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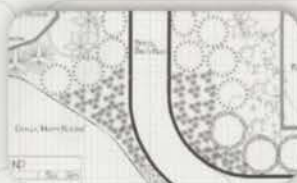
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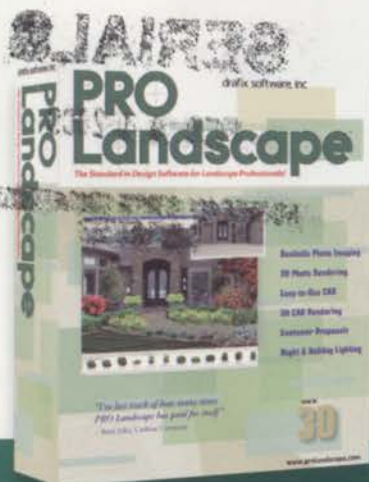
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Features

BUSINESS TRENDS

32 Like Salt in a Wound

High demand makes for higher salt prices. So what can business owners do to conserve cash and supplies?

IRRIGATION

60 Knowledge is Power

How irrigation contractors can learn to fine-tune their trade.

RESEARCH

70 Fertilizer Meta-catalysts

A new approach to maximizing nutrient management.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

80 Powered to Please

Riding spreaders give an Ohio LCO more time, less fatigue.

86 Sold from the Start

After testing applicator prototypes, a veteran LCO realizes the importance of comfort and efficiency.

90 One Guy, One Machine

Sherman Henton is fully committed to one spreader company.

NEWS MAKERS

38 What Credit Crunch?

A key player in equipment financing says the economic downturn will have less impact on borrowing for mowers than many have feared.



Making the Leap

How contractors will clear economic hurdles and prosper in '09.



20
COVER STORY

24

To Buy or Rent

Which option fits your business needs?



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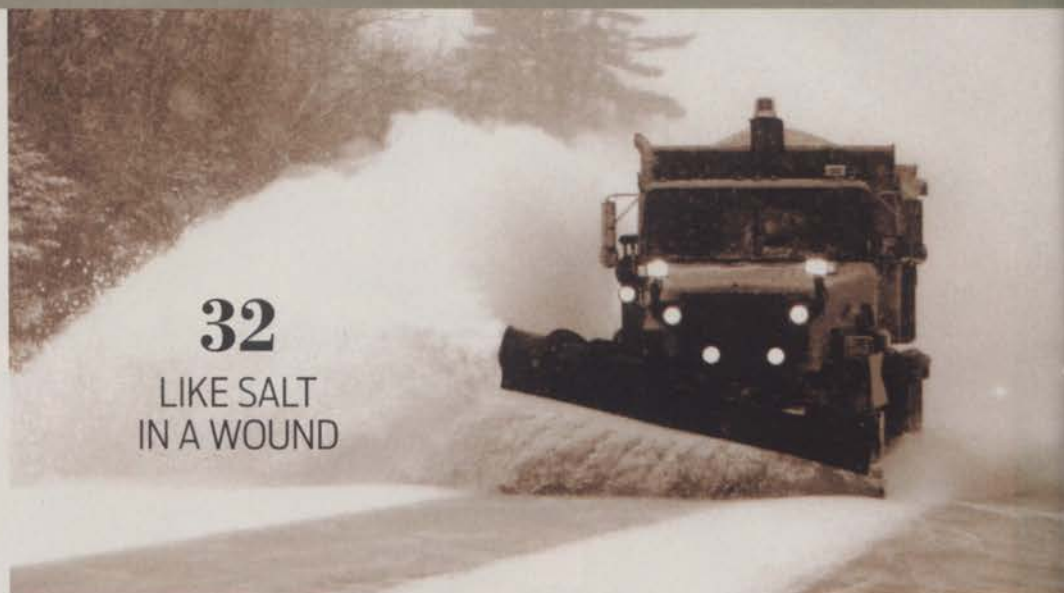
USE READER SERVICE #12

Departments

- 8 Publisher's Note
- 10 Forum/News
- 12 Online Contents
- 16 Your Space
- 91 Classifieds
- 96 Ad Index

Columns

- 14 **Sales & Marketing**
MARTY GRUNDER
- 30 **Benchmarking**
JIM HUSTON
- 68 **Water Wise**
BRIAN VINCHESI
- 98 **Devil's Advocate**
PAT JONES



BRIEFCASE

44 **Inventing a Way to the Top**

For Dothan Irrigation owner Ron Franz, change is always a good thing.

50 **Northern Niche**

Thanks to its emphasis on environmental and customer care, Turf Care Enterprises has become a Chicago-area mainstay.

102 **Image is Everything**

ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design looks prestigious, but 'dirty work' pays its bills.







KEVIN GILBRIDE
Publisher

Listening and Learning

Last month, I made my way to the Ohio Turf Foundation's annual conference and show in Columbus. I love this event because it has historically been one of the strongest regional expos in our industry. And because it's an easy two-hour drive from our Cleveland office.

But, in recent years, OTF – like many regional shows – has not been what it used to be from a company participation standpoint. Some small and regional suppliers that always exhibited in Columbus are now focusing their interests and trade show dollars elsewhere. Other companies are simply asking local distributors to represent them at events. And a lot of businesses have dialed back their travel and show budgets. Frankly, that's a shame, since gatherings like these are the heart and soul of our industry.

I guess that's why my expectations were relatively modest as I motored toward the Greater Columbus Convention Center. After all, my goal in going to shows is different than attendees (education, networking and shopping) or exhibitors (selling). My purpose is to meet decision-makers and convince them that they should support *Lawn & Landscape* with their advertising.

In short, I'm there to sell to the people who are selling to you. If key folks are back in their corporate headquarters crunching numbers, I can't do my job.

Thankfully, I was immediately and pleasantly surprised as I traversed the OTF show floor. I spotted corporate leaders like Dr. Toni Bucci of BASF, Bayer's Neil Cleveland, Turfco's Scott Kinkead, Mary Ellen Cleary of Cleary Chemical and many more.

Still, considering everything, why were all these "big guys" there?

For two reasons, it turns out. First, they wanted to show their support for Ohio's green industry. And second, they wanted to meet customers, listen to what they had to say and learn.

Listening and learning. What a concept, huh?


Well, we learned from that experience too. That's why, next month, you'll see something different in *Lawn & Landscape*. We've assembled a new and engaged Market Insight Council to help us keep our finger on the pulse of the industry and to guide our editorial decisions for years to come. We selected a diverse group of contractors, LCOs, consultants and others from all parts of the market (and all parts of the country) to critique the magazine each month, suggest story ideas and help shape our editorial plans for the year.

We have representatives from big companies and small companies, lawn care and landscaping, and education and industry. *Lawn & Landscape's* Market Insight Council mirrors the market, and we'll take what the council tells us very seriously.

Seems like common sense, right?

Well, we think that having readers drive the editorial content of a magazine is the best kind of common sense – a common-sense commitment to publishing a magazine that meets your real, day-to-day business needs when you need it the most.

And, just because you're not officially on the Market Insight Council doesn't mean we don't want to hear from you. My door is always open, so to speak. Feel free to call or e-mail anytime you have ideas – both critical or positive – about *Lawn & Landscape*. I'm at 800-456-0707 or kgilbride@gie.net.

That's how we listen, and that's how we'll learn. 

Lawn & Landscape

Leading business media for landscape contractors.

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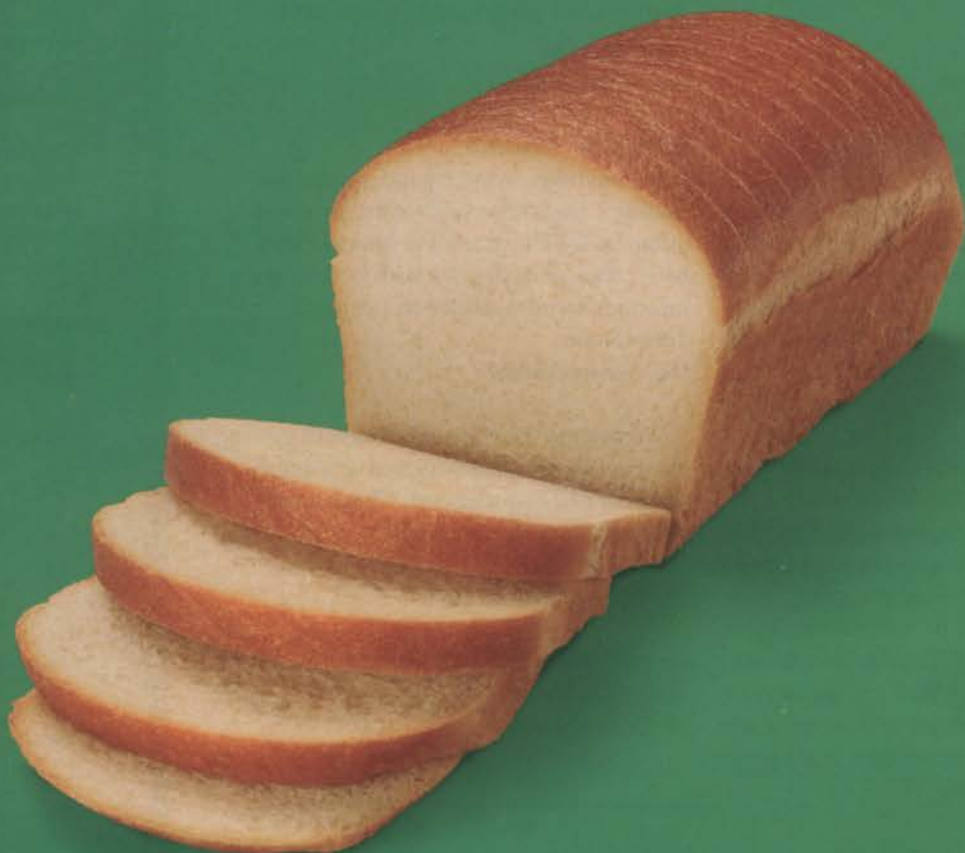
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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S

DEVILISH DELIGHT

I just wanted to drop you a line and let you know that I have gotten a kick out of your last two Devils Advocate articles. Keep up the good work. It's always an enjoyable read that puts a smile on my face and leaves me laughing.

Troy Tiedeman
Tiedeman, LLC
www.tiedemanllc.com

CERTIFIED IRRIGATION CONTRACTORS?

Is anyone on the *Lawn & Landscape* message board certified through the Irrigation Association? They are extremely rigorous exams but I don't think there is enough appreciation for what it takes to pass them.

Todd McCabe
L&L Message Board

I went through the program last year at the IA show in San Diego. I failed the test by one question, but passed the test the second time. It's a very hard test in my opinion but well worth the effort. Now I can say I am a CIC contractor. I just signed up for the CID course in design. Look through the IA Web site and see just how many contractors in your area are certified. You will be amazed. It is a great selling tool to have.

Dave Reynolds
L&L Message Board

We have not done the irrigation certification, but over the years have been certified in several other nursery, arborist, and landscape programs. We have not found it to be help as a marketing tool. It's good for the ego, and looks good to peers. Of course, we are in a small market where decisions are made based on reputation.

Doug Austreim
L&L Message Board

BARGAIN TRUCKS

Does anybody have a good source for finding a used 4x4 truck with a plow and dump body? The places I've looked either have pick-ups or big rigs with little or no information on the one-ton range.

Aaron Smith
L&L Message Board

We went to the state of Nebraska's surplus equipment sale and picked up a dump truck for half of dealer cost. Check if your state sells surplus equipment.

Ann Reams
L&L Message Board

CommercialTruckTrader.com
Andrew Hardscape
L&L Message Board

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



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HARDSCAPE NORTH AMERICA 2009 OFFERS VITAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES


Possessing the latest knowledge can make the difference between getting a job – and getting a job done with the excellence and value that can inspire customers to refer you to others. That kind of knowledge is what you'll find in the educational seminars offered during Hardscape North America (HNA) 2009, Jan. 14-17 at the Cobb Galleria in Atlanta.

These seminars cover must-know topics for hardscaping professionals – and there's something for every experience level. From business-building and management techniques to installation and technical topics, each session is an educational asset.

According to HNA committee chair Chuck Beckman, this year's Hardscape North America will provide a full range of trade show and training seminars throughout a few time-saving days.

"For 2009, HNA offers seminars and training for segmental wall and paving construction techniques, plus new programs such as ponds, fountains, low voltage lighting and decorative site masonry," Beckman says. "Indoor and outdoor demonstrations will also introduce fundamentals in architectural concrete construction methods, and hands-on classes will provide practical skills necessary for success in the marketplace."

Beckman adds that HNA instructors are nationally recognized, top-notch industry experts, and that all are ready to share their knowledge and insight with attendees.

For HNA details and registration information, visit www.hardscapena.com or e-mail icpi@icpi.org. 



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ONLINE Contents

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

JANUARY 2009



Cindy Code

Director, Interactive Content
Lawn & Landscape

Director's Pick



To take your mind off the dour economic headlines, visit www.nfl.com and fine-tune your Super Bowl pick, select the coveted first commercial to start the Feb. 1 game or purchase your favorite team's sportswear. Or, if you're not a football fan, visit www.nascar.com and gear up for the Feb. 9 Budweiser Shootout at the Daytona International Speedway. You'll find lots of interactivity on either of these sites.

Closer to home, *Lawn & Landscape* and two of its partners are offering several must-view Webcasts:

Life After the Yellow Pages

Jan. 21 at 2 p.m. EST

Sponsored by *Real Green Systems*

Are you still trying to grow your business using the Yellow Pages? Log on for this one-hour Webcast and learn:

- How to use your existing data to market for new customers
- How to enhance your data and use marketing data effectively
- How to up-sell your current customers
- Door to door sales
- Direct mail and effective offers
- Putting together a marketing plan.

>> Register at www.lawnandlandscape.com/realgreen

Smart Strategies for Growth

Jan. 21, Feb. 3 and Feb. 17, all at 2 p.m. EST

Sponsored by *Weed Man*

This Webinar series will directly impact your business. Every session will give you a take-home tip that you will be able to apply directly to your business. These one-hour sessions will not disappoint you and can be watched in the comfort of your office, enabling you to have key managers and employees as part of the call to share in this great learning experience.

>> Register at www.lawnandlandscape.com/weedman

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Five Ways to Get Up in a Down Economy

I graduated from college in 1990. There was a recession during this time, but I really never noticed. I didn't have many worries and I certainly wasn't the seasoned reader or consumer.

Today, however, I am keenly aware what's going on. Running my own business, I see firsthand what the current economic issues are doing to people. I am not an economist, but rather a father/husband/entrepreneur – someone who wants to provide for his family and make his corner of the world a better place. What I see going on right now troubles me but, with every problem, there is an opportunity. And since I'm a positive thinker, I wanted to share how you too can "get up in a down economy."

First of all, success is a mindset. How you approach the hand you are dealt will help you recover faster. There is little to be gained by complaining to your team about the troubles you have. Sure, tell them that things are tough. But also show them the steps you are taking to maintain or survive this downturn. Your team is looking for someone who can help them right now – not someone who will only make them feel worse.

That's why you should consider these five ways to stay upbeat and improve business:

1. Get out and see every client you have in person.

Recently, the president of the firm that manages my retirement account with called me and asked if he could come see me at my office. That was a switch; normally I had to go see him (which isn't a big deal and his office is a lot nicer than mine). But I have to admit, it was gratifying to have him come to my place. I could see, hear and feel his concern. He not only told me what

his company was doing to survive but he also gave me a few personal tips on finance and business that I really appreciated.

What's the bottom line? After our meeting, I felt better about the future and him. I'm not sure why since I, like most of you, have lost a fortune on my account. But I felt better knowing that at least he cared and had a plan. Wouldn't it make sense for you to go to all your clients and do the same?

Maybe, even without them asking, show them some ways you can cut costs. They might not need it, but think of the opinion your client would have of you after making the gesture.

2. Network like crazy.

I try to spend at least \$300 every month on lunches with prospects. I meet with people who are either clients, prospective clients or who know people who can become clients. It's very easy to set this up, you'll learn a ton and you'll remember why you got into business in the first place – it's fun! I find meeting with people one of the most motivational things I can do. Some of the questions I always ask are: How is business? Who do you know that is doing well? Is there anything I can help you with?

If you can't afford the \$300 a month, then stop by their office with donuts and talk to them. I am often amazed at how much business this generates. The results usually aren't immediate, but it sets the groundwork for a future sale. Other forms of networking are getting involved at a church, coaching sports, attending chamber meetings and even hanging out at the local coffee shop.

3. Get around positive people.

If you take a baby shark and put him in a small aquarium, he will only grow to the size of the aquarium.

But if you put that baby shark in the ocean, he will grow to be much larger. Sharks grow to fit their environment. People are the same, in a sense.

If you spend your free time with negative people who talk about how bad they've got it and who seem to think the sky is falling, you will have the same kind of thoughts (and it will be almost impossible for you to change). But if you are around positive, opportunity-driven, forward-thinking people, your chances for success will increase dramatically. It is amazing what a few hours a week being around other positive people can do for you, your family and your company. Find positive people and stick to them.

4. Go for the money.

Even in this economy, there are many people still doing well. People who provide healthcare to the aging are doing well. So are doctors and lawyers. Educators are hanging in there as are some entrepreneurs. In every marketplace there are people doing well, and maybe those people could use your services. You will never know unless you go out and talk to others and find out where the money is.

5. Do some marketing.

The last thing you want to do in this environment is run and hide. Keep your name out in the community. I assure you that the business owners who work hard to market their name will sell some work right now. But, more importantly, they will be one of the first names others think of when the economy turns around. Some marketing ideas to consider are postcards, door hangers, good old-fashioned cold calling and giving talks to local clubs. Don't sit still! Show that you and your company are alive and well and that you're staying up when others are down. **L**



MARTY GRUNDER

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

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What does your space look like?

