

PLUS: Benchmarking Your Business // Innovations // GIE+EXPO

NOVEMBER 2008

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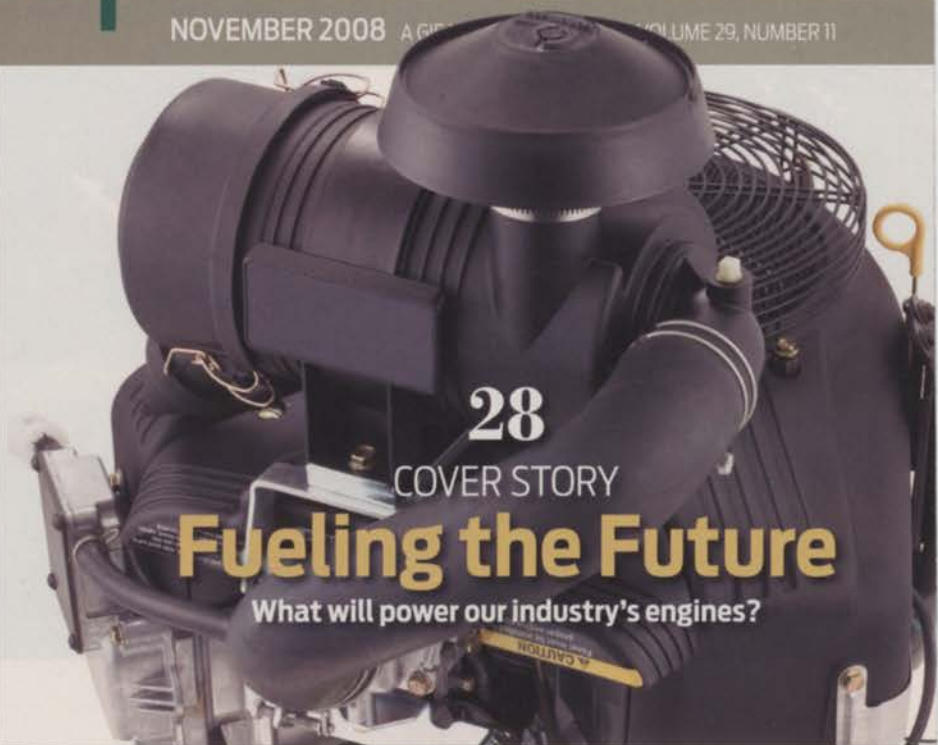
With small business equipment purchases, you can't always get what you want.

Cover photo courtesy of Briggs & Stratton.

CORRECTIONS:

October cover by Rob Johnson.

October Medium Briefcase photography by Trey Clark.



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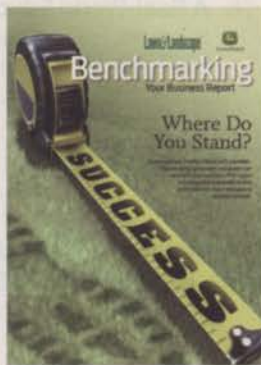
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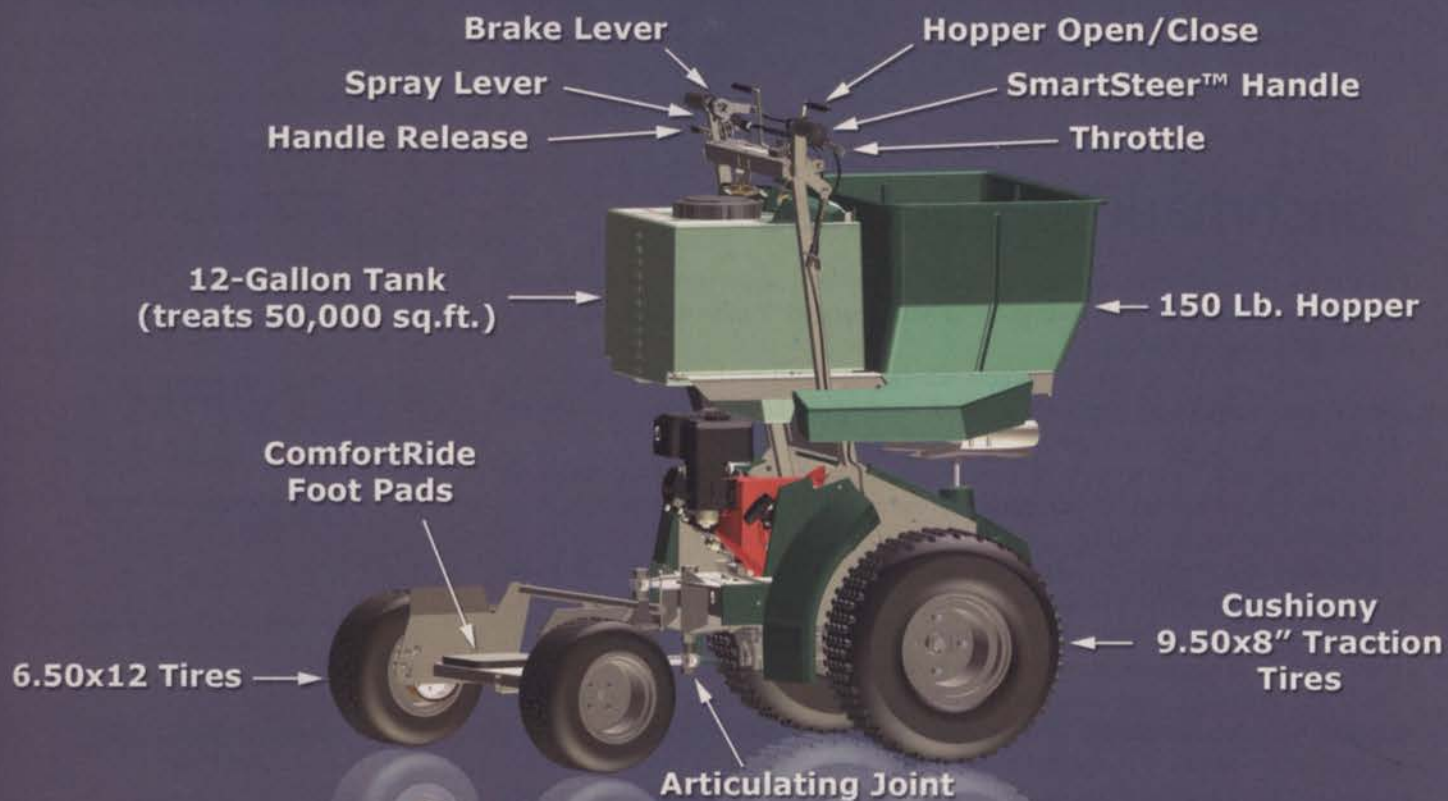


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MARGARET HEPP
Editor

Benchmark Your Success

It's a time of unprecedented economic chaos, political uncertainty and cultural change in our market. Yet, your goals haven't changed: You're out to run a successful, profitable operation.

The first step in doing that is to know where you stand in the market and how you stack up against your competition. And, once again, *Lawn & Landscape* is here to help.

In this month's "Benchmarking Your Business" report, we analyze mounds of data about today's market. Columnist Jim Huston interprets it to help you set your goals for business costs and factors that you need to rely on every day.

According to our study, almost half – 45 percent – of lawn and landscape business owners adjusted their budgets to accommodate increased expenses. In short, everyone's had to adapt and change because, whether it's due to fertilizer, fuel or labor, the cost of doing business is simply higher.


In "Benchmarking Your Business," you'll find data collected from the field, illustrated by charts designed to help you compare your direct and indirect costs to the industry averages. For example, our research shows that 61 percent of your equipment needs are unplanned. What's more, almost 20 percent of lawn and landscape business owners said they abandoned their 2008 budget because of rising material costs. It's true that materials costs increased for 90 percent of the readers we polled – an average jump of 18 percent per company – but it points out how essential it is to log your numbers and stay focused on your goals. In the long run, you can't just walk away from a business plan.

"We prepare for the worst and hope for the best," says Stephen Hazeltine, president of Hazeltine Nurseries, a full-service, \$19-million landscape firm in Venice, Fla.

This month, we've focused on planning for the year ahead, helping you weather the worst and enjoy the payoffs of the best.

- Our cover story, "Fueling the Future," outlines current and forthcoming innovations in energy to help you chart equipment purchases for 2009 and beyond.
- Columnist Scott Brown explains how he got his landscape business's finances in order with the help of asset-based loans.
- Contributing feature editor Anne Moore Odell explores the cost-effectiveness of stormwater management and how it can help boost your profits.
- Plus, we take an in-depth look at new EPA emissions standards and how they'll affect your bottom line.

Finally, check out our Briefcase section for another dose of business perspective. Each month, we provide a case study of a small (less than \$1 million), medium (\$1 million to \$5 million) and large (\$5 million and up) business. We have a diverse offering in November: a small design/build firm in Florida, a family business near Boston and a Phoenix landscaping company that went from a one-man operation to a multi-million-dollar enterprise.

I'd love to hear more about your business plan. Drop me an e-mail, and let me know if you've made changes for the coming fiscal year. What's different? What hasn't changed? And how will you benchmark your success in the coming year? 

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HAVE YOUR CAKE

Wow. This magazine has really set itself apart from other industry publications.

I can't tell you how pleased we are to see the information changes coming from *Lawn & Landscape*. From reading the September article on the Noon Brothers to listening to the podcast regarding grubs in our area. The icing on the cake came from the article about the 15 fatal business errors Webinar from Godhill. We listened and were impressed by the information, and we were so pleased to find it on your site.

Keep up the greatness.

Mr. Green Lawncare
pianga@tds.net

IT'S NOT EASY

The September "Green Issue" of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine was an absolute home run. Your articles covered everything from stem (no pun intended) to stern. Everything from green buildings and hybrid vehicles to IPM and green program management.

A great job, but one we have come to expect from *Lawn & Landscape*. Keep up the fantastic efforts for our industry!

Norman Goldenberg
TruGreen
normangoldenberg@trugreenmail.com

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

I am writing in response to the October 2008 issue. As always, your articles were fantastic! However, I would like to respond to the portion of the "Pierces Landscaping" article regarding H-2B.

To be honest, I was floored that a fellow owner of a landscape company would question the need for H-2B workers. The fact that Scott Pierce feels H-2B is a "big excuse" blows my mind. Our company was ready to close our doors several years back because we could not find seasonal workers no matter where we advertised! In 2007 we tried the H-2B program (nine workers) and we have grown tremendously since that time. This year, we have 10 H2B workers and as a result, we were able to hire several more college graduate American supervisors and foremen! The H2B program has been the ticket to our success.

We just applied for H-2B workers for 2009. As part of the process, we had to run an ad in the newspaper for several days straight. We only had one phone call! This is exactly what I am talking about. H-2B is not "a big excuse."

The H-2B program is absolutely critical to the success of our company and frankly, it upsets me that one can feel differently because I experienced life

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READERS' Forum

with and without the H2B program. By far, the H-2B program has done wonders for our company and we will be lost without it.

Brian Cuccaro, CLP
Newcastle Lawn & Landscape
Mohnton, Pa.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

I can't thank you enough for September's "Green Issue!" I started 3 Little Birds Landscaping two years ago to get away from the cut and paste companies, hoping to give customers more benefits with their landscapes.

A majority of the work I do is creating habitats that are beneficial for wildlife. I am also a member of our local Earth Week Committee and am glad to see the challenge go out to our industry to "Go Green." You have inspired me to revamp and retool my business to be even more eco-friendly and to start

practicing what I preach.

I'm working on a memo to challenge landscapers in this area to do the same. Once again, thank you and I hope that everyone in our green industry steps up to the plate.

Mat Paulson
3 Little Birds Landscaping
Moorhead, Minn.

FRESH INC.

I don't see anyone from the green industry on *Inc.* magazine's Top 30 Entrepreneurs Under 30 list! (See the list at www.inc.com/30under30/2008.)

I'm not sure, maybe *Lawn & Landscape* did this before. Maybe the folks at L&L can set out and find the TOP 10 *Lawn & Landscape* entrepreneurs under 30?

Andrew Hardscape
L&L Message Board

Dear Andrew,

Yes, we've done this before - check out our online archives for the Feb. '07 issue. -Ed.

DIGITAL GET-DOWN

I got the e-mail, clicked and opened. Voila! Your entire October magazine viewable digitally on my computer.

It was incredibly impressive - outstanding appearance, fast loading, simple and easy to use and high-quality resolution. It's a great "look back" reference piece and I don't have to shelve the hard copy (recycle). Simply ingenious!

Scott Brown
Presidential Financial Corp.
Gainesville, Ga.

THE BEST POLICY

Thank you for an excellent October issue. I'm an author, a licensed landscape architect and contractor and I teach sustainable landscaping to professionals.



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USE READER SERVICE #16

I appreciate the honest evaluation of the industry and the many resources you offer to readers. Bravo!

Owen Dell
County Landscape & Design
Santa Barbara, Calif.

JUST ADD WEB

Page 31 of October's *Lawn & Landscape* refers to the dynamic Web site of Now Just Add Water. I have been searching and cannot find their site. Do you perhaps have a link you could send me?

Tracy Crow
Florida's Choice Lawn Care
Tampa Bay, Fla.

Dear Tracy,
You can find the site at www.nowjustaddwater.com. – Ed.

Got something to say?
E-mail mhepp@gie.net.



SHADOW OF DOUBT

I enjoy many of the articles in *Lawn & Landscape*. They are informative and provide a service to the industry. However, I take issue with the October article regarding "Work in the Shadows" and the featured ANLA testimonials.

Honestly, I do not know where to begin. The companies profiled in this article are truly pathetic. They cry foul because the illegal labor they have become dependent on is disappearing. Well, I cry foul too. I have been struggling to run my company legally. My company has legal workers, required insurance, licenses and the rest while companies that hire illegal workers cause an almost unbearable downward pressure on prices. When you play by the rules you have to spend double the energy cutting other costs to remain competitive. What do you get in return for cutting costs? More profit? No. You get to survive another year. It is a fallacy that Americans will not do the work. And with H-2B, the pain these companies feel is completely self-inflicted. Now we should feel pity for them? Please! I feel like it is finally a little relief from the pervasive, unfair competition in the industry. I am thankful for the increased regulation.

John P. Bazylewicz
Beach Lawn Care
Norfolk, Va.



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Insects Use Plants like a Telephone

Dutch ecologist Roxina Soler and her colleagues at the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research have discovered that subterranean and aboveground herbivorous insects can communicate with each other by using plants as telephones. Subterranean insects issue chemical warning signals via the leaves of the plant. This way, aboveground insects are alerted that the plant is already “occupied.”

Aboveground, leaf-eating insects prefer plants that have not yet been occupied by subterranean root-eating insects. Subterranean insects emit chemical signals via the leaves of the plant, which warn the aboveground insects about their presence. This messaging enables spatially-separated insects to avoid each other so they don't unintentionally compete for the same plant.

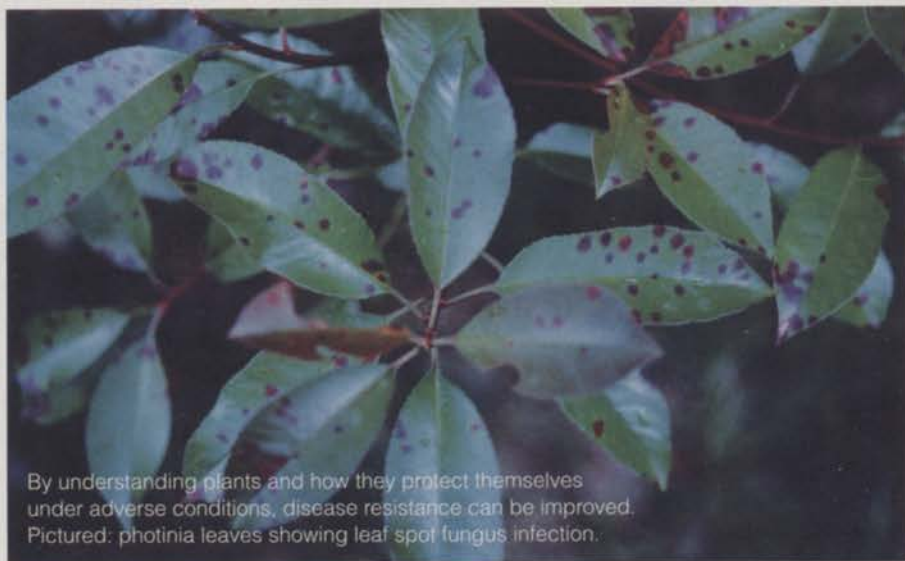
In recent years, according to *Science Daily*, it has been discovered that different types of aboveground insects develop slowly if they feed on plants that also have subterranean residents and vice versa. It seems that a mechanism has developed via natural selection, which enables the subterranean and aboveground insects to detect each other. This avoids unnecessary competition.

Green Telephone Lines

Via the “green telephone lines,” subterranean insects can also communicate with a third party, namely the natural enemy of caterpillars. Parasitic wasps lay their eggs inside aboveground insects. The wasps also benefit from the volatile signals emitted by the plant leaves, as these reveal where the wasps can find a good host for their eggs.

The communication between subterranean and aboveground insects has only been studied in a few systems. It's still

Via the “green telephone lines,” subterranean insects can also communicate with a third party.



By understanding plants and how they protect themselves under adverse conditions, disease resistance can be improved. Pictured: photinia leaves showing leaf spot fungus infection.

not clear how widespread this phenomenon is.

Plants Fight Back


Plants are not only smart, but they also wage a good fight, according to a University of Missouri biochemist. Previous studies have shown that plants can sense attacks by pathogens and activate their defenses. However, it has not been known what happens between the pathogen attacks and the defense activation, until now. A new MU study revealed a very complex process that explains how plants counter attack pathogens. This discovery could potentially lead to crops with enhanced disease resistance.

“There is a chemical warfare between plants and pathogens,” says Shuqun Zhang, associate professor of biochemistry in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources and the College of Medicine. “Normally, plants put effort into growth and development. However, when plants sense pathogens, they have to use some of their energy and resources to make secondary metabolites

to fight disease. Until now, very little has been known about how this process is regulated.”

According to the study, plants first sense the attack of a pathogen, and then activate defense responses by triggering a complex signaling cascade in plants. One of the defense responses is the induction and accumulation of anti-microbial defense chemicals, known as phytoalexins.

In his study, Zhang found the specific signaling path, known as a mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) cascade, in the plants that ends when the defense chemical camalexin is created. Camalexin is essential for resistance to some plant diseases. Zhang used *Arabidopsis*, a small flowering plant and the first to have its entire genome sequenced, and *Botrytis cinera*, a fungal pathogen that causes grey mold disease in a number of plants.

“By understanding at the molecular and cellular levels how plants protect themselves under adverse environmental conditions, such as pathogen attacks, we could eventually improve the disease resistance of crops,” Zhang says. 

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USE READER SERVICE #18



ONLINE Contents

/// Network with the industry through *Lawn & Landscape's* interactive Web tools.



Cindy Code

Director, Interactive Content
Lawn & Landscape

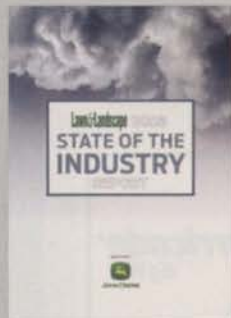
NOVEMBER 2008

Specialty E-Newsletters

In addition to our news- and product-based e-newsletters, *Lawn & Landscape* is introducing six new specialty e-newsletters for the professional landscape contractor. These targeted e-newsletters will focus on critical areas of importance to the marketplace and include power equipment, irrigation, nursery, trucks and trailers, pesticides and fertilizers and hardscape products. The landscape industry spends millions of dollars on products in these key service areas, which represent significant growth and expansion at the commercial and residential level. For more information and to sign up for these e-newsletters, contact Cindy Code at cocode@gie.net or 330-523-5331.

RSS Feed

Stay up to date with industry news, events and personnel changes through *Lawn & Landscape's* RSS feed. RSS (which stands for "really simple syndication") delivers targeted industry news, event listings and convention coverage directly to your desktop via a sophisticated electronic syndication service. With RSS, users simply access a link on their desktop to view news feeds from their particular areas of interest (i.e. *Lawn & Landscape*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, etc.). Syndicated content from these sources is then fed directly to desktops as it's posted, providing valuable market information and industry news without having to search for it. Click on the orange RSS News feed button at the top of *Lawn & Landscape's* headline news (www.lawnandlandscape.com).



STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

Our 2008 State of the Industry report is now online. Get up to date on the issues, services and influences that shape the professional lawn and landscape industry. While online, compare this year's data with reports from the past five years for the most authoritative voice on the landscape industry.

Director's Pick



Lawn & Landscape.tv

www.lawnandlandscape.tv/browsevideo.php

Live from Louisville!

If you missed the industry's only national conference and trade show for landscape professionals, don't dismay. The *Lawn & Landscape* editorial team conducted nearly 60 GIE+EXPO interviews with landscape professionals from across the country on topics including business outlook, fuel and fertilizer prices, labor, PLANET

programs, marketing, paying your employees and much more. The interviews were broadcast live from the GIE+EXPO in Louisville, but are now available at www.lawnandlandscape.com.



Our editors and videographers also compiled a collection of interviews with show attendees as they walked the exhibit floor. Attendees revealed the coolest products from the show, key take-home tips and show benefits. Log on now for your show review!



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USE READER SERVICE #19

WaterSmart Innovations Conference and Exposition Draws 1,200 Participants From Around the World

Second international conference and expo will be held Oct. 7-9, 2009, in Las Vegas

Las Vegas – Almost 1,200 participants from 42 states and the District of Columbia as well as 17 foreign nations attended the inaugural WaterSmart Innovations Conference and Exposition, held Oct. 8-10 in Las Vegas.

Presented by the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) WaterSense program and other leading national and international organizations, WSI offered 150 professional sessions in a variety of tracks as well as an expo hall featuring nearly 140 exhibitors.

"We're thrilled that such a broad cross-section of disciplines – from water agency officials to elected leaders, landscape professionals, golf course supervisors and water-use consultants – connected to make WSI a success," said program chairman Doug Bennett.

"The fact that so many people from such a range of professions came together to discuss the challenges and solutions related to urban water efficiency underscores the conference's goal of sharing ideas and experiences on a global scale," Bennett said.

The conference also featured keynote addresses by Prince Feisal Ibn Al-Hussein of Jordan and by noted climatologist Dr. Jonathan Overpeck, coordinating lead author for the United Nations' Nobel Peace Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Benjamin Grumbles, assistant administrator of the EPA's Office of Water, presented the first WaterSense Partner of the Year Awards during the conference's Oct. 9 keynote luncheon.



The WaterSmart Innovations Conference brought together a diverse range of 1,200 professionals. Photo: Southern Nevada Water Authority

Also addressing the conference was Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and SNWA general manager Pat Mulroy.

Technical tours included visits to the Hoover Dam, the Springs Preserve, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area and other locales showcasing Southern Nevada's water-efficiency practices and water resources.

Next year's conference will be held Oct. 7-9 at the South Point Hotel and Conference Center. The deadline for submitting abstracts is Jan. 30, 2009. More information is available at www.WaterSmartInnovations.com. **L**

No Surprise: New EPA Emissions Standards Coming

Washington, D.C. – Gasoline-powered lawn mowers, a big cause of summertime air pollution, will need to be dramatically cleaner under rules issued in September by the EPA.

The long-awaited regulation requires a 35 percent reduction in emissions from new lawn and garden equipment beginning in 2011. Big emission reductions are also required for speedboats and other recreational watercraft, beginning in 2010.

The reductions will be the equivalent of removing one out of every five cars and trucks on the road, according to Bill Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies.

The EPA said approximately 190 million gallons of gasoline will be saved each year when the rules take effect, and more than 300 premature deaths prevented annually. The rules will also reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides – a major source of nitrogen to the Chesapeake Bay and a key component of smog.

"These standards help fight smog in our neighborhoods and waterways as we continue to improve the environmental

landscape," said EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson.

The EPA estimated the cost of implementing the reductions at \$236 million a year, a charge that will likely be passed to consumers in the form of pricier mowers and other machines.

Industry groups said exact figures were difficult to calculate, but the California Air Resources Board has estimated that walk-behind mowers would cost 18 percent more under the new regulation, while the price of commercial turf care mowers would rise about 3 percent.

Environmentalists welcomed the regulation, which applies to lawn care engines under 25 horsepower and to a full range of gas-powered personal watercraft. The rule requires a 70 percent reduction in emissions from recreational watercraft.

"These new clean air standards will reduce dangerous smog pollution from high-emission gasoline engines while helping to cut costs at the gas pump," said Vickie Patton, Environmental Defense Fund deputy general counsel.

The reductions on lawn mower emissions will probably be accomplished by adding catalytic converters that reduce pollution from exhaust but add to the cost. **L**



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Brickman in Beijing

Beijing – It started with a bare, clay-packed field in downtown Beijing. Two years later, it ended with three Olympic-caliber baseball fields on which, after 32 games in 10 days, South Korea took home the gold, Cuba the silver and the U.S. the bronze.

Murray Cook, baseball operations manager for the Beijing Olympics and head of the Gaithersburg, Md.-based Brickman Group's sports turf services division, oversaw the project from start to finish.

The Wukesong Sports Center baseball field wasn't Brickman's first international project, or first Olympic project for that matter. Cook is a 27-year veteran of the sports turf industry, with expertise in field design, construction, maintenance and operations.

He's also a sports facility consultant for the American Major League, universities and municipalities, and an international consultant for the Olympic Games. Un-

der his leadership, Brickman was head of the design, construction management and maintenance operations for all the baseball and softball fields for the 2000 Sydney games and the 2004 Athens Olympic games. This resume made Brickman a natural choice for the Beijing job, which included design, construction and daily maintenance of a practice field and two playing fields.

"My experience working with Major League Baseball and the International Baseball Federation was part of our qualifications," Cook says. "We know the requirements for fields of a higher playing level than a typical recreation field, so we just became the right choice."

Despite the fact that China is not a "baseball country" – the country is home to only three permanent baseball facilities, Cook says – Brickman's team had more than 120 eager volunteers and a hired staff of 30 locals to help with the expansive project. While communication was

difficult, the passion was commendable. "Terms like pitcher's mound and chalk box are not even part of the Chinese vocabulary," Cook says. "But it was phenomenal to see how many people waited in line to volunteer for the Olympic preparation as a service to their country."

The biggest challenge was overcoming the communication barrier, Cook says. "Whether verbal or written, some things I would say would be translated into something else," he says. "I just had to learn to be patient, endure mistakes and then learn from them."

Ordering materials proved to be another challenge. With such different terrain, China simply didn't offer some of the turf management materials Cook and his team needed to get the job done. As a result, specialized mowers were imported from California. Two gallons of Bermuda grass seed was shipped from Oklahoma. Thirty-five tons of soil conditioner was sent from Texas – an order which took

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four months to arrive. Because of the 12-hour time zone difference, Cook was often on the phone with Beijing contacts and suppliers well past midnight Eastern Standard Time. "It's difficult to coordinate things on the other side of the world," Cook says. "The soil conditioner arrived on the morning of the first day of practice."


China's hot, muggy summer and harsh winter were less than desirable conditions for growing baseball-quality turf. Bermuda grass was the turf of choice for its hardiness and durability. The practice field was planted from seed, and one of the playing fields was created with 1,200 sprigs of turf planted in two-inch increments. The main playing field, which didn't withstand the winter, was replanted with sod last May. "The weather conditions, particularly last year, were terrible," Cook says. "But I can personally say they made great improvements to the air quality over the past year."

Cook made about 18 trips to China during the past two years to oversee progress and keep things on track. His team of three other Brickman employees, who also have professional sports turf management and international travel experience, joined Cook for five weeks before and during the Olympic games. The knowledgeable team, as well as other assets the Brickman Group has to offer, was imperative to a successful project. "At Brickman, we have expert resources – horticulturists, agronomists, landscape designers and architects – at our fingertips," Cook says. "Having the right team in place is important to get a job of this caliber done right."

