In contrast, LESCO – whose stores are all in leased buildings – mainly serves the maintenance side of the green business as a distributor of pesticides, fertilizers, seed and other soft goods. On paper, the merger provides opportunity

to serve the full-service contractor who both installs and maintains properties.

As Deere works to integrate LESCO into its JDL locations and fulfill its vision of becoming a true solutions provider to its customers, a LESCO shareholder has filed an appeal against the sale citing the price per share undervalues the

by previous management to eliminate field sales staff to reduce costs. The move backfired, costing LESCO sales in a business in which relationships play a key role.

Hawkshaw stated the sale couldn't have come at a worse time – immediately following one of the worst operating years in the company's history. Between lost sales, raw materials costs

"They both bring something to the party. It wouldn't work if either was lacking in any one area." – Paul Wolbert

intrinsic value of LESCO. The definitive merger agreement calls for the purchase of LESCO for \$14.50 per common share in cash.

Hawkshaw Capital Management currently owns more than 1.2 million shares of LESCO common stock, which is said to represent 13.6 percent of shares outstanding.

"LESCO's intrinsic value is significantly higher than what Deere & Co. is offering," says Frank Byrd, managing member of Hawkshaw, an investment management firm that serves as an investment adviser to private investment funds, in a letter to LESCO's board of directors. "The proposed price of \$14.50 at best captures the cost synergies available to Deere & Co. as a strategic acquirer, but fails to adequately compensate LESCO shareholders for a return to normal operating earnings and the value creation from continued expansion of the company's high return on capital retail service center business."

The most recent 52-week period showed LESCO stock ranging from \$6.70 to \$18.17. It traded at \$10 a share just before the announcement and, as of deadline, listed at about \$14.40 per share.

Throughout last year, LESCO was rejuvenating its standing in the golf industry following a decision

and restructuring, the company posted a \$20 million year-end operating loss. The issues that precipitated the stock's decline are temporary and fixable during the next two years, Byrd says.

LESCO CEO Jeff Rutherford declined to comment on the sale or the shareholder complaint.

As the sale continues through shareholder and regulatory approval, Deere executives say it will work with distributors on both sides to determine the best way to deliver products and services to its customers.

"The positive reaction we've heard from our customers and associates affirms why (this deal) makes sense," says Breningmeyer. "It's more resources for our customers and an expanded portfolio of goods and services than in the past."

Breningmeyer says no decisions have been made about future branding of the combined company; however, he said LESCO's stores-on-wheels remain in its plans. JDL customers currently choose from name brand products throughout its locations, so it wouldn't be unusual to see LESCO products.

While redundancies exist between LESCO's Cleveland headquarters and John Deere Landscapes' headquarters in Alpharetta, Ga., Breningmeyer says it's too soon to say whether or not the office will remain open. — *Cindy Code and Heather Wood*

Maryland Turfgrass Industry Brings in \$1.5 Billion



The same new homes that are gobbling up farmland across Maryland at an alarming rate have provided a boon to the turfgrass industry, a \$1.5 billion business in the state.

An estimated 1.1 million acres – nearly 20 percent of Maryland's land base – is covered by maintained grass, and by far the greatest portion adorns the yards of single-family homes, according to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The survey estimates that 937,000 acres of turfgrass in Maryland are used for lawns for single-family homes. This represents 82.6 percent of all the maintained grass in the state. County government properties come in a distant second with 78,200 acres or 6.9 percent of the total.

Driven by one of the hottest real estate development markets in the country, Maryland has the sixth-most-expensive farmland in the nation, according to a USDA survey released last year.

Maryland's turfgrass industry also accounts for an estimated 12,730 jobs, two-thirds of which are full-time positions, and wages top \$291 million.

Other findings of the study:

- Nearly 31,000 acres of new turf were installed in 2005 at an expense of \$89 million.
- Single-family homes accounted for 28,190 acres.
- Lawn care companies employed the most workers – 5,800 – followed by golf courses with 2,330 and schools with 1,200 turf maintenance workers. — *NW*

HEALTH CARE

Small Business Health Plans Back On Front Burner

There's going to be renewed effort to help bring health care costs down for owners of small businesses during 2007. That's when several organizations, including The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), will continue to support legislation creating Small Business Health Plans. SBHPs are a way for business owners to band together in order to provide cheaper health care for their employees.

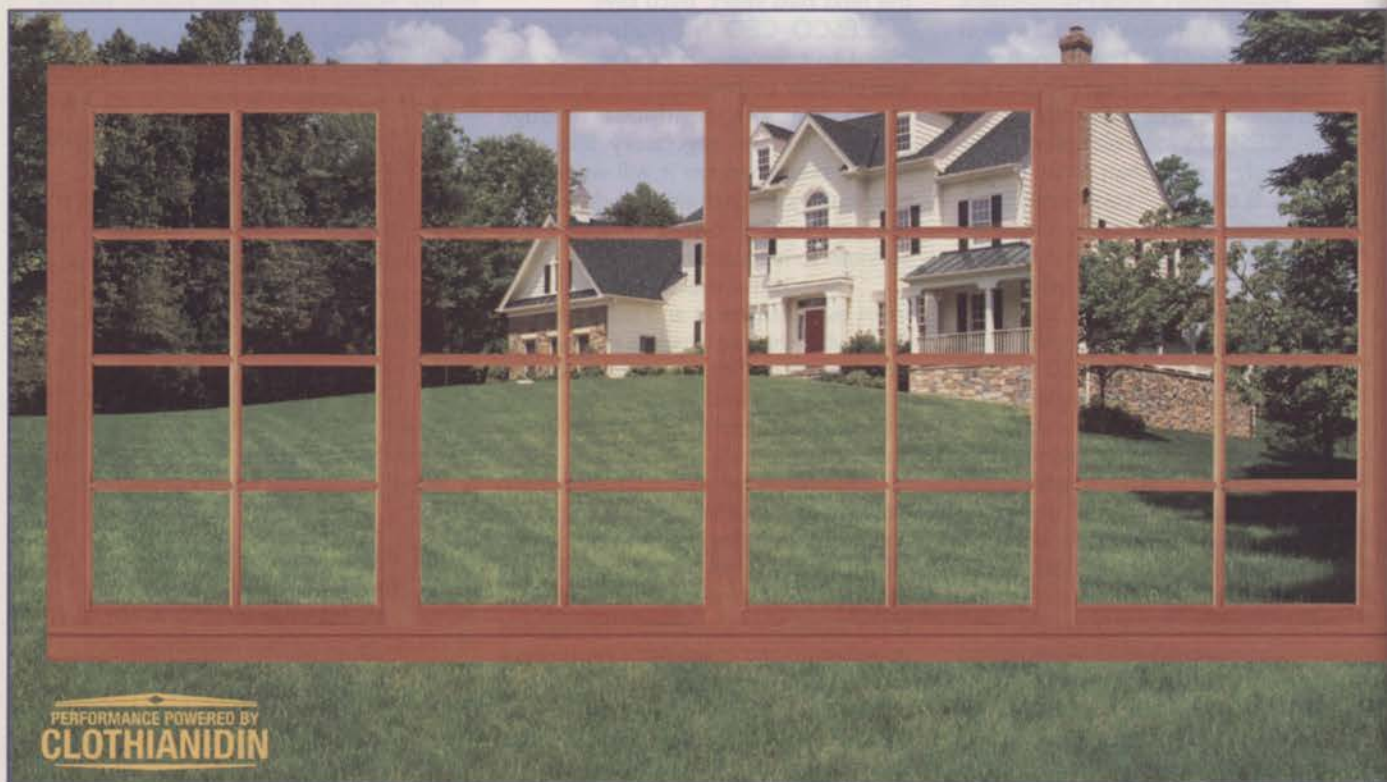
"We've lobbied for that for several years," says Tom Delaney, PLANET's director of governmental affairs. "In our industry, employees are the biggest natural resources we have and we have to fight to hire and keep them. The benefits you're able to offer employees to retain them are vital to your company."

Health care coverage for all businesses has

skyrocketed in recent years, but even more so for small business owners. Large businesses have the ability under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 to pool resources in order to streamline operations and provide consistency in health care benefits. Small businesses have sought to do the same through association health care plans. Over the past decade, several bills have been introduced in Congress, but have failed.

"House members have been very supportive all along with this," Delaney says. "The problem has been in the Senate."

PLANET is working with the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), which also supports small business health plans. "As the cost of health insurance keeps going up, the numbers of companies who can offer health care at all or make it affordable are going down," Delaney says. — Mark Phillips



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H-2B Users Get Update at Second Fly-In

H-2B users who were deterred by winter storms in February attended the second Fly-in of the year March 6 in Washington, D.C. Advocates from the hotel and seafood industries joined lawn and landscape professionals to learn the status of a potential introduction of H-2B cap exemption legislation in Congress.

Although the group couldn't escape frigid weather the second time around, it was pleasant compared to the snow and sleet that affected the first Fly-in's attendance. About 40 attendees made the trip this time, driven by the concern that not all companies who use H-2B will get the number of workers they need for the season.

"It's awful trying to run a business when the labor force is unpredictable," says Tom Delaney, director of legislative affairs for the Professional Landcare Network. "It makes it tough."

The seasonal worker program has a yearly cap of 66,000 workers. The provision that states returning workers aren't counted against the cap is set to expire Sept. 30. H-2B us-

ers are pushing, at the very least, to extend the cap exemption another year. The ultimate goal is to remove the sunset clause or to remove the cap altogether.

Delaney's not sure how quickly legislation will be introduced, citing uncertainty among some legislators on the length of time the exemption should be in place. He doesn't think it's out of the question to see a five-year exemption proposed.

The challenge is getting all the legislators who co-sponsored the bill in the past to step up to the plate again.

"The rank-and-file majority will not do it too many times," Delaney says, but he adds that some H-2B users will contact their legislators as many times as it takes before they'll sponsor or support the bill.

So far there hasn't been talk of another Fly-in, but if legislation is introduced, or if it falls out of lawmakers' minds, H-2B users will gather again.

"We're always going to want the exemption," Delaney says. "Whatever date they put in there we'll be back trying to get it extended or permanent." — Heather Wood

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inside the industry

LABOR



Immigrants Impact Wage Increases

A commonly held assumption is that immigrant workers take the jobs of native-born citizens because they're willing to do the same jobs for less money. And it's a frequent argument made by those who advocate against an increase to the annual cap for H-2B workers.

However, a recent study sheds some light on the notion that immigrant workers have a positive impact on the wages of native-born workers. In fact, the average real wages of native-born workers in California have benefited by about 4 percent due to the influx of immigrants to the state over the last 15 years, according to a study conducted recently by the Public Policy Institute of California.

From 1990 to 2004, as the number of immigrants in California increased and were hired to perform certain jobs and tasks, so did the need for complementary jobs in managing, organizing and training – positions that were filled by native-born workers.

In addition, native-born workers benefit because they are able to specialize more, the study found, thus the increased supply of one type of worker fueled the demand for another; in this case educated, native-born workers.

However, the increase in new foreign-born workers has had a negative impact on the wages of established immigrants. The study found immigrants who entered the state before 1990 lost between 17 and 20 percent of their real wages due to the entry of new foreign-born workers. – Mike Zawacki

LABOR

Small Business Unaffected by Minimum Wage Increase

Most small business owners don't anticipate being affected by the increase in the federal minimum wage slated to take place over the next two years, according to a recent national survey.

The survey, conducted by Sure Payroll, a Chicago-based small business payroll firm, reported 91 percent of business owners already pay their employees above the current minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. Seventy percent of employers polled support an increase in minimum wage, but some disagree on how much the increase should be. Twenty-one percent say an increase to \$7.25 an hour is too high, 38 percent say the increase is satisfactory and 11 percent believe it should be higher.

Reaction to the increase among landscape contractors has been mixed. "The 41 percent pay increase is a bit much," says Paul Wagner, owner of Masters Lawn, Walled Lake, Mich. "It's almost like the government is trying to make up for years past."

The increase is warranted because many people working in the landscape industry are underpaid, says Gary LaScalea, president of GroGreen, based in Plano, Texas.

"Anyone living on minimum wage today is basically living in poverty, and I think this increase is long overdue," LaScalea says.

While 80 percent of small business owners don't believe the increase will affect their businesses, 59 percent believe the increase will have a negative effect on the small business economy, the study says. Likewise, nearly 59 percent believe business owners will have to raise their prices to compensate for the increase, and nearly 10 percent believe some businesses will be forced to close their doors, according to the data.

"If a company has to shut its doors because of a \$2-an-hour increase, they're not doing very good business in the first place," Wagner says. "How can you feel sorry for a company that does business like that?" — Emily Mullins

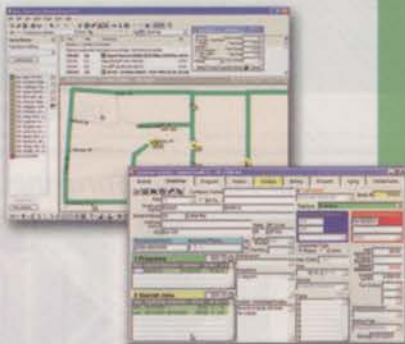


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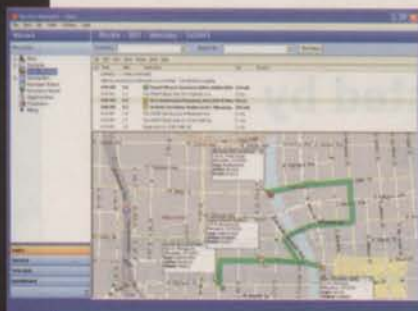
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USE READER SERVICE # 25

inside the industry

TOP 100

TOP ONE-HUNDRED

Last Call for Top 100 Entries

Lawn & Landscape has moved the Top 100 list to the June issue – and we need your help collecting information.

Each year the Top 100 list ranks the largest industry contractors based on revenue. We recognize that basing this list solely on revenue doesn't account for recent growth, innovation, management excellence or employee skills and benefits, but we believe it's relevant and important to provide this industry benchmark nonetheless.

Plus, you have to admit, it's an interesting read.

Whether you're big or small, we'd like learn about your company to consider you for this year's Top 100 list as well as stories we write throughout the year. The deadline for submissions is April 30.

To submit your company's information, contact Associate Editor Marisa Palmieri at mpalmieri@gie.net or 800/456-0707 ext. 237.

HEALTH

Smoke Breaks Waste Nearly 15 Minutes

Most landscape contractors gripe about workers smoking on the jobsite.

Not only does it look unprofessional, landscape contractors say, but there's the real danger that their personnel will carelessly litter the jobsite with burnt-out butts, drawing the ire of their clients.

Then, contractors say, there's the matter of the time it takes for an employee to enjoy a smoke break.

In fact, a recent study found that nearly 50 percent of smokers take between three and six smoking breaks per day at work, and two-thirds of those smokers indicated an average puff session lasts as long as 15 minutes. At that rate, a single smoking employee could be account for as much of 90 minutes in unproductive lost time per day.

Business owners and managers intuitively know that smokers taking cigarette breaks cuts into productivity, but many don't realize the extent of time lost, says Ron Finch, vice president of the Washington D.C.-based National Business Group on Health, which conducted the survey.

"We learned from this survey that the extent of time lost at work due to smoke breaks could be staggering," Finch says.

The survey also found that while employers advocate smoke-free workplace policies as a way to encourage workers to kick the habit, smoking employees would rather have their bosses provide them with some sort of smoking cessation program. — Mike Zawacki



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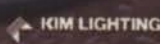
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USE READER SERVICE # 28

inside the industry

IRRIGATION

Tweak Your Marketing Message for Smart Irrigation Month

July, which the Irrigation Association last year dubbed Smart Irrigation Month, is right around the corner. The Irrigation Association Communications Committee provides the following quick and easy marketing tips to boost irrigation sales and promote water conservation this season. Find additional resources and ideas for Smart Irrigation Month, including logos, articles, success stories and more, on the industry Web site at www.irrigation.org/SIM/industry.htm.

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USE READER SERVICE # 30

SPANISH LESSONS

Considering that a growing number of landscape contractors are employing Hispanic or H-2B workers, improving communication is becoming more crucial to ensure quality work done right the first time.

In an effort to aid landscape and lawn care professionals in their communication efforts, *Lawn & Landscape* will be running a few phrases each month in English and Spanish, including a pronunciation guide, courtesy of the book *The Lingo Guide For Landscapers* by E.G. White. To inquire about ordering the book, which costs \$14.95, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/store or contact the *Lawn & Landscape* Book Department at 800/456-0707.

If there is a phrase you are having trouble with, let us know at mzawacki@gie.net.



Photo: Rainbird

- Place the Smart Irrigation Month logo on all print and electronic media. Add a link from your Web site to www.smartirrigationmonth.org. Update your on-hold message to talk about SIM and technologies that help conserve water.
- Consider creating promotional offers to focus on water-saving products and services. Offering an incentive can motivate customers to take advantage of new technologies and methods. Create a flyer or campaign that summarizes all of the smart products and services offered by your company.
- Position yourself or an irrigation professional at your company as a local expert. Offer to speak at events, and share the SIM message your local media via news releases, media advisory and story pitches. It's an opportunity to raise awareness of the difference certification and properly used technology can make in irrigation efficiency.
- Offer experts and examples for home and garden publications to illustrate how smart irrigation technology can save money, time and water while producing high yields or beautiful landscapes.
- In line with the national effort, suggest your city or county declare July as Smart Irrigation Month to raise awareness of the need to conserve water and the role irrigation can play. Contact Beth Casteel at beth@irrigation.org for a proclamation and press release template.
- Download, customize and print the EPA Smart Irrigation Month brochure with homeowner tips for efficient irrigation and share it with your customers.



1. ENGLISH: We need to light the flower beds.
SPANISH: Debemos iluminar los canteros/arriates.
(deh-Beh-mohs ee-loo-me-NAHR ehl bahl-KOHN.)
2. ENGLISH: We need to put flags where the lights are to go.
SPANISH: Debemos colocar los banderines adónde irán las luces.
(deh-BEH-mohs koh-loh-CAR lohs bahn-deh-REE-nehs ah-DOHN-deh ee-RAHN lahs LOO-sehs.)
3. ENGLISH: We need to use a conduit to protect the cable.
SPANISH: Debemos utilizar un conducto para proteger el cable.
(deh-BEH-mohs oo-tee-lee-SAGR oon kohn-DOOK-toh PAH-rah proh-TEH-hehr ehl KAH-bleh.)
4. ENGLISH: Where are the wire cutters?
SPANISH: ¿Adónde esta el corta cables?
(ah-DOHN-deh ehs-TAH ehl dehs-tohr-knee-yah-DOOR?)
5. ENGLISH: We need to plant the lights in the ground.
SPANISH: Debemos instalar las luces baho tierra.
(deh-BEH-mohs ehm-pahl-MAHR EHS-teh KAH-bleh.)

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POSTING SIGNS

market watch

7 to 15 percent

The amount landscaping can add to a home's value. As a bonus, landscaping can reduce air conditioning costs by up to 50 percent through shading the windows and walls of the home.

Source: *The American Nursery and Landscape Association*

Employers More Generous with 401k

During a four-year period, 10 percent more employers in the United States began matching their employees' 401(k) savings plans.

The research, conducted by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, says 36 percent of plans had a match rate of 100 percent in 2006, up from 26 percent in 2002.

Forty-five percent of 401(k) plans had a match rate of 50 percent in 2006, down from 53 percent of plans in 2002. "While a 50-percent matching contribution continues to be the most prevalent match level, the number of employers matching at 100 percent has risen steadily," says Patricia Pou, a principal with Mercer Human Resource Consulting. "This increase is consistent with the move from defined benefit pension plans to 401(k) plans."

The analysis, which looked at the benefit programs of more than 1,025 employers, indicates the majority of organizations offer pretax retirement savings plans—90 percent sponsor either a 401(k) or 403b plan.

35 percent

More than 7,000 Americans surveyed say employees who are "always helpful" is the No. 1 most important customer service attribute. Good prices came in at No. 6 with 9 percent. Fast service was No. 8 with 4 percent.

Source: *BIGresearch*

82 percent
apologizing or admitting error

79 percent
giving someone negative news

71 percent
letting someone know they are
angry with him/her

40

The percentage, at any given time, of all small businesses facing immediate transfer of ownership (within the next two years).

Source: *U.S. Small Business Administration*

An overwhelming number of Americans prefer in-person discussion when addressing issues such as admitting error, giving negative news and expressing anger. Even with the U.S. culture being dominated by myriad communication avenues, including online social networking, text messaging and e-mail, people still prefer face-to-face time. Adults believe that face-to-face conversations, such as with customers and business owners or employees, are not likely to be misunderstood. In contrast, 80 percent of those surveyed say e-mail messages are likely to be misinterpreted. As for phone calls, 47 percent believe they can be "somewhat difficult" to misinterpret.

Source: *WhitePages.com, Harris Interactive poll of 2,395 American adults*

Minimum wage increase: Much ado about nothin

Small business owners are not losing much sleep about an increase in the national minimum wage, according to a survey by payroll service provider SurePayroll. Congress is considering raising the minimum wage to \$7.25. Of 309 business owners surveyed:

- I don't think there should be any increase – 25.6%
- I support an increase but think \$7.25 is too high – 21%
- I think there should be an increase to \$7.25 – 37.9%
- I think the increase should be higher than \$7.25 – 11%
- Don't know or don't care – 4.5%

A majority of small business owners, 51 percent, didn't know the minimum wage in their state.

48,590

The number of landscape workers certified through the federal H-2B program during fiscal year 2004, the most recent figures available. Landscaping was the No. 1 certified H-2B occupation, with more than twice the number of the No. 2 occupation, forestry worker, with 24,185.

Source: *U.S. Division of Foreign Labor Certification*

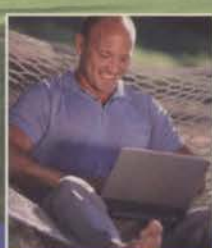
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USE READER SERVICE # 32

CALENDAR

Calendar Note

To ensure that your meeting date is published, send an announcement at least 12 weeks in advance to Heather Wood, Web editor, at hwood@gie.net.

APRIL 11 – 13 Grandy & Associates Basic Business Boot Camp, Dallas and Milwaukee, Wis. Contact: Linda Haddix, www.grandyassociates.com, 800/432-7963

APRIL 27 Practical Pruning Workshop with Denice Britton, President of the American Society of Consulting Arborists, University of California, Davis Extension. Contact: www.extension.ucdavis.edu/ag, 800/752-0881

APRIL 27 – 29 San Jose Home & Garden Show, San Jose, Calif. Contact: 800/321-1213

MAY 9 – 11 GIE Media's Snow Magazine's Snow Industry Exposition and Conference, Indianapolis. Contact: Lola Perez Wenham, www.snowmagazineexpo.com, 800/456-0707

JUNE 20 – 24 Professional Landcare Network Summer Leadership Meeting, Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. Contact: www.landcarenetwork.org, 800/395-2522

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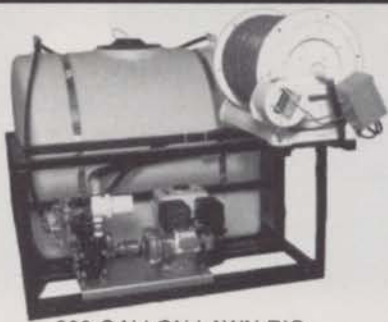
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Create recurring revenue

Growing its maintenance division insulates Roundtree Landscaping from market forces.

Preparing for the future is one thing that all business owners should think about. Unfortunately, not all of them do. Landscape industry leaders often focus on achieving the next short-term milestone, like securing a contract, fully staffing the company for the upcoming busy season and next year's marketing campaign, rather than where their companies – and the markets in which they operate – will be in the next five to 10 years.

After years of short-term thinking and leading Roundtree Landscaping on her own, Johnette Taylor was finally able to position her company for strategic growth after it hit the million-dollar mark in 2000.

Founded in 1984, Roundtree stayed small for 10 years. It was just Taylor, who's a landscape architect, designing landscapes for clients with a few employees to do installations. After a decade, she committed to growing the company and did so steadily for six years.

Around the time the company reached \$1 million in revenue, Taylor realized some things about her business had to change. First, she knew she couldn't continue to do it all on her own and that, for the company to continue to grow, she needed to take on a role that would allow her to plan strategically for the future. (See "Making Key Hires" on page 48).

continued on page 46

by marisa palmieri | associate editor



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continued from page 42

In addition, Taylor identified several market conditions she knew would influence the future of her business, namely drought, a lack of qualified labor and a changing customer base. Her flexibility and foresight have allowed her to work around these challenges, with the hope of doubling Roundtree's revenue over the next seven years.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO MAINTENANCE.

The core of her plan? Expand the maintenance division at this predominantly design/build company to bring in at least half of its revenue.

In 2003, Taylor hired former client and landscape architect Berit Hutson. Today Hutson is tasked with taking over and growing the company's maintenance division. "It's been an on-going goal to increase maintenance – just in case," Hutson says. "It's not just the drought, it could be economics; it could be a recession or anything that causes people to not invest in their landscapes. Maintenance is just that stable income that will keep our company busy even if we don't have landscape work."

Historically, maintenance has been the company's smallest division. In 2006, maintenance accounted for 20 percent of Roundtree's \$1.1 million revenue, with design/build and design-only making up 70 and 10 percent, respectively. "I didn't want to do maintenance initially," Taylor says. "I really loved landscape design and installation, and maintenance was a necessary evil – something you had to do."

Today, however, Taylor has a new appreciation for maintenance. She understands it's a way to insulate the business in the event of extreme watering restrictions, lack of qualified labor and a demographic shift among clients.

In the summer of 2006, the town of Prosper, Texas, entered stage four "emergency" drought restrictions. That means no landscape irrigation, no installing new landscaping and no

modifications to existing landscaping. No exceptions.

Luckily, Prosper is not one of Roundtree's mainstay communities and the ban was lifted after several months, so the company didn't take a large hit. But Taylor knows that

company is preparing for the future, focusing on maintaining irrigation systems, retrofitting clients' systems with drip, deep-soaking and micro-irrigation technology and installing drought-tolerant plant material. "We all face the similar issue of limited resources," Taylor adds.

Labor, too, is a looming issue in North Texas. "We go all the typical routes for recruiting," says Taylor, noting Texas's 4-percent unemployment rate is among the nation's lowest. "Web sites, word-of-mouth – we'll try just about anything." Roundtree has even tried out-of-the-ordinary hiring tactics, like offering internships to high school horticulture students.

Taylor hasn't enlisted the government's H-2B program yet (due to the company's relatively small size and year-round need for workers), but she hopes her strategy to expand the maintenance division may be the labor solution she needs.

"Maintenance has a lot more room for alternative sources of labor vs. landscape installation, where we need craftsmen," Taylor says. A focus on growth in the maintenance division will allow Roundtree to hire high school and college students and other less experienced, entry-level laborers.

Another factor that's affecting change at Roundtree is what Taylor calls "a changing climate for our services," brought on by social shifts in customer demographics.

"Generationally, things have changed a lot," Taylor says. "People who used to hire us were mostly my parents' age. Now we work for people who are more my peers and younger." These younger customers are more landscape savvy and often more willing to participate in their yard's design and maintenance than landscape customers of the past, Taylor says.

Landscaping as a hobby has garnered widespread attention thanks to gardening TV shows, magazines and Web sites and greater exposure at big-box stores. Consider that 83 percent of all U.S. households participated in one or more types of do-it-yourself lawn and garden activities in 2005. That statistic set a new record in terms of the percentage and number of households participating in landscaping, according to the National Gardening Association.

continued on page 52, sidebar on page 48

Roundtree Landscaping

PRESIDENT: Johnette Taylor
HEADQUARTERS: Dallas
FOUNDED: 1984
EMPLOYEES: 14 year-round workers

SERVICE BREAKOUT (2006):

70% Design/build
 20% Maintenance
 10% Design-only

CLIENT BREAKOUT:

90% Residential
 10% Commercial

REVENUE BREAKOUT:

2007 Revenue: \$1.25 million (projected)
 2006 Revenue: \$1.1 million
 2005 Revenue: \$1.2 million
 2004 Revenue: \$1.1 million
 2003 Revenue: \$1.1 million
 2002 Revenue: \$1 million
 2001 Revenue: \$1.2 million
 2000 Revenue: \$1 million

GREATEST CHALLENGES:

1. Labor shortage. Texas has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. We need to find good employees that fit the company culture of wanting to learn, build relationships and produce high-quality work.
2. Drought and extreme weather conditions.
3. Changing market for services.

CONTACT INFO:

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 Dallas, Texas 75204
 PH: 214/824-7036
 FX: 214/824-7038
 WEB: www.roundtreelandscaping.com
 E-MAIL: johnette@roundtreelandscaping.com

North Texas' water woes aren't going away anytime soon. Other water districts may eventually resort to similarly severe restrictions, and then how does a landscape design/build and installation firm survive?