Send photos of your shop, truck, trailer or office and tell us why it works (or doesn't) for you: dychum@gie.net.

A Mobile, One-Stop Shop

Kurt Ramaekers, Miracle Landscapes, Inc. • Lincoln, Neb.

"Our landscape installation division consists of hardscape installation (pavers and retaining walls) as well as softscape installation (planting, mulch, rock, etc.). We don't do any grading, sod sprinklers or water features. We also have a maintenance division that focuses on commercial mowing."



"One of my on-the-job landscaper guys will keep the trailer organized. It's best to clean during a low point in a job when people are standing around. When we leave a site, we try to have the trailer completely back in order."

"The 16-foot enclosed trailer holds tools such as a bed edger, sod cutter, plate compactor, jumping jack, retaining wall block splitter, masonry saw with dust collection system, shovels, rakes, brooms, a sledge hammer, wheelbarrow, backpack blower and laser level. We used to always keep our stuff in customers' garages during jobs so it wouldn't get stolen. Now we just throw it all in the trailer and we're good to go."

"The most difficult stuff to load is everything stored on the right hand side. The jumping jack is a pain because it's always falling over. The tools on the right and all those little pieces of equipment are always rolling around. I've got them tied down, but it's never quite perfect."

"I built all the hooks and shelves in the trailer. It took about two days and we spent about \$500 on lumber and hooks."



"The most difficult part of using a trailer is that you have to have another pickup to pull it. We use a three-quarter or one-ton Chevy truck."

"Also, gas mileage is horrible with the trailer. Ninety percent of our driving is in town, so we average about 10 miles per gallon across the board. The main thing that we've done to increase gas mileage is just have more materials delivered on site, and we've started using roll-off dumpsters to decrease our trips to the dump. Having the trailer cuts down on fuel use too because we can store stuff in the trailer and we don't have to take extra trips to places such as Home Depot."

"I estimate the trailer saves us up to five man-hours a week loading and unloading equipment. It's been one of the best overall investments I've made."

"We leave the trailer at the job site all the time. I only bring it back to the shop if I absolutely have to. That's why it's such great advertising. It's huge and it has the company name on it, and we just leave it parked there for however long we are at a job. Customers don't mind it. Then we can just take the trailer right to the next site, which saves more time."

Forward Thinking

To improve how landscape contractors cut grass, the Next Lazer Z would need to focus on four key areas.

Exmark engineers had a lot of work ahead of them.

The company had just invested an unprecedented amount of time and resources talking to landscape contractors, distributors and the members of its outdoor power equipment dealer network to determine what they wanted in the next generation of its best-selling Lazer Z. Exmark's Voice Of Customer (VOC) initiative had sought invaluable insight from countless individuals from coast to coast and everywhere in between. The challenge now was to translate this feedback into a product that delivered on end-user needs and expectations.

Back home in Beatrice, Neb., engineers began to mold the amalgam of thoughts and ideas into a physical concept for a revamped Lazer Z.

After weighing all of the feedback, four major areas of concentration emerged that would be the keystone features of the Next Lazer Z. "Nothing on the new mower is a result of chance," says Steve Finkner, the Next Lazer Z's senior principal design engineer. "There was a reason for everything we did. Every feature has a purpose and was designed in a very deliberate manner."

Cut and performance. As the hallmark feature of the Lazer Z, the goal was to redefine quality of cut and productivity. As such, Exmark engineers enhanced the durability of the zero-turn's mowing deck, added an innovative deck lift system and modified the transport lock function to maximize product performance.

Comfort and handling. If contractors expected to spend hours on the Next Lazer Z, then it had to be comfortable. Advances were made to bolster seat comfort and performance, including greater width and an adjustable seat back pitch to conform to the operator's posture. Likewise, changes were made to improve the feel and ergonomics of the mower's drive lever.

Safety. The Next Lazer Z's new rear-sloping Rollover Protection System (ROPS) allows the operator to shed low-hanging branches on the job site. In addition,



components on its unibody frame were realigned to improve the zero-turn's center of gravity and to offer the operator optimum traction and security. Also, trailer tie-down points were added for maximum safety during trailer transport.

Ease of maintenance. Time spent off the mower is time a contractor isn't making money. To rectify this concern, engineers streamlined the Next Lazer Z with a 40 percent reduction in parts. In addition, the new zero-turn features fewer grease points, alleviating time spent on routine chassis maintenance. Exmark designed its hydro drive system without hoses and reduced overall maintenance. Lastly, an electronic diagnostic system provides the operator with a quick and convenient monitor to alert and troubleshoot common problems in the field.

As the preliminary models took shape and entered the testing phase, Exmark engineers were confident the advancements and improvements in the Next Lazer Z's technology made the best zero-turn mower on the market even better.

>> This is the second of four advertorials focusing on Exmark's development of its Next Lazer Z from concept, design and production through to customer experience.

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USE READER SERVICE #16

Making the Leap

How contractors will clear economic hurdles and prosper in '09.

BY PAT JONES





"A lot of contractors have lived fat on the building boom. We have to get back to business basics."

— Jeffrey Johns, Coastal Greenery, Inc.

The half-hearted clinking of glasses as the clock struck midnight on Dec. 31, 2008 and the faux hugs that followed were just a couple of the signs of wariness most Americans are experiencing today. It can be hard to wrap your head around everything that's going on and the economy is presenting challenges for any businessperson. Contractors are clearly no exception.

That said, many around the industry have done some deep thinking about the immediate future and, in the spirit of the New Year, resolved to make changes in their professional and personal strategies.

Lawn & Landscape talked to a range of contractors around the nation to find out what their biggest concerns are for the year ahead and what they plan to do to succeed.

BACK TO BASICS

"Today's economy has humbled even the most humble of us," says Jeffrey Johns of Coastal Greenery, Inc., in Brunswick, Ga. "A lot of contractors have lived fat on the building boom. We have to get back to business basics."

Johns sees those basics "literally in our customers' back yards." He says its time to "cater to their every need and deliver great value for the same or less cost."

In short, he's fighting back.

"We're changing our whole structure to meet those (customer) needs. We're consolidating our crews to have three-man crews with one supervisor instead of two, and one truck on-site instead of two.

"We're doing the same with routing. The idea is to pay more attention and put one crew in one area for the week."

Johns is also making the leap personally by getting out from behind his desk and back into the field with customers. "I'm literally staying in direct communication with customers as my primary job now.

I can't just stay in the office and crunch numbers. I need to be the leader in front of customers – face-to-face whenever possible – to learn their needs and make adjustments to meet them."

Like many, Johns is already acting on his 2009 resolutions by changing the way does business now. For example, the firm has consolidated its organizational chart by doing away with two production management positions and folding their roles into the responsibilities of the account and branch manager jobs. "We're working lean...that's our mantra for 2009."

The new structure also means that teams will be working more entrepreneurially.

"If an employee on that team leaves, it's up to the leader to fill that position. The account managers are now routed to have dedicated crews...they're running that business, not me."

It hasn't been easy, but Johns knows that it's a necessary evil to consolidate and reinvent his staff.

"It's very uncomfortable that we've had to eliminate some positions and let some good people go, but you have to make decisions based on the organization, not the individuals."

FOCUS ON ROI

The West Coast market has always been a different animal compared to many parts of the country, and the challenges faced by Heaviland Enterprises, Inc., in Vista, Calif., prove that again.

Owner Tom Heaviland is in the comparatively fortunate position of being primarily a commercial maintenance businessman that hasn't needed to rely as much on new construction to drive business.

"We're not recession-proof," he says. "But we're less vulnerable than those tied to housing or big office developments.

"That said, clients are pulling back a bit and we need to be sensitive to that."

Where Heaviland thinks he's most likely to feel pain is in the upgrade business – a relatively modest but important part of his annual revenues. He fears that new planting projects, irrigation enhancements and other grounds improvements may go by the wayside unless he acts.

"We'll have to be more creative to get that business," he says.

For example, Heaviland plans to push any improvements that can deliver a return-on-investment for pennywise corporate clients.

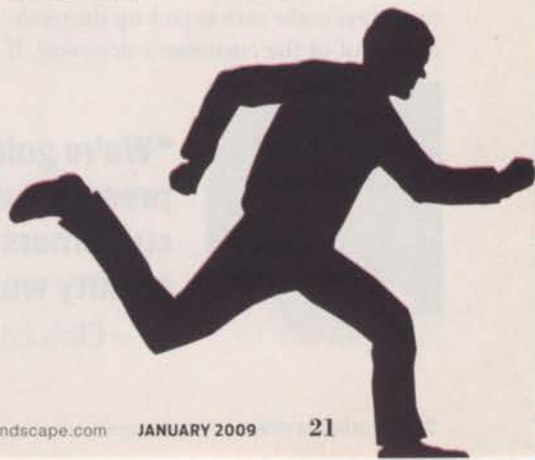
"We're looking at irrigation programs, smart controllers and other products that have subsidies associated with them for water-use reduction, which is obviously a big deal out here. They're going to respond to anything that will pay for itself in a few years and irrigation is a good place to position that, even if you're not in the San Diego area."

Heaviland's other resolution: better training.

"We need to improve on our overall business training, particularly at the crew leader level. That's where it really makes the biggest difference, because they're key to customer retention."

Like others, reorganizing to get away from the traditional structure of operating teams is also part of the plan for 2009.

"We have to be more client-focused than operationally focused," he says. "Just getting the job done isn't enough...you have to stay engaged with the customer all the time."



All that said, Heaviland doesn't plan on taking a step backwards next year. "Our goal is to grow and I'm pretty optimistic we can do that. That almost certainly means taking market share from someone else, but so be it."

LITTLE THINGS COUNT

In the Pacific Northwest, David Llanes of A Peace of Mind Landscape is looking to cost-containment and attention to detail to move him through the tough year ahead.

The Portland, Ore.-based firm carries about 140 accounts – down a little from their high-water mark a year ago – but still enough to push them upwards of \$500,000 in annual revenue.

Llanes realizes that companies like his are perhaps the most vulnerable to low-balling techniques, so he's focusing on the little things he believes can make a big difference in retaining customers and building business through referrals.

"We started our 2009 New Years resolution a year ago," he laughs. "I've already been streamlining because of fuel costs, so we've cut employees and other expenses due to that."

More importantly, he also took the challenge personally and got back behind the wheel of one of his trucks.

"I have to ensure that the highest level of service and customer relationship is provided. I'm rotating through our different routes and making face-to-face contact every day. I don't want to lose an account just because the customer didn't feel we were paying enough attention to them."

Llanes also preaches that his crews should look for little things they can do around their properties that customers will notice.

"When we get there in the morning, we always make sure to pick up the newspaper out of the customer's driveway. If

they're on vacation and the papers or flyers are piling up, we'll stash them away. If the cover has blown off the patio table or a barbeque, we'll put it back. People notice little things like that. If you're a friend and a good neighbor to your customers, they're far more likely to stick with you."

His philosophy is even reflected in the company name.

"My wife hated the macho names most contractors used and she asked me, 'What are you really trying to provide?' The term 'peace of mind' just popped out of my mouth. We later added the 'A' in front to be first in the phone book!"

Llanes' resolution and his advice to others?

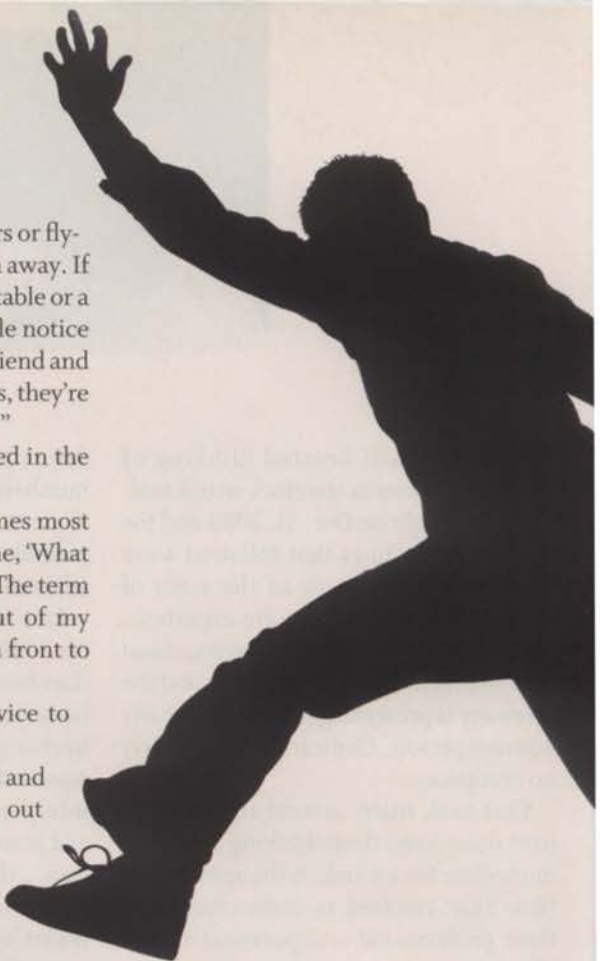
"Don't ever stop wearing jeans and boots to work, so to speak. Get out there and make sure that you really have a grip on the company. Don't assume you're employees are doing what they're supposed to be doing the way you know it needs to be done. Growth is fine and selling is fine, but if your properties aren't up to your standards, you're in trouble."

RETHINKING MARKETING

When we asked Chris Lambert, the president and owner of Raleigh-based Carolina Outdoor Care about his plans for 2009, he divulged them succinctly: "Making hard decisions every single day."

The Raleigh area, which has been in the middle of an unprecedented boom, is now busting fast and the competition is brutal.

"I have no idea where my installation business is going to come from," Lambert says. "The residential market is pretty well shut down. What little business is out there is mostly going to firms with almost no overhead who don't pay taxes and usually do payroll under the table.



They bid so low that they won't even cover their costs. How do you compete with that? Those guys won't be in business for long, but it still hurts everyone else in the short-run."

Cost management is an obvious part of the equation for Lambert's firm.

"We're looking at everything to control overhead. I did let one manager go (out of 22 full-time staffers). But, the biggest problem is how you plan for commercial and residential business next year. Usually, you can plan from year to year and adjust, but there's just no history for what we're going through right now."

That said, Lambert is not about to roll over and play dead.

"I'm making some major changes to our marketing. We're going to expand our Internet presence, direct market and reach customers who are looking for quality work."

Why focus on the Web?

"We've been struggling with Yellow Pages advertising for years, maybe spending \$1,000 or so per month, but that's really geared toward residential and the amount of leads we're getting has been diminishing. We think the Web and zip-code targeted direct mail will take us to the customer instead of waiting for the customer to come to us."



"We're going to expand our Internet presence, direct market and reach customers who are looking for quality work."

– Chris Lambert, Carolina Outdoor Care

Lambert's view on the bottom line for the year: "I wish I could say I was excited about 2009, but I'm a realist and it's scary. Everybody says they're trying to get lean, but there's never been a time like this. Those who really hustle will make it through."

TARGETING A NICHE

For Louis Mullen, president of the strictly residential Lawn Monkey in Denver, the crummy economy means it's time to look to a different customer base.

"People are losing jobs and lawn care just isn't a necessity for the average person," Mullen says. "I've already had a few clients stop our service because they're unemployed. It's the same story everywhere."

Mullen and his managers have a three-pronged plan for 2009.

"First, we're going to increase our ad-



Heaviland

Second, Mullen plans to set his company apart by enhancing services for existing clients.

"We're looking at doing things like adding one free month of fertilization for our regular customers. The idea is to give them something the low-bid guys can't or won't. We think once they see the results, they'll stick with us."

Finally, Lawn Monkey is targeting niche segments of the population for whom outside lawn care is more of a necessity.

"We're reaching out to disabled and

vertising dramatically. It'll lower our margins, but we have to be prominent. We're putting more emphasis on the Web but also doing more ads in local community papers."

elderly groups to form partnerships and offer specialized services, snow removal, etc. The goal is to generate referrals from the organizations. It's a good service and it's more recession-resistant than the rest of the homeowner market."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Whatever the specific New Year's resolution for their business was, contractors around the nation are clearly focused on three simple things:

- Managing the business, rather than letting the business manage them
- Using face-to-face interaction with customers to ensure higher retention and satisfaction rates
- And getting creative and more targeted with marketing and sales efforts.

So, despite the fact that 2009 will be a nasty year, contractors are already proving the old maxim: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. **L**

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To Buy or Rent

Which option fits your business needs?

BY PETER HILDEBRANDT

The decision of whether or not landscape contractors should buy or rent their large equipment often comes down to dollars and cents. It's a decision that would also be easier to make if contractors knew they were working through nothing more than a small recession. However, there may be a towline out there waiting to pull in landscape contractors who are looking hard for new work.

Dennis Slater, Association of Equipment Manufacturers (AEM) president, sees the need to get dollars into the construction pipeline.

"An immediate increase in public works funding will help jumpstart the U.S. economy," Slater says. "Construction projects are being deferred and our customers are looking for work. It's estimated that there are currently 3,000 projects that could begin work within 30 to 90 days of a governmental funding commitment."

But regardless of how long the economic downturn lasts or whether public

works projects will provide needed work for contractors, Brad Rowe reminds his Michigan State University landscaping students that the decision to purchase equipment often comes down to how much they're going to use it.

Teaching courses in landscape construction, landscape contract manage-



ment, plant propagation and sustainable landscape practices, Rowe advises students not to just buy equipment so they can have a toy.

