

MARCH 2009
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How Much

Do YOU

Make?



If you answered 'whatever's leftover after expenses,' turn to page 46 to determine how you can start paying yourself a fair wage.

Features

INTERVIEW

40 Nursing His Business Along

Jerry Faulring chucked a successful career in lawn care to start one of the most successful nurseries in the mid-Atlantic. Here's why and how.

BRIEFCASE

60 Pricing Up When Things are Down

In a turbulent economy where "spend" has become a nasty word, landscape contractors struggle to price services to keep clients and still run a profitable business. *Lawn & Landscape* talks to three professionals who share their unique strategies.

Small – less than \$500,000

62 Give & Take

Appealing to a limited client base will require pricing flexibility this year for Greenough Landscapes.

Medium – \$500,000 to \$4 million

66 A Question of Loyalty

Loyal customers are the backbone of Landscape Unlimited's business, but everyone is scrutinizing prices this year.



66 A QUESTION OF LOYALTY

46

COVER STORY



How Much Do You Make?

If you answered 'whatever's leftover after expenses,' turn to page 46 to determine how you can start paying yourself a fair wage.

Large – More than \$4 million

70 Income Over Increase

High profit margins reign over a high customer count at Kinnucan Co.

SUSTAINABILITY

90 IPM in Action

Sure, everyone encourages lawn care operators to use IPM, but how does it work? And does it really save time and money? One company shares its approach.

STRATEGIES

74 New Show, Old Tricks

New administration could cause floodtide of new and renewed pesticide regulations.

82 A Safe Investment

Are hazards lurking at your job sites? Effective safety inspections can save your company both money and lives.

What's Your Niche?

86 Center Stage

Landscape Design's new outdoor staging service appeals to homeowners in a pinch to sell.

INTELLIGENT IRRIGATION

94 Treading Water

Irrigation professionals in Georgia seek profit while battling drought, water restrictions and a faltering economy.

INSIGHT

18 **Recession Obsession?**

Hanging your head because of negative news? Take a look at the big picture. Things might not be as bad as they appear.



22 **A Case for Optimism**

The consumer confidence and sentiment surveys show plenty of doom and gloom, but this economist says the long-term outlook for consumer spending is – gasp – positive.

26 **Buying a Franchise in a Down Economy**

Despite the uncertainty on Wall Street, buying a franchise now can be a good move – if you follow a few rules.

MONEY

28 **Safe Bets**

Where is your cash? And how safe is it?

30 **Business for Sale?**

Sure, it may seem like no one's buying anything today, but now could be a good time to sell.

PERSPECTIVE

Live & Learn

34 **Nip/Tuck**

A tough economy teaches Blondie's Treehouse where to cut costs.

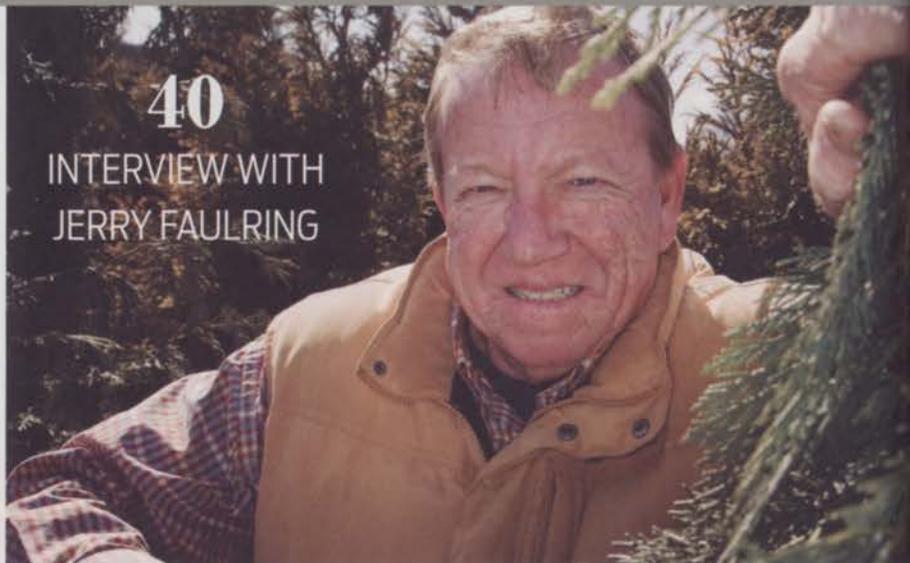
Finding Balance

36 **Secret Garden**

More than seven years after 9/11, landscape architect Amber Freda reflects on her time spent tidying a rooftop garden the week following the attacks.

40

INTERVIEW WITH JERRY FAULRING



TECHNOLOGY

104 **Start Your Bidding**

Landscaper launches an industry online auction site.

106 **Idle Chatter**

Improved idling, routing and maintenance can save more fuel than you think.

108 **From Push to Pull**

Tired of Yellow Pages ads? Try online search marketing where you pay only when a customer clicks on your link.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

110 **Sprayers**

122 **Chain saws**

Departments

8 On The Web

10 My Turf

12 Readers' Forum

14 Editor's Notebook

124 Classifieds

129 Ad Index

Columns

32 **Notes From the Grunderground**
MARTY GRUNDER

88 **Huston, We Have a Problem**
JIM HUSTON

100 **Water Wise**
BRIAN VINCHESI

130 **Devil's Advocate**
PAT JONES

108

FROM PUSH TO PULL



SERIALS

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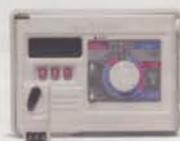
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Cindy Code
Director,
Interactive
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*Lawn &
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MARCH 2009

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USE READER SERVICE #13



NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Editor

Nickels & Dimes

How much money do you make?

It's not a question many are willing to answer out right. It's like asking someone how old they are or how much they weigh – most just don't risk it.

Unless it's public knowledge, people tend to feel they will be judged in some way if they reveal their salaries, and for many a good reason. If the amount is perceived as too much, coworkers and employees may resent the owner or demand wage increases, regardless of worth. If the amount is perceived as too little, owners risk embarrassing themselves in a society that often equates money with worth. There is also the fear of finding out that maybe, just maybe, an owner doesn't make near what he should after years of toiling away building a successful business.

It's one of those personal bits of information no one talks about, and some feel no one *should* talk about.

