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APRIL 2009

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What
Now?

>> p. 44

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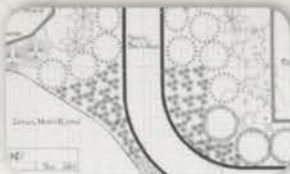
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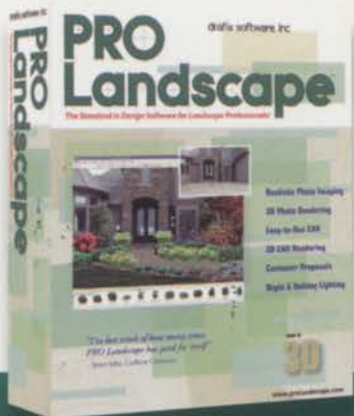
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Have you checked out the new www.lawnandlandscape.com?

Lawn & Landscape's online community continues to grow. Last month, we introduced our new-look Web site, which includes stories, video, audio and social networking — all in one site. If you haven't visited recently, please check us out. You'll be pleased by the terrific additions to our interactive forums, including separate threads on key industry issues and market niches, as well as the ability to post photos and graphics within your posts.

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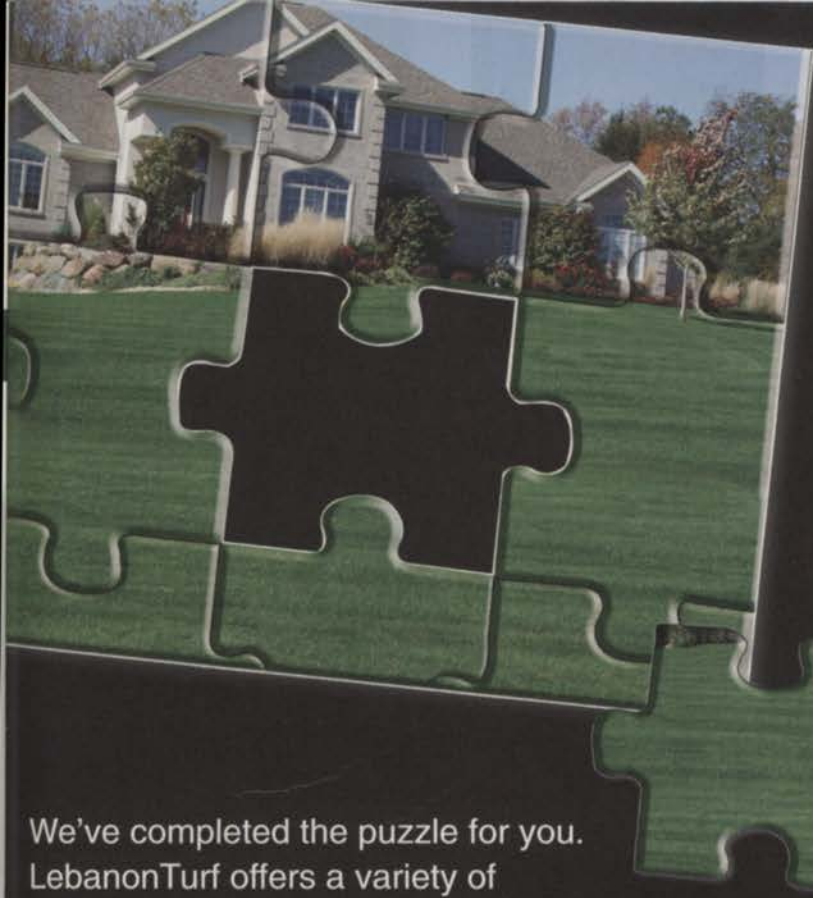
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COMING THIS MONTH ONLINE Podcast interviews with:

Allen James – president of the Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment on lessons U.S. contractors can learn from the new Canadian pesticide restrictions.

Jason Cupp – CEO of Highland Outdoors on successful use of customer e-newsletters.

Jim Huston – president of JR Huston Enterprises on managing your P&L.



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NICOLE WISNIEWSKI
Editor

It's All About Perception

When I saw the research come in from our latest poll about how landscape businesses are feeling about the country's new president, I wasn't surprised, but I was a bit taken aback.

Some of your comments were very strong. One survey respondent said in the story on page 44: "The best thing Obama can do for my business would be to stay in the White House, lock the door, turn off the telephone and come out in four years."

I knew contractors were going to sway heavily toward the Republican ticket and ideals. But because of the perception out there that consumers were feeling positive about change, I thought maybe small businesses were also going to come in saying they are giving Obama a chance.

Not in this market and not in general small business. A majority of contractors in every category are pretty displeased with his election, his first few months in office, his stimulus package, and his small business promises that have gone mostly unmet.

This also got me thinking more about consumers. When they first elected Obama, they seemed optimistic about change. That was my perception. But surveys actually tell a different story. While some may argue it's too soon to tell if the new fiscal stimulus package has had any financial impact on the economy, it's been long enough to test the mood of Americans – your customers – concerning how they think it might help them. And, in fact, as of our mid-March press time, customer mood was five points worse than the prior week's reading and three points worse than the week before the signing of the bill, according to Gallup polls. Compared to a year ago, the reading is 25 points worse.

Clearly, no one is feeling good about the economy right now – you, your customers, your employees.

But as Frank Mariani says as he offers his economic advice on page 18, "things will get better. They always do."

From the Great Depression, the oil crisis in the 70s through to Black Monday and the dot-com bubble, Americans have been resilient. We've always bounced back.

And this is that time when you may have to look at your company and reevaluate. You may have to implement a few contingency plans. You can't operate as if it's business as usual. If backlog, leads, contract renewals and sales are looking poor, you may have to make some tough decisions, as Jim Huston recommends on page 84, and get your business on track.

Yes, the media are going to continue to push the negative news because that's what they see out there. That doesn't mean you have to buy into it. Change what you can and keep your business moving forward. In the process you could even gain a better handle on the situation and feel more comfortable moving forward without letting fear and negative headlines drag you down.

It's all about perception. And if you reinvigorate your business with a solid plan, then you can go into each customer meeting and sales call with a fresh perspective. And that change in attitude could mean the difference between easing customers' fears and gaining their business or chasing them away with the same negative news that's bringing you down. Stay positive, stay focused and you're more likely to stay profitable. **L**

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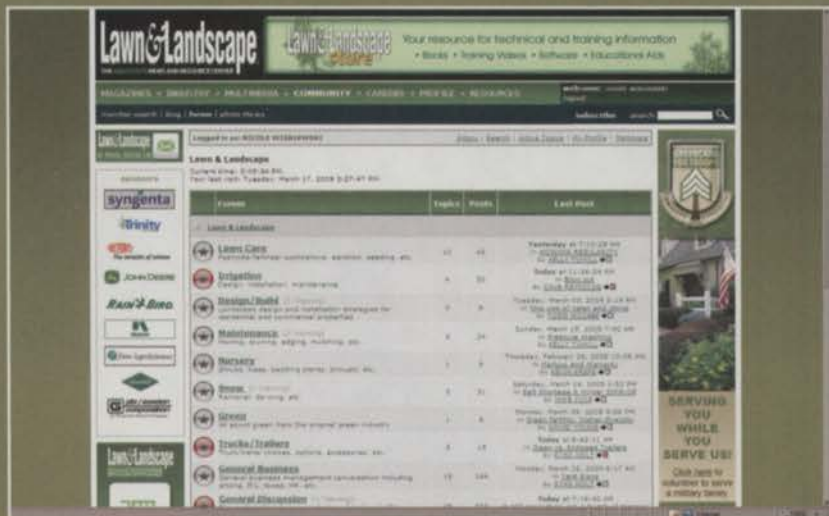
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Leading business media for landscape contractors.



Dear Editor,

I'm in the process of learning my way around the new *Lawn & Landscape* Web site. Your message boards are valuable. I have learned a great deal from this forum over the years. Thanks for your help.

Gerry McCabe
Quality Control Manager
Aexcel Corporation

Dear Editor,

Your content, look and commitment continue to shine through in your online products. Great Job!

Jim Paluch
JP Horizons
Concord, Ohio

Dear Editor,

Congratulations on continually adding to your publications. I just finished reading the irrigation e-newsletter. The continued additions and your great articles are truly

of value to contractors. I use many of the articles to help train and explain various industry subjects to my employees.

Take care,

Wayne Winner
TechScope, Inc.
Richardson, Texas

Dear Editor,

Please send me all the e-newsletters you publish as I am pursuing to expand my business. Your publication just blows me away; it is very professional and informative. Thank goodness for people with high standards. I need to learn as much as possible to become successful in this business. If you have any advice, please inform me. I would love to glean what I can from very successful landscape maintenance professionals.

Thank you so much,

Willis Sanchez
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USE READER SERVICE #14



Performance Under Pressure

Gaining work quality and life balance

If you are a 50-year-old male, and your doctor says you are "right where you should be" in terms of health, then you are a part of the average, meaning you actually have a 50-50 chance of getting heart disease, says Murray Banks.

The news silenced the 238 attendees at the Professional Landcare Network's Executive Forum in Orlando this February.

Wellness is a lot more than "not being sick" or just "being in the average," adds Banks, 60, the wellness speaker, trainer and skiing and triathlon champ who educated attendees on neutralizing stress and improving balance. "Your well being affects your stamina, energy, attitude and ability to focus. While you can't eliminate stress from your life, you can balance it."

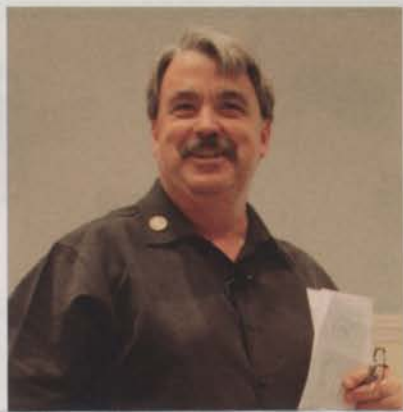
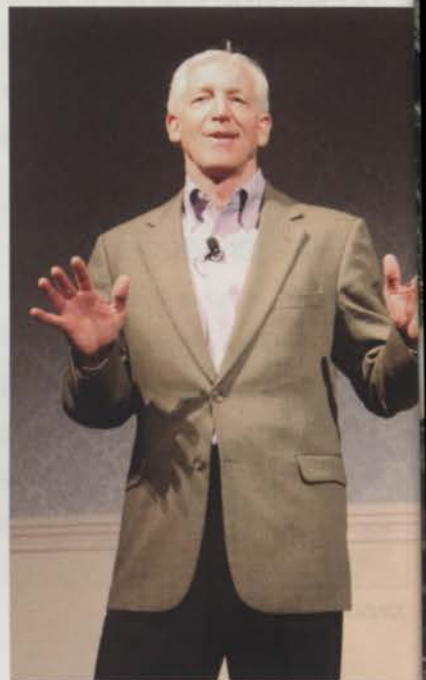
First, don't focus on the word stress, Banks suggests. Use the word challenge instead. "Then, use the Richter Scale of stress when something upsets you," he says. "Ask yourself is this a 10 or a 2 and then give it the energy it deserves." And a 10 is a family member is in the hospital, Banks adds, to put it in perspective.

A great way to deal with stress is through laughter. Of course, sense of humor is the first thing to go when one is tired and stressed. What a busy business owner most needs at this point is what he least wants, which leads us back to Banks example. The best way to reduce stress and improve health so a landscape contractor doesn't find himself below or stuck in "the average" is through physical fitness and healthy eating. Banks recommends contractors plan time to workout before all of their time is planned. The most time effective exercises are walking or using a fitness machine at home. The most beneficial plan balances cardiovascular activities with strength and flexibility training. Banks basic minimum recommendation is 30 to 45 minutes of activity four to five times a week. Another part of living well is eating well. Banks suggests eating well 90 percent of the time and not worrying about the other 10 percent.

And a positive attitude never hurts. Though it won't solve all of your problems, "it annoys enough people to make it worth the effort."

Visit this issue at www.lawnandlandscape.com for a Web Exclusive on how business owners can have health and business prosperity for the long term from the National Federation of Independent Business, as well as other stories from the Executive Forum. — Nicole Wisniewski

Photos clockwise from top right: Wellness expert Murray Banks talks about healthy living at PLANET's Executive Forum. Landscape contractors David Snodgrass and Rollin Haas brainstorm ideas during Bill Arman's session on "Growing a Best of Class Organization." Attendees listen to fitness guru Scott Smith from Motivation to Move on getting fit and neutralizing stress. The Harvest Group's Bill Arman, PLANET President Jason Cupp welcomes attendees.



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HUSTLE & FLOW

To improve your cash position in today's economy, maximize cash in.

Economic stress leads to customer stress, which leads to financial stress. Understanding and boosting cash flow can help reduce this stress.

How do you get cash in more quickly? Send statements earlier, advises Joe McPhail, Real Green's vice president of operations, simply.

At the company's 2009 Conference & Expo in Orlando, Fla., in January, McPhail suggested contractors start with a door hanger invoice on the day of service, and then send a first statement 15 days later and a second statement 30 days later. When the account reaches 31 to 45 days, make a customer service call and send a past due notice. At 60 days,

send a demand/request for payment. By 75 days, make a final customer service call and place the account in the hands of a third party collections agency, McPhail advises.

"The goal is to shorten the collection cycle," he says. "Most people get paid every two weeks so if you hit them twice a month, you get better results. People pay the squeaky wheel."

Offering more payment options is also a good idea, McPhail suggests. He recommends contractors offer credit card payments online and by phone, payments by check, autopay, and prepay and installment options.

Educating customers on payment

terms is another trick to getting money in on time, McPhail says. "If they know you don't mind waiting until 45 or 60 days to receive payment, then they will always pay you late, putting you at the bottom of their priority list," he explains. "People with cash flow problems usually do not have a collections system and payment process in place."

Including a due date on invoices also improves accounts receivable by 50 percent, McPhail says, adding, "Without a due date, it goes to the bottom of the pile."

Read next month's story on chasing receivables to get a better handle on your cash flow. — Nicole Wisniewski



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USE READER SERVICE #18



THE UPSELL ADVANTAGE

Don't work twice as hard trying to get new customers when you can get a better return on investment with current clients.

The average customer starts spending at the bottom of the typical marketing pyramid, which is made up of the people who are least likely to respond to marketing materials, according to Real Green Systems President Joe Kucik.

Kucik outlined the advantages of marketing upsell services to current customers during his free marketing seminar, which he held on Jan. 8, the day before kicking off his Real Green Systems 2009 Conference & Expo.

"You get on average a \$4 return on every marketing dollar invested to obtain a new customer, but you get a \$10 return for every dollar invested when you're upselling to current customers," Kucik explained, pointing to his own lawn care business – Real Green, based out of Michigan – as an example. "Upselling is the most profitable part of my business."

Why? "You've already built trust with your current customers, they are already interested in your services, if you know their size you know their price and you know their needs already since you're on their property regularly," Kucik says, adding his philosophy is "the more you do for your current customers, the less likely they'll be to cancel services."

When marketing to current clients to pitch upsell services, Kucik recommends sending mailings four to six weeks prior

to the service window. Contractors can include upsell messages on direct mail pieces, referral letters, door hangers, mid-season property evaluation forms, prepay letters, invoices and on larger lawn posting signs. From using lawn posting signs last year at his company, Kucik generated 177 new leads, resulting in 127 new sales – \$29,737 in revenue.

Also, market to the right people. "Offer grub control to people who have had grub problems in the past year or two," Kucik suggests. "It would be easy to send a marketing piece on grub control to everyone on your list, but it is a waste of money. Market with a scalpel, not a shotgun."

And that, as Kucik explains, will mean a better return-on-investment.

For more coverage of Real Green's event, visit *Lawn & Landscape's* April Web Exclusives at www.lawnandlandscape.com. – Nicole Wisniewski

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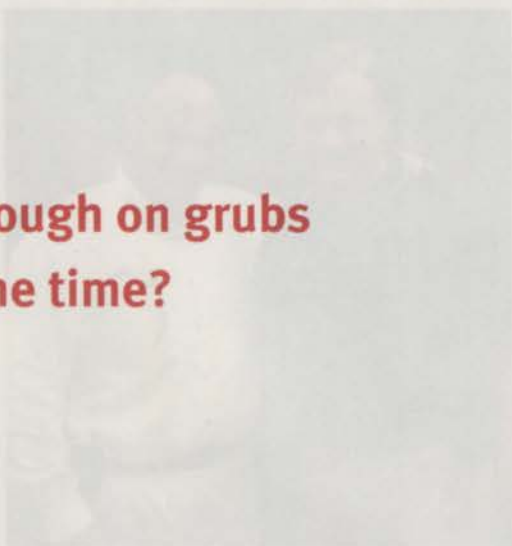
WE WILL SURVIVE

One of the Top 25 landscape contractors in the U.S. shares economic advice.

When contractors get a chance to sit down with one of the leading landscape contractors from the floor, inevitably they are going to ask him what he's looking for in the market.

— *Charles M. Smith, a landscape contractor and founder of M&S Landscaping, Inc., in the Atlanta area.*

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WE WILL SURVIVE

One of the Top 25 landscape contractors in the U.S. shares economic advice.



When contractors get a chance to chat with one of the largest landscape contractors from Illinois on the phone, inevitably they are going to ask him about how he's handling business in the recession.

During Marty Grunder's January teleseminar and follow-up March Webinar with Chicago's Frank Mariani, he not only told them his plans but gave them some encouraging words.

"Things will get better; things are going to improve – they have to," Mariani says. "We need to survive and make it through these next 12, 18, 24 or 36 months – however long it takes."

What does a company like \$35-million Mariani Landscape do in a recession? First, Mariani built a couple of different budgets. "We built budgets based on what we think we can do this year," he says. "We think we can grow our maintenance business 10 to 15 percent – we are being aggressive and are six times ahead of our pace over

Marty Grunder with industry mentor Frank Mariani.

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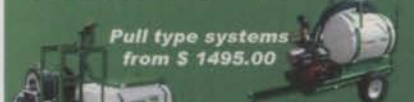


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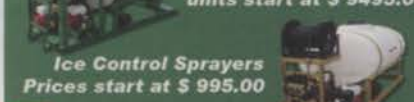
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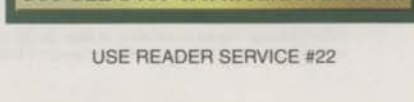
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USE READER SERVICE #23



last year, so we're doing well. We think our construction business will contract 20 percent. We also built a budget showing a 25 percent across the board cut in revenue. Whatever the final outcome is in this economy, we plan to manage the numbers closely and at the end of the year make sure we're operating in the black. We will manage this business to profitability. We can do it. And we want to do it without layoffs. We're looking at every other expense we can cut first."

Before losing employees, Mariani is putting more emphasis on sales, turning over every rock to find work, as well as managing overtime.

But this comes with a warning. "We won't take work we shouldn't do or that isn't profitable just to get the sale," Mariani says.

The company did not give out raises this year because "we thought it was more important to keep people em-

ployed," Mariani shares. "So we will limit people cuts to the greatest extent possible and then if we have to go there, we will start with the least experienced people and those who aren't doing their jobs, but first make sure we've given them the opportunity to improve. Crew leaders are very important to us because of the training that goes into that position, so we will protect them as best we can."

Another interesting economic challenge a teleseminar attendee asked Mariani involved local landscape competitors shopping around their established maintenance accounts. While it may look like a good buy, Mariani suggests contractors do their homework first. "Are they selling it because they are going to lose it anyway?" he asks. "Are they selling it because it's not profitable or because the client is unreasonable? Are they selling it because they are go-

ing to go out of business? A lot of people are looking for a large amount up front to get out of a problem. Make sure it's a project or projects that will work with your portfolio of business. Be careful."

Mariani's overall plans and philosophy basically provide scenarios for every situation, and this is what he recommends contractors do so they don't react too slowly to economic challenges or warning signs. "Planning is not an option this year - it's a mandate," he says. "You have to be prepared."

For a look at how Mariani is handling marketing in today's tough economy, turn to page 62. - Nicole Wisniewski



For more of Marty Grunder's interview with Frank Mariani, visit the April Web Exclusives at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

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USE READER SERVICE #25



BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Trend Spotting

Wondering what popular consumer magazines and television shows are telling your clients to focus on in the landscape this year?

We have the answers.

What will customers be talking about as you start their work this spring? According to top consumer magazines and Garden Media Group, there are eight trends that have risen to the surface, and keeping them top of mind is wise for landscape contractors looking for business opportunities in today's economy.

1. Veggie tales. A Garden Writers Survey says more than half of Americans planted vegetables this year, and seed sales more than doubled over last year. Also, local farmer's markets are seeing an upsurge in business, community gardens have waiting lists, and plant swaps are on the rise. Why not include a vegetable garden in your next design proposal?

2. Blended gardens. "Transform yards into ornamental but productive spaces as lettuces and parsley mix with roses and petunias," says *Traditional Home*.

Garden centers also report an increase in demand for fruit-bearing shrubs like blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and elderberries being used as ornamentals.

3. Going native. Plant natives like *Iron Butterfly* from American Beauties™ to adorn rocky areas with rich purple; they are tolerant in hot, dry locations. Caryopteris *Grand Bleu*® and dwarf native



'Little Joe' pye-weed, both introduced by Star® Plants, attract bees and butterflies, as do ornamental grasses like northern sea oats or wavy hair grass. Also, offer customers water-conserving plants like succulents, cactus, yucca and ferns.

4. On the water front. Whether moving in fountains, endless waterfalls or fish ponds, the soothing sounds of water can turn any backyard into a private oasis.

5. Outside in. This year, customers are looking to bring the outside in, so offer them options to extend their outdoor spaces. Tropical plants like bromeliads and orchids create instant beauty and boost oxygen. Peace lilies, ferns and spider plants are mobile air purifiers.

6. Contained. Containers are no longer a trend but a garden staple in large and small spaces. Gone are the three-note containers with the thriller, spiller and filler formula. Think one note containers with an evergreen shrub or tropical plant for 'boom without bloom.'

Shrubs have strong growth potential, says Allan Armitage, renowned breeder and author. They are sustainable and cover a sizeable piece of ground, and, once established, require less mainte-

Use berry bushes as ornamentals, like this pink blueberry bush.



Red, like the blooms in this Sun Parasol Pretty Crimson mandevilla, will be a hot color in the landscape this year.

nance. Some new shrubs, like 'Vernon Morris' viburnum, are multi-taskers, providing four seasons of color and food and shelter for wildlife.

With containers, select natural materials like cast stone and terra cotta. "Big and bold is 'in' and square is the new round," says Peter Cilio, creative director for Campania International.

7. Pops of color. From walls and furniture to accents and art, metallics in dramatic tones of pewter and bronze, and colors like electric pink, acid green, plum and yellow, reminiscent of 60s pop culture, are showing up in garden décor and elements.

Offer clients anything red this spring from Carefree Spirit shrub rose and true red rhododendron 'Trocadero' to tropical red Crimson Sun Mandevilla. Gene Bussell, garden editor for *Southern Living Magazine*, also says to look for shades of green to be dominant in most planting schemes.

8. Bubbling. Outdoor living continues to boom as the trend for "stay-cations" and "bubbling" comes home. "People are staying home more and investing in their homes," says Bussell. "They're still time-strapped so they're looking for easy care, high-value plants... so offer them shrubs, perennials, natives - anything that will last," he suggests. **L**



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BY WILLIAM LYNOTT

Wondering where to invest your money in this economy?
This financial expert says focus on the long-term.

Invest-igative Report

When it comes to investing our money, human nature likes to play tricks on us. When the stock market is reaching new peaks, we can't wait to jump in. When it stumbles and falls, we stop investing, or worse, we start selling. Despite the lessons of the past, that insistent inner voice keeps urging us to follow the crowd.

And so the typical investor tends to buy high and sell low – exactly the opposite strategy for profitable investing.

Decades of experience have demonstrated that when a rising market starts to look like a win-win situation, it's at its riskiest. When the market is mucking around in a slump, the gloom and doom tends to grow, keeping us from taking advantage of a buy-low situation.

The stock market boom of the late 1990s provides us with a textbook example of how costly our tendency to follow the herd can be. In early 2000, stock values soared to their highest levels. Investors were falling over themselves to get in on the action. Most of that new money was going into the darling of investments – technology funds. By March 2000 – the market peak – investors had poured tens of billions of dollars into technology funds.

As we would soon learn, that was the worst possible time to invest. By October 2002, the S&P 500 index had fallen nearly 50 percent. Even worse, the NASDAQ had lost more than three-quarters of its value.

Now for the “fun” part. At that point, with the market at its lowest in the cycle, investors started taking more money out of funds than they were putting in – human nature was once again having its way with them. Then, the markets began their recovery, reaching a new peak in October 2007.

The moral of this story is quite clear. Listening to that inner voice telling us to follow the crowd may be exactly the wrong thing to do when it comes to investing our money. When investors are pouring money into the market causing it to rise, we expect it to continue rising. When the market falls, we expect it to continue falling.

So, what can we do to keep ourselves from falling into that buy-high, sell-low financial abyss? One of the strategies favored by many financial advisers is called dollar-cost-averaging. That technique calls for establishing a fixed dollar amount to invest at regular intervals (e.g., monthly) and sticking with that pattern regardless of whether the market is going up or down.

With dollar-cost-averaging, when the market is rising, your money will buy fewer shares, and when it's falling, your money will buy more shares. Since the market has a positive average rate of return, proponents of this technique suggest that by buying your shares at the average price over a period of time, you will benefit from the market's average return.