Despite all the hard work and the U.S. team's third-place finish, the fields were slated to be torn down in September. The downtown Beijing property is simply too valuable to be dedicated to the foreign sport of baseball and is rumored to be used for office development in the near future. As Cook says, "China is definitely not a baseball country." – *Emily Mullins* 



Mark Your Calendar

The 8th Annual NOFA Course in Organic Land Care will be held this Jan. 14–16, 20 and 21 at the Doyle Conservation Center in Leominster, Mass.; Jan. 27–30 and Feb. 2 at the CT Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven, Conn.; Feb. 17–20 and 23 at the Birch Hill, Schodack, N.Y.; and Feb. 25–27, March 2 and 3 at the Save the Bay Center, Providence, R.I. This five-day intensive course trains and accredits professionals practicing organic land care (caring for land without the use of synthetic pesticides or soil amendments). It is recommended for landscapers, designers, municipal and parks employees, horticulturists, master gardeners and entrepreneurs. Visit www.organiclandcare.net for more information. 

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Employee Time Card

Name: DAVID B. Date: 8-12

Day	Start	Lunch	End	Jobite	Activity	Hours
Monday	7	1/2	3:30	Brentwood	Gen	8
Tuesday	7	1/2	3:30	"	"	8
Wednesday	7	1/2	4	"	"	8 1/2
Thursday	7	1/2	4	Crestview	"	8 1/2
Friday	7	1/2	4	"	"	8 1/2

Employee Signature: *David B.* Total Hours: 41 1/2

WHEN YOU CAN HAVE THIS.

Employee Time Card

Displays the total time worked by each employee



David Burns

Time card for: Monday, December 8, 2008 - Friday, December 12, 2008

Jobite Name	Cost Code	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Total
Brentwood Job	Irrigation	7:38	7:35	7:53	-	-	23:06
Crestview Job	Planting	-	-	-	7:58	7:49	15:47
		7:38	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:49	38:53

David B.

David Burns

Regular Hours	38:53
Overtime Hours	- 0 -
Double Time Hours	- 0 -

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Organization on the Go

Terry Delany, AAA Lawns, Inc.
Fayetteville, Ark.

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"Even though we store fuel on the side of the truck, we carry backup fuel cans so that we don't have to drive the truck everywhere to refuel."

"The best part about Super Lawn Trucks is the space for advertising," says Terry Delany, president of AAA Lawns, Inc. "Because you have a big cargo truck, it's a billboard. I tell people I own AAA Lawns and they say, 'Oh, those big green trucks I see everywhere.'"



"The hydraulic folding ramp takes about 30 seconds to go down or come up. It's not as fast as dropping a gate, but it's more secure. We throw a padlock on the back and there's no way thieves can steal anything."



"Crates require you to put something away rather than throwing it on the shelves. They hold things like jumper cables, extra spools and front wheels for mowers. If we get a flat, we can just switch the wheel out."

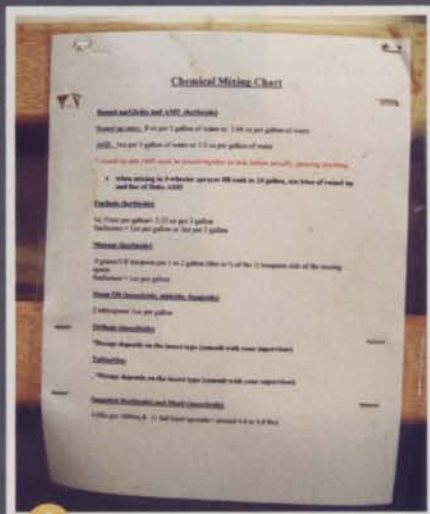


"After a year or two, we went in and did some arranging. Just two weeks later, we found that everything wasn't where it was supposed to be. So we came up with a plan to have photos indicate where equipment belongs. Photos transcend language barriers, and nothing gets lost anymore. It makes it easier for our mechanic to take inventory every day."

"We put four-inch lips on our shelves. Because of the lips, nothing has ever fallen off. Things like chemicals are held by bungee straps."



"Our mechanic comes in on Sunday and cleans all the equipment. Once a week everything gets pulled off and serviced."



"To avoid mistakes, mixing instructions are mounted next to all the sprayers and chemicals."



BY DAVID YOCHUM

FUELING THE FUTURE

Alternative energies such as electricity, ethanol, biodiesel and propane have grabbed the national spotlight.

But which will power our industry's engines?

Jon Fritz, vice president of McDonnell Landscaping in Brookeville, Md., says his company hasn't done much with alternative fuels.

Neither has Lee Edwards, president of The Greenery in Hilton head, S.C.

Or Bruce Allentuck, president of Allentuck Landscaping Company in Clarksburg, Md.

"We're still doing an analysis of what's available," Allentuck says. "We're exploring."

Still, when it comes to new energy, the one thing Allentuck and nearly every other business executive has been searching for remains elusive: a solution.

In recent years, electricity, ethanol, biodiesel and propane have all emerged as frontrunners in the race to replace gasoline. Some of these alternatives are already being used by progressive lawn and landscape contractors throughout the country. Yet others still seem best suited for a flux capacitor.

So with several legitimate energy options in the pipeline, which fuel should businesses be filling their small engines with in coming years? Judging by opinions

from some of the industry's top professionals and engine experts, the answer may surprise you.

BUYING THE BUZZ

In less than two years, General Motors will bring a mainstream plug-in hybrid electric vehicle to the auto market. Rumors say Toyota will follow suit with a new Prius hybrid, and Honda plans to introduce an all-new hybrid electric vehicle next year.

With the largest international automakers stuffing electric power plants under their hoods, electricity should inevitably become the preferred fuel for small engine applications, right?

Without more support from end-users, don't bet on it.

"Contractors aren't requesting anything with electric mowers," says Gary Little, president and owner of Little's Lawn Equipment in Ithica, N.Y. "The technology isn't there. They have to mow a lot of grass fast. They can't be waiting for something."

But hybrid electric vehicles are already running on highways. Why would the

A letter to all commercial mowing professionals, dealers, distributors and manufacturers.

Dear Commercial Mowing Industry Professionals,

Over the last few years, there has been an undeniable trend in the commercial mowing industry toward stand-on products. I'd like to take this opportunity to share my insight regarding the recent growth of the stand-on market and encourage our continued mutual success.

As our industry grows, all of our businesses grow and vice versa. Our individual efforts to improve our businesses through our respective areas of expertise result in greater success for all of us. The stand-on trend is a perfect example of this phenomenon.

First off, I congratulate and commend each of you who have embraced the stand-on as the most productive mower category today. There are currently about six brands of stand-on mowers. If you've researched stand-on mowers, you certainly understand their productivity and profitability. For those of you who have not looked into them, I encourage you to do so this winter.

In my career, I've witnessed similar trends three consecutive times in the following three categories of mowers:

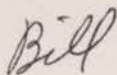
First off, I congratulate and commend each of you who have embraced the stand-on as the most productive mower category today.

1. The rise, plateau and decline of commercial intermediate **walk-behind** from the early '80s to the early '00s.
2. The rise, plateau and decline of commercial zero-radius-turning, **mid-mount riders** beginning in the late '90s and losing momentum over the past two or three years.
3. The growth of the **stand-on** market, which began around 2000 and has dramatically accelerated over the last few years in spite of industry-wide commercial mower declines.

Incremental advances in technology and the resulting productivity gains have driven this evolution of the commercial mower market. As a leader in the stand-on category, we at Wright are naturally grateful that the industry has begun to embrace standing as superior way to mow. Just as our company, partners and users have profited from this trend, I believe the entire industry will profit as more of you make the shift to stand-on mowers.

Again, I congratulate and give a hearty welcome to the newer participants in the stand-on category. I hope all is well with your businesses and families these days and that you have the finest season ever in 2009!

Sincerely,



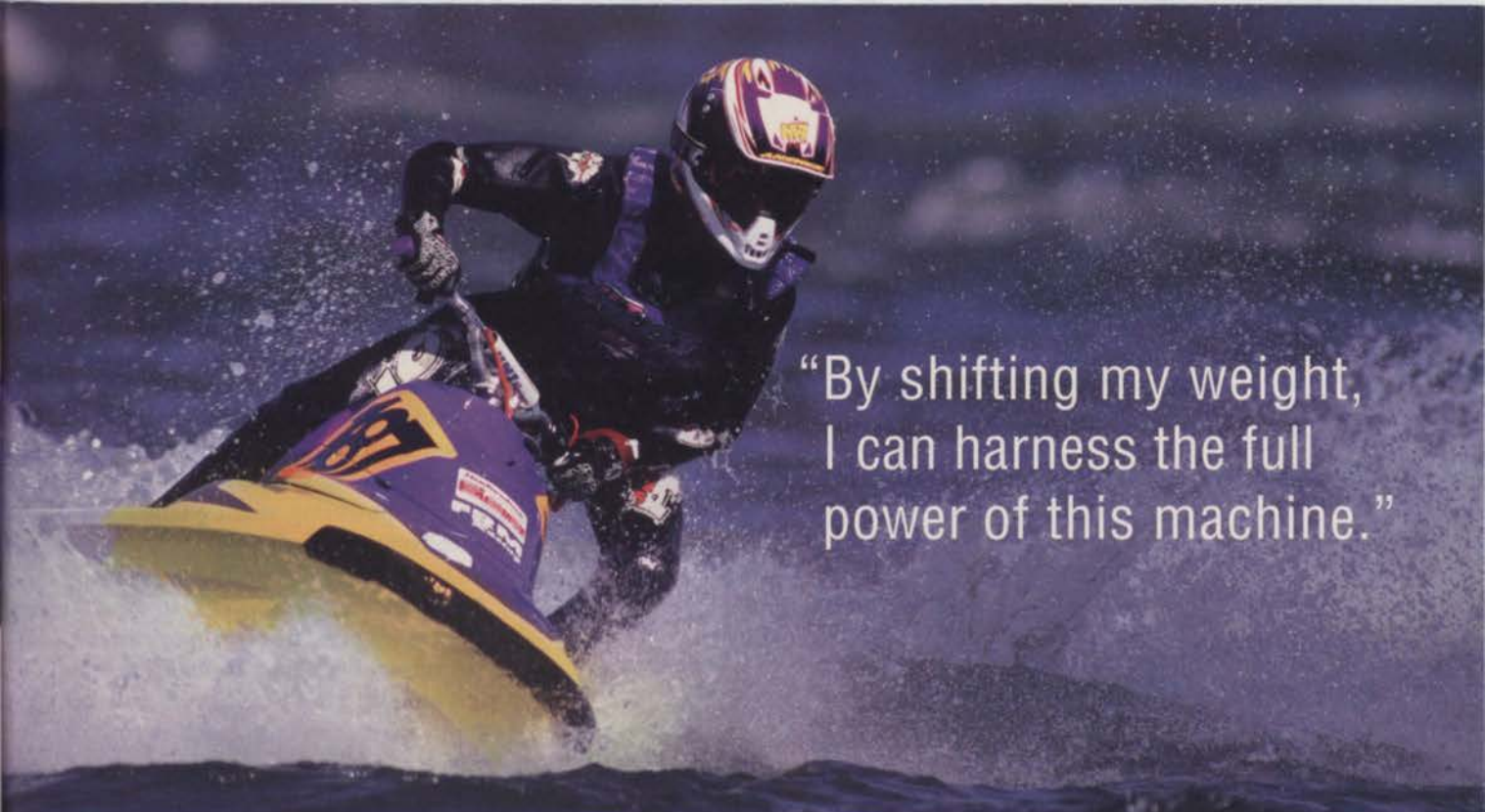
William R. Wright, CEO
Wright Manufacturing, Inc.



In 1981, Bill Wright started with a lawn maintenance business, Lawn-Wright, which grew to mow about 500 lawns per week. In 1983, he also founded a separate manufacturing division, which led to the development of stand-on mowers. In 1993, he formed Wright Manufacturing, Inc. for the purpose of manufacturing stand-on mowers and Wright shipped their first Stander® in October 1997.

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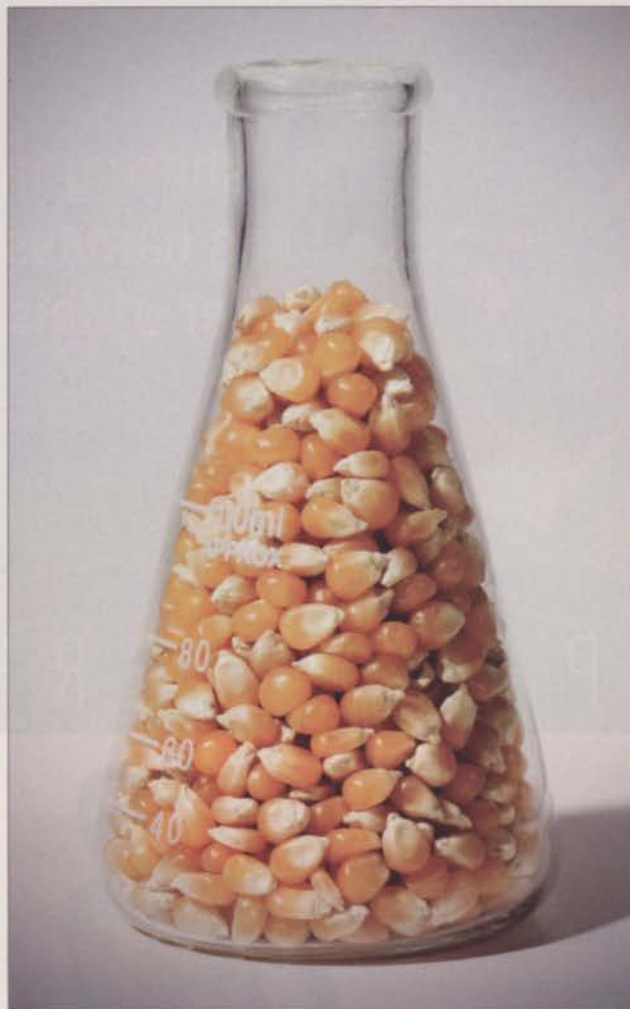


THE WRIGHT WAY TO MOW

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“When a new fuel is being developed, especially one that’s alcohol based, there can be problems with the internal engine design.”

– Jim Roche, EETC executive director



energy be unreasonable for mowers?

Marv Klowak, Briggs & Stratton vice president of research and development and quality, says hybrid electric technology is only viable in automobiles because they have a lot of part-load applications.

“In most lawn care equipment, you tend to run more than mid-throttle due to the nature of the power requirements,” he says.

Beyond power concerns, Klowak says another issue hindering smaller hybrid electric technology is pricing. Hybrid systems, which consist of an engine, electric motor and complex power management programs, are still relatively costly. And even if those costs could somehow be amortized for lawn care equipment, there are still issues with hybrid battery technology.

Klowak and Jim Roche, executive director of the Equipment & Engine Training Council (EETC), both say today’s batter-

ies don’t have the required energy density to work in mower applications. This is part of the reason why Briggs & Stratton, Kohler and Kawasaki have no plans to introduce electric-powered mower engines in the immediate future.

But that doesn’t mean things can’t change.

Klowak says it will all be up to the end-users.

“If there becomes a demand for electric engines, we’d certainly entertain it.”

GROWING ALTERNATIVES

Whereas hybrid electric power represents the distant future of fuel, ethanol and biodiesel offer doses of today’s alternative energy reality.

In fact, both fuels can already be found at Mariani Landscaping in Lake Bluff, Ill.

“We’re using biodiesel and ethanol to power work trucks,” says Mariani produc-

tion coordinator Tom Crawford.

But despite utilizing alternative energy in its large engine applications, Mariani, like many lawn care companies, still powers most of its lawn equipment with gasoline.

Kohler, which just introduced a North American diesel line last February, has found a way to sympathize with those wary of powering small engines with unconventional fuel.

Over the next 12 months, the company says it will become the first to offer an entire lineup of “flex-fuel” engines that can run on both gasoline and E85 – an eco-friendly, gasoline/ethanol blend that is produced from crops such as corn or sugar cane.

Still, industry experts like Roche don’t consider E85 as anything more than a second-rate energy alternative.

“It’s not the best choice,” he says. “When a new fuel is being developed, especially one that’s alcohol based, there can be problems with the internal engine design. You have to change all your internal components to withstand the negative aspects of the alcohol in the fuel.”

Executives at Briggs & Stratton see problems with E85’s affordability.

“Ethanol actually has worse fuel economy compared to regular gasoline,” Klowak says. “It’s a 35 percent reduction.”

Similar to ethanol, biodiesel offers both advantages and disadvantages over conventional energy.

Because it can be made from vegetable oil and blended with regular diesel, many feel biodiesel is an inexpensive green fuel choice.

Rob George, maintenance supervisor at Clarence David & Co. in Matteson, Ill., says his company’s trucks, tractors and riding mowers all run on biodiesel.

But George also says he stops using biodiesel before the winter season because the fuel has a tendency to gel. Another biodiesel drawback can be purchasing pricier, requisite diesel engines – some of which cost thousands of dollars more than their gasoline counterparts.

“Unless you get into some of the larger applications, the up front cost versus the value just isn’t there,” Klowak says. “I doubt it ever will be.”

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ADDING ON

Ethanol and biodiesel are immediately available alternative fuel options, but neither can be considered permanent fuel solutions. Could propane, commonly referred to as LP (liquid petroleum gas), be any different?

Kohler, Briggs & Stratton and Kawasaki all appear optimistic.

As a non-toxic, non-corrosive and

additive-free high-octane fuel, LP is beneficial because it burns cleaner than gasoline and diesel. With each passing year, Kawasaki and other engine manufacturers expect more OEMs to offer LP powered ZTRs. And Kohler, which has seen growing interest in propane throughout the country, already has an LP engine delivery system available.

"There's a lot of advantages with propane," Locklear says. "If you can get it right, it's cheaper than gas. And you could switch all your units over and even have a propane tank on site."

But LP isn't a perfect energy solution just yet.

Experts say that because propane has a low energy density than both gasoline and diesel fuel, engines powered by the fuel will return worse fuel economy. Some also believe that LP could damage engine valves, even though according to the Department of Energy, the fuel successfully powers more than 270,000 vehicles in the United States. But setting aside mechanical risks, working with the fuel can also be a hassle.

"With liquid propane, you now have to have a bottle added to your application," says Cam Litt, Kohler marketing manager. "It's a little bit of a different fuel system compared to the typical commercial-type cutter."

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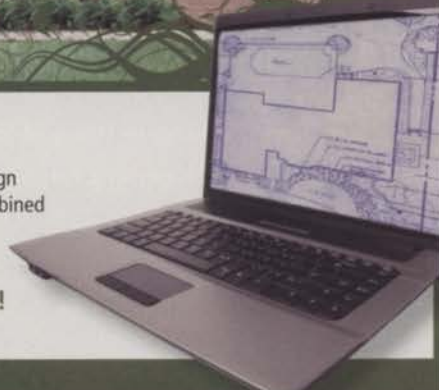
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THE WINNING COMBINATION

Despite the current and futuristic energy alternatives, engine manufacturers know that end-users will drive technology based on practicality, not potential. And that even with a number of legitimate energy options, right now, most say a familiar fuel will be the standard energy for tomor-

row's lawn care equipment.

"Gasoline is pretty darn good," Klowak says. "Folks forget that gasoline engines are getting better all the time, so there are always improvements coming."

One of the major improvements propelling gas forward is electronic fuel injection (EFI) technology – an efficient way to

meter fuel delivery inside engines.

"Regular engines have a gravity feed system with a manual fuel pump," Roche explains. "With electronic injection, you get a more precise, efficient combustion of fuel rather than it being too rich or too lean. This reduces the amount of fuel and helps curb emissions."

Over at Kohler, EFI is a major focus.

"That's the way to improve fuel economy," Litt says. "With EFI you can tweak the power, emissions and your ECU to get the best of both worlds. Another key feature is that EFI technology is available at a reasonable cost. After investing in the technology, most equipment users can see a payback within a year. And the more equipment they have in their fleet, the more fuel savings adds up."

Kawasaki is also experimenting with EFI. After adding a version of electronic injection to its fuel-thirsty 37-horsepower engine, the company began seeing energy savings of up to 15 percent. Additionally, the engine maker is constantly tweaking the intake and cylinder head areas of its gasoline engines, and the company is promoting its FH series engine with V-valve technology.

"V-valve is essentially the same technology as you hear about on hemispherical combustion engines," Lockyear says. "Because the valves are sitting in a 'V,' it allows for less restriction when pulling fuel and air into the cylinder and exiting the cylinder the exhaust. If the engine breathes better, it's more efficient."

Like Kawasaki, Briggs & Stratton (which just introduced its first electronic injection engine last January) knows other things can be done to make gasoline more efficient than alternative fuels.

"Fuel injection helps, but the key is to have a closed loop feedback system where you measure the exhaust and control the carburetor or fuel injector to get a precise air/fuel ratio," Kowak says. "Engine management strategies where you're controlling spark plug timing and air/fuel ratio make the most sense."

But is gasoline really the best future fuel?

"It's the most cost-effective from the initial price," Klowak maintains.

And to today's end-users, that matters more than anything. **L**



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USE READER SERVICE #29

EMISSIONS: IMPOSSIBLE?

EPA Phase 3 emissions regulations are set, and by 2012, small lawn care equipment engines will have undergone a dramatic shift – and so could your bottom line

BY MARGARET HEPP

Just what you need – another price hike.

But look deeper into the new Environmental Protection Agency antipollution rules for lawn mower and handheld equipment engines and you might be anxious to pull out your budget. Phase 3 exhaust emission regulations for small spark-ignition engines (less than or equal to 19 kW) will take effect beginning in 2011, but first-time evaporative emission controls roll out in '09. Now's the time to start thinking about what this important legislation means for your riding mowers, zero-turn mowers, string trimmers, edgers and other handheld equipment – and your overall business.

Signed Sept. 4 and published Oct. 8, the final EPA "surf and turf" rule – so called because of its applicability to lawn equipment as well as pleasure boats – is expected to achieve a 95 percent reduction in emissions since 1997. Generally, these standards mirror the California Air Resources Board (CARB) regulations put in place for the '07-'08 fiscal year. While it's true that air pollution is a more urgent concern in California than in other areas

of the country, CARB representative Parke Terry says emissions reductions should be a lawn and landscape business concern throughout the country because of customer demand. Landscape businesses are tapping into this demand already – 11 percent of landscape contractors say their businesses are adding green services in 2009, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research – but whether your customers are asking for it or not, our industry will soon be expected to comply with the EPA's standards for the cleanest, greenest engines in lawn care history. How will the rule affect your equipment's power and efficiency? And what about cost? Is it the right time for your business to approach jobs with alternative types of equipment?

QUANTITY VS. (AIR) QUALITY

Zak George describes Fort Collins, Colo., as a young, middle-income town. With a population of around 120,000, Fort Collins is just small enough for George to be familiar with some of the other lawn care services in town – more than 70 in all, including zero-emissions franchise

Fast Facts: Leaking Pollutants – and Profit

According to the EPA, an estimated 17 million gallons of gasoline are spilled each year nationwide in the refueling of lawn machines.

"For our modeling work, the projected 2008 spillage estimate is about 20 million gallons of gas for all lawn and garden equipment," says EPA spokesperson Cathy Milbourn. "To go further and provide a lawnmower-specific number, the projected 2008 spillage estimate for gasoline-powered walk-behind lawnmowers is about 5 million gallons of gasoline."

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Small SI Evaporative Standards

Starting Dates and Estimated Reductions for Evaporative Emission Standards				
Evaporative Controls	Class I (NHH)	Class II (NHH)	Classes III-V (HH)	Estimated HC % Reduction
Hose Permeation	2009	2009	2012-2016	95%
Tank Permeation	2012	2011	2009-2013	85%
Running Loss	2012	2011	N/A	80%

Clean Air Lawn Care. George is eager to make a distinction between his business, Zak George's Landscaping, and Clean Air Lawn Care.

"They're not a direct competitor," he says. "They're in it to make the world better."

This might be so – according to Clean Air's Web site, their mission statement is to "change the way America cares for lawns by empowering ... local owners and managers to deliver an exceptional lawn care service that improves the quality of life in their communities" – but Zak George's Landscaping is no slouch when it comes to environmental stewardship. He switched from a truck to a Toyota Echo economy car and went from 10 miles per gallon to 42 mpg. George's irrigation services are reducing clients' water consumption (including the local Target store) by up to 67 percent.

Interestingly, George argues that the volume of lawn care he provides makes his business not only more profitable, but also more environmentally conscious. "If a 60-inch mower uses as much gas as a 32-inch mower, that's green," he says. "You're doing twice as much work with half as much fuel."

It helps that equipment's getting better and better, George says. "Fuel injection helps," he adds. "But it's all personal preference for business owners."

But new regulations could affect the performance and the fuel-efficiency of engines, says one major manufacturer. According to the EPA, fuel injection and catalysts, in addition to general improvements, are expected to be part of the change in new Class II equipment, which includes riding mowers and zero-turn mowers and accounts for \$4 million in sales per year. Gasoline-powered walk-behind mowers (both commercial and homeowner-grade) represent around 15

percent of the small SI nonroad engine category.

George hopes new equipment won't affect his efficiency. Clean Air LCOs can take half a day to service a single residential property, George says, while his gas-powered mowers speed through a day's work at 13 mph. There's a fine line, he says, between doing what you can for the environment and going too far.

"Right now, I think Clean Air's a little early in the industry," George says. "Down the road, they probably have a better chance. It's a cool concept, but it's tough. Those types of business never last long."

By using higher-octane fuels, keeping filters clean and minimizing idle time, George feels his business does its part. But, he says, he's primarily a profit man. "We're into mowing as much as we can," he says. "The more we produce, the better off we are."

PAY TO PLAY

It's unclear if performance will be affected by new emissions standards, but cost will almost certainly be impacted, says Kris Kiser of OPEI.

"There's going to be a cost component," he says. "It's going to cost more to build cleaner engines. The cost of compliance is real. But we don't see it effecting sales appreciably. The cost change will come over time – but you'll save money on fuel."

Manufacturers will meet emission targets by creating engines that burn less, Kiser says. For some, it's less a hardware issue than a software issue. All manufacturers will be required to build test facilities for their equipment, a large expense that doesn't even include the testing procedures or certification/warranty fees. Cost will vary by manufacturer, and a few might be able to absorb costs without passing them on to customers.

Were you featured in this issue?



Larry Rohlfes, CAE, assistant executive director of the California Landscape Contractors Association, testified on Tier 2 emissions standards in the state of California. For hearings, manufacturers put together a coalition of groups such as CARB, Rohlfes says. Within that group, suppliers were divided over the impact of emissions standards on equipment, buyers and the industry as a whole. "There was a group of manufacturers who said, 'This is bad,'" Rohlfes says. "There was another group who said, 'This is good.' But there were manufacturers who were prepared for the change and manufacturers who weren't."

The California ARB estimates commercial mower costs will go up about 3 percent following the implementation of the new standards for riding mowers in 2011. "I don't think you'll see any one manufacturer's prices much higher than another's," Kiser says. Across the board, the machines themselves are dramatically different than they were before emissions regulations started in 1997, Kiser adds – and it's a big transition for the outdoor power equipment industry.

"It's not your grandfather's lawnmower anymore," he says.



Atlanta-based Kindest Cut Lawn Care marketed both zero-emissions and standard lawn care services. The company now has a reputation for eco-friendly turf practices.

Still, regulations aren't making things any easier for equipment manufacturers. "Our official position is it's challenging," Kiser says.