In fact, in *Lawn & Landscape's* nearly 30 years, we have addressed revenue and pay scales for employees across the board, and while our research has revealed an owner's average salary, we haven't outright asked people if they felt they were paid fairly and if they knew how their salary stacked up to others inside and outside the industry.

Until now.

We broke the rules and asked the question no one wanted to ask... or answer. And, surprisingly, we drew some tremendous response from the industry. After all, who wouldn't want to learn how to add an extra zero to their paycheck? (Check out the story starting on page 46.)

During our research, we learned that a great failing not only among landscape businesses but also among general small business is that many owners undervalue their own worth with low salaries, yet these same people feel they have a successful business.

Now, before you jump at this statement, let me justify a point here. Many owners prefer to reinvest in their businesses over taking higher salaries as a means to grow. Others think that during a recession, it's wise to earn less for the sake of keeping the business free of layoffs until a time when they can pay themselves back. There are many scenarios that do justify rises and falls in pay rates.

However, beyond the normal start of a business and during times like those described above when an owner makes sacrifices, there must be a point when you have to decide whether you are really in a viable business that delivers value to you customers, your staff and yourself or whether you've just bought yourself a job. Many people look at what they are paying themselves and see this as a good salary for the job. What they overlook as the business owner are the hours they put into that business.

After all, you personally need to earn an income that affords you the lifestyle you want for yourself. Isn't that why you started your own business in the first place? **L**

"A great failing among landscape businesses is that many owners undervalue their own worth with low salaries."

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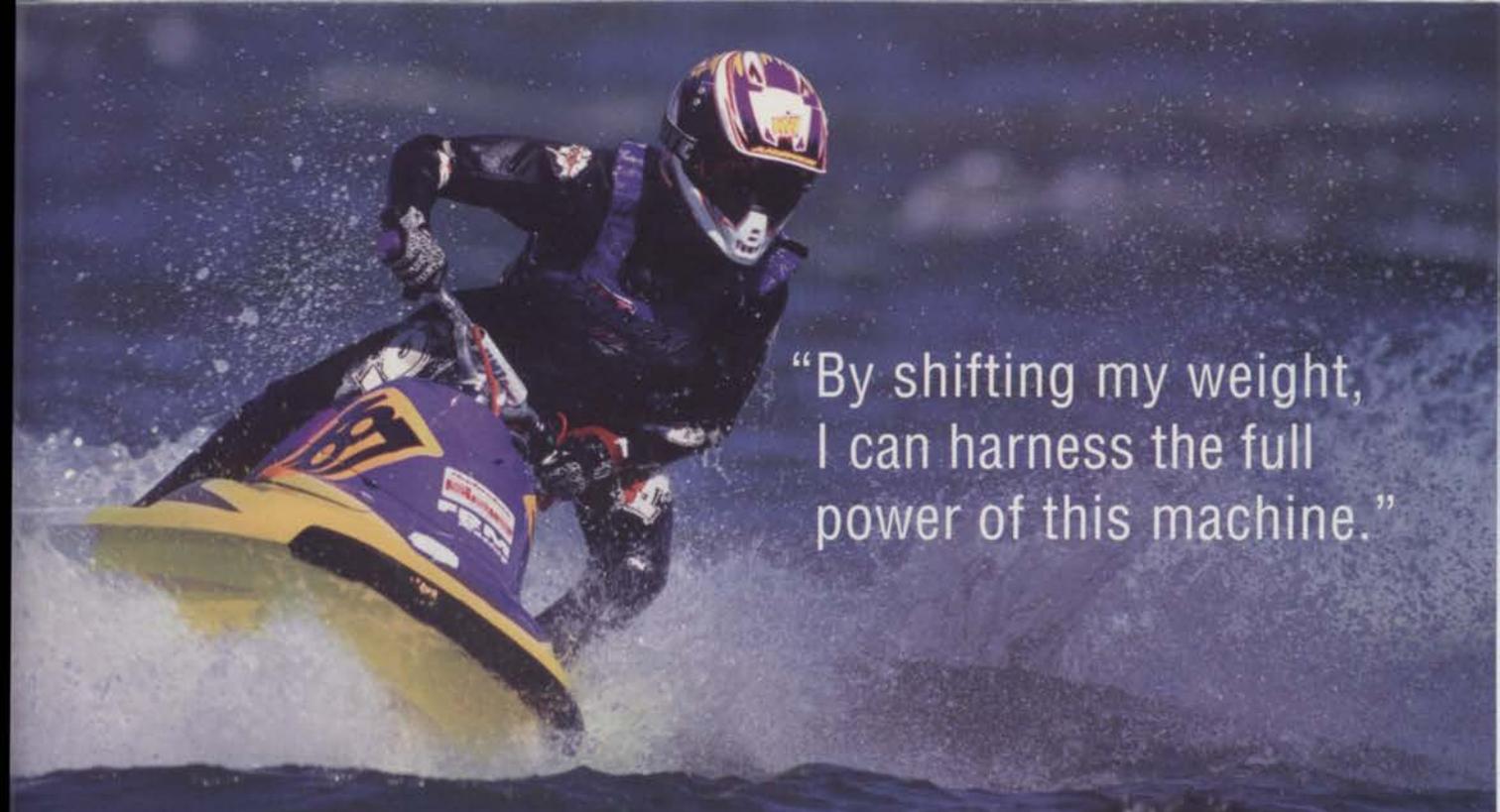
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USE READER SERVICE #14

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UP WHEN THINGS ARE DOWN

I was reading Marty Grunder's Sales & Marketing column "Five Ways to Get Up in a Down Economy" in January *Lawn & Landscape*, and I totally agree with you. It was refreshing to hear about ways to stay upbeat and improve business in a down economy, although the concepts are not new. I am trying to introduce the benefits of compost to people and find it quite challenging. Keep the upbeat articles coming.

Bill Dufault
Heiress Compost, Michigan

TOAST TO TEXAS

Just enjoyed your special report "Fast 5" in the December 2008 issue of *Lawn & Landscape*, especially the part about my home state of Texas. You're right on target that the contractors here aren't hurting nearly as badly as those in California, Arizona and the Great Lakes. Favorable business conditions like low taxation and readily-available labor will keep companies relocating to Texas for a long time to come.

Jeff Carowitz
Strategic Force Marketing, Huston, Texas

THANK YOU

I was thinking about the past year and thought about you and the staff at *Lawn & Landscape*. Thanks for all you do to help our industry.

