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JULY 2009
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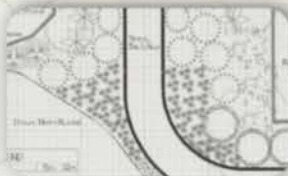
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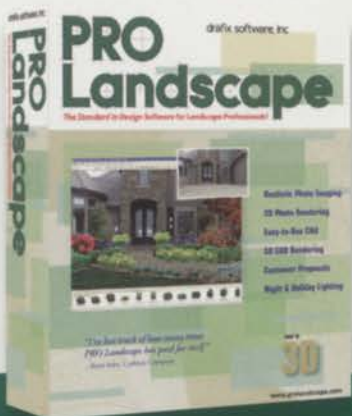
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NICOLE WISNIEWSKI
Editor

Avoid the Trap

At the end of many of the surveys *Lawn & Landscape* sends out, we typically include two open-ended questions – one asking if you'd like to be interviewed for upcoming stories and another asking you to share article ideas for future issues of the magazine.

And we take these suggestions extremely seriously in terms of shaping upcoming editorial because we feel it's important to you – the readers of the publication – to have this input, particularly in today's challenging economy.

Recently, when reviewing results for a survey, I was surprised by someone's response to the last question. The respondent wrote: "After 20 years, we may be out of business this year."

This comment stood out amidst the other ideas concerning efficiency, marketing and pricing. It sort of just hung there as if this once hopeful business owner had put so much into the company and now felt there was no choice but to throw in the towel.

The remark stuck with me. I couldn't help but think, "What could someone do to help this owner and change his outcome?"

Then I came across an old golf motivational story that goes something like this:

One golfer steps up to the tee, looks at the water trap nestled just before the green, lines up his shot and thinks, "I will not hit the ball into the water."

He takes the shot and, sure enough, the ball plops straight into the water.

The second golfer steps up to the tee, sees the water, lines up his shot and says, "I will hit the ball onto the green."

He takes the shot, and the ball lands on the green.

The moral is obvious: Be careful what you aim for because that's what you are going to hit.

This year, you may have positioned your business in the best way possible. You may be marketing and selling your services adequately. You may be hiring and training better. But if you don't have the right state of mind as a business owner, does any of this matter?

We all hear about how bad the economy is. The news and the numbers say things are pretty grim. Whether it's concerning our own businesses or those of our family and friends, we're all coping with restructuring, layoffs, tight staffing, pay cuts, cost trimming and budget slashing. It's scary.

The bad news is top of mind – how *couldn't* it be?

But stop for a minute and consider what this does to your outlook. Are you thinking about the water trap? Are you constantly thinking about how to protect your job, your company and your livelihood? Are you worrying about how far the numbers can slide before you close up shop?

When the only thing on your mind is the water trap, then isn't that where you're going to end up? **L**

“ Be careful what you aim for because that's what you are going to hit.”

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READERS' Forum



GREEN WITH ENVY

I read with great interest the article "Green Crude" in the April edition of *Lawn & Landscape*. Our company has tried to stay well informed on alternative fuel issues, and algae-based fuel is one of the interesting emerging alternatives.

As a manufacturer we believe in taking a leading role in making the cleanest solutions available while not compromising on equipment performance.

Thanks for your part in keeping us all informed on these issues.

Ray Garvey
The Grasshopper Co.
Moundridge, Kan.

LIGHT THE WAY

It has come to my attention I provided incorrect information for the April *Lawn & Landscape* article "Legal Landscapes." In

the accompanying chart, the states of Wisconsin and Kentucky were listed as requiring an electrical contractor's license for low voltage installation. No such license is required for both states. Wisconsin excludes (from licensing) installations less than 100V while Kentucky has a 50V exclusion.

In addition, it was not my intention to dissuade any unlicensed contractor from launching or pursuing the profitable business of landscape lighting. It is quite doable to partner with electricians in a lighting business when the law requires. Landscape lighting is an extension of landscape design and it makes artistic and economic sense for green industry professionals to do this work.

Steve Parrott
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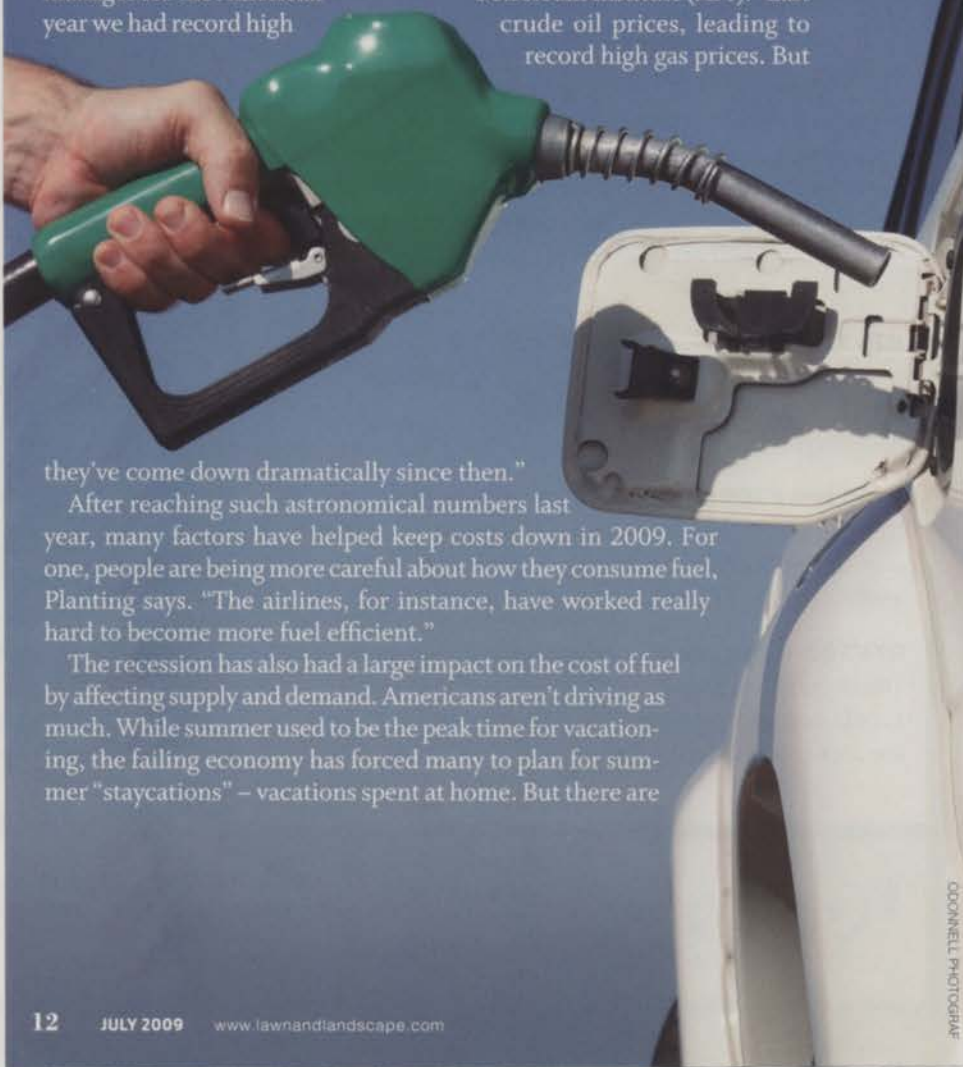
An annual fuel update and report. BY LINDSEY GETZ

As we get into the heart of summer 2009, it's hard to forget the skyrocketing prices of last year, despite assurances that we won't see a repeat performance this season. At press time, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) projected regular gasoline prices would average \$2.67 per gallon.

Still, many we spoke with remained skeptical. In fact, fuel prices have remained No. 1 in our survey listing contractors biggest business-limiting concerns for five years. Some were already seeing prices steadily rising in their area. While nobody wants to see pump prices like last summer's, many landscape companies admit they are at least better prepared and already taking steps to keep their budget in check.

There are several factors that affect the price at the pump, some weighing more heavily than others. "Historically, the No. 1 factor explaining gasoline prices has been the cost of crude oil," says Ron Planting, statistics manager for the American

Petroleum Institute (API). "Last year we had record high crude oil prices, leading to record high gas prices. But



they've come down dramatically since then."

After reaching such astronomical numbers last year, many factors have helped keep costs down in 2009. For one, people are being more careful about how they consume fuel, Planting says. "The airlines, for instance, have worked really hard to become more fuel efficient."

The recession has also had a large impact on the cost of fuel by affecting supply and demand. Americans aren't driving as much. While summer used to be the peak time for vacationing, the falling economy has forced many to plan for summer "staycations" – vacations spent at home. But there are

Looking For Opportunities in a Tough Economy?

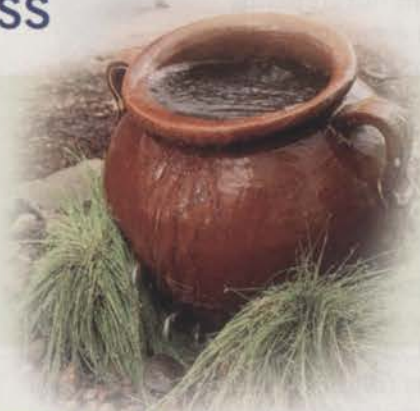
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other sectors of the economic state that are having an even bigger impact, says Planting. "Manufacturing and trade are way down from last year and that affects diesel demand," he explains. "In addition, there's been reduced air travel as well, and that means less pressure on crude oil prices."

HESITANT OPTIMISM. Even as the experts predict prices will max out at around \$2.70 per gallon at the pump this summer (the EIA prediction at press time), many landscape companies have a hard time forgetting when the numbers just kept going up last season, even after it seemed they couldn't possibly go any higher. In fact, we didn't talk to any contractors who weren't at least a little

doubtful. "We are always skeptical," admits Kory Ballard, president, Perficut Lawn & Landscape, based in Des Moines, Iowa. "Last year was a tough year for several reasons in our area including record rainfall, high fuel prices and an uncertain economy."

In 2008, Ballard's company used 180,000 gallons of fuel. For the \$13 million full-service landscape company, the purchase of fuel came out to 5 percent of the company's gross revenue. This year, in order to be more prepared, the company is pre-purchasing fuel. "We have two locations with on-site tanks that are filled by a fuel provider," explains Ballard. "We started talking with our supplier and pre-bought 80 percent of our anticipated fuel for 2009. While fuel was at a two-year low and we were paying more than the pump price, we are guaranteed not to pay more than our pre-determined price. This is a

comfort for us and has allowed us to properly budget our fuel costs for 2009. We expect to save over 40 percent for the year."

Kay Borders, vice president of Georgia-based Borders 'n Blooms Landscaping, a small full-service lawn and landscape company, says she too is only cautiously optimistic about fuel costs remaining low. "I think everyone is still skeptical," she says. "You can't always believe what you hear on the news until it comes to fruition. Last year the numbers just kept going up."

Rapidly rising prices have had a significant impact on the company's budget, adds Borders. In the last four years the amount the company has spent on fuel has nearly doubled. It jumped from \$13,000 in 2004 to \$25,000 in 2008. Borders says this means finding the delicate balance between earning a living and retaining a customer base. "We've

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had some of our customers for so long that you don't want to run them off," she says. "They're going through the same thing and paying high gas prices. But you still have to make a profit."