"If you're not going to use a skid steer all the time in your business, don't buy it," he says. "You've got to use it enough to pay for it. Look at how much time it's going to save you; in the case of a skid steer it's going to save a lot of time as opposed to shoveling by hand."

With large equipment such as skid steers, Rowe says much depends on the landscaping company and what it's doing.

"I believe in equipment. I think it saves a lot of time and your employees are going to be happier. Anyone would rather work a skid steer than a shovel, and you can get so much done much faster. But if you buy the thing – use it."

Rowe feels whether companies will buy, rent or simply maintain what they have with their equipment depends on

the size of companies and what they do. If he is constantly building hardscapes, Rowe is glad to have equipment such as a skid steer. If he's doing mostly annual planting, maybe not.

"I don't feel that equipment prices are necessarily going to go up mainly because there is less demand for machinery today," Rowe says. "I would assume there would be less demand for the services, which in turn means there will be less work going on and lower demand for the equipment. This means companies making the tools must cut back their production capacity or they risk having more pieces out there than they are able to sell. That, in turn, will take the price down too."

If your company is in good financial shape, Rowe says it might not be a bad time to purchase equipment.

"I can see why someone might not buy something and instead go rent equipment, but I'm not sure that would be offset by doing less work. I think the long-term

trend for landscaping services is very bright. And the need is only going to increase and people will get paid more. But five years from now, I don't know what things will look like. I would hope things will get turned around by then."



Rowe

CLOSE TIES TO HOUSING

As the recession deepened, construction spending as a whole has lessened, according to Andy Lewis, marketing manager for Compact Power and BOXER Equipment in Fort Mill, S.C. Included in this tightening of the economic belt were landscapers, builders and anyone involved in the realm of landscape architecture, design and installation.

"Most landscape architecture work directly correlates with new home con-

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USE READER SERVICE #20

struction," Lewis says. "In the landscaping industry, a reduction in capital expenditures has been felt on a global scale."

There is a compounding affect here as well. Residential construction and commercial construction go hand-in-hand. For example, most wouldn't establish a new Blockbuster franchise in an area without new home construction. The two are dependant on one another. Therefore, the slowdown in housing ultimately equates to a slow down in the construction of businesses that support a community.

"When there is a downturn in the housing market, there's a slowdown in the entire landscape industry, especially with treescapers, sod installation workers and irrigation people as well as many of the things that come as standard issue with a new home," Lewis adds. "Frankly, in light of this fact, a lot of contractors are renting as a short term solution for a challenging market place."

Lewis has noticed an increase in small to medium-sized contractors trending towards renting equipment. Without the mature work pipeline they had just one year ago, landscapers may have a little trouble legitimizing a capital expenditure.

"Of course this is not a uniform truth," Lewis says. "Many of our customers are purchasing equipment now to leverage the extremely strong financing and warranty programs manufacturers are offering. When the recession lessens, and the work pipelines begin to reach capacity and supply and demand level back off, one should assume these incentive offers will weaken. Savvy entrepreneurs know this and are taking action now, before the end of the year."

"The trends I am witnessing show rental is on the rise. Internationally the



Sean Ozias of Ozias Lawn Care & Landscaping uses CAT equipment.

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Marketing manager Andy Lewis says as the recession deepened, construction spending as a whole has lessened.

rental market is growing even faster than domestically. For example, in England, 70 percent of equipment is sold directly into rental or 'hire companies,' as they are referred to there. But from a competitive sales analysis perspective, we're seeing financing rates for purchases I haven't witnessed in the last five years; they are very aggressive. It's definitely a real good time to buy."

STICKING WITH OWNERSHIP

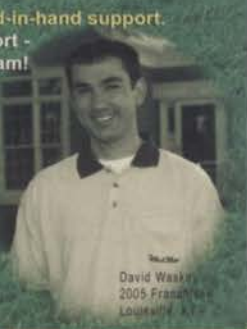
Sean Ozias owns Ozias Lawn Care & Landscaping, a seven-year-old business in Newton, Pa. Ozias has a Caterpillar skid steer, three Exmark Lazer mowers and various trucks and saws. When he started, Ozias rented nearly all his larger equipment, including steers. But as he has earned more money, he has increased his equipment purchases.

"In the long run, if a business owner plans on sticking with their business, the equipment should be owned," Ozias

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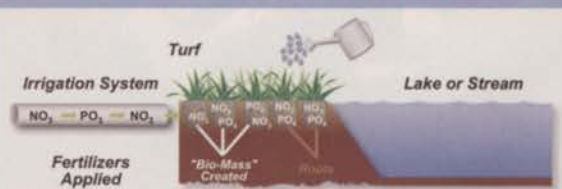
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says. "At this point, I own most of the equipment I use to run my business. It doesn't pay to rent a skid steer for \$400 dollars per day when you can have a payment for \$600 per month."



Lewis

Ozias sees owning and maintaining his current equipment as the best option.

"There are many deals available now, as well as quite a few going-out-of-business auctions where deals on good pre-owned machinery exist. For 2009, if you are able to buy you will get better deals than you ever have before. If you were to purchase a Ford pickup, you'd probably get a better deal than you could have two years ago."

"On the other hand, I think there is growth in the rental market as people become frugal with their spending and may be operating on a day-to-day or week-to-

week basis. If you have the resources and are not over-extending yourself, I would think now is the better time to buy. People are quite willing to wheel and deal to get items out of their showrooms."

LEASING WITH AN OPTION TO BUY

Jerry Haupt of Manitowoc, Wis., is a landscape contractor and owner of Lakeland Landscape Service. He has a regular crew of five full-time employees with three or four part-time workers. Haupt was thinking of upgrading one of his three 160 Series Bobcat skid steers, but at this point, he says he'll probably put that plan on hold.

"We're going to sit tight through the winter and probably through the start of next year," Haupt explains. "I'm still mulling over the idea of getting a tracked vehicle; they're nice but they come with a price tag too. I'm told the tracked vehicles work for snow removal – something we do in winter – but I have to try it first."

Lakewood Landscape usually buys most of its equipment, but does have some trucks on lease right now. These include a small pickup and small dump truck.

"The main reason we went that route is you can keep the monthly payment down and usually buy them out at the end of the lease," Haupt says.

EYING THE BIG PICTURE

Due to the economic hardships that a lot of small businesses are feeling right now, Brandon Hutchins, managing partner at Anytime Yardcare in Roy, Utah, has found that renting larger equipment is beneficial.

"Banks are restricting the amount of the money and the frequency with which you can get small business loans," Hutchins says. "Because of that, it is very important to be as liquid as possible. A lot of the equipment necessary to run a successful landscape company comes with high price tags. In a normal market, it's not tough to



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get a small loan with 90 days same as cash, one year same as cash, etc. Using one of those types of loans enables a company to recoup its initial investment for the equipment by performing jobs during that time period. A lot of rental companies are also feeling the economic crunch, so they are more willing to give discounts to frequent renters, and many are lowering their prices to try and earn more business."


Renting more equipment has helped Anytime Yardcare have more cash on hand and has enabled the company to actually expand its business.

"As banks become more willing to loan and economy grows stronger, we'll gradually start to buy some equipment that we're currently renting," Hutchins says.

In the end perhaps it's best to consider Ozias' big-picture assessment of buying and renting.

"Five years from now, I think it's going to be in exactly the same place it is now – or was two or three years ago," Ozias

says. "There are 50 percent of contractors who are renting, and 50 percent who are

purchasing. The ratio holds steady over the years." 



Landscaping companies big and small are finding that banks have restricted equipment financing options.

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USE READER SERVICE #28

It's 2009. Now what?

Starting this year, our industry is facing more uncertainty and adversity than most of us have ever seen. We're heading right into an economic "perfect storm." Overall, the economy is sluggish, to say the least. Credit markets have stalled. Consumer confidence is at an all-time low. Normally, any one of these three issues would usually be bad enough, but all three combined create an atmosphere of chaos that our generation has never seen. Your choice is whether to squarely face the brutal facts, give in to worry and pessimism or proactively create a strategic plan to help you weather "the year of the storm."

So where should you begin?

CREATE A STRATEGIC PLAN

A strategic plan is a "big-picture" plan. Like the captain of a ship facing a storm, you need to have a strategy. First, batten down the hatches and put out into deeper waters so as to avoid the "rocks" and "shoals" that might surround you. Once there, you need to man your instruments (compass, charts and maps, GPS, radar, navigational system, etc.). These are your objective reference points – benchmarks if you will.

Your budget for 2009, as we discussed in the last issue, is your primary objective reference point for the upcoming year. Within that budget, your No. 1 benchmark to monitor is sales revenue. If you price and produce your work correctly, sales volume then becomes your primary mission. If you can't price and produce your work correctly, first fix that problem, and then address the sales volume issue. Monitor your sales by means of a spreadsheet or chalk

"A \$1 million company can afford roughly \$125,000 in office salaries. If sales drop to \$500,000, then office salaries need to drop to \$75,000."

board that displays every lead and proposal along with its status. If you can't hit your sales goal, be prepared with another plan.

BUILD A 'FALL-BACK'

If all of your costs were "variable" – increased or decreased in direct proportion to sales – your problems would be minimal. However, you have "fixed" costs – ones that don't go away as sales fall. They include things such as vehicle and equipment payments and general and administrative (G&A) overhead items such as rent or office staff salaries.

G&A overhead costs normally comprise about 25 percent of your sales dollar. On average, office staff and owner's salaries, with labor burden, make up roughly half of all G&A costs or 12.5 percent of sales. If you can't achieve your sales goals, the first thing to address is office salaries. A \$1 million company can afford roughly \$125,000 in office salaries. If sales drop to \$500,000, then office salaries need to drop to \$75,000. Office staff can either reduce their hours or they can go into the field and produce billable hours.

Be prepared to sell unnecessary equipment or put it in "mothballs." One of my clients has already taken six of his trucks out

of action. Fortunately, the vehicle are already paid for. But they are officially out-of-service and now carry minimal insurance. The associated motor vehicle fees are much less, as well. He will not have to re-register them until he, once again, makes them active.

STAY POSITIVE

No one knows for sure how 2009 will turn out. Perhaps the fears will be more of a "Chicken Little" situation. However, I suggest that you prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I also recommend that you surround yourself with positive, pro-active people who focus on action that gets results. Look for opportunities and be creative. Discipline yourself to "stay" on your instruments – your objective reference points. For you, your primary reference point is your sales goal for 2009. And be prepared to make some very tough decisions this year to conquer the stormy seas. The survival rate for captains who take such an approach is much higher than for those who do not.

Finally, remember, the current economic cycle is just that, a cycle. You will get through this and you will be better for it, but it will be difficult. There are smooth waters ahead for those who discipline themselves and prepare today. **L**



JIM HUSTON

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

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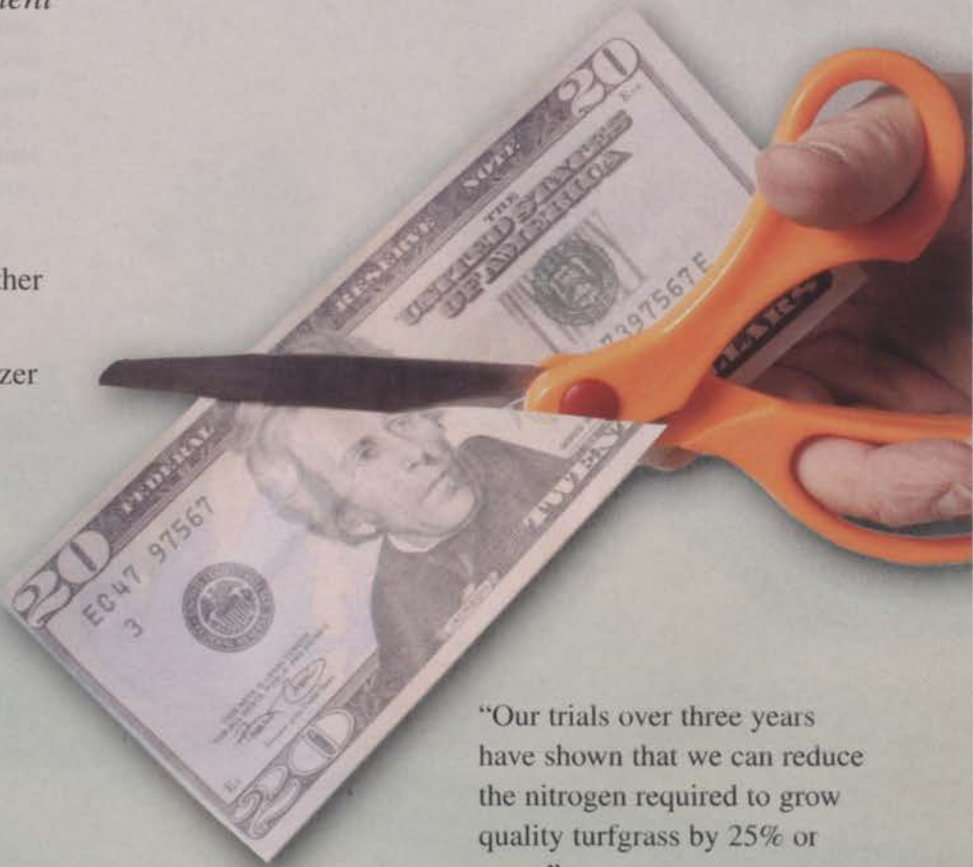
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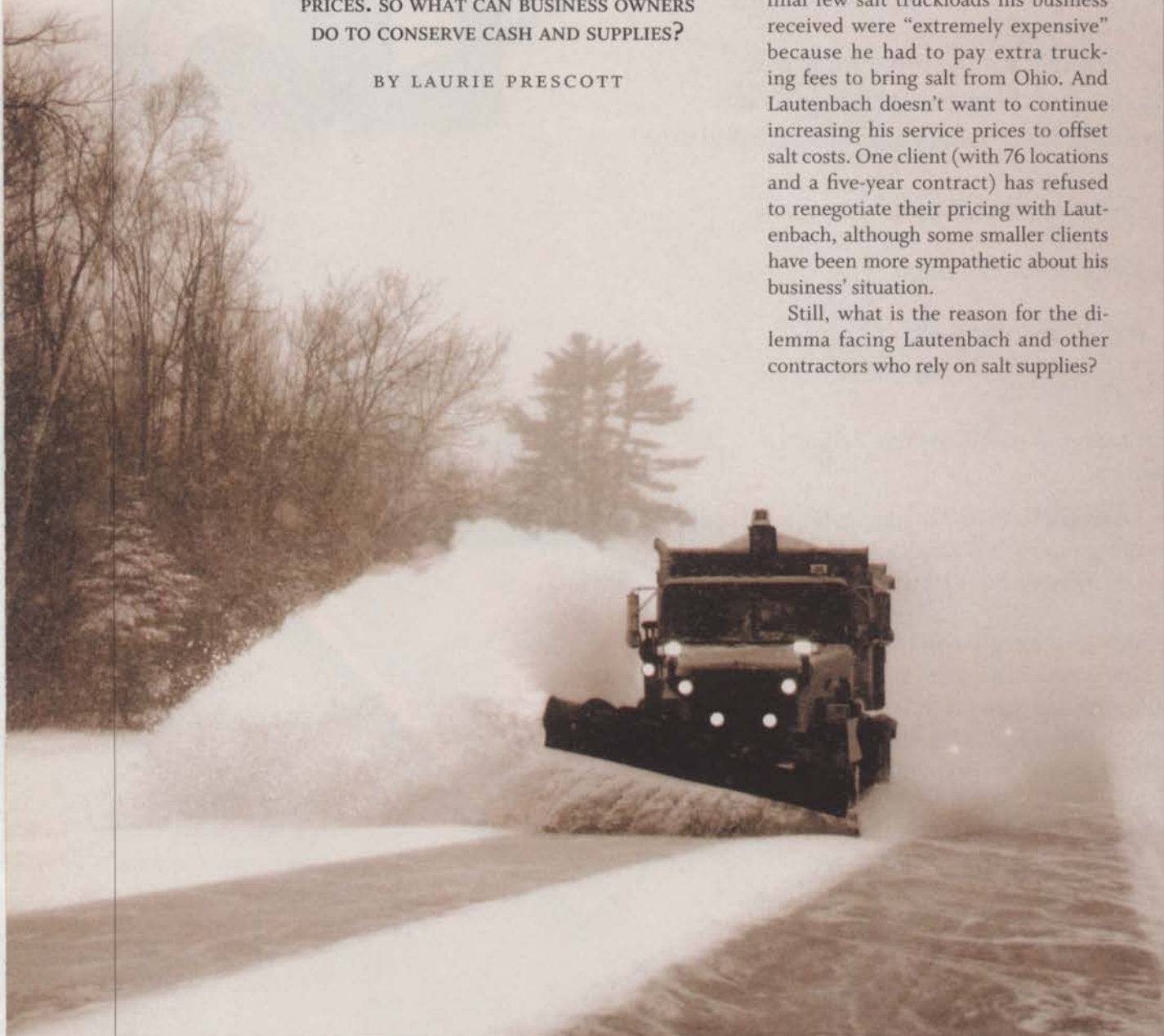
Like Salt in a Wound

HIGH DEMAND MAKES FOR HIGHER SALT PRICES. SO WHAT CAN BUSINESS OWNERS DO TO CONSERVE CASH AND SUPPLIES?