Dale Micetic
President, ISS Grounds Control, Phoenix, Ariz.

PROBLEMS WITH PRICING

We all want more money for the work we do. Comparing our overhead to other industries that charge a lot more with a lot less overhead, we should be getting a lot more for what we do. Problem is, we've got to keep our prices down as cheap as possible in order to be a viable industry.

Chuck Twist
L&L Message Board

The other problem is anyone with a truck and a lawn mower thinks they can cut lawns for \$35.

Craig Rolfe
L&L Message Board

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information on pricing, read this month's Briefcase series starting on page 60.

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USE READER SERVICE #15





A PRICE TO PAY



An impromptu roundtable on the first night of the Agrium Advanced Technologies Green Industry Grad School Dec. 8-10, 2008 prompted some interesting discussion about the price of fertilizer and how lawn care operators are coping.

The majority of lawn care operators present said their fertilizer prices increased between 60 and 90 percent from 2007 to 2008, and when looking at the cost increases on the raw materials in fertilizer, one can see why prices were so steep. In just one year, urea costs more than doubled, phosphorus and potassium costs more than tripled, and the price of sulfur went up 600 percent, Agrium reports.

While prices have stabilized considerably for many (Sean Kaiser, head of the fertilizer division at New Milford, Conn.-based YardApes reports prices increased 33 percent since last May and only 1 percent since last October, showing a leveling off of increases for the company), some expect them to increase again once fuel prices move up again this summer.

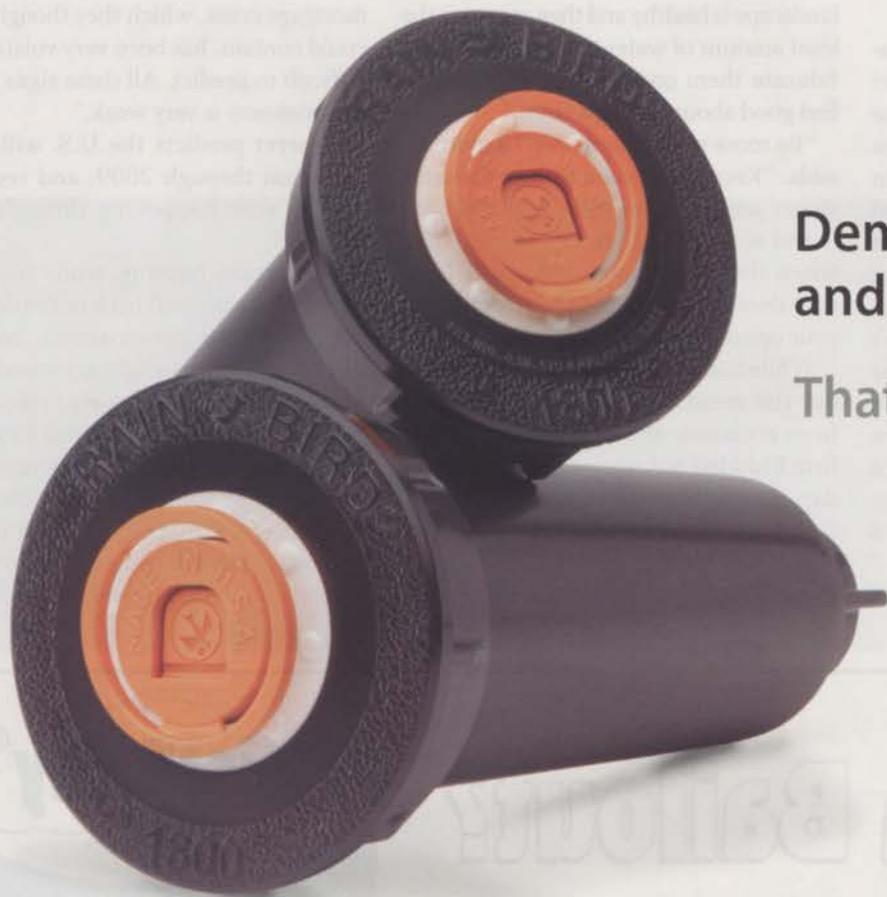
Where this really affects LCOs is in their pricing. Event attendees were only able to raise prices a small amount – not nearly enough to counter rising fertilizer prices. Both Naperville, Ill.-based Spring-Green and Norcross, Ga.-based Arbor-Nomics raised rates 5 percent, while Nature's Select of Winston Salem, N.C. increased prices 1 to 2 percent.

For more information from the event, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com. – Nicole Wisniewski 



Clockwise from top left: Spring-Green's Harold Enger and Yard Apes' Shayne Newman; industry consultant Marty Grunder educates attendees on how to outservice, outsell and outdo the competition; Arbor-Nomics' Dick Bare with Enger conversing during a session; Bill Hildebolt and Gene Queen with Nature's Select Premium Turf Service preparing for a discussion; Queen with Michael Ferro from Tomlinson Bomberger Lawn Care and Landscaping; Jeff Korhan updates attendees on emerging trends in Internet marketing and the green movement.

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USE READER SERVICE #16



Turf Wars

"Turf is useless."

That is what government regulators are saying about that lush jade carpet families like to play and relax on when the weather warms... the same one that keeps landscape and lawn care professionals in business, according to Erica Santella and Barry Troutman – two Florida-based turf specialists from lawn care giants TruGreen ChemLawn and ValleyCrest Cos. "Activists say, 'If you can't eat it, don't grow it,' but they completely ignore the benefits of turf," Santella continues. Both industry veterans spoke on growing lawn care businesses in the face of government regulations during Bayer's Healthy Lawns, Healthy Business Summit on Dec. 4, 2008 in Orlando.

How can contractors counteract these

negative opinions? "Educate your clients," Santella says. "They should feel comfortable calling and asking you questions about their lawns and irrigation needs, so they feel confident knowing their landscape is healthy and they are using the least amount of water to keep it thriving. Educate them on turf's benefits so they feel good about having a lawn."

"Be more politically active," Troutman adds. "Know who your county commissioner and city and state legislators are – and make sure they know you. Then when they have questions about lawn care they will be more apt to ask you for your opinion."

While Santella and Troutman rounded out the event, Orlando's Stan Geberer from economic and financial consulting firm Fishkind & Associates kicked off the day, sharing recession update.