But some say the fact that their customers are going through the same thing makes them more understanding. Though it might be tough for them, too, they are aware that a fuel surcharge is necessary so that their landscape company isn't losing money. For Gasper Landscape & Design, a Richboro, Pa.-based company that spent \$90,000 in fuel costs last year (up approximately 50 percent from the year before), tacking on a fuel surcharge was necessary to balance out the extra cost of fuel in 2008. Owner Bob Gasper runs both a full-service retail garden center and a full-service landscape construction firm, which bring in a combined \$7 to \$7.5 million. "We do a lot of bulk deliveries

and added our fuel surcharge there, and never had a problem," he says.

Bill Atwood, owner of Bill's Complete Lawncare, and four other Texas-based businesses including two landscape companies and two seasonal decorating companies, also uses a fuel surcharge, and says he remains unconvinced about prices remaining low. "I would be surprised if gasoline did not exceed \$3 per gallon this summer," he says.

Atwood, whose companies brought in a total revenue of \$3 million last year, says fuel is the second largest expense for his business, next to labor. In 2008, he spent exactly 15.43 percent of his total lawn care revenue on gasoline. With gas making up such a large portion of his budget, he found last year's high prices shocking. The highest price Atwood paid in his area last year was \$3.85 a gallon, a price he says totally caught him off guard. "I did not plan for that

large of an increase in my budget, nor did I plan for that large of an increase in our annual price for customers," he says. "Fortunately we have a clause in our contract that allows us to increase our price for lawn care by \$1 per lawn for every 25 cents increase in the price of gas above the cost of gas at the time the contract was written. That saved us from a huge disaster. We were actually able to recoup our gasoline expenses above our budgeted amount."

MORE WAYS TO SAVE. Many companies that felt the pinch of high prices last year are tightening their driving routes and finding other ways to keep costs down this year. But many, like Gasper, say preventing wasted gas has always been a goal – even when prices weren't astronomical. "We have 15 large trucks and spend a lot on fuel, even in normal conditions," he says. "So we already



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stick to the tightest routes possible. It's just been a matter of continuing what we were already doing."

Borders agrees well-thought-out routes can help prevent wasted fuel. "We've got our routes down to where we're in the same area all day," she says. "We stress the importance of getting all of the jobs in that area done in one day. You have to keep your routes structured and confined to specific areas or else you'll be driving 50 miles back and forth constantly. I've found that a lot of other landscapers are doing this same thing."

Atwood says another benefit of having his routes down to the shortest and fastest ways possible is that it allows him to know exactly how much gasoline will be used in a given week – and then budget accordingly. "The report the foreman turns in every day has mileage when the crew left and mileage when they got

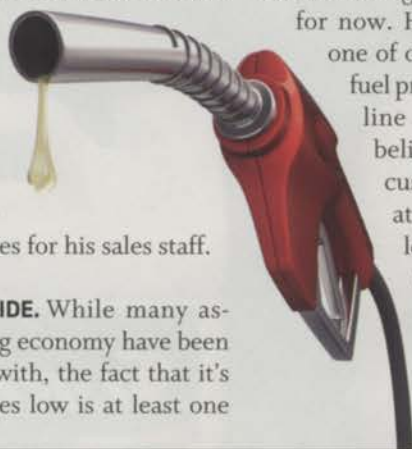
back to the shop," he says. "It had better be very close to what it was the previous week or someone has some explaining to do!" Atwood also requires his crews to shut the engine off at all job stops and requests not running the air conditioner unnecessarily.

Ballard has his company's routes well-managed, too. He worked closely with his entire management team in order to reduce any wasted driving. And he's even taking it a step further and now considering smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles for his sales staff.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE. While many aspects of the failing economy have been difficult to cope with, the fact that it's keeping fuel prices low is at least one

positive that landscape contractors can lean on for now. It may just be the bright side of things – assuming costs don't rise too much this year. And if costs do rise, the positive is that most contractors do seem more prepared to handle it, especially after dealing with last year's prices. Though skeptical that prices will remain low all season, Ballard is making an effort to stay positive for now. He notes: "Since fuel is one of our largest expenses, low fuel prices will help our bottom line tremendously. We also believe that our residential customers feel some relief at the pump, making them less likely to discontinue outsourcing their lawn services." **L**

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



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Bill Kemp

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Crestview Job	Planting	--	--	7:58	7:49	15:47	
		7:28	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:49	38:53

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8:30 - 10:30 a.m. -

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Friday, October 30

8:30 - 10:30 a.m. - *Egg-Sucking Dogs*

Charles Vander Kooi,

Vander Kooi and Associates

In this dynamic and motivating seminar, industry expert Charles Vander Kooi addresses the four personalities that are needed to make a company thrive in any economy and a bonus system that will reward your employees fairly.



Saturday, October 31

8:30 - 10:30 a.m. - *Developing*

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Bill Arman, The Harvest Group

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If you're like most business owners and professionals, you think of every dollar as being the same as every other dollar. In truth, there are two kinds of dollars – before-tax dollars and after-tax dollars.

After-tax dollars are real dollars; when you spend them, each is worth 100 cents. Before-tax dollars are different. While they may look the same on paper, a before-tax dollar is an illusion; it's worth less than 100 cents. How much less depends on your tax bracket – and how well you do your homework.

While there is no practical way to escape taxes entirely, there are some simple approaches to investing that can help you to increase those valuable after-tax dollars in 2009.

1. MAXIMIZE YOUR TAX-DEFERRED RETIREMENT ACCOUNT EARLY. Don't wait until tax filing time to fund your retirement account. If you have the cash, making the maximum allowable deposit into your 401(k) or IRA as early in the year as possible not only reduces your tax load, it also adds months to the tax-deferred compounding of your investment.

If you haven't yet set up a retirement account, now is the time to take action. The latest increases in allowed contributions to pension plans offer important tax advantages. The 401(k) contribution limit was raised to \$16,500 for 2009.

The "catch up" provision has also been increased. Anyone past the age of 50 is allowed the \$16,500 plus a "catch up" of \$5,500 for a total contribution of \$22,000.

If you can't make the maximum contribution, make the highest contribution your finances permit.

2. ALLOCATE YOUR ASSETS CORRECTLY. It's important to make sure you hold the right kinds of investments in each of those accounts. Some types of assets can be classified as *tax-inefficient*, others are *tax-efficient*. It makes sense to allocate your tax-inefficient assets to tax-deferred accounts such as your 401(k) or IRA, thus deferring taxes as long as possible. Tax-efficient assets are best held in regular taxable accounts.



Keep It. You Earned It.

Better manage your pre- and post-tax dollars to have more after Uncle Sam comes calling.

BY WILLIAM LYNOTT

Some examples of tax-inefficient assets are corporate bonds, which produce fully taxable income, and the typical actively managed equity mutual fund.

Prominent among tax-efficient investments are municipal bonds. Also, some mutual funds are specifically managed to be tax-efficient; they will usually be promoted as such. Examples would include most index funds, specifically broad-market and large-cap index funds. These funds tend to have less turnover of the equities within the funds and thus generate less taxable capital gains.

3. PUT THE KIDS TO WORK. By putting your children to work in your business, you convert their personal allowance into deductible compensation. And it gets better: If your children are under 18 and work for your unincorporated business or professional practice, you need pay no Social Security or Medicare taxes on their earnings. You can pay them \$4,400 each and then make Roth IRA contributions for them in the

same amount.

Since you're giving the kids an allowance anyway, putting them to work in the business allows Uncle Sam to help fund that expense. Obviously, the work done must be reasonable for the business, but it doesn't have to be technical or professional in nature.

These are just a few examples of opportunities to reduce your income tax obligation. Maximizing those precious after-tax dollars requires a little early planning and effort on your part, but the time you spend chipping away at your income taxes may be the most profitable investment you make this year. **L**

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

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USE READER SERVICE #26

Sell Work *Right Now*

It's very hard to be successful in sales right away; it takes time. The best sales professionals are tops because of their ability to develop and maintain relationships. So, this month I want to share with you how to develop and capitalize on your relationships.

If I were you, I'd be spending as much time as I possibly could meeting with people who either can use your products and services or know people who can. I am amazed many contractors still sit back and wait for the phone to ring. You have to get out there and create some opportunities.

I always say, "It's not what you know, or who you know, but who knows you when they need you." Here are the five best ways to meet people who can help you grow your business:

1. Join any association that has members who fit the makeup of your typical client. Optimist clubs, rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, alumni associations and the like.

2. Read the business paper. Stay informed about new businesses moving to town and those doing well. Send them a copy of the article and invite them to breakfast. I'm not afraid to meet with anyone; you shouldn't be either.

3. Join a networking group. One of my top salespeople at my landscape company has not only gotten some business from the group he joined, but it has also given him a lot of confidence and improved his communication skills.

4. Be someone others want to get to know. You do this by being a friend. Be someone others can trust; do the right thing – always. It also doesn't hurt to be good at

what you do. Be committed to learning and it will help you excel in many ways.

5. Become focused on making friends. When you focus on a particular goal, its chances of being accomplished are greatly enhanced. Make it a goal to meet three new people each week. Three per week amounts to more than 150 people a year. If you sell a job to just 10 of those people, think about what that could do for your business.

Now, assuming you have clients

about what you can do that won't cost you much, but be perceived as valuable to the client.

- ✓ Incentivize your whole team to sell. Let them know they'll receive a percentage of every referral they give you. This is something you ought to be doing all the time, not just when times are tough.

- ✓ Send a handwritten thank-you note to every client you have. I don't care how many you have, just do it. If it takes the next 30 weeks to get this done, do it. This

**"People do business with winners.
So act like one."**

who are happy with your goods and services, here are seven ideas you can use to sell some work right now:

- ✓ Call clients and set up a time to go see them and walk their property. Not only is it a very successful way to point out enhancements you could do at their property, it's a way to enhance the relationship you have with the client.

- ✓ Provide unsolicited quotes to your clients. If one of your clients doesn't have nightlighting, put together a proposal for that and go see them. If they have a hedge that is half dead, give them a quote for a new one. If their yard needs some maintenance, show them what you can do.

- ✓ Offer incentives for your clients to hire you to do other things. Tell your clients if they let you install the front landscaping, you'll keep it weed free for the rest of the year. Or if they let you mow the lawn for the rest of the year, you'll give them a free aeration. Think

might not seem like something that would sell work right away, but today, when handwritten notes seem to be a thing of the past, you might be surprised what this could do.

- ✓ Ask other companies, like plumbers, remodelers, pool builders and even bankers to refer you to their clients. You can have them send your information or you can get their mailing list and send a special offer.

- ✓ Keep your name out there. Park your trucks on busy street corners every weekend. Do some advertising, such as some radio commercials and some direct mail pieces. Cold call on properties you'd like to work on. Think.

People do business with winners. So act like one. Stay away from negative business owners who only want to talk about how bad they've got it. Remember, people do business with companies they trust to do the job right and follow up. **L**



MARTY GRUNDER

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

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Live & Learn

by Chuck Bowen



Parting With a Partner

Thomas Fitzsimmons talks about how he brought on – and then bought out – a minority partner in his landscape company.