Another approach that many professionals suggest is the buy-and-hold philosophy. This calls for buying only stocks with solid fundamentals or mutual funds with low expenses and good diversification and then sticking with them during good times and bad.

In other words: Ignore the crowd and avoid reacting to the emotion of the moment. This can be tough to do when the market is in a dive, but remember, following the herd is almost always the wrong thing to do. While you can't control the forces that produce market volatility, you can control your own response to them.

The best advice when it comes to your personal investment philosophy is to stay focused on the long term. There will always be news of the sort that invites a reaction from investors: a change in leadership in the White House, bad news involving an industry or political turmoil. As a long-term investor, your goal is to stay focused and avoid short-term distractions.

Our built-in tendency to follow the crowd may come in handy in some circumstances. It may pay to jump into that long line if someone is giving something away at the other end. However, when it comes to investing your money, separating yourself from the herd will almost always work to your advantage. **L**

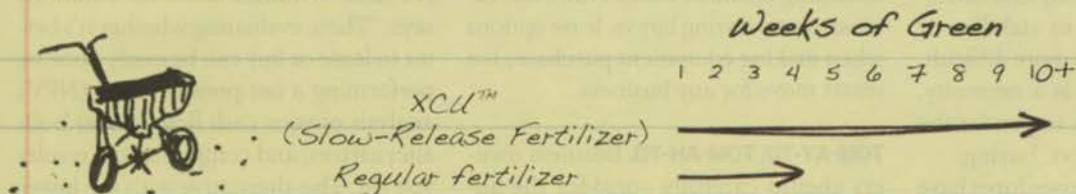
The author is a freelance writer based in Abington, Pa., with 40 years of experience in business management and financing.

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USE READER SERVICE #27





You Can't Buy Everything ... Or Can You?

The economics of leasing vs. buying equipment in today's economy.

BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

As credit dries up in today's economic environment, companies – particularly small businesses – may find investing in new equipment to stabilize or grow their organizations more difficult. And if new equipment is a necessity, they are stopping longer to ponder the pros and cons of leasing vs. buying.

"Credit policies and procedures have and will continue to be tested," Kenneth R. Collins Jr., chairman and CEO of Susquehanna Commercial Finance, recently told the Equipment Leasing and Financing Association. "We expect credit quality to continue to deteriorate through the second quarter of 2009 and that a number of weaker segments, such as transportation, construction and some small businesses that have been surviving on dwindling cash reserves, could be culled by this recession."

Luckily, as of February, 66 percent of contractors report having no problems obtaining business loans. However, extensively reviewing buy vs. lease options when making equipment purchases is a smart move for any business.

TOM-AY-TO, TOM-AH-TO. Business owners should carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of lease and purchase options when buying equipment. They must account for individual and operational cash flow and tax needs, operator's aptitude and equipment skills, and the goals and objectives of the business.

"The starting point for your decision-making is the projected cash flow statement you've worked up showing the dollar benefits of the project, and the costs under the options you are

considering – in this case, leasing vs. purchasing," online small-business resource Winmark Business Solutions says. "Then, evaluating whether it's better to lease or buy can be easily done by performing a net present value (NPV) analysis of your cash flows under both alternatives, and comparing the results you get. The alternative with the lower NPV will be the cheaper alternative in the long run."

Considering the economy, keeping your cash in your pocket is wise. One way to do this is by leasing your assets, according to Joe Musto, an independent commercial leasing broker with Lease One who has been in the banking and finance industry for more than 14 years. This could be one of the reasons eight out of 10 businesses favor leasing, per Musto's statistics. And during challenging times, leasing has some unexpected benefits, he says, including:

✓ **Leasing conserves cash** – With leasing there is no need for the large cash outlays required when purchasing (typically only one or two advanced payments are due at lease signing). No more depleting working capital.

✓ **Leasing preserves existing lines of credit** – Present sources of short-term borrowing are unaffected by leasing. An owner can keep bank credit lines open for other areas of his or her business.

✓ **Leasing can offer tax advantages** – Leasing payments are operating expenses and are 100 percent tax deductible for most businesses.

The Stimulus Advantage



Most businesses need new equipment at some point, but the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008 made buying more equipment *immediately* a potentially smart business decision. Section 179 of the Internal Revenue Service tax code now allows businesses to write off the full purchase price of qualifying equipment purchased or financed during the tax year. That means if a small business buys or leases a piece of qualifying equipment, it can deduct the full purchase price from the business' gross income. Small business owners should consult their tax professional to ascertain their current tax position.

Section 179 can change yearly without notice, but the current deduction limit is \$250,000 and the total amount of equipment purchased cannot exceed \$800,000. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, signed into law in February, has extended the enhanced Section 179 incentives through Dec. 31.

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USE READER SERVICE #28

✓ **Leasing can improve financial statements** – Leasing can improve a balance sheet by reducing long-term debt and simplifying bookkeeping.

✓ **Leasing offers creative programs** – With specialized lease programs, contractors can find custom-tailored leases to fit more than one business need. Some seasonal programs require business owners to make payments only when a company is open for business, i.e. summer vs. winter.

✓ **Leasing can help improve profit and growth** – No more investing in equipment that may become obsolete.

✓ **Leasing offers a speedy approval process** – This is typically much quicker than a traditional loan or credit line.

The major disadvantage of leasing equipment is that, because an owner is not purchasing it, it cannot be considered an asset and cannot be sold. “Conversely, after you purchase equipment, it’s yours,” explains Crystal Riley, president of Lease with Crystal. “This is especially advantageous when dealing with a piece of equipment that has a long, useful – and I emphasize useful – life and is not in danger of becoming

technologically obsolete in a short period of time.”

That brings us to buying’s benefits, which according to Tim Lemmons, a University of Nebraska – Lincoln Extension educator, are:

✓ Buying makes it easier to replace equipment at the owner’s discretion.

✓ Owned equipment can be used as collateral against other loans.

✓ No security deposit is required (though down payments to secure financing may be higher).

✓ There are no use limitations (some leases specify the number of machine-use hours before a penalty).

✓ Buying gives a business increased asset value on the balance sheet.

Both leasing and owning property provide tax advantages to small business owners. Before making a final decision, Lemmons suggests small business owners understand how each might affect their cash flow and tax situation, which will vary from operation to operation.

THE DEPRECIATION EQUATION. Small businesses should also consider other factors when investing in equipment.

When weighing the economics of buying vs. leasing, it is important to understand the key components of machinery value and the change in value over time.

Depreciation is defined as the decline in asset value over time. “It also represents the basic ownership costs of a capital asset and the consumption of an asset’s value over its useful life,” Lemmons explains.

“As equipment ages, the accumulated cost of repairs begins to mount,” he says, advising business owners to consider long-term repair costs when deciding whether to buy or lease equipment, particularly machinery. “Repair costs should positively correlate with the total hours of equipment operation; the greater the accumulated hours of operation, the greater the accumulated cost of repairs. Usually the lessee is responsible for all repairs not covered by warranty, just as the owner would be. However, leased equipment may be replaced before repair costs begin to mount.” **L**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape* and can be reached at nwisniewski@gie.net.

Decisions, Decisions

	Leasing	Borrowing	Credit	Cash
Interest Rates	Fixed rate	Can fluctuate with the market	Fixed or variable	None
Speed of Approval	Within two business days after a bid has been selected for most amounts	Days to weeks	Days to weeks	Instant
Down Payment	Typically, only one or two payments up front, which are applied to your balance	Typically, 10-20 percent of the total amount	Typically, 10-20 percent of the total amount	100 percent
Financial Statements	Generally unnecessary for transactions less than \$150,000	Generally needed regardless of amount requested	Generally needed regardless of amount requested	None
Tax Benefits	Operating lease payments can be 100 percent tax deductible when shown as an operating expense	Depreciation can be taken over the useful life of the equipment	Depreciation can be taken over the useful life of the equipment	Depreciation can be taken over the useful life of the equipment
Equipment Obsolescence	Used as a hedge against obsolescence	You own the equipment	You own the equipment	You own the equipment

Source: Joe Musto, *Lease One*

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Know Your Customers

Recently my wife and I went to dinner at an Italian restaurant in my hometown. It's a nice, quiet place that serves upscale Italian food. We had a great meal, the service was excellent and I was impressed. As an entrepreneur and a professional speaker and author, I am always analyzing businesses. I look for ideas I can implement at Grunder Landscaping Co. or ideas I can write about or speak about. No, it's not easy being married to me, but this is who I am. I am always learning, always trying to find better ways to do business. I realized something that night while leaving the restaurant.

While Lisa and I left the parking lot and drove to meet some friends, I told her how impressed I was with how this restaurant did everything except for one important item. Lisa gave me one of those "Now what?" looks. I went on to explain to her how amazing it is that everyone is complaining how bad business is, yet very few are really doing anything more than the basics. Now you are wondering what they did not do, aren't you? I'll tell you, because a lot of us are guilty of this.

What this restaurant did not do was ask me for my name, address and/or e-mail so they could stay in touch with me and try to develop a relationship with me. This lovely restaurant got the hard part – the food and service – right, but the easy part – staying in touch with me – they blew big time. Here's what they should have done.

At the entrance to the restaurant, there should be a place to put your name in their database. This could be a sheet where you write down your information or even a computer. You have to make it easy for your clients to give you their information. Sometimes you have to push the envelope to be successful and do things others don't do and things that aren't considered normal.

Then once we sat down, at some point during our meal I would have liked to have met the chef or the owner of the restaurant. It would be nice if he gave us his or her card with a photo on it so I remember what he or she looks like. On the back of the card could be the recipe for his bruschetta or a coupon for a complimentary dessert or 10 percent off of any catering. When you do this, you bond with your clients and you form relationships. You can't keep in touch with someone if you don't know their name and their address.

With the check, there should have been a card to sign up for their newsletter or to join their "club" – something that made it worth my while to give them my information. This would then allow them to send me occasional e-mails offering taste testing, special discounts, new menus and other offers. If they don't do this, then when I am looking for someplace to go to dinner, there are all kinds of options for me. But if someone makes an effort to keep in touch with me, and I see them as a person or a friend and not just a restaurant, I want to help them out by spending my money with them. This is something I feel we do very well at Grunder Landscaping Co. We keep in touch with our clients through every available form of communication. Friends buy from friends; the more friends you make, the more sales you make. It's as simple as that. **L**

DO IT NOW, DO IT OFTEN AND DO IT TODAY

Here are some things all of us should do to make friends, make sales and generate business.

1. Get all client information in one database. Send a postcard to prospects and point out your specialties – not just the obvious.
2. Put together a plan to keep in touch with your clients more frequently. This takes time; be consistent with your presence and your message and use all forms of communication. Remember, when you're talking to your clients, they can't be talking to your competition.
3. Spend money on the obvious marketing items that give you years of benefits, such as jobsite signs, lettering on all four sides of your trucks, uniforms and signage in front of your office.
4. Make sure your Web site is search engine optimized. If someone enters your hometown and the word "landscaping" or "lawn care," your company's name should come up in the first 10 listings on a Google search.
5. It's your responsibility to make your name unforgettable to clients. The only way you can do that is by repeatedly and creatively keeping your name in front of them.



MARTY GRUNDER

is a speaker, consultant and author, and also owner of Grunder Landscaping Co. in Miamisburg, Ohio. Reach him at marty@gle.net or via www.martygrunder.com.



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USE READER SERVICE #31

Riding the Wave of Change

Hurricane Ivan teaches a lesson in sustainability.

Ron Kutter describes Alabama's Gulf Shores/Orange Beach as a sleepy beach community. It boasts a tiny population, hordes of restaurants and condominiums, golf and fishing hot spots and, of course, gorgeous weather.

However, in the days after Sept. 16, 2004, this tight-knit, lower-Alabama locale looked nothing like a southern paradise. If anything, it resembled a virtual wasteland.

"Debris was everywhere," says Kutter, recalling how Hurricane Ivan desolated his maintenance company's service area. "When the storm surge came in, it went up to the second floor of the

condos, and in some areas, sand was 6 feet deep. There was no power on the whole island."

This was the aftermath of the worst storm to ever pummel coastal Baldwin County. Before Hurricane Ivan hit, Kutter and his maintenance team were happily en route to grossing \$400,000 in revenue. Then, overnight, Kutter's Grounds Maintenance's client base was slashed from 60 commercial properties to eight, putting the business's very existence in jeopardy.

"There was no grass left for us to cut," Kutter says. "I slept on the floor of my shop for a few days and spent many

restless nights wondering what I was going to do."

And the maintenance company found an answer to his question right there in his shop. Sitting on his desk was an old motivational card with a picture of a tidal wave. The caption on the card read, "Ride the wave of change or find yourself beneath it."

After Kutter saw that single sentence, he knew exactly how his business would begin generating new revenue.

"Honestly, it came to me right then," Kutter explains. "I was going to figure out some way that I can survive with the equipment I have. So I met with a business owner who had storm plans – cleanup contracts already signed in case of a disaster – and from then on we had a new focus."

That focus included an immediate shift away from the maintenance work upon which Kutter and his team built their reputations. Instead, he and his crew began cleaning condominiums, shoveling sand, hauling debris, doing de-

Ron Kutter went from being on his way to grossing \$400,000 in revenue to an actual \$829,000 – all by taking advantage of unexpected opportunities and having a Plan B.





After going from 60 commercial maintenance accounts down to eight as a result of Hurricane Ivan, Ron Kutter had to rethink his business model.

molition work and helping general contractors get properties back in order.

"At one time, I had 77 employees working for me – every unemployed front desk person, pool guy, retail clerk, waiter or cook," Kutter laughs. "They were all digging out shrubs and palm trees and holding sledgehammers."

Kutter's Grounds Maintenance's cleanup activities lasted for six months and helped double the company's 2004 projected revenue to \$829,000. But even after cleanup was complete, Kutter still had little grass to trim.

So he changed his business model again in 2005 – this time positioning

Kutter's Grounds Maintenance as a 100-percent landscaping company.

"Keep in mind that I knew that would be a short-term solution," Kutter explains. "I just wanted to return to what I did. I wanted to get the properties back to the point where I could install plants, irrigation and grass that I could then mow."


Short term or not, Kutter's new landscape operation became an overwhelming success. Former maintenance crews were completing three or four projects at once, and the business generated \$1.47 million in revenue. By the time all that landscaping matured in 2006, Kut-

ter's revenue jumped to \$2.84 million, and he has since been able to restart his regular grass cutting business with even more success.

"Now I'm probably 70 percent maintenance again, and I'm up to 80 customers," Kutter says.

As someone who brought his company back from the brink of collapse, Kutter offers this advice to those facing today's financial tsunamis: "Always change and have a Plan B. Storms come and go. You just have to adapt to the situation." **L**

The author is a freelancer based in Pittsburgh, Pa.



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What I Know

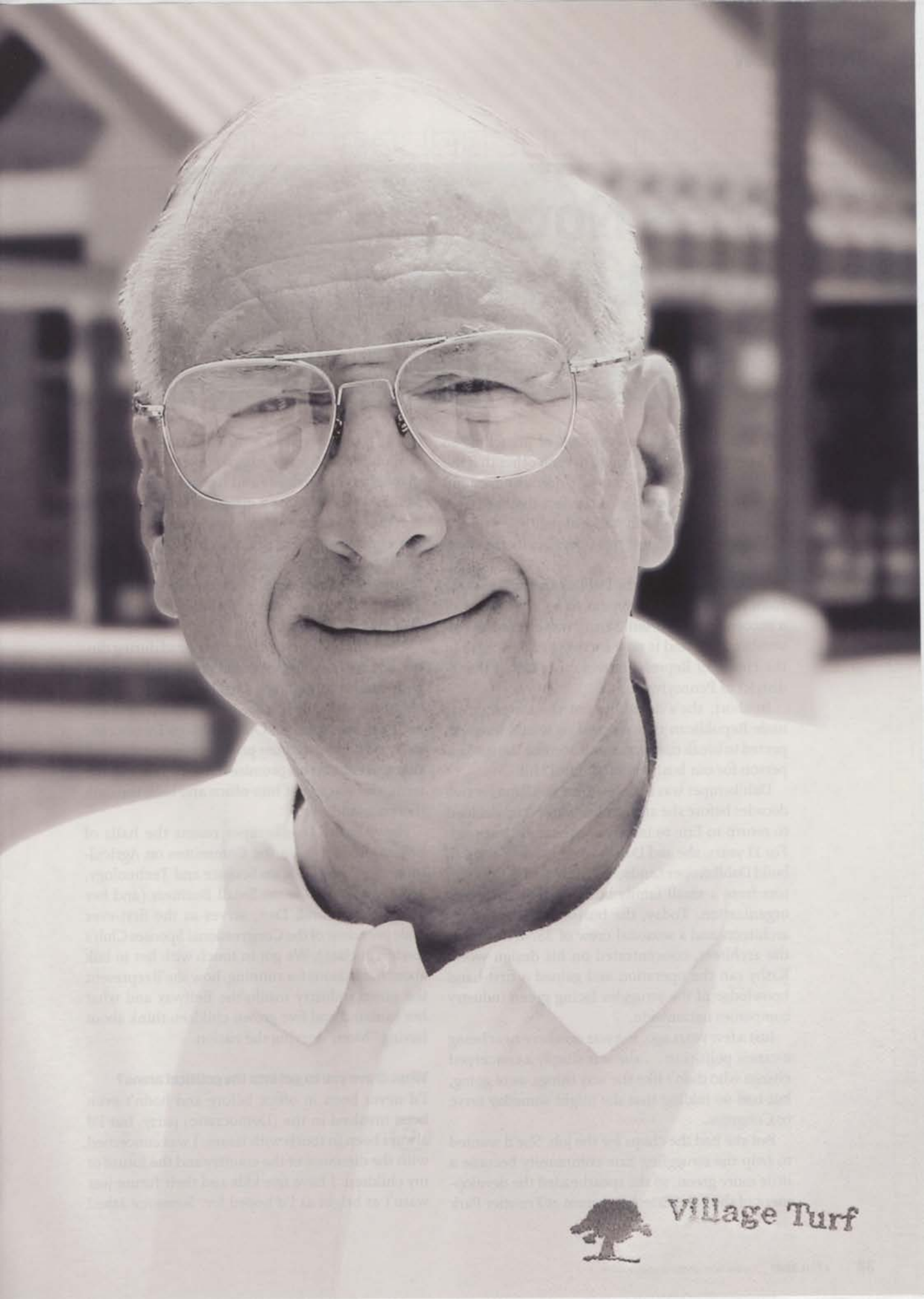
Interviewed by David Yochum

Lou Kobus

Landscape business owner, 60, Mount Vernon, Va.

- **I don't know if I'm the best guy to talk about balance.** I'm really kind of two-dimensional. Forty hours a week is a job, 80 hours a week is a hobby and 120 hours a week is what I do.
- **The biggest influence** in my life was my grandfather and uncle. My grandfather taught me the love of plants and love for living things. My uncle taught me survivability – he was a scout for General Patton's tanks in World War II.
- **I'm a history buff.** We're only 5 miles from Robert E. Lee's home and about 8 miles from Arlington National Cemetery, which was General Lee's property. Both Mount Vernon and the Lee Mansion are right off the Potomac River. And Annapolis isn't far away. Did you know that after he was done farming, George Washington would go over there with his buddies to gamble and drink?
- **The old joke is** the Marine Corps started in a bar and it will probably end in a bar. It's true too – they recruited men in a Philadelphia bar called Tun Tavern. I used to go out to a favorite bar with friends, but now I spend a lot of time writing.
- **Business takes more of my personal time now.** We start actual operations in the Washington, D.C., area by early March. By April, we're usually out there cutting. From Christmas to February, though, I have two or three months off.
- **During the summer,** I like to go out on the Potomac in my little Boston Whaler boat and cruise. I do that until it gets dark. It's peaceful – I don't bring my cell phone. Another one of my favorite things to do is at our operations in Mount Vernon, we have a front porch. I sit there in my rocker with a little bit of Maker's Mark and I quiet myself down.
- **I love ball games.** My house is just 8 miles south of D.C., so it's not hard for me to get to a Nationals or Redskins game. Mickey Mantle was probably my favorite sports hero. I met him a couple of times. He played until his knees gave out. Then there's Dick Butkus, Sam Hough and Mario Lemieux – guys that played hurt and defied the odds.
- **The progression of life** is that when you're young, you do everything. You go out and get motorcycles and cars and you play sports. Then as you get older, people need to be taken care of. I do a lot of mentoring right now. I love to see people develop and grasp new concepts.
- **It's good to keep in touch** with the core group of guys you grew up with. You get to see how their families developed. I'm "Uncle Lou" to a lot of kids.
- **Once a marine, always a marine.** You're part of a fraternity. As a retired officer, I still get invited to symposiums. And there's always a luncheon with retired marine officers in Washington, D.C., every month. A lot of things go on there. I get briefings, but they are definitely all unclassified.
- **What couldn't I live without?** Every morning I have some quiet time that I use for prayer. If that was taken away from me, I probably wouldn't be able to survive. **L**

Lou Kobus is the owner of Fox Run, a design/installation maintenance company that has annual revenue of \$5 million. His business clients are 60 percent government, 30 percent commercial and 10 percent residential.



Village Turf

She's Not Afraid to Get Her Hands Dirty

As an active member of the green industry, and now in Congress, **Kathy Dahlkemper** speaks her mind. BY PAT JONES

As an industry often accused of preaching to the choir – complaining to each other that the politicians in Washington just don't understand us – many have bemoaned the fact that we never seem to have a voice in national politics.

Now we do ... but it's not necessarily the voice you'd expect.

Congresswoman Kathy Dahlkemper, a Democrat from Erie, Pa., who happens to be a co-owner of a successful design/build firm, was elected in November 2008 and is now serving her first term in the House of Representatives on behalf of the 3rd district of Pennsylvania.

In short, she's definitely not the stereotypical male Republican that most of us would have expected to break the barrier and become the spokesperson for our business on Capitol Hill.

Dahlkemper was a professional dietician for two decades before she and her husband, Dan, decided to return to Erie to take over the family business. For 11 years, she and Dan worked hand-in-hand to build Dahlkemper Landscape Architects & Contractors from a small family business into a thriving organization. Today, the business employs four architects and a seasonal crew of 35. While Dan, the architect, concentrated on his design work, Kathy ran the operation and gained a first-hand knowledge of the struggles facing green industry companies nationwide.

Just a few years ago, she was nowhere near being a career politician ... she was simply a concerned citizen who didn't like the way things were going, but had no inkling that she might someday serve in Congress.

But she had the chops for the job. She'd wanted to help the struggling Erie community become a little more green, so she spearheaded the development of the Lake Erie Arboretum at Frontier Park

(LEAF) and served as a director of the thriving non-profit for 10 years. And, through her daily work managing the business and her volunteer service for LEAF, she became a master at bringing people together in public-private partnerships to benefit the community. Finally, she really understood small business because she'd been running one for more than a decade. In short, even though she didn't realize it as it was happening, she became a skilled politician.

The light bulb went off over her head during dinner one night when a spirited political discussion with friends turned into a decision to run against longtime incumbent Rep. Phil English. Between her fresh approach, an Obama-driven Democratic Party tidal wave and her primary opponent's decision to renege on his promise not to run for another term, she was swept into office and took the oath this past January.

Now, Kathy Dahlkemper roams the halls of power and serves on the Committee on Agriculture, the Committee on Science and Technology, and the Committee on Small Business (and her designer husband, Dan, serves as the first-ever male president of the Congressional Spouses Club's freshman class). We got in touch with her to talk about her reasons for running, how she'll represent the green industry inside the Beltway and what her husband and five grown children think about having "Mom" serving the nation.

What drove you to get into the political arena?

I'd never been in office before and hadn't even been involved in the (Democratic) party, but I'd always been in touch with issues. I was concerned with the direction of the country and the future of my children. I have five kids and their future just wasn't as bright as I'd hoped for. Someone asked

Congresswoman Kathy Dahlkemper, co-owner of Erie, Pa.-based Dahlkemper Landscape Architects & Contractors, was elected in November and is now serving her first term in the House of Representatives.



INTERVIEW

me to run and I told them they were absolutely crazy. I loved the (landscaping) business and the non-profit work I was doing. Life was good, so why would I get into politics?

But, I eventually decided to go for it. It really is a public service. It's a way to give back to my country, just like LEAF was a way to give back to my community.

My first issue was the war, but what became more of a driving force was the economic situation. The 3rd district was suffering. A lot of bright, talented kids left to go to college and couldn't come back because there were no jobs. I thought we could do better here. I figured I could be a great salesperson for the region.

How did your background in the green industry contribute?

It contributed a couple of ways. First, I'd learned that hard work pays off. That's rule No. 1 in the market. You're fighting Mother Nature, employee issues and uncertainty. You have to work hard. In my part of the country, you also have to make a living in eight months. You have

to put in a lot of time and realize that there's not a job you won't do. That paid off in the campaign and I think it will in Congress. Thanks to my background, I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty.

Second, it's all about relationships. Our (landscaping) business did very little advertising ... it was all word of mouth. We learned that if you treat your customers right and do a good job, they'll come back and tell others. That happens in politics too. You have to reach out to your constituents and let them know who you are and develop trust.

Finally, and this is much more current, is the environmental side of things. The green industry has been a leader in this at the commercial level. We've been good stewards and driven change from year to year. I want to take that and use that background in Congress to focus on green energy, improving streams and lakes and other conservation issues.

You're not the typical politically conservative owner in our industry. How does that factor into your leadership style?

Our industry depends on being good stewards. Most of the country doesn't

have enough water. How can we, in our industry, be better conservers of water? If anybody needs to conserve water, we do. Yesterday, I added an amendment in a bill that requires businesses to look at both (water) conservation and energy as they do financial sustainability analyses. Most people don't realize that irrigation systems are much more efficient ways to use water. We need to be leaders in getting that message out.