Geberer started by laying out the statistics. "In December 2007, we started losing 100,000 jobs a month. The fall off

in business confidence and consumer confidence is down to a 40-year low. Spending at the consumer level is bad – retail sales are not well at a 3 percent decline month to month. The subprime mortgage crisis, which they thought they could contain, has been very volatile and difficult to predict. All these signs tell us our economy is very weak."

Geberer predicts the U.S. will be in recession through 2009, and recovery will be slow happening through 2010 and 2011.

Concerning housing, while there has been a dramatic pull back in the demand for residential construction, housing markets are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel as they bear off some inventory... "of course, we had to see a pull back of 70 percent in residential construction to get there, but it's something." Geberer says, predicting a 2010/2011 housing market recovery. "There are lots of houses on the market but nobody's home," he says. "But

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USE READER SERVICE #63

as home prices continue to decline, people will be able to buy homes again, and that pent up demand will unfold."

For a look at pesticide regulations amid the new administration, turn to page 74, and for a landscape industry recession check, turn to page 18. — Nicole Wisniewski



Clockwise from left: Economist Stan Geberer gives audience members an overall U.S. recession update, as well as news from specific areas of Florida; Robert Palmer, owner of Weed Pro, spoke on a panel titled "Managing and Growing Your Business in a Tough Economy" during the Doylestown, Pa. summit in August 2008; Erica Santella and Barry Troutman round out the Orlando summit with a look at pesticide and fertilizer regulations.

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USE READER SERVICE #65



Recession Obsession?

Hanging your head because of negative news? Take a look at the big picture. Things might not be as bad as they appear.

BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

The *Economist* has something they call an R-word index, which counts the stories that use the word "recession" in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The index reached a seven-year high in January 2008. On average, each newspaper published 7.1 stories per day containing the feared term.

While they don't have statistics that show today's high, as one can imagine with the barrage of negative headlines lately, the number has soared.

Employment experts say small businesses stand to lose as many as 2 million jobs through the end of the year, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. The National Federation of Independent Business reports small business confidence dropped to the second lowest level in its 35-year history in January. The recession began in December 2007, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research, which means it's already the third-longest downturn since 1945, and come May, it could become the longest in postwar history.

And the negative news continues.

"Yes, the short-term outlook is dismal and will remain that way for months," maintains Economist John Cassidy in February's *Portfolio*. "On top of a slumping housing market and credit crunch, we have soaring unemployment, an unprecedented fall in consumer confidence, daily corporate retrenchments and a dramatic slowdown in the world economy, which is affecting even India and China. Where's the good news?"

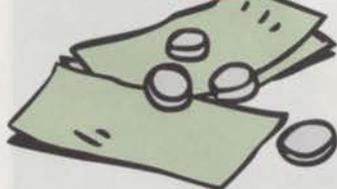
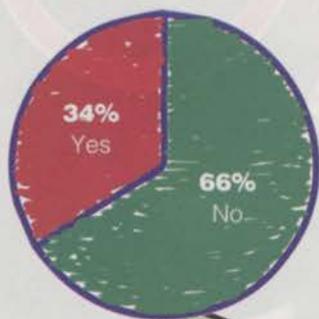
So *Lawn & Landscape* set out to find some good news. We conducted a survey in February to get a pulse on how the landscape industry is coping with the recession. And the results, surprisingly, are not that bad.

While 87 percent of contractors agree the economy is in a recession and one-third say this is the worst economic climate they've experienced in their company history, more than half (52 percent) are optimistic about business this year. The average landscape contractor expects a 3 percent increase in sales.

Though sales are starting off slow, customers are optimistic – just taking more time to make decisions, according to 41 percent of respondents. And 66 percent of contractors have not had challenges

A Look at Lending

Since October 2008, have you had challenges obtaining business loans?



obtaining business loans.

Though Cassidy doesn't call himself a "heady optimist," he thinks "there is a danger of repeating the mistake that many of us made during the boom: extrapolating current trends to make decisions about the future, failing to take into account how rapidly economic circumstances can change. There's a risk that we may again overshoot the mark: As the economy goes down, we could be overemphasizing the negative just as we exaggerated the positive on the way up."

Let's take a look at the trends and review some advice from industry experts and contractors on kicking off spring 2009 in the right frame of mind.

OPTIMISM OVER PESSIMISM. Some general small business surveys concur with *Lawn & Landscape's* latest research. In December 2008, SurePayroll found 40 percent of small business owners had not seen their business negatively impacted by the down economy.

"Main street is doing better than people think," notes Michael Alter, president of SurePayroll. "While it's true that many small businesses are struggling, there is still a healthy contingent of small business owners who are holding their own in this difficult economy, and many who are managing to grow their businesses even in these tough times."

This study also found that small business hiring is up 3.3 percent year-to-date. "You're not seeing the large scale layoffs that you see in larger companies," Alter says.

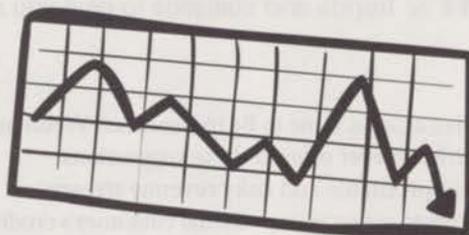
"Small businesses tend to run lean and mean relative to their large company counterparts.

There isn't usually much fat to cut, and new hires are added only when business levels justify the expense."

With no bailout options for small businesses, many business owners are cutting costs to keep from running in the red. More than half of SurePayroll survey respondents indicated they will be cutting back expenses in 2009 with sales and marketing and human resources being mentioned as top areas for cuts. *Lawn & Landscape* data clashes with this a bit in that the average landscape contractor plans to actually increase marketing 2.2 percent this year to help boost business. This is wise, industry experts say. One of the greatest mistakes owners make during a recession is reduce or completely eliminate their marketing efforts, especially as the competition gets more fierce, says Miamisburg, Ohio-based industry consultant Marty Grunder.

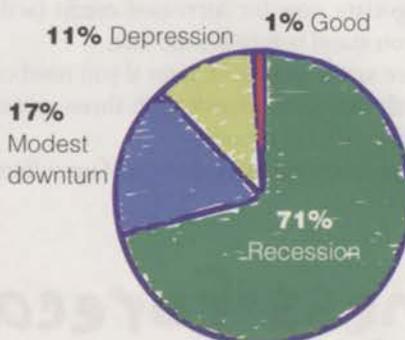
The same is true of the need for professional development and training, echoes Keith Rosen, executive sales coach for Profit Builders. "When times are tougher, you need to build a competitive edge, and you're not going to do it simply by doing more of what you did yesterday," he says. "You can't incentivize yourself out of a recession."