In 2002, Thomas Fitzsimmons thought he'd found the perfect solution.

The president of Chux Landscaping, Pine Brook, N.J., had started a lucrative business designing pools for his high-end clients. He would sell and design the jobs, and then subcontract the construction. But he wanted to bring the whole operation in house, and so he and Charles Baldissard, already his 50-50 partner and operations manager, decided to hire a minority partner.

The new partner already worked for a large pool company and also wanted to help Chux Landscaping expand its pool business.

"It gave us the incentive to start a pool division," Fitzsimmons says. "It was really a fluke that my vision of where I

wanted to take the company was something he wanted and could do. He was the right person for both scenarios."

So, the \$3 million-a-year company branched out from its traditional base of landscape architecture and general contracting, and started Artisan Pools.

"It really was a nice mix to have because you're on all of these projects. We really became a full-service design build firm. I don't regret doing it," Fitzsimmons says. "It was something my current partner and I always had a vision and a dream to develop."

But the dream just wasn't meant to be. Fitzsimmons started receiving complaints from customers about the work being performed. "What hit close to home and what struck me as problem-

atic were the customer complaints and service issues," he shares. "It was really kind of spiraling out of control."

And, he adds, at the high-end of the market, "you're selling yourself. People expect the world of you at that level. When their expectations aren't being met or exceeded, you have to do something about it."

So last year, Fitzsimmons and Baldissard bought out the minority partner. When the partner was in charge of the pool division, Fitzsimmons wasn't involved with the management of the projects himself. "Now I am," he says.

He offers this advice to contractors who are planning to bring on a partner:

- Draft a detailed compensation agreement.
- Include a plan in the contract for breaking the partnership.
- Make sure everyone understands the company's business plan.
- Try a sliding scale of equity, where the new partner earns a certain amount of value in the company after he meets certain benchmarks or sales volumes.
- Have a plan in place covering who is responsible for repairs to work performed after the partnership is broken.

But Fitzsimmons doesn't regret the experience. Rather it provided the company with the incentive to add on a pool division, which sets Chux apart from its competitors. And with the partner gone, Fitzsimmons was also able to promote his foreman to manager. He says: "I wouldn't do it again, but I don't regret it – it did help launch a new service." **L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach him at cbowen@giemedia.com.

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What I Know

by Chuck Bowen

Risky Business

How one contractor manages risk.

All of your employees come to work on time. The trucks, mowers and string trimmers all are maintained and run well. You just cut checks for payday and still have money in the bank. The sun is shining, and everything's going smoothly.


But what about those thunderclouds on the horizon? A crew calls and says the engine died on the dump truck. The mulch delivery is late, and a customer is calling about a skid-steer that just sank into his soggy lawn.

Owning a business – especially a small business – can be risky, and one of the biggest challenges any entrepreneur faces is how to deal with the stress of knowing that any number of things can – and likely will – go wrong before the day is through. Brad Johnson, president and owner of LawnAmerica, tries to keep it all in perspective for himself and his employees.

“From a Christian standpoint, I’m just a steward of this business. I could lose it in a heartbeat. I told my staff this week – I could live another 20 years or another month, we just don’t know,” he says. “That affects my decision-making process and how I view things. That effects how I run my business. I just try to keep it all in perspective.”

The lawn care company is in its 11th year, but it’s not Johnson’s first. He has started several other lawn care companies that he eventually sold to TruGreen. Now based in Tulsa, Okla., LawnAmerica has 7,000 customers and 33 employees – and Johnson sees it as one, big family.





Smooth operator: Sure, Brad Johnson feels the pressures of managing risk when making daily business decisions, but he doesn't let that affect him. Control what you can and manage the rest is his mantra.

"As a responsible business owner, you kind of view your employees as your kids," he says. "You're responsible for their paychecks and their well being. That's a big responsibility having all of those employees who depend on you to earn a living."

And that responsibility is something he's learned more about. Now 55, he says he does things a lot differently today than when he got into the business more than two decades ago.

Johnson gives a recent example. A few weeks ago, he needed to get a trailer up to a branch office in Bartlesville, about an hour's drive north. Well, Paul lives in Bartlesville, he can take it up in his personal truck. Great plan, except for the liability involved – if there's an accident, who's at fault? If Paul gets in a wreck pulling company property, his own insurance might not cover him, and Johnson's business insurance won't cover Paul's personal truck.

"I don't want him doing that," Johnson says. "Five or six years ago, I would have said, 'Yeah, go ahead and do it.' You do tend to think about the things that could go wrong in a simple situation like that.

"We don't shoot from the hip as much as we used to," he adds. "We try to be more deliberate, and think about things with risk in mind."

So, a large part of Johnson's time is spent thinking about how to manage risk. One way he does that is to keep his employees happy – and working hard – with an incentive plan in place: Twenty-five percent of year-end profits go back to employees. Route managers get a cash bonus for accounts they sign up, as well as accounts they retain.

"That's several thousands of dollars in a route manager's annual salary," he says. "So they care about not just getting customers but losing customers, because it's money out of their pockets."

And he's been seeing more of those accounts retained, even in a down economy. In 25 years, he's never had a year where the business didn't grow. In the last two years, he's seen growth of

30 percent. Cancellations are up a few percent this year, but the sales numbers are keeping pace with predictions.


"We're going to scale down to 16 percent growth. The economy is helping us out," he says. "We felt like our growth was outpacing our ability to do really good work and not have me pull my hair out and not have too much stress."

His goal this year was actually to advertise less and become more profitable. He says he's not more stressed out this year than in past years – the spring was rainy, but things are going well.

And Johnson knows any growth in this economy puts him in a unique position. One of his good friends runs a Dodge dealership that is under a lot of pressure. The dealership has been in his family for 60 years. "There are a lot of business owners who are just struggling. That's the stress of the business owner the typical employee doesn't see.

"I think obviously, the more successful you are and the larger you grow, you have more risk – you have more to lose," he continues.

But at the end of the day, Johnson knows revenues could drop, or a ton of customers could call up and cancel their contracts. So, he tries to keep it all in perspective, and focus on the things he can change. "It's important to work hard and do a great job, but the things that are going to last are the relationships with customers, employees and vendors. Especially employees; I try to take care of them," he says.

"I try not to lose sleep over it, but it's there," he adds about risk. "You do have to plan for it and think things through and manage it ... you can't alleviate it, but you can manage it to where certain actions are less risky than others." 

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine. Reach him at cbowen@gie.net.

Balancing Act

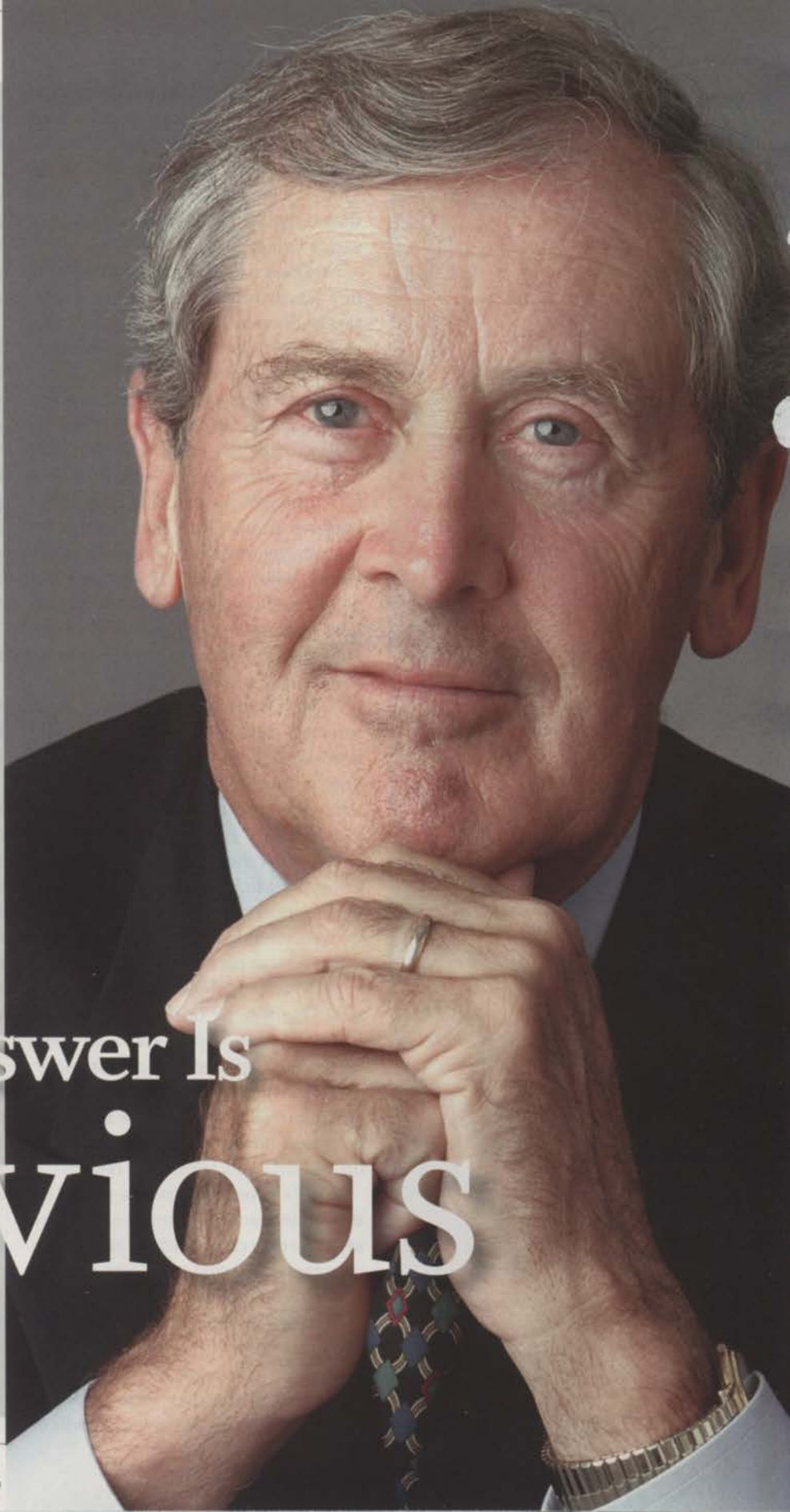
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INTERVIEW

AIG tried to be everything to everybody and look where that got them. Jack Trout says in today's economy the answer is specialization.

Landscape contractors can take a fresh approach to marketing by focusing on what they do well.

The Answer Is Obvious



BY CHUCK BOWEN

Landscape contractors all do something well – stellar customer service, super-efficient routing, maybe they're just really good at cutting grass. The key to success, and standing out from your competition, is finding that thing, and doing it over and over and over again, according to Jack Trout.

Trout is a marketer and author who developed the theory of positioning in 1980. It deals with the practice of differentiating a product in the mind of the potential customer – like, making one landscape company stand out among a field of dozens.

Trout was in Akron, Ohio, recently promoting his latest book, *In Search of the Obvious*, which explains the core principles necessary for a successful business: Essentially that any good plan or company should be simple, clear and, well, obvious. Afterward, he took questions from the audience, and *Lawn & Landscape* got a chance to participate.