For now, Roundtree hasn't had to resort to all-out "survival" mode to cope with drought. Nevertheless, the

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WEEKLY TIMECARD

NAME: Bill Owen DATES: 9-13

	START	LUNCH	END	JOB CODES	JOB SITE/PROJECT	HOURS
Mon.	7:00	1/2	3:30		Brentwood	8
Tues.			3:30			8
Wed.			4:00		▼	8 1/2
Thurs.			4:00		Crestview	8 1/2
Fri.	▼	▼	4:00		▼	8 1/2

SIGNATURE: Bill Owen TOTAL HOURS: 41 1/2

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Employee Report

Owen, Bill Date Range: 4/9/2007 through 4/13/2007

Day	Date	Jobsite	Start	Stop	Cost Code	Hours	Total
Mon	4/9	Brentwood	7:08 AM	12:05 PM	Irrigation	4:57	
			12:41 PM	3:22 PM	Irrigation	2:41	7:38 hours
Tue	4/10	Brentwood	7:12 AM	12:07 PM	Irrigation	4:55	
			12:43 PM	3:23 PM	Irrigation	2:40	7:35 hours
Wed	4/11	Brentwood	7:12 AM	12:02 PM	Irrigation	4:50	
			12:46 PM	3:49 PM	Irrigation	3:03	7:53 hours
Thu	4/12	Crestview	7:17 AM	12:19 PM	Planting	5:02	
			12:50 PM	3:46 PM	Planting	2:56	7:58 hours
Fri	4/13	Crestview	7:13 AM	12:07 PM	Planting	4:54	
			12:44 PM	3:39 PM	Planting	2:55	7:49 hours

Signature: Bill Owen Owen, Bill

Total 38:53 hours

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making key hires

Early in Roundtree Landscaping's history, President Johnette Taylor couldn't afford to hire experienced managers, so she hired recent college graduates. She was pleasantly surprised by their enthusiasm and performance, but the downside was these young employees stayed with the company for a few years, gained experience and then moved on.

In 2003 with Roundtree at a steady \$1 million, Taylor used her networking skills to recruit two industry veterans with her level

of technical expertise and managerial capacity. As part of her goal to strategically position Roundtree for the future, she needed to prepare the company for her to step out of daily operations and eventually to leave. "Although I'm not ready to leave, I wanted to make sure that at any time it was a viable business without me," Taylor says. "It was time for me to delegate and get out of the way."



From left: Suzanne Ouren, Johnette Taylor and Berit Hutson. Photo: Mark Byrne

First Taylor hired Berit Hutson. The two women met when Hutson, who at the time was a corporate landscape architect for State Farm Insurance, hired Roundtree to complete several projects. "I would always tell her, when you decide to give up this State Farm thing you should just come to work for me," Taylor says. In 2003, ready for a change, Hutson moved from Illinois to Dallas to join Roundtree. Collaborating for several years as client and service provider gave the women mutual confidence that they could work well together and learn from each other. Today, Hutson manages Roundtree's maintenance and landscape architecture divisions.

The next year, Taylor knew she needed to hire someone to help boost the company's sales as she moved out of a traditional sales role. "I thought, who is the best salesperson I know?" Taylor says. She turned to Suzanne Ouren, who she knew from the Texas Nursery & Landscape Association. Ouren joined Roundtree in 2004, bringing years of industry experience – she formerly owned her own green industry firm that included landscape maintenance, design/build, interiorscape and retail nursery components.

Taylor's nephew, Eric Taylor, rounds out the company's management team as operations manager. She brought him on in early 2007 to refine systems and add business management knowledge. "Starting out small and doing it all myself for so many years, that was a really hard step," Taylor says of delegating. "Now I feel like we've got the right people in place and we'd like to see the company double in size."



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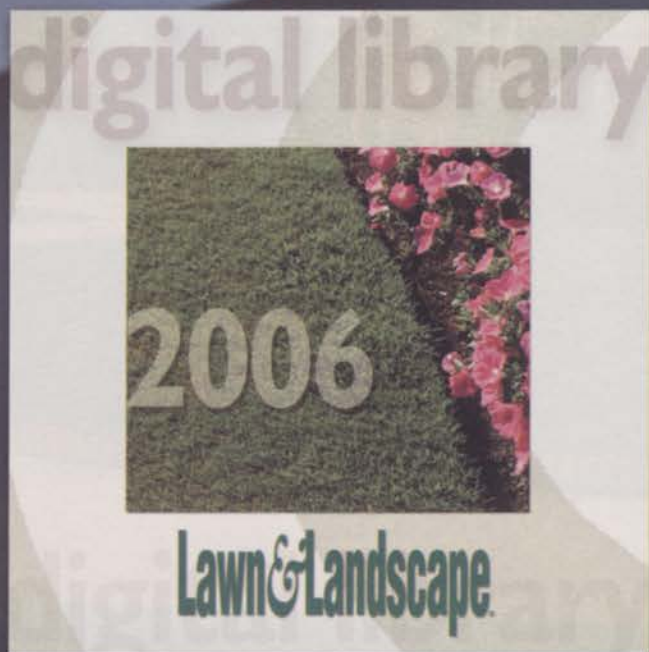
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continued from page 46

All of these factors have created a better-educated, enthusiastic pool of customers, who enjoy doing a part of their landscaping themselves.

"We've found that as our clientele has changed somewhat over the years, a lot of people like getting out and doing some of their yard work," Taylor says. "They don't mind mowing the lawn and doing some additional yard work. But they want somebody to partner with them to make sure their home looks good all the time."

A NEW SERVICE. To cater to this younger, more involved clientele and at the same time boost the maintenance division, Roundtree created a new specialized maintenance offering called horticulture services.

Taylor compares horticulture services to the bi-weekly or monthly cleaning services popular among homeowners. Most people don't mind vacuuming regularly and doing their dishes, but they're too busy to dust



The goal of horticultural services is to partner with clients to keep their landscapes looking great year-round. Photos (above and page 56): Roundtree Landscaping

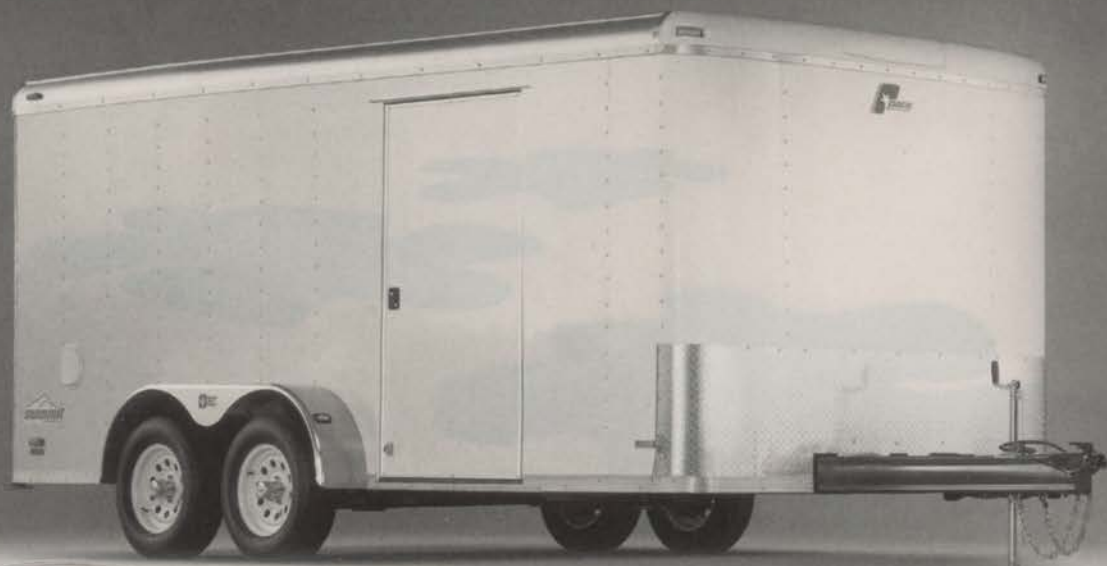
and polish furniture and do full-fledged bathroom cleaning.

Likewise, many homeowners don't mind mowing their own yards, but they don't have the time, energy or know-how to do all of the things required to maintain a prize-winning landscape. That's where Roundtree's

horticulture services comes in.

Horticulture services eliminates mowing – the activity that homeowners are usually most willing to do themselves – from a typical maintenance package and provides them with technical services like an annual tree assessment, monthly irrigation checks,

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Additionally, this service places Roundtree in a bracket in which it doesn't have to compete with a neighborhood kid or a "mow, blow and go" contractor charging \$20 for their weekly services.

"We can't compete with that, so there's no sense in even trying," says Hutson, adding that one of Roundtree's selling points is its technical expertise — including on-staff landscape architects, licensed irrigators, an arborist and both management and field staff with years of experience.

Clients like horticulture services because they can opt to mow themselves or hire someone in the neighborhood to do it inexpensively — potentially saving them several hundred dollars per month, while their yard still receives expert care.

This service is priced by the man-hours required to do the work

annually and then billed out over 12 months. Taylor estimates that a client paying \$600 per month for full-service maintenance would pay \$200 to \$250 per month for horticulture services. While the company nets less money per client for horticulture services, the work rendered is more profitable, less equipment-intensive and better in line with Roundtree's level of expertise. Taylor projects the profit margin on horticulture services to be 10 to 20 percent better than that of full-service maintenance.

The company gradually introduced this concept to its customers over the last two years to a warm reception. About one-third of Roundtree's maintenance clients opt for horticulture services over full-service maintenance.

It's been successful partly due to an experienced two-man crew that's well-managed by Hutson, who's a landscape architect, certified arborist and licensed irrigator.

Hutson conducts the annual tree assessments, Roundtree's horticulture services crew takes care of bi-weekly and monthly tasks like pruning and irrigation checks, and Hutson hires subcontractors for highly technical jobs like major tree work and specialized chemical applications, though the company retains pesticide licenses.

Hutson also is responsible for quality control, which she completes by making visits to clients' homes and sitting down with the crew as needed to go over any questions or concerns. "Her design background is a nice asset," Taylor says. "She's really able to teach the staff to look at maintenance from both a design and horticultural standpoint."

This hands-on management is possible partly because of Roundtree's size — 14 employees. Considering Taylor estimates the number of employees will double as revenue grows,

continued on page 58, sidebar on page 56




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keeping costs down

Johnette Taylor has an undeniable practical streak when it comes to keeping overhead costs down. Taylor, president of Roundtree Landscaping in Dallas, has purchased a lot of equipment over the years as jobs have dictated. During this time she's developed a pet peeve for idle equipment. "When I drive up and it's sitting in the yard, I think 'Oh, it's gotta go,'" she says.

Taylor prefers to sell the equipment and then rent it if necessary. "When I look at what the rental is going to cost me for a month and I look at what I could purchase it for and pay per month, I have to make sure that I'm really going to continue to use it." She doesn't like to own a piece of equipment unless it will go out 80 percent of the time.

"Eliminating that recurring equipment expense if you're not really using it that much

is one of the places you can really cut back," Taylor says.

She also feels strongly about inventory waste. She opts to have all plant material delivered to a jobsite, which limits the number of times it's handled and avoids any chance for damage. Jobsite delivery typically costs about \$75, but Taylor doesn't believe that Roundtree is losing money. "It's that lean management mindset of just-in-time deliveries," she says. "From a cost standpoint, the plants don't show up until we need them and we didn't pay for them in advance." Plus, until the plants are taken off of the truck, they're the nursery's responsibility."



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USE READER SERVICE # 46



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continued from page 54

she needs solid leaders and training in place. Three of Roundtree's top production employees are being trained to take on leadership roles over the next year to cope with the company's growth. In February, for example, they traveled to Denver for a three-day green industry leadership training event. In addition, management is developing a training program and employee competency assessment to make certain quality continues. The program is a skill benchmarking system that ensures new employees master certain tasks within certain time periods after being hired. As it grows, managers will use these benchmarks to monitor quality and decide on promotions.

Because horticulture services isn't performed weekly like traditional maintenance, Roundtree takes care to explain this difference to clients upfront. Hutson includes a calendar with a homeowner's contract that shows what services will take place each month. "And there's always the disclaimer that the calendar is assuming weather is cooperating," Hutson says. "It's all on the calendar and I haven't had any issues as far as that goes."

PRODUCTION BOOSTER. Along with quality control, another chal-

"We've found that as our clientele has changed somewhat over the years, a lot of people like getting out and doing some of their own yard work. But they still want somebody to partner with them to make sure their home looks good all of the time."

- Johnette Taylor

lenge with growing maintenance is keeping production rates in check.

In addition to hiring Operations Manager Eric Taylor this January, Taylor implemented a time-tracking scanner system to streamline the process for production information reporting. "We're looking for ways to be more productive and not make people work harder," she says. The scanners compile

job, task and material data for both maintenance and installation crews.

Each production person has his own scanner that's used to clock in and out every day. Employees also have notebooks that list every task they perform, and they scan these tasks upon completion. On the maintenance side, crews scan in and out at each site via barcode tags affixed to fences with zip ties.

Before adding the scanners in January 2007, employees filled out work orders. At the end of the day data had to be manually entered. "All told it cost probably five to 10 hours a week of overtime, five to 10 hours a week of a manager's time, which is at a high rate of pay, and probably a minimum of 10 hours a week of a clerical person's time," Taylor says.

Now, at the end of the day each employee plugs his scanner into the computer and production data downloads automatically.

Although it's too early to tell how scanners, which cost about \$6,000, will save, Taylor has her expectations. She estimates the scanners will save the company the salary of one employee each week.

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USE READER SERVICE # 48

place since hiring Eric Taylor this year, Hutson in 2003 and Landscape Installation Manager Suzanne Ouren in 2004, Taylor is finally comfortable stepping out of her day-to-day activities. "My role now is to market and prepare the company and our clients for the future," she says. "Right now my role is to make sure in our marketing that people really understand who we are as a company so our clients are the most appropriate clients for us."

Taylor always has marketed her firm's expertise through community involvement and education, like teaching classes at the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Society. But with Roundtree in growth mode, the new challenge is to take the message she conveys in a two-hour class to a broader audience.

One solution is a DVD Roundtree produced two years ago. Playing on the popularity of HGTV, the three-minute spot includes a conversation with Taylor about the company and

its credentials and shows two projects transform from design to installation.

Roundtree usually distributes the DVDs as a "leave behind" after the first meeting. They're given to most clients, but those new to the landscaping process are ideal, Taylor says. "It clarifies any questions they have about the process and also can build some trust and confidence."

The initial cost, from \$5,000 to \$10,000, is nothing to balk at, Taylor acknowledges, but she says it's worth it. "Even if it helped close one sale, it would have more than paid for itself."

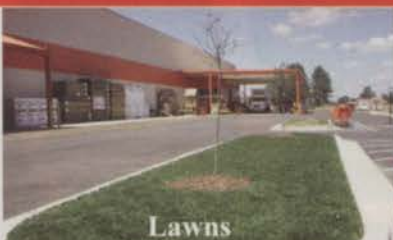
Another effective marketing program focuses on reaching high-end new homeowners. "When a realtor sells a house, being associated with them is one of the greatest opportunities to reach somebody new in town," Taylor says.

To pilot the program in 2004 she tapped a real estate agent she knew socially. Now she works with two agents, supplying them gift cards

to offer their clients for free design consultations, landscape cleanups or several weeks of maintenance. Taylor works only with high-end agents who close between 12 and 24 sales per year and earns about two jobs per year from each one. "It's a fairly expensive proposition on our part, but we really only need one good project to make it more than pay off," Taylor says, noting it costs less than \$50 annually to create the gift cards in house and distribute them by hand. "The consultations and free designs or maintenance is where our expense is involved." She estimates these expenses range from \$100 to \$1,000 per client.

With this solid marketing effort, growth plan and management team in place, Roundtree Landscaping's strategic positioning is more focused now than ever, but flexible, too. Taylor says: "Looking at our challenges, labor issues and also drought, when we can't install new plantings, we still have to maintain existing landscapes." ■

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DOOR TO DOOR ISN'T DEAD



Until 2003, telemarketing was one of the primary methods the lawn care industry used to generate business because of the opportunity to initiate a large volume of low-cost sales. The advent of the Federal Trade Commission's National Do Not Call Registry four years ago greatly inhibited the ability of lawn care firms to reach their prospective clients.

Facing this major roadblock, some of these companies found a new – or perhaps old – way to sell their services: knocking on doors.

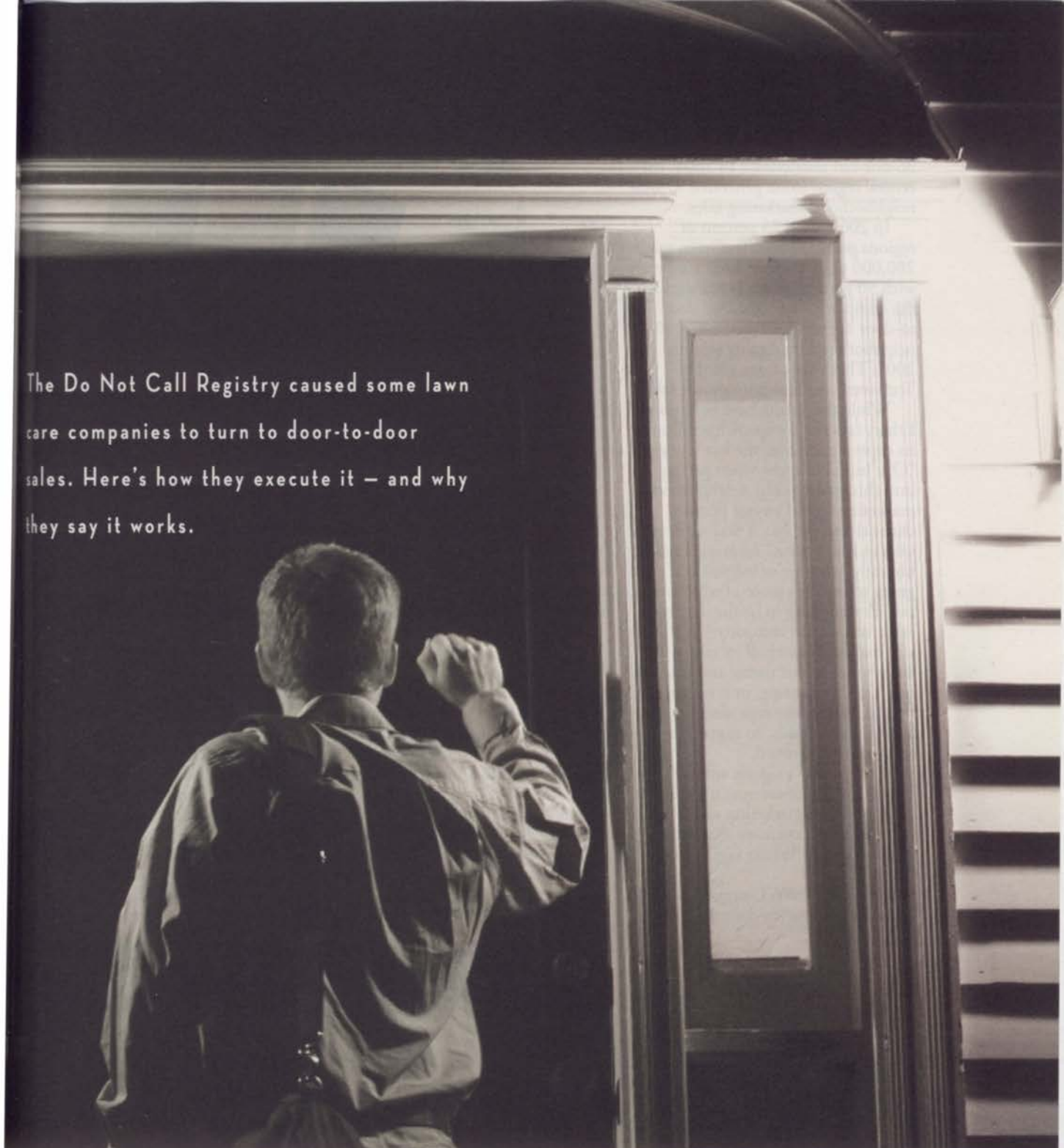
Door-to-door sales evokes thoughts of a simpler time, when asking people for their business was the extent of a salesman's

marketing efforts. Today, commerce is quite different. Marketers use “buzz” and “blink” techniques, search engine optimization, pay-per click advertising and a variety of other ways to get their names in front of their customers.

With these modern methods available, some business owners are skeptical that door knocking works. They say homeowners may perceive this sales strategy as a nuisance and that people in this day and age don't want to be bothered.

Although it takes persistence, regulatory due diligence and a

by marisa palmieri | associate editor



The Do Not Call Registry caused some lawn care companies to turn to door-to-door sales. Here's how they execute it — and why they say it works.

Photo: Dreamstime.com

greater investment in manpower, several lawn care companies are proving that door to door could be the way of the future.

TRUGREEN'S DOING IT. TruGreen ChemLawn is one of these companies.

The industry's top earner with close to \$1.5 billion in revenue in 2005, TruGreen at one time generated 100 percent of its sales from telemarketing, says Tim Erhart, director of sales. "With the do-not-call list in place, in order for our

company to continue to grow, we've had to move into other areas of sales generation, one of which is what we call neighborhood marketing."

In 2004, TruGreen's central region piloted its neighborhood marketing, or door-to-door sales, program under the leadership of regional Marketing Manager Kerry Tidwell. This region, which encompasses the state of Indiana, looked into door-to-door sales before the company's other 19 regions because it was one of the first areas to have statewide

do-not-call restrictions. In 2004, the central region alone generated 87,000 neighborhood marketing sales.

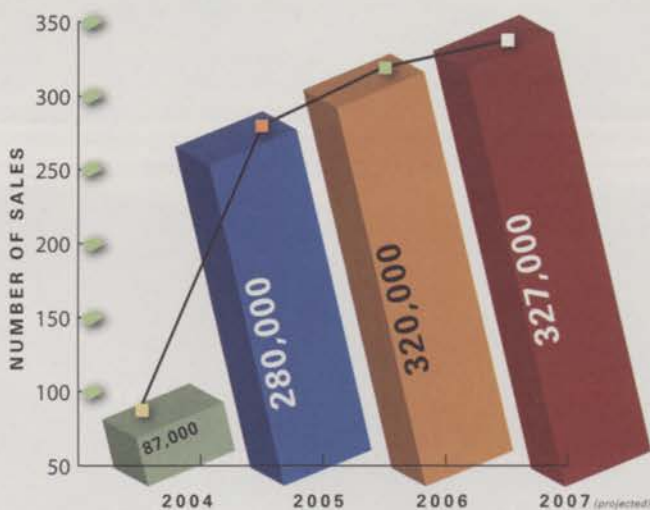
In 2005, with 75 percent of regions participating, TruGreen made 280,000 door-to-door sales. Last year, with 90 percent of regions compliant, the company made 320,000 door-to-door sales and projects 327,000 neighborhood marketing sales in 2007. That's about one-third of TruGreen's million-plus annual sales.

While the results have been good, Erhart says the company has adjusted its expectations over the last few years. "Our initial thought when getting into this was that our neighborhood marketing would be our primary channel and the No. 1 way we'd make sales as a company," he says. "Quite honestly, what we've learned is it's going to be a big piece of what we do, but it's not going to be the driving sales force in the company." TruGreen still makes at least half its sales over the phone, Erhart notes, and plans to use "pull" marketing, or creating inbound interest through direct mail and other methods, to supplement sales moving forward.

Cost played a significant part in this decision, considering a TruGreen neighborhood marketing sale is 50 percent more expensive than a telemarketing sale, Erhart says.

METHODOLOGY. Companies considering door-to-door sales and

TruGreen's Neighborhood Marketing Sales



marketing can implement it in a variety of ways, the simplest of which is the owner of a business knocking on doors each evening on his way home from the shop, says Joe Kucik, owner of Scott's LawnService of Lansing, Mich. "That's how I first got into lawn care back in 1984," he says. "I only had to do it for a month and a half before I was so busy I didn't have the time or need to do it anymore."

It can be difficult for an owner to get motivated to knock on doors himself, Kucik acknowledges. "Even after weeks of doing it, it was hard to knock on that first door every night," he says. "But I really believe you can take somebody who's not afraid to go door knocking and they could grow a lawn care business in a year."

Kucik founded his current busi-

ness, a Scott's franchise, in 2003 and started using a lead-generation method in 2006.

Ideally, one supervisor manages a team of six door knockers (who are typically friendly high school or college students) and two salesmen. For his first year testing door-to-door sales, Kucik promoted two of his best technicians to salesmen.

This crew targets one neighborhood at a time, deploying two door knockers per street. "They should go together for nothing else but safety, working across the street from each other," Kucik says. The uniformed door knockers introduce themselves and the company with the intent to generate a lead for the salesmen. When they reach the end of the

continued on page 69, sidebar on page 6

foot in the door

In his experience, a door-to-door sales representative is best equipped for success if he comes with an attractive offer, says Joe Kucik, owner of Scott's LawnService, Lansing, Mich. "You have to have an offer, and 5 or 10 percent off is probably not strong enough," he says. Half off the first application or one free service with a pre-paid program will yield better success, he says. "The better the offer, the better the results."

Having an offer can get a salesperson's foot in the door, but it's not everything, says Tim Erhart, TruGreen's director of sales. "What we've noticed is it's more of an issue of having better sales reps," he says. "If you can train your sales reps how to approach people at the door and capture their attention, they can do that without an offer." TruGreen has toyed with incentives, but Erhart says it hasn't conclusively proved better results.



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'EXPECT REJECTION' and Other Tips



Door-to-door has been the way The Southwestern Co. has sold books and educational materials for more than a 150 years, so we know that direct selling can add value to a business. However, a word of caution: A sales call gone awry can hurt your business as much or even more than a successful one can help. It is important to have a calm demeanor, positive attitude and to begin with a professional impression. Your prospect will sum you up in the first 30 or fewer seconds, which leaves you little time to create a first impression. Expect rejection and be able to deal with it accordingly, as it just goes with the territory when peddling door-to-door. Remember, the person on the other side of the door is not rejecting you, he or she is rejecting your service. Don't take it personally.

Here are a few tips for business owners to increase their client base through door-to-door cold calling and referrals:

Know the Law. Many local ordinances require a solicitation permit prior to knocking on your first door. If you don't have one where required, you are breaking the law and risk a citation, fine or court appearance. Also check to see if there are any time restrictions, such as no solicitation between the hours of 9 p.m. and 9 a.m., or if the permit expires by a certain date. Check with the Federal Trade Commission, as this government agency enforces specific laws related to door-to-door, such as the three-day cooling-off period.

Training. One of the biggest errors in door-to-door marketing is the lack of research, planning and training. Everything from business management to sales etiquette must be considered to maximize success. Business owners want to ensure they have the right people for the job, as the individual represents the company.

Ethics. Ethics should be part of the training. Always be truthful and represent the best in business practices. Reputable direct sellers

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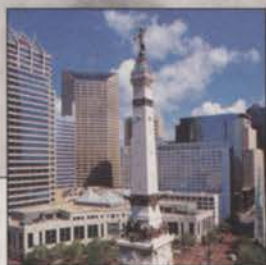
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abide by a code of ethics such as the Direct Selling Association's code. Respect those who display signage expressing their wishes not to be solicited. Always thank those who open their doors.

Credibility. Establish credibility from the start. Begin with an introduction that includes your name, company and services. Carry a photo ID with company information and a permit if required. Check in with the local authorities to let them know you are soliciting door-to-door. Wear professional apparel such as a uniform or logo item. This will assist with your credibility and reduce uncertainty of who you are and what company you represent.

Safety. Be aware of your surroundings. Carry a cell phone and do not go in a home if you feel uncomfortable. You can just as easily relay your message on the porch or in the yard – which may even work to your advantage because of the service being offered.

Ask for Referrals. While the homeowner may or may not need your service, he or she may know someone who does, such as a senior citizen or single parent.

Have a Leave-Behind. Be sure to leave behind a flyer, brochure or magnet with the company logo and contact information on it. Coupons or other discounts may even generate future business.

Evaluation. Keep records in the form of statistics to evaluate what worked, what did not, who worked, who didn't and what services were sold where. This information can be used in any number of ways to build a successful avenue of marketing your business to consumers. – *Trey Campbell*

The author is the communications manager for The Southwestern Co. Established in 1855 in Nashville, Tenn., it is a direct selling company. Southwestern helps college students run their own summer businesses by selling educational products to families in their homes. Contact Southwestern at www.southwestern.com or 888/602-7867.

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USE READER SERVICE # 51

continued from page 64

street, they give any leads to the supervisor, who relays them to the salesmen.

Although the door knocker tells the customer that a representative will be out in the next two days, Kucik likes the sales rep to follow up within 30 minutes. "It's a sales tool to exceed their expectations," he says. "Plus, they're home, you know it and you want to get in front of them. The salesmen can say, 'I knew you were interested, so I got out here right away.'"

After one year of implementation, Kucik says the company expects each door knocker, working three hours a day (typically between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m.) to yield nine leads, or about three leads per hour. Salesmen typically close one-third of those leads. He pays his door-to-door sales reps a commission like he would any salesperson and he pays door knockers \$6 to \$7 per lead.

"As long as you've got the right people in place, it's pretty effective," Kucik points out. "You can make sales for less than \$60 per sale. It can be an economical way to pick up new customers, like telemarketing used to be."

The Weed Man franchise system has implemented a similar system over

in Canada, the organization discovered that on-the-spot sales didn't work. "What we know about our customers is that they want to buy from a company or person they have a relationship with," says Phil Fogarty, submaster franchisor for Weed Man in Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. "So we decided to try to create

"Our initial thought when getting into this was that our neighborhood marketing would be our primary channel and the No. 1 way we'd make sales as a company... It's going to be a piece of what we do, but it's not going to be the driving sales force in the company."