We as a country are very much in love with our yards. We're using more native plants and being a lot smarter with water and other inputs ... a lot of this philosophy comes from my husband, by the way.

We still have to have the science to prove we have the lowest impact. People outside the industry haven't seen the way we've changed in terms of quantity and application techniques. We really didn't have the science in the past. Now we do. We need to tell that story.

What do you miss most about working every day in our market?

Mostly I miss the people. We have a great group at the company that's like

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USE READER SERVICE #34

INTERVIEW

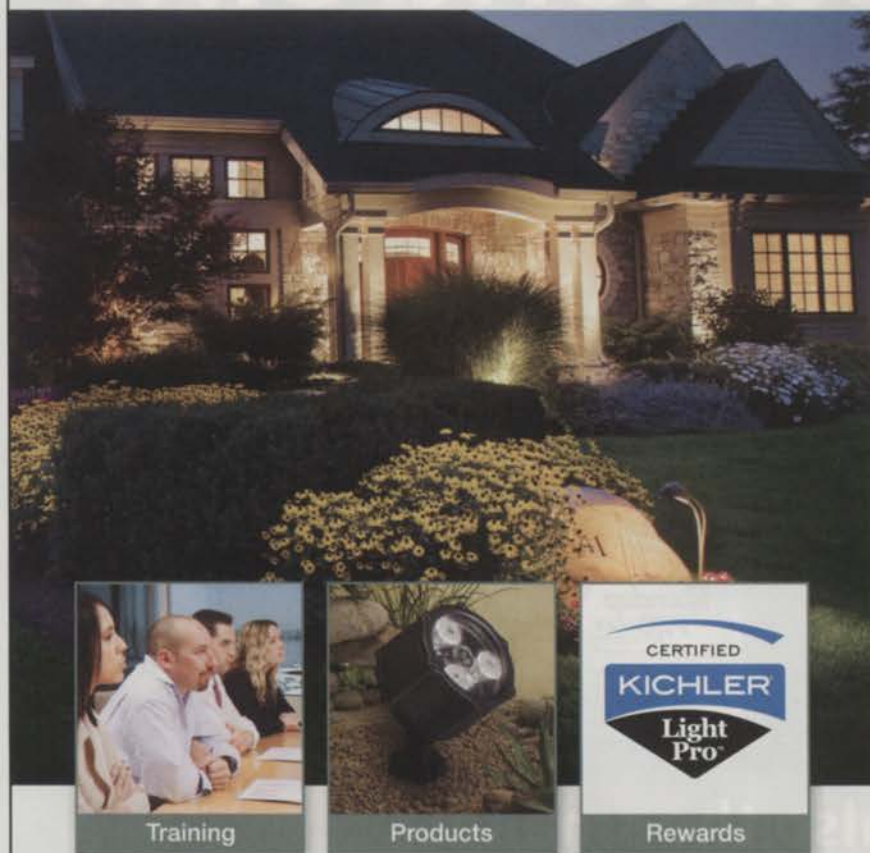
family. I miss the joking and knowing about their lives. I miss the relationships, the people we brought from other areas and other aspects of the day-to-day operation. I try to stop in (when I'm in Erie) but it's hard. Mostly, I miss being outside! D.C. is a maze of

tunnels! I seem to always be inside or underground.

Now that you're in office, what advice do you have for landscapers and other small businesspeople about having their voices heard inside the Beltway?

Every group of professionals – it doesn't matter if you're involved or not – they all have organizations. Be a member because there's strength in numbers. And know the issues. You need to be able to make your case. Finally, if someone comes to my office from my district, I'm really going to try to see them. Even though you, as a member of an association, have people working for you, there's something special about having a constituent along. You should make time to be there personally.

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What lessons did you learn in the green industry that you hope to pass along in Congress?

I'd tell them that it's a lot of very good small businesses that often started out with a lawn mower in the back of a truck. We are an industry that's evolving and can be on the forefront of what's really happening environmentally and otherwise in this country. But, bottom line, we're the essence of small business.

When you get time off – if ever – what do you do for fun?

I did get to go skiing a couple of times this winter. I just like to be outdoors, going hiking or bike riding and also visiting with my kids and my two grandchildren. I have another (grandchild) coming this spring. This job takes a lot of time, but you have to occasionally take a day for yourself.

Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share with our readers?

Any way that you can get involved you should do so. You don't have to run for office, but get involved. It's all important. I'm a true believer that it takes a lot of people to make change happen. And it's not just going to happen in D.C. or a state capitol. I'm really excited to be a part of changing government and helping the green industry. I hope people reading this will feel the same and accept the same challenge. 

The author is a contributing editor and columnist for *Lawn & Landscape* magazine. He can be reached at pjones@gie.net.

USE READER SERVICE #35

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WHAT NOW?

Landscape contractors remain skeptical of the new president and his policies. Can they find opportunity in Obama Nation?

BY TOM CRAIN

Although the Obama presidency is still in its infancy, small businesses are bracing for change. With a new administration representing a significant shift in both political parties (Republican to Democrat) and political leanings (right to left) coupled with an economy in one of the most severe recessions in U.S. history, there is much anticipation from the small business community as to what will happen next.

This is especially since small business does not typically lean in this direction – 77 percent of landscape business owners are Republican and 67 percent voted for John McCain, according to a recent *Lawn & Landscape* survey.

In a late February address to Congress after the \$787 billion stimulus bill passed, Obama spotlighted small business concerns, giving a few hints about his agenda: “I will not spend a single penny for the purpose of rewarding a single Wall Street executive, but I will do whatever it takes to help the small business that can’t pay its workers or the family that has saved and still can’t get a mortgage.”

Checking in with the green industry, there

is more skepticism than hope about Obama’s early pledges and first legislative steps in helping small businesses. A majority – 72 percent – think Obama will *not* help small business and the economy in his first year and a majority 55 percent say, “He was not my choice; I think his policies will negatively impact my business.”

“I was hopeful that the president and his people would instill some confidence in the public and get people spending money,” shares Joe Markell, president of Sunrise Lawn/Landscaping Services, a Northern Virginia company that employs 50 people. “With the market falling and people uncertain about what the future holds, it appears the opposite is happening.”

Another 36 percent of contractors say, “I’m optimistic he will bring about change and will spur customer spending.”

“I like what I am seeing in President Obama right now,” admits Alan Horne, owner of Yard Elves, a Northern Colorado-based landscape construction company. “Obama is off to a good start in fixing some of the larger problems in our economy, which can positively affect small business in the future.”



Party Favors

Who did you vote for in the November 2008 election?



Barack Obama
28%



John McCain
67%



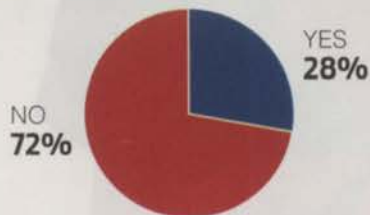
Other
5%

Which way do you typically lean when you vote – Republican or Democrat?

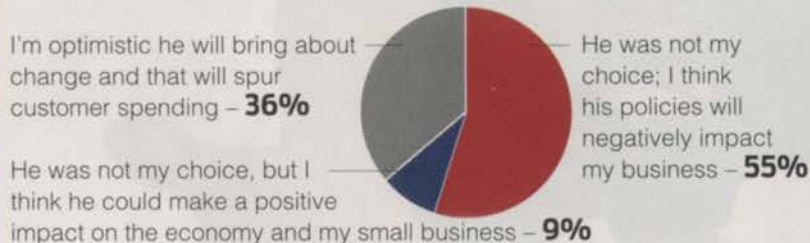


Taking Care of Business?

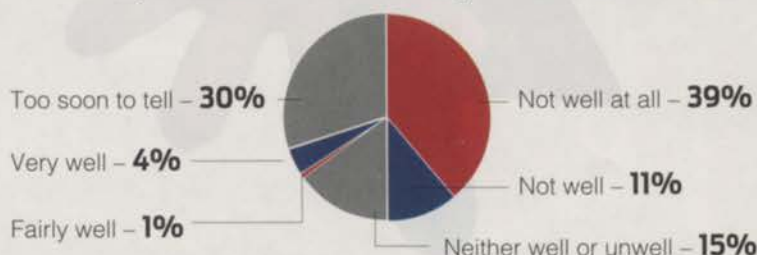
In your opinion, can President Barack Obama help small business and the economy in his first year?



How do you feel about Barack Obama becoming president in regards to how it will impact your small business?



In your opinion, how well has the current administration represented the interest of your business?



Tom Curdes, owner of Barron's Lawn Service/Weed Man in Toledo is also optimistic. "Although it's still too early to tell, Obama seems to be working his tail off to make something happen."

While the economic news is grim, a portion of the industry is optimistic. Since landscape contractors and the nation must adapt in the current situation, *Lawn & Landscape* conducted a survey and spoke to businesses across the country to gauge their feelings on some of these issues and find out where they see opportunity.

STIMULATING A NATION. Now that the stimulus bill (formally known as The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009) passed, is that the big fix that small businesses were looking for?

Most members of the national business news media and small business organizations think not.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* blog appearing soon after the passage of the \$787 billion stimulus plan summed it up: "Small business groups had rallied for an economic-stimulus plan packed with generous new tax breaks and other relief measures making it easier for businesses to grow and hire employees in this tough economy. They aren't too pleased with the outcome."

National Federation of Independent Business President Dan Danner says: "Certainly, some provisions are a step in the right direction. The stimulus includes an extension of increased small business expensing for 2009, relief from the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) and support for the Small Business Administration's lending programs. These provisions are a good start, but in the current economic climate, it's simply not enough."

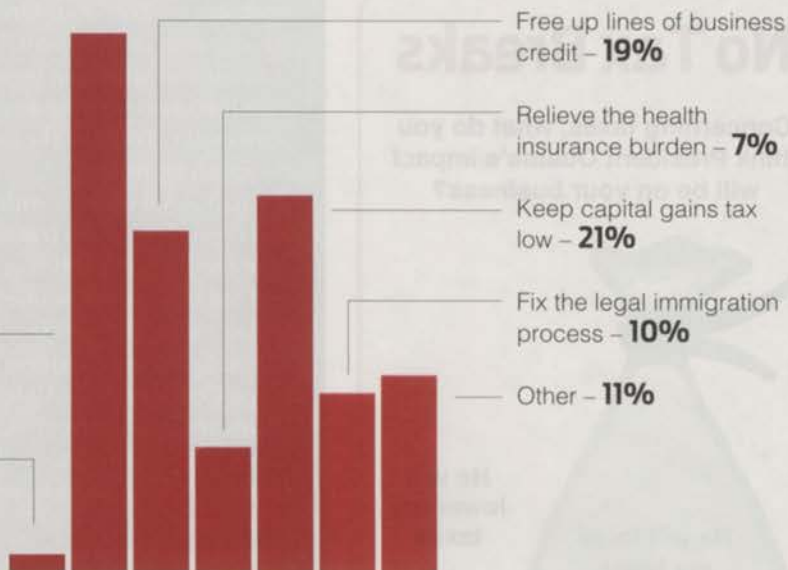
And do members of the green industry think the stimulus bill will help their businesses? Sixty-three percent say, "No," and another 30 percent are not sure.

The Big One

If you could pick one thing you think President Obama should focus on to help your business, which one would it be?

Eliminate employer matching federal withholding tax for businesses with less than nine people – **31%**

Give a one time federal tax rebate to hire a new employee – **1%**



WONDERING WHAT 'OTHER' INCLUDED?

Here are a few comments from survey respondents:

Instill a feeling of working together as a country, respecting other opinions and **supporting honest and respectful dialogue.**

Create sustainable, **long-term jobs and job growth.**

Get the federal government out of areas they have no business being in at the federal level. Let people be responsible for themselves and take responsibility for their choices and actions. **Live within your means.** If a small businessman must live within his means then so should the federal government, state government, local government and everyone else.

He needs to think about what can impact the consumer and small business. **Giving people an additional \$13 in their checks will not have an impact.**

Cut the business tax rate and **make the Bush tax cuts permanent.**

Provide some type of tax credit or **incentive for homeowners to invest in their homes/landscapes.**

Leave business alone. Failing businesses should be allowed to fail. No bailouts. Mismanagement is a costly mistake. I've made bad decisions and had to learn from them. Government should not intervene.

Get out of the way and **allow the bubble to burst.** Some people need to suffer and realize that we all need to work to earn our bread.

Get money into consumers' hands. He could have done this in a variety of ways like converting all home mortgages to 4 percent fixed rates. Within 30 days, most homeowners would have extra cash and at no detriment to anyone except the mortgage companies that took money from the taxpayers.

He must get the American people jobs, lower the cost of living, put a stop to the criminal ways of credit card companies and banks, and **make the playing field level** so Americans can afford to have small luxuries like a landscape contractor.

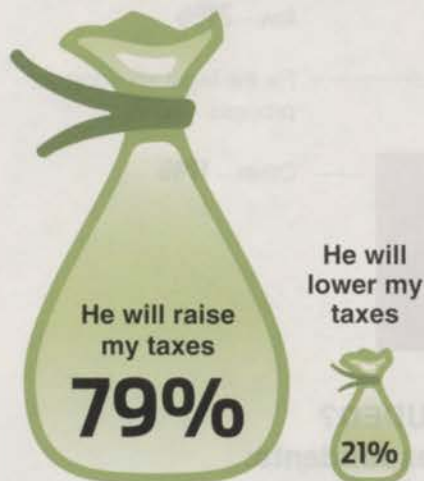
Leave small business alone. This is a free capitalist society. We do not need more government intervention in our business. **A well-run business shouldn't need government money,** nor should the government be in health care. We will be paying dearly (as will our children) for the spending that is occurring.

The best thing he could do for my business and my country would be for him to stay in the White House, lock the door, turn off the telephone, leave his Blackberry alone and **come out in four years.** He is the worst thing since FDR.



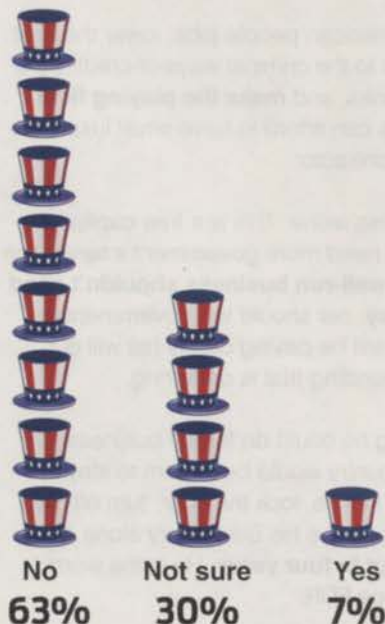
No Tax Breaks

Concerning taxes, what do you think President Obama's impact will be on your business?



Not Enough Incentive

Will the stimulus plan passed by Congress help your business?



Bob Grover, co-founder and president of Pacific Landscape Management in Portland, Ore., cautions about too much stimulus and government involvement. "Much of the 'stimulus package' is just wild government spending greatly expanding our debt," he says. "We got into this crisis because too many Americans overextended themselves with credit. To think the government will do better by doing the same thing is a bit ironic."

Challenged enough with the ever-changing government rules, laws and regulations on his business, Markell says: "I am very concerned about how the Stimulus Bill is creating a lot more government involvement and red tape, and how one party (the Democrats) is wielding its power without enough input from the other side (the Republicans)."

Eric Spalsbury, business development manager for Heads Up Landscape Contractors in Albuquerque with more than \$26 million in revenues and 300 employees, thinks the stimulus bill hasn't done nearly enough for his business: "I don't think this goes far enough to really help small businesses as much as it could. We fear our business taxes will increase."

And Spalsbury isn't alone – 79 percent of landscape contractors expect tax increases as a result of Obama's election.

TAX INCENTIVES. The stimulus bill contains tax provisions aimed at small businesses. It sets aside \$730 million for the Small Business Administration, which helps small businesses obtain loans. It also contains grant programs, tax benefits and other initiatives that could help small businesses.

Businesses that drew less than \$15 million in revenue are eligible for refunds by applying losses in 2008 and 2009 to the previous five years' taxable income, instead of the two years allowed before. The package also provides \$2.2 billion in grants for research through the Small Business Innovation Research and the Small Business Technology Transfer programs. Plans to modernize agency's computer systems, boost local and state programs, expand broadband and improve energy efficiency also could present opportunities for small businesses through government contracts.

The stimulus bill also includes a number of energy incentives aimed at both individuals and businesses, including increases in the section 25C residential energy property credit, the section 25D residential energy efficiency property credit, and the energy investment credit.

"One way Obama could economically stimulate the green industry and green jobs is to include policies for landscaping services under the Energy section," says Horne. "We all know a properly designed and installed landscape can reduce energy bills significantly."

Grover believes strongly that raising taxes on small businesses that make more than \$250,000 is not fair. "The current stimulus package will have to be paid for somehow, and it will certainly be through tax increases," he says. "Saying nobody needs to make more than \$250,000 is the first step toward America becoming a socialist country. That will not be good for business."

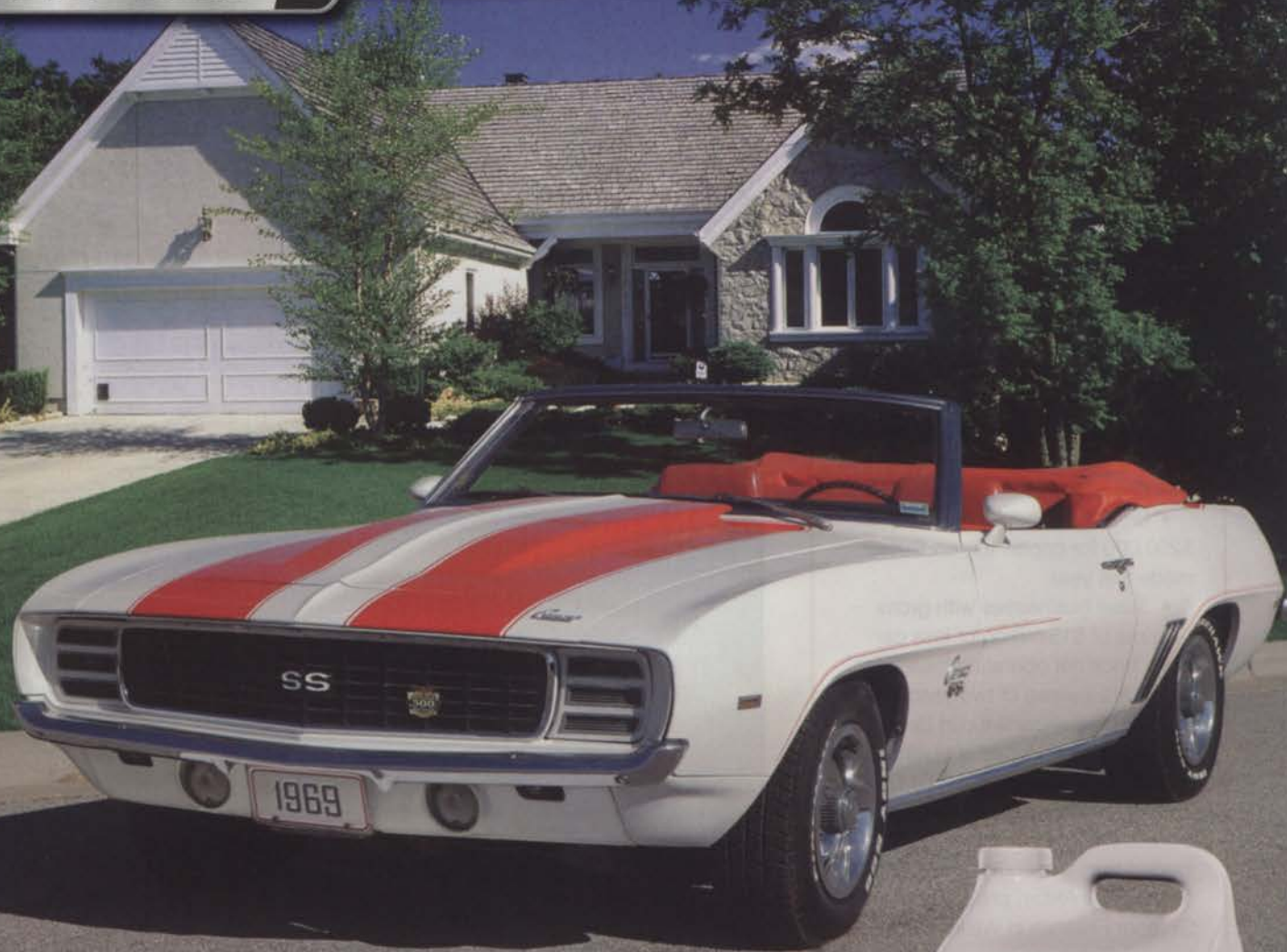
"Cutting taxes has always proven to stimulate spending and would really help small businesses," adds Markell. "Right now I don't see a lot that will help me directly. It is not good policy to penalize people if they are successful. I am for everyone paying their fair share of taxes, but we need to keep this money in the hands of the people who can create jobs

40

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Give Me a (Tax) Break

Under the economic stimulus package, the Senate Finance Committee reports:

- Businesses can write off 50 percent of the cost of new equipment purchased in 2009.
- Small businesses can write off \$250,000 for capital expenditures made this year.
- Small businesses with gross receipts of \$15 million or less can carry back net operating losses for five years instead of two years.
- Some companies can defer taxes on certain types of business debt repurchased before 2011.

But many landscape business owners think this is "more back loaded than it is front loaded," points out Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes in Walkersville, Md. "His adding these tax deductions may help my company but not until tax time next year."

The Huffington Post's George Cloutier, a small business consultant, agrees. He wrote: "The stimulus bill includes various minor tax cuts for small business, as well as additional depreciation and write-off incentives, but these benefits can't be collected until at least 12 to 15 months from now in 2010 when small businesses file tax returns," he says. "Of course, this is assuming they haven't foreclosed by then and that they made any money in one of the worst years on record for small business."

and are willing to spend it to make things better. The less bureaucracy, the better. Let the people in the trenches use their money to help us get out of this mess."

Horne, on the other hand, believes that government needs to step in – in a big way – to save small businesses. He has had to take out a second mortgage to keep his business afloat. "I am all for the government guaranteeing private lending to small businesses at affordable interest rates, cutting or waiving taxes for small businesses for at least four years, and providing grants to existing businesses. Some of these stimulus elements would economically energize existing small business owners who have been through hell over the last few years."

Spalsbury believes there is too much pork in the stimulus package and not enough money for legitimate projects to keep enough viable companies working. "Obama needs to provide greater accessibility to credit for businesses and include more tax incentives for businesses," he says.

ON THE HOME FRONT. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is designed to address two groups of homeowners: those who are current on payments but have high interest rates and not enough equity to qualify for refinance, and those who are at risk of losing their homes. The housing plan, which is estimated to cost from \$50 to \$100 billion, also intends to provide \$200 billion in additional financial backing to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to increase money available for home lending, something Congress hopes will particularly encourage first-time homeowners.

"The residential hardscape industry is a luxury service – it's expensive, economy-driven and something people *can* live without," says Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes in Walkersville, Md. "It's my finding that anytime there's ever the slightest slowdown in the economy, our industry is one of the first to feel it."


"Obama has made it clear that he is all for getting things back off of the ground and putting money back into the economy," Aksar adds. "It's too early to tell, but I hope so. His mortgage plan is something that very well could help my company."

With a second business in real estate, Horne likes the fact that Obama's attention is on the housing market. He is convinced the \$8,000 new homeowner credit will assist with stimulating the housing market bringing more than 300,000 new home-buyers into the market nationwide. "From a landscaper's perspective, I believe this credit will encourage new homeowners to spend money," says Horne. "But, I don't believe homeowners will spend money on landscaping, which is considered to be a luxury item, unless there is incentive to do so."

Markell adds: "One of the biggest things to help the housing market is to lower the interest rates. Homeowners would be able to refinance and get some of that money out into improving their properties, including landscaping. This is one area the president should really pay a lot of attention to."

"First time home buyer incentives will help, like providing 4 percent interest rates to homeowners if they qualify for a new loan," says Spalsbury. "This would free up more disposable income to feed the economy including landscape projects and maintenance. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. It will take time."