While Trout's clients have included big name firms like Apple, IBM and Xerox, his marketing advice holds true for small businesses.

What's one thing a small business can start doing today to market better or market smarter?

Specialization. Get really good at one thing and communicate that to your marketplace. That's the future of good small operations. Don't try to become everything for everybody; don't chase other people's business.

How do you defend your position when a competitor with a bigger marketing budget steals it?

With great difficulty. There is no easy way out of that one. You're going to have to spend some money.

It's the 22nd Immutable Law of Marketing: Without proper resources, even the best idea will not get off the ground. You've got to have enough resources. It's interesting because people always ask me, 'If you redid the laws, what would you change?' I would only add a law. I would add the 23rd law, and it's called the Law of Top Management. Unless you have top management involved, you will have no success. The CEO has to be aboard on all of these strategies.

How important is the CEO?

Let me give you a Peter Drucker quote.

Many years ago, Peter Drucker, the father of management consulting, wrote a book, and said something that absolutely nailed it and has been totally ignored over the years. He said: 'The purpose of a business is to generate new customers. Only two functions – two – generate new customers: marketing and innovation.' He said every other function is nothing but an expense.

Look at what CEOs at a lot of big companies do. They work on finance or they work on manufacturing stuff or they work with the board. That idea has been lost in the shrouds of history. In a competitive world, Drucker is absolutely correct – marketing and innovation. That's really where top management has to be.

Talk about the nuts and bolts of repositioning for a small firm that doesn't advertise.

The strategy of a small firm against bigger players is specialization. You have to specialize in one area and build yourself around that specialization because people will think you're pretty good since that's all you do. Small guys have to play specialization. Big guys can try to be everything to everybody.

The crowd in the middle gets really squeezed.

If you've missed the opportunity to move forward and are positioned poorly, what do you do?

Go for another job. You've got to sort it out and say, 'Where do I go next?' This is the GM problem: Where do we go next? We've missed a lot of timing. The problem is when you hit that situation, chances are you don't have a lot of money, chances are you're broke, and now the law of resources kicks in, so that's a tough spot to be in. Branding is a slow process; it takes time and money.

How long does it typically take for a repositioning strategy to get traction?

It took Lotus about four years, a lot of PR and a lot of effort. It's almost a direct equation of money – how much money you pour into it. If you spend a lot of money, you can do it quicker. If you spend less money, it's going to take a little bit of time. And it just takes some consistency.

In these tough times, when so much is uncertain, is it better to take a wait-and-see attitude, or get busy repositioning?

I would get repositioning if I could. The bad news is it's ugly out there. The good news is there's not a lot of noise out there. A lot of your competitors are frozen in place, so what you have is running room now. You have a chance to get out there if you have the resources to get out there, and you don't have a lot of people saying the same thing and jumping all over the place. In other words, there's a certain silence you can take advantage of. So I would much rather use this time to figure out what to do and do it as soon as I can while the noise level is down and your competition isn't do-

ing very much. Silence is golden in this particular case.

Is there an example of effective positioning where you're not directly taking on a negative, but affirming a positive for a category that moves a brand, where

you're not repositioning against the competition?

Yeah, sure, but you're more in the positioning game when you're taking advantage of an attribute. When I talk about repositioning, normally, you see two issues: You're either hanging a

negative on your competition or you are adjusting perceptions about yourself in a changing marketplace.

If you're Pepsi Cola going against Coke, and using 'The New Generation' ...

The problem with Pepsi and Coke is, essentially, they've never been consistent. Coke has one, powerful, simple idea, which they dropped years ago: 'The Real Thing.' They *never* should have changed that.

And Pepsi had a very good idea: 'The Choice of the New Generation.' So you had: This is the youthful drink, and this is the real thing. Those are the underlying strategies those colas should stay with and never change. Now they're in slogan land – these meaningless, silly slogans. Meanwhile, the category is going down; people are drinking less cola. And then Pepsi changes its logo. What the hell for? That's ridiculous. And it's a change you can hardly even notice. In fact, they made it worse. They're just floundering. They haven't got a strategy. Coke should go back to 'The Real Thing' and reintroduce that.

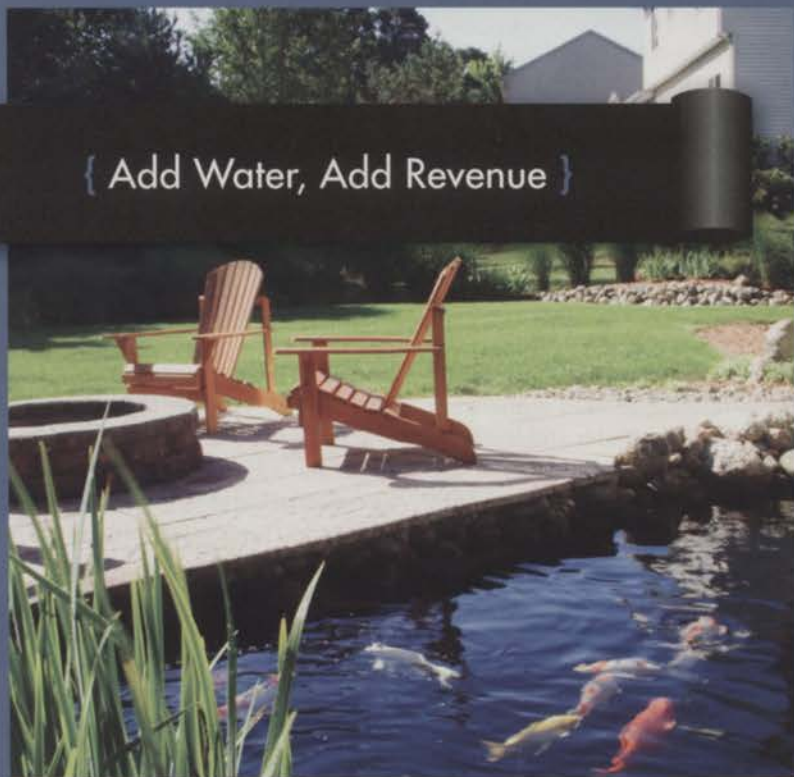
How far should a company go with customer segmentation? What's a good rule of thumb?

I think segmentation gets a little nutty, to be honest with you. It adds levels of complexity when you start getting into the segmentation game. You have a product, and you have a market. If you're starting to say that market breaks up into five segments, all right, well, which ones are you going to go through? Which ones does your strategy work for? If you're after a segment that is quality-oriented, whatever it is, rarely can you say, 'I'm going to have the same idea working in five different groups.' It gets very complicated.

Does our positioning role change now that so much of the conversation is happening user to user online?

Online stuff? Look. Online stuff is a tool. It's a new tool. It's a new medium reaching your marketplace. Don't get nutty about this online stuff; I mean,

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it's a tool. About 10 percent of the marketing dollars in America go online. Ninety percent go to traditional means. All you've got to say is, 'How do I use the new tool?'

To be honest with you, it's really still a work in progress. A lot of companies are still groping around. You should take your positioning strategy – the same ideas you develop for other traditional media – and put it online.

You've got to approach a Web site like you approach an ad: 'What's my position and what's my strategy?' Is it visible? How do I handle it?'

Is it possible to overdo repositioning? If so, where do you draw the line?

With repositioning, chances are you do it once. You have to sort of evolve in a way. And evolution is a slow process. You don't do a lot of it.

Has anyone done a better job of continuously repositioning than McDonald's?


Yes. I don't like McDonald's, to be honest with you. They're successful because they're inexpensive. Look, 'I'm lovin' it' is not a good idea. Essentially, McDonald's strategy should be, 'The World's Favorite Place to Eat.'

I'd say BMW with 'The Ultimate Driving Machine for Almost 25 years' is hanging in there with that basic concept. I would not give McDonald's high marks; I would give BMW very high marks.

How do you combat a fear of positioning when a be-all-things-to-all-people strategy seems safer?

You've got to point out companies like AIG. I mean, here's an everything-for-everybody insurance company. Years ago, I was working with them, and I said you should be America's answer to Lloyd's of London, because that's the kind of insurance they were doing way back when. No, they wanted to be everything. They wanted to do indemnity, they wanted to do property, and the next thing you know they're doing the kind of weird stuff that took them over the cliff.

So, in a way, your best strategy is to simply point out that not too many companies find happiness trying to be everything to everybody. How can you own an idea in the mind? You can't own everything in the mind. Everything to everybody means you're sort of nothing

in the mind. That's the problem. 

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. He can be reached at cbowen@gie.net.

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USE READER SERVICE #30



Cast a Wider Net

As unemployment rises, landscape contractors are reeling in more applicants than ever before.

But it doesn't make snagging the right workers any easier.

BY JULIE COLLINS

It seems a bit counterintuitive: When times are good, angling for quality employees is tricky for many landscape companies that don't have the time or the bait to snag a big catch. When unemployment increases in other industries, trolling for new hires gets a whole lot easier.

As the longest recession since World War II continues to take its toll on the U.S., many in the landscape industry are actually benefiting from the increased layoffs, thanks to a larger labor pool.

"People are cutting back, and that's giving contractors more selection in terms of who they're hiring," says Tom Grandy, president of Grandy & Associates, a business training firm in Owensboro, Ky.

In fact, employers in many industries, including landscaping, are being inundated with candidates who are desperately seeking work, says Jean Seawright, a certified management consultant and owner of Seawright & Associates in Winter Park, Fla. According to a *Lawn & Landscape* survey, 49 percent of contractors say unemployment has increased their job applicants for hourly/seasonal labor positions.

Yet it's not all smooth sailing – the challenges that come along with that increase in applicants leave many landscape professionals green at the gills. "With a significant increase in the number of candidates, the challenge becomes how to effectively and efficiently manage the volume of resumes and applications," Seawright says. And many contractors (30 percent) answering the survey say this hasn't meant higher quality workers either.

MORE FISH IN THE SEA. The unemployment rate climbed to 8.9 percent in April (the highest since 1983) even as the pace of layoffs slowed (539,000 workers lost their jobs that month). That leaves a lot more people fighting for the few jobs that are available.

"A year ago, it was just about impossible to find good help or help at all,"

says Andrew Blanchford, president of Blanchford Landscape Contractors, a design-build firm in Bozeman, Mont. "In terms of qualified help, it's still hard, but in terms of general labor it's no problem now. We have applications coming in and we're not even advertising."

Blanchford hired five new workers this year, and the rest of his crew (he has 17 full-time employees) returned from last season. Most new hires had experience – some quite a lot. "I have one new hire who has 10 years of experience," Blanchford says. "He's probably being underutilized by us right now, but we're thinking this is an opportunity to build for the future, so he will probably grow into a bigger position with us in time."

Although Blanchford wrapped up his new hires for the year before the season was underway, hiring employees is an ongoing process for some business owners. "We're consistently hiring," says Ryan Jaycox, owner of Integrity Lawn Care, a landscape and lawn care company in Fenton, Mo.

Many of Jaycox's applicants are from other landscape companies in the St. Louis area – they aren't getting the number of hours they used to when the economy was good. Others have been laid off from one of the largest Chrysler plants in the area, which recently shut down. Some of those former Chrysler employees are trying to start their own companies; many others are attempting to work for companies like Jaycox's.