- Tim Erhart

the last three years, also as a result of the do-not-call list.

Weed Man first tested direct selling, where a salesman simply knocked on the door himself. After some trials

that relationship by making several contacts with them. We're using our door knockers as lead generators, like in telemarketing." After receiving the door-to-door leads, sales representa-

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tives set up firm appointments over the phone and visit their prospective clients at their homes.

Like Kucik, Weed Man owners also prefer to hire high school or college students as door knockers. "The younger they look, the more likely people are to come to the door," Fogarty says, adding that Weed Man franchises send pairs of knockers out into targeted neighborhoods, supervised by an adult. Although the teams' sizes and structures vary from location to location, on average Weed Man door knockers generate one and a half to two leads per hour, Fogarty says. "It's been wonderful as a good way to start off a relationship. We still take advantage of the phone as much as we can, but we don't stop because someone won't let us call them. We want density in our neighborhoods and this is a great way to do it."

TruGreen's approach is to send the salesmen directly out into the field, not preceded by a lead generator.

The TruGreen neighborhood marketing sales force is generally made up of former telemarketing salesmen. "When we first started, we thought it would be a completely different salesperson," Erhart says. "But in a lot of cases our telephone reps made the transition into knocking on doors." Companywide, 80 percent of TruGreen's door-to-door sales take place in the spring, so these salesmen may do telemarketing or quality audits the rest of the year.

In fact, telemarketing is a big part of TruGreen's neighborhood marketing success. The company learned along the way that homeowners may say they're interested but prefer to talk to their spouses before making buying decisions. In this case, a TruGreen representative takes down the homeowner's name and phone number and asks him or her to initial a form granting TruGreen permission to follow up with a phone call.

Typically, neighborhood marketing reps spend about six hours per day

which helps generate in-bound sales, Erhart says.

CHALLENGING PROPOSITION.

Fear of rejection and alienating consumers is one major challenge associated with door-to-door sales and marketing efforts. "There's a fear of anything new," Fogarty says. "Occasionally somebody's having a bad day, but generally we feel people are pretty receptive."

If you're polite, nine out of 10 people say thanks for stopping by, Kucik says. "I've only had one person slam a door in my face," he says.

Erhart agrees. "I started out in this business as a sales rep on the phone and I thought the doors were just going to shut in my face, but that's not what happened," he says. "Does it happen occasionally? Yes, but it's not near as often as you'd think. On a nice day when you're talking about how to make someone's lawn look better, people are more receptive than you'd think."

The key to a well-received door-to-door sales plan is following soliciting laws and regulations, which can be tricky because restrictions are different from municipality to municipality. Some towns simply require that solicitors request permission, others require permits (which can range from \$20 to \$2,000) and some prohibit door-to-door sales entirely.

Regardless of laws and restrictions, direct sales professionals say to always respect an individual homeowner's wishes. "If an individual puts a sign on their door saying 'No Soliciting,' then we'll turn around and go away," Fogarty says.

Weather, too, is another factor to consider. "I think weather's the biggest challenge," Erhart says.

Although TruGreen's neighborhood sales team knocks on doors rain or shine, homeowners are less likely to come out and talk if the weather is nasty, he says. But Fogarty says poor weather can be an advantage. "Everyone's home," he says.

As with any kind of sales, Erhart says a sales rep with a winning, positive attitude gives neighborhood marketing the best chance of success. As he explains, "If you're going to smile and walk up and down the street and be enthusiastic about what you're doing, then you can make as many sales as you want." ■



"Our opinion of that is it would just add cost," Erhart says.

Depending on the region, TruGreen uses a territorial concept, where teams of sales representatives are assigned to a set of ZIP codes to target for the entire spring, or a crew-canvassing concept, where a group of eight to 10 salesmen blast a particular neighborhood in one day. Although homeowners sign commitments on the spot, no money is exchanged at the door.

in the field, knocking on at least 100 doors per day, and then make these follow-up calls in the evening. "Some of our neighborhood sales reps make a good chunk of their sales over the phone because of that process," Erhart says. On average, the neighborhood marketing team's goal is 10 to 11 sales per week per person.

Considering that a person is home at only 23 percent of the doors company reps knock on, TruGreen leaves marketing materials in the mailbox,

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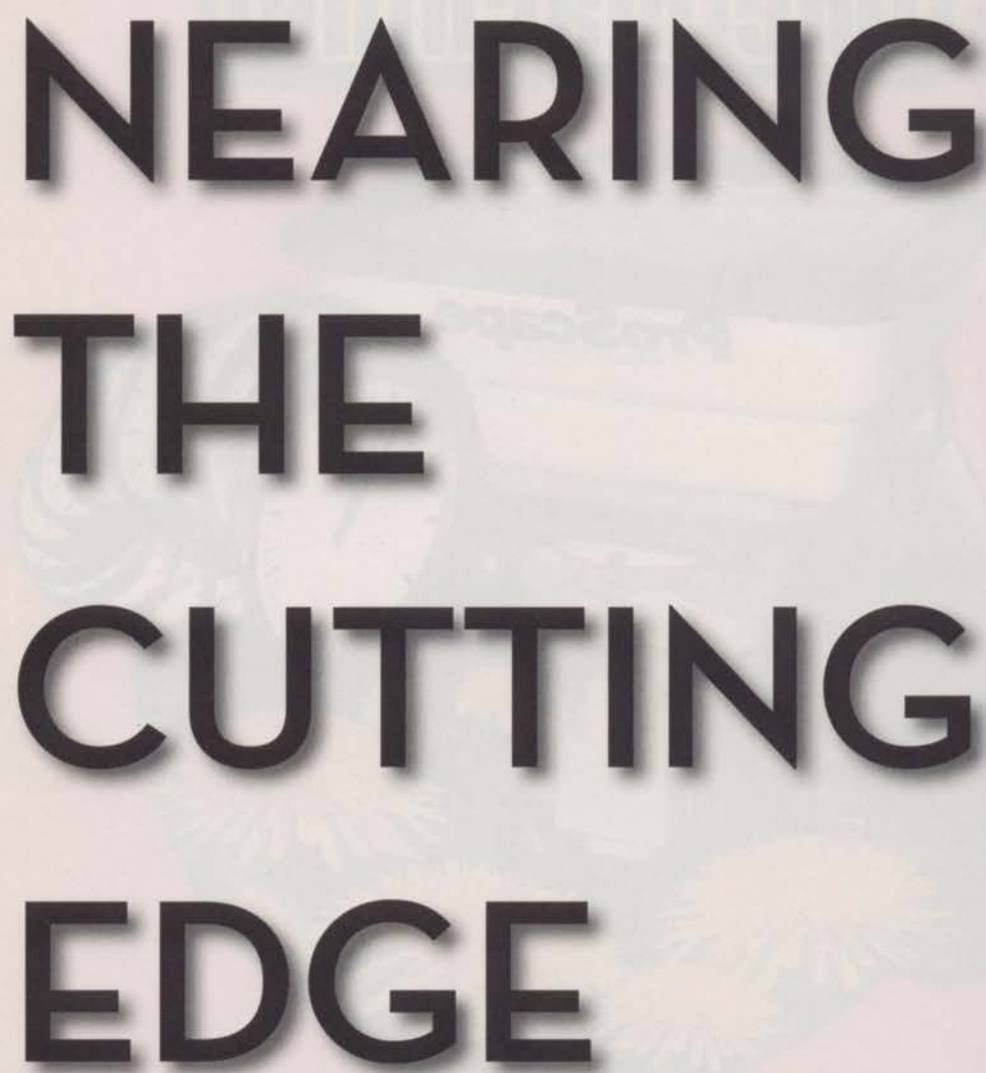
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NEARING THE CUTTING EDGE



Contractors like the advantages of communication technology but have been slow to adapt.

W

hen it comes to business technology, nearly three quarters of landscape contractors consider themselves proactive, integrating high-tech systems to increase performance and avoid operational problems.

Though, when probed further, a recent *Lawn & Landscape* business technology survey discovered that contractors more readily invest in and adopt in-the-field technology than back-office systems.

For example, nearly 57 percent of landscape contractors budget for business technology purchases, the *Lawn & Landscape* study shows, and 84 percent earmark \$5,000 or less for technology investments and system upgrades.

And for the most part, landscape contractors believe their technology investments have made their business processes more effective (78 percent) more so than improving employee

by mike zawacki | managing editor



Photo: Dreamstime.com

performance (66 percent), according to survey data. Overall, 63 percent of contractors believe these investments have resulted in higher profits, the survey says.

So what technologies are landscape contractors investing in? Cellular and other two-way communication technology – providing a vital link between the work crews and headquarters – are the most readily adopted by landscape contractors, the *Lawn & Landscape* study reveals.

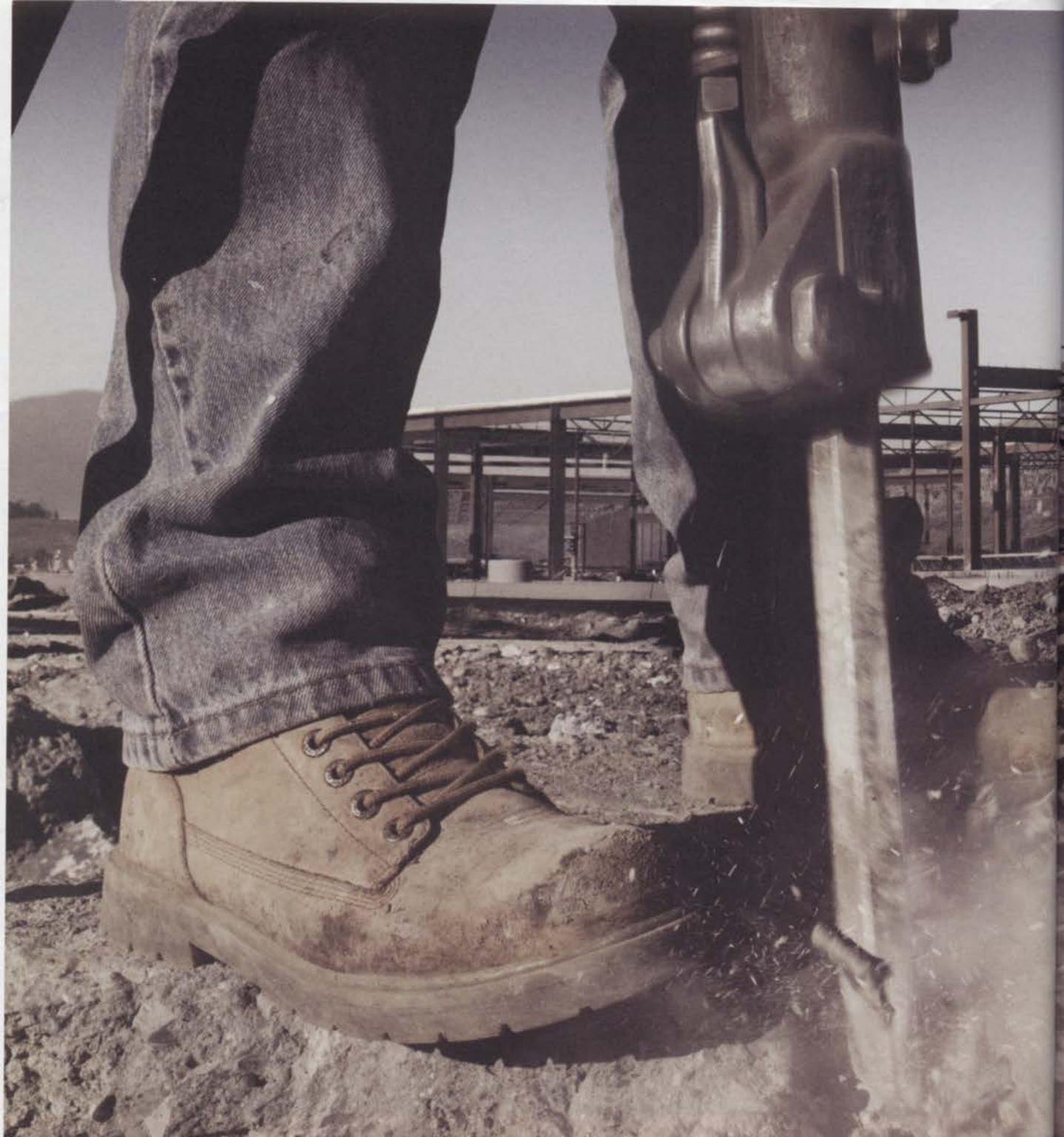
In contrast, more cutting-edge – and less-proven – technology such as global positioning systems (GPS), while holding the potential for greater efficiency and performance, remains relatively untested in the green industry, survey participants indicate.

Having nearly 60 percent of landscape contractors regard business technology as a budgetary line item is not as encouraging as the figure may indicate, says David Sloan, marketing director for Kansas City-based Drafix Software.

"It also means nearly half – the other 40 percent or so – dismiss technology," he says.

While unexpected when you consider the vital role business technology plays with many modern companies, Sloan says it may be an accurate reflection for the landscape industry. "A lot of landscape contractors out there are mom-and-pop-type shops that are comfortable in the (low-tech) way they've been doing business and are alright with that,"

continued on page 76



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continued from page 73

Sloan says. "I would guess that 43 percent who are not budgeting for these improvements are one- and two-man shops who are happy with their paper and pen systems."

A company's size, though, has a bearing on its attitude towards adopting and implementing business technology. For example, the *Lawn & Landscape* survey found that landscape companies reporting more than \$500,000 in annual revenue budget for technology purchases and upgrades, provide their employees with cellular and two-way communication devices, maintain an active presence on the Web and more frequently update and/or replace hardware and software systems.

As a result, these companies more often report a return on their technology investments. Likewise, 92 percent of these contractors report that integrating technology has made their business processes more effective, and 76 percent reported their businesses were more profitable, the study found.

COMMUNICATION. Accessibility drives landscape contractors' desire to be connected to clients, crews and companies.

More than 67 percent of landscape contractors provide their employees with cell phones for communication, according to the *Lawn & Landscape* survey data. Likewise, 94 percent of firms reporting more than \$500,000 in revenue provide cellular devices to some members of their workforce, the study says.

So who's dialing? Overall, contractors say the top employees issued these tools include foremen/supervisors (71 percent) top-level managers (56 percent), and crew chiefs (40 percent), according to the *Lawn & Landscape* survey. In contrast, the study found less than 15 percent of landscape companies provide their laborers with cell phones, and a small contingent (less than 5 percent) provide them to everyone on staff.

Less popular among all landscape contractors surveyed were two-way or Nextel-type devices, with less than a third (31 percent) of contractors using the walkie-talkie/cellular-hybrid communication devices, the survey says. However, two-way devices were more popular among firms reporting more than \$500,000 in revenue (62

percent), the data says. And as seen with cell phones, the devices were allocated most often to foremen/supervisors (75 percent), top-level managers (58 percent) and crew chiefs (46 percent).

Communication is key to running a successful landscape business, says Scott Hutchings, vice president of operations at Grant & Power Landscaping in West Chicago, Ill. His firm provides all employees with cell phones and adds the investment is worthwhile.

"I like knowing I'm connected to all of my foremen regardless of whether I have a landscaping issue or a snow removal issue," Hutchings says. "And all of our clients like knowing they're connected to me and can reach me on my cell at any time."

SOFTWARE. When it comes to updating design, business and accounting software, the majority of landscape contractors are keeping these systems up to date.

In fact, nearly 66 percent of landscape contractors have updated their computer software within the last year, according to the study, and an additional 24 percent have done so within the last three years. Only 2.5 percent of contractors say they've waited longer than a decade to do so.

With regard to landscape design software, the numbers match up to the trends Sloan has observed in the marketplace.

"Between 20 and 30 percent of the people I talk to at the shows still do this by hand," Sloan says.

"They seem in-

going digital

Digital cameras may be one of the most popular high-tech tools used by landscape contractors, according to a recent *Lawn & Landscape* business technology usage study.

More than 87 percent of contractors use a digital camera for business purposes, the study says.

And it's a trend that's most popular among contractors at larger landscape firms. More than 95 percent of contractors at firms reporting more than \$500,000 in annual revenue use digital camera, according to the study.

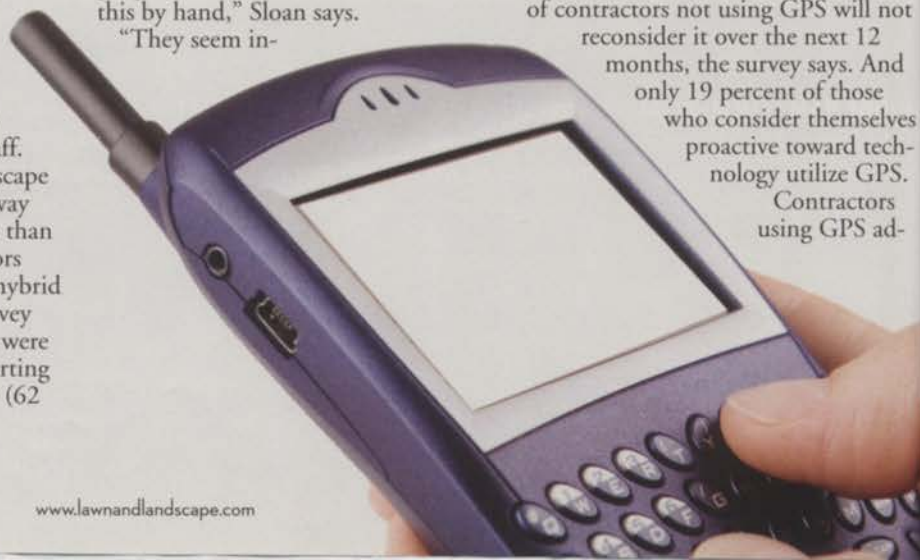
terested in the technology, but they're just not budgeting for it. One of the No. 1 challenges we face is getting the message across to these landscape contractors that technology is not your enemy, it's your friend."

GPS. Despite its apparent benefits, landscape contractors are not utilizing global positioning systems (GPS) in their operations, the study discovered.

More than 85 percent of contractors do not use GPS, and the main reason they dismiss the technology is they do not believe it is applicable to their landscape operations. Other reasons to pass on GPS include the rewards not justifying the financial investment, the need to invest in heavy equipment and the business isn't large enough in size to warrant adopting the technology, contractors say.

And while some say they are investigating in GPS, nearly 65 percent of contractors not using GPS will not reconsider it over the next 12 months, the survey says. And only 19 percent of those who consider themselves proactive toward technology utilize GPS.

Contractors using GPS ad-



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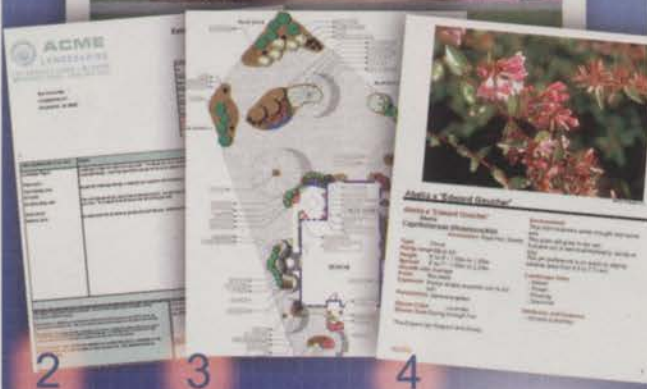
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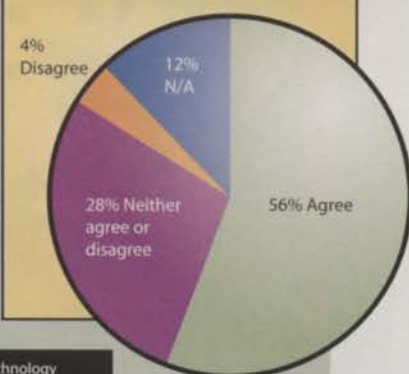
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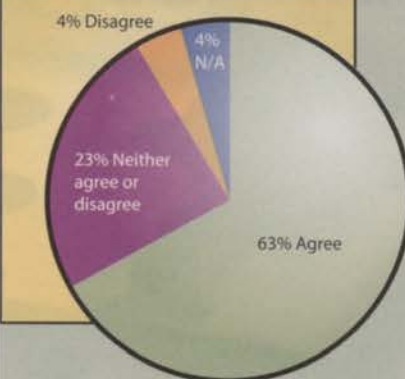
business technology

technology assimilation

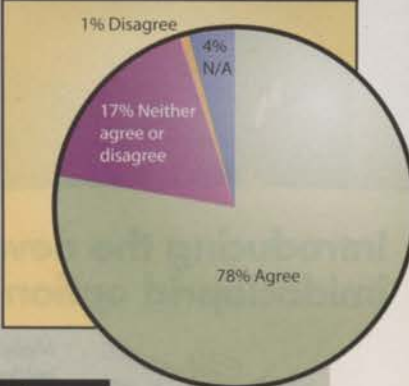
Integrating technology has made my employees more effective.



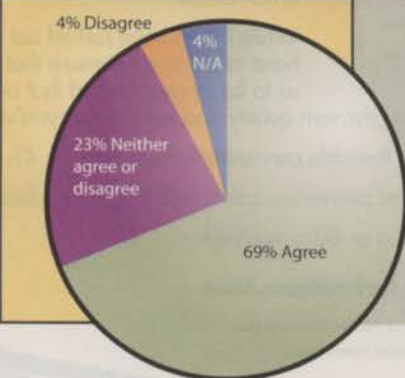
The investments I have made in technology have made my business more profitable.



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opted the technology for routing (62 percent), to increase operations and procedural efficiencies (58 percent) and to track work crews and their progress (44 percent), the study says. And while the rewards have justified the investment for 78 percent of GPS users, the study indicates 52 percent see additional untapped potential in the technology.

thom Data Systems in Tinton Falls, N.J. Most landscape matters do not require an immediate response.

Rather, Mish says a better investment is software that creates tighter routing for landscape contractors. "A better use of the money is to use technology that will create more efficient routes for the contractor's day-to-day work," she says. "This is where you'll

"Fleet tracking has been the big buzz word for GPS," Kucik says. "Sure, everyone wants to know where their trucks are at, and every owner has fears about having unsupervised crews out in the field all days.

"But there's also the improved safety features in allowing drivers to not have to read maps while they drive and the efficiency factor in getting crews to their destination over the shortest distance possible," he says. "Contractors using these systems together are seeing a significant increase in productivity, between a 10- to 15-percent increase."

HIGH-TECH. The use of handheld devices and laptop computers in the field among landscape contractors was split almost evenly, with nearly 45 percent of contractors saying they or someone on their staffs utilize one of these devices in the field. This trend, however, increases with higher-performing firms, the study found, with

"A lot of landscape contractors out there are mom-and-pop-type shops that are comfortable in the (low-tech) way they've been doing business and are alright with that." - David Sloan

Contractors don't consider GPS a good fit for their operations because the technology is more ideal for tracking fleets and personnel for timely matters and issues, says Jamie Mish, sales and marketing manager at Mara-

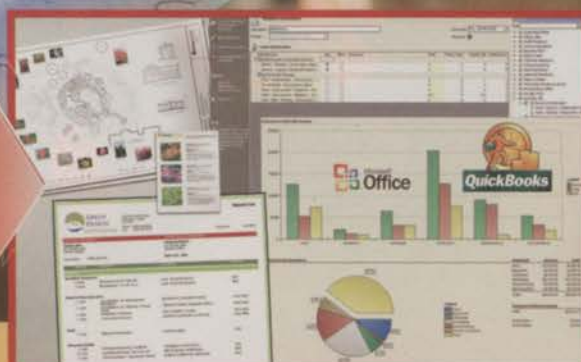
find the cost savings."

Successful integration is an education issue, says Joe Kucik, owner of Real Green Systems in Walled Lake, Mich. GPS technology offers more than fleet tracking, he says.

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more than 90 percent of contractors reporting more than \$500,000 in annual revenue using these portable high-tech tools.

"This is a trend that has occurred over the last few years," Mish says. "People want to be connected to their office and to information."

The popularity stems from the various applications of the mobile solution hardware and software that increase productivity. Contractors using these devices have access to more information than they ever have had before, whether it's a project proposal or a client history, Mish says. Likewise, contractors are now able to input information and data right in the field instead of deciphering handwritten notes back at the office. And, mobile devices decrease or eliminate the amount of data entry done by office support staff, freeing

them up to attend to other duties, she says.

Like many contractors using laptop computers in the field, Hutchings says he keeps his in his truck at all times. "I have a portable printer that

goes with my laptop which enables me to write up bids on-site," Hutchings says. "For me, it's a tool that makes my job a lot easier."

However, Kucik does not believe such a high percentage of contractors are using this handheld technology in the field. While they may say they are using laptops and handhelds in the field, they most likely are not using the associated industry-specific software systems to their fullest capacity.

"I believe the number contractors fully using this technology and these business systems is closer to the percentage who say they are using GPS," he says.

Kucik argues handheld devices allow contractors to integrate, at a cost savings, the innovations associated with GPS along with data collection to create a more efficient mobile system.

"These products have a lot of functionality," he says.

at a glance

During the first quarter of 2007, *Lawn & Landscape* surveyed landscape contractors throughout the United States on issues relating to their adoption, application and maintenance of technology. With the assistance of the research company InsightExpress, *Lawn & Landscape* surveyed nearly 350 landscape professionals from its subscription list. In addition, we interviewed additional contractors and technology suppliers to gain their insights into trends regarding technology usage and the landscape industry.

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USE READER SERVICE # 62

THE WEB. While contractors are technology minded, they may not be as savvy with components considered business staple.

Sixty-six percent of landscape contractors do not have company Web sites, the study found. Likewise, 63 percent of contractors who consider themselves "proactive" in regard to technology usage don't maintain a presence on the Internet, according to the *Lawn & Landscape* study.

The lowest frequency (30 percent) of company Web sites was seen among Midwestern landscape contractors, while the highest (36 percent) is among contractors in the western U.S., the study found.

Many landscape contractors still don't see the business potential inherent in having a presence on the Internet, says Sal Mortilla, owner of Landscaping Unlimited in Long Island, N.Y.

"This is a classic example of our industry being in the dark ages," says

Mortilla, who generates about 85 percent of his business via his Web site.

Contractors have been slow to understand that many customers prefer to deal with firms who use technology, Mortilla says. "If they didn't then they wouldn't be on the Internet," he says. "I see guys who could be doing so much better than they are if they embraced the technology."

Sixty-six percent of contractors without a Web presence means gained Web leads for the 34 percent of landscape contractors who are active on the Web, Mish says.

"Web sites don't cost much to put up and maintain and the main point of having the Web site is to get sales leads," she says. "And the cost per lead is very low. And it's not like the Yellow Pages where you compete against everyone else on the page."

Grant & Power uses its Web presence as a component of the sales process, Hutchings says. The site enables clients to begin the selection of a

"wish list" of what they'd like to have in a design/build project, he says.

"When I get to the client's home they're ready to go," Hutchings says. "It takes out a lot of the time lost in those middle steps explaining our services and what's available. Instead we can start right in and spend more time on the nitty gritty of the design. Ultimately, I'm not selling a single landscaping project, I'm building a relationship."

However, the study reveals that e-mail is a much more popular tool for landscape contractors than Web sites. Nearly 80 percent of contractors say they and their employees utilize e-mail for work-related activities.

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Visit the April Online Extras section for more insight into how landscape contractors are utilizing technology systems to enhance their business operations.