THE KINDEST APPROACH

Few business owners strive for "zero," but Steve Kilbride wakes up every morning

figuring out how to get there. Two years ago, Steve Kilbride founded Kindest Cut Lawn Care in Atlanta to have his cake and eat it too. He marketed a zero-emissions lawn care service, but also provided standard lawn care to reach maximum market share. The small business has grown 75 percent since inception. Kind-



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USE READER SERVICE #34

est Cut promotes its zero-emissions lawn care services in the community, and as a result, has a reputation for eco-friendly turf practices. But he stresses that it's important to let practicality dictate his marketing.

"I'm not anti-gas mower any more than I'm anti-automobile," Kilbride says. "Both are useful and necessary tools. But just as you shouldn't hop in your car to drive a mile for an errand, there's no reason to use a gas mower on a modest and reasonably level lawn. We offer zero-emissions lawn care as an option to those who want it and want to make the commitment. Some grasses like zoysia need to be cut weekly with a manual mower. There are instances – overgrown lawns, steep slopes, clients that only want a monthly cut – where a gas mower is a necessity. As long as a manual mower is not an option, why not get a piece of the business?"

And Kilbride says competitors are asking the same question.

"I regularly get calls from competitors who are curious about our approach – mostly because their clients have complained about the noise they make," he says. "I also get calls from across the U.S and Canada from folks wanting to start a similar business."

Again, though, practicality still drives his business. "In a global economy, we need to keep American manufacturers competitive while at the same time protecting the environment for future generations," he says.

Peter Estournes, vice president of Gardenworks, Inc. in Healdsburg, Calif., saw similar benefits for his business in a battery-powered mower.

"Some of our jobs are very small lawns in densely populated neighborhoods," he says. "I started thinking about the 21" mowers we use and the noise we have when we fire our mowers up and use them for five or ten minutes and shut them down."

Estournes read about the Neutron battery-powered mower in a pamphlet and, after learning from the company's Web site that a 19" mower could cover up to 2,000 square feet on a single battery charge, he decided to give the ma-



Kiser

chine a try. He purchased the mower plus a spare battery in Sept. for about \$800.

While the mower is plastic and hasn't quite held up to the frequent activity,

Estournes says the company sent him replacement handlebars when the machine was cracked on the job, and the lightweight plastic frame makes operations more efficient.


"One man can carry the machine when the battery's taken out," Estournes says. "The mower only weighs about 19 pounds."

He plans to monitor the machine over the next 10 months to measure its year-long performance. Overall, however, he believes it's a smart business experiment – one that others should try for themselves.

Terry believes battery-powered sales will pick up in earnest during the next 10 years, beginning in California and extending to the rest of the country.

"I think you're going to see increasing interest in both customers and landscapers in California in battery-operated lawn and garden equipment, assuming manufacturers can produce what's needed," Terry says. "I see California leading the nation in that area. Los Angeles played around with a battery-powered backpack blower, which turned out to be far too heavy, but considering all the battery technology, it seems almost inevitable that it'll migrate to lawn equipment. I see increasing use of battery technology for lawn equipment 10 years ahead."

Kiser believes there'll always be a zero-emissions debate. "But even with a battery mower, you have to charge the battery," he points out. "That energy comes from a coal-fired power plant."

Overall, the best opportunity for your business is to promote your environmental stewardship. "The amount of carbon emitted by the mower is greatly outpaced by the amount of carbon the lawn will absorb and sequester," Kiser says. "Lawns are starting to be viewed a little more positively." 

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The Changing Face of Agronomy



A social networking Web site draws crowds of undecided college students to Iowa State University's green program

BY STEFANIE TOTH

Marketing to teenagers is always difficult, but the Internet revolution makes it virtually impossible to avoid this demographic. Accordingly, Bradley Miller, undergraduate coordinator at Iowa State University's agronomy department, has devised a plan to reach new college students using the Web.

Miller began looking for ways to revamp ISU's agronomy program two years ago. He knew that students were interested in conservation and renewable energy, but current advertising techniques weren't effective. So, Miller began talking with prospective students to gain insight into their methods of communication, and the answer became clear.

"The Internet is where people go to get information," Miller says. "We figured there were students coming to college who were interested in agronomy topics, but just didn't know what agronomy was. Our main challenge was making them aware of the field."

ISU previously marketed its agronomy program through classroom visits, but face-to-face interaction wasn't bringing in recruits. That's when Miller turned to Facebook, a social networking Web site.

More than 100 million people regularly use Facebook, and according to the site's self-description, members are mostly college-aged students. The emergence of this and other social networking sites has given Miller and ISU a nonstop advertising avenue.

"The Internet is one more opportunity to communicate with people," Miller says. "Facebook was able to provide us with the ability to bring our message specifically to the teen demographic."

Miller has used Facebook to communicate with agronomy students around the world. Because agronomy embraces a variety of sciences, such as biology, ecology, chemistry, physics and earth science, Miller potentially could reach millions of people interested in the subject. How? Facebook search results and other site features are generated around a user's interest, and in addition to promoting an agronomy "group" (which agronomy students can join to discuss the profession and network with one another), Miller uses Facebook ads that pop up when keywords are entered into a student's profile.


"Facebook allows members to indicate their interests," he says. "We can choose

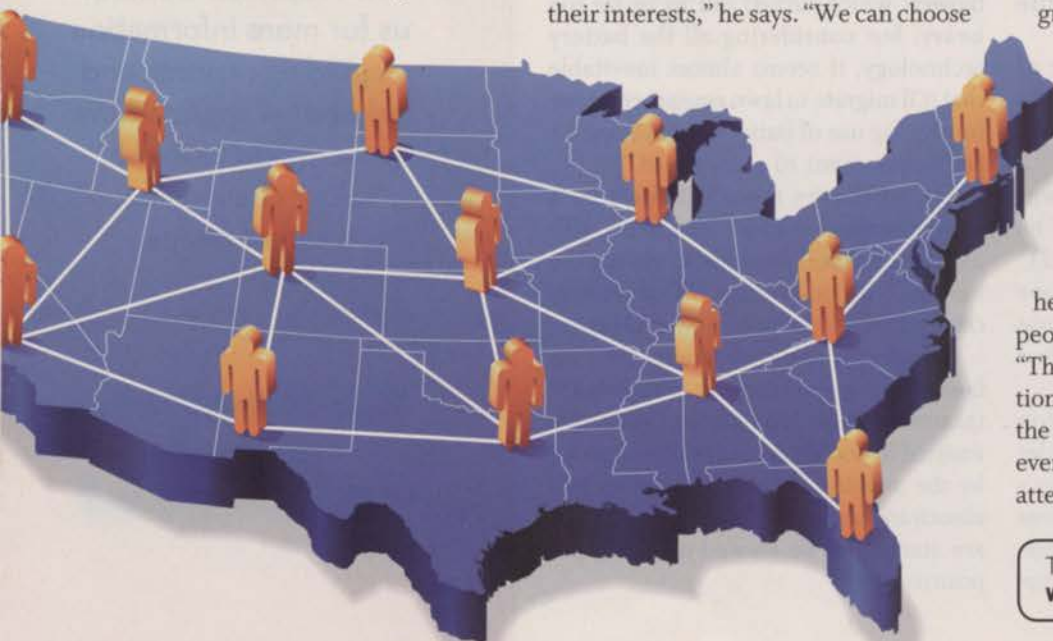
for our advertisement to be shown only to those who've indicated interests connected to agronomy."

The next step to promoting ISU agronomy was to draw students to the department's Web site. But first, the site needed a dramatic overhaul. To start the process, a graphic design consultant was hired to create an image with which students would be able to connect. Collaboration efforts among the consultant, Web design staff and Miller produced a logo that's attracted more than 3,500 visitors to the site to date. The logo, intended to appeal to a diverse group of students, was also printed on clothing, stickers and even lawn chairs.

"By talking with prospective students and observing the many communication mediums that are out there, one can get a sense for what these students are looking for and what communication mediums they're paying attention to," Miller says. "Not all the site's viewers will be convinced to become agronomists, but at least it helps more people know what agronomy is."

Since the aggressive Internet advertising was launched, ISU's agronomy program enrollment has increased to 184 students. Exactly how much of the increase can be attributed to Facebook is unknown, but Miller says it's essential to keep up to date on different marketing techniques.

"We've really reinvented our approach to make a clear message about how the science of agronomy helps society address the issues young people are concerned about," he says. "The increase in availability of information because of the Internet does increase the need for us to effectively compete with everyone else who's trying to get students' attention." 



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USE READER SERVICE #36

*What concerns
a top EPA
official about our
industry? His
answers might
surprise you*

The Non-Point Man

BY PAT JONES

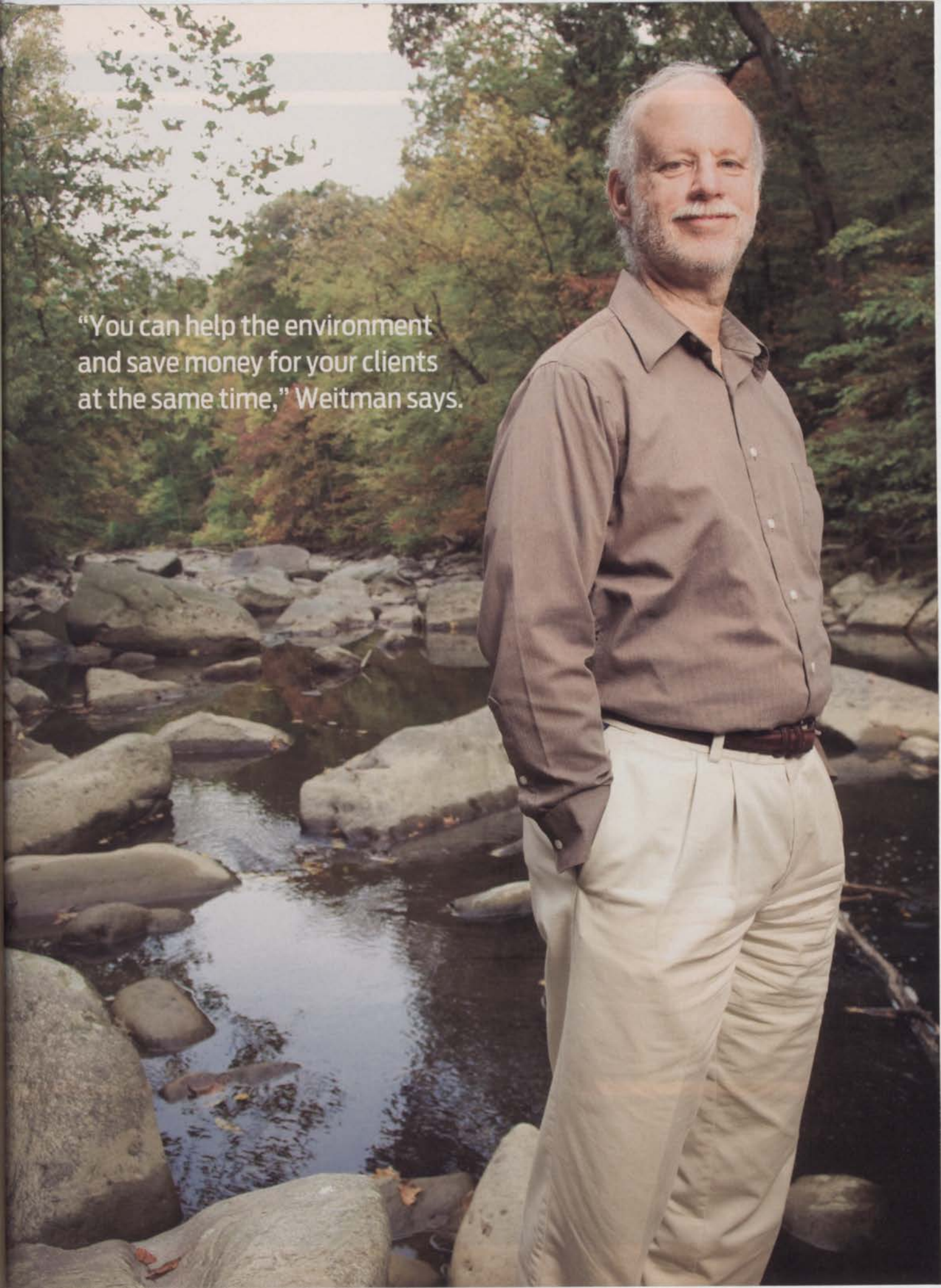
Dov Weitman's position with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is inherently contradictory: He's the point man on non-point. More accurately, he's the chief of the agency's Non-Point Source Control branch and is charged with developing programs to reduce impacts from areas such as agriculture, forestry, grazing and, of course, urban runoff. But ultimately, his priority and passion is stream and watershed protection.

We caught up with Weitman – a Harvard-educated attorney and 30-year EPA veteran – following an October speech to the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), where he suggested ways that designers and contractors can profit from the green movement in urban design.

In layman's terms, define non-point source pollution.

Dov Weitman: We define it by what it isn't. Point source gets discharged from a particular place: factories, sewage from homes, wastewater treatment, etc. It all comes from one point. In my program, we address things that are diffused over the land. There are a lot of things such as stormwater runoff that fall in the middle. Congress has decided that stormwater runoff – in larger cities – is considered point source and is regulated. Non-point pollution at the federal level isn't a regulatory program. It's more about outreach, education and funding for programs.

Weitman loves the water at Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. – but it's a textbook illustration of what's wrong, he says. Photo: Mike Morgan

A photograph of a man with a grey beard and hair, wearing a brown button-down shirt and light-colored trousers, standing in a natural setting. He is positioned on the right side of the frame, with his hands in his pockets. The background features a stream flowing over large, grey rocks, surrounded by dense green and autumn-colored trees. The lighting is soft, suggesting an overcast day.

"You can help the environment and save money for your clients at the same time," Weitman says.



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When you think of our business – lawn care, golf, etc. – what issues jump to mind?

DW: The main overall issue is development. Lawns and urban landscapes are just a part of that pattern. We're seeing that more land is becoming impervious or functionally impervious. In other words, it rains, and instead of the water doing the natural thing – replenishing groundwater – it now hits the ground and stays on the ground and runs off. It looks for the nearest sewer or flows into the nearest stream. It's a tremendous volume of water and it physically destroys streams and watersheds. That's the No. 1 problem.

If you're in an urban area and you go by a stream and see that brown water, that's soil off the banks and the bed. You also see banks with roots sticking out and trees falling in. It's a reflection of the force of the water. The streams in developed areas get wider and shallower. In a normal system where water infiltrates into the ground, that doesn't happen.

So our main focus really comes down to groundwater recharge, loss of habitat and risk to groundwater.

That might surprise those in our industry who think the EPA just worries about lawn chemicals.

DW: In our group, we've always paid attention to those issues. We have a whole chapter on fertilizers and pesticides in our guidebook. We do consider it a problem. When we talk to ag producers about our concerns with their practices, they always point out that urban pollution is a factor, too.

There are certainly issues with fertilizers, pesticides and oil/gas spills from service stations. But those aren't as serious as the simple volume of rain that runs off in urbanized areas, eroding our stream beds and our stream banks.

Talk about "dead zones" in the Great Lakes and other places.

DW: The main dead zone over the last decade is the one in the Gulf of Mexico. It's such a large area and so hard to study that it's difficult to say how much pollution might come from lawns. The U.S. Geological Survey has models showing that the primary source of the pollutants – nitrogen and phosphorus – comes from fertilizers applied on agricultural lands and from animal waste.

What kinds of practices or new regulation would you advocate to limit impact from urban practices such as lawn care?

DW: We can talk about better practices – using less fertilizers and pesticides or using them more judiciously – but the theme I'd like to focus on is the business opportunity side of "green infrastructure," or low-impact development. These are the kinds of practices needed to infiltrate water on the site. Things like rain gardens, infiltration, bio-filters, green roofs, porous pavers and such. We're working quite closely with the ASLA because they believe that the aesthetic part can be compatible with our goals. There's a huge opportunity here for the landscape contractors, particularly as more cities begin to require these types of construction.

Could you give us an example of green infrastructure?

DW: Imagine you're landscaping a house with a decent-sized yard. Take a low-lying corner of that yard that's maybe 150 square feet. Dig out a few feet of soil in that area and return a mix of soil and an amendment to increase porosity. You can use sand or peat or compost. You're creating an area below the surface that returns rainwater to groundwater. You can make it aesthetically nice, but make sure to select the right plants that can handle lots of water or none. We have a bunch of rain gardens at EPA Headquarters that look gorgeous this summer. The whole idea within our division is to encourage more of this kind of simple solution.

Green roofs are another example. The concept is probably new to most landscape contractors, but who's more qualified to plant a lawn on a roof? Green roofs are going to grow into a lucrative thing as well. We're seeing hundreds of them in cities such as Chicago, Portland and Washington, D.C. As I said, it's an amazing business opportunity for contractors as they become more commonplace.


What was the focus of your ASLA speech last month?

DW: My focus was that you can help the environment and save money for your clients at the same time. We studied 17 cases, and in almost all of them, the developer used these types of practices and saved money. Hard infrastructure items such as big sewer pipes and sidewalks are very expensive. If you can reduce or eliminate these things, you can save a lot of money. There might be added expenses for a rain garden or a green roof, but the avoided costs are generally greater than the increased costs of doing them. It's a business opportunity to embrace.

What's your greatest fear about our watersheds?

DW: I live two blocks from Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. They close the roads on weekends and my wife and I love to walk through there because it goes into the heart of Washington. On one hand, we love to have the water there. On the other, it's a textbook illustration of what's wrong. Trees are falling in, the banks keep getting wider and there are no fish. When I witness this, it hurts. That's my motivation. I came to EPA to make a difference. I want future generations to be able to appreciate the beauty of nature, and to have groundwater to drink and use.

Any last thoughts about the "green" movement?

DW: It's growing rapidly, and I can't emphasize enough that it means more business for people in your market. Cities and counties nationwide are pushing this and it's growing phenomenally. Every day, I hear about more communities getting into it. Everybody's totally jazzed about the progress we're making and I think your readers should be, too. 



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At John Deere, we understand the many economical and life-enrichment benefits the green industry provides for all of us. We appreciate all you do every day to beautify the land where we live, work and play. This is why we are proud to have the opportunity to sponsor your 2008 *State of the Industry* and 2008 *Benchmarking Your Business* reports. It is our expectation that each business owner studying the research findings available within each of these two reports will be able to utilize some of the lessons learned to better the results of his/her business operations in the approaching business cycle.

When we consider the tough economic environment under which each of you had to run your business in 2008, we must realize this past cycle has not been an easy one to survive and thrive in. At John Deere Co., we continue to search for ways to help you become more successful, even in the tough times. This is why, for the third year in a row, we are the Green Industry Conference (GIC) Platinum Sponsor for the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and the Gold Sponsor for the Professional Grounds Management Society's (PGMS) School of Grounds Management. The classes offered at the GIC help you with industry certification, as well as help you find solutions to a multitude of business operation challenges. Speaking of PLANET, after one year in the market place, the John Deere affinity program available to PLANET members is beginning to gain traction producing advantages for those members who have utilized it. This program allows PLANET members access to very competitively set prices on commercial equipment ranging from Z-Trak mowers to tractors, to utility vehicles, and much more.

One year after John Deere Co. acquired LESCO, we continue to work on an extensive project list integrating LESCO under the John Deere Landscapes organization. We hope the work we have done in 2008 to align the Landscapes locations with John Deere Dealers for mowing equipment sales and overall equipment support will move us closer toward becoming your destination for total solutions to help you succeed.

Even after 170 years, our business is not much different than yours. We continuously change, adapt and implement new processes in order to build a better business for all of our customers. We look forward to seeing you soon! Have a great 2009!

J. Gilbert Peña
Segment Strategy Manager, B2B, John Deere



JOHN DEERE





P&L: Where Do You Stand?

In an uncertain market riddled with variables, the one thing landscape contractors can control is their numbers. This *Benchmarking Your Business Report* is your comprehensive guide to the profit-and-loss statement. Rely on this tool for budgeting and checking the temperature of your business.

Budgeting has never been so complicated for Hazeltine Nurseries. Fuel prices and other operating costs are up, while labor is steady but uncertain – the numbers fluctuate weekly.

“We prepare for the worst and hope for the best,” says Stephen Hazeltine, president of the Venice, Fla.-based, \$19 million, full-service landscape firm.

Hazeltine is holding off on big investments like equipment, for now.

“We’re waiting to see what consumer confidence does,” he says.

Douglas Freer echoes this sentiment. He says a backup plan for his Cleveland Heights, Ohio operation, Lawn Lad, is in the works. This year, Freer will focus on what he can control: productivity and efficiency. Opening the books to employees will get everyone on board with the plan, he explains, noting their performance has a direct impact on sales, equipment condition, customer satisfaction and, ultimately, whether the company profits.

David Rykbost, president, Dave’s Landscape Management Co. in Hudson, Mass., flat out says:

“We choose not to participate in the down economy.”

By scrutinizing job costs vs. bids, reviewing monthly financials and keeping an eye on line items, such as labor as a percent of revenue, Rykboost and company Controller Jeanne Lapidis always know where the business stands. "You have to know what benchmarks are acceptable in the industry and for your company," Lapidis emphasizes.

This year's *Benchmarking Your Business Report* walks you through the profit-and-loss (P&L) statement and highlights important benchmarks so you can take the temperature of your business. Jim Huston, president, J.R. Huston Enterprises, a green industry management consultancy based in Geyersville, Calif., provides "ideal" and "exemplary" benchmarks (see chart on page 6-7); our *Lawn & Landscape* survey, conducted by ABR Research, reveals industry averages. How does your operation stack up?

Allow Huston to guide you through the onerous task of reading the monthly financials so you can get on the path toward profitability.

WORK THE NUMBERS. Huston suggests thinking of the P&L statement as a job-cost report for all jobs thrown together. The goal, always, is to achieve profit. Begin your budgeting process by setting a profit goal.

"The more profit, the better," Huston says. "Profit gives you more options, money for capitalization, money for bonuses. Your first job is to hit 10 percent net profit margin after all the bills are paid, and if you're doing 15 percent, you're doing a great job."

Those numbers aligned with survey respondents: 25.3 percent expect 10 to 15 percent net profit after taxes; 15.6 percent plan for 16 to 20 percent profit. However, 32.7 percent say profits will reach 5 percent or less for 2008.

Huston's benchmark for direct costs is 70 percent of net sales; overhead should come in at 25 percent, give or take a few points. Half of that overhead will go toward office staff and the owner's salary. The benchmarks for line items that fall under those two categories are detailed in "Chart Notes" on page 6.

While smaller organizations tend to be more nimble and can react quickly in a changing market, their P&L statements tend to lack consistency in some line items, namely owner's salary. As the company grows, this ratio becomes a smaller percentage of sales, Huston notes. For instance, an owner who takes a salary equal to 10 percent of \$250,000 in sales will not take 10 percent if sales are \$3 million. Meanwhile, the owner will ramp up office personnel and, therefore, pay out that 10 percent to support staff. The ratio stays the same, but the split changes as a company grows, Huston explains.

Also, smaller companies are hit harder by insurance prices. Large organizations benefit from buying power. "If you do a half-million in sales, an insurance policy can throw the numbers out of whack," Huston says. "Larger companies develop more stability."

Aside from the owner's salary, direct and overhead cost ratios should remain consistent, Huston says. Many times, if a line item is inflated, the business owner has not allocated the cost properly.

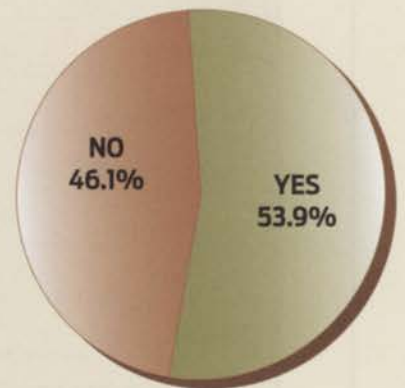
Huston is sympathetic toward owners who balk at the numbers. Sales and production usually take precedence over paperwork. He offers this advice for contractors who tend to push aside monthly P&Ls: "You can keep on top of your business if you do three things: Price it right, produce it right and produce enough of it," he advises.

NIP & TUCK. Dale Micetic, division president of ISS Grounds Control in Phoenix, Ariz., leads managers through the budgeting process each year starting in August with "target budgets." In September, the real number crunching begins, and managers study each line item, taking into consideration last year's performance, current trends and year-to-date expenditures. Always during the budget-building process, he asks the question: "Does this make sense?"

A few sets of eyes review the numbers. In 2008, attention focused on gasoline and labor costs. But ISS Grounds Management's lower materials costs – 21 percent in 2008

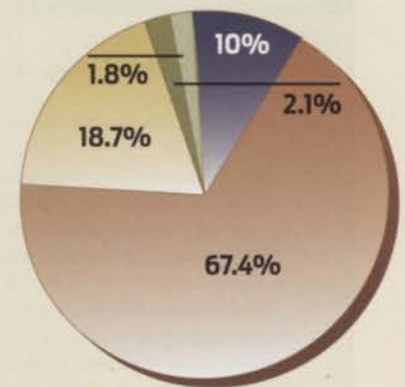
FIGURING FINANCES

Do you receive monthly income financial statements?



PAY DAY

How many days does it usually take you to receive payments from customers?



Within 30 days	67.4%
Within 60 days	18.7%
Immediately	10%
Within 90 days	2.1%
More than 90 days	1.8%

All charts: Lawn & Landscape

"You can keep on top of your business if you do three things: Price it right, produce it right and produce enough of it."
 – Jim Huston

PROFIT-AND-LOSS STATEMENT: COMPARE YOUR AVERAGE WITH INDUSTRY BENCHMARKS

Industry financial guru Jim Huston sets "ideal" and "exemplary" goals for business costs. See how your numbers compare by filling in the fourth, blank column.

COST OF GOODS SOLD (Direct Costs)	AVERAGE	IDEAL	EXEMPLARY	YOUR NUMBERS
Materials (with tax)	15.6%	(see A)		
Gas & oil	14.1%	4-6%	3-5%	
Labor (field)	17.3%	(see B)		
Labor burden (field)	3%	75% of field labor		
Subcontractors	2.3%	(see C)		
Equipment	8.4%	8%	5-7.9% (see D)	
Equipment rentals	2.1%	(see E)		
Miscellaneous direct job costs	3.2%	2%	1%	
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS		70% of sales, +/- 5%		
GROSS PROFIT MARGIN		15%	20% (see F)	

CHART NOTES

DIRECT COSTS

- A:** Material costs depend on services sold. Typical benchmarks: landscape construction/installation = 30%, plus or minus (+/-) 3%; maintenance = 5-10%; lawn care = 10%.
- B:** Field labor depends on services performed. Typical benchmarks: landscape construction/installation = 20-22%; maintenance = 35-45%; lawn care = 24% (+/- 3%).
- C:** Subcontractors total cost depends on company strategy. The goal is to cover those costs completely and add 15% to sell the labor rate to clients and earn a profit. For instance, account \$115 for a subcontractor that costs \$100.
- D:** Equipment costs depend on the business. Capital-heavy operations naturally will spend more in this category, increasing the 8% average by 10% or more. The key, always, is to recover these costs and achieve a profit margin.
- E:** Equipment rentals depend on a company's deduction methodologies. Cover this number through accurate job costing. (Know how much rental equipment costs per hour to run, plus profit.)
- F:** Profit margin goals should start at 10% net (after bills are paid). Ideally, set the profit margin goal first, then work backward and fill in direct expenses, always keeping in line this magic number.