BY LAURIE PRESCOTT

Bob Lautenbach, Jr., one of the owners at Bob's Snowplow in Grand Rapids, Mich., has seen prices for a ton of salt rise from \$42 to more than \$113 during the past year. Lautenbach says that this year is the first he has had to guarantee his order and had to commit in June. Last year, Lautenbach says the final few salt truckloads his business received were "extremely expensive" because he had to pay extra trucking fees to bring salt from Ohio. And Lautenbach doesn't want to continue increasing his service prices to offset salt costs. One client (with 76 locations and a five-year contract) has refused to renegotiate their pricing with Lautenbach, although some smaller clients have been more sympathetic about his business' situation.

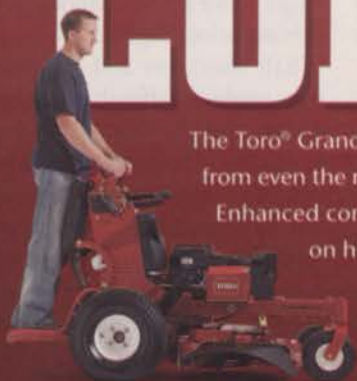
Still, what is the reason for the dilemma facing Lautenbach and other contractors who rely on salt supplies?





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Count on it.



Salt shortages and price spikes have made it difficult for contractors to budget for, bid on and order materials.

Hurricane Ike caused mine closures throughout Louisiana, a salt-producing state.

Referring to factors that have affected the price and availability of salt for snow removal, Dick Hanneman, executive director of the Salt Institute, calls it a "perfect storm." Prices can be 50- or even 100-percent higher than they have been for the last few years and shortages can push prices even higher. With eight to 12 million tons of road salt being used every year in the United States, the price increases can really add up.

BAD WINTERS, BAD PROBLEMS

The winter of 2007 was severe in Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, which caused several problems for salt distributors. The melting of accumulated snow and ice resulted in high waters, which made rivers such as the Mississippi difficult to navigate. This resulted in the shortest shipping season on record for salt producers. Intense competition for barges on the Mississippi didn't help. But the final blow was Hurricane Ike, which resulted in closure of the Morton salt mine and salt mines throughout Louisiana, a heavy

salt-producing state.

With the reserves of both suppliers and customers nearly wiped out, many Midwestern contractors are trying to protect themselves this year by not only replenishing supplies, but also increasing their orders by as much as 52 percent. With increased demand, the only place to get more salt is offshore, which is also driving prices higher.

Salt shortages and price spikes have also made it difficult for snow removal contractors to budget, bid and order materials. Hanneman recommends that smaller contractors need to "understand the supply chain." Unfortunately, state agencies, municipalities and counties have larger orders and are going to be supplied first. In order to be higher than your competitors in the "pecking order" Hanneman says be one of your supplier's best customers. "Pay your bills on time," he explains. "Contract with someone for a certain amount of material and then accept that amount."

Other suggestions from the Salt Insti-



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USE READER SERVICE #31

tute include establishing a *quid pro quo* relationship with long-term salt suppliers by trying to order worthwhile quantities, allowing some flexibility in the delivery schedule, providing prompt payment and for rapid unloading of delivery trucks.

STORE AND SAVE

Hanneman also recommends starting early and taking delivery early. Contractors who don't already have a storage area have a choice of building one or more of the permanent fabric and frame structures or building temporary surge piles at their facility.

The Salt Institute Web site (www.saltinstitute.org) suggests looking for sources of salt storage or contingency storage off-site. Recommended options "may include unused industrial and military complexes, unused concrete, blacktop and aggregate producing and plant facilities and unused industrial silos that have sufficient corrosion resistance."

Lautenbach co-ops his salt storage and orders with two other contractors who have a storage facility and equipment for loading. Although he pays extra for the storage and equipment use, he finds that the price is fair and the difference is



Hanneman

offset by the discount for ordering in larger quantities.

Troy Clogg, owner of Detroit-based Troy Clogg Landscape Associates, built a new temporary storage facility this year to guard against shortages. Clogg says that he will spread the cost out over five years, but like Lautenbach, he had to lock in on his order early.

"The gist of what we did was to use a little foresight and take more risk to negotiate a salt price earlier than we have in the past and then pay for it," Clogg explains. "The real deal is that it has gone from a 'just-in-time' kind of inventory management to speculating what you will use for a season and then pre-buying it to get a consistent price and availability."

Proper salt use and storage center upkeep can also help keep costs down. The Salt Institute recommends inspecting and maintaining storage facilities before salt deliveries, as it is difficult to repair storage buildings after they have been filled. In addition, the Institute also advises that applications of salt be controlled so as to

distribute the correct amount for the prevailing weather and road conditions.

Truck-mounted infrared sensors can more accurately calculate the appropriate application rate than wall mounted thermometers, which measure temperatures several feet above the road. Pavement temperature is the critical measurement for applying chemicals and abrasives in snow and ice control operations.

SALT ALTERNATIVES

Some snow removers are experimenting with a mixture of sugar beet juice and salt, which is less damaging to concrete and metal equipment.

Beet juice is a waste product that, when mixed with salt, is a more effective way to treat icy and snow-covered roads. When using the combination beet/brine for pretreatment, it stops melting snow at about 20 degrees below zero, compared to a salt/brine that will stop melting snow at about 18 degrees. It also leaves a residue on streets that negates the need for reapplication after a light snow.

In addition, the beet juice product (known as Geo-Melt) coats the salt and makes it less corrosive to vehicles, equipment and roadway infrastructure.

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A beet/brine pretreatment can melt snow until about 20 degrees below zero.



Clogg

Geo-Melt also makes the salt tacky, which reduces the tendency of salt to bounce off the road into surrounding areas.

Even though Geo-Melt is more expensive than salt brine, some contractors believe that its net cost could be lower, given that one treatment lasts about twice as long. It also can reduce or eliminate the use of calcium chloride in colder weather, which can be extremely corrosive to older, steel-bodied vehicles. However, Clogg notes that beet juice forms a somewhat sticky substance that can cling to cars and other surfaces.

Clogg says he had seen virtually no liquid use in Detroit until 2008, but now it's everywhere.

"Historically, salt in the Detroit area has been very cheap relative to other markets, but now contractors are scared that they won't be able to get salt," he explains. "We chose to invest in salt this year rather than go through a complete

change in equipment needs, training and product storage."

However, Clogg adds that his company is setting up one liquid truck and "trying many liquid products until we find the one that we think works the best." He has found that the down side to using liquids is that they have to be applied before forecasted bad weather. And in this economy, few want to pay for what they don't need.

In the end, Clogg says that salt problems are separating the business thinkers in the industry from the non-business thinkers.

"A lot of people have had the luxury of buying what they needed only minutes before they needed it, but that's not the case anymore."

However, Clogg admits that there is no guarantee that thinking ahead makes for the best decision.

"I believe I'm trusting the right information based on what I know. However, if salt prices should suddenly plummet like gas prices have, that would be the worst thing that could happen to me this year." **L**

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USE READER SERVICE #33



BOB DONNAN

What Credit Crunch?

BY PAT JONES

A key player in equipment financing says the economic downturn will have less impact on borrowing for mowers than many have feared.

Jack Snow claims he's been slowing down, traveling and working less lately. Yet the only time slot he had available to talk with *Lawn & Landscape* was a Sunday afternoon.

So much for slowing down.

The man who has driven Sheffield Financial to the top of the equipment credit market was born and raised in Clemmons, N.C., and earned his accounting degree from Guilford College after serving in the army. After school, he worked for a company that distributed graphic arts equipment – printing presses and large format cameras used in production. Then, in the mid-70s, with interest rates at 23 percent and long lines at the gas pump, he suggested the equipment company begin leasing products to make things easier on customers.

Just like that, a credit career was born.



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Snow later started his own company, Signet Financing, to expand financing to other industries. One day, he got a call out of the blue from Mike Ariens, owner of Gravely, who was looking for someone to give credit to a chemical company that wanted to purchase a fleet of mowers. Snow swung the deal. A week later, Ariens called again to ask if Snow wanted to sell him his company because no one else was independently financing equipment purchases in commercial mowing at the time.

Over the next five years, Snow expanded his business, learned more about the market and, in 1992, he and his wife Bonnie started Sheffield Financial, doing an amazing \$4 million in revenue the first

year. The company, which they sold to Branch Banking & Trust (BB&T) in 1997, now finances \$750 million annually in the commercial mowing and all-terrain-vehicle markets. Major customers include Scag, Grasshopper, Wright, Land Pride, Ventrac, Husqvarna, Yazoo Kees, Dixon, Encore, Dixie Chopper, Walker, Hustler, Bush Hog, Woods, Bobcat, Bunton and, of course, Ariens Gravely.

Lawn & Landscape caught up with Snow to ask him about the current state of the market, what the future may hold and how contractors can ensure that they aren't squeezed by the credit crunch.

For the average contractor, how serious is the credit situation right now?

For our customers, the ones that have been doing business with us for years, it's going to be pretty much status quo. We have a philosophy that relationships mean more to us than anything, and we have relationships with 8,000 dealers and probably 150,000 end-users. For those folks, it's not going to be that difficult. For new folks just trying to break into the market, it may be a different story.

This has been almost a perfect storm scenario. In 2007, we had drought. In 2008, sky-high gas prices. And, now it's the housing downturn. We've seen past dues and bad debt increase a little, but we've always stuck to our knitting. We don't finance refrigerators or boats and we don't do crazy stuff like offers to finance

“We don’t have unlimited capital. We have ample capital. We’ve built a very good base of dealers, end-users and manufacturers.”



BOB DOWNHAM

mowers for \$29 a month and then jumping it to \$300 a month a year later.

We don't have unlimited capital. We have ample capital. We've built a very good base of dealers, end-users and manufacturers. Obviously, we're watching past dues and bad debt but it's pretty much business as usual.

Are you hearing horror stories about firms that are really up against a wall because of this?

We are getting quite a few calls from end-users to let us know that things aren't as rosy as they used to be. We work with them until the spring – until they can start mowing again. We routinely rewrite loans and payments. We've always done that. For example, on every installment loan that we make, we allow them to skip six payments throughout the course of their contract. It might be a problem with seasonality, weather, taxes or whatever. We give them six coupons they can use to buy some time. We also push back due dates for 90 days in some other cases. You have to be flexible and work with the customers. If you don't, everybody loses.

What are the most important things contractors should be doing to protect their credit and ensure continuity?

The first thing is every business needs a good accountant. The owner needs to have someone who can look at their expenses and income and give them guidance. I have seen plenty of good businesses that didn't know if they were making or losing money until it was too late. Watch your expenses, be smart.

The second is to get close to your favorite dealer. Our relationships with dealers allow us to finance things simply because the dealer knows and vouches for that customer. About 95 percent of the time the dealer is right and things work out fine. We have to know a customer has the ability and desire to pay us off and, when times get tough, a loyal dealer is the best source for that information.

The final thing is if contractors get in trouble, they shouldn't be afraid to communicate with us or other creditors.



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What do you mean by that?

If I was a commercial cutter and found myself in that position, the first thing I'd do is call the finance company and let them know I have a cash-flow problem. All they have to do is ask and we can nearly always work something out. It's the one's who don't contact you and just hope the problem will go away that really get in trouble. It's exactly the same as the people with sub-prime mortgages who now face foreclosure because they hoped a miracle would come along. Miracles happen once in a while, but good communication with a lender is a far more realistic solution.

What kinds of things is Sheffield Financial doing to help ease the pain?

We're working proactively with the commercial cutters. We've installed a bunch of new software that, when the customer gets past due 10 days or so, they automatically get a call. We have people dedicated to working with them. As long as we un-

derstand the situation, we can help them. We work with them. It does us no good when they default. If we have to repossess equipment, we can usually only sell it for 50 cents on the dollar.

Are repossessions common?

Unfortunately, we have to do it sometimes. At around 90 days past due, if nothing is happening, we ask for the equipment back. That's very, very rare. Our repo inventory is only one-tenth of 1 percent annually.

Jack, bring out your crystal ball. How will the market look different in the future from a financial standpoint?

I think you're going to see the industry go back to basics. Commercial customers are going to be buying features and benefits instead of just jumping at a purchase based on financing. In my opinion, financing had become too prominent in the sales process. The days of the crazy

financing stuff are over for the next four or five years.

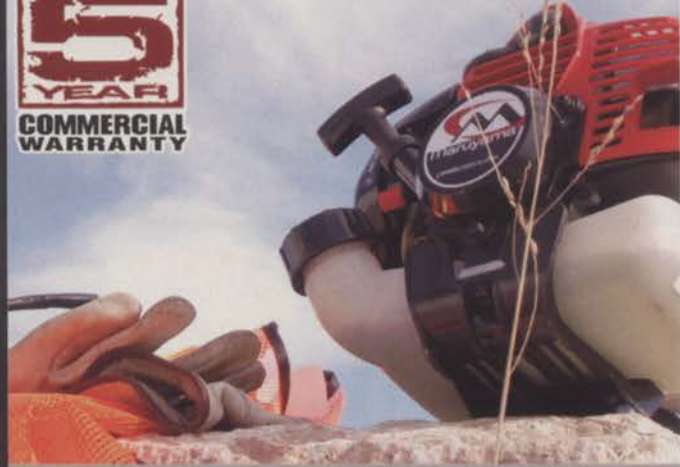
Other than that, I actually think 2009 is going to be a great year and we're going to be a big part of it because we're solid. More folks will eventually come in and compete with us and the crazy financing options will emerge again, but we'll stick to basics. I've seen a lot of those companies come and go. We're still here.

So, what's the bottom line on the credit crunch for equipment?

As far as we're concerned, it's over. We have ample capital and we're already through the crisis. There will be some bumps in the road, but grass is going to grow and need to be cut. That means people are still going to need mowers, and we'll be right there with them. **1**

Jack Snow is president and CEO of Sheffield Financial. He can be reached at jack@sheffieldfinancial.com or 1-800-438-8892.

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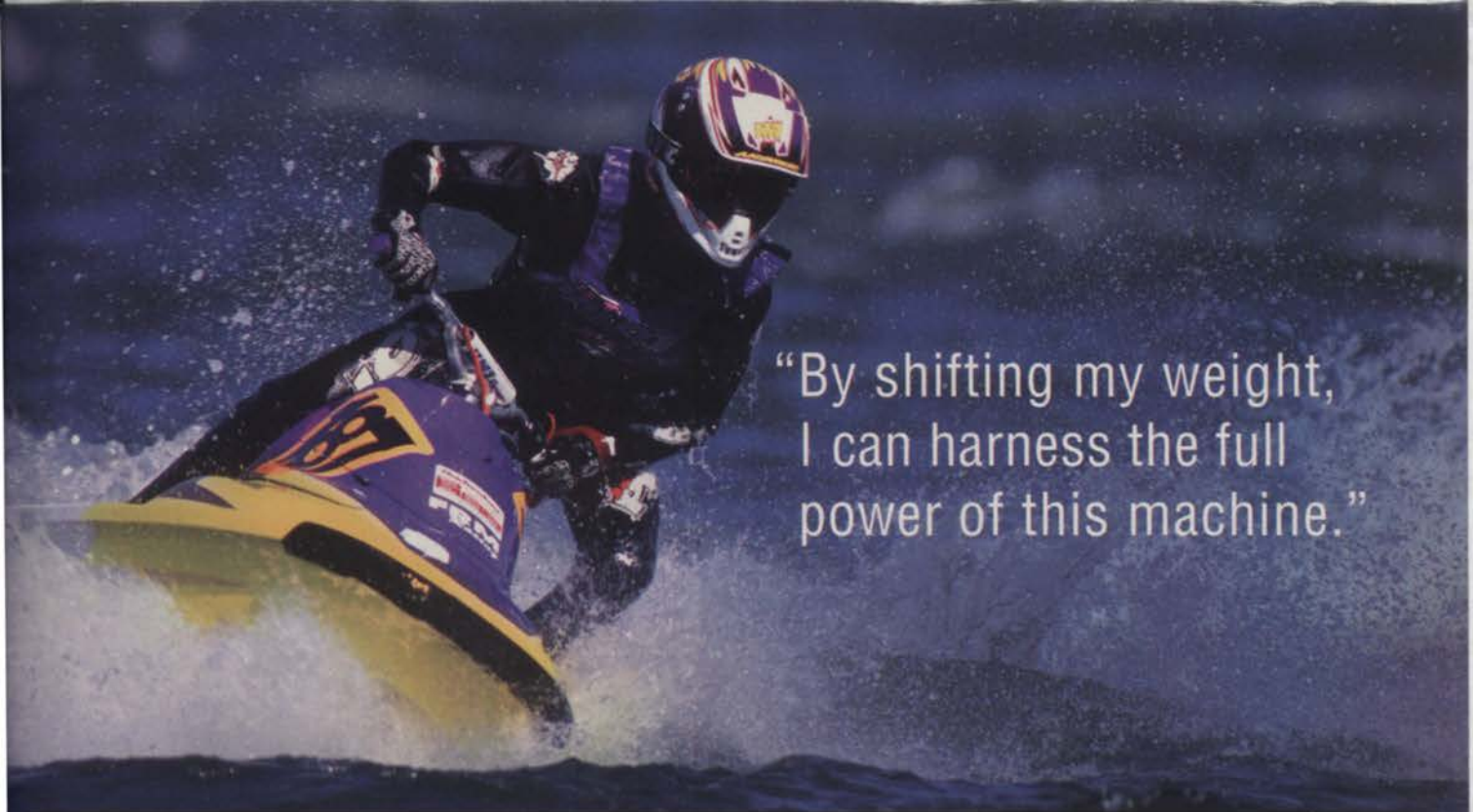
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USE READER SERVICE #38

THE WRIGHT WAY TO MOW

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Inventing a Way to the Top

For Dothan Irrigation owner Ron Franz, change is always a good thing.