"It's tough. We've brought guys on with zero experience and generally put

Employee Evaluations

Has rising unemployment increased the number of job applicants for **HOURLY/SEASONAL LANDSCAPE LABOR POSITIONS** at your company?

I have not hired any hourly landscape laborers this year



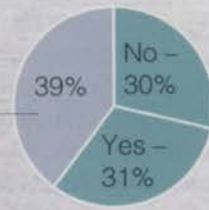
Has rising unemployment increased the number of job applicants for **SALARIED AND/OR HOURLY YEAR-ROUND MIDDLE MANAGEMENT POSITIONS** at your company?

I have not hired any middle management employees this year



Have recent economic challenges and the resulting unemployment situation across the country helped you obtain higher quality workers, in your opinion?

I have not hired any employees this year



them on the mowing side, because our goal isn't just to help our company, it's to help the city we're in," Jaycox says. "Even if they don't have the experience, we'll bring them in and get them trained so they can make money again."

Jaycox's hiring practices aren't solely for the benefit of the unemployed, however. He needs the help. Despite the choppy economy in the St. Louis area, business is booming for Integrity Lawn Care. "We haven't felt the crunch in any way. People are still spending money and they want a company that has a good track record and does good work," Jaycox says. In fact, Integrity Lawn Care is on track to double what the company made last year – around \$1 million.

With that boom in business, Jaycox is renting equipment from other companies and even hiring their crews to supplement the work of his 15-employee staff. Often, those workers who assist Integrity Lawn Care are so impressed with how the company is run that they ask about jobs. "They see how we work and how many jobs we have and I guess it attracts them. They want to be a part of what we're doing," Jaycox says.

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STILL NOT SMOOTH SAILING. Despite the influx of applicants, business owners face considerable challenges when it comes to hiring. One of the biggest problems: a shortage of qualified help. "A lot of people think they can just jump into our industry because there are low barriers," Blanchford says. "But as long as there are people in the pool who know something, we probably aren't going to spend any time talking to the people who don't."

Sometimes, however, it's hard to determine who has the experience and who doesn't. Rob Schmidt owns Bob's Lawn Care, a small, mostly residential mowing and trimming service in Forest Hill, Md. This spring, he spent three weeks trying to find a new hire. In the process, Schmidt worked with a number of local organizations, including a small business development center,

and posted the job opening on the state labor department workforce exchange Web site and Craigslist.

Out of 40 possible candidates – a considerably higher response rate than in past years – Schmidt interviewed about 20 people. At times, the process of hiring the two employees he ultimately selected was a painful one.

"I had a lot of wasted time dealing with people who were getting unemployment benefits and didn't really want to work," Schmidt says. One laid out her demands (she needed 40 hours of work a week at \$13 an hour or she wouldn't consider an interview). Another wasted five hours of time in training before telling Schmidt he didn't want the job.

"A lot of job applicants play games when you first talk to them," he says. "They say they know how to do something and want to work, but then they

don't show up or return messages."

Finally, Schmidt started asking people if they were on unemployment during interviews. "I was tired of wasting time, so I started asking what they would need to consider taking the job. I was frank with them so I could screen the ones who weren't serious.

"I had a bigger pool of candidates because of higher unemployment, but I needed them," he adds. "In the past, I didn't do a good enough job screening applicants. This year, I was determined not to have the same luck."

A LOWER QUOTA. Many landscape companies have fewer positions to fill this year because business is slow. This presents another challenge: "It's a whole different caliber of people looking for seasonal work compared to those looking for year-round work," Blanchford says.



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In addition, some companies have fewer openings because so many employees from last year are sticking around – even with reduced hours and wages, they know better than to give up a steady gig. “Motivation is not really a problem right now because most of the people we have get that if they’re not motivated and producing, there’s somebody behind them who will,” Blanchford says.

Blanchford’s design/build work has slowed, so he was forced to cut back hours for his full-time designer. Rather than leaving altogether, the designer was willing to stick around on an as-needed basis. Other employees who have dropped from salaried to hourly positions are staying on, too – a boon for Blanchford’s business, because he doesn’t have to start from scratch with new hires. “I think there’s more of that than the employment numbers tell you

– a lot of people employed but not fully employed anymore,” he says.

Schmidt agrees. “There are more people who call and are willing to accept part-time work. They want to work full time but they’re willing to take anything they can get.”

REELING IN THE KEEPERS. Even when landscape professionals make the right hires, there isn’t any guarantee they’ll be able to keep employees around. Nineteen percent of business owners surveyed worry that once the economy improves and more jobs become available, employees will jump ship.

“Right now in the landscape industry, if you’re looking for someone to dig a hole, you’ll get a better quality individual, but they won’t stay with you for very long,” Grandy says. “In reality, they’re going to take the job and then start looking for something else.”

Keeping quality employees in the green industry will be easier if companies pay more and charge more, says Kim Parker, owner of Kim Parker Plants, an interior plantscaping company in Milpitas, Calif. “We have yet to elevate our image from ‘gardeners’ to ‘technicians,’ where better money can be charged and expected. What we do is detailed, difficult, dirty, hard work, and the people willing to do this work should be well-paid.”

Previously, when unemployment was about 2 percent in Bozeman, Blanchford says finding qualified labor was hard, so he overpaid people. But now unemployment is closer to 5 percent, so he estimates entry-level labor has dropped from about \$12 to \$10 an hour.

Yet wages – and whether they decrease or increase in this economy – vary depending on where firms are located. “You have to pay more if you’re

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going to retain decent people," Schmidt says. "Since I started, I've raised what I'm willing to pay because at the lower end I wasn't getting any applicants. I've gone from starting at \$9 to starting at \$10.50. I just raised one guy to \$12."


Jaycox pays well, too – and attributes that, in part, to his success. Right now, his entry-level mowers are generally paid \$12 an hour. Head foremen make \$30 an hour, plus commission as part of the company's sales team. "Everybody else is in between," he says. "A lot of companies think I'm crazy when I tell them how much we're paying, but the employees love it, and it keeps them here."

Although Grandy cautions retention may be tricky, he acknowledges, "You might find some who want to stay in this industry and move up the ladder and fill management positions later on."

Jaycox hired some laborers who have held management positions in the past, but they didn't quite have the experience to make it as foremen. Still, they're willing to work because they get paid for at least 40 hours a week.

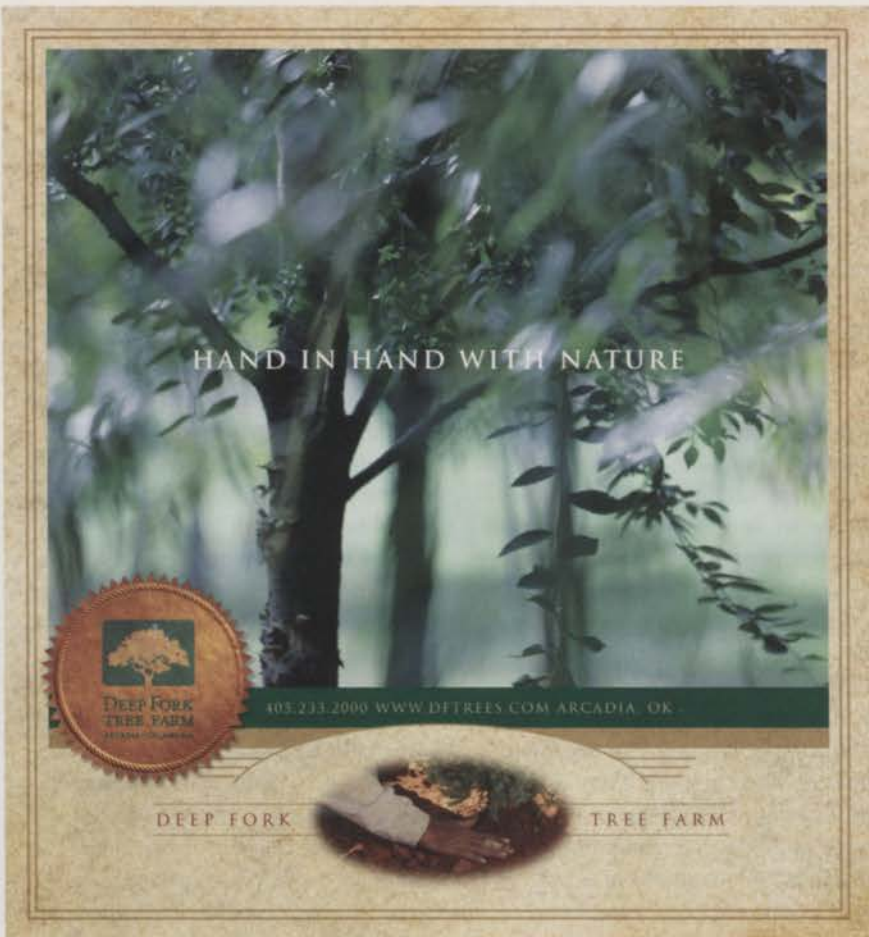
"Last year our biggest challenge was a lack of qualified applicants. This year, to be honest, we don't really have any labor challenges," he adds.

Jaycox acknowledges the industry is in a recession – and he doesn't think it's going to come out soon. "But in a way it's good because it's going to weed out the good companies from the bad. Companies that strive for customer service, take care of employees and are doing things in the community will excel. The companies that don't will suffer."

"Ultimately, in the next 12 to 24 months we'll see less competition," Blanchford predicts. "The question for me is where does the pool of available work go? Is it going to grow so there's more work for fewer companies or is it going to stay smaller and the adjustment is getting to the right size for the market again? That's what I don't know." 

The author is a freelancer based in Lincoln, Ill.

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Made for Hire

We talk to three green industry employers who share hiring mistakes that helped them define some of the HR best practices they use today.

Hiring is like speed dating, like marriage after the first date. Think about it. You meet a desirable candidate. You speak to that person for a short time over the phone, then you invite this individual to interview knowing little more than vital stats: age (maybe), address, phone number, education, career history.

Yet you are prepared to invest in this person for the long-term, even if your “history” together goes no deeper than a couple of meetings before you invite the person to join the company. “Candidates come in for an interview, you size each other up and make a serious commitment,” says Doug Freer, president, Lawn Lad, Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

Then, like a personal relationship, you learn how to work with this employee and, hopefully, you stick together through the good times and bad.

The anchor that makes this seemingly frivolous engagement to employees work out in the end is strong core val-

ues, Freer says. His are entrepreneurial spirit and ecstatic customers. He seeks to hire candidates who are motivated self-starters, people with a positive attitude who display an ability to cater to the company's loyal client base.

Because the fact is, you can teach employees how to run your equipment, but just like any relationship, you better love what you can't change.

“After we hire someone, we are mistaken if we think we are going to change their personalities,” says Wayne Volz, president, Profits Unlimited and Wayne's Lawn Care in Louisville, Ky. “The reality is that all the time you invest training that person could be wasted.”

Volz isn't suggesting that you hire clones of yourself. But recognize your goals as a company and what characteristics are required of employees to succeed in your organization.