WORKER REFORMS. When it comes to employment-related issues, the green industry is waiting to see what will happen with both immigration



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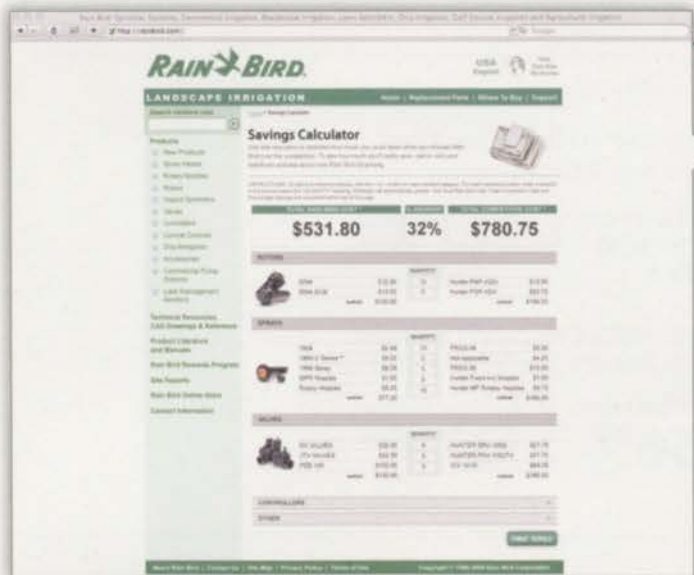
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Rain Bird Model	Qty	Rain Bird List	Total	Hunter Model	Qty	Hunter List	Total	Est. Savings
ESP-Modular	1	\$127.00	\$127.00	PC300I	1	\$162.00	\$162.00	\$35.00
Module Upgrade	1	\$50.00	\$50.00	Module Upgrade	2	\$47.00	\$94.00	\$44.00
5004 Rotor	10	\$12.00	\$120.00	PGP-ADJ	10	\$19.95	\$199.50	\$79.50
1804 Spray	10	\$2.48	\$24.80	PROS-04	10	\$3.35	\$33.50	\$8.70
DV Valve	7	\$22.50	\$157.50	SRV-100G	7	\$27.75	\$194.25	\$36.75
Rotary Nozzle	10	\$5.25	\$52.50	MP Rotator	10	\$9.75	\$97.50	\$45.00
TOTAL			\$531.80	TOTAL			\$780.75	\$248.95

YOU SAVE \$248.95*

Typical Commercial Installation

Rain Bird Model	Qty	Rain Bird List	Total	Hunter Model	Qty	Hunter List	Total	Est. Savings
ESP6LX 120V	1	\$356.00	\$356.00	ICM800PL	1	\$379.00	\$379.00	\$23.00
Module Upgrade	1	\$129.00	\$129.00	Module Upgrade	1	\$140.00	\$140.00	\$11.00
5004 SAM Rotor	120	\$13.50	\$1,620.00	PGP-ADV	120	\$25.75	\$3,090.00	\$1,470.00
1806 Spray	40	\$9.29	\$371.60	PROS-06	40	\$10.50	\$420.00	\$44.40
PEB 100 Valve	16	\$103.00	\$1,648.00	ICV 101G	16	\$99.00	\$1,584.00	\$64.00
TOTAL			\$4,128.60	TOTAL			\$5,613.00	\$1,484.40

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and, particularly, health care reform.

President Obama affirmed that his administration is preparing to push for a new round of comprehensive immigration reforms. "It's going to take some time to move that forward, but I'm very committed to making it happen," he says.

"It will be interesting to see what happens with immigration as the high unemployment rate does not help the cause for a guest worker program or amnesty," says Grover. "I appreciate the president's pledge to provide legal status to immigrant workers but the sentiment in America is against it and there are too many other issues in crisis to allow this to come to the forefront. I believe nothing will be done for several years, so we will be in limbo once again."

Markell sees little hope with immigration issues in the near future. "In Northern Virginia, it is difficult to find people on a consistent basis when you need them," he says. "I don't have much hope anything will be resolved in the next year or so."

According to the International Franchise Association (IFA), Congress and the Obama Administration need to take steps to ensure small business owners can afford to provide health insurance coverage for their employees. It recommends that by promoting small business insurance pooling options and reducing costly state benefit mandates this could help small businesses make health insurance available to more employees.

PLANET believes health care reform has consistently been a top concern for employers and employees in the green industry struggling with spiraling health care costs. The association is taking a similar stand to IFA. "We advocate pooling arrangements, allowing small businesses to purchase group-rate health coverage for their employees under the umbrella of a trade or professional association," says spokesperson Tom Delaney.

Spalsbury likes PLANET's stand on health care reform. "Anything that will bring costs down benefits us," he says. "It's hard to know just where Obama stands on this issue. So far, it's all just rhetoric."

WEIGHING IN ON OBAMA. Grover cautions about too much government involvement which he sees happening with the Obama administration: "Government is not the answer to all that ails us, but everyone is looking for a hand out. Who is going to pay for it? My business will not grow this year and may even shrink due to the economy, but we are prepared as we did not leverage ourselves in the good times. The economy is cyclical, and government's attempt to avoid the downturn never works and is always expensive."

"It's probably still too early to tell what effects Obama's policies have had on small business," adds Horne. "If Obama saves hundreds of small businesses two years from now from his actions today, then he has succeeded. As much as we all want our situations remedied quickly, we should also realize there are a lot of small businesses that may benefit in the future from the seeds that are planted today."

As the American economy – and Obama's response to it – continue to evolve, so too will landscape contractors. *Lawn & Landscape* magazine will continue to report on the new administration's impact on the green industry, and how landscape professionals are finding success in this new, and sometimes uncertain, political landscape. **L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Akron, Ohio.

Forcing the Issues

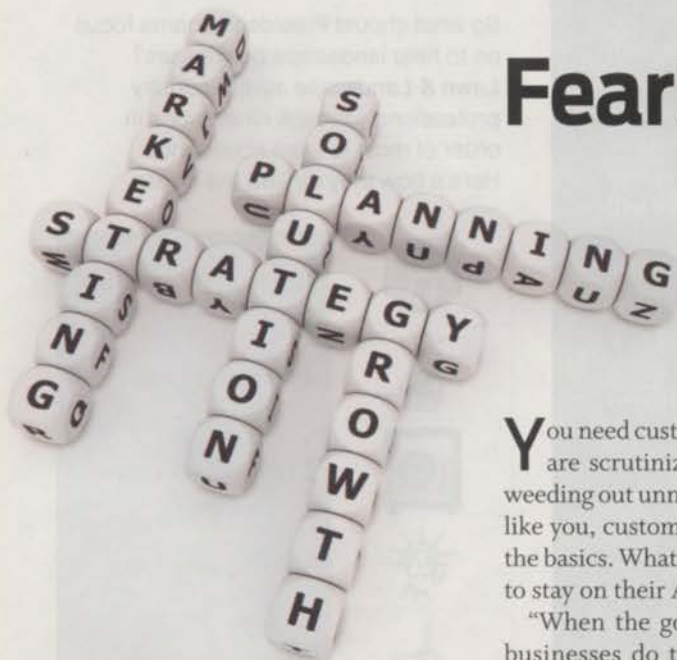
So what should President Obama focus on to help landscape businesses? *Lawn & Landscape* asked industry professionals to rank nine issues in order of most to least importance. Here's how they ranked the issues.

	1 Economy/Recession
	2 Lowering taxes
	3 National security
	4 Immigration
	5 Energy policy
	6 Health care policy
	7 Housing situation
	8 Education policy
	9 Foreign policy



Check out the April Web Exclusives for more information about President Obama and his affect on small business. Also, visit the *Lawn & Landscape* Forum at www.lawnandlandscape.com/forum to read participants' views on Obama's impact on the industry.

MARKETING IN A TOUGH ECONOMY



Fearless Marketing

Now's the time to pull out all the stops. Marketing your business in a down economy could be the ticket to sustainability.

Lawn & Landscape talks to three professionals who share their strategies.

Marketing Staples

Follow these keys to building a strong marketing program from this month's briefcase contractors.

- 1.) Know how current customers found you.
- 2.) Remember to keep wooing your long-time clients.
- 3.) Return to strategies that were successful in the past.
- 4.) Diversify so you can sell deeper into your existing customer base.

You need customers. And lately, they are scrutinizing their budgets and weeding out unnecessary expenses. Just like you, customers are getting back to the basics. What is your company doing to stay on their A-list?

"When the going gets tough, some businesses do their best marketing," says Gene Fairbrother, a consultant and spokesman for the National Association for the Self-Employed. "It's survival." Cutting out marketing in good times or bad is like putting up a closed-for-business sign, wiping your trucks clean of their neat logos and ditching the company uniform policy. Unthinkable.

"You can't cut marketing – that's an absolute death wish," Fairbrother says. According to Ad-Ology research analyzing marketing and advertising trends in more than 370 industries, business owners recognize this fact. Sixty-seven percent of respondents will spend the same or more on marketing this year; more than half say now is an opportune time to gain market share.

But how? And, just as important, how much must a business spend on marketing efforts? There is no magic number, and no formula for the best way to go about the business of retaining and attracting customers. One company loves its direct marketing program; its competitor gets results from advertisements in a shelter magazine. Another business relies on customer referrals. The price tag on each initiative varies.

"You spend what you need to," Fairbrother says. Two percent at a \$5 million firm is a far bigger budget than the same percentage at a \$150,000 startup. "You may need to increase your marketing budget and cut in other areas."

"Set benchmarks for your marketing program and determine what infrastructure will be necessary," Fairbrother adds, noting that a goal to increase business by 20 percent, if realized, could pose a real problem without the manpower to support new customers. "In good times or bad, you must have the infrastructure to work along with your marketing plan."

Another rule of thumb, Fairbrother reminds: Speed kills. "If you create business so fast that you do not have the ability to provide quality, you'll lose those customers and end up right back where you were before."

Marketing is an art that requires striking a balance between speculation – how much new business a campaign may bring in – and planning, in terms of preparing to service new customers and keep the old ones coming back for more.

Lawn & Landscape talked marketing with three landscape contractors who operate companies in different revenue categories. Here is how industry peers will budget for and execute promotions this year. **L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Bay Village, Ohio.



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Range & Repetition

As Aaron Sheehan watches customer acquisition costs soar, he considers more grassroots ways of marketing his business so he can win A-list customers.

“We always get a better response from those prospects from lists we create.”

– AARON SHEEHAN

When Gro Lawn secured business from half of the people who responded to its direct mail campaign, Aaron Sheehan figured his cost per acquired customer was about \$80. The next year, he ramped up his direct-mail efforts from 5,000 pieces to 65,000 promos, blanketing his Fort Worth community. His response rate was 75 percent lower and customer acquisition cost him twice as much. But the real problem was that Sheehan didn't have the manpower to service all of these customers.

“I learned a lesson,” says Sheehan, who boosted staff and now employs three full-time workers and one to two seasonal workers. This year, he will mail 17,000 direct mail pieces, targeting neighborhoods where the Gro Lawn crew has collected property information. Customers who cancelled services or rejected estimates in the past will also get mail from Gro Lawn. “We always get a better response from those prospects from lists we create,” Sheehan says. And he's still frustrated with the rising cost for customer acquisition: It has quadrupled in the last three years.

Sheehan has increased business by 15 to 20 percent every year since starting Gro Lawn in 2000. Then, he offered a

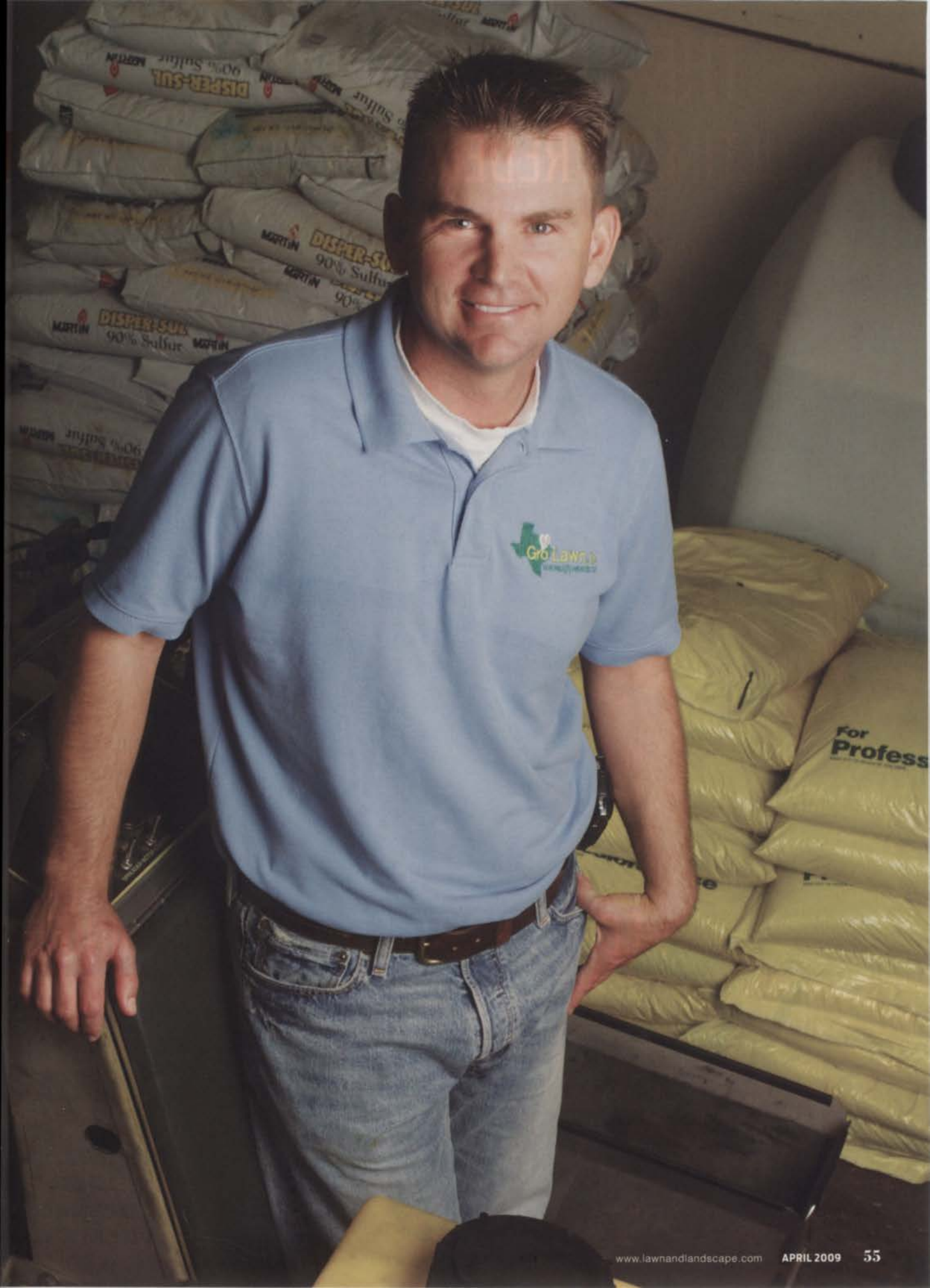
full array of maintenance services, and his company was essentially a side-gig while he finished school. During that time, he decided to change his area of study to horticulture and grow the business. Now his customer list is 540 strong.

Three years ago, Sheehan dropped maintenance to focus on lawn care, expanding his client base by networking with landscapers who referred clients to Sheehan for the service. These valuable referrals have produced big account wins for Sheehan.

“I gave estimates the other day and the smallest property was 33,000 square feet,” Sheehan says of a typical afternoon. The accounts keep getting bigger. “I think that is because I built a network of relationships with people in mowing and landscaping, and they do some higher-end homes and recommend our service to their clients.”

Rather than relying on customer referrals, which Sheehan says are easier to acquire from new clients than long-timers, he prefers to see referrals from other contractors. That takes time.

“Networking is a slow process because you have to build landscapers' confidence in you, but we have found



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that after a couple of years, some of them come to us and say, 'I was treating these lawns and I'm tired of dealing with it,'" Sheehan relates. "We take over that job for them."

Sheehan cultivates relationships with landscape maintenance companies by crafting special e-newsletters for this audience. "We send them notifications telling them what pests or conditions to look out for," Sheehan says. This is Gro Lawn's way of staying in front of its contractor "customers," which feed Sheehan's business.

Additionally, Gro Lawn diligently collects every customer's e-mail address and updates this database regularly. "That requires constant management," Sheehan remarks. These e-mails are especially helpful for marketing add-on services, such as fire ant control, aeration, tree and shrub care, and grub control, which Gro Lawn began offering last year. By adding grub control as an elective to its total lawn care package, Gro Lawn added \$80,000 to its revenues, Sheehan says.

"Our customer value is double that of many competitors," Sheehan says. "We upsell clients as much as we can without putting pressure on them."

Monthly e-mails give customers watering recommendations and announce disease alerts. The customer education is free, and it keeps Gro Lawn top of mind with existing clients. Sheehan also makes sure every client receives a phone call from Gro Lawn the day before service. Technicians inquire about customers' special concerns for the property, and they follow the service with another call.

Keeping in contact with clients has helped Gro Lawn maintain customers over the years. By early February, the company's renewal rate was only off 5 to 10 percent compared to last year.

Sheehan also makes sure that Gro Lawn is easy to find, and since more people use Google for phone numbers today, he wants his Web site to be on the top of the search engine's results list. It's usually in the top five. Essentially, Gro Lawn invested in SEO (search engine

Gro Lawn

Principal: Aaron Sheehan

Location: Fort Worth, Texas

Established: 2000

2008 Revenue: \$420,000

Customer/Service mix:

residential; lawn care, tree and shrub care, perimeter pest, grub and fire ant control

Employees: 4

Marketing history: Direct mail; networking with landscape contractors for lawn care referrals; education via e-newsletters; a robust Web site; referral coupons; signage

Marketing today: Continued direct mail, targeting cancellations and rejects; real estate-type signage at neighborhood entrances; e-newsletters; and improved contractor networking.

optimization) by hiring a company to design its Web site with searchability in mind. "The Internet has been a really good way to generate business," Sheehan says. Gro Lawn acquires 25 to 60 customers annually that way.

This year, Sheehan will continue his direct mail campaign, targeting those with the highest probability of responding – canceled customers and those who have rejected Gro Lawn estimates in the past. He will stake 300 to 500 real estate-like signs at neighborhood entrances to advertise service. (He knows the city will remove some of them.) He will continue e-mail newsletters and networking with contractors – now there are 10 companies that Sheehan "partners" with to gain referrals.

"The economy is challenging us," Sheehan says, "but our fingers are crossed for our marketing campaign in 2009."

The author is a freelance writer based in Bay Village, Ohio.

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The Specialist

Spear's Landscape thinks artificial turf is a sleeper service that could go over big if they get the word out, and the company is prepared to more than double growth this year.

Homeowners at the Minneapolis home and garden show were stumped and intrigued by the Spear's Landscape exhibit. The artificial turf looked real and the plant material looked fake. Showgoers asked if Jeffrey Spear's homegrown company was a national firm.

Looks are everything – at least for ushering customers in the door. But solid reputations are built by backing up perceived value with quality and service. A job well done gets talked about. And word of mouth is exactly how Spear, president of Spear's Landscape, garnered some of the company's most innovative design/build projects.

Aside from customer referrals as the main marketing engine, Spear's Landscape advertised lightly in

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Jobsite Name	Coat Code	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Total
Brentwood Job	Integration	7:38	7:35	7:53	--	--	23:06
Cashew Job	Planting	--	--	--	7:58	7:49	15:47
		7:38	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:49	38:53

Regular Hours **38.53**
Overtime Hours - 0.0
Double Time Hours - 0.0

Signature: Bill Kemp

WEEKLY TIME SHEET

Employee: Bill Kemp

Day	Start	Stop	Job
Mon	7:00	3:30	Integration
Tue			
Wed			
Thurs			
Fri			



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“We are trying to cater to people and their needs, so if a job makes sense, we’ll be flexible on price.” – JEFFREY SPEAR

local newspapers before. This year, he ramped up his overall marketing campaign, set aside 8 to 10 percent of his budget and jumped into the trade show circuit – his company will display its booth at eight shows. With a full-time designer on staff now, a robust Web site, a promising niche service in artificial turf and a full-throttle marketing plan, Spear is prepared to invest in earning business this year.

“We know in this market we are going to do anything and everything to stay busy and successful,” Spear says. “If that means we need to spend more money to get that work, then we’ll do it. The investment will pay off with more brand awareness and more exposure.”

Spear says presentation is the company’s No. 1 marketing tool. Back-to-the-basics qualities like honesty, timeliness and cleanliness separate Spear’s Landscape from competitors, he says.

“We are a high-end company and

those qualities are important in this day and age,” notes Spear, adding that clients who have been burned approach landscapers with an appetite for class. “We have really tailored our company’s image as very professional.”

Because Spear focuses on high-end design/installation, selling one solid job from a marketing lead is a worthwhile return on investment. Spear invests in Internet pay-per-click advertising with Google and Yahoo, spending about \$1,000 a month during the high season. He says the unbranded advertisement – content that provides tips and ideas – is most successful. “The little articles draw people to our Web site,” he says. Spear will continue advertising this way, educating the public for free, and paying for every click.

Additionally, he’ll focus on getting every job the company bids. “We are trying to cater to people and their needs, so if a job makes sense, we’ll be flexible,” he says, noting that “holding out” in this market could be problematic. “Cover your costs and move forward,” he says.

The initial investment in trade show presence can be significant; Spear spent in the neighborhood of \$10,000 for his booth. But the Minneapolis home and garden show produced promising leads for the company’s artificial turf offering, which Spear expects will be the company’s sleeper service. He has not marketed it at all until this year.

For artificial turf, Spear is mainly targeting homeowners with small properties, people with swimming pools, golfers who want their own putting greens, families with play systems where underlying turf takes a beating. “Our product has a head fall rating of 10 to 12 feet,” Spear adds. He’ll be marketing this safety factor. “It’s good for children.

“Artificial turf has come a long way

from your basic indoor/outdoor carpet, so to speak,” Spear continues. In fact, he has given crewmembers instructions to meet him at the house with the artificial turf. They drive right by it without stopping; they can’t tell the difference from a distance.

“It’s a specialized niche service and not every landscape company can install it,” Spear adds. He plans to launch a direct marketing campaign, and send out mass e-mails to his client list and area landscapers who might refer their clients to Spear for the service. Golf events will also provide opportunity to promote the product.

Spear figures the artificial turf will balloon into bigger projects. “If we can turn someone’s back yard into a personal amusement park or venue with a pool, putting green, maybe a basketball court...” he muses. “In this type of economy, it’s tough to go to the cabin on vacation. People are looking to spend their money at home.”

Spear is counting on it, and he is well aware that even the economy for spending at home is tight. But he’s optimistic – headstrong, even. Considering the total landscape industry in Minnesota, he figures his \$1.4 million projected “market share” for 2009 is not a terribly large piece of pie. He can taste it already.

If anything, the marketing money Spear spends this year will earn him business once homeowners loosen their purse strings.

“We’re showing customers we’re here for the long haul,” he says of increased exposure through marketing. “We are a company that’s growing in hard times, and if we can get through this and move forward, we’ll only be stronger when the economy gets better.” **L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Bay Village, Ohio.

Spear’s Landscape

Principal: Jeffrey Spear

Location: Otsego, Minn.

Established: 2001

2008 Revenue: \$600,000

Customer/Service mix: high-end residential; landscape design and installation; artificial turf; lighting

Employees: 7

Marketing history: Web site; customer referrals; Internet pay-per-click advertisements

Marketing today: Increasing more of the same types of marketing, showing customers “we’re here for the long haul.”



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LARGE – MORE THAN \$2 MILLION

BY KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE

Mariani Landscapes gave two run-of-the-mill marketing strategies a high-class spin in order to appeal to a sophisticated client base. Direct mail and customer referral bonuses have never been part of Mariani's repertoire – until this year.

"Basically, we answered the phone for years and years, and we were successful," says Frank Mariani, president of the Lake Bluff, Ill.-based firm. Mariani, in a sense, is the godfather of landscaping in his region. He's a mentor to national companies that look toward his business as an example of setting high standards, changing with the times and establishing a rock solid reputation.

But a tough economy can break even the strong ones, Mariani knows. He has been through recessions and, in his 36 years, made mistakes.

"In the past, I took work just to take work, and I basically matched people's price," Mariani says – this was years back and before the Mariani name carried the same



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Mariani has always attracted cream-of-the-crop clients the old-fashioned way: lots of face time and via referrals. But Mariani is branching out this year with 'neighbor' programs to include clients in the marketing process.



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USE READER SERVICE #42

Midwest Landscapes
Principal: Frank Martin
Location: Lake Bluff, Ill.
Established: 1999
2008 Revenue: \$20 million
Customer Service: Excellent
and excellent customer service
multi-family landscape
Dutch maintenance
and excellent customer service
holiday care
Employee: 100 year-round
300 seasonal
Marketing Strategy: word of
mouth, targeted advertising
Marketing Today's Market
growth and customer loyalty
same-day service in certain
high-traffic markets like
restaurants and hotels throughout
the week — a proven alternative

"In the past, I took
work just to take
work and I basically

Mariani Landscape

Principal: Frank Mariani

Location: Lake Bluff, Ill.

Established: 1959

2008 Revenue: \$33 million

Customer/Service mix: high-end residential, commercial and multi-family; landscape design/build, maintenance, seasonal retail, estate operations and holiday decor

Employees: 100 year-round; 380 seasonal

Marketing history: word of mouth; targeted mailings

Marketing today: referral rewards and promotions touting same-day service in certain neighborhoods, meaning less emissions and noise throughout the week – a greener alternative.

“In the past, I took work just to take work, and I basically matched people’s price. I could have diminished the brand. We won’t play that game now.”

– FRANK MARIANI

weight as one like Rolls Royce. The company had always been one people trusted and associated with quality. “I could have diminished the brand,” he says. “We won’t play that game now.”

Mariani has a different strategy. Back to those two marketing methods: He designed a neighbor program that rewards clients with a \$250 bonus for referring a customer who signs a contract with Mariani. To be honest, he wasn’t convinced that a cash incentive would excite his clients. And, in the end, he suspects the success of this program – the company has added a couple dozen customers to its list – is because his loyal clients enjoyed serving as pseudo-scouts.

“I think people appreciated being recognized and becoming part of our team,” Mariani says. “It turned into a fun project for clients to recommend us and some of them donated the reward by buying flower pots for the school or a holiday display for their church or synagogue. A lot of goodwill happened then and is happening now because of that program.”

Referrals are critical in this business, Mariani says. “When you are working with la crème de la crème, chances are, it’s not going to be through *Yellow Pages*, it’s going to be at a cocktail party or a social event where people are talking about landscaping,” he relates. “In our case, someone may drive past a project where our trucks stand out and they see a great job. That is what we depend on.”