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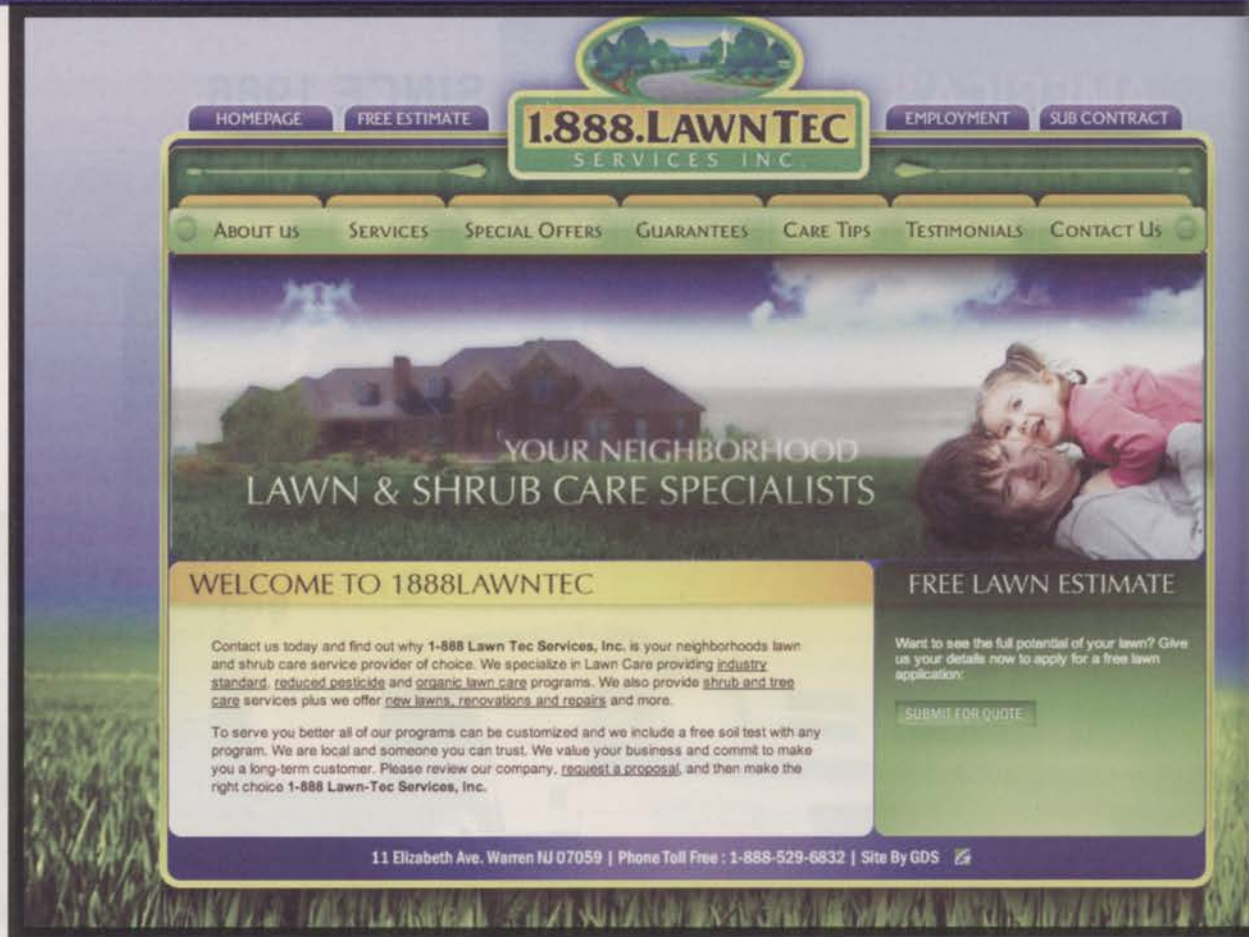
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NET GAMES

What you should – and shouldn't – do when establishing or revamping your company's Web site.

by dan antonelli | contributing editor



Competing against your larger competitors or franchise-type lawn services with an amateur approach to online marketing can be difficult. For this company (www.1888lawntec.com), their online presence reflects a professional, franchise-life feel, while providing potential clients a clear understanding of their lawn and shrub care services. Photos: Graphic D-Signs

This Web site (www.nicolazzobros.com) illustrates a simple way to quickly view photos. Simply place the mouse on the smaller thumbnails on the left side and the large photos pop into the window on the right side.



Tired of telling your customers that you don't have a Web site? Or maybe you have a Web site but it's not working for you. There's no better time to revisit the issue of whether or not you should be on the net. But first, you need to be aware of what works and what doesn't, as well as what a site can and can't do for your landscape business.

WHAT A SITE WON'T DO FOR YOU. The biggest misconception most landscape contractors have is that once they get a Web site, somehow it's going to bring in a lot of business on its own. The reality is most landscape contractors want to stay within a 75 mile radius of their home town. This limits the effectiveness of search engines, since most customers might search using more broad terms (i.e. "landscaping NJ" or "New Jersey landscape contractors") and that means you may get leads outside of your area. So, your search engine strategy has to be very narrow and region specific in focus.

But make no mistake, a properly optimized site will bring in leads and should pay for itself quickly. For instance, ranking No. 1 on Google for a search phrase like "NJ Landscape Contractors" means your link will be in front of thousands of potential clients during the course of a year.

WHAT YOUR SITE SHOULD DO. First and foremost, your site should establish your company as a reputable, professional organization. It should make it easy for potential customers to quickly look through your work and establish a positive impression of your firm. With that in mind, it should also help eliminate the wrong kind of clients just as it should reel in the right.

Some landscape company sites present high-end design work, so having photos of their high-end clients' landscapes on their homepage or a button on their site will make it obvious that the visitor has come to the right company. On the flip side, visitors looking for a less expensive firm that does more simplistic designs may believe they're at the wrong place. In practice, this works well as a tool when a potential client is on the phone and inquiring about your service. You can point them to the site, and they'll immediately get a sense for what you do. It's also helpful if you get cornered about pricing options. You can have the potential client view the portfolio section of your

continued on page 90





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continued from page 87

site and give price ranges for actual jobs completed. The time you'll save is immeasurable. You'll weed out the tire-kickers, and bring in the people who will pay for your work.

Also, there are some numbers you should know to get started. A typical starting price for an entry-level site that includes search engine optimization is \$3,500. Web hosting plans can range from \$19 to \$35 per month. Routine maintenance on a site (edits, changing photos, etc.) by a designer typically run \$85 per hour.

PLANNING YOUR PRESENCE.

Here are some points to consider, as well as common pitfalls to avoid, when planning your online presence.

1. Designing your own Web site. If you're a creative person and have an industry standard Web design program, designing a Web site can look easy. But just like your clients who think laying down brick pavers must be pretty easy, clearly there's a lot involved in building a good marketing tool for your firm. As a business that's selling the importance of a neat, professional job and installation, you don't want to present an amateur image. Designing your own site may be a poor use of your resources because the learning curve is steep, so think about this seriously before attempting it.

2. Hiring a friend, student, etc. Be careful of this concept as well. You may get a Web site that can be functional but fails to deliver the strategic marketing objectives of your business.

3. Developing a marketing plan for your Web site. You'll hear from some people who have had a site built complain it's not generating any leads or sales. Building a site and marketing a site are two different things. You can't expect that once the site is up suddenly Google's going to make you No. 1 for "Landscape Designer California." Your Web designer should be advising you on a marketing program designed to generate traffic to your site. This is a separate component and might consist of a paid placement strategy with the major search engines, in addition to traditional search engine optimization techniques. A good rule of thumb here is to really look for actual search engine results from the design firm you are considering hiring.

ANATOMY OF A LANDSCAPE WEB SITE DESIGN



1. Page Title. The page title contains relevant keywords and phrases that will help with the search engine ranking.

2. Easy Navigation. Keep this as simple as possible – About Us, Services, Gallery, Contact Us, Testimonials and a Site map (which helps for search engines).

3. Flash Element. You can use Flash to create some visual excitement on the site while being able to highlight one of your best jobs. This site's introduction has some audio with a bird that "pulls" the image in and faux waterfall movement.

4. Keyword Density. It's important to place as many keywords in HTML (not graphics which cannot be read by search engines) on the home page. Here, it's placed within the copy terms that people would use to find a company like this.

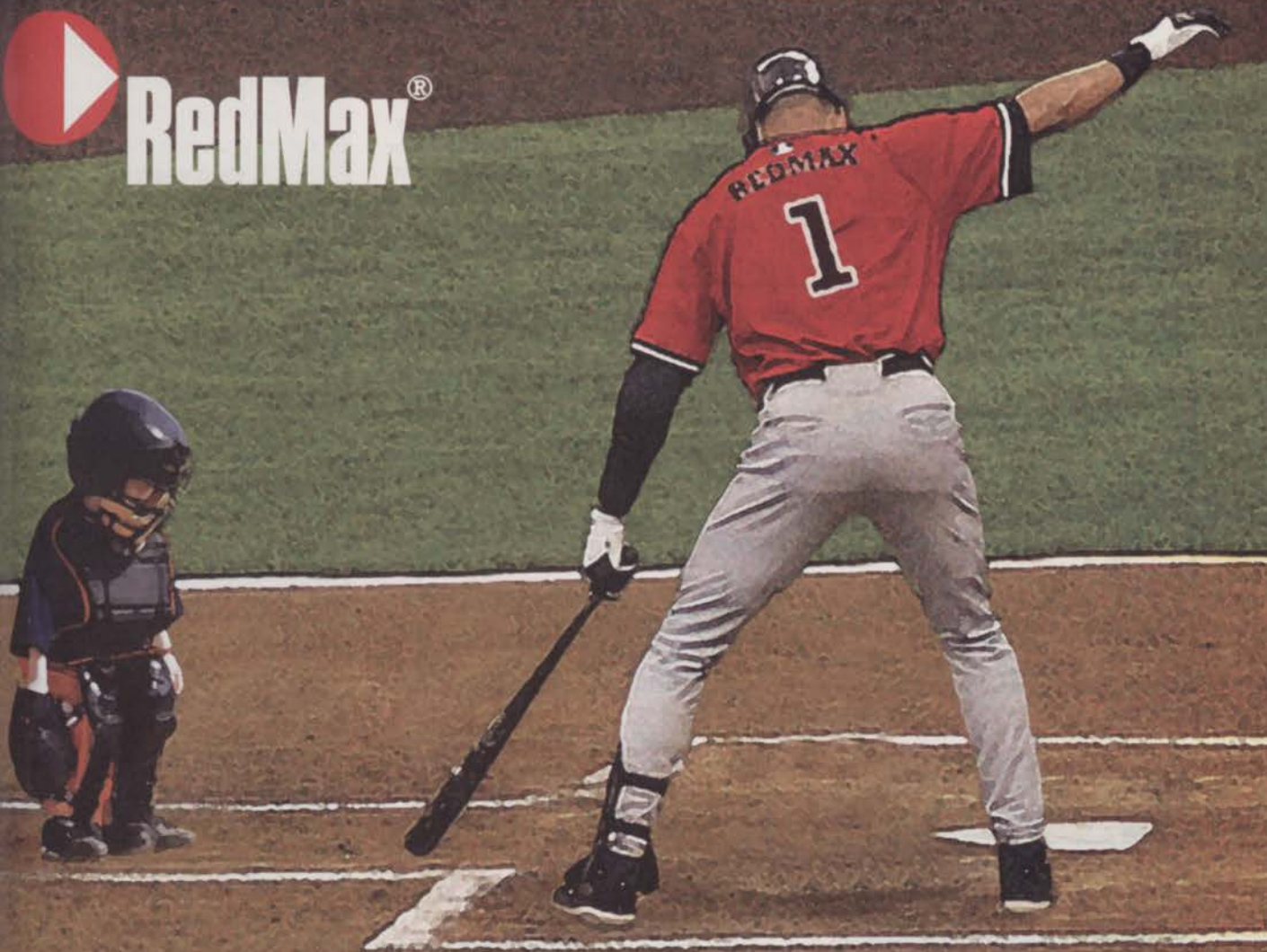
5. Address and Contact Info. This information appears on every page throughout the site. You don't want visitors to work to find out how to contact you.

6. Page Width. In general, it is still a good idea to have your site designed for 800 pixels wide, although you want to also make sure the site looks pleasing on larger monitors. Use sophisticated background fills to ensure the site looks good on larger monitors with higher resolutions settings.

4. Having poor navigational structure. The Web site needs to contain a logical flow and hierarchy. There are certain things viewers, especially potential clients, expect to see. The Web site should be as succinct as possible and present the relevant information

in a cohesive, logical manner. It should be easy for people to contact you (phone numbers and e-mail information should be on every page). Nothing on the Web site should be more than three clicks away from finding.

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5. Including unprofessional copy-writing. Contrary to the common myth that "no one reads anything; they just look at the pictures" – you'll want to make sure the wording on the Web site is polished and professional and speaks on the level of your target audience. While you may know what "compacted underlayment for brick

pavers" is, don't assume your audience does. To them, it's just a pretty patio. Ask your designer if they work with a copywriter or have one on staff who can interview you and write the copy for the Web site. Even if you write the bulk of the copy yourself, you'll want to make sure a professional reviews and thoroughly edits it.

Once the site is built, it's time to market it. Here are a few quick tips on marketing your new site.

1. Paid search engine placement. A paid strategy might entail paying to have your site listed on the top of the search engine for various search terms under the "sponsored links" category. This allows you to set a budget per month, and you are charged per-click when someone goes to your site from the search engine. This is very effective but can get expensive the broader the term. You are able to target the reach to specific regions.

2. Your answering machine/voicemail. If no one is there to answer your office phone, make sure potential customers learn from your message that they can get immediate information on your Web site.

3. Stationery and business cards. Change everything that goes out of your office to now also include your Web site address.

4. Vehicles. Make sure your trucks contain your Web site address, especially on the back of your vehicles. People are more likely to remember the Web address than a phone number.

5. Meetings. Encourage your prospects to visit your site before you do a site visit. This will immediately set the tone for the type of company they are dealing with and presumably will give you a big leg up on the competition if your site looks professional.

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6. Establishing an archaic method for viewing photos. What's shown in your photo gallery is probably the biggest selling point to a potential customer. Unfortunately, many landscape Web sites make the viewer work too hard to look at their work, and they end up frustrating their audience and losing potential business. Years ago, one big issue that needed to be considered when building a landscape company Web site was the manner in which the photos were loaded and viewed. Load times were clearly more critical several years ago than they are today. The vast majority of higher-end consumers are on some type of high-speed Internet, and since they are presumably your target audience, you can have much easier and



efficient ways for your photos to be viewed, such as photo galleries using a disjointed photo method – a simple way to allow viewers to quickly look at a lot of photos. It eliminates pop-ups or annoying “before and next” type navigation. The view simply stays on one page and places the mouse over smaller thumbs, that, in turn, display the larger photo – nothing to click and no browser “back” buttons needed.

7. Templated sites. Templated sites offer the advantage of a lower cost entry onto the Web. You can pick from existing sites and through a Web interface, simply drop your information into the pre-packaged Web site. You can also add and delete photos on your own without needing to ask your Web designer. However, the question remains whether a templated Web site can adequately and professionally reflect your landscape company and your unique corporate identity.

8. Web hosting plans and stats importance. Consider the importance of the Web hosting plan offered by your designer. One feature that is often overlooked is how the Web hosting provides stats for your Web traffic. Analyzing your hits, page views and other information tells you where people go on your site and how long they stay. For example, if your average visitor spends only 30 seconds on your site, then maybe it's not

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working properly. It's also helpful to know where your traffic is originating from (i.e. search engines, other Web sites, etc).

9. Do your homework. When choosing a firm to undertake your Web design, make sure whoever you hire understands your company and the message you are trying to communicate. Make sure you find appealing designs in their portfolio; otherwise don't be surprised if you're not happy with their design for your business. 

The author is president and creative director for LandscaperMarketing.com and Graphic D-Signs. He can be reached at dan@landscapermarketing.com.

www.lawnandlandscape.com

Questions about your Web strategy? Start a discussion on the online message board.

Most Web sites utilize consistent buttons that people expect to see. Here's a general outline of what your Web site should include.

Home Page. Set the tone for the rest of the Web site. Flash on the home page can provide some visual excitement. It's also important to use a lot of HTML text on the home page for search engine purposes.

About. Here's where you can talk a little more in detail about your business, your dedication to excellence, your experience, awards, honors, etc. You may want to include a picture of yourself, your shop trucks and your employees.

Services. Have one page that lists all of your services, or perhaps multiple pages for each service category.

Portfolio. This is the meat of the site and where visitors will spend their time.

Testimonials. These add credibility and are very popular on a Web site. People really do read them.

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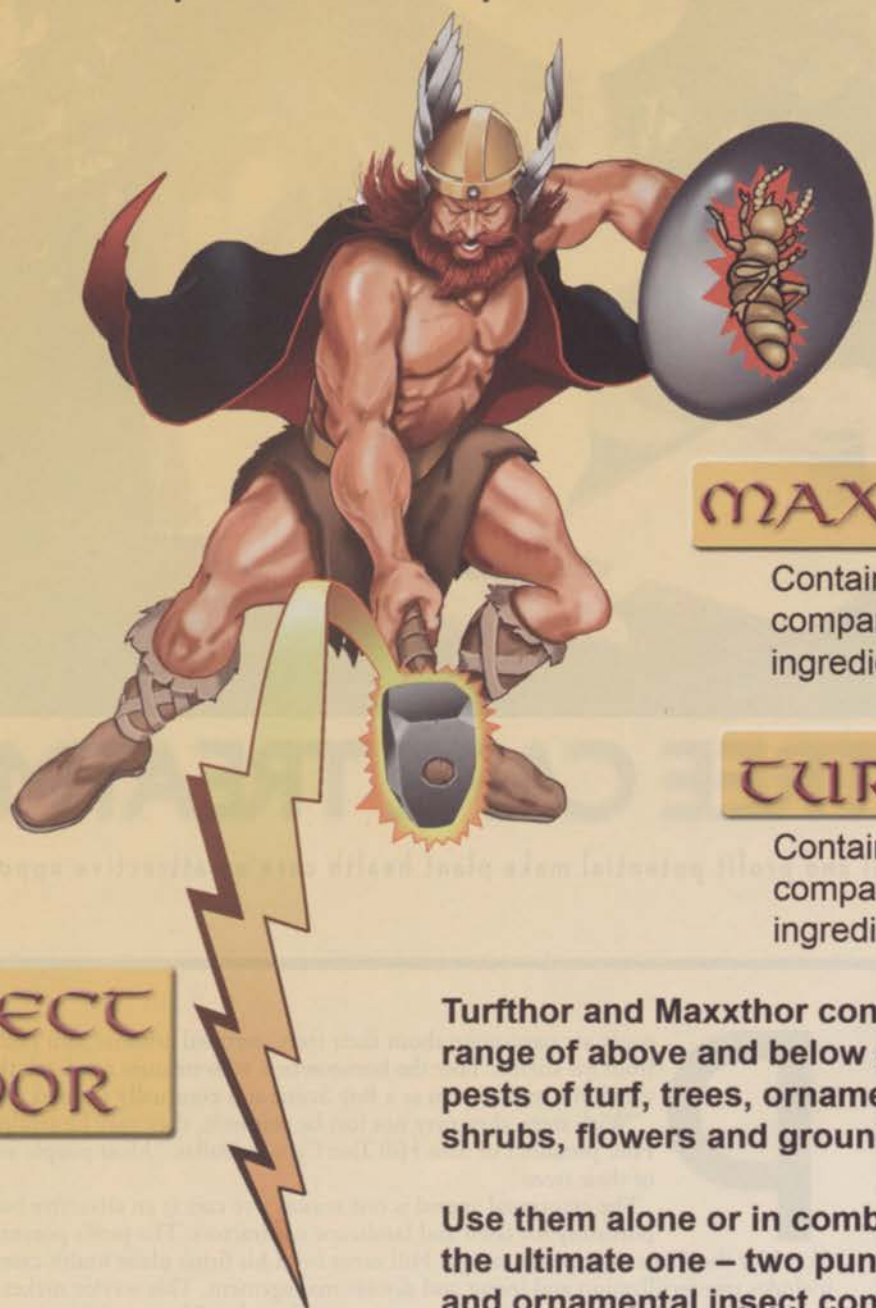
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Photos: International Society of Arboriculture

THE TREE CARE TREATMENT

Emotional appeal and profit potential make plant health care an attractive opportunity.

People are passionate about their trees, certified arborist Sam Hill has learned from his clients. Take the homeowners who treasure a red oak their son cultivated in a milk carton as a Boy Scout and eventually planted in the yard. "With trees, they may not just be aesthetic, they may be sentimental," says Hill, president of Sam Hill Tree Care in Dallas. "Most people want to take care of their trees."

The emotional appeal is one reason tree care is an attractive business opportunity for lawn and landscape contractors. The profit potential is another. Consider the 55 percent profit margin Hill earns from his firm's plant health care division, which includes tree fertilization and insect and disease management. This service makes up about a quarter of his company's near-\$1 million revenue. The other 75 percent is tree maintenance, which includes pruning, stump grinding, tree removal and other services.

"Plant health care is a really good service to provide, especially for a lawn maintenance business that's out on customers' properties on a weekly basis," Hill says. "That makes adding it even better because there's a pair of eyes on the trees every week." Many companies are looking to

by marisa palmieri | associate editor

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sell more, profitable services to their customer base, and plant health care (PHC) is a profitable, often easy-to-sell add-on.

Another reason tree care can be a natural fit for green industry firms is many companies, especially those providing lawn care services, already own some or most of the requisite equipment. For example, Hill's firm uses a mix of methods, including foliar spraying, soil injections and trunk injections to treat various pest problems and nutrient deficiencies.

Foliar spraying, one method used for applying tree care products like pesticides and horticultural oils, requires a hydraulic pesticide sprayer, which many lawn care companies already own. For those that don't, they can purchase a self-contained skid-mounted sprayer for between \$3,000 and \$4,000, Hill says. "It's a nice way to start because you can put it in the back of a truck or in the back of a trailer." There's a wide range in price for other sprayers, like truck-mounted, power take-off-driven sprayers, which can cost more than \$10,000. Lawn care companies that already have hydraulic sprayers should

remember they need a dedicated non-herbicide tank for their tree care services, Hill says. Lingering herbicide residue could damage a tree.

Soil injections, used for applying fertilizers and pesticides, are performed using a soil-injection probe connected to a tank by a pressurized hose. Contractors with spray tanks can use the same one for soil injections, and only need to purchase the soil-injection probe, which is available for about \$300 from a spray equipment distributor.

For trunk injections, contractors have several options including two types of microinjection (low-pressure or high-pressure) and macroinjection.

Tree care professionals use microinjection to tap into trees' vascular systems to apply insecticides, fungicides, fertilizers, micronutrients and plant growth regulators. Low-pressure microinjection requires a cordless drill and a rubber or plastic-faced mallet (all of which should cost less than \$100). The start-up cost for a high-pressure microinjection system, which requires a syringe-like direct-inject tool, is about \$600.

Macroinjection requires drilling a hole more than $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch in diameter and distributing 30 to 60 gallons of material into a tree. It's often used to treat diseases, especially high-profile ones like Dutch elm disease and oak wilt. The equipment needed includes a tank, plastic tubing and tees, which technicians insert into the holes they've drilled by lightly tapping them with a mallet. A set of equipment should cost about \$300.

Diagnostic skills are the No. 1 necessity when adding plant health care to a business. The International Society of Arboriculture offers arborist training and certification.

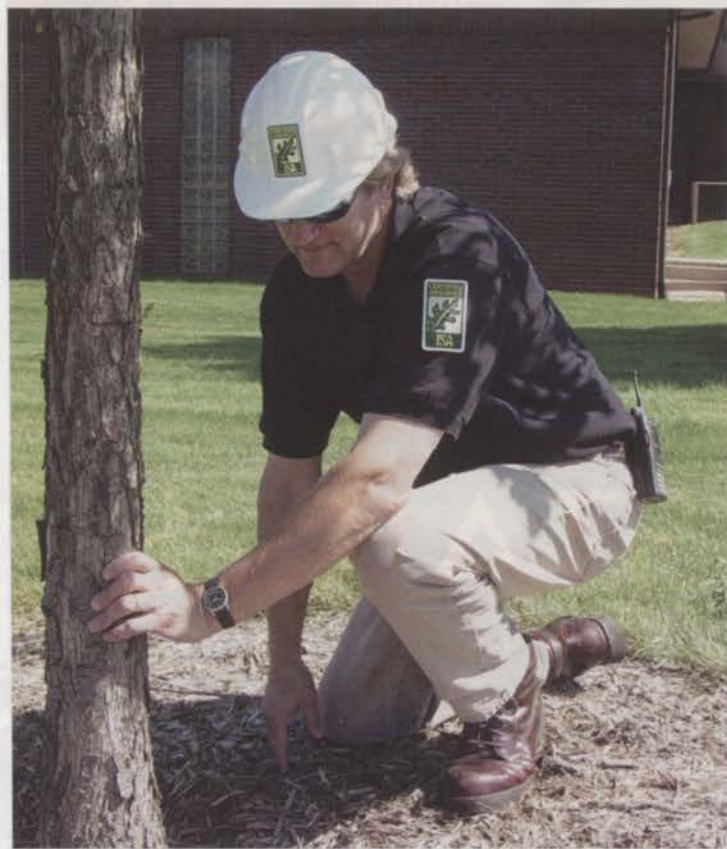
TRAINING TIPS. While equipment is essential to get the job done, contractors interested in plant health care will discover that gaining the diagnostic and application skills will be the greatest investment they make. "If you make a mistake on a lawn, the customer won't be happy, but you could re-sod it and they'd have another lawn in a few weeks," Hill says. "If something happens to a 100-year-old tree, there's probably going to be litigation. People are passionate about their trees, so you should get as much education as possible so you can avoid misdiagnosis and misapplication."

On the diagnostic level, training in ornamental integrated pest management (IPM) is necessary, but nothing compares to having a staff member certified by the International Society of Arboriculture (as either a certified arborist or a board-certified master arborist). These designations ensure the professional is knowledgeable in diagnostics and treatment of tree problems, fertilization and other issues. "The industry has done a good job promoting that certification, and a lot of customers will ask if you're certified," Hill adds.

Industry associations like the ISA and the Tree Care Industry Association also provide continuing education for tree care professionals. "I would also recommend, even though I'm down in Texas, the University of Maryland's Advanced Landscape IPM PHC Short Course," Hill says. "My plant material and climate are different, but I was able to adapt the information."

Applicator training is typically done in-house at Sam Hill Tree Care, although the company also sends technicians to training sponsored by the Texas Cooperative Extension and other local sources. Because tree care technicians handle pesticides, they are required to have up-to-date pesticide applicators' licenses. Manufacturers of tree care products also conduct training seminars, which are particularly helpful if the specific product requires its own application technique.

SERVICE SETUP. Tree care divisions can take various shapes within companies. At Sam Hill Tree Care, the PHC division runs two one-man crews. Each technician has the potential to generate between \$180,000 and \$200,000 in revenue annually, Hill





IPM knowledge is key when learning plant health care diagnostics. Hill recommends the University of Maryland's Advanced Landscape IPM PHC Short Course.

says. Since 1999 the division has averaged 20 to 50 percent growth each year, and Hill shoots for a 55 percent net profit on all services in this segment. "We're able to hit this number because it's just one man and a truck," he says. "Our pruning crews require three men, a large truck and a chipper plus tons of liability. We promote PHC as much as possible and use pruning to get in the door."

Other firms set up the service differently. Some cross train their lawn care applicators to perform both tree and lawn services on their routes. Others use tree care as an advancement opportunity for their lawn applicators, promoting excellent, detail-oriented technicians to their own PHC routes.

Hill conducts most of the company's sales by going out to visit clients' properties, doing walk-throughs and employing his PHC and IPM knowledge. In addition to listening to a client's concerns, he identifies possible key pest problems that may pop up in

the future. "Sometimes you just have to be honest and say we might not have a solution," he says. "It might not be the right plant for the right place. It may be better off to remove and replace it."

In tree care sales, educating the client is necessary because they're usually unfamiliar with application techniques and materials. Hill says one challenge is remembering that competing companies may take different approaches to plant health care. "Because tree care is not the client's specialty, it's hard for them to differentiate what's a good, valid service and what may not be." As such, Hill makes it his priority to stay on top of research and resources available in plant health care. "We will often quote or provide copies of research articles just to enhance our credibility and show we are recommending a treatment that's beneficial to the tree."

Another reason education is essential is how infrequently the services occur throughout the year. "With

lawn spray services, you're doing herbicides, preemergents, fertilization — all on a six- to eight-week schedule," Hill says. "You may be doing tree care once a quarter."

Infrequent applications can cause customers to get out of the tree care mode. Fewer applications can lower a client's perceived value and cause them to discontinue service, Hill says.

"A really good way to overcome this is to sell the entire year at once," he says. To sweeten the pot and boost cash flow, Hill recommends offering a pre-season discount for customers who pay upfront.

In addition, Hill recommends companies set an expectation when they make the initial sale. Part of his company's proposal and contract includes a space for Hill to specify what time of the year the application will take place. For example, Hill would advise clients that horticultural oil sprays and imidicloprid treatments take place from mid-December through early March; foliar pesticide spraying takes place during the growing season, usually late March through early September; and fertilization may take place year-round.

When it comes time for an application, a receptionist calls clients to set up appointments for the technician's visits. "At this time we try to educate them about what the application is," Hill says. This phone call doubles as an operational tool to ensure technicians' jobs run smoothly. "We ask them to put away children's toys, leave gates open for us and if the tree is in the backyard not to have cars parked under it," Hill says. If the customer hasn't been compliant, applicators are trained to pick up toys, cover non-removal items with tarps and request that cars be moved, if possible. "But sometimes we just have to reschedule," Hill says.

PRICING POINTERS. Careful job costing has allowed Hill to designate a set price to each different task based on what type of pesticide, fertilizer or nutrient is used. Each type of application is priced according to the size of the tree being treated and type and amount of product being used. For a fungicide being sprayed, Hill estimates the size of a tree's crown to decide how many gallons of product he'll use, and then he charges a per-gallon price, which accounts for





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labor. "You have to have good numbers for this way to work, but it's very effective," he says, noting internal time studies are a good way to get this information. "You need lots of good data on how long it's going to take you to perform the service and what your material cost is."

The wide variety of material costs is what makes "good numbers" essential, Hill says. For example, horticultural oils, which are highly refined petroleum oils combined with an emulsifying agent, are rather inexpensive (about \$3.50 per gallon). Fertilizers are about \$40 per 30-pound bag. Fungi-

Some companies train lawn care technicians to make plant health care applications; others promote detail-oriented lawn techs to their own PHC routes.



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cides, however, can cost as much as \$400 per gallon.