BY DAVID YOCHUM

It's the classic American fairytale. Tough economic conditions steal a man's job. High unemployment rates prevent him from finding another. And just when all hope seems lost, the man's carefully-invested bottom dollar returns phenomenal riches.

Normally, this would be a great motivational story for any entrepreneur. But not for Ron Franz.

More than 30 years ago, this was his reality.

"My boss said he could give me severance pay for about 30 days or until I found a job," says Franz, owner of Alabama-based Dothan Irrigation. "But I couldn't find a thing. So I put a \$3 ad in a newspaper that said I 'cut grass' and my phone started ringing off the hook."

However, Franz's rags-to-riches LCO story doesn't stop there.

Unlike typical business fairytales, his continues to be one of mul-

tiple endings, false starts and new beginnings. But throughout every change, Dothan Irrigation's ambitious owner adjusted to new challenges and shifting demands. And today, he's inventing his way to the top.

GROWING WITH OPEN EARS

Since the beginning, Franz has built Dothan Irrigation by listening to customers. In the 1970s, he opened a shop as a lawn care provider. Catering to landscaping requests in the '80s, Franz purchased \$15,000 worth of new construction equipment. Then in the '90s, Dothan Landscaping began getting calls for irrigation.

So, Franz modified his business again.

"I changed the name of our company to Dothan Irrigation and dropped landscaping almost completely," Franz says. "Today we



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basically install sprinkler systems, French drains and build reusable wet areas."

But while Franz's irrigation business garners \$200,000 in annual revenue and is held in high regard throughout Dothan, Ala., (Franz says nearly all of his business comes from upper-echelon referrals), his small business still fights to survive.



Southern Alabama's extreme heat takes its toll on Dothan Irrigation's small, four-man workforce, and this doesn't bode well for a company that faces stiff competition.

"It's fierce down in this area," Franz says. "Fifteen or 20 years ago, I could name my price. Now, I'm forced to price a job by the head because everybody else prices that way. And I used to get roughly \$120 or \$130 per worker. Today, I'm lucky to get \$80 or \$90."

Franz says another constant hindrance is that the state of Alabama does not require irrigation contractors be licensed.

"To do work, all you need is a \$100 permit," Franz explains. "Contractors jump in, bring prices down, starve to death in about a year or two and then drop out. Most of the systems that they install aren't

good either because they had to cut prices somewhere, usually by adding too many heads onto a small line."

PROBLEM SOLVING

To separate his company from more than 15 local competitors, Franz only offers thorough, high-quality installations. He says he's one of the few contractors that calculates water pressure into irrigation layouts, and the only contractor that delivers detailed, as-built irrigation system plans to each homeowner.

But with the economy slowing, Franz can no longer sit and wait for premium business referrals.

These days, you'll find the progressive irrigation contractor walking into local courthouses, asking to see all housing permits that have been issued in the past 30 days.

"The courthouses give the phone numbers, addresses, the size and the value of a house that is going to be built," Franz

Dothan Irrigation owner Ron Franz and his four employees service homes in southern Alabama.

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Bill Kemp
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Cashew Job	Planting				7:58	7:48	15:47
		7:38	7:35	7:35	7:58	7:48	38:53

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explains. "A lot of times the builder includes the irrigation system with their home, and we can't touch that. But we track down owners that want to handle landscaping and irrigation themselves."

While making the legal system work for him is a novel idea, perhaps even more innovative is Franz's approach to solving Dothan Irrigation's everyday efficiency problems. For example, if he sees employees wasting time with store-bought tools, Franz will simply make his own.

"I realized that the shovels people buy at retail stores weren't made to dig narrow trenches," Franz says. "So I took a torch to my shovels and cut them down narrow."

Unfortunately, Franz's unique shovel invention is slightly overshadowed by one mistake – he never patented his idea.

"Of course, patents came out and now

(competitors) have great shovels to do the job," he says with a chuckle.

BUILDING A FUTURE

Never one to stop innovating, Franz remains dedicated to Dothan Irrigation and is already developing another invention to help his crew succeed.

Only this time, he's working with specialists at Invent Help to patent his new idea – the Franz Filler.

"The hardest part on every irrigation job is not installing the pipe or trenching, it's covering everything with dirt," Franz explains. "So I looked on the Internet to see what's already out there, sat at the drawing board and came up with a machine that will actually fill trenches back up."

Franz says he spent three days at a metal shop before leaving with his first Franz Filler prototype. Then, he gave the Franz Filler to the men at Dothan Irrigation for field testing.

"They came back and said, 'Ron, you really need to go out and try this thing for yourself.'"

Franz did just that, hauling his invention to a job with 850 feet of trench work. It took the Dothan Irrigation team nearly seven hours to dig the trench, but only 45 minutes to cover it up using the Franz Filler.

"Normally that would have taken at least a half day with three men," Franz says. "And we covered it up twice."

As part of his agreement with Invent Help, Franz can't reveal many details about his Franz Filler. However, he was informed that his filler invention has "good potential" for mass production. It's a tool that Invent Help says 3,000 suppliers have the capability of producing, but not one that has Franz scrambling to change his company's focus yet again.

Unless, of course, customers start making his phone ring off the hook. **L**

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One Tough Animal

USE READER SERVICE #44



Kevin Vogeler grew tired of the way other turf businesses operated, so he opened his own.

Northern Niche

Thanks to its emphasis on environmental and customer care, Turf Care Enterprises has become a Chicago-area mainstay.

Kevin Vogeler says spraying a heavy blanket of chemicals on every customer's lawn – whether it needs it or not – isn't quality turf care. And it certainly isn't customer service.

Providing personalized, environmentally friendly turf care solutions to every customer is, and that's what Vogeler has focused on since founding Turf Care Enterprises in Barrington, Ill., in 1986.

"I was dissatisfied with the way most lawn care companies did things," Vogeler says. "They did not customize programs for individual lawns. They used large tanker trucks, applying the same products to everyone's lawns."

Plus, he says, companies overused chemicals and failed to keep promises that they made to customers.

"I loved working with plants and I loved helping solve clients' problems, but I grew tired of the way people in the industry went about their business," he says. "I knew there were consumers who were tired of the same things, so I decided to start my own business."

Vogeler's goal was to raise the bar on customer service, and he's done just that by focusing on customer needs and specializing in plant health care for lawns, trees and shrubs. By building his business upon tenets that he says were lacking from the industry, Vogeler's

company has steadily grown for more than 20 years – despite heavy competition from the large corporate lawn care companies in the area, all of whom are after the same, high-end northwest Chicago residential market.

A NEW KIND OF GREEN

Turf Care Enterprises' focus on the environment differentiates it from other companies in the area. "The first (lawn care) company I worked for had no concern for all the chemicals that they used," Vogeler says. "Their policy was if a customer in your route had insects, we sprayed everyone's lawns with insecticide, with no concern for what these chemicals were doing to beneficial insects. These chemicals were not natural to the environment and I questioned what they were doing to the billions of microorganisms in the soil."

So Vogeler left that company and went to another one that used primarily organic lawn treatments. "This new company eased my concerns with regard to the environment, but they did not provide the results customers were looking for," Vogeler explains. "So I combined the best of both approaches to my lawn care programs."

Turf Care Enterprises keeps chemical pesticide use

to less than 3 percent of all materials they apply, instead relying on mostly natural and organic fertilizers and products. Necessary chemical pesticides are applied only when and where they are needed. "We lived by integrated pest management principles before it was the thing to do," Vogeler says.

Yet he doesn't always promote the 100-percent organic programs that his company offers. "Too many people find they don't get the results they're looking for (from organic programs)," Vogeler says. "What people want out there is safety. They want to make sure what they're doing is safe for their families and pets. We can do that without going 100-percent organic."

In addition to its focus on turf care, Vogeler's company also boasts a professional tree and shrub division, which employs full-time ISA-certified arborists. Turf Care Enterprises' goal is to protect, prevent and correct problems with insects, diseases and environmental conditions that may be damaging customers' shrubs and trees.

It's an approach that sets the company apart, according to Dave Berndt, John Deer Landscapes branch manager and Turf Care Services equipment supplier. "They're one of the companies out there that not only does a good job with lawn care, but they also have an excellent tree and shrub division," Berndt says. "They're more multi-faceted than most of the medium-size companies."

CUSTOMERS FIRST

Vogeler's focus on proper education is part of the reason the company has succeeded. In its first year, Turf Care Enterprises posted revenue of about \$40,000. Today, that has increased to \$1.5 million.

"We provide weekly training and regularly send our employees to seminars, university classes and workshops," Vogeler says. "We currently have a higher ratio of certified landscape professionals than any of our competitors."

This knowledge is then passed on to homeowners.

"I preach to my employees that the customer is the most important person in our organization," Vogeler says.

"We give them instructional information on how to adjust their mowers and water, and when we come out for applications we reinforce that," Vogeler says. "It's mostly education, pointing out that we do use the best products, but it means nothing if customers don't do their part. They're pretty open to that - they want their nice, thick golf course lawns."

And it's evident when customers listen. In neighborhoods where Turf Care Enterprises handles most of the lawn care, Vogeler says some lawns look dramatically different than others. "They're on a similar program. It's just how customers care, water and mow. If the customer

fails to follow the proper practices like mowing or watering, we will not achieve our goal."

Educating customers is just one part of a large-scale customer service strategy that generates results.

"We place the customer above anything else," Vogeler adds. "I constantly preach to my employees that the customer is the most important person in our organization."

That dedication to the customer shows. Vogeler's says his employees are always out to do the right thing for the customer and are looking for ways to differentiate themselves from the norm.

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"They definitely do things with the customer in mind. Everybody watches the bottom line, but in hard times they don't cut the corners just to make the bottom line. They also look at things from a customer's perspective."

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

Some 20 years ago, Vogeler focused on direct customer contact for generating new business by going door to door in residential areas. Today, his company still drums up business by using similar methods.

Employees work to exceed expectations so that current customers refer friends and neighbors. And they even knock on potential clients' doors.

Although the economy has slowed, Vogeler says there's still a market for his company's services. Enough of a market, in fact, that Turf Care Enterprises typically charges 5 to 10 percent more than competitors due to its level of service and its emphasis on the environment. But from the time Vogeler started his business, he guaranteed customers that if they used his service and did the necessary maintenance between treatments, he would improve their yards by the end of the year.

"If I couldn't, I would give them their money back," Vogeler says. "We would take a picture of their lawn with an imprint of the date before we started service and a picture at the end of the year. I never had to refund anyone's money, as I made certain to improve their lawn."

The company's focus on making customers' lawns the envy of their neighborhoods will never change. But Vogeler and his team are working to make their operations more efficient.

"We're looking to cut out waste and control expenses," he explains. "We can't control what's going to happen with the economy, but we can control our company."

That's why Vogeler says his company is focusing on trimming fat from its operations, reducing waste and keeping costs down.

But of course, these cuts won't come at the expense of the environment or the customer. That's exactly what sets Turf Care Enterprises apart. **L**



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USE READER SERVICE #48

Image is Everything

ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design looks prestigious, but 'dirty work' pays its bills.

Joe Gonzalez could be the typical New Yorker.

His vocal cords reveal a scruff, Big City accent. He has experience working for a successful fashion company. And when it comes to business, Gonzalez never forgets to wear his accounting glasses.

"I have a financial background," Gon-

zalez admits. "Even today, I wouldn't consider myself a horticultural guy."

But for the past 18 years, that's exactly what this Floridian has been.

As the CEO of Venice-based ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design, Gonzalez built a four-man mowing crew into one of the sunshine state's largest, multi-faceted lawn care companies. With 225 full-time employees, a design center, two satellite offices and a corporate head-

quarters, ArtisTree is positioned to tackle virtually any lawn care requests, including irrigation, pest control and landscape renovation. And although slightly down from 2007, the business' 2008 projected revenue is nearly \$14 million – an astounding figure considering Gonzalez says most customers have trimmed budgets.

"Luckily, our demographic is the baby boomers and retired people who are somewhat insulated from the market downturn," Gonzalez explains. "But regardless of liquidity, everyone is holding onto their money and putting off large renovations or purchases."

For a company that prides itself on offering "vogue" landscaping to Florida's



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CEO Joe Gonzalez and president Frank Fistner of Venice, Fla.-based ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance and Design.



retired elite, some might think locked wallets would signal trouble for ArtisTree.

Not so.

While Gonzalez left New York, he took his business and marketing sense with him, creating a glamorous company stabilized by not-so-glamorous work.

COOLING AND CUTTING

Two decades ago, Gonzales knew he wanted to start his second career as an entrepreneur. But that's about all he knew.

"When I landed here, it was somewhat of a slow pace," Gonzalez explains. "I was looking for something to buy that would get me going everyday. There was a moratorium on construction, so I began looking into the air conditioning industry."

Simultaneously, the brokers that introduced Gonzalez to cooling also offered him a small lawn mowing company. Gonzalez says the business was generating about \$20,000 of monthly revenue – all from local housing associations.

"So I bought that, bought the air conditioning business, realized in short order that getting into air conditioning was

a mistake, and started focusing on the landscaping and maintenance side of things," Gonzalez says. "Frank Fistner (one of Gonzalez's original employees and ArtisTree's president) told me this was a worthwhile industry and convinced me to put some dough into it."

Lucky for Gonzalez, Fistner knew what he was talking about.

Gonzalez says there was only one other total lawn maintenance provider in his area, which meant competition was mostly "mom-and-pop" mowing, pruning and chemical companies.

"Immediately, our objective became doing total maintenance, which required getting licenses, irrigation products and chemicals," Gonzalez says.

But coming from the fashion industry, Gonzalez realized his company needed something more than a bevy of services to be successful. It needed a new image.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"ArtisTree" wasn't exactly the company that Gonzalez purchased in 1990. Initially, his lawn maintenance service was called Save-On Enterprises.

"I found the name appalling because that's just not what we were," explains Gonzalez. "But in the beginning it was just a struggle to survive. About six years ago, we were getting bigger and bigger and decided we needed to change the name. Our management team did a brainstorming session and one of the guys came up with ArtisTree. Immediately, it became the only choice for us."

Gonzalez says changing his business' name did wonders for the company. Workers acted different. Attitudes changed. And

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Joe Gonzalez, ArtisTree Landscaping Maintenance & Design CEO

What is ArtisTree's biggest challenge today?

The major challenge is the economy. A year ago, I would've said labor. But really it's probably a combination of the two. There's a lot of labor out there now because of the economy, so it's not a critical issue. When construction was in full swing labor was hard to attain here. We are on the H2-B program and that's been a great source of labor in the summer months, but it's a renewed program. We'd love to see some policy solidifying the program.

How do hurricanes affect your business?

ArtisTree is in a unique area where they seem to go around us. We've only had one direct hit (Hurricane Charlie) on a peripheral part of our maintenance range. We were able to deploy and get that community squared away. We did have opportunities to bail and go on the other coast to make some money in a hurry, but we didn't want to do that to our existing customers.

everybody in the company felt uplifted.

"We already had a base of success that represented what the name was, but the name made us solid," Gonzalez says. "We started to attract a different caliber of people. When I look at our clients and the amount of support we have now, it's pretty tremendous."

ArtisTree's customers are mostly southwest Florida homeowner associations located in high-end communities such as Sarasota, Bradenton, Venice and Lakewood Ranch. But while the company's landscape designs garner attention, the majority of ArtisTree's revenue is generated by regular mowing and maintenance work.

"Maintenance is where the value is," Gonzalez explains. "I know what my monthly billings are going to be. But construction is the 'chi-chi' side of the business. People like its creative aspects."

Gonzalez admits that ArtisTree first struggled with its design/build services, but things improved as the company grew financially. Fister says ArtisTree rarely lost accounts during its first 15 years of business, and with construction enhancing profit margins, the company became a leader in landscape maintenance and design.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Still, being an industry leader means

nothing unless customers are informed. Five years ago, ArtisTree predominantly advertised by word-of-mouth. But after hiring a professional public relations director and outsourcing the production of a first-rate, multi-media Web site, the company is reaping new rewards.

"Marketing is pretty critical to our success," Gonzalez says. "So are our account executives – the people responsible for booking business."

Looking at the challenges of tomorrow, Gonzalez says he won't knuckle down under pressure to change how ArtisTree operates. He recognizes that companies can force themselves into bankruptcy if they begin flexing numbers just to buy business and survive.

So to continue on a healthy financial path, Gonzalez says ArtisTree must do what it does best – manage its money and image, deliver a good product and continue to offer reliable service.

"I've always had the viewpoint that if you get a complaint, you have to answer that complaint as quickly as possible," he explains. "We've always had a 24-hour or same-day procedure in terms of responding to complaints and inquiries. If there's a branch rubbing a client's roof at night and he can't sleep, that branch has to go. There's nothing more important that we can be doing than getting that branch out of there. That's the mentality we infused into our company." **L**

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Knowledge is POWER

How irrigation contractors can learn to fine-tune their trade



BY JOHN TORSIELLO

Winter is an ideal time for lawn and landscape contractors to hit the books (and the Web) in anticipation of selling irrigation system maintenance services for the coming season. With the number of new residential and commercial units dwindling in an ever-tightening economy, adding existing irrigation system maintenance services can create vital new cash-flow streams for contractors.

"Given the current economic crises, the only people growing their businesses and working full-time are the service companies," says Stephanie Pollard, irrigation industry consultant and owner of The Oasis Group, an irrigation installation company based in Ontario, Canada. "I was talking to a contractor in Florida and they said business owners there are making a shift. They don't have 3,000 new homes coming online every year anymore, so they are looking for an edge in the marketplace."

In many instances, that edge is education. Most irrigation equipment companies offer various levels of training for both residential and commercial contractors. And having a comprehensive working knowledge of a system – knowing not only how to install it but also how to maintain it – can result in potentially lucrative service contracts.