Meanwhile, the direct marketing campaign Mariani launched this year will focus on specific addresses identified by the Mariani salespeople as fitting prospects for the company, as “our type of business, rather than blanketing an entire city.” Focus is key, and so is the design of the piece. It must reflect the look and the feel of Mariani. Branding in this way, over time, secures and sustains business.

And holding on to valuable clients in times like this was never more important, Mariani points out. His company

will continue efforts to communicate with clients regularly, meet with them face-to-face, entertain their feedback on projects and simply be visible. “The easiest piece of business is the business you already have,” Mariani says, simply. “You work so hard to get new business, and in the meantime you lose existing clients.”

This year, Mariani began mining its existing book of business much earlier, in October, to ensure clients were signed up for services in 2009. “We are running three or four times ahead of our pace with the renewals,” Mariani reports.

The Web continues to be an increasingly important venue for marketing services, and Mariani says e-mail communications are convenient for clients and “green.” (He reminds customers of this, too.) One promotion announced in Mariani’s e-newsletter encouraged clients to ask neighbors to sign up for service because Mariani could service them the same day, reduce travel time and, therefore, carbon emissions and fuel. What’s more, booking several neighbors’ service the same day reduces overall mower and blower noise in a neighborhood by confining it to one day. The cherry on top: the e-mail announcement didn’t waste paper or postage.

“Those kinds of promotions that spread the word about what you are doing are green and, quite frankly, the pennies do add up these days,” he says. And the infectious message to get all the neighbors involved means add-on clients for Mariani.

Ultimately, the key is to be creative, be visible and stay true to your brand, Mariani emphasizes. “We are choosing not to participate in this recession,” he says, simply. “It doesn’t have to be a bad year. We are not afraid to tell people we are looking for business, and we appreciate our customers for being a part of our team.” **L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Bay Village, Ohio.

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White Noise

Leaf blower use is still a hot-button issue in areas across the U.S. But with improved machine performance and responsible operation, noise complaints may be put to rest.

BY JULIE COLLINS

To landscape professionals, the hum of a leaf blower starting up in the morning is the sound of productivity and profitability. But to many property owners, it's a roar, a nuisance, and a harbinger of noise and air pollution that should be avoided at all costs. More than 30 years after the first leaf blower made its way to the U.S., the battle still rages over what many landscape professionals consider one of the most effective tools in their arsenals.


Whether they're used at residences or on the grounds of commercial properties for gathering leaves in the fall or for cleanup year-round, blowers often raise the hackles of people living or working nearby, more so than other types of outdoor equipment.

"Some people tell you it's dust and air pollution, other people say it's noise pollution. Everybody has their own pet peeves," says Daniel Hanson, president of SCLM Co., a commercial and residential landscape maintenance firm in Laverne, Calif.

Blower ban advocates argue that gas-powered leaf blowers emit pollutants and spread particulate matter, which has been shown to aggravate asthma

Blower ban challengers in the industry might face an uphill climb as regulations tighten in certain states.





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and cause respiratory problems. Yet one of the biggest grievances people raise involves blower noise.

"Blowers operate in a frequency range that's irritating to humans," explains Kris Kiser, executive vice president, Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI).

"Old blowers have a high-pitched whine not common on other products," adds Larry Will, retired vice president and consultant for outdoor power equipment manufacturer Echo, Lake Zurich, Ill. That's why people go after blowers more than other outdoor equipment.

AN ON-GOING ISSUE. Typically, the brouhaha over blower use begins when a municipality or city receives a complaint from a resident. "Usually the complaints are loud and repetitious," Kiser says. "Often the same person, an anti-leaf-blower advocate, leads the charge."

From there, Will says it's an emotional

issue that spreads from community to community. Complaints often originate in affluent communities, although areas with parents who worry about their children's health or older residents who are sensitive to noise may also advocate for restrictions. "There are some communities that are very concerned about things such as noise and are in a position to take issue with it," Will explains. "They are usually influential. Other communities, such as working communities with other sources of noise like factories, don't usually see movement with blower legislation."

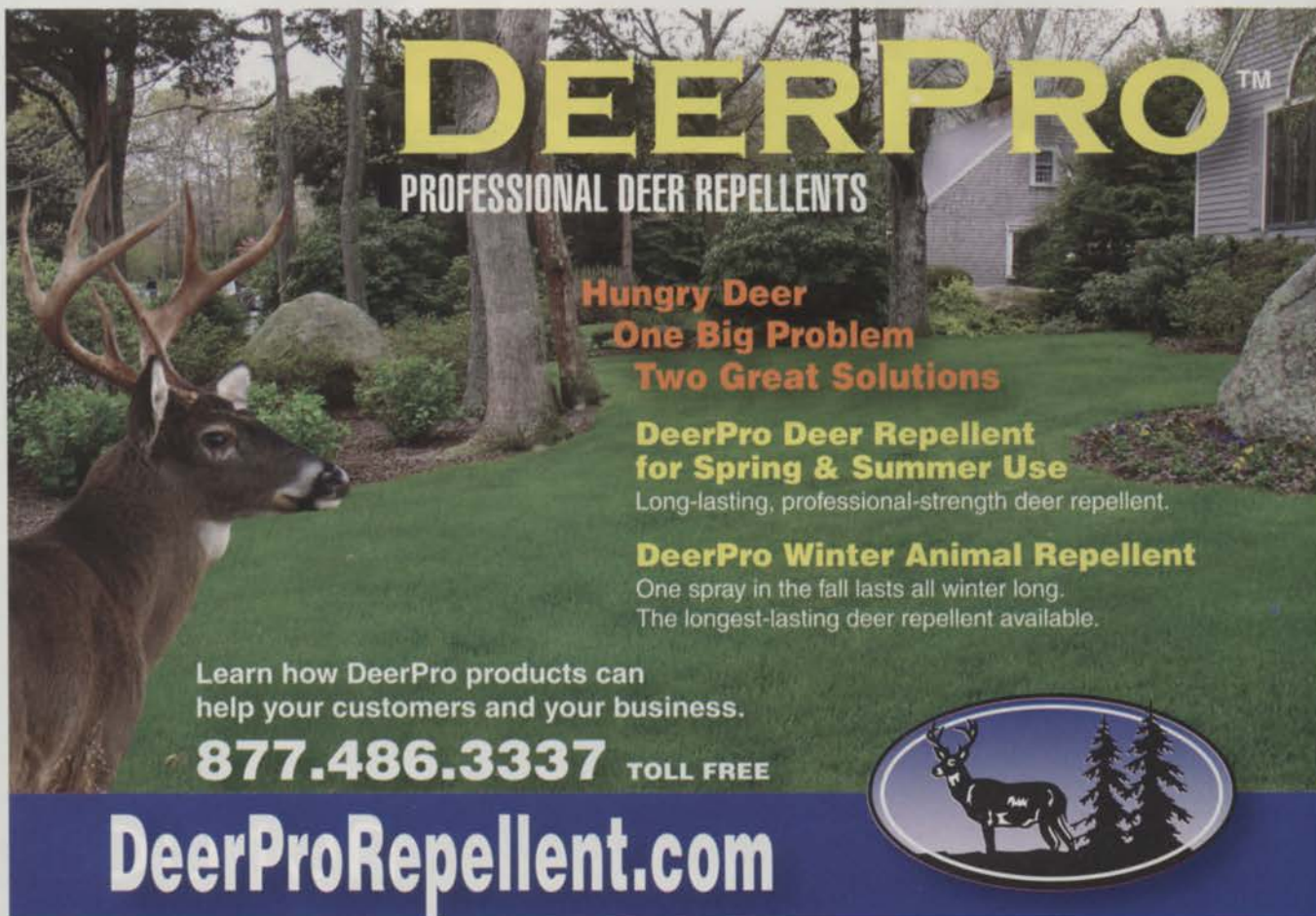
Blower restrictions are found across the country, from Chapel Hill, N.C., and Portland, Ore., to Phoenix and portions of southern Florida. California in particular has long been a blower legislation hotspot, as Barbara Alvarez, president of Alvarez Landscape & Maintenance and past president of California Landscape

Blow & Go

Thirty-two percent of landscape professionals plan to purchase backpack/handheld blowers this year, spending an average of \$1,463.

Contractors Association (CLCA), can attest. She spent much of her time from 1999 to 2001 working on legislation to prevent statewide bans on blower use in California. During that same time, many individual cities passed bans or restrictions.

Despite work by the CLCA, a number of cities in California have passed complete bans on gasoline-powered blowers. And in Laguna Beach, all blowers – including electric models – are banned, which is particularly challenging for landscape professionals who are forced to rely on rakes or yard vacuums, says Robert Wade, owner of Wade Landscape



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in Laguna Beach and director of legislation for the CLCA. Rather than enacting bans, however, most California cities simply restrict the hours when blowers can be used and specify the decibel level at which blowers may operate. If it's a choice between bans or restrictions, many landscape contractors would gladly deal with the latter.

Alvarez believes the animosity toward blowers from the late 1990s and early 2000s is dying down in California. In fact, she says the city of South Pasadena recently overturned a ban on leaf blowers because newer models are quieter

and produce fewer emissions. "Progress is happening as technology gets better," she explains.

Yet as the debate over blower use cools in California, it's heating up in areas including Hawaii and the Northeast. According to Will, cities and counties including Eastchester, N.Y.; Montclair, N.J.; and Brookline, Mass., are in the midst of blower debates.

"The most recent debate was in Yonkers, N.Y., and cities surrounding New York City," Kiser explains. "There's a woman up there who has taken this as her cause." As a result, cities in Westchester County, including Yonkers, Rye and Scarsdale, recently banned blowers during certain months of the year because of noise and environmental concerns.

It's a situation that's directly affecting Nicholas Esposito, owner of Truly Green Landscaping & Design, which

provides landscape services to the New York metropolitan area and nearby cities including Scarsdale, which has banned blower use from June through August. "In those months, that's when we really use them," Esposito says. "It's a shame, but what can we do? Our association [the New York State Turf & Landscape Association] just keeps trying to fight it, but we've really had no luck."

MORE IN A DAY'S WORK. Opponents of blower use argue that manual tools, such as rakes, tackle cleanup jobs just as well. Perhaps that's true for homeowners spending an afternoon cleaning up the backyard, but when it comes to professionals working with blowers day in and day out, it's a different story. According to the California Landscape Contractors Association, work typically done with a blower takes five times longer when handled by hand. And ac-

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What do you think of blower bans? Are they impacting your business? Sound off at the *Lawn & Landscape* online forum at www.lawnandlandscape.com/forum.



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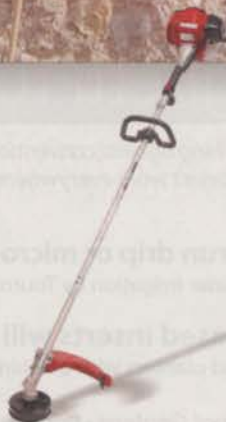


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STRATEGIES /// Tactics for managing day-to-day operations

Down with Noise

Blowers "are a valuable tool that we can't have taken away," points out Daniel Hanson, president of SCLM Co., a commercial and residential landscape maintenance firm in Laverne, Calif. For that reason, many landscape contractors and industry experts encourage crews to be more respectful of the noise they create with blower use. Try these tips to get your crews to reduce their blower noise.

- Use one blower per location.
- Run the blower at part throttle whenever possible, staying away from open doors and windows.
- Consider avoiding blower use altogether at certain times of the day.
- Carry one quiet leaf blower for use in areas where noise should be kept to a minimum.

According to the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), landscape costs increase from 20 to 40 percent if operators do the same work without a leaf blower. That can be a hardship for many companies.

Still, professionals such as Esposito refuse to pass the increased cost of raking on to customers. "At this time in the economy with the way things are, how could I go ahead and charge anybody any higher prices? It would be ridiculous," he says. "We try to work around it and not make a mess."

It's not just landscape contractors and their employees who suffer from blower regulations either. Whether crews are responsible for maintaining private residences or commercial settings, blower use results in considerably tidier work. "As an owner, walking around after the property is done, I see there's a lot we could really do better if we used a blower," Esposito says.

He admits there are times when blower use is necessary, even during the summer when such equipment is banned. To make blower use discreet in those situations, Esposito purchased a couple of handheld units that are smaller and quieter than larger backpack models. "We know it's not the right thing to do, but we just hit some areas where we need them. We limit ourselves and we try to keep them really low," Esposito says.

Truly Green Landscaping & Design and other companies that occasionally sneak in blower use run the risk of tickets and fines if they are caught. "Some police officers are pretty cool about it and say, 'Hey, listen, you have to turn it down,' and they'll give us a break once in a while," Esposito says. "But if they see us again, they'll give us a hard time and a ticket. I'm always telling my guys to be careful because this is the blower war."

Although enforcement is a real threat in some parts of New York, even in Yonkers the mayor has said that police have

better things to do than enforce the blower ban. The same is true in many California cities. Alvarez says police in Los Angeles only react to specific complaints because the city has more critical issues with which to deal. Other California cities, including ones in which Hanson's company does business, have lifted bans altogether for that reason.

BRINGING THE DECIBELS DOWN. Reducing the irritation blower cause is easier thanks to manufacturers' concerted effort to produce quieter machines. Prior to 1990, many leaf blowers were as loud as 78 decibels. Most blowers that have been introduced in the past two to three years are between 65 and 70 decibels. "A lot of manufacturers have said, 'We need to do whatever we can.' They are doing their best," Kiser says.

"Sound reduction is now an important design goal in the development process," Will adds. "For every 6-decibel

reduction in sound level, sound pressure is reduced by 50 percent."

"I'm always telling my guys to be careful because this is a blower war."

— NICHOLAS ESPOSITO
on avoiding tickets for blower use

In addition to working to produce quieter blowers, manufacturers including Echo, Shindaiwa, Husqvarna and Stihl also strive to meet or exceed stringent Environ-

mental Protection Agency (EPA) and California Air Resources Board emissions guidelines. Yet despite improvements, protests persist.

"The problem now is the blowers' reputation, more so than reality," Will says. "Blowers in the past were noisy. New designs, however, are universally quieter — some by as much as 75 percent. Unfortunately, some older blowers remain in service and continue to irritate people." That's why Will believes legislation should focus on phasing out older blower designs rather than banning the equipment altogether.

One reason older blowers are kept in commission longer is newer, quieter units may cost more. That's where blower buyback programs, which make it easier for professionals to upgrade, come in. One such program in the South Coast Air Quality Management District of Southern California allows landscapers to exchange older gas-powered leaf blowers for new models for only \$200 per blower. The improved fuel efficiency of these models is a selling point manufacturers push, too, because it can save contractors money in the long run.

Increased prices and regulations or not, Kiser says blower purchases have jumped in recent years. In fact, market research firm Mintel International reports handheld and backpack blower shipments increased from 2.3 million in 2002 to 2.8 million in 2007. In other words, despite additional regulation, blowers are still in demand.



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TAKING RESPONSIBILITY. Without responsible operation, it doesn't matter whether the blower being used is a quieter model or not. "Part of the problem is you get people out there using a blower who don't know how," Hanson says. "Running the throttle up and down constantly can be an annoying thing, and if you're just blowing dirt and debris everywhere, that's a complaint." Early morning or late evening use and the number of blowers that are operated at once are two other common irritants that lead to objections from residents.

That's why OPEI works to educate blower operators on ways to limit noise. (For ideas, see "Down with Noise" on page 72.) "What we have found is when they put in behavior modifications, the problem goes away," Kiser says.

Contractors are willing to do what they can to reduce complaints, particularly if it means keeping blowers

in employees' hands. That's why many companies have implemented blower education programs. Hanson's company requires new hires to watch training videos so they are familiar with proper blower use. Then it's up to each crew foreman to make sure everybody understands correct equipment use.

In addition to advocating training, Will recommends every contractor carry one quiet leaf blower for use in areas where noise should be kept to a minimum. That's what Hanson's teams do.


"It may not matter if you're cleaning a parking lot, but it may be very important next to a hospital," Will says. "Do something before it becomes an issue."

Beyond encouraging responsible use, landscape professionals' best bet for fending off blower legislation is to be proactive. Will says contractors should make their views on the issue and their reasons for using blowers

Blow Out

Handheld and backpack blower shipments increased to 2.8 million in 2007 – despite increased regulation, blowers are still in demand.

known. "When you hear talk of blower bans, go to city hall and ask to be in the discussion," Wade suggests. "Show up at meetings and city council events. Volunteer to give demonstrations of effective, quiet use."

"Have the manufacturers help," adds Alvarez, who says Echo and Stihl were particularly helpful when she was battling the push for stricter regulations in California. Most of all, she stresses, "Embrace the other side so you can come to a point where both sides win. Compromising is key." 

The author is a freelancer based in Lincoln, Ill.



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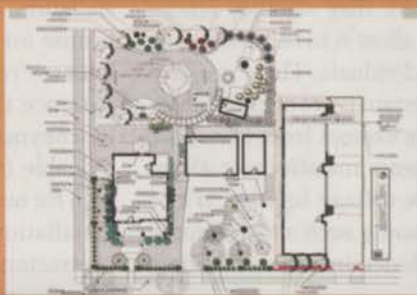
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LEGAL LANDSCAPES

Low-voltage landscape lighting and the law – a survey of the 50 states. BY STEVE PARROTT

“It is estimated that licensing results in a cost, or “dead weight loss” to society of between \$34.8 to \$41.7 billion per year compared to a labor market without licensing.” – Reason Foundation

The installation of low-voltage landscape lighting is simple and safe. It is virtually impossible to sustain any serious injury from contact with a current below 30 volts. The laws that apply to electrical installations are primarily set and enforced by the states and vary considerably.

In an effort to catalog the applicable laws, I conducted a comprehensive survey of all 50 states. Here are my findings.

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS. Some states that require electrical licensing don't exempt low-voltage work in their statutes, but when asked, they say they ignore this work and allow it to be installed by unlicensed individuals. There are also cases where certain types of low-voltage installation are exempt from licensing, such as telecommunications or alarm work, but low-voltage lighting is not mentioned – some such states assume lighting is included in the exemptions; others do not.

Local municipalities may have their own licensing that may or may not affect low-voltage installation. A cataloging of these local laws was beyond the scope of this survey.

SURVEY RESULTS. Of the 50 states, 24 (plus Washington, D.C.) require some form of licensing for low-voltage installation. Of these, 11 have a specialty license for low voltage. These specialty licenses require less training and experience than needed for a master or journeyman's license. They provide a doable (though uniformly arduous) path for non-electricians to pursue legal installations. One frustration among contractors seeking these licenses is that the required experience and testing is almost entirely focused on indoor electrical work – work that requires learning a great deal of electrical code that never applies to landscape lighting.

The remaining 14 of these 24 states

require an electrical contractor, journeyman or master electrician's license. These states effectively restrict landscape lighting installation to electricians. Green industry professionals may work with these electricians on lighting projects, but the profit potential is greatly reduced.

TRENDS FAVOR THE ELECTRICIANS. Low-voltage landscape lighting is a relatively new profession that has grown tremendously during the last two decades. Nationwide, green industry professionals have embraced lighting, incorporated it into their businesses and established it as a value-added profitable service. This growth has been widespread among the states, even in those states where "technically" the work is not exempt from electrical licensing.

New Jersey is an example of a state where low-voltage installation is not exempt in the statutes. When the electrical laws were written in 1964, no mention was given to landscape lighting (it didn't exist). Starting in the 1980s, green industry professionals built a low-voltage lighting industry in the state. The State Electrical Board and local inspectors took little notice of low-voltage work and non-electricians were free to install it – until 2007.

In 2007, New Jersey State Electrical started to enforce the electrical laws for low-voltage landscape lighting. Warning letters were sent, fines were issued and local inspectors did drive-by enforcements. The penalty for an unlicensed worker engaged in low-voltage electrical work is up to \$20,000 per offense.

This recent enforcement threatens the livelihood of landscape lighting professionals in the state. They now face the prospect of hiring electricians to do the bulk of the work, effectively diminishing profits. In response to the problem, a group of concerned parties formed a landscape lighting task force under the umbrella of the New Jersey Green Industry Council (www.njlawfix.webexone.com). This group is currently working with legislators to amend the electrical laws and exempt landscape

lighting from licensing.

Amending laws is a long and expensive task, and the New Jersey effort, while broadly supported by contractors, struggles to gain financial support from the industry. Larger industries have healthy coffers to support legislative change, but landscape lighting has only a handful of major players. Despite aggressive fundraising efforts, only one manufacturer and one distributor have made significant contributions to the effort.

New Jersey is not the only state where landscape lighting professionals are at risk. Nearby Connecticut recently stiffened its laws, as did Florida and several other states. Every state that fails to specifically exempt low-voltage lighting from licensing is at risk of having overly-restrictive licensing come into play.

TO LICENSE OR NOT TO LICENSE? In our survey, New Jersey landscape contractors were asked their views on legislation. While an amendment exempting them from licensing received near unanimous support, half of them said they would like to see a specific low-voltage license similar to those applied in 24 other states.

When asked why they would like such a license, several reasons were given. Most commonly, contractors felt having a license would drive away the low-

bidder who do poor work and undercharge. This is essentially an argument for restricting a profession so only a few companies can compete in the market. It fails to recognize bad companies fail. If a skilled and educated professional with a well-run company can't win out over unskilled, unprofessional companies, then he's doing something wrong. The best landscape lighting clients are high-income, sophisticated consumers – they recognize a quality company and will choose them every time.

In response to this desire to limit competition, David Beausoleil, CAST Lighting president, says, "Licensing tends to commoditize a profession and makes it more difficult for one company to distinguish itself from another." He cites the example of electricians: Homeowners tend to assume that one licensed electrician is as good as another.

This commoditization tends to limit what electricians can charge for their services. Landscape lighting, on the other hand, especially in unlicensed states, is a profession where prices can be raised to a great degree, totally dependant on a landscape contractor's demonstrated skill and experience. Licensing puts all players at the same level and consumers will expect prices to be fairly uniform regardless of other distinguishing factors. Without licensing, companies develop their own distinguishing qualities that they can



The laws regulating low-voltage landscape lighting vary by state, and can limit landscapers' ability to work in this niche market.

market to the greatest effect.

In states like Connecticut and Florida, which have adopted restrictive licensing laws, the landscape lighting industry has suffered – fewer companies enter the market, fewer lighting products are purchased and it has become more difficult for licensed companies to expand their markets.

This last point is true because landscape lighting is still an emerging indus-

try, and every new lighting project (even poorly designed ones) stimulate consumer awareness and inspire them to hire someone to light their own homes. In fact, many good landscape lighting companies get a large proportion of their business replacing poorly designed jobs. In the absence of a healthy number of landscape lighting businesses, many consumers opt to do their own lighting, purchasing inferior products from local

home improvement stores.

In conclusion, it is the opinion of this author that licensing for the safe profession of landscape lighting serves only to create unnecessary barriers and restrictions – barriers to enter the profession and restrictions on practicing it. **L**

The author is communication and marketing director for CAST Lighting, Hawthorne, N.J., and chairman of the New Jersey Landscape Lighting Task Force.

Licensing Requirements by State

Here is a list of the most up-to-date statistics on low-voltage licensing requirements for landscape lighting. Laws and enforcement practices may vary according to region; contractors should check with local authorities for applicable laws. For more details and contact information, go to www.cast-lighting.com/learning/legislation.



STATE	LICENSE
Alabama	None
Alaska	Electrical Administrator
Arizona	C-12 (Low Voltage Communication Systems); C-21 (Landscape and Irrigation Systems)
Arkansas	None
California	C-7 Low Voltage Systems Contractor, or C-27
Colorado	Electrical Contractor
Connecticut	L5, L5 (Limited Electrical Journeyman - 25 volts or less)
Delaware	None
District of Columbia	Master Electrician Limited (low voltage)
Florida	Limited Energy (Low Voltage System Specialist (ES, ET) - class code 069)
Georgia	LV-G (Low Voltage Contractor - General Systems)
Hawaii	Journeyman
Idaho	None
Illinois	None
Indiana	None
Iowa	None
Kansas	None
Kentucky	Electrical Contractor
Louisiana	None
Maine	Limited Electrician in Low Energy
Maryland	None
Massachusetts	None
Michigan	None
Minnesota	Power Limited Technician
Mississippi	None

STATE	LICENSE
Missouri	None
Montana	None
Nebraska	Class B Journeyman Electrician
Nevada	Classification C-2d (Low Voltage Systems)
New Hampshire	None
New Jersey	Journeyman
New Mexico	ES-3, Low voltage special systems (under 50 volts)
New York	None
North Carolina	None
North Dakota	None
Ohio	None
Oklahoma	Electrical Contractor
Oregon	None
Pennsylvania	None
Rhode Island	Journeyman
South Carolina	None
South Dakota	None
Tennessee	Electrical Contractor
Texas	None
Utah	None
Vermont	None
Virginia	Electrical Contractor
Washington	Electrical Contractor (Limited Energy System (06))
West Virginia	None
Wisconsin	Electrical Contractor
Wyoming	Low Voltage Technician LV-G (General Systems)



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Today, there are 25 to 30 million deer in the U.S. feasting on homeowners' properties. Photo: Liquid Fence.



Deer Hunt

Growing deer populations and irritated homeowners could bring profit for contractors willing to offer this easy add-on service.

BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Deer damage to gardens and shrubs, including trampled and eaten plants, is the No. 1 complaint in urban and rural landscapes, according to the West Virginia University Extension.

And while no one argues homeowners shouldn't continue to improve their landscapes and keep plants lush and thriving with regular irrigation and fertilization, they don't realize they are opening up a buffet deer can't resist.