And with that, give employees who meet expectations reason beyond a

paycheck to continue working for you. “It's not always pay that keeps people around,” Volz reminds. Benefits, quality equipment, opportunities to excel, a career path – show people value that money can't buy.

And to be sure you can afford those employees you hire, truly understand your cost of doing business and the real expense associated with bringing on a new employee, Volz says. A \$10-per-hour worker may cost you \$14 per hour. Figure the cost of uniforms, benefits, state and federal unemployment, training, etc.

Finally, take your time when hiring. “We generally hire fast and fire slow, but we need to do the opposite,” Volz says.

This month, *Lawn & Landscape* talks to three landscape contractors who operate companies in different revenue categories. Here, they share hiring mistakes and lessons learned. **L**

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

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USE READER SERVICE #37



Stop, Look, Listen

Mowing & More hunts ideal employees by watching work ethic and digging up referrals from people who excel in this area.

University of Maryland junior Chad Stern relies on employees for 100 percent of the production of his company Mowing & More.

When Chad Stern was ready to hire the first employee for his landscape business, Mowing & More, he didn't bother hanging signs in the school lunchroom or recruiting friends. "I went to a private school where most of the kids probably weren't interested in doing manual labor," he says.

Stern, however, knew he wanted to develop a career in the industry from the time he began mowing lawns when he was 12 years old. But he needed help.

Anticipating spring and more work than he could handle, Stern was in the market for a full-time employee he could trust to manage 100 percent of the field work. By this time, he was in ninth grade and sales were growing in \$60,000 to \$80,000 increments each year.

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Then, in the winter of 2003, a roofing contractor at his parent's house was braving frigid temperatures to finish the job. Stern took note. "It was January and about 15 degrees, and I thought the fact that he was out there working was a reflection of his work ethic," Stern says.

Stern asked the roofer if he had relatives looking for work. Stern also called a couple of business owners featured in *Lawn & Landscape* to ask their advice on hiring. He was prepared to manage payroll when he brought on the roofer's brother.

Today, Stern has six employees and is a junior at the University of Maryland. His shop is close to campus, but he still relies on employees for 100 percent of production. And he still recruits workers by keeping jobs "in the family" of those who are already employed by Mowing & More.

"I feel like there is better retention when new employees are working with people they already know instead of with complete strangers," says Stern, adding that hiring family of employees also lessens the burden of training. "It's up to the field employees to make the new workers feel comfortable and welcome," he says.

Because Stern spends all day in

Mowing & More

Principal: Chad Stern

Location: Chevy Chase, Md.

Established: 2002

2008 Revenue: \$390,000

Customers/Services:
residential; landscape management

Employees: 6 full-time

Hiring philosophy: Stern says the best way to find employees who will deliver on their word to provide quality work is to "shop" for model employees and ask if their relatives need work.

standing there," he says.

The one lesson Stern learned the hard way was to sell enough work to support each hiring decision. He recruited an employee who lasted two weeks the summer of 2002. "I realized I didn't have enough work to give him," he says.


Now Stern knows his numbers. Each employee can handle \$60,000 to

"I have always depended on my employees to be **honest** and **responsible** because I can't be standing there." – CHAD STERN

class, trust is a huge hiring factor. He dispatches his three two-man crews in the morning and checks in with them late afternoon to be sure the day's production tasks are handled. "I focus on doing sales estimates, quality control and equipment maintenance," Stern says. His employees are "enthusiastic to show up," he adds. Attendance and quality are not a problem.

But Stern also knows he can't micromanage his workers. "I have always depended on my employees to be honest and responsible because I can't be

\$80,000 in revenue. Figuring steady growth – last year the business was up 19 percent – Stern aims to hire one new person each year.

Those hard-working employees stick around because Stern returns the favor. "I work as hard for my employees as they do for me," he says, relating that he may help them by fixing a piece of equipment. "I personally help them out and I know they appreciate that and it means a lot to them." 

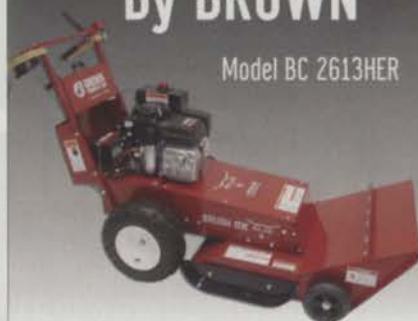
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Trading Up

Lawn Lad attracts higher caliber workers by drug testing applicants and providing them with a 100-page manual upon hiring.



Implementing a pre-employment drug screening policy altered Doug Freer's job applicant pool.

After a highly qualified employee with six months tenure at Lawn Lad stole the company's brand-new four-wheel-drive plow truck (it was M.I.A. for several days before it mysteriously reappeared), Doug Freer, president, decided to start drug testing applicants.

"I recovered my truck and the business went on," Freer says, noting that the worker's drug, alcohol and gambling issues flew under the radar.

"After we instituted a pre-employment drug screening policy and advertised that, our pool of applicants changed dramatically."

Essentially, Freer "traded up." He knew of people who wouldn't apply to work for Lawn Lad because they would not pass the drug test.

Meanwhile, setting a higher bar required a greater commitment from Freer in terms of the way he ran his business. His 40-page employee manual

with job descriptions has evolved into a 100-plus page document that includes horticultural study materials and details the company's financial practices.

Also, Freer markets his business as a professional firm, and having a certified landscape technician (CLT) on staff attracts other serious candidates. He moved out of his home office and into a building three years ago, and he utilizes his Web site to filter applications because he notices that better qualified

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Lawn Lad job candidates apply via the company's Web site and then are screened by the office manager.

Lawn Lad

Principal: Douglas Freer, president

Location: Cleveland Heights, Ohio

Established: 1991

2008 Revenue: \$1 million

Customers/Services: 95% residential, 5% commercial (landscape maintenance and installation); 5% residential, 95% commercial (snow removal via Blue Moose Snow)

Employees: 15

Hiring philosophy: Hire selectively and focus on appearance, attitude, demeanor and personal characteristics. People skills are the most important.

individuals tend to search for jobs on the Internet and apply electronically.

"Hire for where you want to be," Freer advises. "There's more to hiring someone than getting work done. What you are really doing is making a commitment to grow your business, so you need to look at the process more strategically than hiring to fill your needs now."

Process is the operative word. Freer advocates creating job descriptions so hiring decisions are targeted. He allows leeway for "new positions" because he knows these job roles will evolve.

"I learned that the first person in that position will fail because they are a guinea pig," he says. "I try to address that fact during the interview by saying, 'This is a new position. Are you flexible and willing to work with me as we evolve here?'"

Also, employers must be prepared to make payroll. Under-the-table pay does not attract committed workers. Regarding

pay, Freer has always paid on time – but he has learned to never pay early, even if a hard-working employee needs help. "Early on, I would get pressured to give loans – little advances," Freer says. "That was frustrating because it created an atmosphere where you play favorites. And if you establish a precedent that you are willing give loans, then employees will think, 'I'll just go to the boss early and ask him for money.'"

Freer always, always pays on time. "You make a commitment whether that money comes out of your own pocket or you have to get a loan from the bank to balance your cash flow," he says.

Commitment is a word that Freer uses liberally in hiring discussions.

Taking his company's pledge to hire quality employees to the next level, he has implemented a three-step application process. Candidates apply through the Lawn Lad Web site after learning more about the business. They are screened by Freer's office manager, who notifies applicants of their status. Those who move on answer a questionnaire. From there, Freer's manager can decide which applicants to interview via phone. Finally, candidates are invited for an in-person interview. Out of 90 applicants this spring, 12 were interviewed over the phone and two were hired.

But Freer is adamant about maintaining his hiring standards. No matter what. "Hire slowly and fire quickly," he says, reciting an HR mantra he appreciates. **L**

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



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USE READER SERVICE #42

No Margin for Error

At Elite Landscaping, hiring is based on attitude and aptitude. And to maintain a tight labor force, there's no room for mistakes.

David Katz got his MBA the winter of 1990 – not the business degree, but a harsh lesson learned when he spent \$150,000 to retain a band of bright-eyed college graduates until spring. He paid for health insurance, holidays, sick time and personal days. “I invested a great deal of money to keep the staff on when we had a brutal winter,” relates Katz, president, Elite Landscaping, Wappingers Falls, N.Y.

David Katz runs a tight labor force and hires beyond skill – a good attitude reigns over 20 years of industry experience, in his opinion.



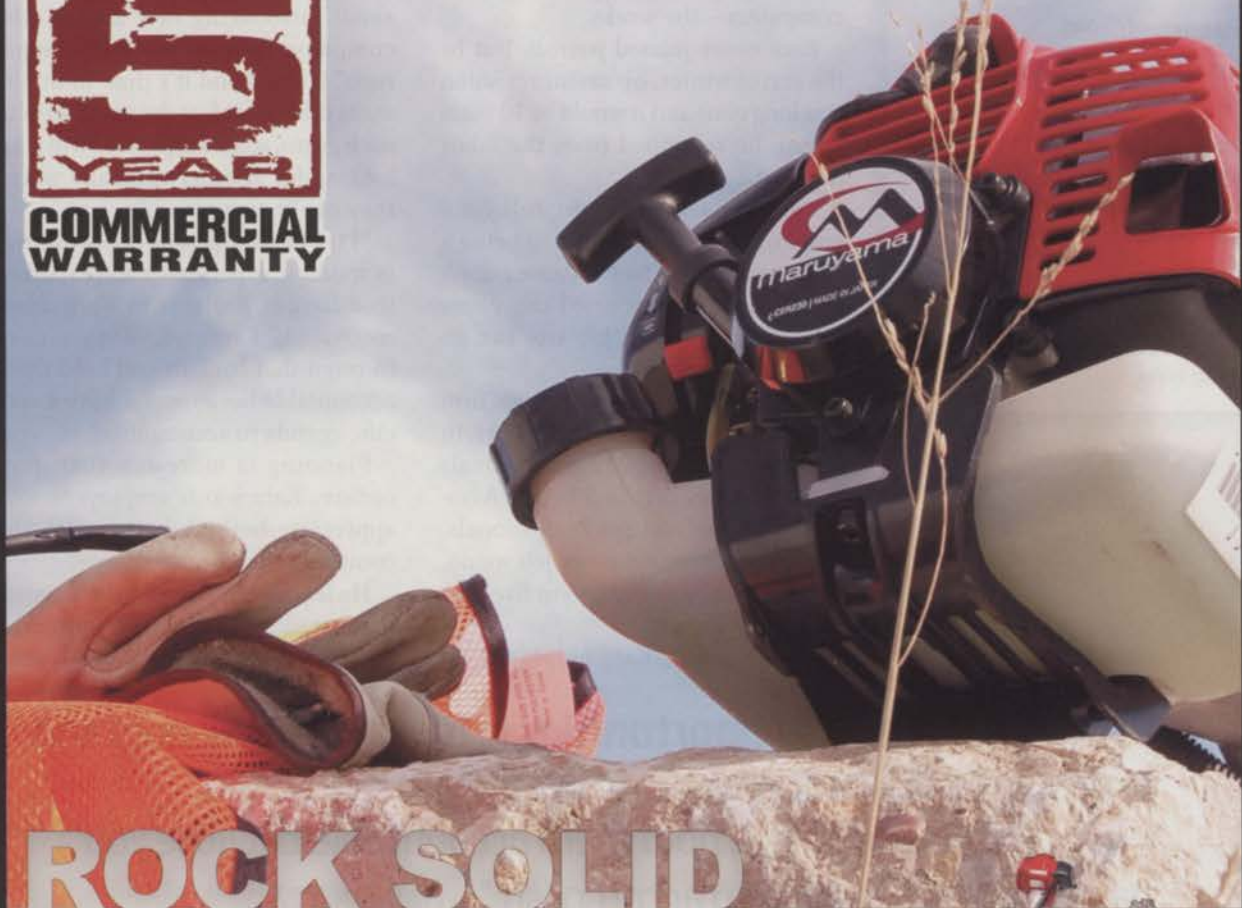
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Elite Landscaping

Principal: David Katz, president

Location: Wappingers Falls, N.Y.