INDIRECT COSTS

- G:** Donations are tricky, and the ratio depends on company size/revenue. For instance, a company with revenue less than \$500,000 that donates 1.2% is generous but gives less than a company with revenue at \$2 million and donates 1.2%. A quarter of a percent is a general benchmark/average.
- H:** Downtime should include only the time when field employees are getting paid but not producing billable hours. This does not include repairing equipment, drive time or load time. It does include shop cleanup time and "dead time." Downtime is usually one hour per week per full-time field employee. That's 2% downtime for a 50-hour per week worker.
- I:** Downtime labor burden should be 75% of total downtime, figuring about one hour per week for a full-time field employee.
- J:** Insurance averages from *Lawn & Landscape* research include worker's compensation, general liability and automobile insurance. Huston defines "insurance" as only medical insurance, general liability and worker's compensation to labor burden, and auto insurance to equipment costs. That explains his 2% "ideal" compared to our average 4.8%.
- K:** Bonds are not used by many contractors. The 1.9% average makes sense if the cost includes equipment licenses, but those should be lumped into the "equipment" line item.
- L:** Office salaries include officers and staff and should range 10% (+/- 2%) of total indirect costs. As the company grows, an owner takes a lesser percentage of salary and office staff takes more. They generally even out to 10-12% total, which is why lumping together officers/office staff is helpful.
- M:** Salaries labor burden should be 12-15% of salary cost.

YOUR STRATEGY:

Set a profit margin goal in the double-digits. Aim for direct costs that are no more than 70 percent of sales. Indirect costs should not exceed 25 percent of sales. Doing the math, this leaves a 5 percent profit margin – a bare minimum. Tweak direct and indirect costs to “make room” for more profit.

GENERAL and ADMINISTRATIVE (G&A)

OVERHEAD (Indirect Costs) AVERAGE IDEAL EXEMPLARY YOUR NUMBERS

OVERHEAD (Indirect Costs)	AVERAGE	IDEAL	EXEMPLARY	YOUR NUMBERS
Advertising	4.3%	1%	0.5%	
Bad debts	1.3%	1%	0.5%	
Utilities	2.4%	2%	1-1.5%	
Donations	1.2%	0.25% (see G)		
Downtime	1.5%	2-3%	(see H)	
Downtime with labor burden	1.1%	(see I)		
Dues and subscriptions	1.1%	0.5%		
Insurance	4.8%	2% (see J)		
Interest and bank charges	1.3%	1%	0.5%	
Licenses and related bonds	1.9%	-0.5% (see K)		
Office equipment, computers, software	2.6%	1%	.0.5%	
Office supplies	2%	0.5%	0.25%	
Professional fees	1.7%	1-1.5%	1-1.5%	
Radios and mobile phone	3%	1%	1%	
Rent	2.6%	2%	1.5%	
Salaries, office staff	3%			
Salaries, company officers	6%	6% <small>(average and exemplary numbers include both salary costs)</small>	4% (see L)	
Salaries labor burden	3.2%	2%	1.5% (see M)	
Small tools/supplies	2.1%	1%	1%	
Taxes, business pre-tax	4.7%	<small>(no benchmark; numbers are figured pre-tax)</small>		
Training and education	1%	1 (+/- 0.5%)		
Travel and entertainment	1.1%	1 (+/- 0.5%)		
Uniforms and safety equipment	1.3%	1 (+/- 0.5%)		
Utilities	2.4%	2%	1.5%	
Vehicles, overhead	5.2%	3-4%		
Yard expense and lease-hold improvements	0.7%	0.5%	0.25%	
Miscellaneous	2.1%	less than 0.25%		
TOTAL INDIRECT COSTS		25% of sales		

vs. 23.5 percent last year – compensated for some increases. Negotiations with suppliers who see slowdowns and want to move product accounted for the expense decrease, Micetic says.

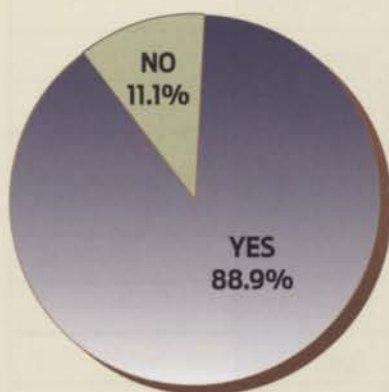
Even with price increases, P&L ratios must stay the same. “You have to manage costs effectively and make sure percentages stay in line with historical numbers,” Micetic says. “If business slows down, that may mean cost-cutting in the indirect cost area.”

There are three items contractors should never cut from their budgets – advertising, equipment maintenance and training. “These items are where you will get the most return for your energy and dollars spent,” Huston points out.

Freer will maintain the same marketing budget for 2009, but he will evaluate, as Huston suggests, how to get the “most bang for your buck.”

ESCALATING EXPENSES

Did your material costs increase this year?



Average increase per company – 18%

CRUNCHING NUMBERS

Describe your budget planning this year.

44.5%

We revised our budget due to increased expenses.

23.4%

We cut spending to stay within our budget and maintain profitability.

19.8

We gave up on our budget this year because of rising material costs.

12.3%

We have been able to follow our original budget.

On the other hand, Freer will examine “the little things” that add up: cell phone bills, software, uniforms. He plans to shop communications carriers, and he decided to purchase a software license before he actually needed it, taking advantage of a price-break. As for uniforms, rather than maintaining an inventory of apparel, he’ll take a just-in-time approach and order shirts as needed.

Office supply costs can easily spiral out of control. The average according to *Lawn & Landscape* research is 2 percent. Huston suggests curtailing this to ¼ percent if possible. The average miscellaneous department also exceeded Huston’s benchmarks. Respondents allocated 3.2 percent of direct and 2.1 percent of indirect costs toward miscellaneous expenses. Chances are, some of those dollars were not allocated in appropriate categories, Huston says.

Micetic says one area to watch is administrative expenses. “If you spent \$100,000 on administrative costs this year and you spend \$100,000 next year but your revenue decreases by 30 percent, those expenses will suck up your profit,” he points out. Prudence is of utmost importance in good and bad economic times.

FEED THE COW. Cash flow positions companies to compete and succeed. The line items on a P&L are essentially bills to be paid. If you do not have the dollars to fund basics, such as payroll, how will you afford the goodies, i.e. new equipment?

Companies that relied on lines of credit to carry them through dry times will find bank dollars aren’t available, says John Hogan, who worked at the U.S. Small Business Administration for 32 years before starting his Cleveland, Ohio-based business, Hogan Consulting. Banks aren’t lending to each other now, so you can bet small business isn’t first in line for a cash infusion. “Without that credit safety net there, there isn’t the luxury to be off that much on your budgeting,” Hogan says.

Hogan calls budgeting “a forced exercise in getting focused.” Maintaining an accurate budget includes setting cash flow goals and, upon invoicing clients, reminding them to pay.

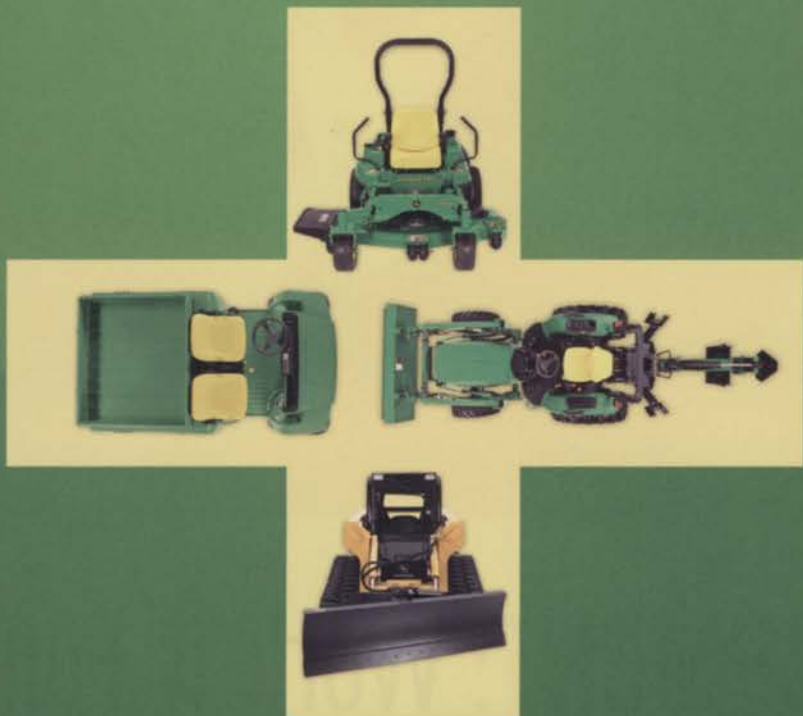
According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, 18.7 percent of respondents have receivables that are 60 days out. Nearly 25 percent do not get paid within 30 days. But holding strong in a tough economy requires stricter control of accounts receivables. “Every day you can reduce your sales outstanding, that’s money in your pocket,” Micetic says.

Think of receivables as unnecessary loans to your customers. You could reinvest that money in the business, use it for operating expenses or payroll. “You need cash to expand and maintain a business because if you don’t have it, you have to borrow it,” Micetic says.

Do not learn to live with aging receivables. “The longer you let receivables go, the more likely someone will not pay them,” Huston warns.

This speaks to customer relationships – another resource that fuels a business during good times and bad. Cash flow is contingent on “making the sale,” Freer recognizes. “Even if we do not increase dollars spent, if we build new customer relationships and friends in a down market, when people are ready to spend, they will come back to us.” \$

It's simple math.



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EQUIPMENT: Work It Full-Time

Curbing frivolous expenditures, landscape contractors will study equipment utilization before purchasing new machines.

How would you like to boost productivity 20 or 30 percent? Jim Huston has advised landscape business owners they can achieve this simply by making use of the right equipment in the field. "Study your equipment and its productivity," emphasizes Huston, president, J.R. Huston Enterprises.

Concentrate on equipment utilization. How many hours will you really clock on that new machine? Can you ride out that truck for another year? These are some of the questions landscape contractors ask themselves while considering equipment purchases for 2009.

TAKE A WAIT-AND-SEE APPROACH. While some survey respondents said they will not add to their fleets this year, investing more in repairing and upkeep as well as renting pieces as needed before buying, others will buy equipment as necessary.

Because Douglas Freer likes to maintain a consistent fleet, he will curb equipment purchases. "We may have more frustration at the moment because of parts availability and older equipment, but we are looking for alternatives to delay the expense," says Freer, president of Lawn Lad in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, adding that he will invest more in routine and preventive maintenance.

Cutting the equipment spending budget by two-thirds will also "tighten the belt" at ISS Grounds Control in Phoenix, Ariz. "Only when we sell new work will we staff that new work with equipment," says Dale Micetic, president. "It's a shame because now is the time to buy vehicles," he adds, remarking on the car

lot deals he sees advertised weekly. But he won't tap into a line of credit for the purchase. "If you can save your interest expense, that will go a long way toward helping the bottom line."

On the other hand, Stephen Hazeltine, president, Hazeltine Nurseries, Venice, Fla., has his eyes on eight to 10 pieces of equipment he wants to add to his fleet this year.

HOW HARD DOES YOUR EQUIPMENT WORK? A quick glance at the P&L equipment category doesn't tell the whole story. Equipment includes everything associated with machines, Huston says. Figure in equipment expenses, such as fuel, repairs, mechanics, depreciation and insurance. The P&L in this report separates gas/oil expenses into a different line item.

The expense deserves its own line in light of rising gas prices that most landscape contractors identify as one of this year's key challenges. ISS Grounds Management's gas bill reached \$1.3 million by October, a 33-percent increase compared to 2007. "We're working hard to monitor fuel usage, reexamining our scheduling and how we route trucks, and looking aggressively at people who could be stealing fuel," Micetic says. Tracking fuel consumption is critical, especially in dire times where people are tempted to take advantage of a company gas card for personal use, he notes.

As for rentals, setting a benchmark is challenging, Huston says. The rent-or-own decision depends on a company's strategy, and whether a company can give equipment a full-time job.

This year, Dave's Landscape Management Co. in Hudson,

PURCHASE PREDICTIONS

How do you project your annual equipment purchases/leases will change this year?

EQUIPMENT TYPE	REGION:				RESPONDENTS WITH REVENUE:			
	All Respondents	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW	Less than \$100k	\$100-\$299k	\$300-\$399k	\$1 million-plus
Tractors								
Increase	11.5%	9.8%	12.3%	13.8%	11.5%	6%	15.7%	15.3%
Decrease	4.5%	6.2%	4.1%	1.2%	2.6%	5.2%	5.6%	6.9%
No change	84%	84%	83.6%	85%	85.9%	88.8%	78.7%	77.8%
Riding mowers								
Increase	33.3%	36.8%	29.7%	33.7%	31.6%	36.7%	25%	42.3%
Decrease	4%	4.8%	4.7%	1.2%	4.3%	3.3%	3.4%	5.6%
No change	62.7%	58.4%	65.6%	65.1%	64.1%	60%	71.6%	52.1%
Trucks								
Increase	18.5%	18.2%	22.3%	22.7%	18.3%	15.1%	21.2%	25.6%
Decrease	8%	8%	5.2%	4.9%	8.1%	5.8%	5.4%	4.6%
No change	73.5%	73.8%	72.5%	72.4%	73.6%	79.1%	73.4%	69.8%
Walk-behind mowers								
Increase	32%	29.6%	28.4%	43.5%	30.9%	32.8%	33.7%	32.9%
Decrease	3.8%	4.4%	3.7%	2.4%	2.4%	6.7%	3.5%	2.8%
No change	64.2%	66%	67.9%	54.1%	66.7%	60.5%	62.8%	64.3%
Hand-held equipment								
Increase	51.7%	50%	53.6%	51.1%	49.3%	57.9%	44.9%	56.9%
Decrease	3%	4.3%	2.5%	1.2%	2.4%	5.7%	3.4%	0%
No change	45.3%	45.7%	43.9%	47.7%	48.3%	36.4%	51.7%	43.1%
Utility vehicles								
Increase	12.8%	12.2%	11.9%	16.9%	8%	17.7%	10.6%	20.5%
Decrease	2.6%	3.7%	2.2%	1.2%	2.2%	2.7%	3.5%	2.8%
No change	84.6%	84.1	85.9%	81.9%	89.8%	79.6%	85.9%	76.7%
Trailers								
Increase	29.2%	23.2%	32.7%	35.3%	26.9%	33.6%	31.9%	26%
Decrease	4.5%	7.3%	2.5%	2.3%	2.4%	6.2%	5.5%	6.9%
No change	66.3%	69.5%	64.8%	62.4%	70.7%	60.2%	62.6%	67.1%
Skid-steer loaders								
Increase	15.2%	14.5%	16.8%	16.1%	11.3%	13.5%	10.8%	21.3%
Decrease	3.6%	3.2%	3.3%	3.6%	1.4%	3.8%	3.8%	5.3%
No change	81.2%	82.3%	79.9%	80.3%	87.3%	82.7%	85.4%	73.4%
Compact utility/mini skid-steer loaders								
Increase	12.1%	10.2%	12.4%	16%	9%	13.4%	10.7%	18.8%
Decrease	2.6%	2.6%	1.7%	5%	1.6%	3.6%	3.6%	2.9%
No change	85.3%	87.2%	85.9%	79%	89.4%	83%	85.7%	78.3%
Sprayers								
Increase	23.4%	24.6%	20.7%	27.4%	22.7%	27.2%	23.6%	18.3%
Decrease	2.7%	4%	1.6%	2.4%	3.4%	3.5%	2.2%	0%
No change	73.9%	71.4%	77.7%	70.2%	73.9%	69.3%	74.2%	81.7%
Spreaders								
Increase	17.9%	20.3%	12.2%	24.4%	15.8%	16.7%	25.3%	16.7%
Decrease	4%	4.6%	3.1%	4.9%	4.1%	4.4%	5.7%	1.4%
No change	78.1%	75.1%	84.7%	70.7%	80.1%	78.9%	69%	81.9%
Computers/laptop								
Increase	26.6%	25.5%	23.5%	37.2%	19.2%	26.7%	29.1%	43%
Decrease	3.9%	5.5%	2%	4.7%	3.5%	5%	2.3%	5.1%
No change	69.5%	69%	74.5%	58.1%	77.3%	68.3%	68.6%	51.9%

EQUIPMENT INVENTORY

How many pieces of different equipment types do you own and lease?

EQUIPMENT TYPE	RESPONDENTS WITH REVENUE:									
	All Respondents		Less than \$100k		\$100-\$299k		\$300-\$399k		\$1 million-plus	
	Own	Lease	Own	Lease	Own	Lease	Own	Lease	Own	Lease
Tractor	0.8	0.1	0.3	0	1.1	0	0.9	0	1.8	0.4
Riding mowers	2.3	0	1.6	0	1.5	0	2.0	0	5.4	0.1
Trucks	4.7	0.3	1.3	0.5	3	0.1	5	0.2	14.9	0.1
Walk-behind mowers	2.5	0.1	1.9	0.2	1.5	0	2.1	0	6.1	0
Hand-held equipment	11.4	0	5.5	0.1	9.5	0	10.3	0	29.5	0.1
Utility vehicles	0.9	0	0.2	0	1.5	0	0.7	0	1.8	0
Trailers	2.9	0	1.8	0	2.8	0	2.9	0	5.8	0
Skid-steer loaders	0.5	0	0.1	0.1	0.3	0	0.6	0	1.7	0
Compact utility/mini skid	0.4	0	0	0	0.8	0	0.1	0	0.7	0
Sprayers	2.5	0	1.7	0	2	0	2.8	0.2	5.1	0
Spreaders	2.7	0	1.6	0	1.8	0	2.8	0	6.3	0
Computers/laptops	4.4	0	1.8	0	4.7	0	2.8	0	11.7	0

ANNUAL EQUIPMENT EXPENDITURES

What percent of your equipment expenditures are for the following?

RESPONDENTS WITH REVENUE:

	All respondents	Less than \$100k	\$100-\$299k	\$300-\$999k	\$1 million-plus
Equipment	31.1%	33.3%	30.4%	29.8%	28%
Service	21.1%	19.6%	22.4%	25.7%	17.8%
Parts	15.4%	16.1%	15.7%	15.4%	13.7%

PLANNING PURCHASES: DO YOU STICK TO BUDGET?

What percent of your equipment needs are planned vs. unplanned?

RESPONDENTS WITH REVENUE:

	All respondents	Less than \$100k	\$100-\$299k	\$300-\$999k	\$1 million-plus
Planned	60.6%	58.3%	56.5%	61.2%	65%
Unplanned	39.4%	41.7%	43.5%	38.8%	35%



Mass., purchased three new trucks for \$86,000, new mowers for \$32,000, used equipment at \$11,000 and trailers for \$18,000 to service a new customer base, following an acquisition.

Dave's Landscape figures cost-per-hour for equipment on construction sites. Large machines like tractors and backhoes cost \$43 per hour. The company figures this by adding up the cost to maintain and run the equipment during its useful life. Then, they divide that total by the number of years and number of hours per week machines will be used. An easier way to estimate equipment cost per hour is to place a call to the local equipment rental shop. Find out the retail rental fee for the machine, then divide the cost by the number of hours you will use it on the job. Add 15 to 20 percent to the equipment cost per hour to allow for profit.

To cover costs, "equipment is billed out at an hourly rate as if it's an employee," says Jeanne Lapidis, controller at Dave's Landscape Management Co. in Hudson, Mass. Maintenance equipment, such as a large leaf vacuum, is recovered at the \$46 per hour rate. For mowing jobs, equipment like mowers is not billed out separately. "That cost is included in the price per hour for each job," Lapidis explains. But extras, like that large leaf blower, are added to the job cost so the company recovers the burden.

COVER YOUR EQUIPMENT COSTS. Review financials regularly, Huston advises, to ensure profits aren't sinking into an equipment fleet that isn't "billing out" enough to recover the expense. \$

A LOOK AT LABOR – YOUR LARGEST EXPENSE

Take a close look at your P&L statement. The majority of expenses support your labor force in some way. Investing in talent may be your 'best buy' in a bad economy.

Labor is your greatest investment. All told, the resources you provide employees through training, quality equipment, insurance and benefits add up to a hefty tab. Then there are office supplies, computers and software to support labor – and gas, uniforms and cell phones. Nearly every business expenditure supports employees, who service customers.

Labor is a commitment. And it represents a significant line item on the P&L statement: one-half of total overhead costs, according to Jim Huston, president, J.R. Huston Enterprises, Geysersville, Calif.

And there are inevitable pains, namely the challenge of recruiting talented workers and retaining them in an industry with a wage that lags behind trades like carpentry, plumbing or electrical work, points out Dale Micetic, president, ISS Grounds Control, Phoenix, Ariz.

"Our guys get hijacked into the higher-paid trades," Micetic says. "Many times we've seen our guys working for an electrician three days later on a commercial site. I don't know too many landscape companies that will pay \$40 for a laborer."

WAGE WATCH. According to the *Lawn & Landscape* survey, the average entry-level mower operator wage is \$8.80 per hour. Crew supervisors earn \$14.30 to \$16 per hour, depending on whether they go to work at a small or large firm.

While some companies, like ISS Grounds Control, increased wages this year to attract workers, "this hasn't affected the flow of applicants," Micetic says. That flow is more like a trickle.

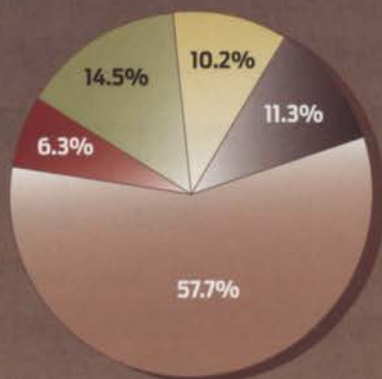
On the other hand, Stephen Hazeltine says labor is the only steady aspect of his budget. While the president of Hazeltine Nurseries in Venice, Fla., struggled to attract labor five years ago, he no longer competes with the construction trade due to the sluggish housing market.

As for figuring the appropriate P&L labor ratio, that depends on the services your company provides, Huston says. Maintenance companies' labor ratios are 35 to 45 percent. The benchmark for design/installation firms is closer to 20 percent, give or take. Companies that perform equal amounts of maintenance and construction can plan on labor as 30 to 32 percent of total expenditures, Huston says.

Subcontractor ratios are completely variable, Huston adds, suggesting a 15 to 20 percent mark-up on man-hours to realize profit. "Just make sure you cover the costs," he warns.

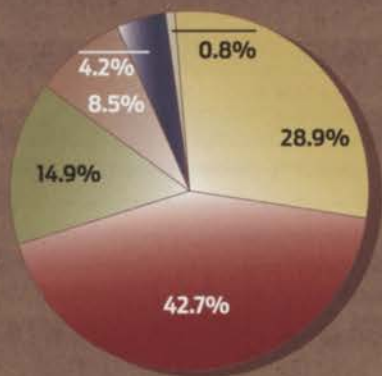
ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

What is your company's standard work week?



5 days	57.7%
4 days	11.3%
Other	14.5%
Less than 4 days	10.2%
5 days, planning to change	6.3%

How many hours per week on average do you work during the season?



40-44 hours	42.7%	50-54 hours	8.5%
Less than 40 hours	28.9%	55-60 hours	4.2%
45-49 hours	14.9%	60+ hours	0.8%

WAGE & COMPENSATION REPORT

Search for your company revenue bracket and region and see where you stack up against the competition.

EARNINGS PER HOUR: HOW MUCH DO YOU PAY?

	TOTAL:	BY REGION:			BY REVENUE:			
	U.S. Average	S/SE	NE/MW	W/SW	Less than \$100k	\$100-\$299k	\$300-\$999k	\$1 million-plus
Entry-level mower operator	\$8.80	\$9.00	\$8.90	\$8.40	\$8.60	\$9.10	\$9.10	\$8.80
Senior-level mower operator	\$11.60	\$11.40	\$12.10	\$10.60	\$10.70	\$12.20	\$11.90	\$12.00
Entry-level spray technician	\$9.00	\$8.90	\$9.50	\$8.30	\$7.10	\$9.60	\$9.30	\$10.30
Senior-level spray technician	\$12.50	\$12.30	\$13.20	\$11.90	\$9.50	\$13.90	\$13.10	\$14.10
Entry-level irrigation crew member	\$7.70	\$8.70	\$5.90	\$8.30	\$3.80	\$9.50	\$8.40	\$9.00
Senior-level irrigation crew member	\$11.20	\$12.50	\$8.70	\$12.00	\$5.80	\$13.60	\$11.50	\$14.10
Entry-level laborer	\$8.80	\$8.90	\$9.00	\$8.30	\$7.80	\$9.60	\$8.90	\$9.40
Senior-level laborer	\$11.70	\$11.50	\$12.10	\$10.90	\$9.90	\$13.10	\$11.60	\$12.10
Crew foreman/supervisor	\$14.70	\$14.10	\$15.30	\$14.50	\$12.80	\$15.40	\$14.90	\$16.00
Field supervisor/account manager	\$16.10	\$18.90	\$14.00	\$14.60	\$12.60	\$20.50	\$13.80	\$20.20
Equipment mechanic	\$14.30	\$15.70	\$13.30	\$13.40	\$8.00	\$22.70	\$13.20	\$16.10
Landscape architect/designer	\$21.70	\$23.70	\$14.10	\$40.10	\$16.60	\$37.60	\$14.90	\$15.70
Salesperson	\$11.20	\$14.60	\$7.40	\$12.80	\$5.20	\$17.00	\$10.80	\$16.00
Operations manager/vice president	\$15.90	\$18.80	\$13.00	\$16.40	\$6.00	\$28.40	\$14.70	\$23.00
President/CEO/Owner	\$33.90	\$28.10	\$35.30	\$44.00	\$28.40	\$34.00	\$30.20	\$62.20

Key: S/SE=South/Southeast; NE/MW=Northeast/Midwest; W/SW=West/Southwest

BENEFITS: PAID DAYS OFF

How many paid days off does your company provide to employees?

DAYS	EMPLOYEE TYPE:		
	Seasonal/ Hourly Labor	Salaried	Exec./Mgmt.
Vacation	3.7 days	4.9 days	6.8 days
Personal	1 day	1.7 days	2.1 days
Sick	1.2 days	2.1 days	2.4 days
Holidays	3.1 days	3.8 days	4 days

BENEFITS: OTHER

Which of the following does your company provide?

BENEFIT	EMPLOYEE TYPE:		
	Days/Seasonal Hourly Labor	Salaried	Exec./Mgmt.
Health insurance	13.5%	16.7%	20.7%
401(k)	7.1%	9.7%	10.6%
Profit sharing	3.6%	6.6%	8.2%
Cell phone	20.5%	24.5%	28.5%
Holiday bonus	31.3%	22.7%	21.7%

BENEFITS & PERKS. Health insurance costs are less of a burden on large entities with buying power. ISS Grounds Control cuts 800 regular paychecks; health insurance is 2 percent of its revenue. Last year, the company spent \$1 million on health insurance for employees who pay 20 percent of their deductibles. An owner-controlled insurance program helps manage rising costs.

In Massachusetts, Dave's Landscape is required by the state to provide health insurance – all businesses with 11 or more full-time employees must offer the benefit and pay a portion of it, otherwise suffer a \$300 fine per employee. The company will pay 50 percent for an individual employee, “and most cannot afford to pay that individual premium,” says Jeanne Lapidus, company controller. An employee's portion is \$250 for individual coverage.

According to a 2007 Kaiser Family Foundation report, one of the many reasons an individual may be uninsured is because the employee decides the health insurance offer is too expensive. Meanwhile, a 2008 Kaiser study showed average employer costs for health insurance per employee hour rose from \$1.60 to \$2.59 during 1999 to 2005. This 62-percent increase in cost per hour exceeds the 23-percent increase in average employer payroll costs for the same period.

Still, insurance offerings are a recruitment and retention tool, as are perks like yearly bonuses. Nearly one-third of seasonal/hourly labor receive an annual bonus, and 20.5 percent of entry-level workers have access to company cell phones. \$

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Spartan Landscaping, LLC*



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Preparing Your 2009 Budget

The Wall Street Journal tells us that roughly 14 percent of small businesses prepare annual budgets. I'd guess that no more than 3 percent of green industry contractors do so. And it's usually to their downfall. Many contractors don't see the need for preparing a budget. My response is, "Hey, if you think you can make plenty of money without one, don't waste your time!" But for other small business owners, there are a few reasons why you should prepare a budget for 2009.