To make matters worse, the U.S. deer population has exploded from 500,000 in the early 1900s to 25 to 30 million today because populations of wolves – deer's natural predators – are down and hunting has been on the decline.

In addition to damaged plants, deer also bring potential lime disease-carrying deer ticks onto a homeowner's property – more unwelcome pests.

So, how about deer-resistant plants? "There is no such thing," says Eric Gerhartz, director of deer repellent manufacturer Liquid Fence's pro divi-

sion in Brodheadsville, Pa. "Deer aren't supposed to like holly, yet I have no holly bushes left in my yard. If deer are hungry, they are going to eat what you've got. Deer adapt."

That leaves the No. 1 way to keep deer at bay being to remove the food source, which isn't a likely option for homeowners who have grown attached to their backyard paradises.

Landscape contractors can cash in on this opportunity by offering deer control services to their clients.

One of the main ways contractors can help customers fend off deer is through repellent applications.

There are a variety of repellents on the market. Fear-based repellents use bobcat or coyote urine to scare deer away thinking a predator is nearby. Irritants or taste repellents have ingredients like hot pepper wax so when a deer takes a bite it alters the taste of the plant making it undesirable. Scent-based repellents use irritating components like sulfur

or mint that make the plant smell unattractive. And masking repellents hide the scent of plants, replacing it with the scent of something foul to a deer, like a dead animal, e.g., a rotten chicken.

Since many of the deer repellent products biodegrade after 30 days, manufacturers recommend monthly applications to guarantee deer-free landscapes, especially during the growing season.

Application times can range from 20 to 40 minutes on a job, depending on size and coverage. Gerhartz says using a backpack sprayer, which is the only equipment necessary for deer control, and spraying at 2,000 square feet per gallon takes about 40 minutes.

Most repellents are available for between \$25 to \$40 per gallon retail. A contractor can likely get this closer to \$5 to \$10 a gallon or less, depending on how much he's buying, Gerhartz says.

When it comes to pricing the service, this is open based on the contractor's costs and desired profit margin. Sean McNamara, manager of Redding Nursery and Great Oak, maker of DeerPro repellents, Redding, Conn., who has offered the service for 25 years, charges \$100 per application using about 5 gallons of product on an average 2- to 3-acre-sized property. During the growing season from May through September he makes five applications. During the winter months, he uses a stronger repellent that lasts longer and charges \$300 for a one-time application using the same amount of product to an average 2- to 3-acre-sized property. McNamara prefers a 300-gallon, low-pressure Solo backpack tank sprayer for deer control.

In addition to learning about repellents, a landscape company interested in adding the service should have a commercial pesticide applicator's license – requirements will vary by state.

"As deer populations continue to explode, there will be increasing demand for these services," McNamara says. "This could be the fastest growing niche in the industry." **1**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*, and she can be reached at nwisniewski@gje.net.



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USE READER SERVICE #55

A Little Icing with Your Cake?



Samuel Thomas Outdoor Development created a division focusing on decorative foliage to appeal to homeowners who want to maintain curb appeal.

By offering extra touch services, a Massachusetts company finds a sales boost. BY LINDSEY GETZ

Ed Palmer wants his clients to know his business can cover *everything*. "We want our clients to think of us as their property managers," he says.

That's the main reason he and his business partner Steven Klose expanded their company to include a specialized division focusing on decorative foliage. Homeowners can call Samuel Thomas Outdoor Development, a Hopkinton, Mass.-based landscape company, for their irrigation, landscape construction or lawn maintenance needs, and can use Samuel Thomas Decorative Foliage for those special added touches.

"The idea is that we can maintain the entire property," says Palmer. "We don't want our homeowners to ever have to call another company. If they need someone we don't have on staff, like an arborist, our customers can still call us and we'll find someone for them and make the arrangements."

Adding this division has not only generated additional revenue for Samuel Thomas, which grossed \$850,000 in sales last year, \$100,000 of which was from the decorative foliage business, but, perhaps more importantly, it has helped retain customers.

"Adding a decorative foliage division was a natural extension of our company," says Palmer. "Since we're already on these properties so frequently, it just made sense to expand and offer these services." Those services include "icing on the cake" additions like window boxes, patio containers, planting annuals and maintenance of indoor houseplants. And in addition to the company's snowplowing service, it's been another way to generate income during the harsh New England winters that often make it difficult for landscape companies to get by. "We also do holiday decorations – not just lights, but decorating the whole interior of a home," Palmer says. "This could include stringing garland, hanging bows, making dry and wet wreaths and even adding fresh floral arrangements."

Since every job is custom in decorative foliage, prices vary considerably. One customer who just wants one-time plantings in a small container he already purchased may pay \$120. This includes replacements of plants, but not maintenance.

But another customer who wants the works, which can include purchasing containers for container gardens and installing window boxes, seasonal wreaths and beds, may pay \$13,000 for the contract for the entire outdoor season,

which includes regular maintenance.

One of the most prestigious homes that Samuel Thomas Decorative Foliage has worked on was the residence belonging to the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "We maintain their annuals and interior houseplants," says Palmer. "They do a lot of entertaining and events with alumni so they want it to look nice, even in the winter. In the past, we've done their holiday décor as well."

In addition, Palmer says he tells all his clients to let him know if they'll be hosting a party. The company will switch their lawn maintenance date so that it's a day before the event, and may even throw in a deck power-washing for free. The company's decorative team has added temporary container gardens, created floral arrangements or even helped set up furniture.

One of the biggest challenges for the division has been surviving the economy. In a time when so many people are cutting out the extras, decorative foliage can be cut from homeowners' budgets.

Because of the housing market crisis, and so many people staying put in their current homes, maintaining curb appeal has remained important to Samuel Thomas' clients. While the decorative division doesn't project revenue growth for this season because of the economy, Palmer expects sales to remain steady – still an accomplishment in his eyes when so many others are struggling to stay afloat. **L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pa.



Samuel Thomas Outdoor Development's business partners Ed Palmer and Steven Klose.

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Don't Be a Fool – Use These April 'Tools'

I've been talking and consulting with green industry professionals and doing seminars and workshops for contractors all over the U.S. early this year. Here are some early patterns we've identified and have been monitoring:

- Residential installation work of all kinds stopped as of early October 2008 (as we all know, the new home production market dried up over a year ago).
- Commercial installation sales are slowing down considerably.
- Architects, engineers and dirt movers are extremely slow at this time (the pipeline is drying up).
- Public works projects are few and far between and therefore extremely competitive.
- All markets are getting considerably more competitive as the "pie" continues to shrink.
- Lawn maintenance, lawn care (fertilization and weed control), irrigation service and other service sectors are hanging on in reasonably good fashion.
- The second-home market for service and installation work is still fairly strong, but it is starting to weaken.

ONES TO WATCH. Based on these trends, here are some simple patterns you should be paying attention to at your company:

Leads – If you have the data, compare the number of 2009 monthly leads to those for 2008.

Job size – Compare the average size of your 2009 jobs to those from past years.

Sales – Compare your 2009 monthly sales to those for 2008.

Contract renewals for service

and maintenance – Renewal rates should still be close to those for past years. However, keep an eye on them to identify early signs that could indicate trouble ahead.

Backlog – How does your backlog (both in dollars and percent of budgeted sales) for 2009 compare with that from previous years?


EARLY ACTIONS TO TAKE. Most of my installation clients are budgeting 2009 sales at 75 percent of those for 2008. However, they are prepared for a 50 percent reduction in sales if necessary. Lawn care, lawn maintenance and service clients are generally planning for minimal or no growth in sales for 2009. If the early signs for 2009 vary significantly (25 to 50 percent) from 2008, these clients are prepared to cut field and office staff. They would be wise to do so earlier than later. Many are planning to consolidate their crews by keeping skilled crewmembers and reducing their labor force at the low end of the pay scale. They want to hold onto good people as long as possible in hopes that

things will turn around.

Since office staff is 50 percent of general and administrative (G&A) overhead, contractors are prepared to cut G&A overhead by reducing office staff. To do so, their strategy is to either:

- Have office staff work in the field producing billable hours.
- Reduce office staff hours worked per week.
- Lay off office staff.

Identify some important early 2009 trends and be prepared to take corrective action sooner rather than later. Remember, if your 2009 sales appear to be below those of 2008, be ready to reduce G&A overhead staff. If you can't find a place for them in the field where they can produce billable hours, you'll have to reduce their hours or let them go.

This is going to be a difficult year. It is going to be even more difficult for the landscape contractor who fails to read the early signals and plan an effective solution strategy for the situation, whichever way it goes. 

THE EARLY BIRD GETS THE WORM

April is traditionally the month when we divide the fools from the "scholars" amongst us. This year, it will be a month of particular interest for green industry contractors. Some significant first quarter 2009 patterns will surface in the form of service and maintenance contract renewals, sales and sales leads. These early trends will give us an indication as to how 2009 is going to shape up. They will also help us to put in place a strategy for the remainder for the year. Those who don't pay heed to these early indicators may very well end up being an "April Fool."



JIM HUSTON

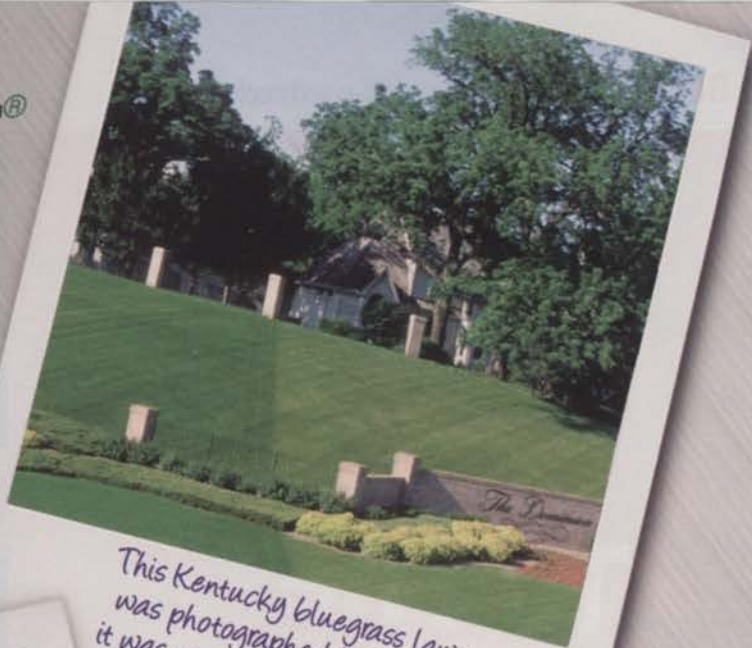
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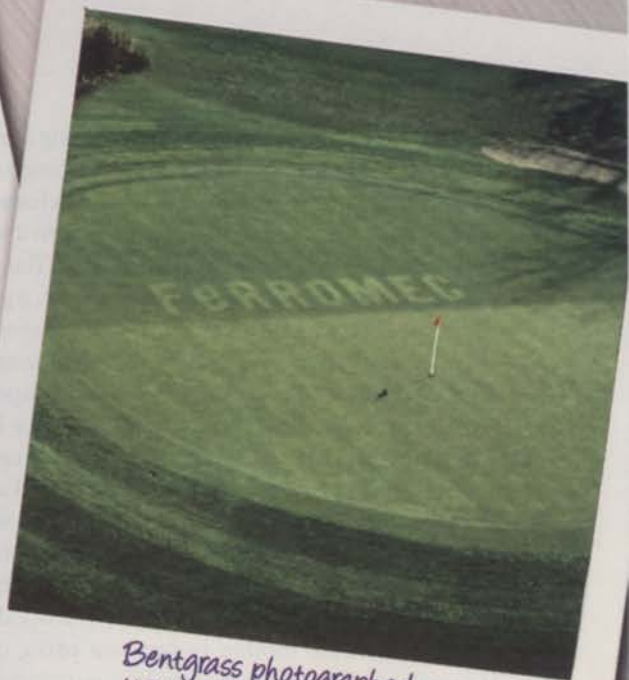
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USE READER SERVICE #57



Eduardo Xol, a member of the "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" design team, rides the memorial tree into place in the Jackson Family's new landscape.



To The Extreme

A Washington D.C.-area nursery and landscape company races against the clock to create a primetime, TV-ready yard for a family in need.

BY JULIE COLLINS

At first glance, the project seemed simple enough for the landscape team at Behnke Nurseries. The client wanted to transform a 1-acre lot into a traditional setting befitting a new, Colonial-style 4,800-square-foot home.

Only there wasn't a budget for materials, labor or time. And once the design was complete, it had to become reality in less than three days. Sound extreme? That's because it was.

The client – the producers of ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" – was on a mission to surprise a single mother who was raising four kids of her own plus 10 nieces and nephews who had recently lost their mother to cancer. The goal was to surprise the family with the brand-new home for the Emmy Award-winning show's sixth season opener. The team from Behnke Nurseries, a family- and employee-owned garden center and landscaping company in Beltsville, Md., was approached about

doing the project just two weeks before filming began.

Behnke landscape designer Andrea Becerril was charged with designing the site. The producers handed over house plans, a plan for the property and a few basic specifications. "The house is fairly traditional so they wanted a traditional landscape and some plants that were big and nice-looking for the camera but that the homeowner could maintain later," Becerril says.

After visiting the property, Becerril had about a week to pull together a design that included plantings and a U-shaped driveway in the front, plus a patio, outdoor fireplace and accompanying plants in the back. Her team scrambled to find the materials they needed to get the job done. "We donated labor and time, then we got other companies to donate plants and materials," she explains.

Normally Becerril draws on the va-

riety of plants in the Behnke Nurseries retail store for inspiration. This time, however, she made use of any donated plants that would look good at the end of June, when constructing and filming took place. "We had lots of different perennials and then a whole bunch of annuals to give a lot of flower color for the camera shots," Becerril says.

The chaos of designing the landscape and rounding up materials was nothing compared to what awaited the team when they arrived at the site. The project was behind schedule – the crews already onsite still hadn't back-filled around the foundation or graded the area that would become the yard. "Our guys got into some of the equipment and started backfilling and grading because nobody was doing it," Becerril says.

Then Becerril learned the producers wanted to make major, last-minute design changes. Originally, they had insisted on a U-shaped driveway at the



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The Jackson house before (inset) and after (above). The new colonial-style home is 4,800 square feet – big enough for a mother of four who is also caring for 10 nieces and nephews. The Jackson Family (right).

front of the house. “I expressed concerns it would look funny and wouldn’t work, but on paper they thought the house was far enough from the road,” Becerril explains. “Once they saw the house built, they freaked out about the driveway.” So she scrambled to redesign the entire front yard and parking area. The new design included a parking pad on the side of the house and a sidewalk that extended from the front door, across the parking pad and down the street, which meant the team had to solicit additional donations of pavers.

Things didn’t move any more smoothly in the backyard, where the producers

had insisted the patio be built on a location with a slope. “It was going to be difficult to build on a slope in a short amount of time because we had to build walls, and then the slope ended up being much worse than expected,” Becerril says. Plus, the house plans she had been

given didn’t have accurate elevations for doors and hadn’t even included window wells and an egress window from the basement. That meant Becerril also had to redesign the backyard in order to move the patio farther away from the house.



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USE READER SERVICE #60

One Tough Animal

Design Details

Company Revenue: \$13 million (\$12 million from the nursery and \$1 million from the landscape division)

Number of Employees: 20

Client Mix: 95 percent residential, 5 percent commercial

Services Offered: Residential new installations, including hardscaping, plants, drainage and retaining walls; plant care and maintenance; turf treatments and holiday lighting

Project Area: 1 acre

Total Labor Hours: Behnke Nursery employees worked more than 570 hours total, with the assistance of 40 to 50 volunteers

Project Cost: All design work, labor and materials were donated

Key Materials: EP Henry landscape materials, including products from their Silk Stone line and their Coventry wall system; machinery used on the project was donated

Behnke Nursery built a memorial brick seat wall to honor a Jackson Family member who recently died from cancer.



Quick thinking, a lot of hard work on the part of the Behnke laborers, and plenty of volunteer help – Becerril estimates they had as many as 40 to 50 people at some points – ensured the project stayed on track despite the setbacks.

And then it rained. The team had finished installing the stone base for the front sidewalk and driveway when the sky opened. Although they hurried to put tarps over everything, water collected on top of the tarps and washed out part of the sidewalk base. “We had to rip out about half the stone and start over, so that set us back a few hours,” Becerril says. And when you have less than 72 hours of work time on a project that normally takes at least three times that long, that’s trouble.

Still, somehow the Behnke team and volunteers finished the driveway, sidewalks and patio. They rolled out sod. And they even had time to complete a memorial in honor of the mother of the 10 children, complete with a tree and a brick seat wall.

As crunch time neared, the workers also had to deal with the television crews running around. “If they needed to film an important scene, we had to put everything down and move – sometimes for an hour – just so they could shoot a 10- to 15- minute scene,” Becerril says. “We all learned patience and perseverance from the magical world of TV.”

Despite all the last-minute changes, the lack of sleep and the weather, the team was able to complete the plantscaping and hardscaping early on the morning of the “Big Reveal.” At that point, Becerril had worked a 21-hour day and some of the Behnke crew had been going even longer than that.

Which is why, Becerril admits, she wasn’t around to watch the family’s reaction when they arrived to see their new home for the first time. She was at her own home, asleep.

In September, watching the two-hour premiere on television was surreal. Becerril says she was disappointed that none of their work in the backyard made it on TV because the egress window didn’t arrive. But she was still proud of what the team accomplished in such a tight timeframe. “I sat there and thought, ‘Wow, I helped do all that work and gave that family a place to live and the kids a yard to play in.’” **L**

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The author is a freelance writer based in Lincoln, Ill.

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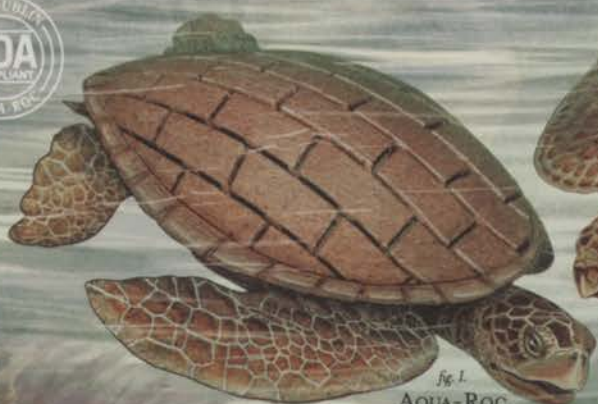


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fig. II.
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fig. III.
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fig. IV.
ECO-DUBLIN
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fig. V.
SUBTERRA
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fig. VI.
SUBTERRA
[herringbone pattern]



fig. VII.
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BY DAVID EWING DUNCAN



GREEN Crude

A scientist states the case for algae as the next alternative fuel. Think it isn't possible? Tell that to Bill Gates and the Rockefellers who are investing in it.

In one of the most memorable moments in cinema, a middle-aged businessman whispers to a young and perplexed Dustin Hoffman one word of advice: "Plastics."

In a 21st-century remake, the word might one day be *algae*.

Plastic was the new gold when *The Graduate* was filmed in the 1960s. In the summer of 2008, as oil prices soared to frightening levels, dozens of little companies managed to bring in a sudden gusher of funding for a technology that has long been relegated to the fringe of alternative energy: turning the green scum that grows in ponds and waterways into fuel.

In just six months, investors pledged more than \$1 billion to 30 or 40 algae-fuel companies, many of them new. Now with oil prices less than half of what they were in the summer of 2008, the fledgling algae industry isn't likely to see more big investments anytime soon, and the credit squeeze will also hamper development. But the companies hope they've raised enough cash to move the technology to the next step and prove the watery weed can be a viable alternative to petroleum.

The fact is, algae contains an abundance of natural fatty oils that don't need much refining to power cars and jets. Nevertheless, making algae into a cost-effective fuel source remains a highly speculative venture. The process has been tried only on a small scale; so far, just a few thousand barrels of fuel have been made from algae. Large-scale cultivation takes place in huge metal tanks or open ponds. According to a 2004 University of New Hampshire study, the pond method would require 30 million square acres – an area equal to the size of South Carolina – to grow enough algae to satisfy the U.S.'s transportation needs. Whatever process is used will require the building of massive new infrastructure for water management, feedstock supplies, nutrients and transportation, even if algae oil can be refined at

existing facilities. If algae companies can't increase production while maintaining prices that can compete with petroleum's, they will fail.

Still, the prospect of replacing petroleum with a plant-based fuel that has a high energy yield compared with other plants has led some major investors to take the algae plunge – including Bill Gates, whose venture fund Cascade Investment pledged a reported \$50 million to Sapphire Energy, a San Diego startup, in a financing round completed in September 2008. The Rockefeller family's Venrock Associates fund has also made a substantial investment in Sapphire, and the company has attracted other blue-chip venture funds, including Arch Venture Partners and the venture capital arm of Britain's life-science nonprofit the Wellcome Trust. "We are investing in this because algae is basically the most efficient photosynthetic process on the planet," says Arch's Kristina Burow.

In the fall, the U.S. Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colo., launched a \$200 million effort to fund innovative biofuel technologies and projects, including some using algae. President Barack Obama mentioned algae several times on the campaign trail, and his advisers expect algae will play a role in his administration's plans for a massive infusion of federal money into alternative fuels. If it does, the money might come just in time to offset the recent fall in oil prices and the credit crunch, which could otherwise imperil algae's prospects. Meanwhile, GreenFuel Technologies of Cambridge, Mass., is developing a system that would use a coal plant's carbon dioxide emissions as a carbon source to feed algae that would be converted into fuel. Near South Padre Island, Texas, PetroSun is converting a shrimp-research facility into an algae pond. Big oil companies like Chevron are also committing resources to pond scum. "Algae still needs to be proven

The fact is, algae contains an abundance of **natural fatty oils** that don't need much refining to power cars and jets.



at scale," says Chevron spokesman Alex Yelland, "but we have a real sense that this will seriously augment the world's biofuel supply in the future."

LIKE OIL FROM WATER. One sunny afternoon in South San Francisco, I find myself investigating the nascent algae revolution from behind the wheel of a Jeep running on biodiesel made by Solazyme, an algae-fuel company founded in 2003. The ride and feel are no different from those of a gas-powered car – no green smoke from the exhaust pipe. In the passenger seat is Harrison Dillon, Solazyme's co-founder and chief technology officer. Before we start the engine, the other co-founder, CEO Jonathan Wolfson, shows me a liter of algae fuel – a clear, slightly viscous liquid that he says is the first algae diesel to meet the highest standards of ASTM International (formerly the American Society for Testing and Materials) for use in engines. The company also recently had its algae jet fuel ASTM-certified.

Wolfson and Dillon won't say how much their green crude costs to make or how the company, which recently closed a \$50 million funding round and

A Contractor Weighs In

Landscape contractor and longtime sustainability convert sees opportunity for contractors in the use of algae as a fuel source, but no opportunity comes without some challenges.

I do think algae is a great idea to explore as we are in direct contact with the owners of a lot of properties with water that produces a lot of algae. I think it would be possible for contractors to find opportunity in this area, but I think there are a few obstacles.

- ✓ If the algae is on the surface of the pond on a client's property and we let it grow so we can be a part of harvesting it for fuel use, it might create an aesthetics issue with a client. I think people could become educated on the benefits of algae in fuel use, but it will take time and a concerted effort. And maybe that's where we come in as landscape professionals.

- ✓ There is a lot of research that needs to be done to identify the right species of algae needed for fuel use and how to grow it and harvest it. I don't know of anyone in the green industry exploring this yet, but that doesn't mean it can't be explored.

- ✓ I think the price of oil will need to continue to rise for this to be viable, and I think it will.

On a related note, researchers at Arizona State University and Montana State University have discovered a bacterium that grows diesel fuel and it sounds like it has some advantages over algae. So I think the technology will emerge, but it's hard to know where we in the green industry need to focus on alternative fuels because it is changing so fast. Where will it all settle out? A few years ago, ethanol was considered a good green alternative, but mostly because it was government funded and enabled people to use an excess of corn that was being produced. So it was a cheap resource.

The problem is that more energy goes into producing a gallon of ethanol than comes out. An engine loses fuel economy and power on ethanol. So this is not a sustainable option, although it may be a stepping stone to move to alternative fuels. Biodiesel, while a great alternative, is not necessarily the answer either. It would take farming a lot of the world's arable land to fuel the world, which would compete with food production land and drive up the cost of food.

I think the best thing we can do now is more of what we are doing already, which is to figure out how to consume less fuel. That way, no matter what the fuel technology, we will need less of it. And if it gets expensive enough, we will use less of it. Look at our current situation. If a new fuel technology comes out that is cheap and plentiful, the price will eventually go up as it becomes more in demand.

So I think we continue to look at how we can use less fuel. Some ideas include using smaller trucks, having salespeople and managers drive fuel-efficient cars, having smaller work areas, performing good maintenance on our vehicles, enacting no idling policies, etc. Maybe that's an area for further contractor discussion – what are they doing to reduce fuel costs and use?

Andrew Blanchford is owner of Blanchford Landscape Contractors in Bozeman, Mont. He belongs to a sustainability training and peer support program that encourages and helps member businesses make sustainability improvements and measure results.



cut a major deal with Chevron for an undisclosed amount in January 2008, plans to go from the few thousand gallons in its warehouse to the millions needed to satisfy a tiny fraction of America's yearly oil habit of 7 billion barrels. "The problem with algae isn't the science," says David Kurzman, an independent biofuels analyst, citing the challenge confronting most alternative fuels. "It's developing a major industrial process and whether this is cost-effective."