What contractors should do is cut costs cleverly, according to Stephen Hillenmeyer, owner and president of Lexington, Ky.-based Stephen Hillenmeyer Landscape Services. During JP

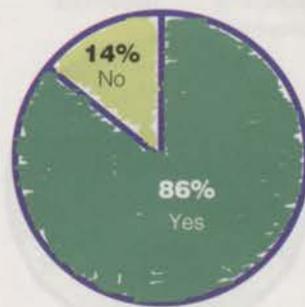


Economic Outlook

What phrase best describes the state of the U.S. economy today?



Is your local economy in a recession?



Compared the past to the present – how would you rate the current economic climate?





Horizon's "It's a Great Time to Be in Business" Webinar on Dec. 18, 2008, Hillenmeyer offered these suggestions:

- ✓ Prune unprofitable and risky revenue streams.
- ✓ Take time to assess your potential customer's credit worthiness before assuming the risk of large orders.
- ✓ Analyze your break even point and plan to drive it down.
- ✓ Reduce fixed costs and increase outsourcing.
- ✓ Make cuts consistent with a recession-proof business plan – not blindly and across the board.
- ✓ Increase workforce efficiency with individual monthly meetings to review progress on key performance indicators.
- ✓ Make contingency plans and set triggers for successive cost reduction initiatives in case the need arises.
- ✓ Don't bank on your bank to lend you more money when you need it. Negotiate now for increased credit facilities and find out where you stand before it's too late.
- ✓ Sell non-core assets sooner vs. later if you need cash.
- ✓ Monitor cash flow like a hawk with three-month rolling projections of daily cash balances.
- ✓ Work your working capital harder – beef up collections and

consider prompt payment discounts.

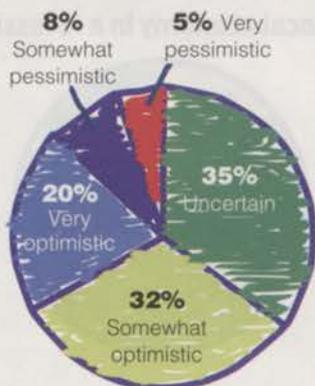
Concerning service pricing in a down economy, contractors should understand how much time is involved in a particular job, and price it realistically instead of eating the losses merely for the sake of securing the job. This includes passing on additional costs, such as high fuel prices, to customers as necessary, advises Andy Birol, owner of Birol Growth Consulting in Solon, Ohio, adding "The lowest price is not always the best price."

Many contractors are following this advice. Though 56 percent of *Lawn & Landscape* survey respondents are holding prices steady this year, 37 percent did raise prices with few customer complaints. The average price increase was 3 percent.

And don't be discouraged by the current fear-based economic climate, experts say. Rather, focus on your goals and work a little harder. Once the economy bounces back, there will be a pent-up demand for those businesses that were able to weather the storm, Grunder says. "I see the economic adversity right now as an opportunity to perhaps learn a new way to run our businesses," he explains. "Maybe it's the way we should have been running our businesses in the first place." **L**

Business Forecast

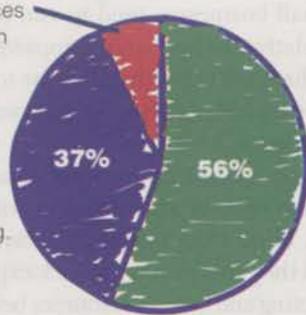
How optimistic are you about business in 2009?



How are you dealing with service prices this year?

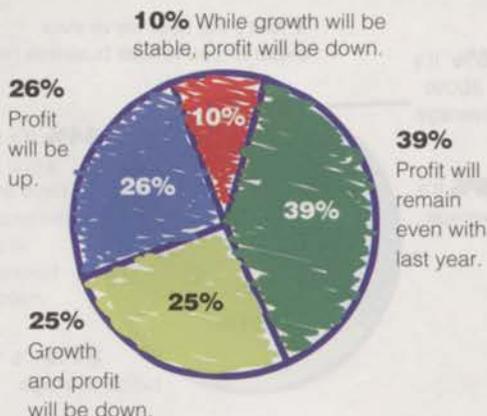
7% We are decreasing prices in order to retain customers.

37% We are raising prices as necessary. Few customers are complaining.



56% We are holding prices steady in order to retain customers.

How do your profit expectations look this year?

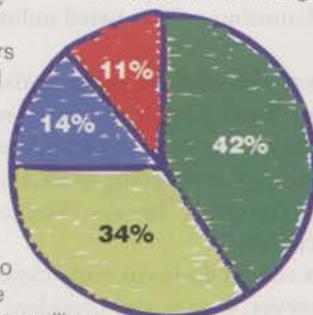


As you sell work this year, how are customers responding?

11% Sales are already up for 2009 – customers are not as affected by the recession as we thought they would be.

14% Sales are on par with last year – customers are not affected by economic concerns.

34% Sales are looking like they are going to be down – more customers are cancelling or scaling back services.



41% Sales are starting off slow. Customers are taking more time to make decisions, but they are optimistic.

OPTIMISM

A CASE FOR



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A CASE FOR OPTIMISM

The consumer confidence and sentiment surveys show plenty of doom and gloom, but this economist says the long-term outlook for consumer spending is – gasp – positive. BY CHARLES HALL

The big question that I have been asked over the last couple of months is: “Will 2009 bring a U.S. economic recovery?” My answer: Yes, assuming no more unpleasant surprises are lurking. Most economists (including myself) think the recovery will start in the second half of the year. The first half, though, will be tough, with the economy contracting 4 percent in the first quarter, following a 5 percent decline in the last quarter of 2008. Assuming recovery is in store for late-2009, it still means that most folks are heading into a spring loaded with uncertainty.

Consumer incomes and spending are both down, and it seems logical that the former would lead to the latter. But it's not that simple. The drop in consumer spending has been disproportionate to the drop in disposable income. Keep in mind when people lose jobs, their spending typically falls by a smaller percentage than their income drops. They use savings or credit to smooth their earnings. From this fact, you might expect the change in spending would be smaller than the change in disposable income. But recent data clearly shows this is not the case, but is exactly opposite. So what's going on?