"There seems to be a very low entry point into our industry," Pollard says. "There are people with a pickup truck and a wheelbarrow going around saying that they can install and care for an irrigation system when they might not know how the sprinklers are supposed to be putting water down on the property."

Pollard adds that contractors who have completed a training program and/or received certification in irrigation maintenance enhance their credibility with customers.

"If you communicate to your customers

that you have taken classes and have some type of certification for servicing irrigation systems, it goes a long way toward building customer loyalty."

Mickey Irwin, owner of Select Environment in San Carlos, Calif., also says knowledge is invaluable.

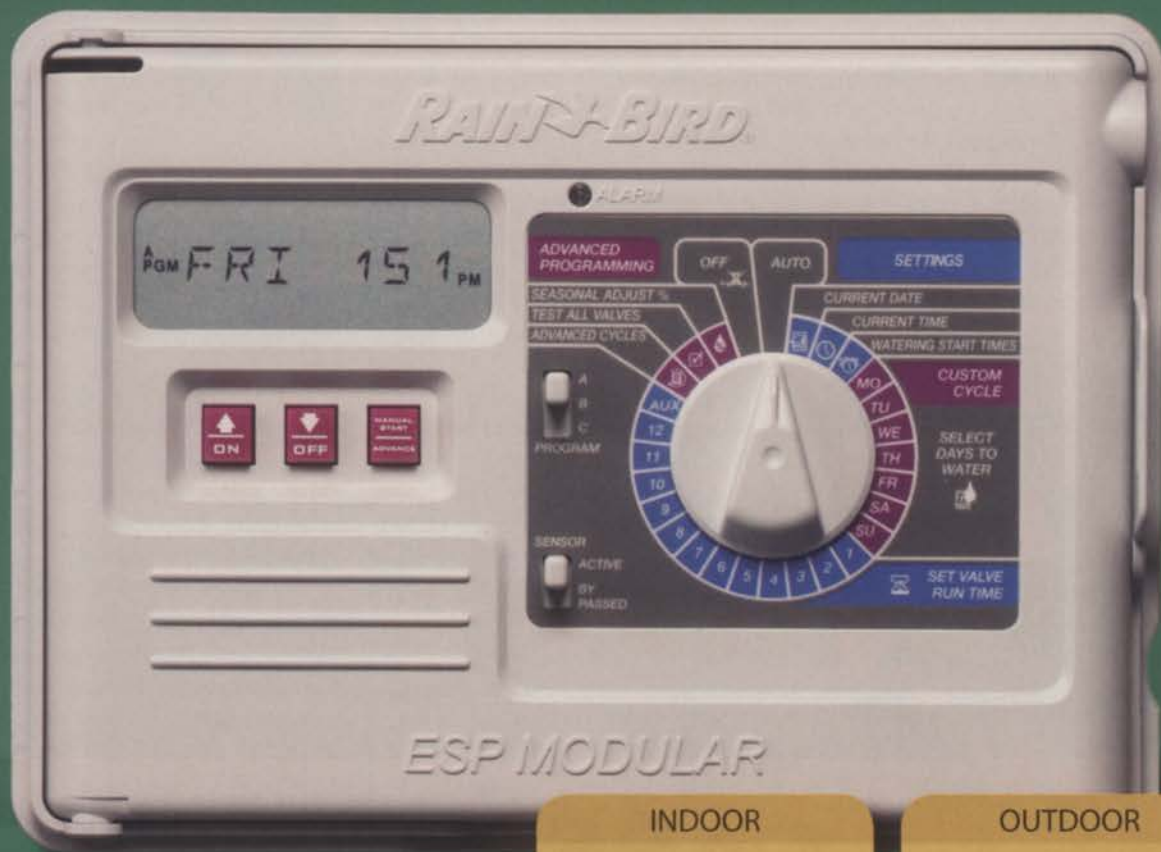
"When I can speak to a client and can be confident that I know what I'm talking about, how can they not hire me?"

Irvin has attended the educational programs offered by Phoenix-based Ewing Irrigation Products for almost 20 years. His studies have covered basic irrigation, troubleshooting, water management, water auditing, lighting and water features.

"Next, I believe, will be the smart controllers, which I have used for three or four years," Irvin says. "The more I can learn the better."

Victoria Michaels, owner of Victoria Gardensmith in Anaheim, Calif., concurs. She has also attended educational semi-

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nars offered by Ewing.

"The more I learn, the more I am able to help my customers," Michaels says. "An irrigation auditor class was very helpful, as it gave me valuable tips on selling to customers."

Ewing Irrigation Products offers a wide range of educational opportunities, including irrigation design and troubleshooting, irrigation system auditing, water feature installation and maintenance, and landscape installation and maintenance. Each



season, the company hosts more than 200 courses. The firm also conducts educational events at various store locations, and its branch and field staff are available for customer consultation. Ewing also offers a digital resource center.

"Right now, professionals are looking to cut costs and streamline operations, improve skill sets and identify ways to grow and develop their scope of services," says Terry Williams, vice president of the Ewing customer experience. "Education is always an area of interest for landscape and irrigation professionals."

Williams adds that many green industry professionals are interested in becoming certified and are requesting new courses to help them prepare for certification, such as the Irrigation Association's Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor exam (which allows individuals to apply to be-

Irrigation classes help contractors prepare for certification tests.



Mann

come an Environmental Protection Agency WaterSense Partner). The designation can prove an important asset in an industry facing increasingly strict water management guidelines and regulations.

"There definitely is a changing environment in our industry from a water conservation angle," says Craig Otto, an instructor at the Rain Bird Academy. "Technology is advancing in irrigation right now, and it is vital for contractors to keep up so their knowledge can be applied properly and is beneficial to customers. More and more end-users are seeing that it isn't always a case of the lowest priced contractor. They want to make sure they get value for their money."

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USE READER SERVICE #55

by certified professionals, and contractors can sign up for one or several classes during the weeks that the academy is being held.

"There are plenty of contractors who know how to install irrigation systems, but some don't do a fantastic job of servicing those systems," says Keith Kuehn,

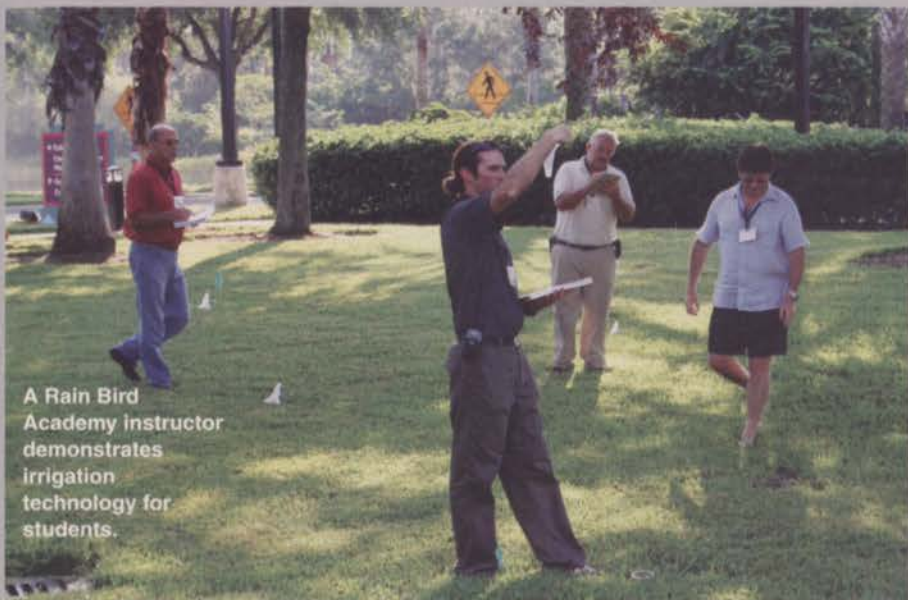
Rain Bird corporate marketing manager. "Servicing is one of the most frequently requested training sessions."

Donn Mann, Rain Bird sales manager, finds that when his company trains contractors to properly service its systems, the result is satisfied end-users who are getting maximum value for their investment.

"We feel what differentiates our company from others in the industry is that we have taken our support to such a high level," Mann says.

Rick Heenan, commercial division sales manager for Vista, Calif.-based DIG Corporation, believes the training and support that his company offers is "an opportunity to come into contact with the contractors on a one-on-one basis." This way, Heenan says, he can discover precise application needs and allow sales people to make specific product recommendations for those applications.

Stuart Spaulding, DIG customer and



A Rain Bird Academy instructor demonstrates irrigation technology for students.

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USE READER SERVICE #42

Water-blogged

Hunter Irrigation offers plenty of traditional educational opportunities for contractors looking to upgrade their technical and business knowledge, but they've also added a new wrinkle: a blog devoted to irrigation topics.

Check out www.committoblue.com/blue-blog for a mix of water-saving tips, educational ideas and fun stuff from around the industry.

technical service manager, says the firm offers irrigation and maintenance contractors access to the company's technical service department during business hours by calling a toll-free telephone support line. Contractors can talk live to an irrigation expert who can troubleshoot and help them repair various types of irrigation products. The company's Web site, where contractors can obtain programming and troubleshooting information, design tips, products specifications and part numbers in addition to answers to many frequently asked questions, can be utilized 24 hours a day.

DIG also conducts irrigation training and product knowledge sessions for contractors at a variety of local dealers and, when necessary, makes field service calls to assist contractors with on-site troubleshooting.

Alden Cleveland, director of sales for Jain Irrigation, says his company offers personalized, bi-lingual training to its nationwide wholesale distribution network and to irrigation contractors.

"Our training is specially geared toward understanding not only Jain Irrigation products, but the application of low-volume irrigation principals, water conservation, installation of systems and proper design and maintenance of those systems to assure efficient operation."

Jain says low-volume systems, while simple to operate, require a regular maintenance schedule to assure proper filter operation that is required of all such systems.

"You need the appropriate pressure regulation to assure quality emitter flow and an evaluation of any distribution or micro-tubing to assess damage that may be present as a result of shovels, edgers, vandalism and other unforeseen events. These are preventative maintenance operations that can really benefit the contractor, and they assure the site's irrigation system performs to customer expectations."

A golf irrigation service component is also available at Toro's service training facility in Bloomington, Minn. The facility has classrooms, complete audio-visual capability and a full shop and lab available for hands-on training.

But for those who can't set aside time to travel, Hunter Industries of San Marcos, Calif., also offers irrigation contractors a wealth of information on its Web site, including a helpful irrigation business library, technical bulletins and project profiles. **1**

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Don't Favor Change? Speak Up.

The words "green" and "sustainable" could be buzzwords of the decade. But how do the concepts behind "green" and "sustainable" work with irrigation? Can we have "green irrigation" or "sustainable irrigation"? If we actually can achieve those goals, will it change how you design, install or manage irrigation systems?

Unfortunately or fortunately (depending on your perspective), the way you approach irrigation is going to change.

In the last few months, a number of various proposed guidelines, standards and specifications for landscape and commercial irrigation have come out for stakeholder comment. These include:

- The EPA's WaterSense for Homes
- The American Society of Landscape Architects' Sustainable Sites Initiative
- The United States Green Building Councils LEED for Neighborhood Development
- The Green Building Initiatives' commercial buildings standard
- And the California Department of Water Resources' Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance.

As an irrigation or landscape contractor, you are a stakeholder in these various initiatives. They will most likely affect your livelihood and how you do business in the future. You need to be aware of these initiatives and be proactive about influencing their content or suffer the consequences.

Many of these initiatives limit either the amount of turfgrass that can be planted, the amount of water that can be used to irrigate or the plant palette you can select from. In all of them, potable water for irrigation is frowned upon and

alternative sources such as rain water, storm water or reclaimed water are preferred. These are potentially all good ideas, but do they make sense?

For example, the WaterSense for Homes specification requires either no more than 40 percent of the landscaped area be turf or the landscape be within a specific, calculated water budget. It would be nice to have 40-percent turf in Las Vegas or Phoenix, but it will use more water than a conventional landscape does. And where are the water savings?

The water budget calculation (Maximum Applied Water Allowance) requires that the landscape use on average be no more than 60 percent of the evapotranspiration (ET). Science has shown that watering at 80 percent of ET will work with no detrimental effect to the turf, but 60 percent certainly has no basis of research behind it. The specification also penalizes highly efficient irrigation systems. To achieve the overall 60 percent, the plant factor cannot exceed 0.43, which dictates a very strict plant palette. With this specification, the EPA is also trying to apply a national standard to what should at minimum be a regional-based specification. But climates are different – one size does not fit all.

The California model ordinance also has a Maximum Applied Water Allowance. Its ET adjustment factor of 0.7 was opposed by the California landscape and irrigation industries, but is still being proposed. The ordinance also demands a number of other irrigation system requirements, including a minimum irrigation efficiency of 71 percent, dedicated landscape water meters that must be installed on all landscapes greater than 5,000 square feet, rain shut-offs,

low volume irrigation in mulched planting areas and no overhead irrigation permitted within 24 inches of any non-permeable surface.

Many of these are good ideas, but they will change how you install irrigation. Even though you may not work in California, remember the maxim: As goes California, so goes the irrigation industry.

The sustainable sites initiative is really a continuation of the LEED rating system for new buildings. It recertifies projects to verify that the site performs as anticipated over time. Much like LEED, it provides points for reducing potable water consumption for irrigation or eliminating potable water consumption for irrigation. Keep in mind that, with these initiatives, naturally occurring subsurface water such as a geothermal or groundwater is considered potable even though it's not drinkable. So, it is not considered an alternative irrigation water source. It further requires that flow meters be installed to record and monitor water use of all irrigated areas.

You may think that none of these issues will ever impact you and, therefore, you don't need to worry about them. But all of these specifications, guidelines or standards will dictate how you can landscape and water in the future. How do you maintain a landscape if you do not have enough water? How do you separate yourself from the competition if everybody has to use the same plant material?

These questions and initiatives need to be taken seriously. If you don't like them, you should support the landscape and irrigation organizations that are fighting them by being proactive, getting online, reading the proposed requirements and responding. Let your voice be heard. **L**



BRIAN VINCHESI

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BY CATHIE CUSH

Fertilizer META-CATALYSTS

A NEW APPROACH TO MAXIMIZING NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT

Rising natural gas prices, an increased focus on bio-fuel crops and growing offshore demand have combined to feed a "perfect storm" that has driven fertilizer costs to record heights. In many markets, fertilizer costs have nearly doubled since 2007. Additionally, the growing environmental movement is raising concerns about nitrate and phosphate leaching and runoff. The industry has tried many approaches to address these concerns, with only partial satisfaction. Products that perform well may not be economical or may contribute to runoff. Environmentally friendly products may be costly or offer lackluster performance. However, a significant body of research indicates that a new category of fertilizer catalysts offers relief to turf managers.

THE NEED FOR NUTRIENTS

Like all living things, plants require various types of nutrients. Non-mineral nutrients – carbon, oxygen and hydrogen – are readily available from water, sunlight, soil and the atmosphere. Plants also require more than a dozen primary mineral nutrients – macronutrients and micronutrients, most of which are obtained from the soil and from decaying plant matter. The three most important macronutrients are nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, which provide raw materials that the plant needs at a molecular level to grow and thrive. Plants use these nutrients in large amounts in order to grow and resist disease. Nitrogen is necessary for all metabolic processes, including protein and energy synthesis. It is a component of chlorophyll, and it is associated with rapid plant growth and vigor. Phosphorus plays a key role in photosynthesis and is necessary to support plant maturation, rapid growth and stress resistance. Potassium is necessary for protein synthesis, photosynthesis and disease resistance.

THE ROLE OF MICROBES

The oldest form of life on Earth, microorganisms (or microbes) are tiny single-cell organisms, such as micro arthropods, nematodes, protozoa, fungi, algae and bacteria. All plants and animals depend on microbes in order to digest food.

Microbes are everywhere, with especially high concentrations in the soil. A single teaspoon of healthy soil may contain 25,000

algae, more than 120,000 fungi and more than 1 billion bacteria. Using genetic analysis, researchers estimate that a biologically rich soil sample may contain as many as 10,000 distinct species of bacteria. Of these many species, only about 1 percent or fewer can be cultured (isolated and grown synthetically). Even less are known to have specific soil functions.

Microorganisms play active roles in many aspects of the soil environment in which they live. Their activity has measurable impact on organic matter and nutrient availability, nutrient

Soil analysis results on extremely salt-contaminated soil by Texas A&M University:

	Calcium	Magnesium	Potassium	Sodium	Total Salinity	Soluble Salts
Meta-catalyst	154 ppm	83 ppm	44 ppm	178 ppm	815 ppm	2.06 mmhos/cm
Alternate Treatment	493 ppm	284 ppm	94 ppm	494 ppm	2138 ppm	5.37 mmhos/cm

FIGURE 1: The technology in the meta-catalyst has been shown to reduce total salinity and soluble salts, freeing up nutrients for plant use.

Meta-catalyst Increases Nitrogen Uptake in Turfgrass

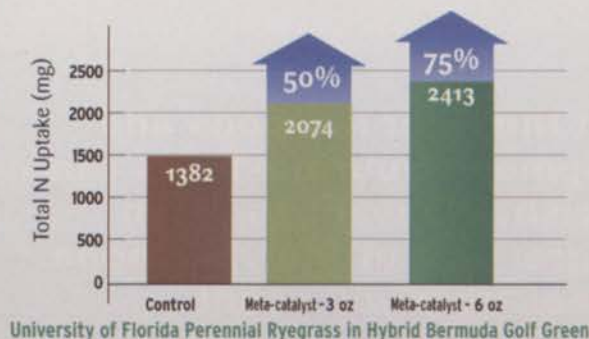


FIGURE 2: The technology in the meta-catalyst increases nutrient uptake.