When Wolfson and Dillon co-founded Solazyme, oil was selling for \$25 a barrel, and the company struggled to find investors.

A few years earlier, the Department of Energy had abandoned an algae-fuel program because it expected the fuel to cost consumers more than \$4 a gallon. "We were sure we could make oil more cheaply than this and that algae would be big one day," Wolfson says.

The impact of plunging oil prices on the viability of algae fuel is unknown. Wolfson believes his company will hit its goal of producing a barrel of algae oil for between \$40 and \$80 in the next two to three years. (In early March, petroleum crude was at \$44 a barrel after rising to more than \$147 in the summer.) "Unless oil falls to under \$40 a barrel, we think we will be competitive," he says. Jason Pyle, CEO of rival Sapphire, says he's aiming to make a barrel of algae oil that could be priced at about \$60. The truth is no one really knows what's possible.

Algae is only one of many crops entrepreneurs hope will challenge petroleum, which remains subject to fluctuations in both price and supply as cartels talk of cutbacks and oil-producing regions remain politically volatile. Money has also poured into ethanol and biodiesel made from so-called first-gen biofuels such as corn, soy and sugarcane. In fact, \$1 billion in private investment for algae is small change compared with the billions of dollars in investments and congressional subsidies that have been aimed at these terrestrial biofuel sources,



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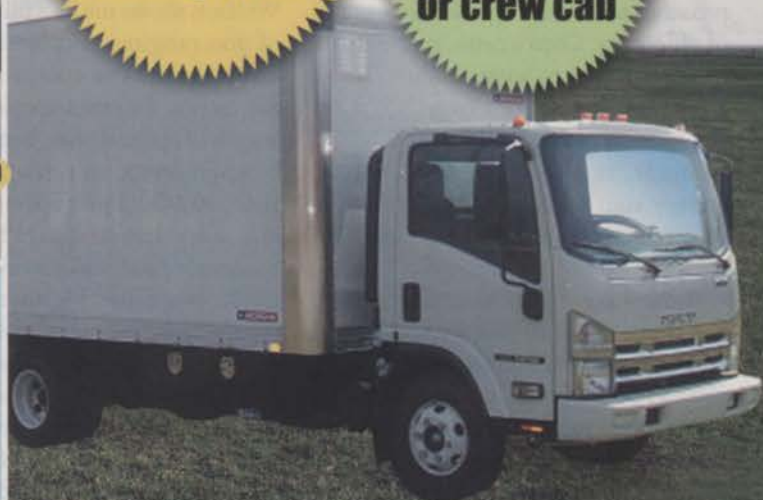
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from which more than 9 billion gallons of ethanol were produced in 2008, an increase of 28 percent from 2007.

But most scientists contend that algae fuel – from cultivation to consumption – has a smaller carbon footprint than other biofuels, though no one will know for sure until algae-fuel production is ramped up. By the barrel, algae fuel provides 3 to 4 units of energy for every 1 unit used to make it, a ratio that approaches petroleum's golden 5-to-1 level of efficiency. Corn's ratio is a mere 1.2 to 1, according to some studies. That's a paltry net output for a crop that, given the spike in global food prices this past summer, is already a controversial energy source. Cellulosic plants like switchgrass also score better than corn, having a 2.5 to 1 ratio.

In the wake of the 1970s energy crisis, the Department of Energy spent hundreds of millions of dollars investigating algae's fuel potential, but it dismantled the program in 1996. Since then, scientists have continued to work with algae to better understand its genetics and how it produces oils. "It's hard not to get excited about algae's potential," Paul Dickerson, chief operating officer of the Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, told 350 scientists, entrepreneurs, investors, oil company representatives and policymakers at the first Algae Biomass Summit in San Francisco in 2007.



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GREENGOO. In Solazyme's headquarters, Wolfson shows me labs filled with flasks of goo ranging in color from lime to forest green. The company's scientists are testing different species of algae in search of optimal ones, both natural and bioengineered, for extracting oil. More than 30,000 algae species exist, but only a few hundred have been studied. Solazyme produces its raw algal material in huge metal fermentation tanks through a process that Wolfson says can rapidly generate large amounts of biomass. Inside the vats, algae is bathed in sugars in a pressure- and heat-controlled environment. It's a little bit like making beer, Dillon says. To produce millions of barrels of algae crude, however, this method would require heaps of sugar and cellulosic material as well as a vast area to house the vats, which could be challenging to build and maintain.

About 500 miles south of Solazyme's headquarters, San Diego-area startup Sapphire Energy – the algae firm that won Bill Gates' backing – is betting

on the open-pond method, taking advantage of sunlight, which is directly converted into lipids, algae's oily store of energy. The company claims it can refine its open-pond algae into not only diesel but also high-grade gasoline – an industry breakthrough. Sapphire executives are staying mum about this method. Pyle says it makes use of sunlight, algae and bioengineering. Sapphire is building a 20-acre pilot farm in New Mexico to experiment with scaling up, he adds.

The open-pond system is currently more expensive than one using fermentation tanks, says Department of Energy biofuels expert Fred Gerdeman. And expanding production from a few greenhouses and pilot ponds to the millions of acres of ponds required to make even a modest dent in the world's consumption of fossil fuels would pose a considerable challenge for Sapphire and other open-pond advocates. Gerdeman believes both enclosed-tank systems and open ponds will be part of the mix in a future algae-fuel industry. Within five years, Sapphire aims to be producing 10,000 barrels of algae oil a day. By 2022, it hopes to reach 200,000 barrels a day—about what an offshore oil platform produces. By comparison, Chevron's worldwide operations produce about 2.5 million barrels a day. Sapphire aims to raise \$1 billion to fund the expansion. "We want to build an oil company," says Sapphire backer Burow. "This is not just a short-term play." 

Factoring Fuel Efficiency

Unlike other biofuel contenders, such as corn, algae isn't a food crop, and it can be grown almost anywhere – even in ponds on nonarable land. As technology continues to develop, the Department of Energy estimates the fuel yield from algae could increase to as much as 10,000 gallons per acre.



GALLONS PER ACRE

This article was reprinted with permission by the author and *Condé Nast Portfolio* magazine. The author is a contributing editor to *Condé Nast Portfolio*, and the "Natural Selection" science columnist for *Portfolio.com*. He is chief correspondent of NPR Talk's *Biotech Nation*, and a commentator for NPR's *Morning Edition*.

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License to Water

States like North Carolina use licensing to regulate irrigation installation practices and conserve water use.

BY JOHN TORSIELLO

North Carolina irrigation and landscape professionals are in the process of adapting to doing business in a brave new world after the state's governor, Mike Easley, signed into law an irrigation contractors licensing bill.

The law, which became effective Jan. 1, created the North Carolina Irrigation Contractors Licensing Board and established a license requirement for irrigation contractors as well as disciplinary rules for non-compliance, including a fine of up to \$2,500. The bill exempted professional engineers and landscape architects, irrigation systems at golf courses and agricultural operations and projects costing less than \$2,500. Individuals and businesses have until July 1 to obtain a license.

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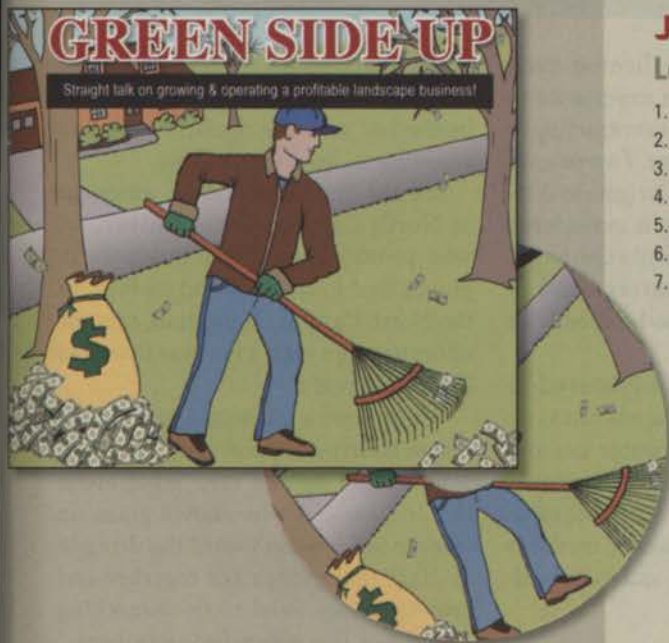
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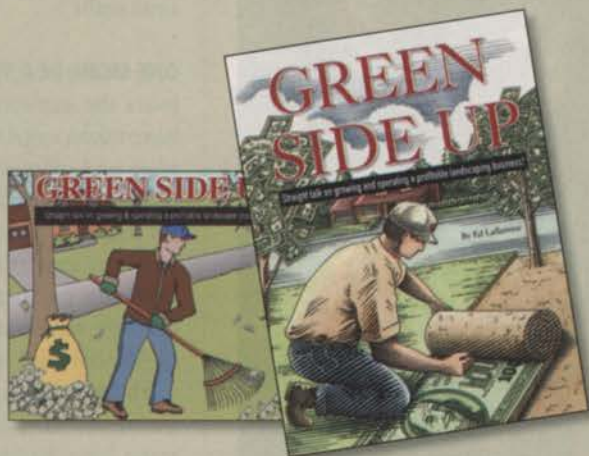
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Author Ed Laflamme, CLP, was founder of Laflamme Services, Inc. a full-service landscaping company in Bridgeport, Conn. Starting out in 1971 with two mowers purchased with \$700 borrowed from his mother, he built an award-winning company to revenues 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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North Carolina Law At a Glance



- Became effective Jan. 1.
- Created the North Carolina Irrigation Contractors Licensing Board.
- Established a license requirement for irrigation contractors as well as disciplinary rules for non-compliance, including a fine of up to \$2,500.
- Exempted professional engineers and landscape architects, irrigation systems at golf courses and agricultural operations and projects costing less than \$2,500.
- Individuals and businesses have until July 1 to obtain a license.

Those applying for a license must have at least three years experience in irrigation construction or contracting or the educational equivalent. Two years of educational training in irrigation construction or contracting is considered the equivalent of one year of experience. A \$10,000 corporate surety bond or letter of credit must also be filed with the board.

The examination administered to obtain a license tests an applicant's understanding of efficient water use and conservation in irrigation construction and contracting; proper methods of irrigation construction; proper methods for irrigation instillation and basic business skills.

ONE MORE IN A TREND. North Carolina joins the growing ranks of states that have taken steps to safeguard water supplies and offer some level of consumer protection by ensuring those doing work on medium to large irrigation systems have the expertise and formal accreditation to perform the task, as well as manage and maintain the system at a highly efficient level.

States such as Texas, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Louisiana have similar laws on the books, and others, like Florida, South Carolina and Nebraska, have city and/or county licensing requirements. Illinois is considering licensing legislation.

Recent droughts in various areas of the country have only heightened gov-

ernment and public concern over water resources. Many communities have banned or severely restricted outdoor watering, at least temporarily.

Ronald Sneed, professor emeritus at North Carolina State University, who provided input and guidance to groups that formulated and lobbied for the North Carolina legislation, says the effort to adopt such a law was thwarted for several years.

"Every time a bill would get to committee it ran into opposition. Somebody would stand up and say, 'What about the 16-year-old who mows grass on weekends?' It wasn't until the drought of 2007 that groups got together and said we really need to do something to protect the green industry here," Sneed says.

Contractors, landscapers and other green industry professionals in North Carolina were concerned severe water usage restrictions would negatively impact their industry, an \$8 billion annual business estimated to employ around 150,000 in the state.

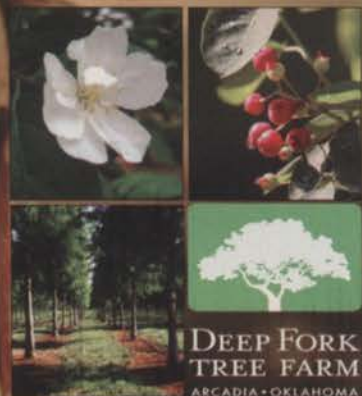
"There were moves to cut landscape irrigation altogether. There was real concern among those in the green industry that their livelihoods were at stake," Sneed says. "That's when people in the industry realized they had to band together to demonstrate they truly wanted minimum standards of proficiency in installing and managing irrigation systems. It's difficult to build more reservoirs, and you can't control rainfall.

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But you can be more efficient in using water for irrigation. There was a strong lobbying effort and the bill was sold on the theme of water conservation."

CONTRACTOR RESPONSE. Jim Garvey, owner of Garvey Rain Co. in Raleigh, N.C., whose firm does \$500,000 in business annually, of which around 90 percent entails irrigation work, likes the new law. "During the drought in 2007 our fate was left up to the city council as to whether we could water or not," he says. "Now, we have a concerted voice that says we are trying to install responsible sprinkler systems that do not waste water."

Kevin McRae, owner of K2 Irrigation Services in Enka, N.C., which derives most of its \$500,000 in annual sales through irrigation work, concurs. "A fair percentage of our work involves coming in after another contractor has installed an irrigation system to repair or retrofit

"There were moves to cut landscape irrigation altogether. There was concern from those in the green industry that their livelihoods were at stake."

— Ronald Sneed, professor emeritus at North Carolina State University



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a system that was poorly installed," he explains. "We have come across some pretty crazy systems and many of them are wasting more water than anything. Water conservation is extremely important today."

"Anyone can go to a hardware store and purchase the materials to install an irrigation system," McRae adds.

"However, the experience and knowledge necessary to install a good, water-efficient irrigation system is extremely important. The new law, hopefully, will reduce the number of unskilled contractors and provide more opportunities for those who take the time and effort to become licensed, certified and continue their education on a regular basis."

New Jersey, Massachusetts Also On the License Bandwagon

New Jersey has had a law mandating irrigation contractors must be licensed on the books for a decade.

"At the time we passed the legislation, only Texas had licensing regulations. A number of states since have adopted such laws, and others, like Illinois and California, are looking at the situation hard," says Bob Dobson, a member of the New Jersey Landscape Irrigation Contractor Examining Board and owner of Middletown Sprinkler Company in Port Monmouth, N.J.

Dobson says the New Jersey bill was aimed at providing consumers some degree of protection against shoddy workmanship and protecting water resources that were coming under extreme pressure from new construction and dwindling supplies.

"We wanted to guard against the consumer ultimately paying the price for a faulty irrigation system, and we wanted to ensure well-designed irrigation systems that conserve water and protect a valuable resource. A large portion of our contractor base also thought licensing certification would do away with fly-by-night contractors. While it has had an impact to some degree in that regard, it hasn't totally eliminated that segment of the industry," he says.

New Jersey's regulatory board investigates complaints from the public and has the authority to fine an individual or company installing an irrigation system without a license \$1,000 for a first offense and \$2,500 for each subsequent violation of the law.

Legislation also has been introduced in Massachusetts that would require registration of irrigation contractors and contracting business. It would establish a board to review applications for certification and have the authority to take disciplinary action. Similar bills have failed in the past, said Rich Bradley, chairman of the legislative committee of the Irrigation Association of New England and owner of

Superscape Landscape Management Corporation of East Falmouth, Mass.

"We had a similar irrigation contractor bill pass, but the governor would not sign it because it exempted golf courses," Bradley says. "The state and towns are looking at restricting water usage and we as contractors need to be more involved. There is too much waste. As caretakers of the environment, contractors and landscapers need to work together and learn about being more efficient in the design, implementation and management of irrigation systems."



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INTELLIGENT Irrigation

Greg Todd, owner of Dogwood Landscaping and Design in Apex, N.C., is concerned with the financial impact of the new bill on the industry, such as the cost of bonding, testing, education and the license fee, as well as advertising to "get the word out" that he is a licensed contractor. Todd's firm does \$1.3 million in annual sales, about 10 to 20 percent of which is irrigation work.



Other contractors, including, McRae, say the costs involved are "minimal in the grand scheme of things."

While Kyle Molesky, owner of Williamson Irrigation and Lighting in Mooresville, N.C., approves of the new law, he worries it may place an extra burden on some contractors. Almost all of his \$500,000-revenue business is made up of irrigation work.

"It will be up to us to make sure the client knows a system must be installed and repaired by a licensed contractor," he says. "We will have to police our own industry and competitors. Short term, the cost of the licensing

More states are turning to license requirements to regulate the irrigation industry.

classes, paying for a hotel and the test was an expenditure we did not need. Long term, I hope it will be a positive by driving out unlicensed, 'low ball' bids on projects."

Brent Mecham, irrigation development director of the Irrigation Association in Falls Church, Va., says the future is now when it comes to insuring efficient water use.

"If you believe that water is a precious resource, then there should be some sort of controls to guarantee a high quality of workmanship and a minimum level of expertise for contractors," he says, adding that while not in favor of extensive regulations, in the case of North Carolina such as bill may force things to become better. "There is a mechanism in place for doing the job right."

The author is a freelance writer based in Torrington, Conn.



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Service – A Profitable Alternative

In the past, most companies doing irrigation have ignored the different services that could be offered to a customer after the sale because there was plenty of new installation work and because service is, well, different. And that makes most contractors intimidated about investing in what it takes to be successful. If you look at service from the inside out, it becomes much less intimidating.

Also, there are many opportunities that today's business climate and social awareness have created, including:

- ✓ Few contractors want to be bothered with fixing systems they or others installed.
- ✓ If you have been installing landscape and/or irrigation for the past five to 10 years, you have a large customer list from which to start. No cold calls.
- ✓ Most systems have been installed poorly and are inefficient.
- ✓ Regulation requiring specific water allotments or low-volume irrigation have increased the need to retrofit non-turf areas.
- ✓ Irrigation controller technology has advanced at a rate that makes an existing controller more than five years old obsolete.
- ✓ Irrigation protects an investment in the landscape. Beautiful landscapes are part of the athletics/amenities that attract tenants. When the economy is poor, competition for tenants increases, making aesthetics more important, not less.
- ✓ Even in a poor economy, the increasing retired population

travel and need a reliable irrigation system while away.

✓ A weak economy demands cost control. Improving an irrigation system can reduce costs. If money spent on upgrading a system can be shown to pay for itself within three to five years, the prudent decision is to invest.

✓ Drought over the past few years has heightened awareness of water conservation – even in areas not directly affected.

✓ There are programs in many water districts and cities that can offset some of the cost for improvements (rebates, free equipment, rate reductions) if there is a reduction in landscape water use.

✓ Your best employees would much rather learn new methods and techniques than lose their jobs. It also gives them a stake in the success of the venture.

✓ There are educational opportunities that will help teach the contractor the tools and methods of efficient irrigation that did not exist 10 years ago.

The extent to which you take advantage of these opportunities depends on the types of irrigation service you can provide. Service is not just repair. It is maintenance and management of a system.

Repair – Fix what is broken. Activities include responding to reports of malfunctioning equipment. For this, the irrigation contractor needs many of the skills of an installer to actually make the repair. But knowledge with experience is the key to efficient

diagnosis and repair.

Maintenance – Keep the system in working condition. Activities include: raising & straightening sprinklers, adjusting arcs of sprinklers, cleaning nozzles and screens, adjusting pressure regulation, changing the irrigation schedule, observing drip in operation, etc. Many people call this preventive maintenance, but since an irrigation system uses one of life's two most precious resources, I would call this required. As with automobile maintenance, irrigation maintenance should be a budgeted expense and scheduled to be done at regular intervals in order to maximize resource efficiency and longevity of the system. Also, the more sophisticated the automobile/irrigation system, the more expensive the maintenance.

Management – Perform the activities that maximize system efficiency. The activities include: building monthly irrigation schedules, fine-tuning the schedules, changing nozzles to address specific problems, trimming back schedules, tracking water use, etc. The objective of irrigation management is to deliver the least amount of water to keep the plants healthy.

Your company cannot just put a man in a truck full of parts and send him out on the road. The service business will have to be set up to recognize its own profitability and costs with a commitment of resources and processes by you, the owner. **L**



KURT K. THOMPSON

is a 28-year veteran of the irrigation and landscape industries. His North Carolina-based firm, K. Thompson and Associates, specializes in water use and training. He can be reached at irrigation@gie.net.

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While you may have many years of mowing and maintenance experience in your back pocket, it never hurts to refresh your knowledge of proper mowing heights. After all, maybe the problem you're having on Mrs. Jones' lawn can be solved with a slight mower adjustment.

Mowing turf at appropriate heights and frequencies is a major component of a turf management scheme designed to develop a dense, actively growing, attractive turf.

Conversely, mowing is a destructive practice; it reduces turfgrass leaf area available for producing necessary plant metabolites and also opens leaves to possible disease entrance. In addition, when mowed too short, turf can become open, allowing weed invasion (especially annual weeds such as crabgrass). Finally, turf mowed too short often has poorly-developed root systems and reduced rhizome spread, which also

contributes to the development of a thin, open turf.

Thus, for these reasons, it is important to find the balance that produces attractive, healthy turf in an efficient manner. To help turf managers find the balance between turf and human needs, information about mowing height, mowing frequency, general mowing practices, handling clippings and types of mowers requires consideration.

By mowing frequently and maintaining a uniform turf surface, a neat appearance can be achieved, even at taller heights. Unfortunately, however, a common perception is that a short turf is superior in appearance to tall turf. In reality, turf that is uniform appears neater than uneven turf, regardless of height. Proper height and frequency are the two most important aspects of a turf mowing program.

Mowing turf at the appropriate height is important to turf health and appearance. Turf cut too short usually has a shallow root system, lacks density, and often requires pesticide applications to stave off weed and pest infestations that commonly occur in stressed lawns. Conversely, tall turf is often considered to be unattractive because of wide leaf blades, low density and a clumpy, unkempt appearance. In addition, tall turf may not be satisfactory for some sports applications.

Mow turfgrasses according to the heights

presented in the sidebar. Note that a range is listed for each species. When healthy and actively growing, turf can be mowed at the lower heights; raise mowing heights within the desired range during warm-hot periods or when turf is stressed due to drought, disease, shade, insects or traffic. The heights listed here provide a balance between turf appearance and health.

Turf should be mowed as necessary, not according to a preset schedule. Turfgrasses grow at different rates depending on weather, management and species. A basic recommendation is to remove no more than one-third of the grass blade at any one mowing. For example, Kentucky bluegrass being maintained at a 2 inch height should be mowed when it reaches 3 inches. This "one-third rule" will help maintain maximum turf root growth. Removing more than one-third of the grass blades may cause root growth to cease while the leaves and shoots are regrowing. This practice can be especially destructive if practiced continuously over a period of successive mowings. Roots may not have a chance to fully develop and the plants will thus be more susceptible to environmental and management stresses. Maintenance of healthy, growing turf root systems should be a primary consideration of any turf management program. — Tom Voigt, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

THE RIGHT CUT

Turf Species	Mowing Height (in inches)
Kentucky bluegrass	2-3
Fine-leaf fescues	2-3
Tall fescue	2-3
Perennial ryegrass	2-3
St. Augustinegrass	2-3
Bermudagrass	1½-2½
Zoysiagrass	1-1½
Buffalograss	2-3

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Texas Cooperative Extension, The Georgia Gardener

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Talking Shop

Wondering if you should hire a fleet manager? We sat down with three fleet managers to find out exactly what their busy days entail. And it's much more than turning wrenches.

BY LINDSEY GETZ



Dan Foley is a busy man.

As the owner of D. Foley Landscape, a Walpole, Mass.-based full-service landscape firm that did \$5 million in revenue last year, he has a lot of responsibilities keeping his business running smoothly. Though he tried to manage the fleet side of his business himself taking the equipment to local dealers when repairs were needed, it turned into an enormous time drain.

"Many landscape company owners are great in the field, good with the technical stuff and maybe even trained in business, but very few of us are trained to manage and maintain a multi-million dollar fleet," he says. "If you went to school for business or horticulture, you didn't learn how to manage a fleet. It can become a huge distraction. So it's a smart decision and can free up a lot of valuable time to hire someone who can handle that side of the business."

Today, Foley has brought a fleet supervisor on board who has an integral role in the business – beyond just mechanics. "He does almost all of our repairs, but there's much more to his position than that," says Foley. "He's involved with fleet planning, budgeting,

facility maintenance, and even some special programs we run like our safety committee. We've recognized he's a key part of the value we offer our customers, so we want him in a high level of involvement."

D. Foley is just one of many businesses recognizing the importance of implementing a fleet manager. Though the exact title and responsibilities vary greatly per company, this is an employee who not only turns wrenches but also oversees anything having to do with the equipment, including in many cases even buying and selling it.

Benton Foret, owner, Chackbay Nursery & Landscaping in Thibodaux, La., says the biggest benefit of hiring a fleet manager for his company has been preventive maintenance. "He is seeing our fleet daily and issues are tended to as they occur and, in many cases, the little problems are stopped before they cause larger ones," he says of his fleet supervisor, whom he hired at the end of 2008 season after realizing that the company's fleet management was taking up too much time with the responsibilities split among staff. Foret, whose business did \$2.8 million in revenue

last year, says the position has also allowed the company to control repair and maintenance expenses. "Having incremental inspections and repairing problems as they arise saves us money in the long run."

Of course owners have to realize having a fleet manager will cost more money upfront. "To pay someone to go through every piece of equipment, every day, and then have the mechanics come out to replace very small problems like a belt or a hairline crack is going to cost more money initially," says Tom Canete, owner of Canete Landscape in Wayne, N.J. "And sometimes it might be hard to see the value in that because the truck still runs with these minor problems. But in the long run it may save you a lot of money because you're fixing small problems before they become large problems. But even more importantly you're preventing downtime. We have very few trucks break down on us."