The reason is the recent decline in spending is due to non-income factors, which I think are primarily weak consumer attitudes and expectations. The consumer confidence and sentiment surveys show plenty of doom and gloom caused by the fundamentals of rising unemployment, fear among people with jobs who think they may lose them, and the financial crisis headlines in the mainstream media.

But in spite of this the long-term outlook for consumer spending is... positive. This may seem surprising, but follow my logic. People are currently spending less than normal, certainly less than justified according to their actual incomes. Even if unemployment goes to 9 percent, we'll still have 91 percent of the workforce earning a wage. The monies not being spent now will eventually burn a hole in



DR. CHARLES HALL

is the current holder of the Ellison Chair in international floriculture at Texas A&M University. He specializes in economic factors affecting the green industry today and the financial and marketing strategies firms should employ to ensure survival and profitability. Dr. Hall will be sharing his economic updates with *Lawn & Landscape* quarterly. For more of his insights, visit his blog "Making Cents of Green Industry Economics" at ellisonchair.blogspot.com.

people's pockets (if historical behavior holds true) and your job is to make sure that landscaping stays on their radar by appealing to their wallets.

A landscape is a good investment, yielding a greater than \$1 return in home value for every \$1 invested. And landscaping represents an excellent way to combat falling home prices. In fact, landscapes are one of the only home improvements that increase in value (and size) over time. Other renovations (e.g. bathroom, kitchen) typically yield less of a return than the amount invested.

Homeowners have several motivations for improving the landscape around their home. For the resident of a newly constructed home, the exterior landscape may serve as a "frame" to the home, enhancing its aesthetics. For the resident desiring to sell a home, landscaping could enhance market value.

In a cost vs. value report from *Remodeling Online*, realtors have data showing the value of a home is enhanced with the renovation of a kitchen, bath or bedroom, or with the addition of a deck or patio. The same can be said of landscaping, but little research has been published documenting these effects.

So, several colleagues and I conducted research investigating the effect of three landscape design components on the perceived value of a home. The objective was to provide a consumer's perspective on the value of "good" landscape components and determine which ones matter most. Landscape firms can use this information to market their services to prospective clients, while realtors and homeowners can use it to assess home value.

In general, results of this study indicate a "good" landscape adds anywhere from 6 to 11 percent to the base value of the home, depending on its region. The landscape attributes that contributed most to the increase in perceived home value were, in order: design sophistication, plant size and plant material type. The minimalist landscapes, with small plant size and little sophistication, detracted from the perceived value of the home.

The landscape company owner now has concrete data to show a good landscape adds to the value of a home, and is

a home improvement that will increase perceived home value and, unlike most home improvements, appreciate over time. Use this information to close the deal on potential customers.

Lastly, let me offer this bit of encouragement. The current economic downturn, though severe, is a normal part of busi-

ness cycles. We have had 11 recessions since 1948. On average, that equates to one every six years. This is not the first downturn we have experienced, nor will it be the last. So take heart, tighten your belts, and put your best differentiation foot forward to position yourself for the remainder of this downturn. **L**

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July 2001, Larchmont, New York

July 2001, Larchmont, New York
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BUYING A FRANCHISE IN A DOWN ECONOMY

Despite the uncertainty on Wall Street, buying a franchise now can be a good move – if you follow a few rules. BY TERRIE HALL



With inflation rising and consumer spending continuing to drop, can it really be a good time to buy a franchise?

“Yes,” says Lori Kiser-Block, president of FranChoice, a network of consultants that help people find a franchise match (www.franchoice.com). “While the headlines concentrate on what isn’t working in our economy, there are still plenty of businesses that are thriving. If you know what to look for in a franchise business, you can actually take advantage of some aspects of the current economic environment to lower your start-up costs.

“For example,” Kiser-Block continues, “current low interest rates can mean borrowing money for your purchase will cost

you less. A higher unemployment rate means you will have more good employees to choose from to help you run your business. You may also find that you can now buy or rent business property at a better price than you could have in the past.”

Service businesses, in particular, tend to be more recession-resistant, as they provide something people either can’t or don’t want to do for themselves.

Kiser-Block offers these suggestions for buying a franchise in a shaky economy:

- Look for businesses with low start-up costs to boost your profitability chances.
- Don’t discount service businesses. They tend to be more recession-resistant as they provide something people either

can’t or don’t want to do for themselves. They are also among the best values among franchises because of their low entry cost, high demand and good margins.

· Look for a franchisor that has a strong management team with experience and strategic vision in their specific industry.

· Search for an established franchise with a number of happy franchisees, and talk to them about the business and how they are doing in this economy. This may also lower the risk of your investment.

· Financing a new business can be more difficult during a recession. Use a business funding specialist (Guidant and FranFund are two examples) to help you find the best method of borrowing money. **L**

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USE READER SERVICE #22

FRANCHISE SPECS

In January, *Entrepreneur* released its Franchise 500 list, and there are many landscape-related franchises that made the cut, as well as a few others that were listed in the magazine's detailed charts. Here's a look at the franchise, its ranking and some specifics to get you started on your research.

FRANCHISE	RANK	DESCRIPTION	STARTUP COSTS/ FRANCHISE FEE	ROYALTY	FINANCING OFFERED	CONTACT
Border Magic	N/R	concrete landscape edging, etc	\$64.3K-\$105.4K/\$25	\$250-\$400/mo	Yes	217-892-2954; www.bordermagic.com
Christmas Décor	286	holiday & event decorating services	\$18.7K-\$60.4K/\$10K-\$29K	5%	Yes	866-321-4077; www.christmasdecor.net
Lawn Doctor	131	lawn, tree & shrub care; pest control	\$107.6K-\$110.7K/\$25K	10%	Yes	866-592-6362; www.lawndoctorfranchise.com
NaturalLawn of America	N/R	organic-based lawn care	\$107.8K-\$144.9K/\$29.5K	7-9%	Yes	800-989-5444; www.nl-amer.com
Nite Time Décor	N/R	landscape & architectural lighting	\$30.6K-\$58.3K/\$5.5K	\$2K/yr	No	866-321-4077; www.nitetimedecor.com
Scotts Lawn Service	320	lawn, tree & shrub care, pest control	\$81.4K-\$279K/to\$100K	6-10%	Yes	800-264-8973; www.scottslawnservice.com
Spring-Green Lawn Care	N/R	lawn & tree care	\$87.7K-\$98.8K/\$30-\$40K	8-10%	Yes	800-777-8608; www.springgreenfranchise.com
U.S. Lawns	265	landscape maintenance services	\$48.5K-\$85K/\$29K	3-4%	Yes	800-875-2967; www.uslawns.com
Weed Man	390	lawn care	\$65.9K-\$82.9K/\$20K-\$33.8K	6%	Yes	888-321-9333; www.weedmanusa.com