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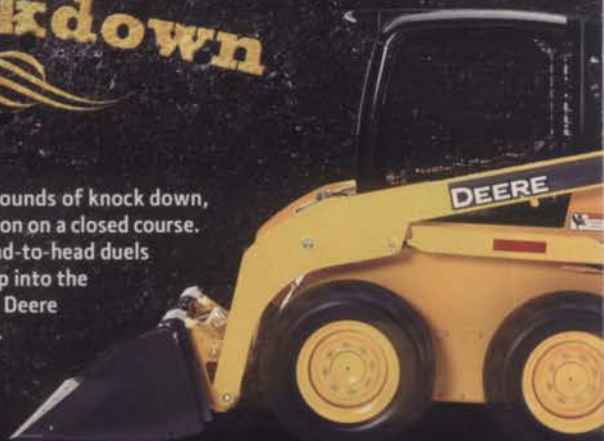
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cycling and uptake (by the plants), and soil structure and function. Living in the soil, this community of microbes will metabolize a variety of organic and inorganic materials. It is important to note that microbes do not all process the same nutrients. Different species metabolize different food sources; some species may

do a less effective job in the absence of a microbial community structure that aids efficient metabolic functioning. The microbes absorb nutrients, process them and release unique biochemicals – a rich variety of enzymes, proteins, carbohydrates, organic acids and many others. The soil solution holds these exuded biochemicals,

which play critical roles in the complex array of plant/microbial interactions.

Some of the most intriguing current research points to biochemical communication as a mechanism for many of the observed interactions in growing plants. For example, bacteria will multiply in the presence of nutrients, but they also seem to be receptive to biochemical signals indicating that the food reserves are limited or that conditions are not otherwise optimal, which may slow down or stabilize population growth. Other signaling agents – for example, the release of root exudates that nourish the indigenous microbial community – may be required to elicit certain functions from a plant. Adding microbes to fertilizer blends (along with concentrated solutions of their biochemical byproducts), appears to help increase the plant's efficient use of essential nutrients.

It is important to note, however, that recent research points to the likelihood that the product's metabolic capacity, rather than organism "counts", may be the critical variable in enhancing fertilizer efficiency. In other words, products with a broad metabolic profile may metabolize a wider range of food sources, making them more available to the plant. Improved nutrient uptake by the plant will, in turn, build greater biomass ("roots and shoots") and better allow the plant to reach its full genetic potential.

A NEW CATEGORY: FERTILIZER META-CATALYSTS

The concept of adding microbes or other enhancements to fertilizer is not new. However, much of the focus has been placed on growing and harvesting individual strains that have been cultured in high concentrations in the laboratory. A fertilizer meta-catalyst, on the other hand, starts with a base stock of naturally occurring microbes that is highly diverse – both microbiologically, as shown in plate counts, and in metabolic capacity – that is, the ability to metabolize a broad range of food sources. Rather than just containing a few isolated species, this meta-catalyst base stock might include scores or hundreds of different strains of organisms living in an interactive community that reflects the soil's extraordinarily rich mi-

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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S

crobial environment. In order to commercialize a meta-catalyst, the diverse base stock is fermented in community, and the microbes are harvested along with a fermentation medium, which contains the rich deposits of naturally exuded biochemicals. The better products are taken through a stabilization process to make them easier to use and to extend their shelf life. They are tested to assure that they are free of known plant and animal

pathogens, and then profiled for production batch management and traceability to ensure consistency. In many cases, the base solution may be blended with other beneficial materials such as humic acid, nutrients or other biostimulants to bundle together benefits for the plant and soil.

The end result is a fertilizer meta-catalyst that contains viable, beneficial bacteria, a complex of fermentation byproducts (biochemicals) and other materials that increase the efficient processing, conversion and uptake of soil-applied nutrients. The meta-catalyst may be added to both granular and liquid fertilizer products to enhance performance. Currently, one such product, NutriLife, is commercially available as a meta-catalyst for fertilizers and has been tested for uses in both lawn care and golf.

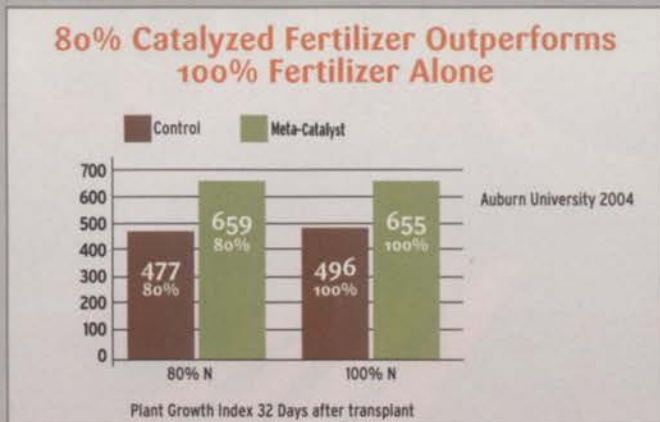


FIGURE 3: Transplanted plants that were treated with 80-percent fertilizer containing the meta-catalyst fertilizer showed significantly better growth than plants treated with 100-percent fertilizer alone.

PROVEN RESULTS

Research on fertilizer meta-catalysts shows promising results. More than 400 field, university and third-party studies have been conducted on such blends, and the products have been proven effective in improving nutrient uptake into plants. The potential implications are enormous – opening the door to reduced fertilizer application rates, improved fertilizer performance and the possibility of reduced leaching and runoff of soil nutrients.

Some of the studies suggest that this microbial technology can increase nutrient uptake in grass and other plants by 25 percent

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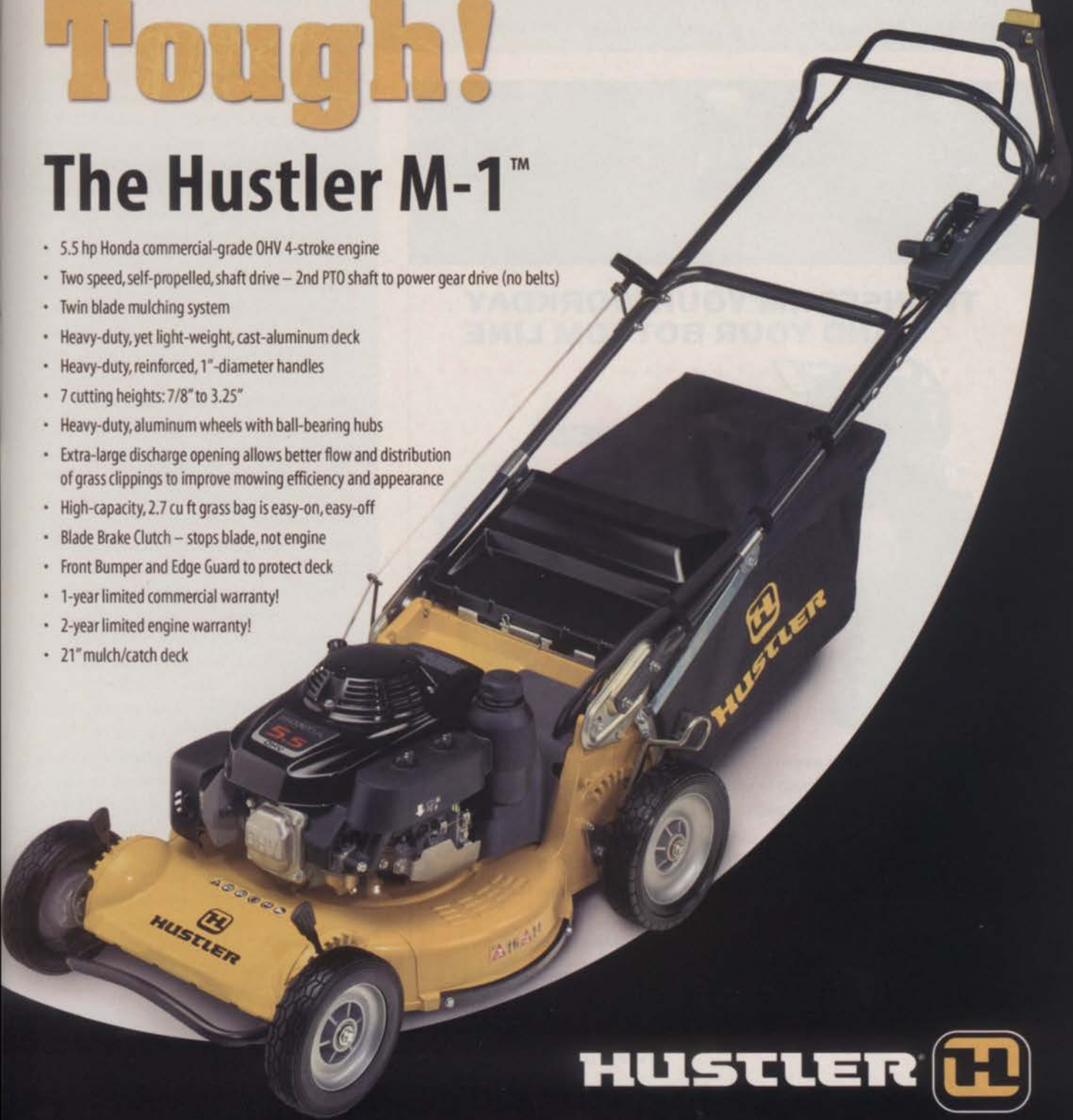
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or more. A University of Florida study on perennial ryegrass and hybrid Bermuda grasses showed that a soil application of the meta-catalyst increased nitrogen uptake over the control by between 50 percent and 75 percent at application rates of three ounces and six ounces per thousand square feet, respectively.

Meta-catalyzed fertilizer appears to have a significant impact on the plant itself—as measured at both roots and shoots. Auburn University conducted a controlled study in bentgrass. Plots were treated either with a conventional 19-5-9 fertilizer or a meta-catalyzed 19-5-9 fertilizer, each applied at a rate of four pounds

per 1,000 square feet. Bentgrass in the treated plots had 91-percent higher fresh root weight, 105-percent higher fresh shoot weight and 37-percent higher average diameter.

In a similar Auburn study of root growth in tall fescue, samples treated with the microbial technology showed increased biomass, especially root mass, in less than four weeks. Deeper roots provide more surface area for nutrient uptake and can draw on soil deposits of nutrients that have not yet been depleted. A healthier root structure can also help plants better survive stress, even in dry soils. Enhanced nutrient uptake is particularly important for new plant establishment.

IMPLICATIONS

When plants use nutrients more efficiently, it stands to reason that it is possible to use less fertilizer—or to use fertilizer with a lower ratio—to get the same results. When nutrient uptake is increased by 25 percent or more, it is possible to reduce fertilizer application rates by up to 25 percent without sacrificing performance. For example, a turfgrass that is normally fertilized at a rate of four pounds per 1,000 square feet could be treated at just more than three pounds per 1,000 square feet with a meta-catalyzed blend. Similarly, if a ton of fertilizer treats 11.5 acres at the four-pound rate, a ton of meta-catalyzed fertilizer treats 14.4 acres, because it is applied at a lower rate. In either case, the use of the enriched blend could reduce costs by 15 to 20 percent or more.

As an alternative to applying the lower rate, it is possible to use a meta-catalyzed fertilizer with a reduced nutrient content. For example, instead of applying conventional 30-0-10 fertilizer at four pounds per 1,000 square feet, an Auburn study says it is possible to apply a meta-catalyzed 22-0-8 fertilizer at the same rate to achieve the same results. In 2004, an Auburn team fertilized transplanted broccoli plants. Plants were broken into four groups. Two groups were treated with conventional fertilizer with 80 percent and 100 percent nitrogen, respectively. Two other groups were treated with meta-catalyzed 80-percent or 100-percent fertilizer. After 32 days, plants in the meta-catalyzed fertilizer groups were more than 30



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percent larger than the other plants, and the 80-percent meta-catalyzed fertilizer significantly outperformed the untreated 100-percent fertilizer.

Clearly, there are some advantages to focusing or improving the efficiency of fertilizer use, as the examples above illustrate. That said, the use of meta-catalyzed blends or any other enriched fertilizers is not a panacea for undisciplined turfgrass

or horticultural management. Sound agronomic practices – including the measurement and management of soil nutrient levels – remain essential to any turf or landscape professional's long-term success.

The use of meta-catalyzed fertilizer can provide several environmental benefits. First, such products can reduce the amounts of fertilizer that must be added

to meet plant nutrient requirements. Second, increases in plant and root mass will enable plants to absorb more nutrients from the soil. As a result of reduced application rates and improved uptake, there is less residual material to leach or run off into the water table. A study conducted by Illinois-based Arise Research & Discovery found that the use of such meta-catalysts reduced nitrate concentrations at 12-inch depths by 48 percent, and 57 percent at a depth of 30 inches.

SUMMARY

A tough economy forces many to tighten budgets, and for turf managers, the rising cost of fertilizer is a challenge. Until now, solutions have forced users to trade off – either on cost, performance or environmental impact. Microbial-based fertilizer meta-catalysts represent a new product category that may enable users to hold or reduce costs without sacrificing performance or environmental health. **L**

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30-0-10 50% Slow N with Meta-catalyst	\$980.00	2.75	0.825	\$1.35	16.30%
46-0-0	\$1,000.00	2.5	1.15	\$1.25	
46-0-0 with Meta-catalyst	\$1,060.00	2	0.92	\$1.06	15.20%
15-25-10 33% SCU	\$1,085.00	4	0.6	\$2.17	
15-25-10 33% SCU with Meta-catalyst	\$1,150.00	3	0.45	\$1.73	20.51%

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Riding spreaders give an Ohio LCO more time, less fatigue. BY DAVID YOCHUM

Watching the economy freefall into recession, some might think green industry entrepreneurs are desperately searching for business.

Not Tom Rankin.

With 450 customers, the owner of Hartville, Ohio-based Rankin Lawn Care already has a solid client base. Today, he's simply concerned with finding value.

"Financially, I got my butt kicked this past year," Rankin says. "Fertilizer prices tripled, which hurt us pretty bad. And the year before that it was gas prices."

With help from only a handful of workers, Rankin, who has owned and operated his Hartville Lawn Care service for 18 years, still pulls in more than \$600,000 annual revenue. But to maintain a large customer base and high

degree of success, Rankin needs all the cost-effective, reliable help he can get.

That's why, since 1997, Rankin says he has been purchasing C&S spreaders.

"Before I had the C&S Turf Tracker, I was pushing a spreader with old-fashioned elbow grease," Rankin explains. "Then I saw the guys from TruGreen Lawn Care using a Turf Tracker and thought, 'Man, I have to get one of those.' It is a fertilizer hopper that you can just drive around the yard."

After his initial Turf Tracker purchase, Rankin, like other C&S equipment owners, quickly found his Turf Tracker saved him some 20 percent of valuable work time. The spreader traveled effortlessly across lawns, fertilizing at consistent, riding mower speeds. And although he says the Turf Tracker was a challenge on



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hills and could be difficult to maneuver through gates, Rankin says the machine's reliability won him over.

"It was bulletproof," he says.

With such positive C&S Turf Tracker experiences, Rankin again dialed the local North Canton-based spreader manufacturer when it came time to update his fertilizing fleet. He recently ordered four of C&S's new Time Machine fertilizer spreaders – each capable of covering more than 4,200 square feet per minute – and has continued performing regular lawn maintenance work.

However, Rankin is finding the Time Machine models aren't performing exactly like his old Turf Tracker spreaders.

"The new equipment has the same spread width, but it's superior on hills," says Rankin, who is no longer forced to fertilize troublesome grades by hand. "It can fit through gates and it's more user-friendly."

Still, whereas old Turf Tracker engines



The new C&S Turf Tracker Time Machine isn't as wide as previous Turf Tracker models.



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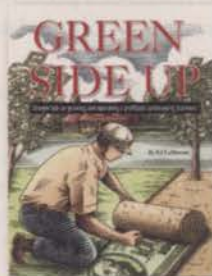
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were "bulletproof," Rankin has found Time Machine engines aren't holding up as well. He says some of the powerplants on his Time Machine spreaders are beginning to show signs of corrosion, and he's had problems keeping the units tuned.

"I started using a brand new one in July and already had difficulty getting it started," Rankin explains. "So to make sure we prolong the life of these Time Machines, we're not going to use them on properties that are less than 50,000 square feet."

Rankin also warns that both older and newer spreader models can tear up smaller lawns that have limited turning areas. However, he says most turf damage can be prevented by putting the machine in the hands of a professional – particularly one that has no problems leaving the spreader parked.

"Those machines can make people lazy," Rankin laughs. "There's no reason a 20-year-old kid can't fertilize a one-acre lawn by hand. Overall though, the operating experience is excellent. Just for the sake of saving time and fatigue, the Time Machines are worth having around." 



Keeping the units tuned is a constant focus for Rankin.

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USE READER SERVICE #79

Sold from the Start

BY STEVE TRUSTY

After testing applicator prototypes, a veteran LCO realizes the importance of comfort and efficiency.



Whether your business is shrinking, holding its own or growing, efficiency is key. You need to accomplish as much as possible in as little time as possible. Safety and operator comfort are also issues to consider. So of course, Matt Nichols was pleased when he finally found a solution that helped increase both for his family's Dover, Del.-based lawn and tree business.

Nichols was originally using another ride-on applicator, but it wasn't providing the productivity he was seeking.

Matt Nichols ordered his Turfco T3000 riding applicator after he was chosen as a member of Turfco's "A-Team."