Do you remember the three-step management mantra that we've been hammering on in past issues? Your chances of being profitable are greatly enhanced if you implement it in your company for all to understand. Here it is:

- Price it right!
- Produce it right!
- Produce enough of it!

In order to implement this mantra, you must have an estimating budget in place. I call it a fair-market value (FMV) budget. It doesn't necessarily contain real costs. Rather, it contains realistic or FMV ones. For example, if you work from home, you probably don't actually have office rent to pay. However, I'd put a fair-market value amount for rent in the budget. Otherwise, you'll never get out of your house and into a real office.

In this budget, we calculate

three crucial items for accurate estimating:

- Labor burden for field crews (FICA, FUTA, SUTA, insurances, etc.) – usually 25 to 35 percent.
- Billable field-labor hours.
- General and administrative (G&A) overhead – usually 25 percent of sales or \$10 to \$18 per labor hour.

These three items address the "Price it right!" part of our mantra. We also project our sales revenue for the upcoming year in this budget. This item helps us to monitor mantra item No. 3, "Produce enough of it!"

For a \$1 million landscape installation company, the budget would normally play out as follows:

- Annual sales: \$1,000,000.
- Labor burden: 25 to 35 percent of field labor.
- Labor hours (billable): 20,000 hours (10 crew members x 2,000 yearly hours).
- G&A overhead: \$250,000 (25 percent of sales).
- G&A overhead per labor hour: \$12.50 ($\$250,000 \div 20,000$ hours).

Now we're ready to bid accurately. Let's price a day rate for a three-person crew working a 10-hour day — that's 30 man-hours per day. We'll include a crew truck at \$10 per hour and tack on a 20 percent net profit margin. Average wage for the crew is \$13.33 ($\$18 + \$12 + \$10 = \40 , divide by 3). I also include a 10 percent overtime

factor and 10 percent risk factor.

Excluding materials, this crew needs to bill \$1,349 per day, \$44.96 per portal-to-portal man-hour and \$49.95 per curb-time man-hour. I'd round all of these figures to \$1,350, \$45 and \$50, respectively. Add material, subcontractor and other equipment costs as needed with the appropriate net profit margin.

Now, we can effectively address all elements of our three-step management mantra.

- You have the tools to accurately price your work. (Price it right!)

- You now have the cost data to properly job cost your work. (Produce it right!)

- You also have a sales goal to monitor. (Produce enough of it!)

Your annual budget, if prepared properly, allows you to think about the big picture: Am I meeting my annual sales budget goal? You can also think little picture: Are individual jobs and services provided coming in on budget?

If you properly prepare an annual FMV budget and monitor these items, it will greatly enhance your ability to run an operation simply and more profitably. **L**

This article was adapted from Jim Huston's books, How to Price Landscape & Irrigation Projects and A Critical Analysis of the MORS Estimating System.



JIM HUSTON

presides over J.R. Huston Consulting, a firm specializing in construction and services management in the green industry. For more information, e-mail benchmarking@gje.net or visit www.jrhuston.biz.



One brick at a time

By Margaret Hepp

Years in masonry helped Dave Rupell lay the foundation for a specialty design/build firm in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

The question came innocently enough: “Hey, Dave, could you build a little barbeque pit in our backyard?”

Dave Rupell, an assistant superintendent at a high-rise masonry company, had never been asked to build – or design – a specialty project. Excited at the opportunity for creativity, Rupell complied with the request from his boss’s wife – and she wasn’t the only one pleased with the results. Rupell was delighted to find that the design/build skills came as readily to him as the enjoyment.

“Masonry is a job,” Rupell says. “I wanted a career, something I could be self-motivated about. I know construction, but what I really love is art and design.”

He fueled his new passion into a small business, Artistic BBQ Creations, and put an ad with a photo of his first completed project in a local magazine near Miami. Before he bid on any projects, he went to

a few local outdoor stores and inquired about their rates. With little experience in the field, Rupell was apprehensive that he might scare away potential customers if he overrated his services, so he priced himself far below his competitors.

“I was building \$20,000 to \$30,000 kitchens for between \$10,000 and \$12,000,” he says.

Business was still slow, at first, and so he kept his full-time job with the masonry company, working on outdoor kitchen jobs as they came along. Throughout his double duty, Rupell was determined to build his business to full-time work. At just 22 years old, Rupell was vulnerable but willing to take a risk. He’d worked in masonry and construction from age 14 and was confident in his ability to succeed.

That confidence came through in his bidding and building, and as word spread around the Miami area, Rupell found

himself inundated with work. At first, he was overwhelmed by the administrative side of his new business.

“I always thought the building and designing would be the hard part,” Rupell says. “But building the outdoor kitchens is the fun part that takes the least amount of time. Doing the licensing, permitting, bookkeeping – that’s where most of the time goes.”

Luckily, Rupell was able to rely on knowledge he’d archived years ago as a 17 year old. He took a class with the Small Business Administration on business development, and was required to write a business plan for a proposed residential development company.

“I learned a lot there about what you need to do to stay in business,” Rupell says. “When I started this company, I always kept words from my professor in the back of my head.”

Rupell referred especially often to a tip about business success. There are three possible main components to a success-



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ful business, he learned, but you can only maintain two at once: price, quality of your product and customer service. It's up to the owner to decide which two will be most functional for his business.

"I knew going into it that I needed to have a good product and good service, so I'd have to charge more," Rupell says.

So he raised his prices, and today charges slightly more than his competitors. He believes that the quality of his projects and his customer service are second to none. Plus, Rupell strives to leave a lasting product.

"I try to do all my jobs in stone and granite," he says. "I'll do stucco to match the house, if customers ask for it, but stone is maintenance-free for life."

At first, Rupell did all his own granite work, but he doesn't have the time to do the intricate work required of the task. Now he subcontracts it – to one person

per project.

"I'm very particular," Rupell says. "Everybody lays stone differently, so hiring one person to do the job ensures it'll all look the same. It's got to be uniform. My outdoor kitchens have to be perfect."

He's found that the jobs themselves are all the marketing he needs, along with testimonials and recommendations from clients.

"If I go out on a service call or a design consultation, I show my customers the work I've done and they pretty much give me free reign to do the work I want to do," he says. "My customers trust me. I'll tell them what to go with, and they take my recommendations seriously."

In fact, he's discovered that what started as purely outdoor kitchen work has expanded into other outdoor building and hardscaping. "When I take my design to the customer, they'll see my vision for

the entire backyard and say, 'This is nice – are you going to do this, too?' We don't go overboard, but I feel like waterfalls and patios can be part of the outdoor kitchen."


A source of pride for Rupell is that he sees each job through from start to finish, and as a result tries to take on no more than three jobs at once. Four at once are difficult to handle, he says. But because he's ready and willing to do all the backyard work, customers will pay more to get the job done right the first time and not have to shop around for additional services.

Rupell says his greatest challenge has been time management, and not on the job. "When I first took off, I was working 15-hour days seven days a week," he says. "I had no time for anything else. I didn't have any time to spend with my wife and daughter."

He began to delegate his tasks, but sometimes ended up putting his responsibilities in the wrong hands. "It wound up taking more time to fix it than to do it myself," he says.

Time is on his side, though, and at 24, he's mastered a steep learning curve. "I try to incorporate something I've never done before with every job," he says. "It's getting harder to do, but that's the fun part."

When he started the business, Rupell was completely new to professional design. He found a free program from Google called Sketch-Up that allows him to import 3-D images into his design. "I can import drawings of grills, refrigerators, cabinets, doors – everything goes online and then I take my customers



Dave Rupell of Artistic BBQ Creations in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., places a premium on quality work and customer service.



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through a 3-D walkthrough. Clients can look through the kitchen and see where all the cabinets are going to be. It's a great selling tool, especially when your contract's over. You can hold a picture of your finished product up to the original design. It's always identical."

The program takes about a week to master, Rupell says, and he'd recommend it to anyone. Best of all, it makes his end of the business easily mobile, and he's expanding to Chicago in spring 2009. He'll be designing in both Chicago and Palm Beach Gardens, so he'll have crews in both locations to manage operations. Essential to the business's success, says Rupell, will be the placement of several trustworthy managers, including his father. "A successful business should allow you to take off for two months, while your business runs the same way," he says.

Mobility and expansion are logical for Rupell's business. Sixty percent of his clients come from outside of Florida – the Palm Beach Gardens area is comprised mostly of second homes. His customers spend most of their time not just in Chicago but in Washington, D.C., New York City, the Hamptons and Las Vegas, according to his research. Rupell hired


several students from the Small Business Association to conduct market research for him before he decided where to expand his business.

"The students researched the demographics as far as income and children," he says "We usually work for families with young children who have a certain income level. We found out we could make the business work in Chicago. The market is a little more spread out than here."

Rupell has considered changing his name from Artistic BBQ Creations to Artistic Grill and Patio to better represent his service offering, but has decided that as long as he relies on referrals for his primary marketing resource, it's best to stick with the name his clients know. Customer service might well be the most important element of his business, Rupell says – not just during the job, but in the lead in and follow up as well. Rupell waits until all equipment and materials are in before he starts a job, to avoid frustrating delays and disappointments due to unavailable materials. And when the job is complete, he gives each customer a thank-you package. "I put together a gift basket for all my customers with supplies for their kitchen," he says. "Sometimes we'll

stock their cabinets, depending on the size of the job. And if there's any trouble, they'll get a nicer basket. It keeps them referring."

Keeping customers happy is vital, but he strives to keep himself happy throughout his work, too. "Running a business takes a lot of time," he says. "It's hard to maintain my personal relationships. It's put a big stress on my marriage. But I'm putting my time in now so hopefully 10 years down the road I won't need to work all the time. I can take time off and go on field trips with my daughter and spend time with my wife."

It's asking a lot of his family and friends, but for Rupell, the payoff is everything: not the profits or the pride, but the sense of accomplishment. "I couldn't work these hours for someone else," he says. "On my own, I don't feel like I'm just working. I'm getting something accomplished every day." 



Rupell works hard now so he can play later.



By David Yochum

Gottscha!

When a weak economy asks the landscape industry to tighten its belt, Richard Gottschalk knows how to respond

In 1981, few would solicit Richard Gottschalk Jr. for business advice. After all, he lacked the pedigree of a Wharton or Tuck graduate. The titles “president and CEO” weren’t scrawled across his calling card. And perhaps most obvious, nobody would dare trust a 21 year old’s plan for, well – anything. But thanks to Gottschalk’s first lesson in operating efficiency, he now commands a venture with as many as 30 employees and annual revenue of \$2.7 million.

How did this Boston native do it? The simple way: by borrowing his mother’s lawnmower.

Launching Garrick Landscaping Co. in Malden, Mass., Gottschalk learned the benefits of being frugal, opportunistic and innovative long before becoming successful. Today, his business has 450 residential, commercial and municipal clients. But 27 years ago, Garrick was a one-man, one-truck experiment.

“The need (for Boston-area landscapers) wasn’t great,” Gottschalk says. “There were only a handful of companies that did gardening and the market was wide open.



The Garrick-Santo Landscaping business team (left to right): Chief operations officer Rob Santo, design/installation manager Anita Gottschalk, president and CEO Richard Gottschalk, office manager Donna Verolla, foreman Richard Hardy and assistant manager Sybil Valez.

So I gave it a go.”

After early success, Gottschalk dropped out of college, diverting his full attention to landscaping. Rather than pursue a civil engineering degree, the young entrepreneur wanted to work with his hands: building walls, installing lawns and doing maintenance. Of course, ambitious, first-time landscapers do encounter challenges.

“Being young and not understanding the business or business in general, I certainly had my share of not getting paid and chasing money,” says Gottschalk, who, before discovering weed-wackers, edged customer lawns with scissor-clippers. “The work cost more than I was charging and I had trouble getting employees to show up.”

But Gottschalk survived, and was able to learn and adapt with an evolving lawn care industry. He took advantage of ALCA (now PLANET) industry events, signing up for tours of other landscaping companies and listening to people within the industry. As desktop computers grew in popularity, he began digitally researching procedures and running estimation programs. And in 2000, Gottschalk further bolstered his company’s experience resume by partnering with Rob Santo. For Gottschalk, it all adds up to a nearly three-decade reputation for award-

winning lawn care, landscape design and snow removal service. Still, perhaps no amount of industry know-how could have prepared Garrick-Santo for America’s current economic climate.

This past summer, the national average price for one gallon of gasoline hit \$4.05 – nearly four times what fuel cost a decade ago. Financial titan Washington Mutual, a symbol of the mortgage boom, has become the largest failed bank in U.S. history. Likewise, credit lines have slowed, home values have plummeted and new construction is scarce.

It appears Garrick-Santo is facing a miserable status quo. But Gottschalk has a survival plan. And he still has his old entrepreneurial playbook.

“This economic hiccup is the third or fourth we’ve been through,” Gottschalk says. “Our long-term plan for success will be focusing on the same issues we have been – efficiency, cutting costs without cutting quality and saving wherever or whenever we can.”

Among the easiest, most efficient changes at Garrick-Santo is the company’s gradual shift to Web-based communications. Although the business still attracts customers by mailings, door hangers and referrals, the Internet has become an invaluable promotional and bookkeeping tool.



Garrick-Santo’s recent landscaping work near Malden, Mass.

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PROVEN SOLUTIONS



This year, the company started collecting e-mail addresses so that instead of mailing statements and invoices, Garrick-Santo can complete administrative work online.

"It cuts down on paper and printing costs," says design/installation manager Anita Gottschalk.

To further help conserve resources (and because many Malden and North Boston-area properties tend to be on the smaller side), Garrick-Santo has tightened travel routes between job sites.

"We'll do maybe a couple of shrubs in the same place where we're cutting grass," Santo explains. "That way we don't waste gas going back and forth."

And the company made one gigantic move intended to improve the efficiency of its vehicle fleet. Garrick-Santo purchased three Super Lawn Trucks – specialized landscaping storage and transport trucks – which not only eliminate the need for equipment trailers, but also act

as mobile advertiser billboards.

"Some of our truck and trailer combos are getting only 4 miles per gallon as opposed to 10 mpg to 11 mpg with the Super Lawn Trucks," Gottschalk says. "It may not seem like much, but it's a huge difference."

Keeping another eye on Garrick-Santo's transportation costs, office manager Donna Verolla says the company has even been evaluating the benefits of smaller, fuel- and eco-conscious hybrid work vehicles to complement Garrick-Santo's "green" philosophy of installing native plants, permeable pavement product

If it's Gottschalk and Santo, who's 'Garrick'?

The name "Garrick" is a combination of Richard Gottschalk's first name and the first name of his brother, Gary Gottschalk. When Richard Gottschalk began landscaping, he'd hoped his younger brother would later partner with him. Although Gary Gottschalk did work occasionally for the company, he chose to pursue a carpentry career and now runs his own small business.

and moisture-sensing irrigation systems. Garrick-Santo is already using soy-based ink on its letterheads, and Gottschalk says he may also begin powering his business with waste oil and bio-fuels.

Is the Garrick-Santo green movement simply continued business innovation?

"Landscapers are stewards of the environment," Gottschalk reasons. "We just want to be more conscious of what we're using. Conserving energy by being efficient certainly adds to the bottom line."

And as landscaping companies search for ways to bump their own bottom lines, few can afford to ignore Gottschalk's op-

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USE READER SERVICE #38

BRIEFCASE




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erating methods. His company recently earned a national PLANET safety award, and Garrick-Santo just moved into a new, 6,000 square foot facility.

But before setting out to duplicate

Gottschalk's successes, keep in mind that the economy isn't exactly what it was in 1981.

If you have you borrow mom's mower, be sure to pick up her fuel tab. 

Learn more online

See more Garrick-Santo's work samples at garrick-santo.com.



Q & A: Richard Gottschalk, Jr., Garrick-Santo Landscaping president and CEO

What was a major problem you faced as a new landscaping company?

"Credit. When I purchased my first truck, my mother co-signed a loan for me. Well, after a couple of years, I needed another truck. I'd always made my payments on time and didn't think twice about going to the same bank for financing. I met with the same banker and, although I'd been in business a couple of years, he told me he didn't think I needed another truck and denied the loan.

I remember sitting across the desk from this gentleman and feeling confident, and I basically got hit in the head with a brick. Stunned, I started thought, 'He knows nothing about me, my business or what my needs are. And he's not going to dictate my future.' I picked myself up, left his office, found another bank within that week and got my truck. But it was important for me, from that

point forward, to not rely solely on banks for financing and to work on a plan to save money and maintain great credit."

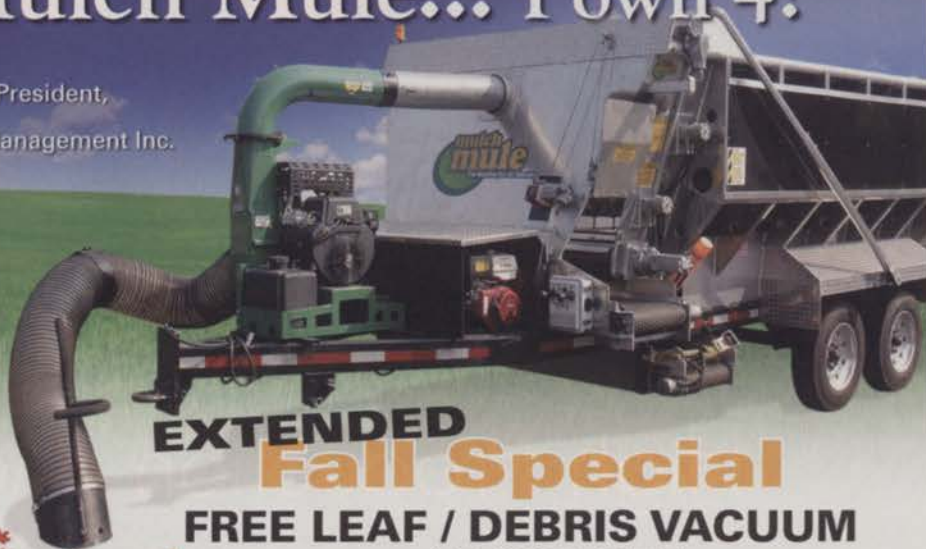
What is your proudest accomplishment as a business owner?

"So far, the proudest day I've had is the day we moved into our new building. In 1987, we moved to our Malden, Mass., location and built a small shed-type building to work out of. Like most companies, it was a yard and a small office 'shed,' which we added to over the years. It was awesome to finally be able to build and move into a 6,000 square-foot facility with 3,000 square feet of office space. We were fixing trucks outside. During snowstorms, it was awful. Now, all our equipment is indoors. And instead of a port-a-potty, we have running water and separate bathrooms for men and women. What could be better than that!"

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USE READER SERVICE #39



A Real-World Education

In seven years, Brian Lemmermann graduated from a one-man operation to a multi-million-dollar enterprise

Arizona State University student Brian Lemmermann didn't have any big plans. He just wanted to make some cash. It all started, he says, as a "convenience thing."

"I figured if I mowed some lawns I could make as much as I would with a job," Lemmermann, now 31, says. Little did he know that he'd end up ditching college in favor of full-time landscaping work – and that seven years later his company, Somerset Landscape Maintenance Inc. would bring in around \$6 million in annual revenue.



Owner of a \$6 million lawn care business, Brian Lemmermann has few regrets about being a college dropout.

Photos: Chris Loomis

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“I just decided to work as hard as I could and see what I could do.”

– Brian Lemmermann, Somerset Landscape Maintenance

Humble Beginnings

Lemmermann, a pre-med student, knew next to nothing about starting a business during his junior year at ASU. What he did know was that he wanted to mow lawns. So, as a college student without a marketing budget, he started acquiring customers the only way he could: by knocking on doors and handing out flyers.

“All day Saturday and Sunday, I made sure I smiled, waved and said hi to every person I saw,” Lemmermann recalls.

Soon Lemmermann had enough mowing work that he couldn't handle it all himself and still attend classes, so he hired help.

“I picked the areas that had the most work together and I'd drop off the two guys that worked with me,” he says. “Then I'd go to class, come back and work. It started as a way to get to and from class and make money, then it got to the point where classes were too inconvenient.”

Toward the end of his junior year, Lemmermann had one crew doing regular maintenance and another crew handling repair work while he ran back and forth between classes.

“I was pretty busy,” he says. “I thought, Why don't I give it a year and see what happens? I didn't sign up for the next semester.”

Lemmermann's dad thought quitting school was a bad idea and worried that he wouldn't make any money. But Lemmermann gave it a shot.

“I just decided to work as hard as I could and see what I could do,” he says. “I liked being outside more than being in class anyway.”

A Smart Start

Today, Lemmermann's dad actually works for his son's company, along with about 135 other employees.

“He's retired and doesn't like to sit around, so he comes and works in the office,” Lemmermann says. “He's pretty amazed with what we've done, but he still thinks that when I retire I need to go back to school and finish my degree.”

Growing to the point where Lemmermann needed that many employees – and convincing his dad he'd made the right move – didn't happen overnight. And early on, it probably seemed like Lemmermann wasn't making any money. But that's only because he was saving all his profit.

“If I made a dollar, I put it in the bank,” Lemmermann

says. “And when I had enough money, I went out and bought decent equipment that made me faster – a riding mower, a dump truck, everything I could do to be more efficient. I never bought anything that was all that fun.”

Then, after his third year, Lemmermann let loose. He finally started spending his hard-earned profits – on advertising. “At the time, I don't think I was grossing more than \$180,000 a year and I was spending \$45,000 to \$50,000 on advertising just to get some work,” he says. That money went toward purchasing Yellow Pages and Web ads, as well as printing flyers and putting signs on trucks.

“I just tried to make our company look as big as possible with all the money I had,” he says.

And it worked. So much so, in fact, that although the 40-odd company trucks still promote the business, Lemmermann doesn't bother with any other advertising.

“Now we're big enough,” he says. “People see our trucks everywhere and we'll get calls out of the blue day in and day out.”

In the process, Somerset Landscape Maintenance has expanded well beyond its original focus – although residential landscaping is still an available service.

“We started with residential, so I won't stop doing that,” Lemmermann says.

Yet his eye has always been on ways to grow his company beyond the initial residential offerings: first into commercial work, then into the municipal realm.

“Everybody wants to get into commercial work and it's hard to jump into,” Lemmermann admits. But once he acquired a couple of industrial clients, Lemmermann started picking up more adjacent properties. Building relationships with owners and property managers increased the company's commercial clientele even more, and today about 95 percent of the company's work comes from commercial clients.

A few years ago, Lemmermann made another leap: this time into municipal work.

“That's even harder to get into because there's so much more involved,” he says. In order to be considered for municipal work, the company had to have its equipment, number of employees and financials meet certain specifications. “Once we got to the point where we were qualified and were able to get bonding, we picked one up and did really well,” Lemmermann says.

That same dedication that keeps residential and

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Still growing: Lemmermann has aspirations of expanding Phoenix-based Somerset Landscape Maintenance Inc. to California and Nevada.

commercial customers coming back has boosted the company's share of Phoenix-area municipal clients, too. "Our bigger customers tell us we are very responsive," Lemmermann says. "If they call, we go right out and take care of things."

After a summer storm knocked down trees across Phoenix, for instance, the company removed about 1,200 trees in a five-day span – in addition to its normal work. "We had guys that just stayed all night moving trees out of the streets because that's what needed to be done," he says.

Somerset Landscape Maintenance made this pos-

sible with a two-year push to increase its cross-selling opportunities.

"We now have two bucket trucks and another truck with climbers, and we have a tree manager," Lemmermann explains.

In addition, he says, "We jumped into chemicals, so we have a couple of GPS trucks that do all the chemical calculations and spray the chemical as you drive. At this point we can serve pretty much any business or municipality with all that they're looking for."

With residential, commercial and municipal work

[continued on page 95]

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USE READER SERVICE #110





Rewarding Great Ideas

Natural innovators embrace new technology, encourage a fresh approach, keep up with changing times and know smart ideas when they see them.

Innovation. It's a hot topic in business journals and at forward-thinking companies today. But what does this buzzword really mean? To many people, innovation means a new product or service that comes along and shakes up old ways of thinking. But you don't have to invent the next big thing to be considered innovative. Innovation simply means doing things differently, whether your goal is retaining existing customers while attracting new ones,

improving products and services, raising your public image or outpacing the competition.

As this year's four inaugural *Lawn & Landscape Innovation Award* winners have shown, successful innovation can be as basic as finding ways to conserve gasoline or as complex as writing new software programs. What the winners of these special honors, sponsored by Syngenta Professional Products, share is a willingness to

think outside of the box and try something new.

To learn more about innovation in the lawn and landscape industry, we turned to industry leaders who've grown their businesses over the years by listening to new ideas and trying new approaches. Here's what they had to say:

Innovative companies encourage new ideas from within. Empowered em-

Stories by Julie Evans

ployees think and act more creatively because they know management is open to new ideas and may even act upon them. The open exchange of ideas creates an environment in which change is possible, says Frank Mariani, president of Mariani Landscape in Lake Bluff, Ill. At Mariani, employees are encouraged to use the in-house Web site as an online "suggestion box." It's a place where employees make suggestions for new and improved services and critique existing practices without fear of retribution.

"We share it all – the good, the bad and the ugly," says Mariani. "Many ideas for new services have come from

says Frith. "It's a much more difficult business environment and much more competitive."

Innovative companies find ways to step up customer service and response times. "You used to be able to say, 'I can get there by the end of the week.' Not anymore. Now, you'd better get out there right away or you could have a problem."

Innovative companies aren't afraid to try new approaches. Companies that innovate are always on the alert for new and better ways to do business, not just when the economy sours or competition heats up. Mariani Land-

more. By eliminating waste (anything that's not value-added), the client gets only those services it wants and needs, explains Tom Lied, CEO.

Innovative companies use technology to enhance customer service and employee productivity – not replace them. Technological tools such as e-mail, text messaging, Internet and global positioning systems (GPS) can be misused and time wasters, Lied says. But they can also improve efficiency, speed communications, generate more job leads and raise your company's public profile. An innovative company knows how to exploit the best of technology and leave the rest behind.

One example is GPS, which can help field crews track their time utilization to maximize productivity and cut down on wasteful practices. But in the wrong hands, GPS can be very controlling and damaging to employer-employee relations, Lied says. "We all have to decide how to use the tool. At Lied's, we trust the records our foremen maintain and don't find it necessary to find out where they stopped for lunch."

Technology also presents opportunities for how companies present themselves to the public, Lied says. An increasing number of clients find leads by surfing the Internet, and innovative companies can exploit this opportunity with polished and educational Web sites that close the sale. Presentation matters.

Forward-thinking companies use tech tools such as search engine optimization (improving the quality and volume of visits to your Web sites) and "pay per click" ads on search pages to capture Web surfers, adds Frith. "You have to do both."

Innovative companies keep open minds. As Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter told *Fast Company* magazine: "The leaders of innovation don't have to be the smartest people in the world; they have to know a smart idea when they see it." **I**

"You have to be more knowledgeable about the product you deliver and have a better understanding of your competitors to figure out how to establish yourself and maintain your presence in the marketplace." – *Russell Frith*

within, and I think that keeps us on the front edge of our industry."

Innovative companies respond and react to shifting societal patterns.

Customer wants, needs and expectations are changing rapidly due to major shifts in society over the past 25 years, says Russell Frith, president and CEO of Holmdel, N.J.-based Lawn Doctor. Two-income households have changed people's perceptions about how much time and money they're willing to spend on lawn and landscape maintenance. At the same time, the Internet has made it possible for people to search for information about lawn care from the privacy of their homes. In the past, homeowners had to rely on estimates and expertise from a handful of competitors before making purchasing decisions.