* Source: *Entrepreneur*; N/R = not ranked; K=thousand(s)

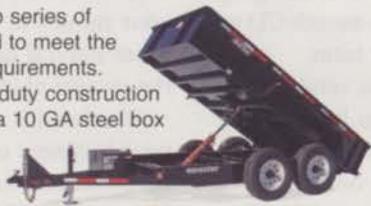
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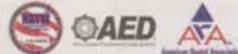


The Specialty Transport series of trailers offers great flexibility with I-beam construction and 82" between fenders with the deck made from 2" nominal bolted oak.

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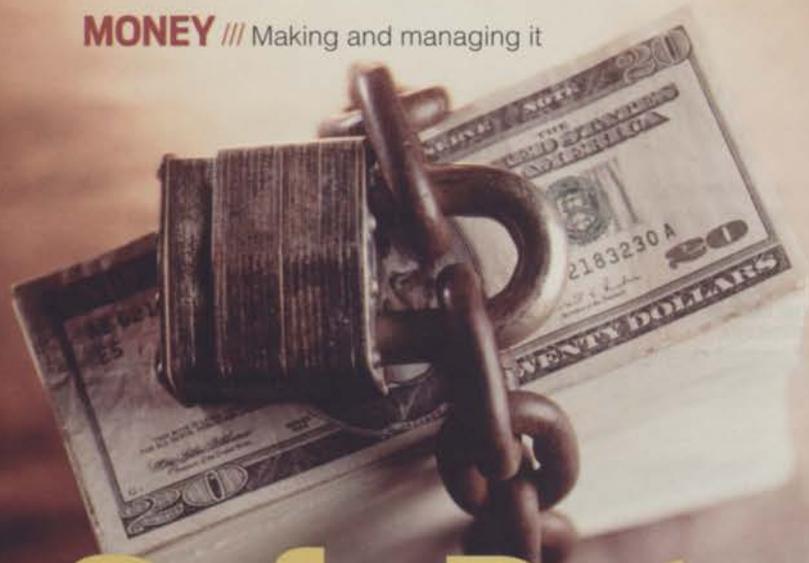
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USE READER SERVICE #24



Safe Bets

Where is your cash? And how safe is it?

In our current financial crisis, it's only natural to worry about the safety of our assets, and every business owner with an investment portfolio has some portion of it invested in cash or cash equivalents. While cash may be king in these troubled times, keeping your cash invested wisely is an essential part of protecting your financial future.

Interest rates are at an all-time low. The current returns on Treasury bills and notes seem almost nonexistent. Even money market accounts and funds are paying an average of less than 1.5 percent, as of press time. This is why you need to take a careful look at alternatives for stashing your cash.

LOOK FIRST TO YOUR BANK. From the standpoint of pure safety, FDIC insurance makes bank accounts one of your best bets. Maximum coverage of \$250,000 per account owner means a married couple can protect as much as \$1 million at one bank simply by setting up several accounts with different ownership categories. (After Dec. 31, 2009, the FDIC maximum coverage will revert to \$100,000, but combinations of joint and single ownership will still allow for several times the maximum coverage at each bank.

Keep in mind FDIC insurance covers not only conventional checking and

savings accounts, but also certificates of deposit (CDs) and money market accounts.

Checking accounts should serve a clearly defined and limited purpose. Smart money managers keep a minimum amount of money in checking accounts that pay little or no interest. Everything else belongs in accounts that will bring in the highest possible interest while still enjoying the protection of FDIC insurance.

CERTIFICATES OF DEPOSIT. Bank CDs are a good choice for longer term investments in this economy. Interest rates are all over the board these days, depending on how much the bank needs the money. Check your local banks first, but don't hesitate to look nationally. For a current check on average rates, log on to Bankrate.com. As of press time, average CD rates are ranging from 2.74 percent for a six-month CD to 3.27 percent for a five-year term.

In general, online banks tend to pay relatively higher rates than local banks, though there are always exceptions. Among the better known online banks are ING Direct (ingdirect.com, 888-464-0727) and Dollar Savings Direct (dollarsavingsdirect.com, 866-395-8693). There are many other FDIC-insured online banks. In general, the longer the term of your CD, the higher the interest rate.

In order to avoid a penalty should you need to cash in a CD before the maturity date, consider using the laddering technique. For example, by dividing your kitty into four or five CDs with maturities ranging from six months to three years, you'll never be far from penalty-free cash.

BUYING CDs THROUGH YOUR BROKER. If you have a brokerage account, you may purchase CDs through your broker on the open market. Most will have a number of CDs from a variety of banks with varying maturity dates and interest rates. If you decide to choose the convenience of allowing your broker to shop around for your CDs, keep in mind they will be registered in your broker's name as custodian, just as your stock purchases are.

MONEY MARKET MUTUAL FUNDS. Another alternative for a portion of your cash reserves is a money market mutual fund, which is available through any broker or mutual fund company such as Vanguard, Fidelity, etc. Money market funds offer slightly lower returns than the choices above, but they have a higher degree of liquidity allowing immediate access to your money should the need arise.

Money market funds come in a variety of flavors. Investors in high income brackets may opt for tax-free funds, while others may choose one of the ultra short-term bond funds. In the current situation, stick with money funds from large, financially strong companies.

In times like these, it's only natural to consider storing cash in a safety deposit box, or worse, stuffed under your mattress. Bad ideas. The contents of safety deposit boxes aren't covered by FDIC insurance, and either choice would leave your money at risk from fire, flood or other natural disasters, not to mention the ravages of inflation.

Whether it's an operating cushion for your business or part of your personal investments, keep your cash working for you in FDIC-insured banks or money funds from the strongest firms. **L**

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

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

BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Business for \$ale?

Sure, it may seem like no one's buying anything today, but in the right market with the right conditions, now could be a good time to sell.

"Always be prepared to sell your business, but operate it with the mind-set that it will be yours forever."