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Then he took delivery of a new prototype Turfco T3000 riding turf applicator last April, and quickly found that the T3000 helped decrease average stop times per client from 38 minutes to 20 minutes.

But before ordering a T3000, Nichols says he spent some time on the Internet sharing ideas with other lawn care operators. When he heard that Turfco was researching a new applicator, he contacted the company directly, saying he was interested in finding out more about it. Soon after, Turfco invited Nichols to Minneapolis for an up-close look at their new product, and he was chosen to provide

The Turfco T3000 has helped Jonny Nichols Lawn & Tree company decrease average stop times per client by 18 minutes.



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USE READER SERVICE #77

feedback as part of Turfco's "A-Team." While Nichols says Turfco was already on the right track, the Dover contractor was able to offer several suggestions to make the applicator even more user-friendly and productive.

"User fatigue was a big factor in completing our lawn applications," Nichols says. "The operator had to use his body to turn our old applicator. The wear and tear on the body would increase as the day progressed, and the operator would be worn down by the end of the day. The T3000's steering is much easier and the operator doesn't get nearly as tired. The pivoting front axle provides better comfort and control on both hills and rough terrain."

Another feature of the T3000 is its ability to apply liquids or granules. It has a 16-gallon spray tank and a carrier tray that can hold 120 pounds of material. Nichols says that the tray operator can place everything he needs for one lawn's

application on the unit.

"You don't have to make a second trip back to the truck for an extra bag or two, then try to figure out where you left off in the application process."

Turfco impressed Nichols enough that he ordered a T3000 to test on his own.

He likes the wider, adjustable spray pattern of his T3000, which is particularly important since 90 percent of Jonny Nichols Lawn & Tree business consists of residential properties of all sizes. And with cruise control, Nichols says he can cover grounds with a consistent speed and more evenly apply the desired product.

"This cuts down on expensive call-backs," he adds. "The width of the unit makes it easy to get into yards with standard gates. With a wider unit, many of the backyards had to be treated with a hand push spreader or sprayer. This really added to stop time."

As with any ride-on equipment, safety

is always a concern. Nichols likes the low center of gravity of his new applicator and its ability to handle hills and rough terrain. He also likes the way the feet are surrounded for operator protection.

"With the T3000, I don't have to worry when the technician is out. It gives me peace of mind."

Coming from a family business, Nichols says he really appreciates the support he has received from Turfco.

"Turfco has been quick to respond to any questions I've asked. They have listened to what I and others have offered and made some great improvements to an already good concept. They put everything we wanted into one piece of equipment."

No matter what wrenches the economy throws, Nichols' lawn and tree service is planning for a more efficient and profitable 2009. And having the right equipment should help satisfy both employees and customers. **L**



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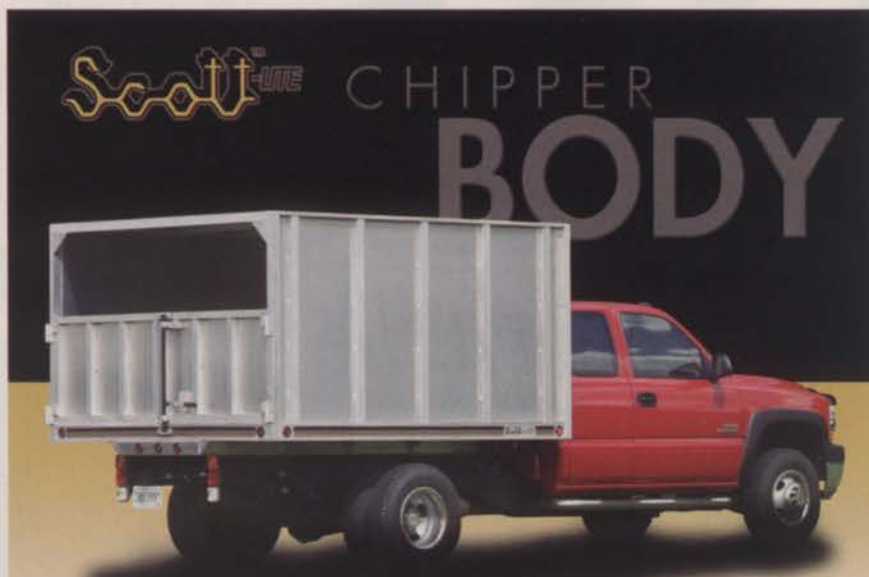
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USE READER SERVICE #79

One guy, **one machine**

Sherman Henton is fully committed to one spreader company. BY PAMELA LANE

A steep hill and the wear-and-tear of six decades on this earth convinced Sherman Henton that he needed to look into a better spreader/sprayer for his small, but growing lawn care business.

"I'll be very candid," Henton says. "I'm 50-something years old and a few years back I about died trying to walk a spreader up a hill on this lady's property. She complained and I had to admit that there were lots of streaks and unevenness because of

that incline. It was just too damned difficult to climb that hill, so I discounted her bill and apologized. At that point, my wife said, 'If you're going to play with the big boys, you have to play with their big toys.'"

So Henton started doing some serious shopping and ended up purchasing a PermaGreen SmartSteer Magnum spreader/sprayer.


That was five years ago, and he's still

loving the decision he made.

"I'd rather lose my wallet than lose my PermaGreen," he says. "It's been a lifesaver."

Henton is the owner, operator and chief-cook-and-bottle-washer of Green View, Inc., in Marietta, Ga. — an affluent and highly competitive Atlanta suburb. Lawn care was a second career for him, but he's committed to doing it right even

(continued on page 95)

A photograph of Sherman Henton, a man with glasses wearing a light yellow polo shirt and khaki pants, standing next to a green PermaGreen SmartSteer Magnum spreader/sprayer. The machine has a large green hopper and a white tank. They are in a residential driveway with a wooden fence and trees in the background.

Green View, Inc.'s Sherman Henton calls his PermaGreen spreader a "lifesaver."

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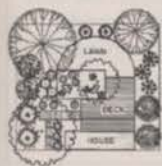


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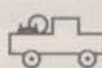
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TOOLS of the Trade

(continued from page 90)

though he's still pretty much operating with one truck and one employee.

"This was a huge purchase for me, but I had to do it," says Henton, who currently has about 65 residential and commercial customers in the burgeoning area. "It is the one piece of equipment that a small operator like me has to have."

When Henton added the Magnum to his inventory five years ago, it was an important enhancement for his business and something that kept him from huffing and puffing up clients' hills. However, what has really sold him on the product has been what's happened in the intervening years.

"PermaGreen's customer service has just been outstanding," he says. "I've always had the feeling – and I know this sounds funny – that if the service rep who was on call was in the middle of his kid's birthday party, he'd stop whatever he was doing and solve my problem. I've lost count of the number of times I've called with a breakdown and they've talked me through a fix while I was still on the site."

Henton isn't afraid to say that the original product he bought had a few faults.

"The mechanism that controls the hopper needed to be refined to be sturdier, and they could have done a better job with the pump and the transaxle," he says.

Henton had to replace the transaxle – which was not covered under warranty – after relatively few hours, but wasn't complaining because the company was "totally supportive" and shared the cost of fixing the problem.

"I've dealt with a lot of companies in my career," he says, "but none has been more proficient in customer service."

Henton continues to like the PermaGreen's Honda 200cc engine, the big 150-pound hopper and the 12-gallon spray tank as well as the sulky, which hasn't caused any problems.

"The mixing mechanism on the spray tank isn't perfect, but it works really well overall."

The 2009 version of the Magnum features a Peerless transaxle, a 5-mph top speed and a 2-gpm pump capable of covering 50,000 square feet at a 30-oz rate. It weighs in at 440 pounds and, according to Henton, is easy to load and unload.

If Henton sounds as if he would just say positive things about any old company, rest assured he doesn't. When Lawn & Landscape contacted him, he was two seconds from blowing us off. Then, we mentioned PermaGreen.

"I wouldn't be talking with you right now if we weren't talking about their spreader," Henton says. "That thing has been huge for my business." **L**

AD INDEX

Company Name	Web Address	Page #	RS #
Agrotain	www.agrotain.com	55	49
Alturnamats	www.alturnamats.com	48	43
Ariens/ Gravely	www.gravely.com	63	55
Belgard	www.belgard.biz	57, 85	50, 73
BOB-CAT	www.bobcatturf.com	65	42
Bobcat Co.	www.bobcat.com	49, 51	44, 45
Bright Water Illumination & Irrigation	www.yourbrightwater.com	47*	40*
C&S Turf Care Equipment	www.csturfecquip.com	78	68
Carson By Oldcastle Precast Enclosure Solutions	www.carsonind.com	62	54
Classen	www.classenturfcare.com	41	35
CLC Labs		25	19
CLIP Software	www.clip.com	52	46
Cub Cadet Commercial	www.cubcadetcommercial.com	11	13
Deep Fork Tree Farm	www.dftrees.com	58	51
Dow AgroSciences	www.dowagro.com/turf	7, 9, 73	
Earth & Turf Products	www.earthandturf.com	77	66
Echo	www.echo-usa.com	72	62
Ewing Irrigation Products	www.ewing1.com	26	21
Exaktime	www.jobclock.com	46	59
Exmark	www.exmark.com	18, 19	16
Fabriscap	www.fabriscap.com	29	27
GRASS Landscaper Billing	www.obexdata.com	89	78
Gregson-Clark	www.gregsonclark.com	66	57
Ground Logic	www.groundlogic.com	28	25
Hustler Turf Equipment	www.hustlerturf.com	75	64
Irrrometer Co.	www.irrometer.com	86	74
John Deere Construction	www.johndeere.com	71	61
JRCO	www.jrcoinc.com	78	67
Kohler Co.	www.kohler.com	100	81
Lebanon Turf Products	www.lebanonturf.com	31	29
Little Beaver	www.littlebeaver.com	23	17
Maruyama U.S.	www.maruyama-us.com	42	37
MistAway Systems	www.mistaway.com	84	72
Mysticrete	www.mysticrete.com	5	12
Neely Coble Co.	www.neelycoble.com	67	58
New England Grows	www.negrows.org	82	71
Novae Corp.	www.novaeorp.com	28	26
Nufarm	www.nufarm.com/usto	35, 37	31, 33
Nutrient Technology Partners	www.nutrienttechnologypartners.com	23, 25, 27, 29	18, 20, 24, 28
Pace American	www.paceamerican.com	52	47
Paladin	www.paladinbrands.com	41	36
Perma-Green Supreme	www.permagreen.com	69	60
Primeraturf	www.primeraturf.com	13	14
PRO Landscape/Drafix	www.drafix.com	2	10
Quali-Pro	www.quali-pro.com	87	76
Rain Bird	www.rainbird.com	61, 79, 99	53, 69, 80
Real Green Systems	www.realgreen.com	59, 64	52, 56
RND Signs	www.rndsigns.com	74	63
Sheffield Financial Corp.	www.sheffieldfinancial.com	45	39
Shindaiwa	www.shindaiwa.com	81	70
Snapper Pro	www.snapperpro.com	3	11
Syngenta	www.syngentaprofessionalproducts.com	39	34
Tafco Equipment Co.	www.tafcoequip.com	89	79
Toro	www.toro.com	33	30
Toyota	www.toyota.com	15	15
Turfco	www.turfco.com	76	65
U.S. Lawns	www.uslawns.com	36	32
Visual Impact Imaging	www.visualimpact.com	86	75
Walker Mfg.	www.walkermowers.com	53	48
Weed Man	www.weedmanusa.com	27	23
Westheffer Co.	www.westheffer.com	26	22
Wright Mfg.	www.wrightmfg.com	43	38
Yanmar America Corp.	www.yanmar.com	88	77

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

New Year, Same Stuff



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

The annual Jones family New Year's extravaganza was fabulous as always. It was a strictly black-tie affair – just a few hundred of our dearest friends – and the caviar and Dom Perignon were stacked to the ceiling.

Or not.

It is, in fact, early December here in sub-arctic Cleveland. I'm desperately trying to finish stories in time to go enjoy some time with my family. And right now, I'm just hoping the old Jeep will fire up and carry me home. So, as usual, it's easier to procrastinate, lapse into a daydream and start playing Devil's Advocate with myself...

Self: By the time everyone reads this, Christmas and New Year's Eve will be history and we'll be grinding away on 2009. I wonder what the next 365 days will bring?

Devil's Advocate: That's easy – heartache, misery, unemployment, bankruptcy, disaster...

Self: Wait a second, Joe Sunshine. Why the attitude?

DA: It's tough out there for everyone and no amount of government bailout is going to fix it. People are losing businesses, jobs, market share and hope.

Self: Look, I was just talking to a former golf course superintendent who's moved over to the lawn and grounds care business. He's damn happy to be in control of his own fate as opposed to waiting around for some fat-cat green committee to approve a budget and beat the crap out

of him about every dollar he spends.

DA: That's just what we need... a bunch of former Carl Spacklers invading our industry and taking clients away from people who've been in the market for years.

Self: Actually, this guy knows what he's doing and he's working for a reputable major company. The one thing that shocked him about our business was the low-balling. The churn-and-burn rate for his territory was close to 40 percent last year.

DA: So, he should quit whining and do something about it.

Self: He has. First, he's proactively calling customers quarterly to make sure they aren't thinking about dumping him. He also keeps in touch with other reputable guys in the area to compare notes on ways they can maintain value in the market. So, they're doing the best they can to keep rates where they should be instead of undercutting.

DA: "Maintain value" sounds like secret code for price fixing. Isn't that illegal?

Self: Price fixing is bad – and if anyone from the FTC is reading this – I'd certainly never advocate anything like that. But, maintaining the value of services is good. Once good companies in your market start discounting to compete with low-ballers, everyone loses. It's a guaranteed death spiral. Pretty soon, you're just another commodity like generic aspirin or bottled water.

DA: But you have to discount to compete with these slimeballs

who will do anything for \$10 less than you could possibly charge and still be profitable.

Self: No you don't. You have to offer value.

DA: I do offer value...I give customers the service they need for a fair price.

Self: Value means more than price. Instead of lowering your rates, why not figure out what low-cost additional services you can bring to the table? Why not offer free hedge trimming in addition to mow-and-blow? Why not provide discounted gutter cleaning for monthly customers who pay at the full rate? Why not find out what really matters to your clients and figure out a way to build that in as a value-add to their program and PROMOTE it to them?

DA: But you're just giving things away. This ain't charity work.

Self: Maybe you sacrifice a little on the bottom line, but you keep your top line where it needs to be and you keep price integrity. Once you start lowering prices to compete, it's too difficult to bring it back up later.

DA: So you're saying I should eat some margin but keep the customers?

Self: Yup. The cost to acquire a new customer is way higher than the cost to keep an existing one.

DA: Everybody knows that.

Self: But not everybody manages with that thought in mind. Given the way things look for 2009, it's time to start thinking differently. This year, the top line has to be top of mind, because without that, there won't be a bottom line. **L**



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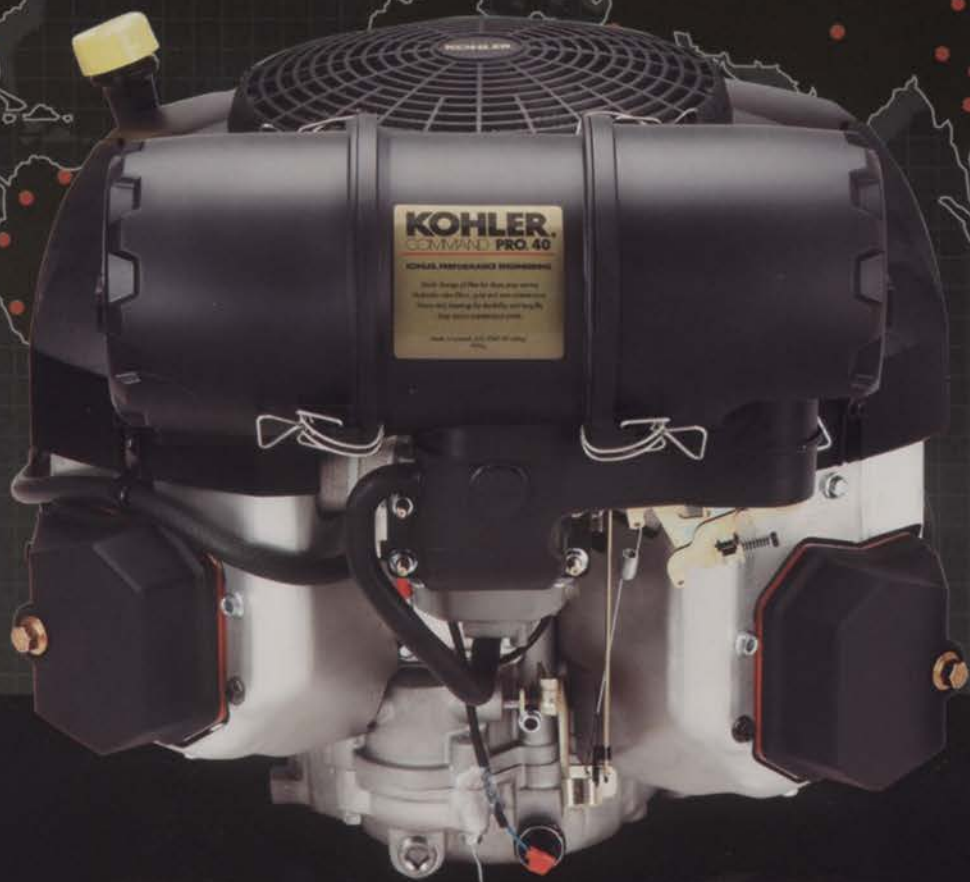
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