"That means you have to be more knowledgeable about the product you deliver and have a better understanding of your competitors to figure out how to establish yourself and maintain your presence in the marketplace,"

scape, for example, recently became the first landscape company in the world to get ISO certified. ISO (International Organization for Standardization), is a network of national standards from 157 countries that seek to ensure quality, safety, efficiency, good management practices and more. Companies who apply for ISO certification (there's a fee) have to adopt and abide by stringent standards that get revisited every year.

What ISO means for Mariani Landscape is simple: It's "making sure you always use the best practices in everything you do, whether it's answering the phone, mowing a lawn or putting together a proposal," says Mariani.

At Lied's Nursery Co. in Sussex, Wis., management is working to streamline and eliminate waste within the company through the principles of Lean, a practice for maximizing customer value and minimizing waste through streamlined operations made famous by Toyota. The aim is to increase the value to the customer while decreasing time, dollars, inventory and

Saving the World One Tree At a Time

By creating a simple online calculator, Davey Tree gave customers a user-friendly tool for learning the benefits of trees on their properties.

The Tree Benefits Calculator (www.itreetools/treecalculator) is based on more than 20 years of peer-reviewed research. It calculates the environmental and economic benefits of individual tree species, says Greg Ina, general manager at the Davey Tree Expert Co.'s Davey Institute in Kent, Ohio.

Davey Tree helped create the calculator with the Casey Tree Foundation, a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C. But the research that made the calculator possible resulted from a formal partnership between Davey, USDA Forest Service, National Arbor Day Foundation, Society of Municipal

Arborists and the International Society of Arboriculture.

A particular tree's structural information (e.g., species, diameter and canopy) yields clues about ecological benefits such as improved air quality, lower energy use (for adjacent homes and businesses) and reduction in storm water runoff. Homeowners can use that information to choose trees that provide the maximum ecological benefits.

Type in "Maple" and "24 inches" in diameter, for example, and a homeowner will learn the tree provides benefits of \$239 per year through increased property value (\$124), storm-water runoff reduction (\$79),

reduced electric bills (\$15) and other cost savings.

For now, the calculator is limited to trees in the Washington, D.C. area, but plans are underway to make it available on a nationwide basis in 2009. That will allow Davey Tree to strengthen its customer service and consumer education. "i-Tree allows anyone to understand that while trees cost money to maintain, they return that investment many times over by making our homes cooler and communities cleaner," explains Ina. "We see it as an opportunity to promote strategic tree planting and help customers understand healthy trees provide more benefits." **I**



"While trees cost money to maintain, they return that investment many times over by making our homes cooler and communities cleaner," says Davey Tree's Greg Ina. Photo: D.S. Resch

Operation Conservation

Starting with hybrid vehicles, Nanak's Landscaping created a domino effect of sustainability practices to which clients are responding positively.

The spike in gasoline prices following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was a shrill wake-up call that Sampuran Khalsa, president of Nanak's Landscaping, couldn't ignore. With a 350-vehicle fleet, the commercial landscape maintenance company, based in Longwood, Fla., simply couldn't afford to conduct business as usual. Gas prices were chomping away at the company's bottom line, and Khalsa took a hard look at the business in search of ways to cut costs.

The first to go was his gas-guzzling Ford Explorer, which he traded in for a hybrid car, the Toyota Prius. Then Khalsa announced to a somewhat stunned management team that they would be expected to do the same. Today, regional and operational managers drive fuel-efficient Toyota Prius or Toyota Scion cars. Company-wide, fuel savings have been an estimated \$175,000 per year.

The wholesale exchange of gas-guzzling trucks and SUVs for eco-friendly alternatives provided an "interesting cultural shift" within the company, admits Khalsa. "Our managers were shocked at first, but now they're thrilled because they've gotten so much positive feedback from people in the community," he says, adding that today customers increasingly expect and even demand these changes.

Energy conservation "is a good business practice. It lowers your costs," Khalsa explains. At the same time, more customers are improving their own conservation efforts, so "they're giving preferential treatment to companies that have sustainability efforts in place."

Khalsa and his employees are constantly on the prowl for new ways to conserve energy and cut costs, and they've come up with some creative changes. For example, the company converted 12 Scions to irrigation service vehicles by removing the backseat and installing racks to hold irrigation equipment. The retrofitted Scions are "perfect for monthly irrigation checks and help reduce fuel consumption significantly," says Khalsa.

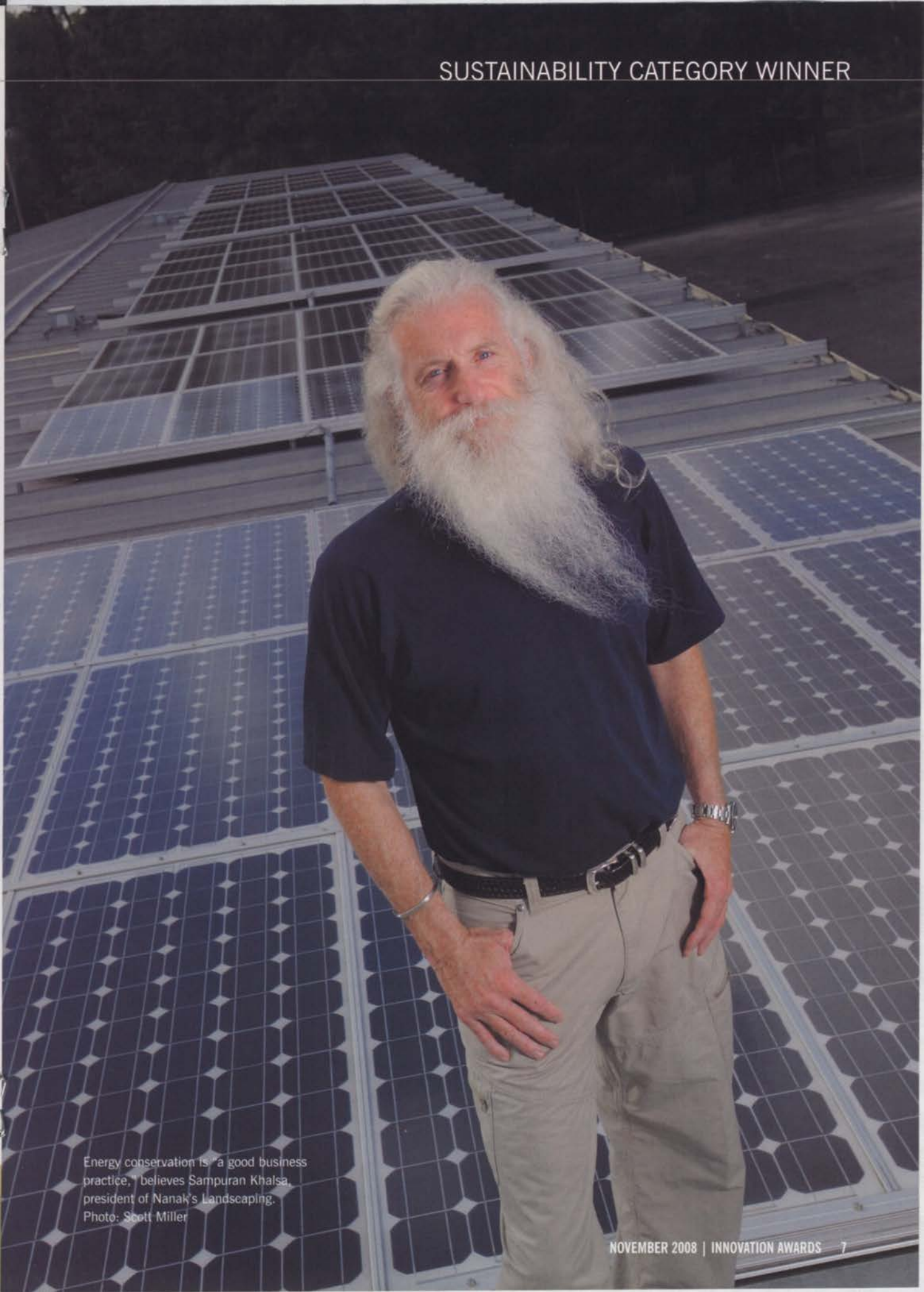
Sometimes, energy efficiency happens by circum-

stance. While surfing the Internet one sleepless night, Khalsa came across a news item about a new Florida law that made money available to small businesses for solar installations. Khalsa checked it out and decided to invest in solar technology, which now powers Nanak's Longwood headquarters. The state of Florida paid for half of the \$160,000 system, and Khalsa secured tax breaks worth \$75,000 from the federal government. The company's out-of-pocket costs totaled \$45,000, but with an 18 percent return on investment, the system should pay for itself within 5½ years.

Operational since January 2008, the solar panels have increased Nanak's energy efficiency, slashed energy costs and cut greenhouse gases. Employees and customers can visit Nanak's Web site daily (www.nanaks.com) to find out how much energy is being generated.

Other environmentally savvy strategies include:

- The company opened a branch near St. Augustine within 15 minutes of a significant portion of the company's customers. The move cuts fuel consumption for crews servicing that region, who had been commuting from the Jacksonville office. The savings total \$96,000 per year.
- The company has developed an eco-driving course for all drivers, with lessons on how to drive in a more fuel-efficient fashion.
- Tires get checked every other day for proper inflation. To speed the task of filling so many tires with air, employees created a small industrial wagon with an air compressor that moves from vehicle to vehicle.
- The company uses electric lawn mowers whenever noise control is an issue. While the technology isn't adequate for wide-scale use, Khalsa is convinced that one day, electric-powered lawn equipment will play a huge role in landscape maintenance. "I think the landscape crew of the future is going to have a battery rack instead of gas cans," he says. **I**



Energy conservation is "a good business practice," believes Sampuran Khalsa, president of Nanak's Landscaping.
Photo: Scott Miller

The Perpetual Volunteer

Moved by children with life-threatening illnesses, City Beautiful Landscaping's Rusty Woodall created a vacation oasis for these families so they can leave their troubles at home.

Four years ago, Rusty Woodall, president of City Beautiful Landscaping in Orlando, Fla., had one of those "a-ha" moments that changed his life. During a meeting with the men's group in his church, the conversation turned to the subject of "giving." Woodall realized he wasn't doing enough to help others. In that moment, he decided he would donate more money and landscape services to organizations in need.

"When God wants to get your attention, he gets it," says Woodall. "And that's what happened to me. He put something in front of me, and I said, 'Wow! I can't ignore this.'"

With a loving family, growing landscape irrigation and maintenance company and a fledgling tree farm, Woodall knew his own life was blessed, and he wanted to start giving back.

At the request of friends, he visited what would become one of his favorite charities, Give Kids the

"I give based on what feels right to me. I don't actively go out and look for charities. If a charity has good leadership and you know they're spending money the right way, then it just feels right." – *Rusty Woodall*

World, a non-profit organization that provides a vacation oasis for the families of children with life-threatening illnesses. Woodall still gets tears in his eyes every time he visits this "village" community in Central Florida. "I was so moved by the stories I heard and what I saw that I couldn't do enough," he says. "The organization provides everything for the

families, from the time they reach the airport until they return home. I think this helps lift a big burden off families' shoulders. For one week, they can leave their troubles at home."

To pitch in, City Landscaping installed sprinkler systems and provided landscaping around some of the newly built guest houses on the property. On volunteer days, Woodall brings his crew to pull weeds, spread mulch and care for the grounds. "I hope to lead by example," says Woodall, who pays his crew members when the company donates services. "I don't require anyone to volunteer, but I hope that someday, they'll realize the benefits and do it on their own."

Although Woodall's decision to give more to charity was motivated by personal beliefs and not by business decisions, the increased giving has resulted in new business. Give Kids the World recently hired City Landscaping to provide weekly maintenance. Woodall says he'll continue to volunteer his company's time, when asked.

In other charitable efforts, Woodall's company has supplied labor and materials to a women's shelter and donated money to a mission group in South America. "I give based on what feels right to me. I don't actively go out and look for charities," says Woodall. "If a charity has good leadership and you know they're spending money the right way, then it just feels right," he says.

Woodall's ultimate goal is to give 10 percent of his company's profits to charity per year. He expects nothing in return but "God blesses those who tithe," he says.

"God owns everything and we're just managing his resources," Woodall says. "If you're faithful with the resources he entrusts to you, then he's going to entrust even more to you in the future." **I**

PHILANTHROPY CATEGORY WINNER



"When God wants to get your attention, he gets it," says City Beautiful Landscaping's President Rusty Woodall. "And that's what happened to me."
Photo: Scott Miller

Noon's Web

Appealing to today's more tech-savvy clientele, Noon Turf Care invented a proprietary means for shopping lawn care services online.

Several times a week, Christopher and Matthew Noon of Noon Turf Care in Hudson, Mass., field phone calls from lawn care companies. After reading about the brothers and their success with online sales in *Lawn & Landscape* (January 2008), the callers want advice on how to innovate their own companies with technology and build online sales.

For now, the technology is proprietary, says Christopher, although the brothers haven't ruled out marketing it to other companies in the near future.

The idea for Noon Turf Care's online quoting and sales system arose from brainstorming and a lot of "what ifs" between the brothers, who are partners in the \$2 million residential lawn and landscape company. They wondered, what if their customers could shop for lawn care online? After all, you can buy airline tickets, shoes, books, computers and just about any other product online, so why not lawn care, too?

And what if Noon could be the first lawn and landscape company to develop and bring this technology to market?

Working with a full-time programmer, Matthew and Christopher spent more than a year and a half and an estimated \$150,000 to get the system up and running. They expect a return on their investment within five years, but the technology already has paid for itself in other ways, says Matthew. In the technology's first two years, Noon Turf Care has enjoyed sales growth of 33 percent and an estimated 40 percent, respectively, despite a tough economic climate that has homeowners pulling back on expenses.

The service is a hit with younger homeowners, who tend to be tech-savvy and routinely buy goods and services online. Older clients may be more reluctant to order online, but the brothers expect that hesitancy to fade, especially as customers discover how easy it is to navigate the site.

Here's how it works: A potential customer visits

Noon Turf Care's online site, www.mysmartlawn.com, types in a home address, then hits send. Within seconds, the customer gets a quote for a seven-step lawn care service based on property size. (The system uses a satellite service to check out the property.)

If the customer clicks "I accept," a technician visits the following day for the first application, along with a thorough lawn diagnosis with suggested add-on services.

The online quote and fast turnaround time help weed out "window" shoppers. "We're filtering tire kickers up front so we can conserve our energies for people who really want to buy the product," says Matthew.

The site also offers a Price Match Promise: If the customer finds a lower price, Noon Turf Care will match that price and reduce the cost of the last treatment by half.

Prospects who decline the online quotes get follow-up e-mails, as well as telephone calls from the company to answer any questions and try to close sales.

Online sales have an added benefit: They've lowered the acquisition cost per customer to approximately \$40, compared to \$150 for direct mail and \$60 for telemarketing, Matthew says.

The system also enables the company to capture more e-mail addresses for ongoing marketing efforts; Noon's database of potential and existing customers is up by 20 percent due to increased customer traffic to the site. To drive more business there, Noon Turf Care offers a 15 percent discount to new customers who sign up for services online. Existing customers are reminded on the invoice to visit the Web site for more information about add-on services or to pay bills online.

Customer service is also stronger because the company reacts swiftly to Web site activity, Christopher says. "Traditionally, customers may see their lawn care company a few times a year, and that's the relationship," he explains. "But through Internet and e-mail, we can talk to customers 20 times a year." **I**

TECHNOLOGY CATEGORY WINNER



"Through Internet and e-mail, we can talk to customers 20 times a year," says Christopher Noon.
Photo: Stephen Faust

A large green lawn sculpture of a horse is being watered by a sprinkler system. The water is spraying from the top of the horse's head and neck area. A green hose is connected to the sprinkler head, which is on the lawn. The background shows a house and some landscaping.

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USE READER SERVICE #111

under his belt, what more could Lemmermann ask for?

"A regional presence," he says without hesitation. "Our focus is probably to build up a little more in the valley, then move on to Tucson and California or into Nevada."

This dedication to growth wows friends and competitors alike. Just ask Derek Dixon, owner of Wards Lawn Power Equipment in Gilbert, Ariz. Lemmermann purchased his first weed eater from Dixon – whose company also offers landscaping services – and still buys equipment from Dixon today.

"If I had to do it all over, I would ask his advice on how to get to the top in quick time," Dixon says. "And he's not quitting right now either, which impresses me. I don't think he's in a hurry, but he knows what he wants and how he's going to do it."

Ready to Help

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about the level of success Lemmermann has achieved is that he did it all himself – no horticulture degree or business school background, and no mentor. He didn't even pick up much advice along the way.

"I remember asking a couple of people if I could sit in on what they did or follow them for a day when I was thinking about mowing lawns," Lemmermann says. "Both of them said yes, then neither of them answered my calls."

For that reason, when others come to him with business questions – whether they're in the green industry or not – Lemmermann is ready to help them any way he can.

"If someone is interested in learning something, I'll show him," he says.

And he's open to helping other business owners who aren't even in his line of work, such as Phoenix-area dentist Peter Ray, who has known Lemmermann since they were in the third grade.

"The biggest thing he's taught me is to invest in things that make you money," Ray says. "He's helped me out on a lot of occasions."

Lemmermann doesn't really think his business knowledge is anything special – he just picked it up along the way.

"I didn't know how to calculate withholding, how to calculate employees' burden costs into my cost of doing work," he admits. "There were a lot of things I didn't know, and some things I lost money on. But I just learned as I went."

The Right Formula

Lemmermann is more than happy to share his secrets for success with others. He says it takes keeping your money close and quality employees closer.

"I always tell the managers that for every dollar we save, that's five dollars we don't have to earn," Lemmermann explains. It's a mindset that has fueled his company's growth even through unstable economic times. "We've been able to expand by purchasing equipment at probably half the price we would've paid for the same thing a year ago," he says. "Having saved up as much as we did and not having payments on things put us in a position to get better deals now."

Dixon says he's impressed by the way Lemmermann pursues bargains – he often purchases trucks, ice machines and other items at auctions rather than paying full price.

"He'll buy a decent truck for \$8,000 when everyone else is buying it for \$12,000," Dixon says.

The one place he is willing to spend money, however, is on hiring and retaining quality employees. "Some of my patients have been his workers and they just really like him," Ray says. "He pays his employees very well, which most people don't do. He believes if you earn it you should get it."

Hiring the right managers has been a major factor in the company's growth. "It's getting people that really like what they do," Lemmermann says. "Not everybody can be great, but if the people at the top like what they do, they care about the business. They're not just there to put in 40 hours, and that's huge."

In addition to rewarding his employees for their hard work, Lemmermann says employee education is essential. He points to the fact that the company employs certified arborists, tree workers and irrigation auditors. In addition, each manager is a certified pest control applicator and has been to a 10-week water management class.

"Education is a really big thing for us because if we can teach the guys at the top, they can show the guys who work with them and they feel comfortable," Lemmermann explains.

Needless to say, Lemmermann has high expectations for himself. "I work 70 hours to 80 hours a week," he says.

Despite his long hours, sometimes people don't even know Lemmermann owns the company.

"When he drives a work truck, it's a leftover truck," Ray says. "And he doesn't tell people he's the owner unless they need to know. That's just the kind of guy he is."

As nonchalant as Lemmermann is about his success, others recognize the way he's cut through Phoenix's landscaping industry.

"I always tease Lemmermann now that when I grow up I'm going to be like him because he has what it takes to succeed," Dixon says. "He just knew what he wanted to do. He still does. It's pretty impressive where he's gone." **L**

Post-Game Wrap-Up: The 2008 GIE+EXPO Show

Almost 20,000 green industry professionals turned out for the nation's 16th largest annual trade show: the 2008 GIE+EXPO held Oct. 22-25 in Louisville, Ky.

Featuring rows upon rows of new products and lawn & landscape equipment, attendees got an up-close look at the latest technology from companies big and small. Altogether, 650 exhibitors showcased products during the three-day event, which covered 500,000 square feet of space in and around the Kentucky Exposition Center.

Elsewhere in Louisville, PLANET and PGMS held complementary workshops, conferences and dinners at the downtown Marriott and Galt House hotels.

For complete show coverage, including exclusive GIE+EXPO video tours, product demonstrations and interviews with top industry professionals, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com. 



On the ground: *Lawn and Landscape* editor Margaret Hepp interviews ISS Ground Control's Dale Micetic at GIE Media's interactive GIE+EXPO booth. Interviews were streamed live on the Web and on three flat-screen TVs surrounding the GIE Media booth. *Lawn and Landscape* also conducted live roaming interviews with dealers and attendees, which can be viewed at www.lawnandlandscape.com.



GIE+EXPO attendees talk business at the Arysta Life Sciences booth.



PLANET president Jason Cupp kicks off the Green Industry Conference (GIC) at the Oct. 23 keynote event inside the Marriott Hotel in downtown Louisville. The GIC is held concurrently with the GIE+EXPO.



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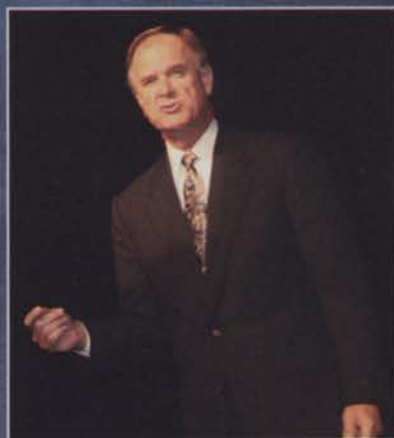
JOHN DEERE



It's all about networking: PLANET members enjoy the Oct. 23 Breakfast with Champions event at the Marriott hotel.



A RedMax representative revs up a chainsaw outside the Kentucky Exposition Center. About 150 companies held outdoor demonstrations.



Former Baltimore Ravens head coach and Super Bowl XXXV champion Brian Billick takes the stage inside Louisville's Marriott hotel. As PLANET's keynote speaker, Billick shared motivational stories from NFL locker rooms and gave members new ideas for running their own successful business teams.



Exmark marketing manager John Cloutier explains the features of his company's new Next Lazer Z mower, which debuted Oct. 23 at the GIE+EXPO.



Kubota was one of many manufacturers showcasing new products, including this RTV 500 utility vehicle with a new variable hydro transmission.

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Workers piece together GIE+EXPO demonstration tents on 20 acres of land outside the Kentucky Exposition Center's South Wing.



Caterpillar introduced three new Compact Track Loader models and its 904H Compact Wheel Loader at the GIE+EXPO.

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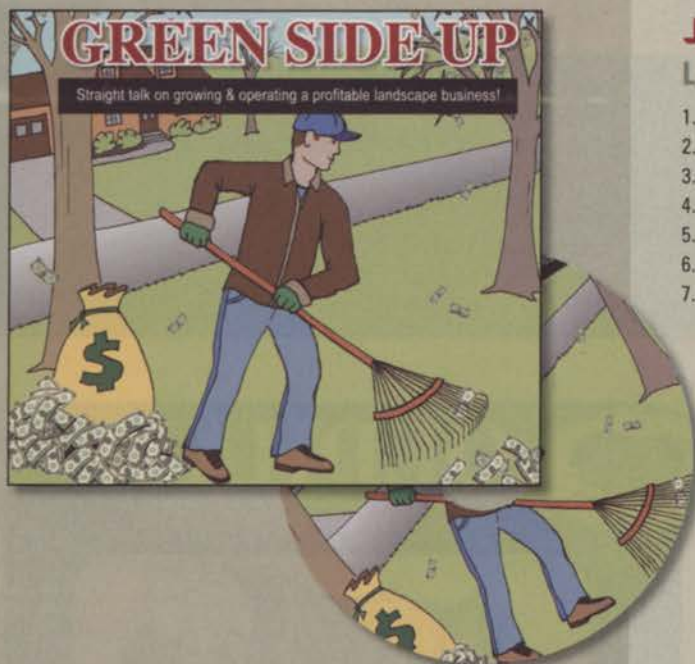
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Author Ed Laflamme, CLP, was founder of Laflamme Services, Inc. a full-service landscaping company in Bridgeport, Conn. Starting out in 1971 with two mowers purchased with \$700 borrowed from his mother, he built an award-winning company to revenues of \$7 million and sold it in 1999. A much sought-after keynote speaker, author, consultant, business coach and mentor, he serves landscape business owners nationwide.



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Kohler launched its EFI-equipped engines during the GIE+EXPO. Over the next 18-24 months, the company says it will incorporate its new EFI system across 26 commercial engine models. EFI technology, which controls the air, fuel, and spark delivery in engines, is said to offer improved fuel savings, performance and reduced emissions.

Stand by me: A Wright Commercial Products representative answers questions about one of the company's newest Stander mowers.

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One late fall afternoon, I was sitting in my office contemplating why the coming Friday's payroll was just barely going to get paid. A large, multi-family community for which we provided contract maintenance had managed – for once – to pay its invoice on time. As I sat there thinking this week would actually be all right, I turned to see my most notorious vendor standing in my doorway.

I call this vendor notorious because he possessed a remarkably keen sense of knowing when I had money in the bank. But on this occasion, he'd miscalculated. Our money was going to payroll first, and anything that filtered in throughout the rest of the week, I assured him, would be his proceeds.

It was the vendor's third trip to my office in three months. At the time, our company was providing large-scale mulch installations to augment our growing maintenance lawn care operation. It was high-volume, low-margin work, but it made our income statements and cash flow forecasts look great to our banker.

The problem, as with any commercial invoice or business-to-business transaction, was that we had to wait a "Net 30" period to receive our money. It's nothing like the payment from Bob and Mary Homeowner, which you can demand when the job is complete (weekly for the smaller companies, or spot on the last day of the month for the bigger companies). Try that in an office or industrial park, or on a municipal account, and you can worry about getting paid after you make bond.

We had ramp-up and mobilization costs that were financially impossible for us to support. Our

cash flow lag time would have put us out of business within 20 days. Thankfully, we kept cash flow statements current, accurate and available for review so that we weren't jumping in blind. And, as it turns out, an answer was already in place: Our notorious lender had left a card for an asset-based lender, who specialized in working capital lines of credit, with a sticky note that said, "CALL THEM NOW!"

At first, this sounded like invoice factoring to me, and I'd always been taught to run from those kinds of "lenders." And in fact, it was similar to a factoring service. But in the asset-based lending (ABL) environment, there are a number of reputable lenders such as GE Capital, Wells Fargo Bank and BB&T. Asset-based lending has been around a long time, but doesn't adver-

established this facility with our own bank), our cash flow problems were essentially over. We were able to take on work of almost any size and scope. We knew we could transfer funds as needed to cover expenses such as payroll and repairs while waiting to be paid by our client.

One of the best ways to hedge or leverage an ABL loan, and sometimes even make a profit on the borrowed funds, is to negotiate better terms with your vendors. A vendor accustomed to a "Net 30" relationship with you will often offer a "Net 10" discount – typically 2 percent – and deeper discounts of 6 percent or 7 percent if you offer to pay upon delivery. They need cash just as badly as you did before you found the ABL industry.

Unlike in factoring, in most ABL situations the lender doesn't

Vendors need cash just as badly as you did before you found the asset-based lending industry.

tise. It would probably take a 10-minute infomercial to explain everything.

I inquired with the company, applied and then worked with the company's underwriter so that they could understand our specific business. Within a few weeks of the original call, I had a formal loan closing, which empowered our business with a \$500,000 line of credit, collateralized by our accounts receivables. The loan facility was simple to understand and the annualized interest costs of employed funds were very reasonable.

Once we were able to draw from our line (exactly as if we'd

own or buy your invoices – they're merely used as collateral. The lender doesn't make collection calls, interfere with your clients or impede your business in any way. Often, you're the only party aware that the lender has become your new financial partner.

Check out the ABL market on the Web or talk with your banker. You'll find a long-standing industry that's reputable, with a number of bright people who can help you fix once-unsolvable problems. **L**

Want to be featured next month?
E-mail the editor at mhepp@gie.net.



SCOTT BROWN


is vice president of an Atlanta-area asset-based lender. He provides commercial lending solutions and advice to landscape companies nationwide. Contact him at scott@scottandsusanbrown.com.