For example, the insecticide imidicloprid is applied by diameter inch. An imidicloprid soil injection on a 12-inch-diameter tree would take about 20 minutes, including mixing time. The insecticide comes in 1.6-ounce water-soluble packets, which can be mixed to treat 24 diameter inches, or two 12-inch trees. "We've figured out that for our chemical cost, labor and profit, the price is \$3 per diameter inch," Hill says. "To estimate, all we have to do is go out and measure a tree. A 12-inch tree would cost \$36."

MARKETING METHODS. When Hill started his business, marketing was one roadblock. After trying all of the "conventional" methods like the Yellow Pages, direct mail and local newspaper and magazine advertising, Hill found he just wasn't getting the high-end residential customers he was

that nursery refer them to you." Does he compensate for the leads? "We just send them business in return and most of the time they want to take care of their client, so they're happy to refer them to someone they can trust. And they know their client will come back to someone who gave them good advice."

Other than referrals, Hill spends less than \$3,000 annually on marketing, including about \$500 on Web site maintenance and \$1,600 total for four postcard mailings per year. "We have a small, one-line Yellow Pages ad now," Hill says. "We do no marketing in newspapers. It's all about word-of-mouth." **LL**

"Plant health care is a really good service to provide, especially for a lawn maintenance business that's out on customers' properties on a weekly basis... There's a pair of eyes on the trees every week."

- Sam Hill

looking for. "I regret the amount of money I spent not getting the clients I wanted," he says.

He knew referrals were the answer, and has since created an informal relationship with a reliable neighborhood nursery. "People go with their plant problems to local nurseries they trust," Hill says. "The nursery could probably sell them a bottle they could spray themselves, but many people don't have any equipment and aren't comfortable doing it. It's great to have



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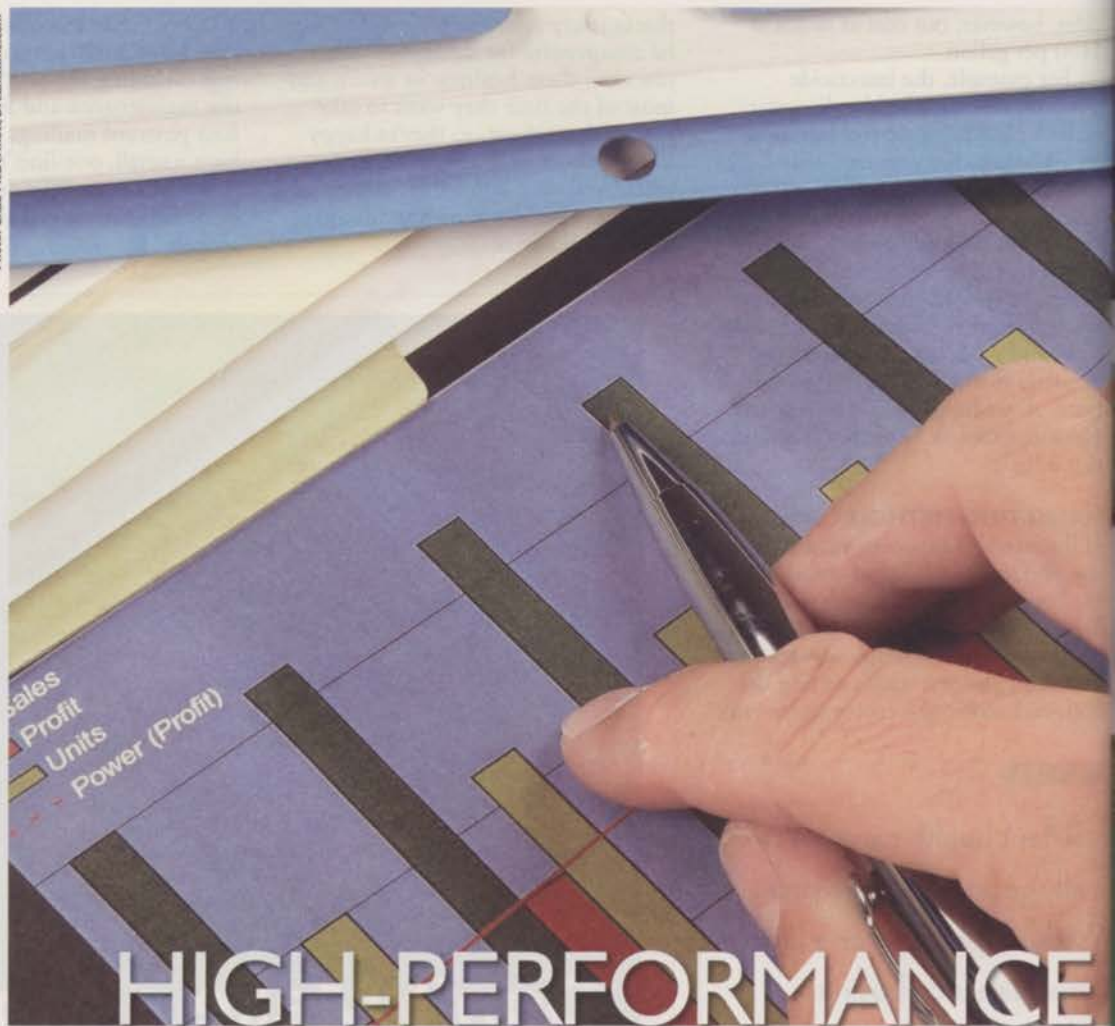
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HIGH-PERFORMANCE MARKETING

The home building boom has simmered, home turnover has declined and home prices have decreased.

Consequently, the cause for concern among small business owners is a decrease in personal consumption, according to Bill Rossi, a professor of entrepreneurship at the University of Florida. For example, when people feel wealthier, they spend more freely, but when housing prices decline and people feel as if their pennies are being pinched, they grab a tighter hold on to their purse strings Rossi says.

As prices continue to level off or decrease, depending on the market, companies in industries directly related to the housing boom, such as landscaping, could suffer a sales slump.

As a result, investing in a smart, high-performance marketing plan is critical now more than ever.

continued on page 110, sidebar on page 108

by jeffrey scott | contributing editor

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stop losing business based on price

Many contractors have one business goal this year – to stop losing business based on price and to finally get paid what they are worth. Do you feel the same? Let's explore what it takes to make this goal a reality. First, assess your own self-respect. Profitable marketing and pricing strategies begin with the concept of "I value myself; I value my time." Once you realize "I am worth it," then you eliminate unprofitable client relationships. Here are nine ways to combat the price question.

1. Raise Your Referrals. Referral clients automatically have positive expectations of you and are willing to pay more, especially when they come from clients who already pay you what you're worth. Shift your business so you are receiving more referrals from your profitable clients. To do this, spend more face-to-face time with your clients. Make it a corporate goal to increase repeat and referral business as a percent of your new business. Change compensation plans, marketing plans, job descriptions, sales roles, etc., so employees are focused on bringing in more referrals.

2. Develop a Unique Product or Service. It is the law of supply and demand. If you sell something in low supply that has a reasonably high demand, you can raise your rates. Spend more time with your clients, and they will share their needs with you. Add new services into your product offerings and reduce the number of other contractors your client has to deal with. Add services that save your clients time. Save your clients more time, and you'll make more money.

3. Fine-tune Your Sales Process. First, remove any obstacles. Do you make your clients jump too many hurdles? Is your response time inadequate for the high-priced niche you want to compete in? Do you give a poor first impression? Handle your first appointment like a job interview. Do less telling and more showing. If you are known for great service, then show great service in how you handle their inquiry, how you set up and confirm the appointment and how you arrive early prepared for the first appointment. Also, review your sales compensation plans. Make sure they are aligned with any strategy changes you put into effect.

4. Hire Talented Sales People. Some people are born salespeople, others are not. Even if you pay more for the right person, you will get a tenfold return on that incremental investment. Salespeople come with extra confidence, extra people skills and that extra something that is difficult to teach to non-salespeople. Use personality tests to assess who should be hunting and who should be gathering.

5. Clarify Your USP. Your unique selling proposition (USP) is the one thing that makes you desirable and unique in the eyes of the clients. Are you clear on yours? If not, take a few days off from work to develop this. Once established, make sure your staff is clear on this, as well. This is the long-term key to getting more money on each sale.

6. Lower Your Costs. Lean thinking has been the rage in the manufacturing industry for years, and it is just making its way to our industry. In some states you can get state-sponsored consultants to help you understand and execute this concept. Lean thinking gets your whole company looking for incremental ways to reduce time and waste from your processes. We applied this to our swimming pool division and reaped benefits after a half-year of continually asking and answering these questions. Lowered costs mean increased profits (or increased sales – your choice.)

7. Increase Advertising. Don't advertise for the heck of advertising. Rather, increase advertising when you have something new to promote. Perhaps you have a new USP or product. After awhile, advertising transforms into a good referral. People simply say, "I keep hearing about how good you are," and this comes subconsciously from frequent advertising.

8. Build Your Brand. Your brand is the summation of all your customer's experiences with your firm. These experiences happen when your customer reads your literature, visits your Web site, speaks to you on the phone, visits with you, meets your staff, sees your work, experiences your work (and your warranty work), receives your bills and staff phone calls, etc. The more unique and consistent and attractive/satisfying this experience, the better your brand reputation will become, the more in demand your company will be, the more leads you will get, the more you can walk away from price sensitive clients and the higher your average job price will be.

9. Ask For More Money. A professional negotiator told me clients don't ask for enough money. His really successful clients simply ask for more money. He gave me this homework: keep asking my clients for something (more money, more time, a referral) until I hear "No" 10 times. He swears by the time I get to the 10th request, I will be extremely surprised and all the richer for it.

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continued from page 106

■ STEP 1 – UNDERSTAND YOUR POSITION IN THE MARKETPLACE.

To market effectively, knowing your market is the first step.

Who are your ideal clients? What towns do they live in? How much money do they have? What are their homes worth? What is their marital and family status? What types of jobs do they have? What is their lifestyle? In answering these questions, not only will you discover your client niche, but you'll also discover what types of people are not your clients.

What problems are you solving for your ideal clients? You might be solving their one big need or you may be attempting to solve a few different needs. Do they need a complete package? A budgeted solution? Healthier lawns or trees? Are their frustrations taken care of? Hint – if you can solve important problems that no one else can solve, you can make more money.

Why is your solution the best? This is known as a company's unique selling proposition (USP). You might have one answer to this question or a list of answers. Make sure your USP solves their problems, has a lot of perceived value and is unique.

■ STEP 2 – SET YOUR SALES/PROFIT OBJECTIVE.

Are you trying to grow total sales? If so, by how much? Or are you trying to grow a new service? Or become known for something in particular or attract a certain kind of client? Set a three-year goal and a one-year goal to separate your different needs.

■ STEP 3 – CREATE THE MARKETING STRATEGIES THAT MEET YOUR OBJECTIVES.

Here are lessons I learned from my own mistakes and successes.

Lesson 1. You need an external and internal marketing strategy. External means direct mail, flyers, networking, etc. Internal means your trucks, signs, office, store and people. Your people are key. How your employees treat your customers defines your reputation. Develop a plan for how you train and treat your employees.

Lesson 2. Use multiple marketing strategies. A single marketing strategy can fail at any time. For example, I used leads from real estate agents last year and they suddenly stopped producing. If that had been our sole strategy, we would have been sunk.

Lesson 3. Exploit each strategy for all you can. For example, when you invest in a route, get as much bang for your buck. Or, if you set up a Web site, just don't throw it up – find multiple ways to use it.

Lesson 4. Your clients need multiple impressions before they call you. It is all about frequency. It's even better if your clients get these multiple impressions from different sources. One client recently told me "I heard about you from some friends, I saw your advertisement, and I looked on your Web site and liked what I saw." Don't just run one ad; run a lot of ads in different places where your clients will see them.

A MARKETING EXAMPLE. Let's say you are a landscape contractor selling to young families with dual income households. Assume your USP is that you are "an expert in creating family-friendly environments." Assume your objectives are:

- To expand in the four surrounding towns.
- To get clients with more discretionary income.
- To get more leads earlier in the spring.
- To grow your company by \$500,000 in two years.

And, let's say you are willing to spend 5 percent (\$25,000) to obtain that growth. So, what is your strategy?

First, identify where your current leads are coming from. This is a system you need to have in place. Perhaps your leads come from people seeing your trucks, from networking and from referrals. Following Lesson 3, exploit these three areas further.

How do you exploit leads coming from your trucks? Make sure all of your trucks are clean, clearly labeled and unique in some way. Start by choosing a color you can own.

Second, if referrals work, put more energy into this. Visit, call and write letters to clients who love you. Remind them why they "fell in love with you" to begin with. Ask them for help in reaching your goals.

Third, if networking works for you, pick the town in which you most want to make inroads and start there. To attract the wealthier homeowner, network with people who already work for them: Realtors, lawyers, architects, builders, patio furniture stores, etc.

To get leads earlier in the year, plan to market earlier in the winter or the fall before (actually, the spring and summer before because it takes time to put a solid plan together).

To get people with more discretionary income, you need to identify where they live, what they read and where they hang out. Also, explore their interests. Do they want to save time? Keep up with the Joneses? Create environments to entertain their friends? Then build your marketing strategy and "message" around this.

And if your town has a preferred newspaper, then advertising in it might work because you know your ideal clients read it. But if there is no clear leader, be wary.

Direct mail is another popular approach, and it works because buying mailing lists that are targeted to your ideal client is easy. Be prepared to experiment with different lists. Getting one that works for you may take a couple some time. Make sure your offer is clear. Why should readers call you? What action should they take? Your ads and direct mail pieces must reflect your USP and convey why you are unique and the best choice.

One caveat: You may find you don't have enough money to do all of these different marketing strategies. In this case, pick fewer strategies and go deep with them. It makes no sense to run an advertisement once. So either commit or do something else.

■ STEP 4 – MEASURE YOUR SUCCESSES AND FAILURES AND MAKE CHANGES.

Measure where appointments come from, which ones turn into sales and which leads are more likely to fizzle out. For example, you closed one of every two referral leads, but just one in five advertising leads?

Likewise, determine for every dollar you put into a specific marketing strategy how many dollars in sales and profits were generated?

This is called the return on investment, or ROI. For example, it's natural to think about ROI before you buy a piece of equipment. Now do the same when you spend money on marketing. And do it with guts, passion and imagination.

The author is co-owner of Glen Gate Pool & Property. He can be reached at jeffs@glen-gatecompany.com.

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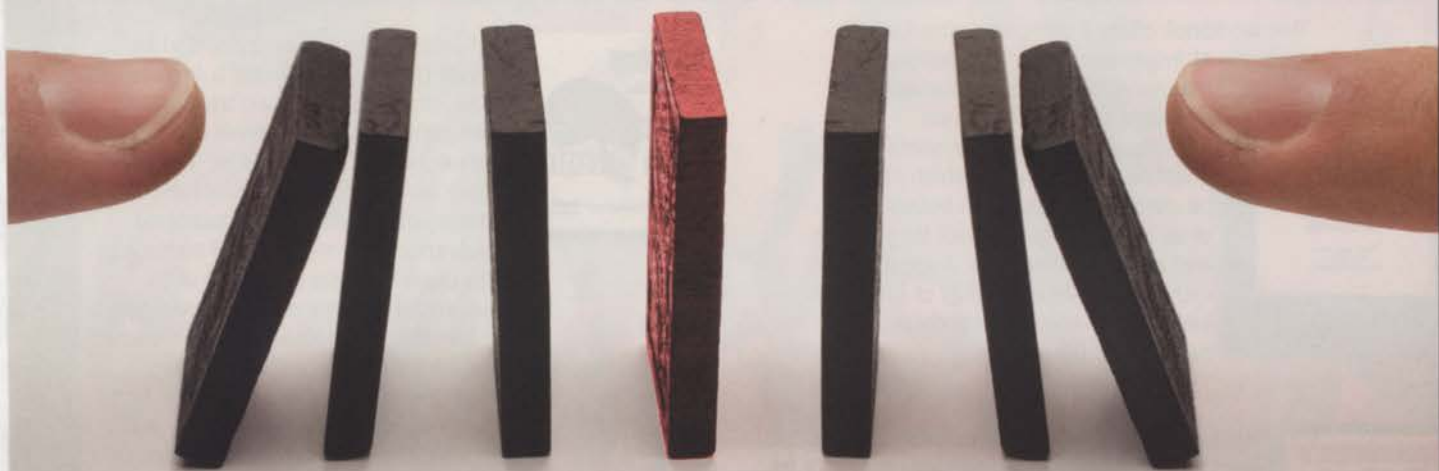
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Out Foxing The Fox

Cut-rate contractors are always a threat, but how can a landscape professional effectively deal with their low-ball strategy? *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board users debate how to counter low-ball proposals and try to understand the cut-rate contractor.

As spring blossoms and green spaces begin to re-emerge from their seasonal slumber, so awaken the low-ball contractors. In fact, landscape contractors contributing to *Lawn & Landscape's* Online Message Board recently posted their complaints about spring advertisements popping up in local newspapers from shady lawn care companies touting they will match or beat anyone's prices.

"How do you react to this sales tactic because I know some of my customers are going to see this," posts landscape contractor Matt Dues. "Do I run an ad myself and somehow slam the low-baller?"

It's an interesting dilemma for landscape contractors. Do they go on the offensive to protect their client base, or do they do nothing and place their faith in client loyalty? The overriding fear is that either action or inaction could result in disaster.

COUNTER OFFENSIVE. Dues has a legitimate concern, respond many message board participants; however, the overall issue is a thorny one and should be handled carefully. Likewise, it's not to be taken lightly, either. As a matter of fact, respondents to *Lawn & Landscape's* 2006 State of the Industry report cited low-ball competitors left them with a heightened concern this year.



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Legitimate landscape contractors should be careful not to overreact to such advertising ploys, many message board participants warn.

"To counter respond would show them that you are overly concerned and adds fuel to that guy's fire," posts Sal Mortilla, owner of Landscaping Unlimited in Long Island, N.Y.

Contractor Ryan Holt, of Drift-

wood Lawn Care in Rising Sun, Md., agrees and adds silence is the best defense.

"I would not be concerned about the low-ball contractor's ad," Holt posts. "If you offer great customer service and do quality work, you should have no problem with the low baller. In no way would I try to 'slam' the low-ball contractor. That may lose

you more customers than this guy's prices."

Quality and customer service are the two best weapons a landscape contractor can wield to combat a low-ball contractor, says Kevin Kreps, owner of New Life Enterprises, in Nampa, Ind.

"Do what you know how to do best," Kreps says. "Let them die their slow death. You'll be here next year, buying their slightly used equipment and picking up their disgruntled customers."

Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes in Walkersville, Md., offers a tongue-in-check remedy to counter a cut-rate contractor's advertising campaign.

"I find it interesting that one would boast they will match or beat anyone's prices," Aksar says. "Knowing that, I would go and price a job at \$15. That dude would have to match it."

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL. Some message board participants posted opinions that a few cut-rate landscape contractors actually perform respectable work. The problem, they post, is these contractors are misguided on how to properly price their work. Other message board participants expressed some sympathy for the plight of cut-rate contractors.

"Most of us were all low-ball contractors when we started," posts Jamie Bush, president of Jamie's Lawn

"To counter respond would show them that you are overly concerned and adds fuel to that guy's fire." – Sal Mortilla

Service in Plano, Texas. "When you don't have 40 hours scheduled to work, the temptation is there for new companies to bid work to get it. It is not a strategy for sustained growth, but if you think you are going to lose key employees by not having hours for them to work, the strategy might pay off to bid some jobs to get them."

A lot of the time the problem with new companies is they do not know what their costs are, says Troy Tiedeman, owner of Tiedeman Lawn

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& Landscaping, Clare, Mich. "So they figure that they'll match your price to get customers," he says.

Other landscape contractors post that the market eventually evens out the cut-rate contractor.

"If the low-ball contractors are doing the same thing you are and just as well they will either wind up raising their rates or going out of business," posts Chad Stern, president of Mowing & More in Chevy Chase, Md. "If customers want to change companies every couple of years because their

consistently offer the lowest price," posts Todd McCabe, president of McCabe Landscape Group based in Wrightsville Beach, N.C.

"I am sure they already know they could find someone else for the same or lower price, so I would not worry about it," McCabe says.

With this in mind, landscape contractors have an opportunity to

use the cut-rate marketing strategy to their advantage.

For example, Jeffery Scott, owner of The Glen Gate Co., Wilton, Conn., posts a cut-rate threat is an opportunity to get closer to the customer.

"Proactively build your relationships with your clients," Scott says. "If you have too many, then focus on

"Do what you know how to do best. Let them die their slow death. You'll be here next year, buying their slightly used equipment and picking up their disgruntled customers."

— Kevin Kreps

prices go up 50 percent they can work with a low-ball contractor. If they want to work with an accountable, reputable and stable contractor they can work for you."

Some contractors even agree that cut-rate contractors have a place in the market and refer to them as a "necessary evil." For example, a certain segment of the customer base wants to do business with the lowest-cost service provider, and aren't the caliber of clients reputable landscape contractors are seeking.

"Let the low-ball contractors have the customers who are only looking for a cheap price," posts contractor Bill Atwood. "They are usually the slow payers anyway. I will keep the customers who want more than cheap mowing and are looking for other services and know that we will be there when we say we will and do a good job. Good customers know that if there is a problem it will be taken care of immediately."

TAKING ADVANTAGE. Established clients choose a reputable contractor because of the consistency in the work they perform, and not because they



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the clients that bring in 80 percent of your profits."

Customers, Tiedeman posts, expect personal attention, quality service, industry experience and service expertise. Instead of countering cut-rate contractors with even lower rates, contractors need to accentuate these assets as reasons that justify paying a premium for better service, he adds.

"I have found what always works the best is personal attention," Tiedeman posts. "If a customer calls you and you call them, or even solve their problem that same day, then that customer will stay with you forever. And they'll stay with you even if someone else comes in with a lower priced service." **LL**

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Visit the April issue of *Lawn & Landscape* online for the key drawbacks to attracting business through low-pricing practices.

know thy enemy

Winning over a cut-rate competitor without stooping to his level may come down to knowing as much as you can about how he operates. Doing so allows you to design an effective plan to compete against low pricing by providing superior service.

The National Federation of Independent Business offers a few key points you should know about who you're going head-to-head against in the marketplace.

COMPENSATION. How they pay their employees and what benefits they provide offer a glimpse of the value they place on their workers. Knowing this can keep you competitive in attracting and retaining good employees to your company.

PRESENCE. How do they present themselves to the community? How do their employees look? Are their trucks and equipment clean? Do they conduct themselves as professionals on the job site?

FEEDBACK. What are your competitors saying about you? Do they tell customers your services are inferior, that your prices are unreasonable, that you're an incompetent business owner?

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PRICING PRIMER

Software. Spreadsheets. Experience. The list goes on. Landscape contractors in the business of commercial maintenance use a variety of methods to arrive at their pricing schemes. But whatever ways contractors choose to bid commercial properties, one thing is consistent across the country: Commercial maintenance is a competitive service offering.

"Bidding on commercial properties is very price-driven," says Steve Rak, vice president of Southwest Landscape Management in Columbia Station, Ohio. "I know people don't like to hear that, but that's the fact. And it's gotten worse in the last couple of years." Consolidation and the increasing strength of national firms are the reasons competition had increased, Rak says.

One particular challenge Rak and other contractors cite is communicating to clients that there's no real "apples-to-apples" comparison out there. Although the same spec sheet may go to all contractors bidding on an account, each contractor is returning a price based on different scope of knowledge, skills and service. For example, "pruning" may mean the technical craft of hand trimming trees and shrubs to one firm, and may mean shearing

by marisa palmieri | associate editor

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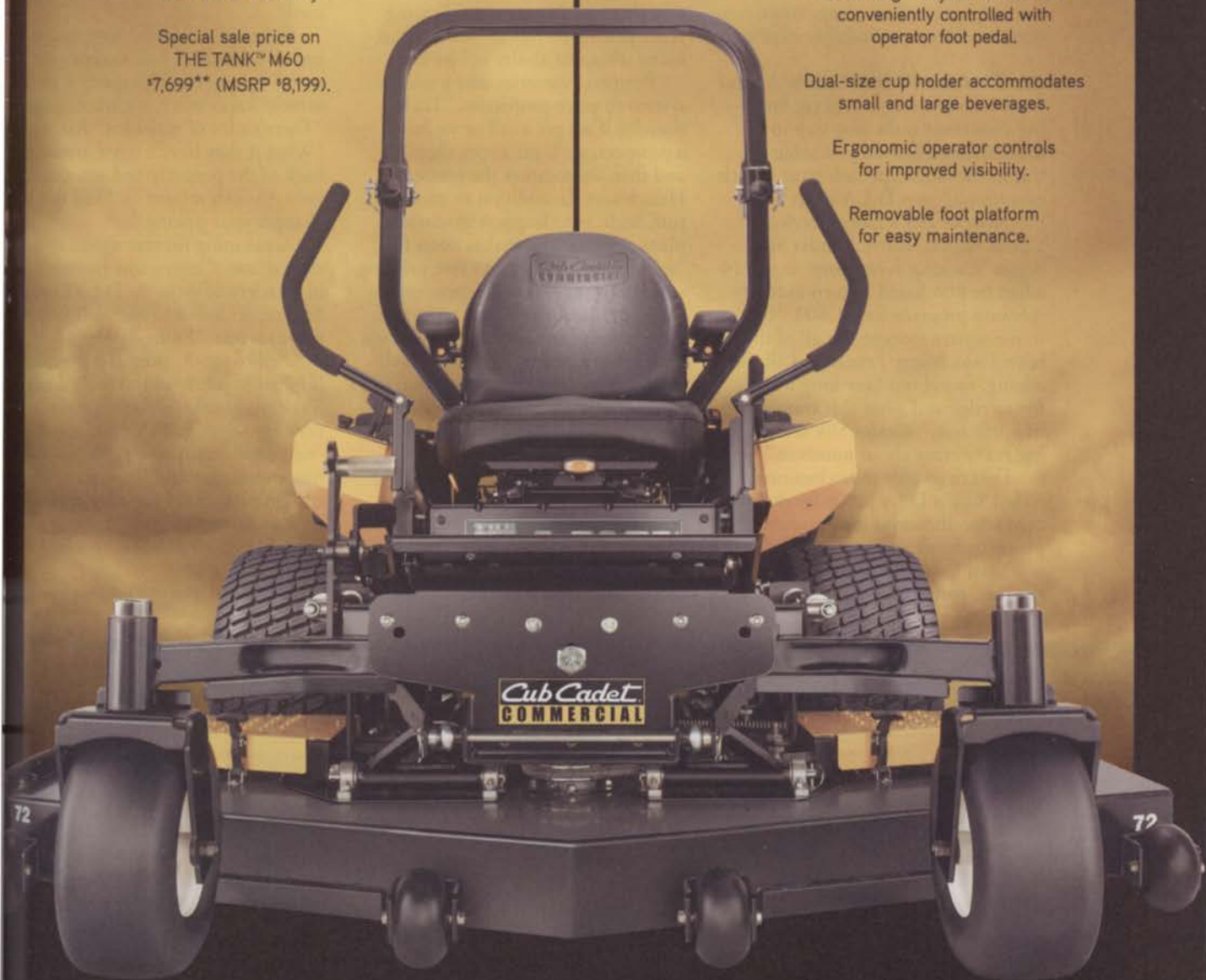
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branches randomly to another. Labor plays into this as well, with some firms employing American citizens, others using the H-2B program and some still hiring undocumented workers, points out John Harich, business development manager for Ruppert Nurseries, based in Laytonville, Md.

Carefully communicating these differences, accurately assessing costs and learning from others' mistakes will help contractors secure more contracts and keep profitability in place.

CRAZY ABOUT NUMBERS. Almost every business owner will say knowing your costs is the first step to profitability. How do you achieve this in the landscape industry? "Track everything," says D.J. Vander Slik, president of D.J.'s Lawn Service, Grand Rapids, Mich. Vander Slik began "tracking everything" at age 14 when he purchased a green industry software program for \$1,400. "I put in the square footages for all of the lawn I was doing, I measured all the edging, found out how long it took me to edge and what that translates to in linear feet," Vander Slik says. "I just got really crazy about numbers."

That rings true in his business today. When D.J.'s Lawn Service receives specifications for a commercial property, he or another qualified estimator will visit the property, measure the turf, parking lots, beds, amount

of hard-line edging and other factors. A custom software system allows him to apply those measurements to job costing data he collects, which helps him determine how long it will take a crew to perform a service, and in turn generate a price.

Vander Slik monitors crews' job costing data weekly to keep budgeted hours in check. At the end of the year he averages crews' actual times and uses that number for the following year's pricing formula. "We want to know what our ability is," he says.

Ruppert Nurseries uses a similar system to price properties. "Traditionally, if we get a call or we have a prospect, we'll get a spec sheet, and then we measure the property," Harich says. In addition to measuring turf, beds, etc., Ruppert inventories plant material and makes notes for "subjective" services, like tree pruning, which can vary widely depending on tree type, condition, age and health. Next, this information is entered into Ruppert's estimating system, which produces the number of expected job hours (based on years of the company's historical data) and generates a price accordingly.

Some companies, however, still put pen to paper. Southwest Landscape Management is one of them. "I've done this for so long that I can look at a property and be pretty darn close," says Rak, who uses a home-

grown method that includes taking measurements, walking the property and dividing up large properties into smaller sections to make estimating easier. Rak also uses a checklist that includes each service (mowing, trimming, edging, etc.) to make sure he includes everything before calculating a price that takes into account the amount of time to perform the service and what type of equipment will be used.