Established: 1985

2008 Revenues: almost \$3 million

Customers/Services: full-service design/build, including in-house pool installation and irrigation

Employees: 8

Hiring philosophy: Hire on attitude. And expect the process to take time.

"That really was not something we could afford," he remarks.

He assigned these talented, young landscape design graduates to tasks such as fixing equipment and organizing the new facility. Meanwhile, Katz was financing a fast-growing firm, investing in machines, phone systems, computers – the works.

Katz never missed payroll. But by the end of winter, his savings cushion was long gone and it would be 10 years before he recouped from the labor expense.

Today, Katz has eight full-time employees, and he admits to being a micro-manager. "Not because I don't trust people, but because I know how quickly things on a job site can go astray," he explains.

Elite Landscaping is a boutique firm that rarely relies on subcontractors. In fact, Katz is one of 225 professionals in the country certified by the Association of Pool and Spa Professionals. "I'm everywhere, on every job we do, and we may be doing one to five jobs each day," he says.

At one point, Katz employed 38

long an employee has worked in the industry prior to joining Elite Landscaping, pay is based on results – not a fancy resume.

The tricky part about hiring for attitude, though, is ensuring enthusiastic employees are just as energetic about hitting performance goals as they are about introducing new ideas to the company. Because once the "sugar rush" is over, and it's time to implement those big ideas dreamed up with such gusto, some employees will start looking for another company where they can "honeymoon."

"I try to offer people opportunities in training, experiences and exposure to different projects to keep them motivated," Katz says. "But you need to reign that back in and hold them accountable because you have a specific agenda to accomplish."

Planning is more fun than procedure. Katz wants employees who appreciate both and stick with the company.

He learned this the hard way, after the first round of college graduates he hired used his company as a launch

"I try to offer people **opportunities** in training, experiences and exposure to different projects to keep them motivated. But you need to ... hold them accountable because you have a specific agenda to accomplish." – DAVID KATZ

workers in season. That roster has diminished drastically, a "correction" similar to the one the U.S. economy is facing.

Katz maintains a tight labor force, and he hires based on attitude and aptitude – not just skill. He references the book *Fire Up Your Employees and Smoke Your Competition* by Jay Forte. "Everyone has a forte, so to speak – their natural gifts," Katz relates. "That is what you need to find."

To Katz, a great attitude is worth 20 years of experience. To that end, he compensates employees based on performance, so regardless of how

pad to their next green industry gig.

Today, Katz screens candidates with technical and philosophical interview questions: *List as many parts in an irrigation sprinkler system that you know. What was your worst job position and why? What was the best job you had and why? What was the longest work week you ever had? Explain that in total hours. If you could create an ideal position, what would that be and why?*

"Expect the process to take time," Katz says, adding "years in business teach you skepticism and caution."

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

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The White Glove Treatment

Working with dirt doesn't mean a company has to leave the place dirty. A Minnesota landscape firm touts the value – and resulting revenue – of maintaining tidy job sites.

BY LINDSEY GETZ

When Southview Design, a Twin Cities-based design/build landscape firm, surveyed its customers in 2006 about what they valued most from the company, cost and work quality weren't what they touted. Instead, they listed job site cleanliness highest on the priority list.

"That was eye opening for us," says Chris Clifton, president of the company, which does around \$7 million per year in revenue. "Cleanliness ranked as their No. 1 concern. So we took that information and started training our crews with a new emphasis on keeping the job site clean."

This focus on maintaining a tidy job site eventually led the company to develop a new initiative. In 2007, they implemented the White Glove Promise, a written promise stating that Southview Design landscape crews would respect each client's home by throwing away trash, picking up tools and sweeping walkways and sidewalks after each job. When the company starts working with a new client, on the first day at the site they hang a clear plastic bag on the front door with a copy of this promise enclosed. Attached to the promise card is an actual white glove, which drives home the point that the company intends to treat that client with care.

"Our crews pick up any trash they've

created and sweep the sites daily," explains Clifton. "And they stack any materials that they're leaving behind in a manner that's neat and tidy. We've even been known to sweep out clients' garages while we're at it – without being asked. Homeowners are always very pleasantly surprised to find out we took that extra effort."

Though many companies might do regular cleanup, by going above and beyond and making it a written promise, Southview Design is setting itself apart from the competition, while keeping clients happy. "Making that promise shows we're really committed to a clean job site and that we know it's an important part of what we do," Clifton says.

Since implementing the program, the company has reaped some benefits of its own, including an improvement in performance. "We've found that a less cluttered job site is also a more productive job site," Clifton says. "And we also lose fewer tools. So there's no doubt the time invested into keeping the job site clean pays for itself through both increased productivity and better control of tools and materials."

There's no question it's also had a beneficial impact on the company's revenue, Clifton adds. "This extra ef-



fort has not only gotten a positive response from our clients, but from their neighbors, too," he explains, "and that's gotten us leads."

Clients who appreciate the White Glove Promise the most tend to be pet owners, whose dogs would otherwise be tracking dirt and materials inside. But every homeowner is happy to see a tidy yard, especially in the midst of a major project. Clifton says the White Glove Promise has given the company a new perspective: "We're a business that deals with dirt," he says, "but that doesn't mean it has to be dirty." **L**

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



Chris Clifton

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The Paralysis of Analysis

A primary objective of a chief executive is to ensure everyone in the organization has clearly defined goals that are simple and measurable. Goals must be both quantifiable and timeable. Too often, field and office staff meander through their daily routines without an end-game strategy. This can be disastrous financially as shown by the following scenario.

THE SCENARIO. Recently, an irrigation service contractor complained to me that her monthly revenue from her four full-time service technicians seemed low. Her company worked year-round. The most they had ever billed in one month was \$44,000 (including parts). Maximum annual sales were about \$450,000. She told me her hourly rate was \$65 per man-hour, and technicians would normally make a minimum of four service calls per day. She added billing \$700 to \$800 per day was not uncommon. I knew immediately something was seriously out of balance.

In this company, the average technician is paid \$19 per hour for a 40-hour week year-round. Total payroll hours per year, minus some holiday and vacation time, were roughly 2,000 man-hours. Adding a 10 percent risk factor, a 30-percent labor burden, general and administrative overhead at \$14 per man-hour, a van at \$8 per hour and a desired 20 percent net profit margin, this technician has to bill just less than \$500 (\$492) per day. Repair parts would be billed in addition to this amount. The portal-to-portal rate calculates to \$61.46 per man-hour

(\$492 divided by 8 man-hours). For easy math, let's round up the hourly rate to \$65 and the daily billable amount to \$500.

ANALYSIS. This contractor's hourly rate is fine (if it is presented to the customer properly). Technicians should bill \$11,000 per month (22 days at \$500 per day) for labor, plus roughly \$150 per day (retail) for parts or approximately \$3,300 per month. Total monthly revenue per technician should be a little more than \$14,000. This equates

monitor her daily revenue generated from each technician because she is under-billing between \$100 to \$200 per day per technician. It is quite possible technicians are doing side-jobs on her time.

CONCLUSION. Pushed by the pressures of running a business in today's economy, too many contractors can get wrapped up in minutia. They monitor the wrong things and/or suffer from paralysis of analysis. Worse yet, they monitor nothing at all. To

“Too many contractors get wrapped up in minutia. They monitor the wrong things ... worse yet, they monitor nothing at all. **Keep things simple**, measurable and timeable.”

to \$168,000 per year. Four full-time technicians should bill about \$672,000 per year. Somehow, this contractor is missing an extra \$200,000-plus in annual billings. That's a lot of money.

RECOMMENDATIONS. First, I'd recommend this contractor keep the \$65 per man-hour rate. However, she should charge a minimum trip charge of \$65, which will cover up to the first 30 minutes on site. Time past the first 30 minutes should be billed in 15-minute increments (or part thereof) at \$16.25. This methodology should generate a minimum of eight billable hours per day or \$520 (\$65 times 8 hours).

Second, this contractor should

save yourself stress and time, keep things simple, measurable and timable.

Setting daily goals for everyone in your organization is critical if you are going to keep your organization focused. However, remember you must be focused on the *right* things. Doing so can make your life much simpler and your bottom line much healthier. Both are critical in these perilous economic times. **L**

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USE READER SERVICE #46

Twenty Grand and Growing

Contractor hesitantly adds aeration ... and business booms.

Bill Greenwood had no interest in providing aeration services, but now it's the most profitable part of his two-man lawn care company.

Greenwood, president of Greenworks, Carmel, Ind., says his customers had been asking for aeration for years and he simply referred them to other companies who offered it.

After much indecision, he added aeration services three years ago. "As soon as I offered it, I was bombarded," he says. "I had no idea it would be so profitable to the business."

In the first year, Greenwood saw \$20,000 in aeration sales at his business, which includes mowing, fertilization and organic lawn care programs. And it has been growing ever since.

This growth has been a challenge, but a good one, according to Greenwood. "It takes a lot more hours because there are just two of us, but we manage it," he says. "If it continues to grow like this, I will have to add a person dedicated to doing aeration, but so far I've been able to handle it myself."


He purchased a piece of fertilizer equipment from LT Rich and became aware of their aerator, specifically the Z Plugger. The zero-turn and ride-on features of the machine have taken all the back-breaking labor out of the equation. "I feared the amount of work I would have when I offered aeration, but I've been able to handle it because of this machine," he says.

And since Greenwood already had a



A ride-on aerator can help boost bottom lines without breaking backs.

solid customer base and didn't see the need to advertise the service heavily, his start-up costs were minimal – just the new equipment. "It paid for itself in one season," he says.

For other contractors who are also hesitant but thinking of making the leap into this service, Greenwood offers a suggestion: "Look for a zero-turn, ride-on machine. That is the only way to go if you plan to do lots of aerations." 

The author is a Valley View, Ohio-based freelancer.