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Chill Out

Winterize irrigation systems for profit and peace of mind

By John Torsiello

Mickey Irvin remembers it well.

"I work in the San Francisco Bay area and it's very temperate," he says. "But 17 years ago we had an unusually cold December. I was visiting my mom in Florida, and on the news they were talking about how cold it was in California. I thought, 'These Floridians don't know what cold is.' Then, when I returned home, it was devastation on irrigation systems and plants."

It was a scene out of an irrigation contractor's worst nightmare. Virtually no commercial or private properties had taken the time to perform the relatively simple task of winterizing their life-sustaining irrigation systems.

"Since that winter, I protect all my backflows, filters and anything else that is above ground upon installation," says Irvin, owner of Select Environments in San Carlos, Calif. "In the recent past we have gone to 'smart controllers,' so now we don't have to set percentages per month or turn off the system for winter."

Irvin also believes in winterizing for temperate climate states.

"Above ground gear driven rotors or above ground sprinklers with check valves should be drained," he says.

In colder climates, winterizing an irrigation system is more complex and time-consuming. Compressed air is often blown through the entire piping system to push out as much water as possible before the winter months. This prevents water from expanding and cracking pipes and joints, which can result in thousands of dollars worth of damage.

"We generally try to get everything done during the month of October," says Shannon Martin, president of Brampton Irrigation, Inc., located in Ontario, Canada. "But typically we're still winterizing into November. The damage done if a system is not properly winterized can be dramatic. Polypropylene pipe is more forgiving and will split in perhaps one or two places and the problem can be fixed. PVC is not as forgiving and the crack can go the entire length of a run. But pipe is pennies when you consider all the other fittings, valves and sprinkler heads involved. When they crack you are talking about digging the entire system out, and

that costs thousands of dollars."

Equally important are the areas that straddle the line between cold and temperate climates. Are they safe from the ravages of nature?

"I have seen a brass backflow device split and underground pipes split in two," says Don Elm, owner of Thirsty Lawns in Spring Hill, Tenn., one of the states in the guesswork weather zones. "I watch the 10-day forecast and if it is going to get down below freezing on consecutive days, I go around and blow out the systems I service with compressed air to get the water out."

Says Lance Elliott, brand manager for Hunter Industries in San Marcos, Calif., "In the southern states, there might be a more lackadaisical attitude toward irrigation systems. As far north as Tennessee, businesses aren't aggressive in winterizing systems. But that doesn't mean it can't happen. I saw it happen maybe 10 to 20 times while I was working in Alabama, where severe cold would damage a system. It might be hard to explain to a customer in some northern areas of the South that they need to winterize. But I don't care

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PROFITABLE Practices

if the pipe is made with titanium, it will crack if water inside freezes and expands. I think a 'better safe than sorry' attitude should prevail."

Many states mandate that irrigation pipes be placed at certain depths in the soil profile to guard against winter freeze, which further helps to protect modern systems in cold weather. And a certain degree of protection against cold weather can be designed into an irrigation system, says Larry Rodgers, president and principal owner of Larry Rodgers Design Group in Lakewood, Colo.

"Most irrigation systems designed today are installed with gravity drains," Rodgers says. "In a perfect world, that would be enough. But it's not a perfect world and water will always remain somewhere in the system when it is turned off. If you want to properly protect the system you have to evacuate the water from pipes and that is usually done with air compressors of varying size."

Adds Rodgers, "A compressor that is operating around 60 PSI is usually plenty for a residential lawn and landscape with a 5-horsepower compressor to do the job. You might go to a 10-horsepower compressor to blow out larger system to allow for the cleaning of the main and lateral lines."

"Most irrigation systems designed today are installed with gravity drains. In a perfect world, that would be enough."

— Larry Rodgers, president of Larry Rodgers Design Group

Says Martin, "We have an air compressor that allows us to run as high as 300 PSI for large systems, but generally we run it around 80 PSI or less for homes. We can get in and do two or three zones at a time and we're out in hardly any time." He says the cost of draining a system can be as little as \$80 to \$90 for a home to several hundred dollars for a commercial property.

Don Mann, sales manager for Rain

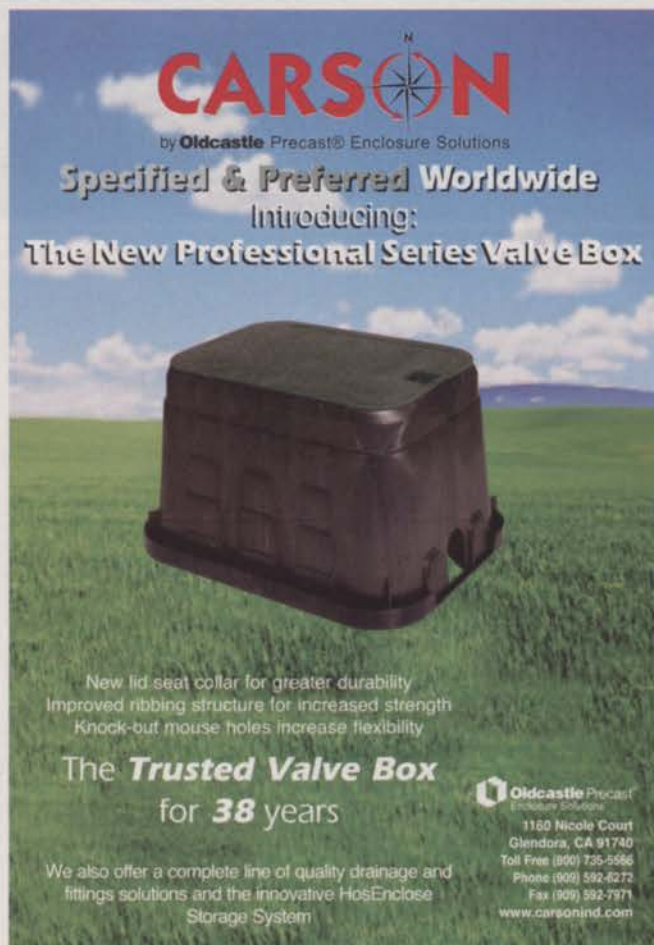
Bird National Sales Corporation in Asuza, Calif., says fees for winterizing irrigation systems vary.

"I've seen the charge go two ways, per zone and the time it takes or a flat fee," he says. "It ranges quite a bit and it's really up to the contractor."

And it's money well spent. Martin

shares another horror story.

"There was a townhouse complex that switched hands late in the year and the property had a full irrigation system," he says. "When the new property management team came in they found out from the landscaper that the system hadn't been winterized, just shut off. We got a call before Christmas and you couldn't stick a screwdriver into the ground. The



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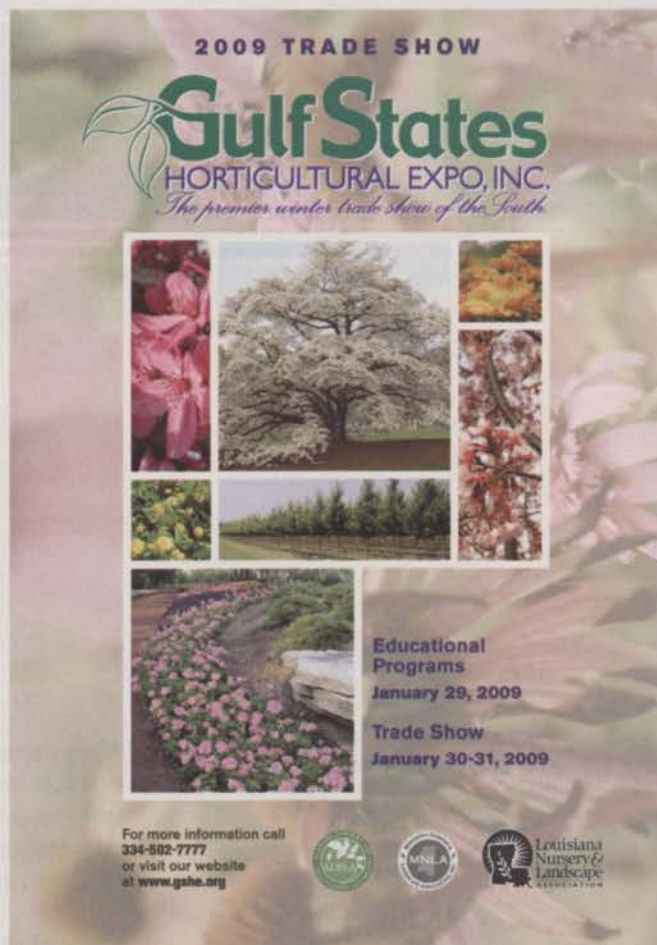
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PROFITABLE Practices

system couldn't be winterized. The next spring almost the entire system had to be replaced and it was around \$20,000 in damage. It was just negligence – one owner or property manager not informing the other about the situation.”

Thus, it is imperative for individuals or companies when considering assuming ownership of a property, especially in the colder climates of the United States and Canada, to practice due diligence concerning the status of the property's irrigation system, even prior to taking over ownership in order to insure that the system will be winterized.

Winterizing an irrigation system is a basic undertaking. The water to the system must be turned off at the main valve, the automatic irrigation controller should be set to the “rain” setting, each of the valves need to be turned off to release pressure in the pipes and all water must be drained out of irrigation components that might freeze.



The task of winterization varies from region to region. In temperate climates, the main shut off valve for the system must be freeze proofed (i.e. either putting it below the frost line, inside a heated room and/or wrapped with insulation). Any above ground gear-driven roto sprinkler needs to have the water drained from it because it may freeze and rupture, and above ground piping should be insulated. Backflow preventers and valves can be removed and stored inside if they're above ground. Safeguarding the backflow preventers and

All water must be removed from an irrigation system for winterization. Usually, this task can be completed with an air compressor.

valves with insulation will also work.

In cold climates, winterizing an irrigation system requires a bit more work and detail. Again, the main shut off valve needs to be freeze proofed. The backflow preventer should be removed, the water in the risers needs to be evacuated and the risers capped. Each drain valve at a low point in the system must be drained, a tricky situation because water usually will not completely drain out of the valves. The valves can be disassembled and dried out before being placed back on, or they can be removed and stored for the winter. Sprinkler heads should also be drained because water can become trapped in them and can cause damage when frozen.

But here comes the challenging part of the operation: All water must be removed from the system, and usually the method used for this is the previously mentioned

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air compressor. It is a task better left to the professionals. Too much air being forced through a system can result in the type of damage you're trying to prevent. The air pressure being forced through the pipes should increase slowly and water should never be blasted out with a sudden burst of air. And air should never be blown

through a backflow preventer or a pump because the equipment could be damaged in the process.

Says Mann, "You can also run into problems with heat buildup in the pipes if you are forcing too great a volume of air through the system. Water doesn't heat up as it passes through piping but air can

and will soften and weaken some of the components."

Irvin says winterizing a system in the northern U.S. should be done by a professional who has the proper equipment and knows how to handle the job.

"A property owner can do it, but someone who has done it, seen it, experienced it would be my choice."

Elliott agrees.


"Think about it," he says. "An irrigation system in many ways is a more sophisticated appliance than a refrigerator or a washing machine. But for whatever reason, some people think Mr. or Mrs. Johnson can winterize an irrigation system but they need a professional to put a new heating coil in their refrigerator. And you have to remember that this appliance, the irrigation system, is buried beneath the earth and you can't see it. The wisdom of a licensed, professional contractor can make the task easier and safer."

Professional contractors can also troubleshoot the system when winterizing it, Elliott says.

"A professional is looking for small leaks or escapes of air during the draining of the system that may go undetected during the normal course of use. You're diagnosing the system for problems. Maybe you go to the homeowner or property manager and say that station seven isn't working properly and you'll find that there was some digging or work done in that area of the property during the year. That's something the homeowner or property manager might not remember when you're ready to turn the system back on in the spring."

He adds, "It's also smart from a business standpoint, because if you're troubleshooting and correcting problems late in the year it's work that you are getting for your company at a time when things are usually slowing down."

It also makes good business sense to communicate with customers on the importance of winterizing and to even set up an appointment several months in advance to have the system serviced.

"Instead of waiting for them to call you, hand them a card with an appointment date to come and winterize the system," Elliott says. "It isn't being deceptive, merely pro-active with your customer." 

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Running a Business Without Capital? It's Like Growing a Tree Without Water

You treat lawns and trees differently in March than in June, right? There's a certain amount of preparation, nurturing and steps undertaken before landscapers can create that golf-course-like lawn or grow that strong oak. The same is true for acquiring financing.

Unfortunately, a lot of landscapers, arborists and other seasonal businesses aren't aware of the steps needed to get financing, and that can lead to rejection when business owners are looking to get a loan or credit line.

Most landscapers begin to slow operations around November, and that's the time to start thinking about business improvements for the coming year. However, approaching a bank or a leasing company in December about a line of credit, working capital loan or equipment leasing is a surefire way to fail. The optimal time to approach your bank is at the tail end of a busy season.

As a rule, lenders like to provide money to people with money. Assuming you're having a good year, July or August would be the optimal time to approach the lender. During those months, you've probably got cash in reserve and, hopefully, all your bills have been paid. That's the time to obtain the line of credit that helps you survive the winter lull. Why? Because you're very liquid and you look great on paper. This makes it much easier to obtain an equipment lease and have a \$100 monthly payment for the first 90 days, which will ensure that: (a) you get the necessary financing; (b) you have very low initial payments; and (c) you'll have the equipment before the season starts. Now you

can market and bid on jobs while your competition is in winter hibernation.

Besides timing, the other key to acquiring financing or a credit line is your personal and business credit scores. There are many factors that affect your scores in either direction. Some of the most important include:

- **Paying your bills on time.** Being late on a bill one time can have a negative effect on your credit score. If your overall credit situation is marginal, having a bill that's 30 days past due might break the deal.

- **Limiting your revolving lines of credit.** Lenders like to see you have the discipline not to extend your credit lines, and that you don't "need" the money, so to speak.

- **Bringing the balance on your credit cards to 50 percent of the credit line or less.** Having one credit card with a \$10,000 limit and \$9,000 balance will impact your credit score far more than three credit cards with a total credit limit of \$30,000 and a balance of \$5,000 on each.

- **Keeping credit lines separate from your partner or spouse.** Whether it's financing a car, obtaining a credit card or conducting any transaction that involves borrowing money, if possible, don't sign jointly on the account.

- **Owning a home.** To lenders, home ownership represents stability from a character and practical standpoint. People who rent a home don't have an anchor to hold them in one place if things go wrong. People with a home typically fight harder to make things right, and it's much harder to pick up and leave when you have to sell

a home. From a character standpoint, it shows you're invested – figuratively and literally – in the place where you live.

By following these simple guidelines, you'll have a much better chance of obtaining the capital needed to grow your business. But while planning and credit scores play a major role in obtaining lines of credit, so does the key component of any transaction: the lender. Many small business owners get locked into the mindset that their bank is the only institution they can turn to for credit. If a bank turns them down, they stop trying.

Actually, your bank is but one lender. Finding other lenders requires some legwork and, in the case of many landscaping company owners, is outside the realm of expertise. That's why contacting a financing consultant can be your best bet.

Financing consultants work with multiple lenders. They know the ins and outs of borrowing money and establishing credit. For example, they know which lenders will want to put a lien on your home or IRA to establish a line of credit, and which won't (something you should never do, by the way). They also know which is a better option: leasing used equipment or buying it outright.

As a landscaper or arborist, getting financing doesn't have to be an arduous process. If you put yourself in the best position credit-wise and approach lenders when your finances are solid, you can not only make it through the quiet winter, but also make improvements that will help your business for next year's busy season. **L**



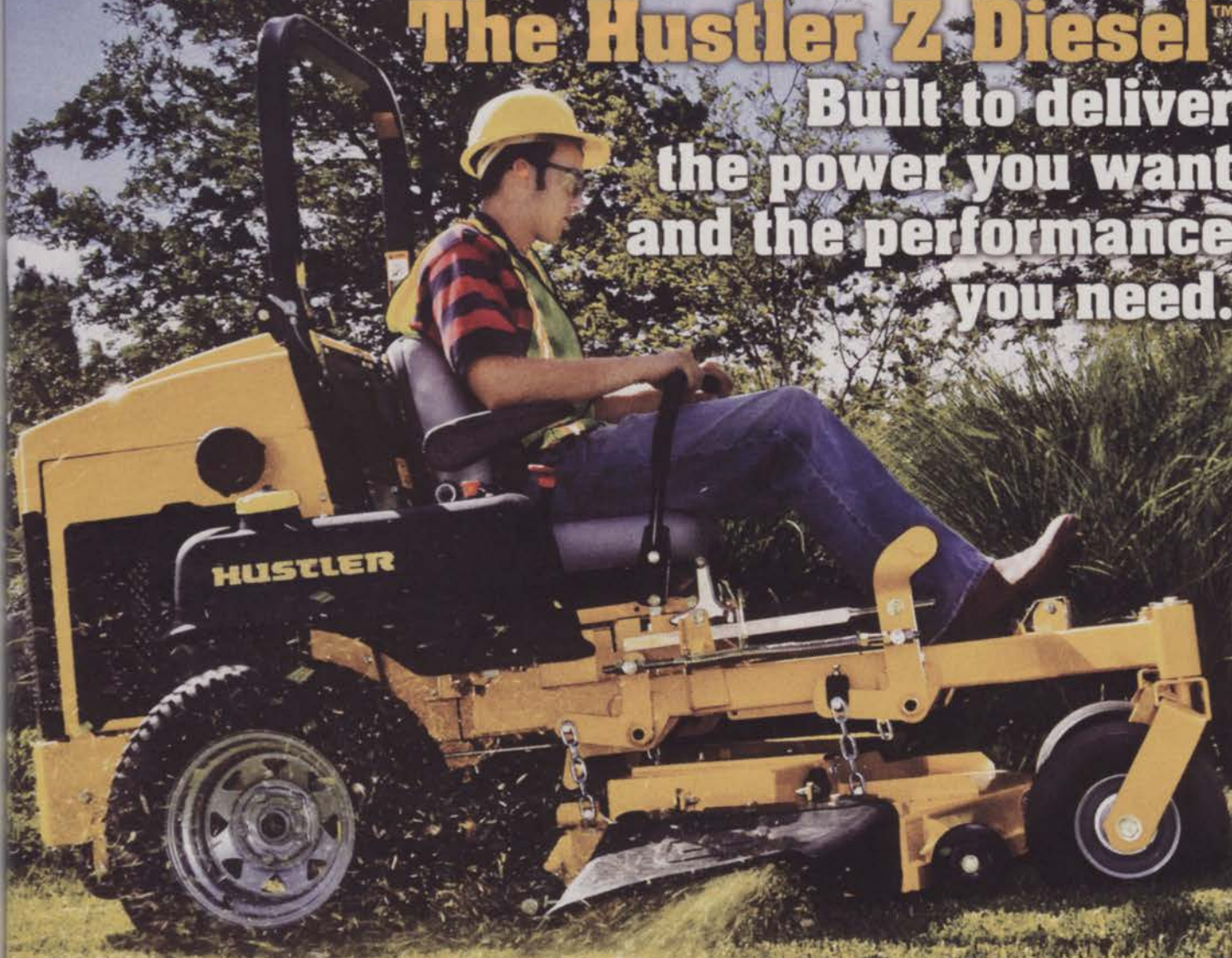
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Bring Rain on the

BY ANNE MOORE ODELL

Landscapers find that responsible stormwater management supports the environment – and makes good business sense

April showers (and November downpours) bring the need for landscapers to think about water. Stormwater that isn't correctly managed can harness pollutants, carrying them into the water supply. Sustainable stormwater management uses techniques that copy the natural world by integrating stormwater into work sites, thereby reducing the impact of run-off on both natural and manmade water systems.

Besides being responsible for creating the look that clients want – be it lush green lawns, overflowing flower beds or geometric shrubs – landscapers are also responsible for meeting local and state requirements in regard to stormwater management, and for educating clients on the best type of planting for their specific area of the country. At each step of the landscape process, from design to implementation to maintenance, stormwater management needs to be carefully planned.



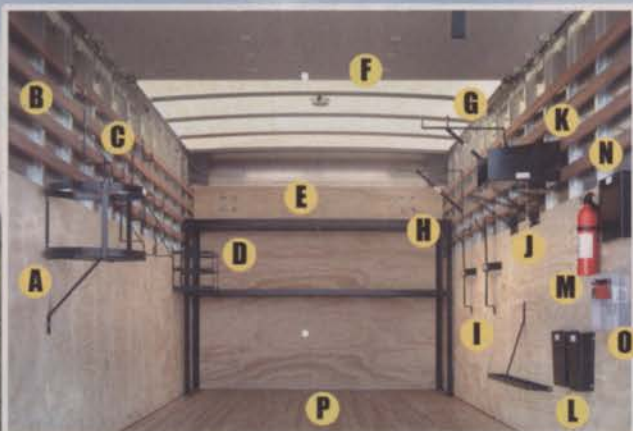


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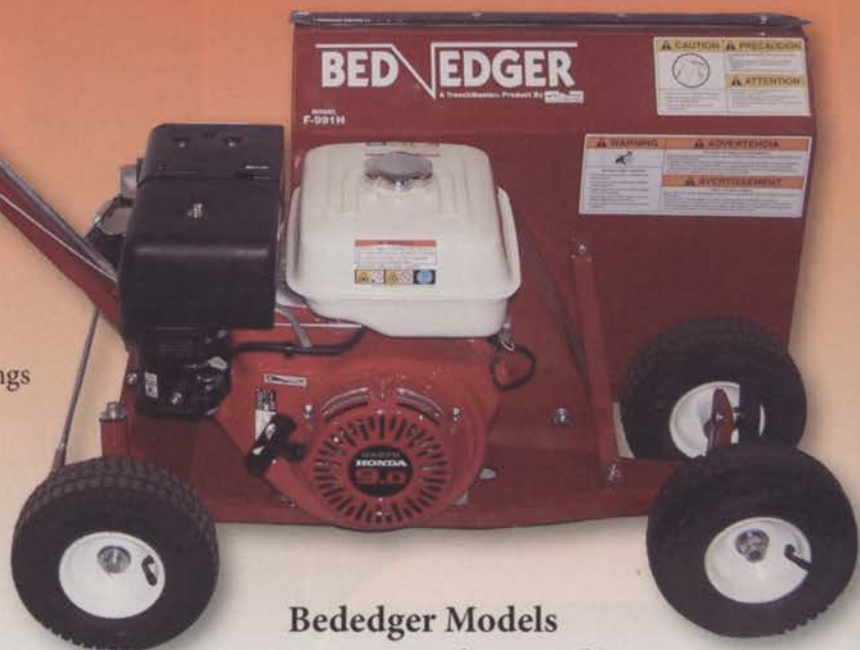
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Many landscapers are realizing that acting to protect stormwater as it enters the water system is not only good for the environment, but good for their businesses. As awareness around water pollution, stormwater runoff and water issues continues to grow, more clients are looking for sustainable stormwater management solutions. Landscapers are finding that working in concert with the local environment, rainfall, and climate makes sense.

EDUCATE

Partners for a Clean Environment (PACE) is an organization of local governments and businesses in Boulder County, Colo., that educates businesses on pollution prevention. PACE works to inform residents and landscapers about sustainable landscaping and offers certification to professionals who show they have an understanding of local plants, low water use and how to design lawns and outside spaces without overusing chemicals.

"Erosion has been an issue with landscaping forever," says Bill Hayes, PACE Team Lead. "Farmers have always worked to keep their topsoil from being washed off their fields. The concept of stormwater management is nothing new. However, in the last decade, stormwater management

has become a water quality issue. As you move from the farmers to the urban planners, you are looking at flood control, the impact of hard surfaces and the water entering stormwater systems."

Landscapers often find they need to educate clients on sustainable stormwater management as they consider the average local rainfall and the topography of each individual worksite. Kathy Vosburg, president and owner of Houston-based LandEscape explains, "The client/landscaper relation is one of trust. The landscape designer is the professional and an authority on many components that make up a beautiful, yet sustainable and environmentally friendly landscape."

The landscaper should encourage homeowners to consider and implement components into the design that address stormwater management, such as rain catchment systems utilizing barrels and tanks, rain gardens and bogs, suggests Vosburg.

The need for sustainable stormwater management is becoming more important at both residential and commercial sites. Implementing the best management practices for stormwater treatment in or around public facilities not only shows the public that the department is committed to reducing the impacts of



Local rainfall can turn a gently landscaped stream into an erosion-causing nightmare.

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stormwater, but also serves as an educational tool.

"As more people see green roofs, bioswales and rain gardens around their towns and in their parks, they will better understand how they function and realize the environmental and aesthetic benefits they can provide," says Rob Dull, lead landscape designer for Snow Creek Landscaping in Arden, N.C. "Landscapers can play a major role in this process. Whether it's specifying the right soil blends or plant species for a bio-retention cell, or being able to identify an invasive species that is impacting a natural stream or wetland. A landscaper can work with the public departments to further advance the techniques of rain management in their specific areas."

Snow Creek believes in continuing education. It has several employees who hold or are pursuing certifications in various aspects of stormwater management. There are many local, state and national organizations that offer classes and seminars on sustainable stormwater management. The aspect of stormwater management in relation to the landscape

industry promises to be a growing market and has positive impacts on everyone involved.

SITE SPECIFIC

During construction, it's important to keep a close eye on stormwater – both to protect against erosion and to keep landscaping material from getting into the stormwater system. Landscapers should carefully track all elements of water management, from dams to silt plans to erosion control blankets.

Once installed, water management structures should be checked frequently to ensure proper function, especially after large rain events. They should be maintained throughout the project to help control erosion from impacting any greater area than is absolutely necessary, Dull says.

"Once the final landscape is installed, the landscape contractor must also inspect the site to make sure all disturbed soils have been properly stabilized," he explains. "This, in turn, will help to protect the client's investment and will reduce the chances of erosion issues/re-

Even simple landscapes require serious thought when it comes to stormwater. "The contractor must also inspect the site to make sure all disturbed soils have been stabilized," says Rob Dull, lead landscape designer for Snow Creek Landscaping in Arden, N.C.





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pairs in the future. Taking a progressive approach to stormwater management throughout the whole process will not only reduce the environmental impact on-site, but will also reduce the overall impact on the watershed in which the site is located."

Dull continues, "Here in western North Carolina, we contend with steep slopes. It makes it challenging to manage the water in the least disruptive way. Some of our common practices include utilizing rain gardens and bio-swales to treat surface flow, harvesting rain from roofs in cisterns for irrigation, using level-spreaders to disperse concentrated runoff from storm pipes, and installing dry-laid stone surfaces versus impermeable concrete or mortared stone. As each site differs, we aim to provide the most sustainable and economical solution to managing stormwater on-site and reducing the overall environmental impact of all our jobs."

KEEPING WATER CLEAN

One of the most important issues in sustainable stormwater management is keeping organic and manmade substances out of storm drains and the water supply. Stormwater codes are often written very generally, because it would be impossible to list all the pollutants that could be washed into storm grates, rivers and streams.

"After an install, a homeowner or business owner needs to be aware of the impact to stormwater flow that leaves, grass, limbs and branches can have on drainage," Vosburg says. "It isn't uncommon for five inches of rain to fall quickly here in Houston and flood city streets and homes due to the stormwater drainage systems being clogged with organic matter.

"Also, there's the issue of pet, chemical and automotive contaminants being washed through the stormwater systems, into our streams and bayous,

into Galveston Bay and ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico," Vosburg continues. "Landscape designers, installers and maintenance firms are in a position to make clients aware of alternative lawn and garden products that would have less of a water-born, negative impact on watersheds, wildlife and key food source populations."

One sustainable solution to help stop landscaping materials from entering the stormwater system as landscapers work on sites is containment. When properly contained, landscape materials such as soils, mulch and gravel are not simply dumped on site in piles that can be washed away by the first rain. Containment also stops expensive materials from being contaminated by dirt.