Although it may be tempting to fire off a bid after just receiving the specs, visiting every property is of the utmost importance, contractors agree. "There's a lot of variables," Rak says. "What if they have a fence around the back of the property and you can only get a 36-inch mower in? Well that changes your pricing."

Accounting for travel time is crucial, too. Contractors include it in a variety of ways. At D.J.'s Lawn Service, it's billed to each job from the previous one. "From the shop to job A is billed to job A, from job A to job B is billed to job B and so on," Vander Slik says. Southwest builds travel time into overhead along with other "non-production hours" like equipment servicing, and Ruppert bills a certain percentage per job depending on how far away it is in terms of time (whether it's 15 minutes to a half

continued on page 124, sidebar on page 122



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USE READER SERVICE # 87

regional pricing at a glance

Any contractor who's been in a commercial maintenance bidding situation knows that it's not uncommon for there to be a several thousand dollar swing between the high and low bid on any one account. And that's in the same market.

Imagine the differences when "bids" are compared on a national scale. Nationwide, the cost of doing business varies widely and contributes to what prices markets will bear for the same commercial property specifications. *Lawn & Landscape* put this rule to the test by interviewing contractors from east to west to find out how commercial maintenance prices differ.

In addition to the services and frequencies listed in the chart at right, contractors were provided with the following specs:

- 19,000 square feet of irrigated turf with a level elevation;
- 20-car parking lot; a 100-foot-long entranceway;
- Modest flower bed; and
- Five trees typical to your region.

The specifications we provided were intentionally vague to account for regional differences (i.e., "five trees typical to your region"). All contractors noted this made the job

difficult to bid on – and they would have to visit the site and ask a lot of questions to gather more information before providing a bid. For the purpose of this story, contractors were encouraged to make assumptions based on their regions. These additional comments are included in the chart below.

On a positive note, all contractors noted they would never simply fax or e-mail proposals to a client – they'd always deliver them in person.

SERVICE	FREQUENCY	ANNUAL COST			
		EAST	MIDWEST	SOUTHEAST	WEST
Turf mowing	28 occurrences	\$5,085 (includes trimming 28 times and edging 14 times)	\$2,072	\$2,364	\$2,700
Turf fertilization	3 applications	\$298	\$225	\$270	\$550
Turf weed control	2 applications	(included in fertilization price)	(included in fertilization price)	\$180	(included in fertilization price – combination fertilizer)
Turf crab-grass control	1 application	(included in fertilization price)	(included in fertilization price)	\$90	(included in fertilization price)
Turf core aeration	2 occurrences	\$529	\$130	\$2,660	\$760
Spring cleanup/mulch	1 occurrence	\$1,275 (includes edging; mulch is based on approximately 10 cubic yards of double shredded hardwood mulch at 2-inch depth)	\$880	\$390 (60 installed bales of pine straw)	\$2,640 (leaves/debris removed on a weekly schedule)
Bed maintenance	28 occurrences	\$479	(included with turf mowing)	\$960	(leaves/debris removed on a weekly schedule; accounted for in spring cleanup above)
Tree/shrub pruning	Full year	\$380 (accounts for 3 shrub occurrences and 1 tree occurrence)	\$675	\$480	\$420 (12-foot and below)
Tree/shrub spraying	3 occurrences	\$449 (only includes 1 occurrence)	\$180	\$400	n/a
Leaf removal	1 occurrence	\$460	\$370	\$1,200	\$400
Pavement Vegetation control	3 applications	n/a	\$150	Included in mowing price; conducted biweekly	n/a
Floral maintenance	18 visits	\$95 (priced as a one-time visit for "perennial cutback")	\$666	\$300	\$732
Contract total		\$9,050	\$5,348	\$9,294	\$8,202



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USE READER SERVICE # 88

continued from page 120

hour, a half hour to 45 minutes or 45 minutes to an hour away).

PRESENTATION. Because of the competitive, price-driven nature of commercial maintenance, it's important to present a well-put-together proposal in person.

"It has to be in person," Rak says. "If they just say, 'Hey, fax or mail us the bid,' they're just looking at numbers on a piece of paper."

Vander Slik agrees. "If a customer calls and asks us to fax over a quote, there's very little opportunity to sell myself," he says. "I always try to present it in person." His proposals are bound into a packet that includes a cover page, schedule sheet, references, a color brochure and, lastly, the proposal page. Vander Slik also includes a loose-leaf copy of the proposal that the client can sign and send in if they choose his firm.

Presenting a proposal in person allows contractors to explain to customers that all quotes won't be apples-to-apples comparisons due to varying levels of training, experience and service. "The biggest challenge is explaining quality vs. price," Harich says. "In that face-to-face time we talk about quality and try to educate about things like the way we prune shrubs. We're hand pruning everything and another company could just be shearing everything."

This in-person presentation also allows you to inquire about unusual specifications if you haven't yet had the opportunity, Rak says. He's found that sometimes clients don't realize that the services they're asking for are out of the ordinary or that other solutions exist. Clearing up gray areas like these can often save clients money, show you're looking out for their best interest and save your firm time and headaches. Rak cites a homeowners' association that requested grass clippings be picked up for the entire property — front yards, back yards and all green spaces. "We're talking acres and acres of property," Rak says.

Getting to the bottom of the client's request is key. In this case, the residents didn't want "clumps." "Ninety percent of the residents were 60 and older and don't spend time in their backyards anyway," Rak explains. "So I said, can't we mulch the clippings or double cut in the back yards? Is this request really that

important? Because we can save you a ton of money."

If the presentation doesn't go as planned, or if the client was seeking the lowest bidder and you weren't it, your job shouldn't end there. Follow up with decision makers to discern why they awarded the contract to another firm. It can be helpful when, or if, you re-bid the following season. "Simply call and say where we were, or why didn't we get the job?" Rak says. "A lot of them will tell you. They might say your mulch was really expensive or we're sticking with the company we have because we're comfortable with them. Sometimes they'll say it was \$1,000 less to go with the other guy." Rak files those comments for the following year to evaluate if he'll be close to being competitive and whether he should re-bid or just pass.

LEARN FROM MISTAKES. When offering pricing for any service, whether it's commercial maintenance or retaining wall construction, contractors should avoid "shooting from the hip." Sometimes business owners are overconfident in their estimating abilities, Vander Slik says. "It's important to follow the steps I've put in place to be successful," he says, noting he learned this lesson the hard way. In the early days, he was sometimes quick to agree to prices on the spot, before returning to the office, crunching numbers and realizing he spoke too soon. "Now, I'm not embarrassed to say, I can't tell you that right now, but please let me work on it and I'll make it my priority to get back with you in a timely fashion," he says, noting within 24 hours is a reasonable time period.

Being eager to place a bid has gotten Southwest Landscape Management in trouble in the past, too. "A lot of times, people want bids in the wintertime and we've gone out, looked at the property when it was snow covered and blew the bid," Rak says. "We learned from that mistake; don't bid the property unless you can really see it. It sounds obvious, but when you're trying to pick up accounts, it's a nice job and you want to get your bid in on time, it's tempting." Instead of rushing to meet a bid deadline in bad weather, just be honest with the client and ask for more time. Nine times out of 10, Rak says, they'll give you another week until you can see the property in better conditions. ■

what about rate increases?

Raising rates can be tricky, especially for a commercial maintenance contractor that just secured a coveted contract. With increasing downward pressure on prices from national companies and the ever-present start-up, low-overhead contractor, how does a landscaping company know when to raise its prices?

The National Federation of Independent Business, a Washington D.C.-based small business advocacy group, offers a few tips for owners who are unsure when to raise rates.

Cost is the No. 1 component. When costs increase (due to a rise in labor rates, equipment costs, fuel prices, etc.), so should your rates.

Competitors are a factor, too. Low rates, when coupled with superior quality, could result in an excess of work. If you're in high demand, it may be time to raise your rates. Plus, low rates can cause potential new customers to question the quality of your service.

Consider the two-year rule. Customers understand that costs go up over time, so a 10 to 15 percent increase every two years should discourage valued customers who understand your quality of work, according to the NFIB.

Once you've established a reputation in a market and have built a good customer base, you'll be more confident to ask for and receive a higher rate.

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STOP INSECTS BEFORE THEY START

Two researchers share their recommendations for improving your preventive control programs this year.



Preventive programs for turf are presented with the view that one pest is often the primary focus of treatments directed by the lawn care operator. This is called the primary target. But the impact of the program or treatment on secondary pests causing damage at application time should also be considered.

PREVENTIVE PROGRAMS FOR NORTHERN TURF. The major justification for following a preventive approach is a past history of infestation and confidence that damage from insect pests will reoccur. Such history is based on previous years' experiences, observations, monitoring and knowledge of the seasonal spectrum of pests occurring at any specific location.

Consideration of a treatment's impact on the primary target and the spectrum of secondary pests can reduce the number of applications needed to achieve the objective.

by harry niemczyk and david shetlar/contributing editors

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USE READER SERVICE # 90

White Grubs. If grubs (black turfgrass *Ataenius*, *Aphodius*, Japanese beetle, masked chafer, European chafer, Asiatic garden beetle, Oriental beetle, etc.) are determined to be the primary target, and a preventive program is selected, early May is the optimal time to apply imidacloprid (Merit) or clothianidin (Arena). In addition to providing season-long control of these grubs, other secondary pests in the spectrum (billbug larvae, first generation cutworm larvae, greenbug aphids and frit fly) will also be prevented. In our opinion, ants (i.e., *Lasius neoniger*) will also be suppressed. Label directions regarding rate(s) to apply should be followed.

While an application of imidaclo-

Season-long preventive control of black turfgrass *ataenius* and *Aphodius*, Japanese beetle and masked chafer grubs can be achieved with June applications of halofenozide (MACH2). Control of European chafer and Asiatic garden beetle is limited. Infestations of billbugs, cutworm and sod webworm larvae existing at the time of application may also be controlled with treatment at this time.

Application of halofenozide from July thru early August also prevents infestation of the above grubs and controls existing infestations of cutworm and sod webworm. Treatments applied from mid-August to mid-September control Japanese beetle and masked chafer and may provide some

damage from annual bluegrass weevil larvae. The principle of this approach is to target overwintered adults as they return to annual bluegrass to begin egg laying, but treatment must be applied before significant egg laying occurs.

Black Turfgrass *Ataenius*. In situations where BTA is the only grub of concern, another preventive option has been used successfully. The principle of control involves a labeled pyrethroid to target overwintering adults just as egg laying begins.

Bluegrass Billbug. The bluegrass billbug is a significant cause of damage to Kentucky bluegrass and non-endophytic perennial ryegrass. Damage can be as subtle as a chronic thinning of the stand. Symptoms are often misdiagnosed as irrigation not reaching the turf, drought or disease such as dollar spot. If uncontrolled for extended periods, the Kentucky bluegrass portion of a sward continues to diminish over time. Kentucky bluegrass varieties vary in their susceptibility to this pest.

An application of imidacloprid, clothianidin or thiamethoxam during the first week of May for prevention of major targets also prevents bluegrass billbug damage and controls a spectrum of other pests.

Other Insects/Cutworms. When cutworms (mainly the black cutworm) are the primary target of concern on turf, a preventive approach is not recommended. We discourage adding an insecticide to a treatment of which the objective is fertilization, growth regulation or disease control just in case there may be cutworms present. Instead, we recommend a curative approach and application of a control when evidence of damage first appears.

Sod Webworm. Sod webworm larvae commonly overwinter in turf. The overwintered larvae resume feeding in early spring (mid-April to early May) by constructing a C-shaped cover of webbed-together topdressing over its burrow. Spring damage can be prevented by treating the turf areas of concern with an insecticide from late September to mid-October to kill the larvae that would otherwise overwinter. A May application of imidacloprid for preventive control of grubs or other primary targets has not controlled overwintered sod webworms.

PREVENTIVE PROGRAMS FOR SOUTHERN TURF. Categorized by insect, these strategies can improve



The earliest feeding stage of a soil-inhabiting target insect is usually the easiest to control. See the difference in size between a newly hatched first instar grub and more mature second and third instar grubs.

prid or clothianidin in June provides season-long control of grubs, it is too late to prevent the first generation of cutworm and billbug larvae. Application from July to mid-August will prevent annual grubs, including green June beetle, but is too late to control most other secondary pests.

In our experience, preventive control of Japanese beetle, masked chafer and black turfgrass *ataenius* grubs has been achieved with a single application of the new thianicotinyl, thiamethoxam (Meridian), in May, June or July. Larvae of billbugs, cutworms, sod webworms and chinch bugs existing during and for a time after application are also controlled.

degree of control of sod webworm larvae that normally overwinter.

Annual Bluegrass Weevil. On turf where grubs and annual bluegrass weevil are major targets, a combination of imidacloprid plus a pyrethroid insecticide or clothianidin from mid- to late-April prevents damage from first and second generation annual bluegrass weevil larvae. This treatment should also prevent larval infestations of billbug, black turfgrass *ataenius*, Japanese beetle, masked chafer, European chafer and first generation cutworms.

On turf where grubs are not major targets, a single application of the labeled pyrethroid insecticides during the third week of April should prevent



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Mole Crickets. The most difficult time to control mole crickets is late fall and early spring when adults are flying to relocate and mate. These adults may burrow deep in the soil profile (below the target zone) during cool or dry soil conditions and, therefore, are less prone to feed, which minimizes their exposure to control materials. Little can be done to prevent this.

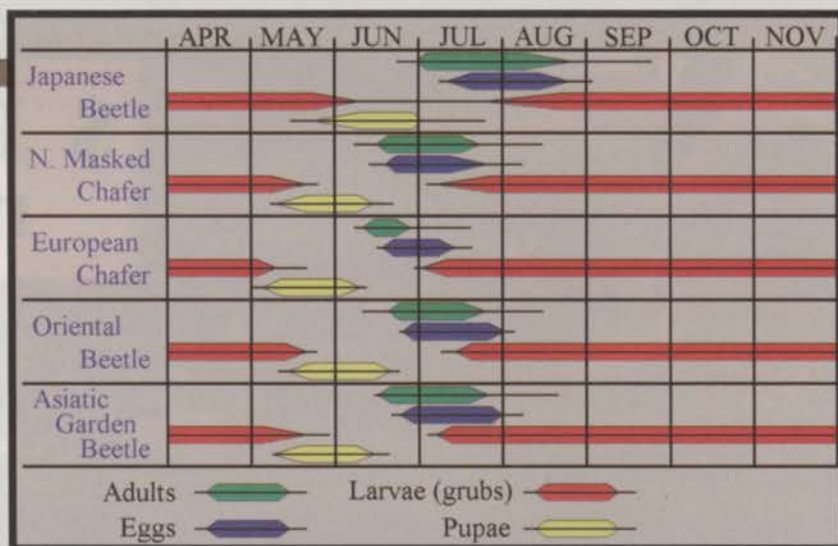
At sporadic times, usually associated with warm and rainy weather, adults move to the surface, tunnel extensively, fly in mass and mate. Research has shown that moist (not saturated) sites with dense turf or weed growth are highly attractive to spring-active adults so eggs will be concentrated there.

Mapping mole cricket activity can help determine treatment areas. In spring, areas where mole crickets are most actively tunneling, emerging, calling and digging back into the soil are where most of the eggs will be laid. A visual inspection of the turf should allow for easy detection of mole cricket "hot spots."

Subsurface Application. In the recent past, insecticides with moderately long residual activity (isofenphos and isazofos) were applied to high risk areas at the beginning of mole cricket egg hatch (usually late May to early June). Fipronil (Chipco Choice) applied with subsurface placement equipment can provide season-long control of hatching mole cricket nymphs.

Surface Application. When applied at mole cricket first egg hatch, surface application of imidacloprid, clothianidin or thiamethoxam adequately prevents mole cricket nymphal damage. The actual calendar date of this event varies considerably from south to north. For example, tawny mole cricket egg laying may begin as early as late March in south Florida, mid-April in north Florida and early May in south Georgia, and egg hatch occurs about 20 days later. Generally, each major biological event in the life history of mole crickets is delayed by one week as one moves 100 miles from south to north. Coastal and island areas can vary from this rule.

Our opinion is that a single surface application of imidacloprid, clothianidin or thiamethoxam (at the highest label rate), made within the first three



Understanding when various grub species lay eggs and early instar grubs begin feeding at the soil-thatch interface determines the best time to make preventive control applications.

weeks of first egg hatch, should effectively prevent damage from tawny and southern mole crickets. One of these insecticides, applied within this time period, should suppress (if not control) the first new generation of cutworms, fall and true armyworms, and tropical sod webworms for 25 to 30 days after application, thereby eliminating the need for a surface insecticide treatment during this time.

Grubs. If grubs are the primary target, and a preventive program is selected, the first priority is to determine which species is present.

In many Gulf States, masked chafers and annual forms of May/June beetles are the most common grub pests. In Texas, Oklahoma and the West, the southwestern masked chafer and annual May/June beetles are the common pests. The adults of these southern grubs usually fly and lay eggs when the rainy season begins or when summer rain fronts pass through. Flights of the southern and southwestern masked chafers are common in late July through August. The May/June beetles usually fly from May to August, depending on the species. Knowing which species is dominant and when it flies and lays eggs is essential for successful control timing.

May and early June applications of imidacloprid generally provide control of masked chafer and annual May/June beetle grubs except where the adults delay flight until mid- to late August (e.g., West Texas). This application should also control secondary targets such as mole crickets, cutworms, armyworms, tropical sod webworms and hunting billbugs.

Where green June beetle is also present, or late flying masked chafers

or annual May/June beetles occur, imidacloprid, clothianidin or thiamethoxam applications should be delayed until mid-July. This treatment will provide season-long control of the grubs and suppress secondary pests such as cutworms, armyworms, tropical sod webworms and hunting billbugs. However, it is too late to provide mole cricket control.

May and early June applications of thiamethoxam or clothianidin should provide control of masked chafer and annual May/June beetle grubs and also control mole crickets, armyworms, cutworms, tropical sod webworms and hunting billbug.

June application of halofenozide has been shown to control masked chafer and annual May/June beetle grubs in July and August. Application at this time will also control secondary pests, such as cutworms, armyworms and sod webworms, that are present at the time of the application. **LL**

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Backhoe Basics

These 'Swiss Army knives' allow contractors to take on bigger jobs and go where smaller machines can't.

Photo: John Deere

Bob Tyler calls them the "Swiss Army knives" of construction and landscape equipment. And while backhoes certainly won't fit into anyone's pants pocket, these large machines enable landscapers to accomplish tasks on a scale much larger than skid-steers or other loaders.

Backhoes fill an important niche for landscape contractors by giving them the ability to provide services, especially large-scale ones, previously out of reach with smaller machines. Much like attachments enable skid-steers to perform multiple tasks, backhoes allow contractors to complete jobs that would typically take several machines.

"If a contractor needs to bury a pipe 4 feet in the ground and then cover it up afterwards, a backhoe would save on buying two separate pieces of equipment — an excavator to dig the trench and a four-wheel drive loader to fill the trench after the pipe was set," says Tyler, product marketing manager for Moline, Ill.-based John Deere's construction and forestry division. "A backhoe can do both."

For Rob Brown, president and co-owner of Agave Environmental Contracting of Glendale, Ariz., the backhoe is an invaluable tool. The company, which has owned backhoes since 1991, often salvages native trees in the Arizona desert

continued on page 136

by mark phillips | associate editor



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GOLF



LAWN

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before development begins. "We use them when we box trees," Brown says. "Instead of hand-digging native trees, we'll use the backhoes with a guy on the ground, cutting roots. They're versatile enough that if there's enough room on a site, we'll use them to move material around."

And Brown's crews use backhoes to move trees and boulders and to excavate tree holes. "In areas where the ground is too hard, they will use them instead of trenchers," he says. "Instead of mobilizing another piece of equipment, we can leave it at the office."

says Jim Hughes, brand marketing manager for Racine, Wis.-based Case. Common backhoe attachments found on a landscape job site include brooms, forks, tree spades, augers and grapple buckets.

"Backhoe loaders offer the most versatility because they have the trenching capability of a small excavator and the front loader performance of a small wheel loader, without changing attachments," says Kevin Hershberger, head of backhoe loader marketing for Peoria, Ill.-based Caterpillar.

to do 10 to 20 trees per day, depending on the soil. In some areas, the ground is too hard and we're not able to hand dig it," Brown says. "We'd probably need twice the amount of guys if we were going to hand-dig them all."

Skid-steers, which come in wheel- or rubber-track forms, are generally small, easy to transport and can work well in confined areas. They're as versatile as the attachments paired with them and can perform a host of duties, such as lifting and carrying materials, digging, grading and general ground preparation.

In addition, they can be used for post-hole digging, planting trees and trenching. Contractors can expect to pay between \$24,000 and \$50,000, depending on the horsepower. Backhoes can range from about \$45,000 to \$250,000, and sometimes more. Four-wheel drive loaders can cost between \$65,000 and \$400,000.

"Backhoes and tractor loaders are important additions to a landscape contractor's fleet because the equipment makes the contractor more versatile and more productive," Hughes says. "The additional equipment gives a landscape contractor the opportunity to bid jobs that may have been too large in the past."

For example, a landscape contractor who typically uses a skid-steer loader as the primary piece of equipment may not be able to finish the grade in a new residential construction community. "If a landscape job requires larger trees to be planted, a skid-steer loader may not have the capacity to carry the trees," Hughes says. In these instances, the higher lift capacity of backhoes is needed.

BIGGER CAN BE BETTER. Whereas skid-steers are known for their agility and ability to work in confined spaces, backhoes are known for their sheer strength and capacity

"If a contractor needs to bury a pipe 4 feet in the ground and then cover it up afterwards, a backhoe would save on buying two separate pieces of equipment – an excavator to dig the trench and four-wheel drive loader to fill the trench." – Bob Tyler

THE DIFFERENTIATING FACTOR.

The obvious difference between a backhoe and a four-wheel drive end loader is a backhoe features both front and rear dig components, while a four-wheel drive end loader has only a front load component. In addition, a four-wheel drive end loader is articulated in the center, which allows it to steer, Tyler says. In contrast, the front wheels of a backhoe steer much like those of an automobile.

"Skid-steer loaders work similarly in principle to a crawler dozer, in that they slow down both wheels on one side to steer, and use various forms of levers to steer rather than a traditional steering wheel," Tyler says. "Skid-steers have the tightest turning radius of all three machine types and are useful for confined spaces, since they can spin on the spot by moving the wheels on one side forward, and the wheels on the other side backwards simultaneously. From a landscaping perspective, this may not be desirable in all instances where there is a desire to avoid tearing up the surface that the machine is running on. Skid steers also have the smallest capacity loader buckets of the three."

Backhoes provide digging ability as well as increased lift and bucket capacities to complete larger jobs,

Backhoes are frequently used alongside skid-steers since they generally have more performance capabilities and deliver more productivity, Hershberger says.

"For example, the larger loader bucket might mean fewer trips when hauling gravel or landscaping material from the street to the backyard of a house," Hershberger says. "If both trenching and loader work are required, a backhoe can do it as equipped, while a skid-steer loader would require changing attachments. A skid-steer loader is of course smaller, and can be transported with a small trailer and pickup truck."

Backhoes and end loaders are larger machines than skid-steer loaders, which have much smaller, rigid frames and lift arms to attach buckets or a variety of other tools, Hughes says. "Depending on the size of their business, landscape contractors are using backhoes and tractor loaders in addition to skid-steer loaders," he says. "Having the additional machines makes the contractor more versatile. They can bid larger jobs and finish them more quickly, which means more money in their pockets."

Brown's employees can dig in tough Arizona soil using the backhoes and cut the amount of work by half. "A 10-man crew is probably going



to move large amounts of materials. "A backhoe is used on applications where a contractor needs to do a lot of digging or material management around a job site," Hughes says. "Each machine has its place in a landscape contractor's fleet. It all depends on exactly what type of landscape construction the contractor is doing."

An end loader, for example, would be adequate if a contractor is generally working with bulk materials and truck loading. A backhoe would add the capability of digging water features, placing landscape rock with the hydraulic thumb, and digging holes for trees, shrubs or fences with a hydraulic auger.

Most advances on backhoes center on productivity, operator comfort and serviceability. Some backhoes feature ride control that cushion the loader arms from rough terrain, eliminating the front-to-rear rocking motion that backhoes and tractor loaders can experience under load, Hughes says. "This is a feature that not only makes the ride more comfortable, but it makes you more productive." Features such as shock absorbers keep the operator from getting too fatigued. Hughes says contractors should look for machines that are easily maintained, such as hoods that can be opened regardless of whether the loader arms are raised or lowered. That will give technicians full access to critical parts and daily service points, he says.

Some backhoes now feature hydraulic thumbs which can be great tools for handling and placing landscape rock, Hershberger says.

With an expensive piece of equipment, it's important for contractors to learn from others' mistakes. "The most common mistakes contractors make when purchasing a larger piece of equipment is to underestimate their future needs," Hughes says. "If you don't take into account your future business plans, you may not buy the equipment with the proper options on it."

For example, if the business is going to expand and hire more employees, contractors should take into account what control pattern they are used to, Hughes says. Many backhoes offer controls that can be switched between backhoe- and excavator-style controls. Another feature to think about is a hydraulic quick coupler, Hughes says. "This feature allows you to quickly and easily change attachments without getting out of the machine's seat," he says. "A contractor may not be using a lot of attachments today, but how about if his or her business expands?"

Hershberger agrees contractors should think ahead. "Using short-term thinking can cause a contractor to purchase the least cost-effective machine if he is too focused on configuration or price," he says. "As with any purchase, a contractor can make a better decision by considering the



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different ways to buy

Because backhoes are rather expensive, contractors will normally want to rent them before buying for a few reasons, mainly to see if there's enough existing work to justify buying one or to explore new jobs they can attract.

"Renting equipment from a dealer is an excellent way to truly determine if the equipment is right for the contractor," says Chris Gustafson, division manager for rental and used equipment of Peoria, Ill.-based Caterpillar. Many contractors rent before buying backhoes because it allows them to develop a long-term plan to ensure the equipment will be utilized over the long term, he says. Backhoes are some of the costliest pieces of equipment a contractor can own. They can cost between about \$65,000 and \$500,000 depending on the features and capacity.

"Landscape contractors are doing both – renting machines and buying them outright. It really depends on the individual's circumstances," says Jim Hughes, brand marketing manager for Racine, Wis.-based Case. "For example, if a contractor won a bid for a job that requires a backhoe and they don't have one, they may rent the equipment just for that job."

Or, if cash flow is an issue, a contractor may rent a piece of equipment because it may be cheaper in the long run, Hughes says. "But if a contractor has good cash flow and it makes sense from a business perspective, buying may be the best choice."

Many dealers offer rental purchase option programs (RPOs), where contractors can buy equipment after the rental period. "They allow a customer to utilize rental dollars toward the purchase of the equipment," Gustafson says. Many times, RPOs allow for a percentage of rental fees to go toward the purchase cost.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? Just how much work is enough for a contractor to justify buying a backhoe? There's no one-size-fits-all

potential to expand his business with versatility features like quick couplers and auxiliary hydraulic lines."

THINGS TO CONSIDER. When buying equipment, no matter what type it is, a contractor should be looking at productivity, operator comfort and serviceability, the experts say. "Productivity is important because a more productive machine puts more money in your pocket because you get the job done faster," Hughes says.

Serviceability is a key to productivity for two reasons – the less time

contractors have to spend servicing the machine, the more time they spend in the dirt making money. Also, the easier daily service checks will be to perform, the more likely they will get done, Hughes says.

How much weight needs to be lifted, how much needs to be moved in what time period, how deep a hole needs to be dug and how narrow a space does the machine have to drive through? These are some of the factors that determine machine size.

"A skid-steer may need a truck and trailer for transport since it has a

answer, but Hughes offers one determinant. "Enough work to pay for the unit over the life of the unit," he says. "It's hard to say how many man-hours are saved by owning a backhoe because each contractor's situation is different."

Hughes suggests contractors ask themselves a few questions: How long would it take to unload a truck full of pallets of sod by hand vs. a machine equipped with pallet forks? How long would it take to dig a hole to plant a tree by hand versus using an auger attachment? "If you look at it in those terms, the equipment is very valuable," Hughes says.