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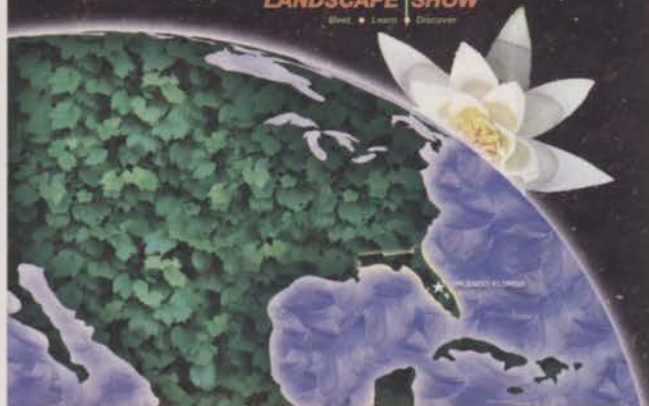
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USE READER SERVICE #66

Aerator tines punch decent holes, so check for shallow wires, cables and sensors before losing cash and credibility on clients' properties.

One Amazing Add-on

For a full-service Massachusetts landscaper, aeration is an easy sell for extra revenue. BY ANGELA DYER


Jim Kelley added aeration services to his full-service landscape company 25 years ago. At that time, it was added because of contractual requirements with his many public contracts, but now he says it's a good way to bring in extra revenue in this tough 2009 season.

"In a down economy you have to look to expand services into your own customer base and this is a good way to bring in some extra revenue," says Kelley, president, Cambridge Landscape Co., Cambridge, Mass. "The only cost is the actual purchase of the machine."

Lawn care operators could see real growth and profitability if they push aeration as an add-on to routine lawn care programs, Kelley says. For his 95-employee company, aeration is part of the general growth of the company because it is included with the maintenance program and is not a separate division.

Since the company's accounts are already pre-measured for turf, they base aeration prices on existing production rates.

Another bonus of adding aeration to a menu of services is that it is an easy sell to the customers. The benefits are

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numerous, including improved air exchange and soil water uptake. Aeration can also reduce water runoff and provide stronger turfgrass roots. "It's a no-brainer – it improves turf density and vigor," Kelley says.

Kelley aerates in spring and fall on

the large amount of athletic turf fields he cares for, since the company does 50 percent of their total work for a well-known university in Boston. The remainder of the business' work is split between residential, commercial and municipal properties. For residential

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properties, Cambridge Landscape typically aerates once per year.

Whether they are caring for a campus or a home, Cambridge Landscape uses four RYAN aerators – the LA 20 and LA 28 models. Kelley enjoys the amount of productivity these machines offer because he says they are fast and have a 2.5-inch coring depth. "We like these because the production rate is 28,000 feet per hour," Kelley says. "We've had these in excess of 10 years."

With this long life, typically only routine maintenance (like oil changes) is necessary. "The tines can wear out over time since you want to be aerating deep in the soil and that can require maintenance," Kelley says.

Overall Kelley is a satisfied customer, but he would like to see all manufacturers work to make aerator tines stronger and last longer.

And, Kelley reminds contractors there is no perfect tool for every job. He suggests contractors do their research and figure out their needs when buying equipment like aerators. "Figure out exactly what you need for the specific properties you are on and then find a machine that matches those needs," he says.

And once starting aeration on a customer's property, remember to ask the client about things like shallow cables in the ground to prevent unnecessary damage. "You have to mark irrigation heads and ask if they have shallow low-voltage wires, landscape lighting or even electronic dog sensors," Kelley advises. "This will ensure you don't put more cost into the job fixing stuff than you need to – not to mention potentially losing a client's trust." **L**

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

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USE READER SERVICE #54

Back to Basics

A lawn maintenance company looks for ways to add value, service for clients. BY ANGELA DYER

Daniel Dye is looking at the 2009 season as a time for his pest control and lawn maintenance company to overcome current economic challenges by providing great services and paying attention to the customer.

They are facing these tough times by "getting back to good old basics," says Dye, an associate certified entomologist and training coordinator for the Gainesville, Fla.-based business.

Providing lawn maintenance that can add value and service for existing customers is important to Florida Pest Control & Chemical Co. That is why Dye added aeration to the company's menu of services in 2003.



Adding value by removing plugs: Aeration lets Daniel Dye offer more to his customers.

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The 55-year-old company is primarily a pest control organization and provides advanced pest management training. However, they also offer a wide range of customer lawn, tree and shrubbery applications to take care of pest, disease and fertilizer needs.

According to the 500-employee company, "aeration is one of the best things you can do when it comes to lawn care and landscaping ... it's an essential step in lawn care maintenance."

Dye says aeration is a great add-on to any company because it basically sells itself. If you "show the customer the need, they usually buy the service," he explains.

For his customers, Dye prices aeration by the square footage of the turf. Then aeration is done when the turf is actively growing in spring and early summer.

For other contractors looking to

add this easy-selling service to their repertoires, Dye suggests doing a good amount of research and trying out several products before making a final purchase, if possible.

In his case, Dye did online research and looked at various university studies. "We tried several aerators and performed aerations on numerous lawns before making our final purchase decision," Dye says.


Once this initial research and testing process was complete, the company decided on the Turfco TurnAer 26 to fit its needs.

Dye's favorite feature and a big reason for the purchase was that the machine could turn much more easily than others he tried. Turfco offers several TurnAer machines direct to customers, and they range in cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000. Landscaping contractors typically look for a machine with a deep

coring ability, and these aerators offer a core depth of up to 2.75 inches.

If he could make any changes to aerators on the market, Dye says he would like to see them have more tines per square foot. And to keep aerators running smoothly and get the longest life out of the machines, he says normal routine maintenance is required.

To build a satisfied customer base when offering aeration, Dye says contractors should follow some simple start-up rules, which include paying attention to proper water requirements before and after service – and keeping an eye on sprinkler heads.

"Make sure the lawn is properly irrigated before performing aeration," he advises. "And flag sprinkler system heads, and run the irrigation system before and after aeration." 

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

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

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

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

1. Landscape Design

Landscape Installation

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

Landscape Maintenance

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

Pesticide Application

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

Other

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

3. What is the service mix %?

Mowing/Maint _____
 Design/Build _____
 Chemical Application _____

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

5. Is Chemical Application work

1. Outsourced
 2. Done by own employees

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

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

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

8. What year was your business founded?

9. What is your business mix? (%)

Residential _____ Commercial _____
 Other _____

10. Is this a Headquarters or Branch location?

1. Headquarters
 2. Branch
 3. Single Office

11. What best describes your title?

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

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

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

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

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

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

MOWING MAINTENANCE

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

PESTICIDES & CHEMICALS

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

CONSTRUCTION & INSTALLATION & DESIGN

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

IRRIGATION

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

HORTICULTURE

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

OTHER

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

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

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

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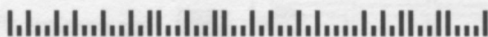
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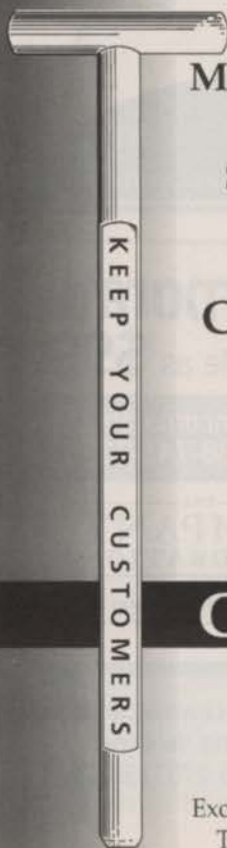
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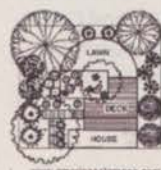
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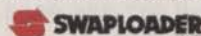
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Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda



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

I'm a sucker for old movies. Unless I'm tuned to ESPN or Discovery, I'm usually watching Turner Classic Movies. (Side Note No. 1: Ted Turner launched the channel because he wanted to be able to watch "Gone With the Wind" and "Casablanca" without a bunch of commercials. It's good to be the king.)

The other night, I was watching "A Guy Named Joe," a great old Spencer Tracy flick where he plays a dead pilot who comes back as a ghost to help trainee World War II pilots learn to fly. He takes an impossibly young Van Johnson under his wing and turns him into a stud pilot. Action, romance and hijinks ensue. (Side Note No.2: The movie was remade as "Always" in 1989. Sucked.)

As the movie progressed, I kept thinking how cool it would have been to fly a fighter plane back in the 1940s. I'm sitting on the couch on my 47-year-old butt thinking, "I coulda learned to fly and been like one of those guys." Sigh. Another regret heaped on the pile that seems to come with middle age and the realization that so much is now behind me.

It's strange how often thoughts of "woulda, coulda, shoulda" creep into your cranium more often as your waist widens and your hairline heads north faster than Santa Claus after a tough Christmas Eve.

As I mused that I coulda been a pilot, I thought about other missed opportunities. I wish I woulda scared up \$40,000 and bought my buddy's old farmhouse out in the country years ago. It sold for more than \$1 million when a developer put up a bunch of McMansions nearby.

I think sometimes I shoulda stayed in law school and become a successful attorney instead of pursuing a silly dream to write for a living. (Sidenote No. 3: That said, I probably would have put a bullet in my head by now if I'd had to practice legal scumbaggery for a living.)

Regrets, I've had a few. I think we all have. I called a few of you to uncover your woulda, coulda, shoulda moments.

✓ *I wish I had not accepted B and C performers because I could not find an A performer (or did not want to go through the pain of firing and re-training new people). I have accepted mediocrity and that has affected the quality of our work, my business and my life. We are a smaller company in 2009, but while we will do less business, with A players we will likely realize a similar profit and I have fewer headaches.* – Andy Blanchford, Blanchford Landscape Contractors

✓ *We should have put less emphasis on new construction (landscape installation) and more on maintenance. We have always been a full-service landscape management firm at heart but allowed ourselves to get caught up in commercial landscape installation as the economy was cranking, fully aware it would not last forever.* – Tom Fochtman, CoCal Landscape

✓ *Poor hiring decisions have set me back more than anything else.* – Tom Heaviland, Heaviland Enterprises

✓ *I regret not having set up policies, procedures and systems sooner. We have run by the seat of our pants since we started our business and just a few years ago we realized we needed to take a serious approach to this problem. We have had to un-teach the old*

stuff and re-teach these new systems we are implementing and it has been hard to break old habits. – Benton Foret, Chackbay Nursery & Landscaping, Foret Land and Tree

✓ *I would have developed a stronger marketing and branding program. We never experienced a lack of work and got lazy. We have recently completed a thorough marketing assessment and are instituting new methods to reach our "ideal" potential customers.* – Bob Wade, Wade Landscape

✓ *In the past we have made some of our hiring and promoting decisions based on future anticipated need, rather than actual present need. While this is a hard balance to strike, nowadays I see the importance of being conservative in such actions without selling short the future growth opportunities of the organization.* – Kurt Bland, Bland Landscaping Co.

✓ *The most important thing would have been to pay more attention to the future. The history of any successful long-term business is one of anticipation of the future. Every business should be thinking cutting edge and have a plan for survival if there are factors beyond one's control.* – Joe Ciaglone, industry nursery consultant

✓ *I wish I'd found a mentor earlier ... and saved more cash!* – Matt Noon, Noon Landscape

See, even the best of the best have regrets and their own woulda, coulda, shoulda moments. I'm curious to hear how you'd change the past if you could jump in the time machine and hit the reset button on life. In fact, let's talk about it. Log onto to lawnandlandscape.com's forum to share your ideas. I'll be waiting there for you. **L**

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