Each of these three companies has found great value in hiring a fleet manager. "I'd argue it's the most valued position in the company," stresses Foley. Now hear what those managers had to say.

Christian Proodian

Equipment Supervisor

Canete Landscape, Wayne, N.J.

Experience: 16 years with the company, 10 years in this position



Q: What are your primary responsibilities?

A: I oversee all of the equipment that we have, and that requires a little bit of everything.

Q: What's your average day like?

A: I come in every morning with one other helper to check on every truck. We check the oil and do a quick walk-around looking for any problems that stand out, like flat tires. It's time-consuming, but it's always better to be safe than sorry. I keep up on anything that may be wrong or have the potential to go wrong. For instance, if I notice a truck is due for an oil change soon, I'll schedule that on my BlackBerry with the mechanic. Or if I see the tires only

have a couple of weeks left, I get that scheduled in advance. The idea is there should be no down time. I'm always looking a little bit ahead and trying to stay on top of everything. Preventive maintenance is my primary goal.

Q: What's the most challenging part of your job?

A: We get so busy sometimes that I'm not able to drive all of the trucks. We have 30 trucks so I don't always have time to take them out myself and that means I have to rely on what the guys are saying. When I can, I do try to fit in extra time to take the trucks out for a ride myself.

Q: What's the most rewarding and most important aspect of your job?

A: Keeping everything in the fleet up and running. And at the end of the day, if everything ran smooth, it feels like a great accomplishment.

Q: Is there anything you wish crewmembers and crew leaders would do to make your job easier?

A: I wish they'd just speak up more – be a little more open. Sometimes they don't tell me right away if they notice something is wrong.

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Donnie Ross

Fleet and Facilities Foreman

Chackbay Nursery & Landscaping,
Thibodaux, La.

Experience: Six months
with the company



Q: What is the most important part of your job?

A: Ensuring the equipment is working properly to eliminate down time and help increase productivity. When someone calls and asks about a job, we want to be able to say, "Yes Ma'am," and then get that job done right away. For that to happen, the equipment needs to be working.

Q: What do you wish manufacturers would do when making equipment to make your job easier?

A: Consider the person who works on the equipment and the hand space required to work on that equipment.

Q: What things do you do that others don't realize?

A: Working long hours. When they're not here, I'm greasing the equipment, washing it down for them, servicing it so when they leave the yard it looks brand new because having clean equipment reflects positively on the company. But they don't see that aspect - all the scrubbing and the buffing. Sometimes when a person is working hard at a job, they think they're the only ones working. But they don't realize what goes on behind the scenes. Everyone has a part. It's like a well-oiled machine - every part is important to the system working as a whole.

Q: What is your average day like?

A: Open the shop in the morning, help the crews get out of the yard quickly, work on equipment that came in from the day before, and keep everything clean and operating.

Q: What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

A: Dealing with the crews to make sure they are taking care of the equipment. Because the crews work hard all day, then have to service equipment all evening, the attitudes can be tough to deal with. But I just tell them to treat the equipment like it's their own personal vehicle. I also tell them, "If you take care of the equipment, it will take care of you." I think it helps keep them motivated.

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Ron Greene

Fleet Supervisor

D. Foley Landscape,
Walpole, Mass.

Experience: With the company
for a little more than 2 years



Q: What experience do you have doing this type of job?

A: I was with Ford for 22 years and saw ahead of my time they weren't doing very well, so I left. I didn't have experience with smaller equipment but I've never had a problem learning how to fix new things and I picked it up quickly.

Q: What's the most challenging aspect of your job?

A: Probably timing. If I'm in the middle of doing something and one of the guys calls because another piece of equipment broke or there's an emergency, I have to prioritize. You can't lay out a schedule for what you'll do in a day because things can always come up. You're always making decisions on the go and hoping you made the right ones.

Q: What are your typical job responsibilities?

A: Anything that has an engine is my job. Making sure the equipment is fueled up, making sure the guys get out quickly in the morning, and making sure the equipment is the best it can be.

Q: What's your average day like?

A: There is no such thing as an average day here. It's constantly changing. In the two years I've been here, I don't think I've had two days that are the same. But I like that. It keeps it interesting.

Q: What's a "best day" for you?

A: A day that the phone doesn't ring and nothing goes wrong. Then the guys come back and brag about how good their jobs went.

Q: What do you wish crew leaders and crewmembers would do to make your job easier?

A: Spend just a day here, watching me, and see how much time is involved in maintaining their equipment. Spend a day in my shoes. Of course, if I spent a day in their shoes and saw exactly what they did, that might change things for me, too. **L**

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Aerial imagery can help landscapers land jobs without ever leaving their desks.

View from the Top

BY LINDSEY GETZ

Rob Reindl has finally found a way to put the measuring wheel to rest.

The president and founder of Oasis Turf & Tree in Loveland, Ohio, is one of many landscape contractors using a form of geospatial technology to help with job estimating aspects like measuring and previewing a property.

"If it weren't for this technology, we'd still be dragging the measuring wheel out every time," says Reindl.

For those unfamiliar with the term, geospatial technology is used for visualization, measurement and analysis of features or phenomena that occur on the Earth, and includes three different technologies, all related to mapping – GPS (Global Positioning System), RS (remote sensing) and GIS (geographical information systems). GIS, which essentially maps data with tools like aerial imagery, has turned out to have great value in the field of landscaping. Programs like Google Earth allow landscapers to get a good gauge on the size of the property and estimate the job price accordingly without ever having to leave the office.

CHOICES ABOUND. While Google Earth is probably the most well-known program, it's not the only one available.

Reindl, whose business did \$1.2 million in revenue last year and focuses primarily on residential lawn care and fertilization, uses Go iLawn, an online software service provided by GIS Dynamics. Reindl took advantage of a demo period with Go iLawn to put it to the test. He took 79 properties that had recently been measured and had three separate employees in his office measure them on Go iLawn. "We were all within 10 percent of the measurements taken on the wheel, so we were very happy with the results," he says.

Using geospatial technology often requires the user to download or install software on his or her computer. Google Earth, for instance, is a desktop application that requires installation and periodic updates. But some products are "software as a service" (SaaS) applications, which essentially means the software is delivered via the Internet.

Go iLawn is one of these Web-based systems that is login- and password-driven and can be used anywhere the Internet is available, making it accessible in the field as well. It uses an integration of high-resolution aerial oblique imagery, provided by Pictometry International Corporation. "Because we also offer oblique views, companies have the abil-

ity to measure elevation and slope," says Grant Gibson, president and founder of GIS Dynamics, the company that developed Go iLawn. "And some companies are even interested in the pitch of a rooftop if they do holiday lighting in the off-season. You can also do those measurements with this technology."

There are also two primary ways geospatial technology captures images – via satellite and via plane. The benefit of images taken from planes is that they tend to be a much higher resolution. But because satellites are in constant action, they can be especially beneficial in rural areas where a plane may not fly over. The clearer view is what Kelly Gouge, protection services manager of Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care, a Denver-based business projecting to do \$14 million in revenue this year, liked about the Go iLawn product, which uses images captured by plane. Google Earth uses a combination, though it primarily uses images from satellites.

Precigeo-Landscape, a Web-based service offered by Whitegold Solutions, is another option many landscapers are considering. In this case, the company uses multiple sources of imagery and has geo-coding experts who compile the information. All the contractor has

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1. What is your primary business at this location? (choose only one)

- 1. Landscape Contractor
- 2. Chemical Lawn Care Company (excluding mowing maintenance service)
- 3. Lawn Maintenance Contractor
- 4. Ornamental Shrub & Tree Service
- 5. Irrigation Contractor
- 6. 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/savers
- 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. Fertiligation
- 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
- 32. Bedding & installation
- 33. 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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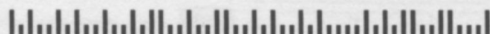


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to do is submit an address. "We locate that address using various sources of aerial imagery and do a processing with software to measure the turf and/or other attributes like trees," explains Jack Zoken, president. "We then send the information back via e-mail or it can be downloaded off of our Web site."

But despite all of the new products cropping up, many landscapers are still using Google Earth. Matt and Chris Noon, brothers and partners at the Hudson, Mass.-based Noon Turf Care, a business bringing in \$2 million in revenue, say Google Earth has met their needs. They subscribe to Google Earth Pro, which has a \$400 annual fee (unlike the regular service, which is free) that includes higher-quality images, the ability to import GPS data and usage of measuring tools.

Real Green Systems, which offers various industry business software programs, has even integrated Google Earth. "With our mapping software, users of Service Assistant can click on a button that would link to Google Maps, Yahoo Maps, Microsoft Live Search and more," explains Dan Wellbaum, sales manager. "Once there, they could use a screen capture program (not included with Real Green's Service Assistant) to capture the image of the property. And

once captured, that image can be linked to the customer meaning it could be e-mailed, printed and viewed right from the customer's screen."

POSITIVE FEEDBACK. While this technology is designed to be user-friendly, there might be a slight learning curve for beginners before they feel completely comfortable. Reindl recommends measuring properties you are already familiar with when first starting out to get a handle on how the software works.

One of the biggest advantages of not having to physically measure the lawn is the time and money saved from not actually visiting a job site. With Go iLawn, the average time to measure a property is two minutes, the company says. "Using this technology has helped us to qualify leads," explains Gouge. "If it's a lead where someone is just price-shopping, and we can give them a quote right away instead of taking the time and money to go out there, then we didn't lose much if they don't go with us."


And customers appear to be responding positively. While the initial face-to-face contact is lost in making the sale, most homeowners seem to prefer the ability to get an immediate quote and faster service than the in-person contact, Chris Noon says. "We still do a full

lawn evaluation on the first treatment, so even though our initial contact was on the phone or via the Internet, they still get that service," he explains. "And they prefer to know they're getting scheduled quickly. When it gets busy in April, it can be like pulling teeth to get quick service, so it's keeping our customers happy."

In addition, Noon says if a customer is calling for a quote in order to price shop, he always mentions that his company can match almost any other quote. "Even though we didn't have an initial face-to-face meeting, that's another way we can build their trust from the start," he points out.

One of the things Reindl likes most about the technology is that it takes the measurement process out of the hands of the sales reps or production members, and puts it in the hands of office personnel. For him, it all comes back to accuracy. "Sales reps want to under-measure a bit so they can sell the job whereas production wants to over-measure," he says. "So we could never be confident it was totally accurate until we had administration handling it."

Reindl even plans to hire a couple of new administration employees who can measure the properties of 40,000 potential new clients. He's found the technology can be a great direct marketing tool.

"Once measured, we can call those homeowners with a price already prepared," he says. "That will be an approximately \$50,000 investment for us with the new employees, but we're expecting it to pay off by helping our business grow." 

The author is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pa.

Geospatial technology allows landscapers to measure a property in two minutes ... a bit less time than it takes to drive there and do it in person.





Weilbacher Landscaping uses its Bobcat 328 compact excavator for the hardscapes and water features it installs.

A Chance to Grow

Large water feature and hardscape installations give landscaper a shot at taking his business to the next level.

Andy Weilbacher hopes to grow his company, 10-year-old Weilbacher Landscaping, this year and implement a second crew to install water features. While the economy may make this goal challenging, he remains optimistic.

"People said that last year about the economy, but we actually had one of the best years in 2008 as we shifted gears from new construction," says the owner of the \$500,000, Millstadt, Ill.-based business. "People instead were taking out home loans and doing remodeling projects."

With homeowners now sprucing up their



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existing houses, Weilbacher could continue to see an increase in hardscapes and water features. "Versa-Lok retaining walls are our No. 1 seller," he adds. For this type of work, their Bobcat 328 compact excavator is used more than he ever originally thought.

The purchase was made when his company was installing a very large water project. Before this, his crews had used their Bobcat skid-steer loaders and would occasionally rent a mini excavator for retaining wall projects and water features. The company was able to get a demo machine they liked and decided to make the purchase. Because of the magnitude of the water feature project the company purchased it for, it recouped the cost on this installation alone.

Now the mini excavator is used to tear out railroad tie walls, move boulders and more. The company currently uses the excavator for nearly 50 percent of its

work. "We purchased it with the grapple option," says Weilbacher, who has five employees. "This option makes it feel like we have three extra guys on the job. The grapple has paid for itself."

Weilbacher already owned two Bobcat skid-steer loaders, so the decision to purchase a compact excavator from the company came easy. It also helps to have a Bobcat dealer two miles away, which simplifies getting service and parts.

When he was looking at his different choices from Bobcat, he knew he didn't want a machine that was too small, yet could still get into tight spaces and smaller backyards if needed. And he wanted one that offered an adequate dig depth; his 328 digs 10 feet deep.


He also chose to not get a cab enclosure with air conditioning and heating, which adds \$4,000 to \$5,000 to the purchase price. Having an enclosure also means the windows need to stay

Compact & Convenient

Nearly 4 percent of landscape professionals plan to purchase compact excavators this year, spending an average of \$20,946.

clean to give the crew good visibility.

With good maintenance – keeping the fluids and filters changed every 100 hours and lubricating the machine daily – Weilbacher says he should get about 4,000 hours out of his mini excavator.

For his next Bobcat purchase, Weilbacher plans to buy the 430 ZTS with zero tail swing. "With this option, there is no swinging past the rubber tracks," he says. "You could work an inch away from a house and not bump it when you swing around." 

The author is a freelance writer based in Valley View, Ohio.

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Growth in Focus

High-end residential Indiana landscaper prevents purchase mistakes by renting first – and plans to double revenue this year.

An already busy organization, Outdoor Environments Group in Indianapolis plans to double total revenue this year, and co-owner Dan Killinger has a positive outlook for a year that is proving to be a challenge for so many others.

“Our sales are great and people are coming in the door. It is just a matter of keeping a focus and reaching your goals at the end,” says Killinger about his 20-employee firm, which does high-end residential installation work, including



Outdoor Environments crews use a mini excavator 50 percent of the time. On dusty sites, keeping the machine greased is important.

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With increasing sales in exterior work, it's not hard to see why Killinger's company made the decision to purchase a compact excavator – the Case CX50. Today the machine is used in about 50 percent of the company's work, including its routine work, plus digging for pool installations and large boulder work.

Once the company was ready to purchase the machine, it signed a rent-to-purchase agreement, where the machine was rented for nine months and then purchased from the dealer.

Killinger rented a few different mini excavators, so he could figure out exactly what worked for the company before he made a final purchase decision. This way no mistakes were made when it came time for the actual purchase. On the

very first rental, Killinger says he made the mistake of not getting the hydraulic thumb option. For the purchase, he knew this was the key feature he needed for the company's work.


"The hydraulic thumb is very important – it helps with boulders and removing existing materials to install new materials," Killinger says. "This is one of the best features and helps boost productivity on the job."

If he could change or add any features to his compact excavator, Killinger says he would like to see a standard quick release for the bucket. This is currently something that has to be installed aftermarket.

Most of the sites Outdoor Environments Group works on are new construction and therefore dusty, so keeping the excavator greased and the air filters changed on a routine basis is important.

"Every 250 hours, we have it serviced by a mechanic who changes the oil and fluids and performs basic maintenance," Killinger says.

The crews use the machine for a lot of lighter work as well, so they can get more life out of it. Killinger expects the CX50 to last for 2,000 or 2,500 hours, or even more depending on how it is used and maintained.

This machine, which Killinger says costs anywhere from \$65,000 to \$85,000, ended up being exactly the right size for the company's projects. He knew he needed a machine that was versatile and had a rubber track because his company does a lot of driveway work. "We needed a big machine," Killinger says, "and one that would maneuver well in tight spaces." 

The author is a freelance writer based in Valley View, Ohio.

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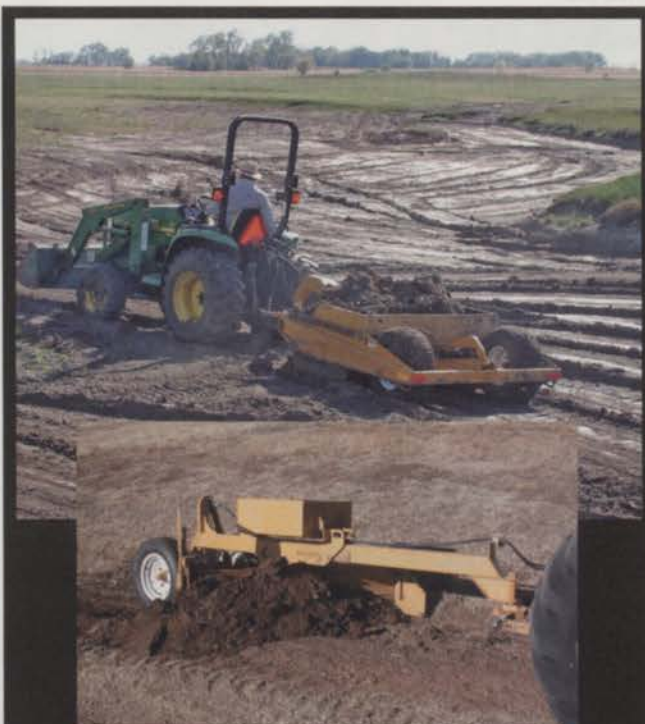
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TOOLS of the Trade /// Compact excavators

Productivity and Performance

\$6 million landscape firm focuses on saving labor hours with efficient equipment.

BY ANGELA DYER

Even large companies like \$6 million Combs Landscape and Nursery in Evansville, Ind., aren't exempt from the economic downturn. In the challenging year ahead, the company expects a 25 percent decline and plans to spend more time trying to find work, Owner Chris Combs says.

But when the company does snag that work, the firm's compact excavators will be able to help maximize productivity and save labor hours – the company's largest expense.

Employing 70 people at peak times, Combs currently owns 10 different John Deere machines, including three mini excavators – two 35D mini excavators and one 50D mini excavator. The company has an average of 11 projects running on a daily basis, so the three machines are used five days a week. The business focuses on landscape and design/build services, in addition to operating a large retail outfit.

Combs Landscape and Nursery uses a John Deere compact excavator to install a large boulder wall.



The mini excavators are used on large irrigation installations, boulder projects and large water feature installations. Combs says his John Deere equipment can be a necessity when working on larger \$3 million to \$4 million commercial construction projects.

Combs has been turning to John Deere equipment for the past 10 years because "they are the most trouble-free, low maintenance machines" he has had in his 25 years of business, he says.

Before making his purchase decision, Combs used a demo machine, and then he purchased it through a dealer. With a price of roughly \$40,000 to \$50,000, he believes these machines more than recoup their purchase price.


The best benefits for his organization include the hydraulic thumb, which lets his crew grip large items.

He also touts his machines' longevity. "We run these for 3,000 hours before we trade them in," Combs explains. "On this set of machines, we have had less than 10 hours of total downtime with 2,500 hours on each machine with

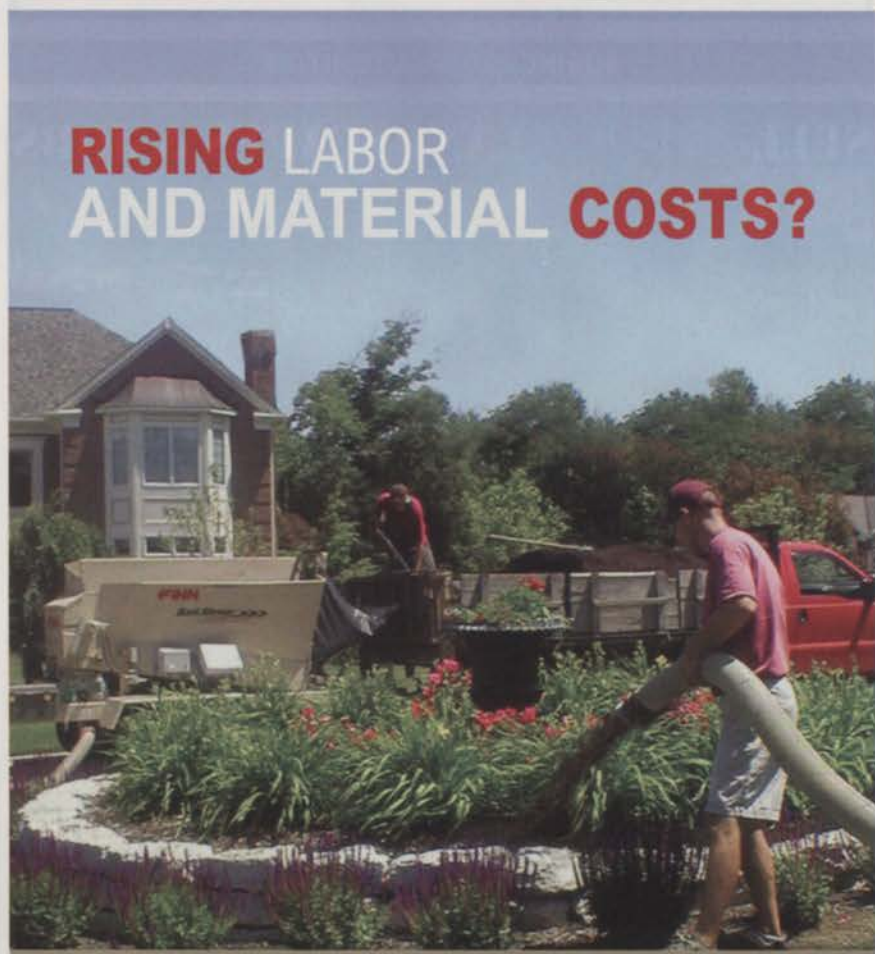
normal maintenance."

Normal maintenance includes regular greasing and oil changes at the proper times, Combs says.

According to Combs, he doesn't feel he made any mistakes when purchasing his John Deere compact excavators, nor

would he change anything because "they have lived up to expectations," he says, adding his business mantra: "When it's right, don't change it." 

The author is a freelance writer based in Valley View, Ohio.



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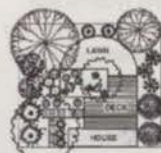
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Industry journalist Pat Jones presents both sides from his sometimes twisted point of view.

Hanging together

As some of you might know, I also write a monthly column for *Lawn & Landscape's* sister publication, *Golf Course Industry*, a magazine primarily aimed at golf course superintendents and related folks in the very scary, ultra-short grass business.

A lot of the operational and regulatory issues over on the superintendent side are clearly different than our business. Superintendents maintain and enhance just one property while you work on dozens, hundreds or thousands. They focus on the needs of a handful of snobby golfers while you try to accommodate many and varied customers. They only need to sell themselves every eight or nine years when they change jobs while you sell your services every day. They will generally spend more annually on pesticides to protect and preserve their 18 little "babies" (putting surfaces) than you spend on control products for 180 lawns in a year.

But, despite the differences, the similarities are increasingly compelling. That's why I decided it was time to play Devil's Advocate and suggest that, like twin sons of different mothers, it's time we made a better effort to get together with our siblings. Here's what I mean:

The Devil would suggest that the golf business and the landscape business are built on totally different business models. He would argue that golf is all about spending lavishly to pamper a handful of spoiled rich morons who like to hit a silly white ball around an unnaturally green playing field. In reality, golf has been forced to become just as businesslike as your world. There are just fewer than 16,000 courses in the

U.S. – about 5,000 more than just 20 years ago – yet there are about the same number of golfers as in 1990. You think you have competition? In an overbuilt, depressed, recession-era market, courses are killing each other over players and it's become a discount-driven, do-or-die market. Sound familiar?

We would also all agree that water is the No. 1 issue facing the green industry, but the Devil would argue that golf courses overuse Earth's most precious resource just to keep things soft and emerald. But, in states like Georgia, even cynical politicians have begun to realize that the economic benefits of golf plus the high-efficiency irrigation systems and smart practices they use more than justify the water consumed.

The Devil might contend that golf courses overdo it with pesticides and fertilizers just to meet the unrealistic expectations of the aforementioned rich idiots. Yet, those things cost money and superintendents are inherently frugal. I also think you'd find that many are just as sensitive to over-application issues as nearly any organic lawn-care type out there. They do want to be good stewards.

LCOs around the country are fighting noise issues ... but so are golf courses. You'd be surprised how often people who live around the course complain about the course's maintenance practices, especially at daily fee facilities where non-golfers are bedeviled by 6:15 a.m. wake-up calls from triplex mowers.

Golf courses, like lawns and grounds, also face the general perception problem that intensively maintained turf and landscape areas couldn't possibly contribute environmentally. Yet, all urban greenspaces

create oxygen, filter pollutants from air and water and provide a cooling effect and other ecological benefits. The Devil in some people berates courses because they don't perceive any benefit from them, whereas they might defend their lawn to the death because it increases the value and enjoyment of their home.

Finally, though we may not be on the top of the priority list, we face a new Congress and a new administration that are far less likely to be friendly to our market.

The point is that now, more than ever, the two primary green industry markets face the same set of issues: economic challenges; concerns about inputs and neighbors; and a general lack of awareness among the public and decision-makers about the benefits of what we do.

We can no longer afford to focus on the differences between our markets when we have more similarities than ever before and, most importantly, more reasons to collaborate and cooperate than ever before.

I'd like to call upon all the lawn and landscape organizations out there to renew and redouble efforts to join forces with the golf industry to show that, together, we are a critical economic and environmental resource in this country. We have to make this happen at the local level. We need coalitions in every community and every state to make our case. If we don't do it, those who oppose the green industry will prevail.

More than two centuries ago, Benjamin Franklin told the nervous patriots who stood up to a monarchy to form our democracy that, "We must hang together, gentlemen, or else we most assuredly shall hang separately." Think about it. **L**



PAT JONES is a veteran journalist and marketing communications consultant in the turf/golf industry. He can be reached at pjones@gie.net.

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