Regardless of whether a machine is going to be purchased or rented, it's always important to demo the equipment before buying it, Hughes says. "That way, you can be sure to know that the machine will fit your needs," he says. "Demos should always take place on your job site because it will present real-world results. If you demo at a dealership, you may not run into the same type of conditions that you could encounter on your job site."



top speed of up to 11 mph vs. around 23 mph for a backhoe or four-wheel drive loader," Tyler says. "Both the backhoe and four-wheel drive loader can often be driven from one site to the next without need for separate transport." ■

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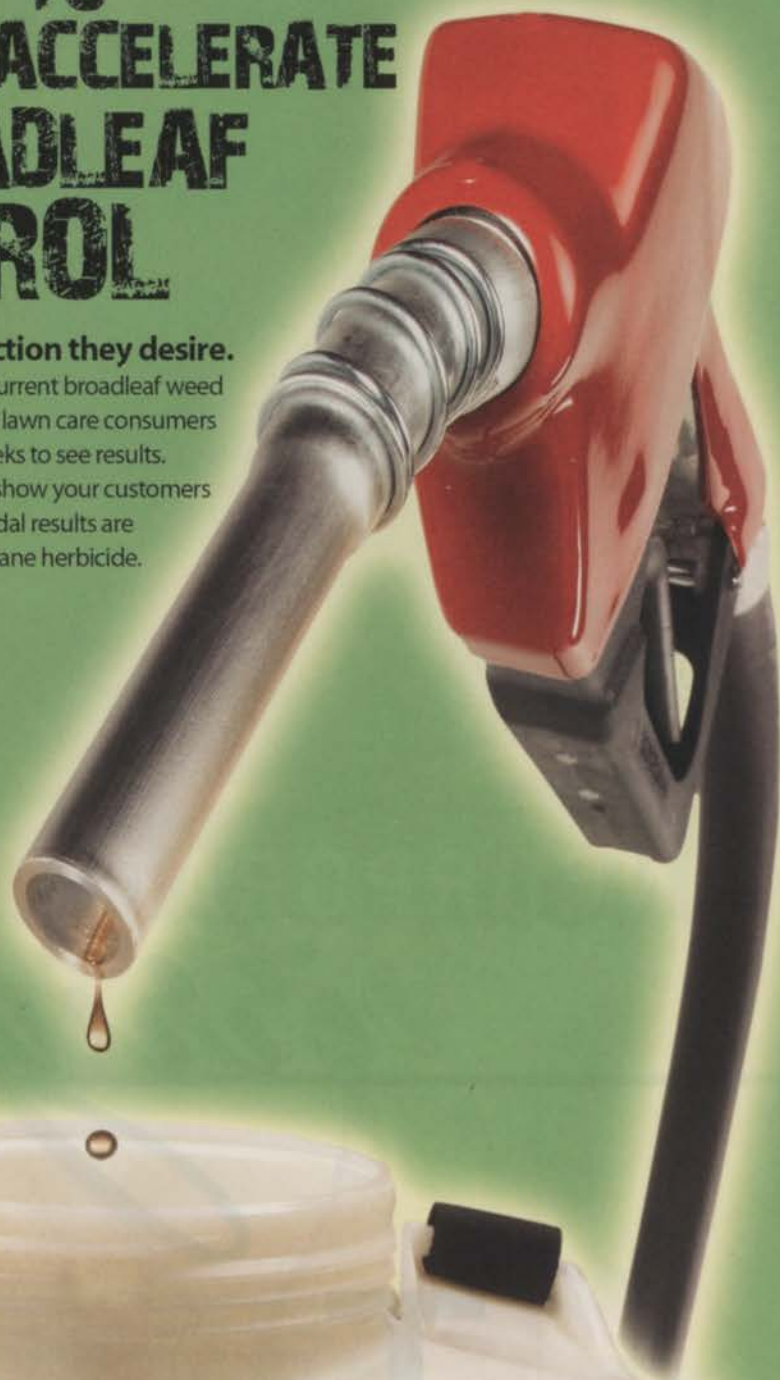


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Adding irrigation maintenance and installation to a business can be a smart move – even if you don't know what you're doing.

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The summer of 1997 was very hot and dry in Sartell, Mo. Michael Hornung and his crew at Valley Green Cos. came across more damaged lawns than healthy lawns as they performed their routine lawn care and aeration services and realized that most of their clients' irrigation systems were either not running or running improperly. To resolve this problem, Hornung and his technicians decided it would be a good idea to install and maintain the sprinkler systems themselves. To promote this idea, Hornung sent postcards advertising the service to his 1,200 accounts. "Within a month's time I had more than 200 customers send their postcards back saying 'Yes, I want you to start my sprinkler system,'" Hornung says. "And that's how our irrigation installation and maintenance services began."

by emily mullins | assistant editor



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Irrigation installation and maintenance now comprise 30 to 35 percent of Valley Green's business and brings in an average of \$315,000 annually. In a way, this profitable add-on service is simply Hornung and his crew picking up the slack of less reputable companies. "There are a lot of companies that emerge, install a system for next to nothing and then

do the maintenance for clients whose installation companies left them with nowhere to turn. Then we benefit and get more work from positive, word-of-mouth referrals."

WHAT DOES IT TAKE? Hornung admits to not knowing much about irrigation when he incorporated the service into his lawn care business

local supplier who helped him get the service off of the ground. The supplier advised him to only offer irrigation maintenance services to his existing customers during the first initial stages of implementation, so as to not get overwhelmed with too much too soon. "Our supplier was very instrumental in not letting us get into the installation side of things too quickly," Hornung says. "If you get too big too fast it will cost you because you don't have the trained people or the experience to handle it."

If Hornung and his crew treated a lawn they felt was in poor condition and thought the irrigation system wasn't working as it should, they would contact their supplier who would come out to the property and help diagnose the problem. "We tried to smooth out the learning curve by having someone who knew what they were doing around to help," he explains. "We then learned from his guidance."

"If you answer your phone, customers are surprised. If you call them back, they're wowed. And if you show up on time, they'll work with you again." - Michael Hornung

are out of business a few years later because they managed their business poorly," he explains. "Oftentimes what we see happen is we get hired to

that hot summer 10 years ago. But by utilizing the resources around him, he was able to learn about it rather quickly. He first went to his





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After the first year, Hornung also sought the guidance of a retired gentleman who had spent much of his career in the irrigation industry. His knowledge was crucial in implement-

ing the irrigation installation aspect of Valley Green, Hornung says. "He basically walked me through the process of installation and fixing existing problems," he explains.

"Since he was retired, he had the flexibility to be a part-time employee who helped out 20 to 25 hours a week. The first person he suggested we hire still helps run the service today."

A third way Hornung took advantage of industry relationships is through a partnership with a lawn maintenance company, also based in Sartell. For the past 17 years, the two companies have referred one another for jobs the other doesn't do, giving both companies the benefit of great word-of-mouth.

"We met at a McDonald's where they were finishing up the mowing and maintenance and we were getting ready to do the fertilization," Hornung says. "We struck up a conversation and have been working together ever since. It's been a great relationship because neither business had to add additional services that it wasn't good at, and we didn't have to deal with fierce competition as we grew."



Photo: Hunter

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With the necessary guidance firmly established, Hornung then needed the necessary equipment. One such piece of equipment was a plow used to pull piping through lawns and dig trenches, which Hornung rented from a rental agency on an as-needed basis for about \$100 per day. It took until the company was doing at least 50 in-

stallation jobs a year before Hornung could justify purchasing one. "If there are 25 weeks in an operating season, I felt we needed to do more than two installs a week to justify having the equipment on our lot," he explains. "Until then, it paid to rent it."

Other equipment Hornung purchased within the first two years of

performing irrigation installation and maintenance was electrical wire locating equipment, a handheld remote control and the typical shovels and handheld tools. "We basically added equipment as we grew and realized we needed it," he says. "With irrigation, a lot of the equipment is technical so if you and your crew know how to use it, you're in good shape." (See "Equipment Checklist" on page 148.)

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INSTALLATION DON'TS. As the business grew, Hornung realized some of the dos and don'ts of incorporating irrigation installation and maintenance as an add-on service. "When you don't know how to do something, you make a lot of mistakes," he says, simply.

One of those mistakes was improperly managing the business' growth. Instead of adding just one or two skilled technicians to his overly busy crew, Hornung decided to add a second crew – a decision that ended up losing him money. "The second crew was not 100 percent active so we didn't make any money – we lost money," he explains. "You have to be able to fully maximize a second crew to benefit from that kind of drastic addition."

Today, Hornung has one full-time dedicated three-man installation crew and one full-time service technician, a combination that suits his business' current needs.

Another mistake was not charging enough on a per-hour basis to cover his overhead costs. "We were actually going out and losing money the first two or three years because we hadn't looked at our true labor costs," he says. "Once we knew what we should have been charging, that really helped."

To price his business today, Hornung considers the product cost for a specific job based on the number of sprinkler heads, valves and controllers, and then he looks at the difficulty of the job and the amount of time it will take to perform it. An average job of his 80 percent residential and 20 percent commercial client base costs between \$2,500 and \$3,200. "Some companies have a minimum job price, but that's not how we do it," Hornung says.

Since incorporating the service, Hornung shoots for a 10 to 15 percent net profit each year, and some

years fair better than others for a variety of reasons. The first few years of business hit the higher end of that goal because of the housing boom of early 2000, he says. But Missouri's housing market has declined in the past few years and use of his installation services has since slowed down. "If the economy is poor, our maintenance sales stay relatively the same, but our installation sales drop," Hornung says. "People will keep up their existing systems, but are reluctant to install new ones because they just don't have money for the extra expense. It's seen as a commodity rather than a necessity."

Other economic factors such as the high price of gas have also contributed to the lull in irrigation installation. "Last year was really hot and dry, but the price of gas went up and people didn't have the extra money for sprinkler systems," he explains. "This year might come full circle as people receive their tax returns, the price of gas has gone down and people want to revive their lawns that died last year."

INSTALLATION DOS. A do that Hornung has always done well is utilizing the support offered to him by irrigation manufacturers. Some irrigation system manufacturers offer beginner, intermediate and advanced training courses that can benefit all irrigation technicians regardless of how many years they've spent in the industry. "We pay for all of our staff to attend these sessions," he says. "They're great for helping newer people get up to speed and for helping veterans refocus and learn new techniques."

Hornung's employees are required to participate every year and take the courses relevant to their level of experience. First-year technicians attend an orientation and one or two introductory classes. Second-year employees attend more involved courses focusing on topics such as design or drip irrigation, and third and fourth year employees take the most advanced classes offered.

Based on their completion of the course, each attendee earns credit hours toward irrigation certification. "A lot of it is hands-on work and some of the courses can get very in depth," he says.

Proper training is not something that can happen in a week's time,

Hornung says, and focusing on this aspect of his business can help decrease turnover by increasing employee confidence. "Irrigation installation is not necessarily an easy job, and the turnover of people who don't understand what they're doing is typically high," he says. "A company shouldn't offer a service if the owner doesn't

plan to properly train his employees. Failing to plan is planning to fail."

Another area where Hornung's company excels is in customer service, which he says can either make or break a landscape company. "The industry isn't as professional as it could be in some areas, and it has a

continued on page 150, sidebar on page 148

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continued from page 147

black eye for poor customer service," he says. Hornung prides himself on being open and honest with his customers and treating them the way he would want to be treated. "If

you answer your phone, customers are surprised. If you call them back, they're wowed. And if you show up on time, they'll work with you again," he says. "If you want to be successful,

those are three key things to start with and are three things we always make sure to do. It sounds so easy but that is where a lot of landscape companies fail."

To promote his irrigation services, Hornung suggests first looking at how much work your company can handle. From there, decide if you can get adequate calls from your existing Yellow Pages ad or if you need to take additional steps. Early spring is the best time to promote irrigation services because people are getting anxious for a summer of enjoying their lawns, Hornung says.

Although he and his team are currently busy planning this year's marketing strategies, the last 10 years of service will probably ease some of their hard work. "Customer referrals are the best form of advertising," he says. "If your customers refer you, and you do good business and follow through, you'll have that customer for life." **LL**



Photo: Rainbird



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See The *light*

Photo: CAST Lighting

Ninety percent of the time Rick Brauneis hooks the client.

Brauneis' bait is professional landscape lighting, and not the big-box, do-it-yourself kind many residential clients are all too familiar with. Once a client sees how a few well-placed fixtures equipped with some wisely chosen bulbs

can add a new dimension to a home once shrouded in darkness, they almost immediately buy into Brauneis' vision.

Landscape lighting's main objective, say contractors offering the service, is to create a certain effect for the client — an electrical 'Wow' factor. Accomplishing this successfully involves an artistic eye, an understanding of how lighting systems work together in concert and the skill to translate a mental picture into reality.

Clients easily become "enlightened" by the potential they discover in landscape lighting, which makes it a particularly attractive add-on service for landscape contractors, especially those

by mike zawacki | managing editor

catering to high-end clients.

"The trend is more people in the middle- to upper-income levels are looking to do a landscape lighting project," says Maria Burk, marketing manager for lighting systems at Kichler in Independence, Ohio. Landscape lighting is the natural progression in the evolution of clients' desire to create and enhance outdoor living environments, she says.

Low-cost and low-tech to adopt, landscape lighting has a short learning curve for contractors. Because of these attractive features, landscape professionals are beginning to see the service in a positive light. According to recent *Lawn & Landscape* research, 35 percent of contractors offering landscape construction services engage in lighting installation. In addition, nearly 35 percent of contractors plan to purchase landscape lighting materials in the coming year, according to the research.

Likewise, the service not only sells itself, but it also serves as the catalyst for future referral business.

"As long as I don't make the client's home look like an airport landing strip it generates a lot of referral business," Brauneis says. "The lights come out and the neighbors start to 'Ooh' and 'Ah' and they want to know who did the lighting work for them."

FLICKING THE SWITCH. Landscape lighting is a logical addition for contractors already offering design/build services. And it's the logical next-step decision for clients investing in exterior living spaces, such as backyard patios and outdoor kitchens.

For example, Patrick Devereux, the owner of Stone Oaks Landscapes in Milwaukee, Wis., already owned the necessary equipment and machinery for his landscape construction projects. Unlike other green industry services, landscape lighting does not require a steep financial investment into specialized and expensive tools. Contractors will need some basic electrical tools, such as a pair of quality wire cutters, as well as meters that measure voltage and amperage. In all, a basic landscape lighting tool kit can be assembled with high-quality equipment for less than \$1,000.

With a basic mechanical background and understanding of electricity, landscape lighting is not a difficult service to get a handle on, says Andy

White, president of Wayside Landscape Services in Asheville, N.C.

"Sometimes, I've found that electricity can be a lot easier to understand than how plants grow," he says. "The laws of physics are very predictable, unlike the laws of nature."

In addition, many states do not require contractors to have an electrician's license to install low-voltage lighting, Burk says.

Another attractive bonus, Devereux says, is there are a number of educational venues available to contractors to learn about proper wiring and to get up to speed on current landscape lighting techniques and design/layout trends.

"I was able to attend a number of seminars and training sessions put on by our wholesale provider to learn how to design lighting," Devereux says, adding many are offered either for free or for a nominal cost.

One supplier provided Devereux with an on-site representative to assist in the design and installation of his first few landscape lighting jobs.

"The hands-on training they were able to provide was very helpful and appreciated," Devereux says. "My

crew was able to learn to do an install the right way and on-site with the help of the rep."

"The best source for knowledge on getting started with landscape lighting is from manufacturer- and supplier-driven workshops and education opportunities that are available to the contractor, often for free," White adds. "I've attended dozens of these types of events over the years and they're the places I can go to get my questions answered or have a professional troubleshoot my problems."

It may take a dozen or more lighting projects before a contractor begins to get a good feel for how systems work and different lighting interacts with each other, White says.

"You can make some good guesses, but until you put that combination of fixtures out there you won't really know for sure," White says. "Eventually, you'll get good enough where you can create the effect you want the first time out, but it takes a number of jobs to get to that point."

And whether a contractor forms a dedicated lighting crew is a matter of personal preference and depends upon the size of his operations and the

Photo: Kim Lighting





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magnitude of lighting installations he or she expects to perform throughout the year.

Devereux, for example, has a three-man crew that specializes in large-scale (more than 20 fixtures) lighting projects. This crew, in turn, trains other workers on proper installation techniques to handle smaller-sized jobs.

Many contractors, though, indicate the crew that performs the landscape install or constructs the design/build project also takes care of the lighting.

People who haven't experienced professional lighting firsthand tend to not want it because many correlate it with the big security spotlights attached to the sides of garages and sheds.

In fact, the greatest challenge landscape contractors offering lighting services say they face when selling a project is countering the Do-It-Yourself mind set. It's not uncommon for a potential client to respond to a contractor's lighting proposal with, "Can't I just go to my local big-box retailer, buy my own kit and do it myself?"

building a lot of momentum for the service," Parrott says.

However, even the most brilliant plans for landscape lighting might not look that great on paper. In selling landscape lighting, contractors say seeing is believing.

Demonstration – or "demo" – kits are a great selling tool for contractors pitching landscaping lighting plans to a client. The average kit consists of a transformer and a sampling of about two-dozen different fixtures equipped with quick-connect wiring. Most manufacturers and suppliers sell demo kits, or a contractor can develop his or her own custom-built kit for a few hundred dollars.

The demo kits are worthwhile investments for landscape lighting contractors. Installation takes, on average, about 30 minutes, and the kit gives the client a preview and appreciation for what a full-array can look like.

"Demo kits are a great way for contractors to market their landscape lighting services," Burk says. "Once people see this beautiful example of what landscape lighting can do for their homes, they want it."

Indeed, the demo kit, set up and left with the client for a week or two, often does all of the sales work for the contractor.

"It's a good idea to leave the demo kit in place for the client for one to

"As long as I don't make the client's home look like an airport landing strip, it generates a lot of referral business. The lights come out and the neighbors start to 'Ooh,' and 'Ah,' and they want to know who did the lighting work for them."

– Rick Brauneis

SELLING AND PRICING. The worst time to sell landscape lighting, as the common joke told by landscape contractors goes, is during the day.

The truth, though, is clients often have a difficult time envisioning the potential improvement factor that professionally-installed landscape lighting can have on their properties.

Professionally installed landscape lighting is a relatively new industry, says Steve Parrott, media and marketing director at CAST Lighting in Hawthorne, N.J., and has seen growth rates of about 30 percent every year for the last 15 to 20 years.

"People are starting to see more professionally lit homes and that's



Photo: Dreamstime.com

under the spotlight

Besides utilizing a demonstration kit, Steve Parrott, media and marketing director for CAST Lighting in Hawthorne, N.J. suggests a few other strategies for contractors hoping to shed some light on their landscape lighting services.

- Donate your services to wire and light a very visible location in your hometown. For example, volunteer to install landscape lighting at the town library or another public landmark.
- Contact the owner of a strategically-place, high-end or historic home and offer to do the install portion of a landscape lighting project for free.
- Market directly to a high-income client base by working a deal with a local country club to install landscape lighting.
- Work with a local garden club or neighborhood association to put on a landscape lighting presentation that not only shows a project's potential for beautification, but also stresses the lighting's safety and security benefits to the community.

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two weeks," Parrott says. "Installers report nearly 100 percent sales at the homes where they have used a demo kit."

The ideal time to sell the service, according to White, is while a contractor is developing and/or selling a landscape or design/build project.

"During the install and construction phases you can incorporate all of your physical systems into the plant material and you won't have to come back and risk cutting into a drip irrigation tube," White says.

"Landscape lighting demo kits are a great way for contractors to market their landscape lighting services. Once people see this beautiful example of what landscape lighting can do for their homes, they want it. — Maria Burk

But this isn't always the case and clients are more apt to consider landscape lighting during the second or third phases of a design/build project. Even if the client is not ready to commit to lighting right away, incorporating the guts — laying the wiring — for a system alleviates a lot of headaches down the road.

Offer the service on a case-by-case

basis, Parrott says.

"Contractors will begin to recognize clients who will want to do a landscape lighting project," he says. "But it may be too much to ask if the bill for the hardscape project is high."

It costs next to nothing to lay cable and install the dedicated circuitry during the construction phase of a landscape or hardscape project, contractors say. Often, the few dollars spent is a worthwhile and time-saving investment.

"Offer to put the wire in the

ground for free and then approach the client the next year with a proposal for adding landscape lighting," Parrott says. "Don't push the client into doing landscape lighting that they're not comfortable with during a design/build project. Tell them you understand if it's too much to pay for landscape lighting now, but you'll throw in a demo kit for free. It'll give

the client a good idea for what lighting could look like."

A solid sales tactic, many contractors advise, is not to push a landscape lighting scheme on a client, but rather suggest it.

"When people see a really good landscape lighting system they will want it," White says. "But remember, this is a discretionary purchase for the typical homeowner and they can be easily talked out of making a commitment, too."

Initially, contractors are unsure of how much to charge clients for landscape lighting services. Devereux suggests fine tuning price around a combination of how long the install will take (Will a transformer need to be installed or an excessive amount of cable laid?) and the going market rate for the service. For example, Devereux charges between \$200 and \$250 a fixture for an average lighting job, which is between 15 and 20 fixtures. He adjusts this figure accordingly for large-scale (more than 20 fixtures) and small-scale jobs (less than 5 fixtures).

"While it's not an exact formula, it's good to approach each job on a case-by-case basis," Devereux says. "When you're installing more than 20 fixtures you're making a pretty nice

continued on page 161, sidebar on page 160



Photo: Kichler Lighting

avoid a bad install

For landscape contractors installing landscape lighting, mistakes are bound to happen. For example, a contractor may misestimate a job that requires more light fixtures than originally projected or underestimates the amount of voltage a string of lights requires.

The bottom line, though, is a poor installation of landscape lighting will burn a contractor every time.

Patrick Devereux, owner of Stone Oak Landscapes in Milwaukee, Wis., offers a few easy ways contractors can avoid a sub-par installation job.

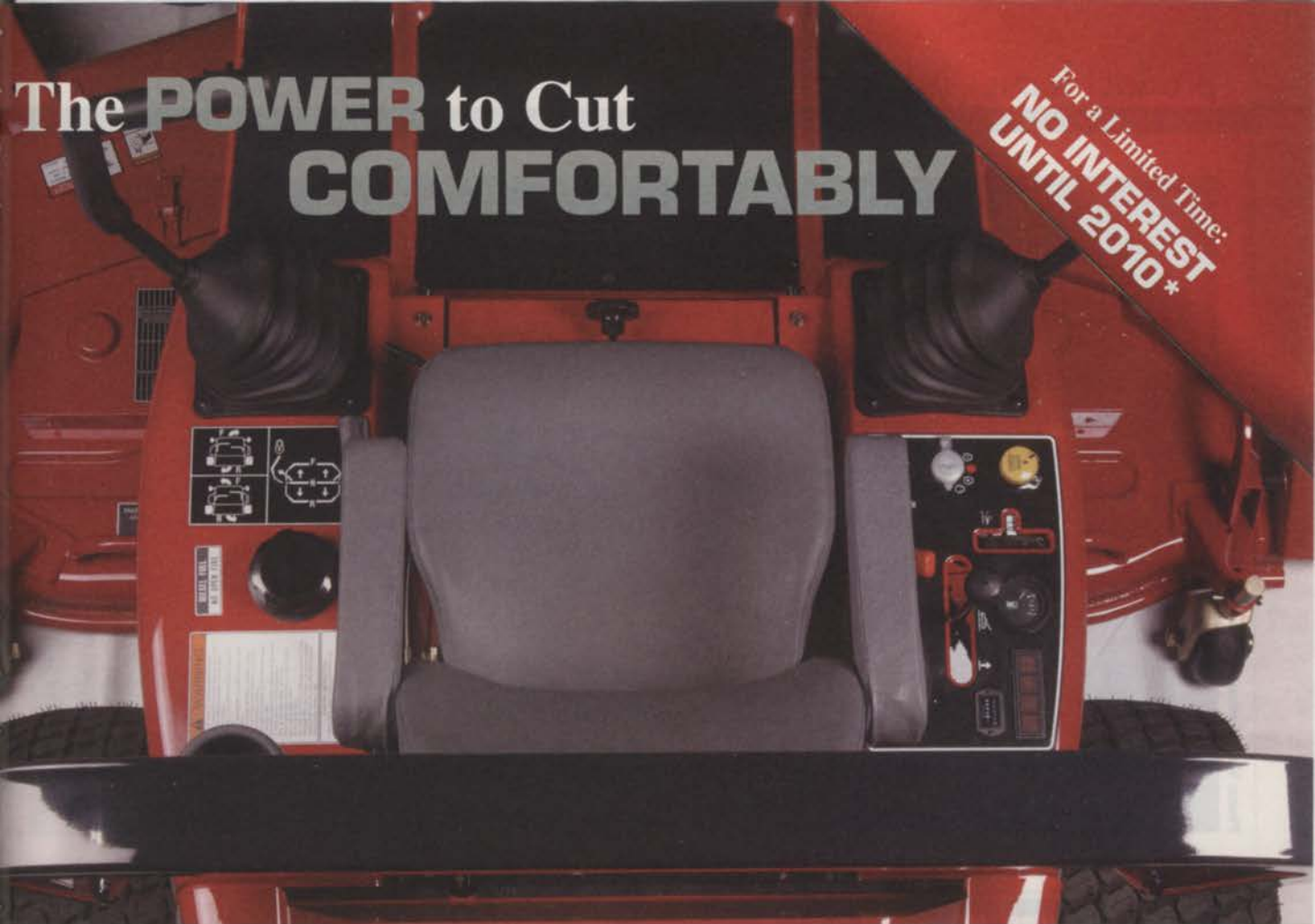
Avoid inferior fixtures. Cheap fixtures do not stand the test of time, with some rotting out within five years.

Keep wiring out of the way. When possible, run fixture lighting out of the way of active landscape areas, such as flower beds.

Run balanced systems. An improperly balanced system will be more expensive to run. Overloaded circuits lead to strings of lights with fixtures that are too bright and too dim. And when possible, run heavier gauge wire to minimize resistance.

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Photo: Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting



bright ideas

Many contractors are adopting remote control switches. "When doing an install on a new home you have the opportunity to run wires just about anywhere," says Andy White, president, Wayside Landscape Services, Asheville, N.C. "But running those same wires in an established home can be expensive or near impossible."

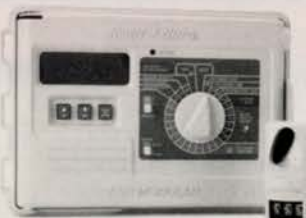
To troubleshoot this problem, contractors are turning to remote-control technology, which bypasses the need to install expensive and invasive wiring. Wireless, remote switching devices send signals to the transformer on when the lights should be on and off.

"Remote control systems have really worked well for us because they allow us to place switches in a number of locations easily," White says.

The remote devices also assist contractors when they're called to troubleshoot lighting problems. "They're great tools for repair work," White says. "Instead of running back in and out of the home to flip switches on and off you can take the controller with you outside and operate the whole system from there."

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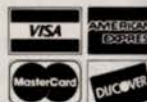
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USE READER SERVICE # 112

continued from page 158

profit. Landscape lighting tends to be more profitable than other landscape work. I shoot for about 35 percent gross profit."

When pricing jobs, some contractors boil a project estimate down to labor and materials. For larger jobs, though, many work backward by establishing a price-per-watt.

"Once you do a few jobs and establish a price you're comfortable with you can divide that into the wattage you've sold for a bigger job," White says. "And then you can adjust that figure according to a particular job's difficulty level."

ELECTRIFYING RELATIONSHIPS.

A common misperception among homeowners is that their landscape lighting project is final once the install is completed.

"Sometimes, I've found that electricity can be a lot easier to understand than how plants grow. The laws of physics are very predictable, unlike the laws of nature." – Andy White

This is not the case. Contractors should educate clients that their lighting arrangement will need to be tweaked in a year or two to maintain its optimal effect. This provides an additional profit center for the contractor, as well.

"Every few years the lighting needs to be re-evaluated," White says. "As plants grow, the lighting needs to change. Some of the lamps and fixtures will not continue to do their jobs because after a few years they'll either become buried or blocked by the surrounding landscape." **LL**

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Visit the April Online Extras section for more on successful landscape lighting.



Photo: CAST Lighting

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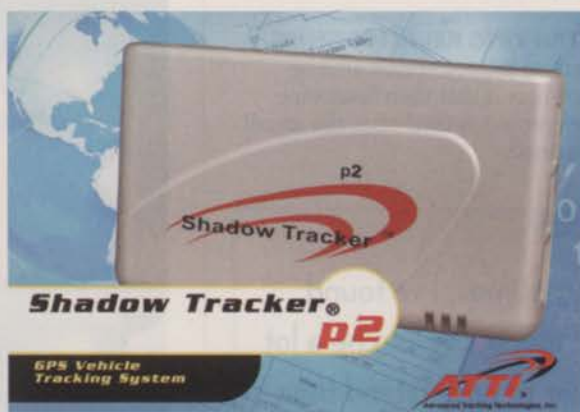
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- Tracks speed and location of the vehicles
- Easy to install
- Includes detailed mapping features
- Productivity reports are available
- Free technical support offered
- Advanced Tracking Technologies – 800/279-0035, www.advantrack.com

Circle 218 on reader service card



CLIP Software Training Video

- Features audio from a recently hosted live class
- Screenshots help users better understand how to set up and use the software
- Contains more than six and a half hours of training
- Covers such topics as set up, managing customer files, preparing work orders, recording the work and billing
- Sensible Software – 800/635-8485, www.clip.com


Circle 219 on reader service card

Computer Systems Odessa ConceptDraw VI

- Features libraries of objects and instruments for landscape design
- Updated version is available
- Objects can be dragged and dropped into designs
- Option to create your own library is available
- Computer Systems Odessa Corp. – www.conceptdraw.com

Circle 220 on reader service card





THANK YOU, LAWN PRO!

Is it possible for clients to be too happy?

Use QuickSilver® herbicide to create a first impression that lasts.