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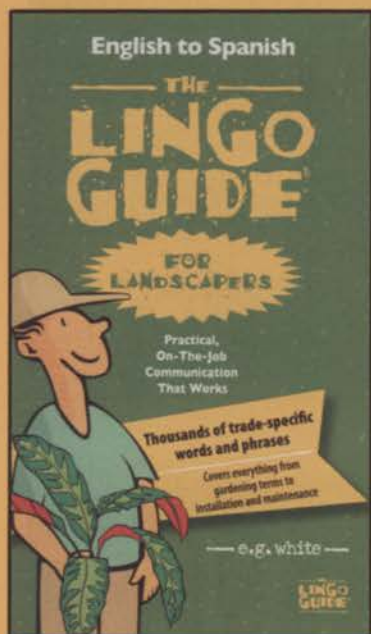
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imate accuracy, installation efficiency, and overall job quality," Dull says. "This in turn enables the company to function at its greatest potential. Not only does the sustainable approach to stormwater make sense environmentally, it also reduces the number of "go-back" related calls from clients to repair a washed out planting bed or other erosion related problems. By installing the right solution the first time, landscapers can reduce the costs associated with these job-site repairs."

As technologies advance along with design strategies in stormwater management, there are more products becoming available for use by the landscape industry. Rain harvesting systems can be bought as complete packages, pre-vegetated green roof units can be delivered right to the job site, and erosion control blankets and coir logs are replacing traditional stone treatments. Many of these solutions are more economical than previous methods and materials.

The U.S. Green Building Council's LEED certification program and the Sustainable Sites Initiative have brought more attention to stormwater management techniques and provided models for sustainable, low-impact development.


"It's exciting to see people changing the way they look at the environmental impacts of stormwater on both a small and large scale," Dull says. "Everyone can make a difference and by offering these services to our clients, Snow Creek is able to do our part everyday and feel good about the product we are providing."

"I'd say for us it's more of 'what's old is new again' regarding the use of rain barrels or any large container to catch roof runoff for irrigating," Vosburg says. Other Low Impact Development (LID) strategies for water management techniques include altering the topography to slow rainwater runoff, and minimizing non-permeable and porous paving surfaces. Utilizing native plants, which are best

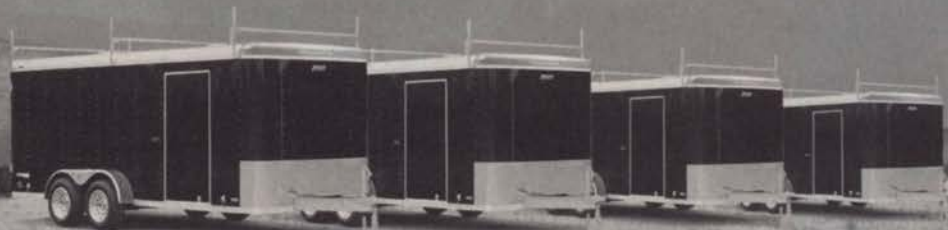
sued to local conditions, can also slow down stormwater runoff.

Working with sustainable stormwater management in mind, landscapers are striving to use fewer chemicals. If fewer chemicals are put into a site, then there is less of a potential that chemicals will wash away. This, in turn, means fewer chemicals to buy.

"Not only will using less keep chemicals keep them out of the water supply but by designing drought- and pest-resistant landscapes, clients and landscapers save money," Hayes says.

Working to keep stormwater clean – whether by using battery-powered tools instead of gas-powered ones, planting islands of native grasses or keeping landscaping materials off driveways – is good for the environment and your business. The best landscapers know what falls from the sky comes around and around again. Simply put, protecting stormwater is protecting your livelihood. 

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Building a College Relations Program: Part II

In my last column, we reviewed the first two steps of creating a successful college relations program: preparation and building your game plan. Now, we move to the next steps, but keep in mind that this isn't a quick fix. A college relations program is a long-term bond built on a foundation of trust and mutual benefit.

THE SET UP

If possible, each college should be assigned a champion and a protégé. The champion becomes the primary contact. He or she assembles the team and makes sure everything is in place. The protégé helps the champion, and is in charge of the recruiting process. He is also a champion-in-training for when the champion takes on other duties or is unavailable for events.

Now, let's get set up for success. The set up is basically getting from your office to the event and being ready for some serious recruiting. There are a lot of moving parts, and you'll need to execute a number of steps.

- Develop the game plan, goals and objectives with team members.
- Assign responsibilities.
- Make shipping arrangements and advance booth reservations.
- Confirm interview schedules and class presentations with appropriate people.
- Have all support materials ready including career questionnaires, interview questions, prepared speeches, company-collateral material with company overviews, brochures, giveaways, and company shirts.
- Be prepared to visit the local Kinko's just in case you have missed something.
- Get parking permits and a map of the campus.

- Locate your booth (if shipped) and begin assembly.

- Arrange decorations and prepare collateral info for handouts.

You should now be set up for success. However, there are several avenues to the screening and interviewing step. Most colleges provide two basic paths: a job fair or trade show venue and a career center.

TRADE SHOWS

First and foremost, practice booth etiquette. Be enthusiastic. Be friendly and approachable. Know your stump speech and be prepared to rate each candidate after you have spent some time with him or her. Here are some more helpful hints for success:

- Ask basic, two-minute screen questions to determine if the candidate is a fit.
- Have candidates fill out a career questionnaire if they're interested in your company. (Do this even if you know they're not a match – it'll come in handy for future data.)
- Deliver your stump speech and get a sense of who is a viable target.
- Be gracious – if the candidate isn't viable, thank him and hand him a takeaway gift.
- Collect resumes if possible.
- Try arranging separate, longer interviews away from the booth at a scheduled time.
- Rank candidates on career questionnaires immediately (on an A-B-C or 1 to 5 scale).
- Provide expectations of when and by whom a candidate may be contacted. Give your name as a backup, in case there's no contact within two days.
- Return career questionnaires to HR for distribution to appropriate departments.

INTERVIEWS AT A CAREER CENTER OR DEPARTMENT

- Schedule your interviews well in advance, and in half-hour sessions.
- Consider school breaks (before and after holidays) or finals.
- Use all other trade show interview procedures.
- Stir interest by arriving the day before interviews begin to give a series of talks to targeted classes.
- Return career questionnaires to HR for distribution to appropriate departments.

THE FOLLOW UP

Don't drop the ball. You've worked hard to get to this point, so keep it going. The intent here is to get the candidate to visit your office or facility, and to leave with a favorable impression. Do not allow much time to lapse from the interview to when the visit happens.

Either the champion or the hiring manager should follow up within 24 hours of the interview, expressing interest in hosting the candidate for a visit. This can be done via phone, e-mail or a handwritten note. Arrange a time and date for the visit to occur. If the candidate is flying in from another state, then your company should make and pay for travel and hotels.

It's worth mentioning that the handoff from the interview screening to the student visit is where most candidates get lost in the shuffle. This is particularly true with larger organizations that have multiple branches.

When the candidate gets to your facility, remember to keep them warm and fuzzy all throughout the tour, the meet-and-greet and the final interviews. If you don't, one of your competitors will. I guarantee it. **L**



BILL ARMAN

is a 32-year veteran of the landscape maintenance industry and is a founder of The Harvest Group, a national landscape business consultancy. He can be reached at 949-466-8837 or people@gie.net.

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 2. Chemical Lawn Care Company (excluding mowing maintenance service)
 3. Lawn Maintenance Contractor
 4. Ornamental Shrub & Tree Service
 5. Irrigation Contractor
 7. Other Contract Services (please describe)

2. What services does your business offer? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

1. Landscape Design

Landscape Installation

2. Seeding or Sodding
 3. Turf & Ornamental Installation
 4. Bedding Plants & Color Installation
 5. Irrigation Installation
 6. Landscape Lighting
 7. Hardscape Installation
 8. Water Features

Landscape Maintenance

9. Landscape Renovation
 10. Turf Fertilization
 11. Turf Aeration
 12. Tree & Ornamental Care
 13. Tree & Stump Removal
 14. Irrigation Maintenance
 15. Erosion Control

Pesticide Application

16. Turf Disease Control
 17. Turf Insect Control
 18. Turf Weed Control
 19. Tree & Ornamental Pesticide Application

Other

20. Mowing
 21. Hydroseeding
 22. Snow Removal
 23. Interior Landscape Services
 24. Structural Pest Control
 25. Holiday Lighting
 26. Other

3. What is the service mix %?

Mowing/Maint _____
 Design/Build _____
 Chemical Application _____

4. How many full-time (year-round) employees do you employ?

5. Is Chemical Application work

1. Outsourced
 2. Done by own employees

6. What are your company's approximate annual gross revenues?

1. Less than \$50,000
 2. \$50,000 to \$99,999
 3. \$100,000 to \$199,999
 4. \$200,000 to \$299,999
 5. \$300,000 to \$499,999
 6. \$500,000 to \$699,999
 7. \$700,000 to \$999,999
 8. \$1,000,000 to \$1,999,999
 9. \$2,000,000 to \$3,999,999
 10. \$4,000,000 to \$6,999,999
 11. \$7,000,000 or more

7. What percentage of growth do you anticipate this year?

8. What year was your business founded?

9. What is your business mix? (%)

Residential _____ Commercial _____
 Other _____

10. Is this a Headquarters or Branch location?

1. Headquarters
 2. Branch
 3. Single Office

11. What best describes your title?

1. Owner
 2. President
 3. Vice-President
 4. Corporate Officer
 5. Partner
 6. Manager
 7. Director
 8. Superintendent
 9. Foreman
 10. Specialist
 11. Agronomist
 12. Entomologist
 13. Horticulturist
 14. Plant Pathologist
 15. Consultant
 16. Technician
 17. Serviceman
 18. Other (please describe)

12. Which of the following types of products and/or services are you considering adding/upgrading in the next 12 months? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

1. Construction Equipment (attachments, skid-steers, loaders, tractors, etc)
 2. Mowers
 3. Chemical Equipment (pumps, tanks, hoses, reels)
 4. Handheld Equipment (trimmers, edgers, blowers, chain saws)
 5. Engines
 6. Tree Equipment
 7. Chippers / Shredders
 8. Fertilizers
 9. Chemicals (insecticides, herbicides, fungicides)
 10. Grass Seed
 11. Nursery / Flowers
 12. Irrigation Equipment
 13. Financial Services (insurance, payroll, finance)
 14. Uniforms (including hats and gloves)
 15. Business Software / Hardware
 16. Design Software
 17. H-2B Services
 18. Hardscape Products (lighting, pavers, water features)
 19. Renovation Equipment (seeders, aerators, dethatchers, spreaders, hydroseeders)
 20. Pest Control Services

13. Which of the following subjects would you be interested in learning more about? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1. Technology solutions for your business
 2. Employee recruitment/retention
 3. Ergonomics
 4. How to set up a safety program
 5. Immigration/H-2B
 6. Major growth areas for contractors: Up and coming add-on services
 7. Alternative fuel/keeping fuel costs down

MOWING MAINTENANCE

8. Mowing-labor savers
 9. Quoting jobs/services
 10. How to add an enhancement crew/division

PESTICIDES & CHEMICALS

11. Generating revenue by adding lawn care services
 12. Best practices: chemical applications
 13. Hydroseeding versus sodding
 14. Fertilization
 15. Organic/eco-friendly lawn care options
 16. Chemical lawn care as add-on services

CONSTRUCTION & INSTALLATION & DESIGN

17. Simplifying installation jobs
 18. Installing pave stone
 19. Software solutions for design projects—designing with technology
 20. Design "how to's": Best practices for proper installation
 21. Design/build/install as add-on service
 22. Water features
 23. Tips on selling design/build projects to home owners

IRRIGATION

24. Basics of irrigation installation & maintenance
 25. Weather-based controllers
 26. Dealing with water restrictions
 27. How to become a WaterSense Partner
 28. Irrigation as add-on service

HORTICULTURE

29. Best practices for dealing with drought
 30. Soil treatments for best plants
 31. PGR's
 34. Bedding & installation
 32. Software for planning
 33. Seasonal planting guidelines

OTHER

35. None of the above
 36. Other (please specify)

14. Which of the following equipment do you have in inventory? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

10. MOWERS (riding, reel, walk-behind, zero-turn)
 20. MOWER ATTACHMENTS (bucket, cab, dethatcher)
 30. HAND TOOLS (shovels, saws, trimmers)
 40. POWER TOOLS (blowers, edgers, chain saw)
 50. APPLICATION EQUIPMENT (foggers, sprayers, spreaders)
 60. CONSTRUCTION EQUIPMENT (tillers, forklifts, tractors)
 70. IRRIGATION EQUIPMENT (filters, pipes, pumps)
 80. TRUCKS and TRAILERS
 90. NON-EQUIPMENT (pesticides, fertilizers)
 99. OTHER

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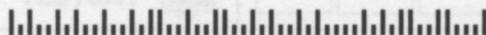


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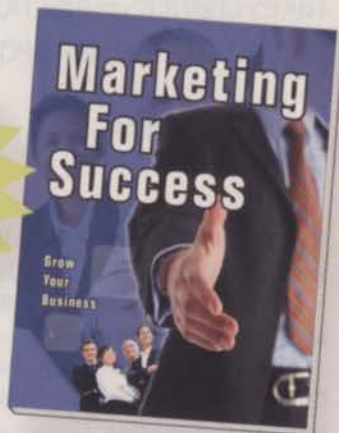
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No Risk, More Reward

California landscaper Jonathan Van Rossen takes chances – just not when it comes to purchasing the right equipment

BY DAVID YOCHUM

Landscapers don't generally launch their careers from a Disneyland-area Holiday Inn.

But for eight months in 1978, that's where Jonathan Van Rossen laid the foundation for an unexpected future.

A New Jersey native, Van Rossen had been sent to Southern California to help establish Rudco Industries' newest bank check manufacturing plant. He was an integral part of the company's national expansion plans – a mobile plant manager and engineer charged with making something from nothing.

Then, fortunes changed.

Rudco Industries was purchased by the Clark Corporation, and Van Rossen, part of Rudco's old guard, was let go because new owners wanted to bring in their own management team. Unemployment could have sent Van Rossen backtracking to the East Coast. However, during his extended Holiday Inn stay, the man made moves.

He searched for and found a home in nearby Corona, Calif., and thanks to some quick planning, started a new job – working for himself.

"I decided to take off four to six months and landscape my property, then figure out what I wanted to do," he says.

Van Rossen began building a huge deck, wall and patio cover. He installed a sprinkler system and constructed an atrium next to his living room. Finally, he built an in-ground spa with a waterfall – a feat Van Rossen is particularly proud of, considering he had no professional masonry background.

"I did have masonry friends though," he points out.

While Van Rossen was landscaping, he was also constantly applying for various city permits. And with each permit came another home visit from a city inspector. Knowing he was between jobs, a few of the inspectors began taking interest in



Jonathan Van Rossen, owner of the Corona, Calif.-based Hydrolawn Company, uses Corona Clipper products for detailed property maintenance work.

Van Rossen's work, hinting that he should make landscaping a full-time career.

"Nah," Van Rossen remembers telling them. "I don't know if I can do that for a living."

But the inspectors didn't listen. They found Van Rossen a job building a local doctor's patio cover, and by the time he completed that project, Van Rossen had scooped up three more jobs in the same area. Soon, Van Rossen purchased a hydroseeder, hired employees and placed advertisements in newspapers.

By 1988, the former Rudco employee had transformed himself from corporate manager to licensed landscape contractor and irrigation specialist. He got a call to bid on steady work at a local housing association property, and continued building his new career on the fly.

"I got the account, then had to buy the equipment – a couple of weed-eaters, an edger, and two walk-behind mowers," Van Rossen says. "My business really expanded from there."

Van Rossen has been purchasing his Corona Clipper pruners from Corona, Calif.-based Western Wholesale Supply for the past 10 years.



Van Rossen maintains properties in Corona and Norco, Calif.

Today, Van Rossen owns the Corona, Calif.-based Hydrolawn Company, and his 10 employees service 18 housing associations in and around the Corona and Norco, Calif., communities. But despite Van Rossen's background of uncharted, head-first business development, he always maintains a continuous sense of value and loyalty. And when it comes to purchasing tree and shrub equipment that sense leads him to one manufacturer.

"When you first start out, you go and try different brands to save a little money," Van Rossen explains. "But you don't save money. The tools either snap off at the head or the bolt, and they don't last as long or stay as sharp. So I spent a little bit more on Corona Clippers and found out that longevity outweighs price."

For the last 10 years, Van Rossen has been purchasing Corona Clipper loppers, clippers, pole pruners, and hedge and shrub trimmers from Western Wholesale Supply of Corona, Calif. Before that, he would order Corona Clippers from the same dealer where he purchased his first hydroseeder more than two decades ago. And today, if Van Rossen can't make it to one of these two dealers, he searches the aisles of home improvement stores for Corona Clipper equipment.

"There's just a difference in the way those tools feel – the way they fit in your hand and the size," explains Van Rossen, who uses Corona Clipper products on his 8-acre to 10-acre properties. "We do have gasoline-powered hedge trimmers, but we use handheld Corona products for detailed trimming. We have the 32-inch loppers for cutting branches and 18-inch handheld shears for hedges. For trimming tree branches, we use the 10-inch handheld pruners and the pole pruners and saws all the time. I get about three and a half good years out of them with pretty consistent use."

And for someone who embraces transformation, would Van Rossen modify Corona Clipper products in any way?

"I wouldn't change a thing," he says. "Even if my business was in the Midwest, I'd still be buying them." **L**

Trimmers on a Trim Budget

BY MARGARET HEPP

Small business owner David Precht learns that when it comes to equipment purchases, you can't always get what you want

When your budget's tight, an equipment purchase is a big decision. David Precht, owner of Frontier Lawn & Landscape in Venice, Fla., wanted to make sure he was making the right choice when he made his hedge trimmer purchase in 2007.

Precht went looking for a solution on LawnSite.com, a site he frequents, where a handful of suppliers operate message boards with threads for product questions and information – and, occasionally, invitations for equipment demos. Precht left a post afterwards with his address and business information. Within weeks, he had the 30-inch trimmer in his hands – and not a moment too soon. The homeowner-grade trimmer he'd been using for occasional hedge jobs stopped working that very morning, and thanks to the trial trimmer, he was able to finish the job on time.

"You can start your business with homeowner-grade equipment," Precht says. "But you can't survive without commercial grade."

During his two-week field test, Precht used the trimmer for a total of 15 hours on various residential and commercial properties – six hours on residential jobs and nine hours on commercial. The performance



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of the trimmer itself was flawless, Precht says – though the double-sided, dual reciprocating blades require the operator to exercise constant care.

“The longer blades help get everything done faster with fewer hours on the job,” he says. “Plus it’s easy to use. One pull and off you go.”

One complaint was the capacity of the fuel tank, which holds 11.2 ounces.

“The fuel efficiency was good, but it could use a larger tank to allow the operator to work with fewer fill-ups,” he says.

Overall, Precht says, his reaction was pretty good, and after he sent the trimmer back to Tanaka, he paid a visit to his local LESCO outlet fully intending to make a Tanaka hedge trimmer purchase.

Precht had to make a change in plans, though, when he learned that his store didn’t carry the Tanaka trimmer line. Reliant on his credit line at LESCO, Precht had limited options.

“I had a client who’d just moved into a house and wanted it to be neat for a family

get-together,” he says. “Once I sent the trimmer back to Tanaka, I had a few trimming tasks left to finish on this job. I didn’t want to pay cash for another unit.”

Rather than go through the test process again and risk losing business, Precht decided to make a purchase in the store that day. He decided on the KHS750A trimmer from Kawasaki – the only product line of hedge trimmers offered at his LESCO outlet.

“If I’d had the cash, I would’ve gone to the local Tanaka dealer and bought all Tanaka stuff,” he says. “But I’m happy with the Kawasaki.”

So happy that in August 2008, Precht went to LESCO and replaced his company’s 2004 Echo handheld equipment with Kawasaki equipment.

“LESCO had a closeout sale on edgers and trimmers, and it was time to replace my handhelds,” Precht says. “After I bought the hedge trimmer, I figured it made sense to stick with one brand.”

More than anything, Precht’s status

as a small business owner dictates his purchases. Precht provides most of the company’s services on his own, including lawn care, hedge trimming, fertilizing and pressure washing. As a result, customer service and prior experience with the product are two important factors when it comes to purchases.

“Sale prices dictate the purchase, too,” he says.

With between \$20,000 and \$25,000 in annual revenue, Precht finds he often has cashflow on the brain. But it doesn’t keep him from dreaming.

“I still find myself going on LawnSite.com and looking at the Tanaka forum,” he says. “I want to buy the new TLE-600 walk-behind edger when I get the money.”


In the meantime, Precht is putting his Kawasaki trimmer to work.

“We’ve been busier each year since we started in 2004,” he says. “It helps to have the right equipment to get the job done.” **L**


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How to Beat the Big Boys

Almost every time I speak, small business owners ask me for ways they can outdo major players in their region. And so, while I might take some heat from my big company friends, I'd like to share some of my techniques with *Lawn & Landscape* readers, too.

But first, be aware that beating the big boys isn't easy. It's like trying to lead the local high school football team of passionate, overlooked players to a win over the three-time state champions – who've also got the support of the entire region. You're the underdog and it's a difficult task, but not impossible. Here are six steps that can lead you to victory:

1. BELIEVE YOU CAN WIN

As Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, said, "If you think you can, you will. If you think you can't, you won't." To compete in any market, you need confidence. Make a list of all the reasons prospective clients would want to do business with you, and then let go of any apprehension you have about "bragging." Let your prospects know how long you've been in business, the awards you've won and the jobs you're most proud of. Clients want to do business with successful people.

2. LEVERAGE THE FACT THAT YOU'RE AN OWNER-OPERATED COMPANY AND THAT ALL YOUR EARNED PROFITS ARE SPENT IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Feature the community service projects your company does, both on your Web site and in printed handouts that you give to prospective clients when making sales pitches. My company's

clients know we're as invested in the community as they are. Their loyalty to you will be reciprocated in your loyalty to them.

3. LISTEN CLOSELY TO PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS

Ask them if there is anything their current service providers do that they don't like. Ask them what you could do to make their lives easier. Ask them what their expectations are. Give them the personalized attention they deserve. Set yourself apart from the big boys, and show them they'll never be just another number to you. Trust me, they'll appreciate it.

4. AFTER YOUR INITIAL MEETING, PROPOSE EVERYTHING THEY'VE ASKED FOR – AND THEN SOME

Instill confidence in the professionalism of your team by letting them know you hire carefully. My

When I first got started, I made it seem like I was operating a whole fleet of trucks by putting several different numbers on the two I had – No. 3 on the hood of one, No. 16 on the tailgate. Clients and competition often asked me how many trucks I had. I always told my clients I had two, but I told my competitors I had eight, just to keep them on their toes. Prospects will often equate the size of your company with your ability to do a job. Figure out how you can magnify their perception of your company.

6. CLOSE THE DEAL

It's my own close, and it goes like this: "I know there are a lot of good landscapers and it's hard for you to decide on one. But there's an obvious reason for you to choose our company and I want to share it with you. While we landscap-

"When I first got started, I made it seem like I was operating a whole fleet of trucks by putting several different numbers on the two I had."

company runs background checks on all potential hires, and requires that they pass drug tests and be conversational in English. Offer your prospects a free service or product that will cost you little but will set you apart from the competition – for example, a perimeter pest control or a special plant. And include a personalized touch when you deliver your proposal, such as a mug with your company name on it. Little gestures add up.

5. ACT BIGGER THAN YOU ARE

Present your proposal in a professional binder, dress nicely and ensure your car or truck is clean.

ers mostly run the same kind of equipment and use the same kind of mulch, there are two things Grunder Landscaping Co. offers that no one else in town can. The first is outstanding service. The second is me. No one will focus more on your satisfaction than I will." This close has helped make my company one of the largest players in our market, and it works as well for me now as it did when I had just two employees.

Give these six steps a try, and let me know if they don't help you give the big boys a run for their money. Just don't tell them I put you up to it. **L**



MARTY GRUNDER

is a speaker, consultant and author, and also owner of Grunder Landscaping Co. in Miamisburg, Ohio. Reach him at landscapesales@gie.net or via www.martygrunder.com.

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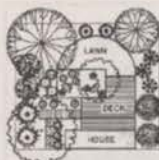
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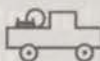
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Industry journalist Pat Jones presents both sides from his sometimes twisted point of view

Show Biz

I'm writing this column as I sit in my garage – er, opulent corporate headquarters – trying to get over a very long week at the 2008 GIE+EXPO show in Louisville.

I'm recuperating because someone down there gave me a really bad head cold (that's what I get for shaking hands with 1,293 people) and I'm basically stupefied by illness and exhaustion. I'm heavily medicated and my mind is wandering like a two-year-old in a park. And once again, I find I'm playing devil's advocate with myself.

Self: Man, that show did me in. Lots of people, lots of events and lots of Louisville fun.

Devil's Advocate: You're tired and sick after a trade show? You're a wuss. What? You've never been to one before?

Self: Hey, I'm a trade show pro. I've been to plenty of GIE+EXPO shows, about a hundred golf shows and a million regional turf shows. This one was harder than usual because I'm still trying to learn more about the market. I actually had to work at it.

DA: So, what did a snarky golf guy like you think about a lawn and landscape show?

Self: It was really good in some ways, but it's still basically an "iron" show. It's pretty much the old OPEI event with some lawn care stuff thrown in. No offense to PLANET, but I wonder how many typical LCOs were really there. Honestly, I think the merger between the old GIE show and the EXPO really hasn't worked all that

well and the lawn care side of the event is pretty weak.

DA: Well, nice job. You've just officially pissed off the PLANET people.

Self: Don't get me wrong. I definitely met a lot of great contractors at the show. But most of them seemed to be guys who owned companies in the *Lawn & Landscape* Top 100. Where are the smaller guys? Where are the up-and-coming guys who are innovating and changing the market?

DA: Apparently they were at home working their tails off. Got a problem with that? You saying that the show lacked talent or something?

Self: Wrong, dude. I talked to plenty of world-class business-people, but less than 5 percent of the owners who are working in the market attend the show. Compare that to the golf show (GIS) which is more like 25 to 30 percent of superintendents, owners and GMs in the market. Sure, there are a few top-level people who fly into GIE+EXPO from the West Coast or Deep South, but it's basically a regional drive-in event for contractors who live within a five or six hour commute of Louisville.

DA: What's the problem with that, smart guy?

Self: Diminishing returns, for one thing. Show floor traffic was definitely down this year and a lot of exhibitors told me they were just seeing contractors they already knew. Sooner or later, the soft goods companies like the chemical and fertilizer people start to wonder about the value of

spending a ton of money to see a few big customers that they probably already have relationships with. That means less revenue for PLANET. And that could weaken the organization at a time when they need to be really strong – politically and otherwise.

DA: So what? They're just an association. What difference can they make?

Self: Seen who's moving into the White House in January?

DA: I hate to admit it, but that's a good point. So, did you actually learn anything new at the show, Mr. Know-It-All?

Self: Virtually every contractor I talked to said he's going to go out and aggressively try to build his business in a tough economy. They also said the downturn will weed out (pardon the pun) a lot of small low-ball competitors and clean up the market. The flip side of that is a bunch of guys who get laid off at the Ford plant are going to throw a push mower and a couple of bags of big box fertilizer in the back of their pickups and replace them.

DA: Big deal. Competition is a good thing. It's survival of the fittest, baby, and some of those pickup truck guys might be in the Top 100 someday.

Self: True, but that means some companies have to fall off that list to make room for them. I can't tell you which contractors will make it and which will fail, but I do know one thing.

DA: What's that?

Self: I hope the guy who gave me this cold goes bankrupt. **(L)**



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