When it comes to weeds, clients aren't patient – so you can't be either. With QuickSilver herbicide, customer satisfaction starts from the very first treatment with visible results just hours after application. That's because when you include QuickSilver herbicide in every tank mix, you see a boost in the performance on more than fifty tough to control broadleaf weeds. And QuickSilver herbicide is specially formulated to be effective at a wide range of temperatures, so your customers never have to wait on the weather for the results they want. You only get one chance to make a lasting impression. Keep customers happy and coming back by using QuickSilver herbicide in every tank. For more information please contact your FMC sales representative or local FMC distributor.

QuickSilver. Customer Satisfaction In Every Tank.

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FMC

FMC Professional Solutions

1-800-321-1FMC • fmcprosolutions.com



QuickSilver®
HERBICIDE

DeWalt Mobilelock

- Stand alone, portable wireless alarm system
- Easily mounted to equipment using heavy-duty magnets or screws
- GPS feature allows contractors to locate device using the Internet
- Includes four sensors that can be individually programmed through a phone or Web site
- DeWalt – 877/456-5625, www.dewalt.com

Circle 221 on reader service card



Drafix PRO Landscape 13

- Features new 3D imaging capabilities
- Allows users to zoom in and out and rotate at any angle to view landscape designs at various perspectives
- 3D feature is integrated into the software's Image Editor and Planner components
- Image Editor gives designers access to more than 5,000 high-quality images
- Planner component creates a 2D comprehensive layout plan that accurately represents plants, irrigation systems, hardscapes and waterscapes
- Drafix – www.prolandscape.com

Circle 222 on reader service card



DynaSCAPE Color Add-on

- Feature is an addition to the DynaSCAPE Suite
- Transforms designs into full-color designs
- User can open a design and quickly drop in a color swatch
- Style Editor allows the user to create custom swatches and styles
- Advanced transparency and shading effects are available
- Existing designs can be colored
- DynaSCAPE – 800/710-1900, www.dynascape.com

Circle 223 on reader service card



Open it up.

Our company, our products and our reputation are all built on one principle: Quality. It's what we're made of. Better parts and better engineering mean greater performance and longer life. At Shindaiwa, we invest more in research,



design and materials to give you a product that outperforms the competition year after year.

EB8510

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First to Start. Last to Quit.

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4
CYCLES

shindaiwa

OHC - Turbo
EB8510

EB8510RT BACKPACK BLOWER

Displacement: 79.7cc / Output: 4.5 hp
Air Flow: 762 CFM Speed: 224 MPH

www.shindaiwa.com / 800.521.7733

USE READER SERVICE # 115

Envista Landscape Software

- Contains several integrated modules, including estimating, sales tracking, scheduling, customer service, profitability analysis and administration
- All information is accessed via the Web, so employees can access real-time information
- Designed exclusively for landscapers by a landscaping company that has been in the business 20 years
- Envista – 866/641-6459, www.envistainc.com

Circle 224 on reader service card



Exaktime PocketClock

- Simple-to-use software that runs on a Palm Pilot
- Allows multiple users to clock in and out
- Can be used alone or with Exaktime JobClocks
- Exaktime – 888/788-8463, www.jobclock.com

Circle 225 on reader service card



Insight Direct Service CEO

- Helps lawn care companies manage tasks including scheduling, dispatching, jobs, service contracts, estimates, customer information and inventory
- Allows the user to provide instant, accurate answers to customers and employees
- Demonstration available online
- Insight Direct – 800/471-4200, www.insightdirect.com

Circle 226 on reader service card



Serveon SAVI Data Collection System

- Customizable wireless, GPS-enabled handheld system allows users to capture, share and report field data
- Sold on a subscription basis
- Contained in the Pharos 525E, a wireless handheld unit
- All data imported by subscribers is stored on the company's secure server network
- All types of data can be stored on the system
- Serveon – 302/529-8640, www.serveon.net

Circle 227 on reader service card



Nufarm has broken new ground – to ensure weeds don't.

The ProDeuce logo features the brand name in a bold, dark blue serif font. Above the 'e' in 'Deuce' is a green swoosh graphic that extends to the left and then curves under the 'e'.

ProDeuce™

Introducing **ProDeuce™** – the first ever
Glyphosate/ Prodiamine herbicide.

Sick of respraying? Wish there was a broad-spectrum herbicide that offered extended grassy weed control throughout the season to cut down on labor? Tired of the carnage of mechanical trimmers?

Introducing **ProDeuce™** – a groundbreaking herbicide that combines the non-selective knockdown power of glyphosate with the preventative long lasting pre-emergent control of prodiamine. Together for the first time in a convenient dual-action herbicide!

Ideal for:

- Chemical edging • Mulch beds of well-established plants
- Cracks and crevices in driveways, sidewalks and patios*
- Foundations • Gravel areas

www.turf.us.nufarm.com (800) 345-3330

™ ProDeuce is a trademark of Nufarm Americas Inc.

* May cause temporary staining. Do not use on areas where this is unacceptable.

Value with a difference.

The Nufarm logo consists of a stylized green 'N' symbol above the word 'Nufarm' in a bold, sans-serif font, with 'Turf & Specialty' in a smaller font below it.

Nufarm
Turf & Specialty

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Smaller Paws. Bigger Claws.

New FastCat models from BOB-CAT® give you all the power, comfort and performance of a big zero-turn mower in a compact design. Mow where the big boys can't! Starting at a slim 36", the FastCat easily gets through narrow gates and into hard-to-reach areas. Choose any one of four workhorse engines for all the power you'll need.

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USE READER SERVICE # 117



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*Free shipping on all orders of \$50 or more

USE READER SERVICE # 118

product spotlight



Real Green Torq N100 Navigation System

- Equipped with TomTom Navigator 5
- Gives voice turn by turn directions with easy-to-use touch-screen menus and a list of points and interests to help you navigate to your destination of choice
- Supports GSM phone services
- Also works as a cell phone
- Includes a 1.3-megapixel camera for live and still captures
- Windows mobile PDA capabilities are available, including Word mobile and Excel mobile
- Real Green Systems – 800/422-7478, www.realgreen.com

Circle 228 on reader service card

Teletrac FleetDirector Tracking System

- Vehicle location and fleet management system for service companies
- Features wireless two-way communication between drivers and dispatchers
- Allows the user to schedule change requests, unplanned delays, parts replenishment issues or crew reassignments
- Message Display Terminal can accommodate both pre-programmed and free-form messages
- Turn-By-Turn navigation gives verbal driving directions
- Teletrac Reporter supplies the facts needed to measure driver, vehicle and customer performance
- Teletrac – 800/835-3872, www.teletrac.net

Circle 229 on reader service card





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call or register online to win a new Magnum or Synergy
800.346.2001 permagreen.com

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USE READER SERVICE # 119

The Way to Wellness

These pesticide formulations offer the cure or prevention for several turf and ornamental problems.

compiled by heather wood | web editor

Advan Enforce Insecticide



- Delivers protection against grubs, mole crickets, billbug larvae, annual bluegrass weevil, cutworms, chinchbugs and European crane fly
- Best used as a preventative before egg lay
- Offers curative action through the second instar
- Advan – 800/250-5024, www.advanllc.com

Circle 230 on reader service card

Arysta Disarm 480 SC Fungicide



- Provides long-lasting, broad-spectrum control of brown patch, anthracnose, gray leaf spot, summer patch and other major diseases on greens and fairways
- Offers fast-acting systemic disease protection
- Includes leaf and crown protection
- Arysta LifeScience – 800/358-7643, www.arysta-na.com

Circle 231 on reader service card

The Hyperactive Fungicide™

BASF Trinity Fungicide



- Member of the demethylation inhibitor class of chemistry (DMI)
- Offers preventive and curative control of patch diseases, anthracnose, dollar spot and pink and gray snow mold
- Can be used in rotation with non-Group 3 DMI fungicides
- BASF – 800/669-1770, www.turffacts.com

Circle 232 on reader service card

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TRUCK

ADOBE

EQUIPMENT

COMMERCIAL TRUCK CENTER

FORMERLY KNOWN AS KELLEY COMMERCIAL TRUCK CENTER

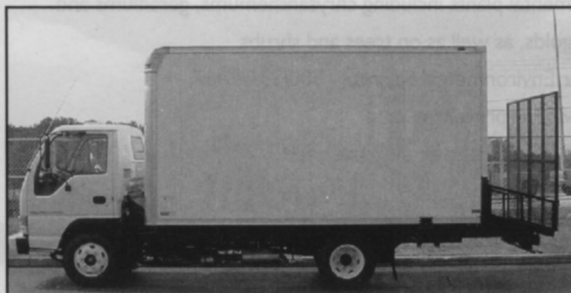


DUE TO MORE STRINGENT EMISSION LAWS ON COMMERCIAL VEHICLES, THE PRICE OF TRUCKS PRODUCED AFTER JAN. 1ST, 2007 WILL INCREASE \$3,000 - \$5,000

Ask dealer for details



2007 ISUZU NPR
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Pwr Windows & Locks
16ft Landscape Body

\$27,471*

2006 ISUZU NPR Diesel
Auto, A/C, 14ft Dovetail
Pwr Windows & Locks
Cruise Control

\$32,344*

2006 ISUZU NPR DIESEL
Auto, A/C, 16ft Landscape
Body, Pwr Windows & Locks
Cruise Control

\$29,966*

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USE READER SERVICE # 120

Bayer Armada Fungicide

Armada™

- Approved for control of foliar diseases of ornamental plants and trees
- Applied as a foliar spray, it controls diseases including anthracnose, black spot, downy mildew, leaf spot, powdery mildew, rust and scab
- Use rates vary from 3 to 9 ounces per 100 gallons of spray solution
- Product may be applied at 14- to 28-day intervals until the threat of the disease is gone
- May be used for preventive and curative disease control on ornamental plants including chrysanthemums, geraniums and marigolds, as well as on trees and shrubs
- Bayer Environmental Science – 800/331-2867, www.bayerprocentral.com

Circle 233 on reader service card

Cleary TriStar Insecticide

- Available in 70 WSP granular formation and 30 SG water-soluble granular formation
- Controls pests including aphids, mealy bugs, caterpillars, scales, whiteflies, thrips, leaf eating beetles and leaf miners
- 30 SG formulation is packaged with 8-ounce containers that allow for multiple measurements of the products
- Both formulations are compatible with many tank partners
- Cleary Chemical – 800/524-1662, www.clearychemical.com

Circle 234 on reader service card



Dow Dimension 2EW Herbicide

- Provides postemergent control of crabgrass and preemergent control of other grassy broadleaf weeds including spurge, oxalis and lespedeza
- Can be sprayed over the top of many landscape ornamentals, including field-grown nursery ornamentals
- Doesn't stain or harm turf
- Sprayable version contains 2 pounds of active ingredient per gallon
- Available in half-gallon, 2½-gallon and 30-gallon containers
- Dow AgroSciences – 800/255-3726, www.dimensionherbicide.com

Circle 235 on reader service card





Spreader shown with optional hopper cover.

Purchase 3 pallets of MACH[®] 2 plus Fertilizer and get the industry's best spreader for FREE!*
Plus 0% financing available with any minimum purchase of \$1500 of MACH 2 plus Fertilizer**

Date of purchase:

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 5/1/07 - 5/31/07
 6/1/07 - 7/31/07

Terms:

0% interest and no payments until 7/07
 0% interest and no payments until 8/07
 0% interest and no payments until 9/07



To find out more, visit your nearest LESCO Service Center[®] location or contact your LESCO sales representative.

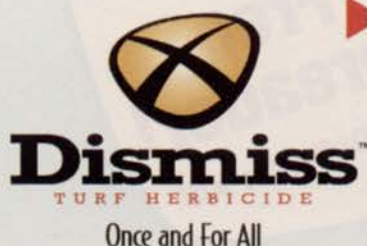
*Offer listed is not valid with any sales covered by contract and/or bid pricing. All truckload orders will be direct shipped to your location. Some offers only available in limited areas. Items on sale may not be in stock at all locations. LESCO reserves the right to substitute a like product if out of stock. Offers valid from April 1 - July 31, 2007. Qualifying purchase(s) must be on one invoice. Offers do not apply to agency products. Some restrictions apply. FREE LESCO Stainless Steel Spreader (#705699) includes the optional deflector kit and has a retail value of \$398. Maximum 5 spreaders per customer. MACH 2 is a registered trademark of Dow AgroSciences LLC. LESCO is a registered trademark of LESCO Technologies, LLC. **Qualifying purchase(s) must be on one invoice and paid for with your LESCO card. Offer listed is not valid with any sales covered by contract and/or bid pricing.

LESCO[®]
Professional Turf Products

DuPont Provaunt Insecticide

- Provides effective control to multiple types of caterpillars, mole crickets, annual bluegrass weevil larvae (curative application), European crane fly larvae, potato leafhopper, grasshoppers and European pine sawfly
- Features the active ingredient indoxacarb
- Classified as a reduced-risk active ingredient by the EPA
- DuPont – 888/638-7668, www.proproducts.dupont.com

Circle 236 on reader service card



FMC Dismiss Turf Herbicide

- Controls yellow nutsedge and green kyllinga in a single application
- Controls purple nutsedge in two applications
- Well-tolerated on most warm- and cool-season turfgrass
- Offers effective preemergent control on annual broadleaf weeds
- Labeled for both lawn and golf turfs
- FMC Corp. – 215/299-6000, www.fmc.com

Circle 237 on reader service card

EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT THE

industry buzz

If you haven't read this week's Industry Buzz then you're missing out!

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Tools of the Trade.

Nowhere else will you find a better and more complete resource for the lawn & landscape industry than L&L Online (www.lawnandlandscape.com) – containing all the tools you need to succeed! Daily news and commentary. Product information. Message Boards. All these tools and more can be found on the industry's leading website. Visit today for ideas and insights into how to better manage your business.

The screenshot shows the L&L Online website interface. At the top, it says "THE INDUSTRY'S NEWS AND RESOURCE CENTER" with a search bar and a "Log In" button. Below this is a navigation bar with links: MAGAZINE, RESOURCES, NEWS, EVENTS, COMMUNITY, and YOUR BUSINESS. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- SPONSORS:** Includes logos for Toro, Lebonanturf, CARE, STIHL, and others.
- Make this site your Homepage!** A button to save the site as a homepage.
- welcome back L&L Advertiser** A message to registered users.
- Friday, March 16, 2007** The current date.
- HEADLINE NEWS:** A list of recent news items, including "APLD Announces Practical Techniques Seminar", "Cal Poly Names New Horticulture and Crop Science Department Head", "Green Building Expo to be held in New York", "Shore Arborist Receives ISA's Highest Honor", "Roof Collapse on Live Nursery", "Massachusetts Consultant Fines Up Debate over Lawn Irrigation", and "Chamber Joins ACLU in Challenging Immigration Ordinance".
- TOP STORY:** A featured article titled "Gas Prices Show Wide Discrepancy from Coast to Coast, AAA Reports".
- TOP 100:** A list of the top 100 products, with "Think You're in the Top 100?" and "2006 Top 100".
- Product Promotions:** A section for promoting products, including "CLIP Software's eCLIP" and "Rain Bird".
- Marketplace:** A section for buying and selling products, including "Rain Bird".
- Product Spotlight:** A section for highlighting specific products, including "Racoma" and "Powered by the X.TORQ".

On the right side of the screenshot, there is a vertical banner for "MEET THE ONLY GAS ENGINE IN CLASSES 6, 7 AND 8" with an image of a gas engine.



Nufarm Mallet 2F Insecticide

- New line of insecticide products based upon the active ingredient, imidacloprid
- Available in 2x2.5-gallon and 8x60-oz. cases
- State registration process is underway with several states having already granted approval
- Nufarm Turf & Specialty – 630/455-2000, www.turf.us.nufarm.com

Circle 238 on reader service card



PBI Gordon Speed Zone Broadleaf Herbicide for Turf

- Provides fast broadleaf weed control for turf
- Injury is visible in hours
- Clover can be controlled in as little as one week
- Herbicide becomes rain-fast in 3 to 4 hours
- Carries a caution signal word
- Low-odor formulation
- PBI Gordon – 800/821-7925, www.pbigordon.com/speedzone

Circle 239 on reader service card



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Check website for availability
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“Hydro walk-behind power seeder!”



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MSRP

TURF
REVITALIZER



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MSRP


USE READER SERVICE # 123

ProScape MESA

Patented Slow Release Nitrogen Technology

ProScape® fertilizers and fertilizer combination products aren't for everyone.

Fortunately, some of your competition still hasn't figured it out. They think low cost is the path to high profits, that value is the same as low price. That's why you're out closing a referral while they're across town scrambling to deal with a customer complaint! ProScape's innovative nutrient sources like **MESA**™ give



*How can something
that works so fast...last so long?*

Extended-release MESA greens faster and lasts longer than SCU.

you more green, faster, and longer than the competition, with less surge growth. You can reduce nitrogen rates lowering spring disease pressure, go longer between applications, even save time and money associated with excess clippings. All while providing excellent quality results that your customers will rave about. ProScape is for serious turf care professionals. To learn more visit our web site www.LebanonTurf.com. Click on Promotions and enter coupon code LL2047. We'll send you a **FREE** 40 page Agronomy Manual just for taking a look!



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Phoenix Peregrine Fungicide

◀ Peregrine™

- Broad-spectrum fungicide controls anthracnose, dollar spot, large brown patch, helminthosporium, pink and gray snow mold and leaf spot
- Can also be used on landscape plantings for control of ovulinia blight, botrytis, downy and powdery mildew
- Contains a combination of chlorothalonil and thiophanate-methyl
- Available as 66.7-percent WDG
- Sold in five-pound, resealable jugs
- Phoenix Environmental Care – 888/240-8856, www.phoenixenvcare.com

Circle 240 on reader service card

Scotts Corral Granular Herbicide

- Preemergent herbicide
- Provides particularly effective control of goosegrass, crabgrass and *Poa annua*, in addition to other annual grassy weeds
- Also provides effective control of certain broadleaf weeds
- Features the flexibility of being used with OH2 and Rout
- Scotts Co. – 800/492-8255, www.scottsprohort.com

Circle 241 on reader service card



make a killing



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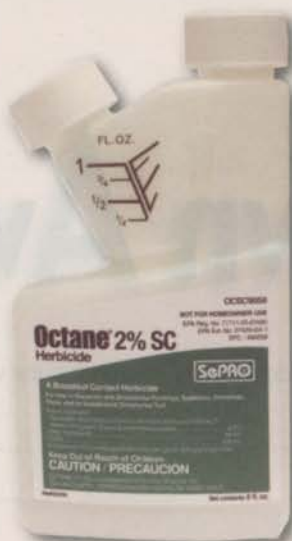


USE READER SERVICE # 125

SePRO Octane 2 Percent SC Herbicide

- Contains active ingredient Pyraflufen ethyl, which when added as a tank-mix with postemergent broadleaf weed herbicides increases the speed of kill
- Visual herbicidal results are evident within 24 to 48 hours of application
- Gentle on desirable turfgrasses
- Low-water solubility and vapor pressure limit its potential off-target movement to sensitive sites
- SePRO – 800/419-7779, www.sepro.com

Circle 242 on reader service card



Syngenta Meridian Insecticide

- Registered for commercial and residential use on turf
- Controls a spectrum of soil and foliar pests with a wide application window
- Features preventive and curative properties
- Product is suitable for use on trees and shrubs and has a reduced need for watering-in after application
- Insects controlled include soil pests such as billbugs and white grubs, Japanese beetles, oriental beetles, and European, Southern and Northern masked chafer; and foliar pests such as aphids, whiteflies, mealybugs and leafhoppers
- Offers control of ants and other insect pests of trees and shrubs
- Syngenta Professional Products – 866/796-4368, www.syngentaprofessionalproducts.com

Circle 243 on reader service card



MeridianTM
Insecticide

Valent Safari Insecticide

- Label has been expanded to include new pests, including chili thrips, cycad scale, Asian longhorn beetle and hemlock woolly adelgid
- Also controls adelgids, aphids, armored and soft scales, leafminers, mealybugs, leaf feeding beetles and wood boring beetles
- Insecticide is systemic, so it quickly controls a spectrum of landscape pests
- Soil application can give control in a few weeks
- Valent – 800/8982536, www.valentpro.com

Circle 244 on reader service card



Blown Away

Strap on one of these backpack blowers and clear the way for a more productive day.

compiled by heather wood | web editor

ECHO PB-755 Backpack Blower

- Equipped with a 63.3-cc engine
- Features a shorter hip throttle that tucks out of the user's way
- L frame with a straight back makes it more convenient to transport or hang when not in use
- Re-designed tube stays flexible in cold weather and allows greater operator efficiency through its increased range of motion
- Includes a 68-fluid-ounce fuel tank, 625 cubic feet per minute at the pipe and 205 miles per hour maximum air speed
- ECHO – 800/432-3246, www.echo-usa.com

Circle 213 on reader service card



Husqvarna 170BT Backpack Blower

- Powered by the X-TORQ engine, providing 70 minutes of run time
- Produces an air flow of 742 cubic feet per minute and a 199-mile per hour wind speed output
- Equipped with the LowVib anti-vibration system
- Air Purge function ensures the unit is easy to start
- Unit is ergonomically designed
- Husqvarna – 704/597-5000, www.usa.husqvarna.com

Circle 214 on reader service card



RedMax Strato-Charged Backpack Blower

- Blower moves 463 cubic feet per minute of air at 131 miles per hour
- Unit weighs 14.9 pounds
- Powered by a 29.5-cc Strato-Charged pure two-cycle engine
- Super e-START reduces pulling force needed to start the engine compared to previous starting engines
- Recoil pulling speed is also reduced
- RedMax – 800/291-8351, www.redmax.com

Circle 215 on reader service card



Tanaka TBL-7800R Backpack Blower

- Powered by a 65-cc, 4.3-horsepower, two-stroke engine
- Produces 850-cubic feet per minute output
- Blows as fast as 205 miles per hour
- Includes a tube-mounted throttle control switch
- Weighs 22.9 pounds
- Tanaka America – 800/482-6252, www.tanaka-usa.com

Circle 216 on reader service card

John Deere BP65LE Backpack Blower

- Features a heavy-duty 64.7-cc John Deere M-Series low-emission engine
- Produces 190-miles per hour maximum air velocity
- Air volume reaches 630 cubic feet per minute
- Large muffler aids in quieter operation
- Pistol-type throttle is tube mounted for easy operation
- Weighs 21.4 pounds
- John Deere – 309/765-8000, www.johndeere.com

Circle 217 on reader service card





SHOWN ABOVE:
Pivot-action base

Bandit Model HB20 SideWinder

- Offers a pivot-action base, allowing the operator to keep the wheelbase stationary while using a smooth gliding motion back and forth to grind stumps
- Available with a 20-horsepower Kohler gas engine
- Includes a 19-inch cutterhead with 24 teeth
- Bandit Industries – 800/952-0178, www.banditchippers.com

Circle 200 on reader service card

Chicago Pneumatic Red Hawk Breaker

- Ideal for small jobs or working in remote locations
- Delivers 2,600 blows per minute
- Weighs 50 pounds
- 19 tools and accessories are available
- Silencing muffler reduces the operating noise level to 107 decibels
- Chicago Pneumatic Construction Tools – 800/760-4049, www.cpconstructiontoolsusa.com

Circle 201 on reader service card



Cover-All Meridian Building Series

- Has a clean exterior design
- Lower roof line ranges from 30 to 70 feet wide
- Is a hybrid of the TITAN and Legend building series
- Includes a one-piece outer-fabric membrane that allows natural light inside the building
- Outer straight-leg design gives a higher straight wall for more useable space
- Cover-All Building Systems – 800/268-3768, www.coverall.net

Circle 202 on reader service card

Dynamax Automated Soil CO2 Exchange System

- Designed for the long-term, unattended monitoring of soil flux
- Automated design allows the soil area to be exposed to ambient conditions between analysis cycles
- Soil chamber automatically closes prior to soil flux measurements being made
- Dynamax – East – 800/727-3570, West – 800/896-7108, www.dynamax.com

Circle 203 on reader service card



Ferris IS2000Z

- 4-wheel suspension system dramatically increases efficiency
- Operator does not need to slow down for bumps in the terrain, which allows the operator to mow faster and get the job done sooner
- Powered by a 30-horsepower Briggs & Stratton Vanguard Big Block Engine that runs more efficiently and saves fuel for the operator
- Suspension system absorbs energy, meaning less wear and tear to the machine and the operator
- Ferris Industries – 800/933-6175, www.ferrisindustries.com

Circle 204 on reader service card



Hudson Foam-A-Matic Sprayer

- Features a 2-gallon capacity
- Foam-sprayed cleaners hold on target longer than traditional liquids
- Includes Viton Equipped O-rings and gaskets to resist harsh chemicals
- Two different spray nozzles are included to provide a heavy foam stream or flat foam fan pattern
- H.D. Hudson Manufacturing – 800/977-7293, www.hdhudson.com

Circle 205 on reader service card



Hunter Wireless Valve System

- Battery-operated controller
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- Hunter Industries – 760/744-5240, www.hunterindustries.com

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J&J Truck Bodies & Trailers True Feather Air Controls

- Allows the operator to have better control over the speed of the hoist to slow the descent of the body
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Kawasaki Mule 3000 Utility Vehicle

- Two-wheel drive vehicle
- Features an industrial liquid-cooled engine, automatic transmission, locking rear differential and tilting cargo bed
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Kim Lighting MiniBounce Luminaires

- Collection of pole-, surface- and ground-mounted architectural landscape lighting fixtures
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Magnum Systems Brush Mulching Attachments

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Nixalite Migrate Goose Repellent

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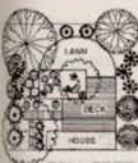
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Developing Foremen at Designs By Sundown

Co-authors Tracy Olson, marketing, and Gene Gillespie, vice president of operations, work for Englewood, Colo.-based Designs by Sundown. They can be reached at tolson@designsbysundown and ggillespie@designsbysundown, respectively, or at 303/789-4400.

It has been said that a company is only as good as its people.

At Designs By Sundown, much of our mandate as a full-service landscape company is based on the importance of hiring, developing and nurturing the right individuals to manage our teams.

This starts with recruiting experienced foremen and empowering them to manage and build their own teams. We seek foremen with a minimum of 10 years of trade experience and five years supervisory experience. The challenge, though, is how do you find these qualified individuals?

Newspaper ads, trade organization Web sites and industry publications are good sources for recruiting quality foremen, but recently we have been successful posting jobs at Web sites such as craigslist.com. A benefit of posting job openings on the Internet is to gauge whether the respondent is Internet savvy and to seek those individuals who possess strong communication and

written skills. This is important since our foremen act as project managers and must communicate well with vendors, clients and co-workers. We also have plans to integrate project management software to improve day-to-day operations that will require computer skills.

In addition to the Internet, we rely on our employees and trade partners to get the word out when we are looking to hire a seasoned foreman. Their referrals normally provide us a list of qualified candidates. We have even hired foremen when we didn't have a position open. They contacted us and their qualifications were too good to pass up.

The interview process is critical in selecting a foreman. This is our chance to determine if the applicant's personality, work history and skills are a solid fit for the requirements of the position and our particular culture. Additionally, this is our opportunity to assess how well they conduct themselves in a professional situation. Our questions focus





Recruiting and developing quality foremen is a priority with Englewood, Colo.-based Designs by Sundown. The full-service landscape firm sees a 25 percent productivity increase in a crew built by a foreman compared to a crew where the foreman inherited his workers. Photos: Designs by Sundown

on making sure candidates share the same core values, performance expectations and passion for the industry as our management team. We ask questions such as "Why do you want to work for us? Have you managed our type of high-end residential projects? How well do you manage crews?" How they respond allows us to determine if they will be a good fit for our company. "Exceeding our clients' expectations" is the primary motivation behind everything we do at Designs By Sundown, therefore all employees, in particular our foremen, must exhibit this level of pride, business and personal ethics and focus on customer satisfaction.

Sound selection is critical because our foremen build and supervise their five- to six-person crews. Why do we build our crews in this manner? When mutual respect is developed between the foreman and his or her team, the result is increased productivity and less turn over. Our productivity increases by about 25 percent


with a crew built by a foreman compared to a crew where the foreman inherited the workers. The crews are familiar with foremen expectations and the foreman has accountability for his/her hires. Less turnover of crewmembers equates to more time on job sites. We don't want our foremen spending large amounts of time hiring and training new crews.

Once hired, it is our responsibility to empower foremen with continued training and to give them the leadership tools to be successful in the field. Annually, we budget about \$1,500 per foreman for continuing education and training. This involves both in-house training, which includes bringing in experts and training on equipment, skills and safety, and industry training through associations we're affiliated with.

Once we've hired a quality foreman and he or she has become an asset to our operations, we do our best to retain them. We don't want to develop "free agents" who become

targets for recruitment by our competitors. We pass along positive comments and present our foremen with motivators such as rewards for above-and-beyond efforts and performance-based incentive programs. When possible, we compensate foremen using an above-the-industry pay scale, which includes base pay and bonus opportunities. At Designs By Sundown, many employees earn additional compensation based on their work performance and by increasing their skill set.

Advancement is another way we acknowledge a "job well done." We promote from within because it reinforces our commitment to our employees for their hard work and dedication.

Developing quality foremen is the cornerstone to building a sustainable and successful landscape business. Everyone is a winner when you build and nurture a quality team of skilled employees. — **Tracy Olson and Gene Gillespie** 

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