This is a good operating mantra any lawn care business should follow, whether they selling a business or not, advises Mergers and Acquisitions Consultant Mark Long of the Ohio-based BlueSky Group. Long's 32 years of experience in the lawn care service business, the last eight as vice president of Scotts Lawn-Service where he made 75 acquisitions, certainly enhance his resume on the topic. He educated a group of about 100 landscape and lawn care professionals on buying and selling strategies during Real Green Systems 2009 Conference & Exposition in Orlando in January.

And the topic is a hot one right now, despite the economic downturn. In fact, data from BizBuySell, an online business-for-sale marketplace, showed asking and final sale prices for businesses were higher in the second quarter of 2008 compared with the same period in 2007.

Nationally, businesses sold had a median revenue of \$395,000 and a median sale price of \$200,000 in the second quarter. The businesses had a median cash flow of nearly \$95,000. Close to 2,100 businesses changed hands through bizbuysell.com in the second quarter of 2008, up from 1,559 in the second quarter of 2007.

What explains the strong market for businesses for sale amid an economic downturn? BizBuySell general manager

Michael Handelsman said in *Entrepreneur* that the law of supply and demand is keeping prices high. His site continues to see rising listings. Also, Handelsman notes, more executives are being laid off with severance packages that might enable them to purchase a business. So demand is up, keeping prices firm.

What does it take to sell a business in this economy? Long has some advice.

BUYER STATS. To position a business for sale, first an owner must understand buyers and their motivations. There are two types of buyers, Long says – financial and strategic, "and the distinction is important to understand because it may mean you walk away with more money from the



transaction," he explains.

A financial buyer usually is looking to buy your business and tuck it in to the existing business, Long says. They are looking for talent, an earnings stream, to increase their customer density, to combine G&A expenses, and to eliminate a competitor.

Then there are strategic buyers. They may want to enter the market or the industry, such as a private equity group with capital, Long says. Strategic buyers also look for ways to radically improve their businesses with an acquisition because of the people and customers involved in the company they are buying.

When valuing a business a buyer will want to look at a company's past 12 months of financials to see how it's performing; the revenue per customer, ser-

on if you were going to keep your business, such as increasing your revenue by launching new services and increasing your revenue per customer."

Set a goal for yourself, Long suggests. "If you need to walk away with \$1 million pretax in order for you to retire comfortably, you'd have to have a \$1.2 million business that is performing well," he explains. "If your business is \$600,000 today, set an aggressive plan over the next five years to get it to \$1.2 million. And if in year three, a strategic buyer comes along and offers you \$1.2 million even though you're only at \$900,000, then you are ready to go. The goals are still the same – you should operate your business as if you are going to have it forever, but be ready to sell at any moment if the opportunity comes along."



For a four-part video series detailing Mark Long's presentation at the RealGreen Conference, visit the March Online Exclusives at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

vice mix and pricing structure to see how these compare to theirs ("If they have to do a price increase to match prices, for instance, that may add to the element of risk," Long says.); and EBITA (earnings before the deduction of interest, tax and amortization expenses), which is another way of analyzing the business' cash flow.

These are financial attributes. Non-financial attributes buyers look for include stability or a business' reputation in the marketplace and talent within the organization.

External factors that make a big impact on what a buyer is willing to pay for a business include the strategic value of the local marketplace, whether multiple buyers are interested, and whether legal/franchise conflicts exist. "For instance, I wouldn't buy a business in Detroit right now – even if it's performing well – because of the local economy, but I would buy a business in Raleigh or Charlotte," Long says.

PREPARING TO SELL. An owner who wants to sell his or her business in nine to 12 months should augment business attributes to boost sales price. "Focus on continuous improvement," Long advises. "It's the same set of objectives you'd focus

Another big part of the buying and selling process is what Long calls gamesmanship. If a seller isn't completely open and honest with a buyer, that buyer is not going to stick around. Sellers should increase transparency with clear and up-to-date financials and complete operating reports. Any confusion will make a buyer uncertain and uncertainty equals risk. Other buyer turnoffs include lawsuits, pending divorces or co-owners who have mixed views on selling their business.

THE OFFER. There are a lot of myths surrounding what a business is worth. Many sellers like to say, "My business is unique," Long says. "This is only true if the business fits in with the buyer's business."

The rule of thumb used to be a business is worth one or more times its revenue. "Don't use this as the going rate," Long warns. "That is harder to count on than it used to be."

Typically, Long sees businesses sell for between .8 to 1.2 times revenue, which is actually where the 1 times revenue myth originated. Again, a lot depends on what is motivating the buyer. Some will offer a premium for the right time, right market and right business. **L**

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USE READER SERVICE #25

Strategies for Staying Afloat

So many of us right now are facing challenges we've never faced before. We've enjoyed success, with our phones ringing, our prospects plentiful, and our futures bright. If we had any problem at all, it was finding enough help to fulfill demand. Clearly, this year is different. With the economy in a downward spiral and the mortgage crisis forcing many folks to lose their homes, it's going to be hard to find enough work to turn a profit. So let's explore five strategies for staying afloat in challenging times.

1. Surround yourself with positive people. People tend to conform to the environment they're in. So distance yourself from naysayers and surround yourself with forward-thinking people who refuse to let the current state of the economy limit their dreams. You can't control the ups and downs of the market, but you can control your attitude.

2. Start exercising. Nothing keeps stress at bay like exercise. If you haven't worked out in awhile, see your doctor for a physical and discuss what you can do to get back in shape safely and effectively. In fact, a Ball State University study recently discovered a direct correlation between runners and successful entrepreneurs. And if you can find another landscaper to exercise with, you can use the time to talk shop and learn a new marketing strategy while you get your heart rate up.

3. Eat right. It's hard to be an entrepreneur and eat right. When I think about the food I ate 15 years ago when I plowed snow late at night, I'm amazed I lived to write about it. I feel much better now that I eat right. Stick to a diet of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, chicken, with red meat and alcohol in moderation, and you – and your body – will be glad you did. And if you want to reward yourself with a well-earned treat, then do. An ice cream cone with the kids once in a while will do you far more good than harm.

4. Find something nice to say to five people each day. People are drawn to those who make them feel good about themselves. When an employee stays late to complete a special assignment, thank him or her personally. When your spouse cooks a great meal, tell him or her how much you enjoyed it. When your kids behave well, let them know it. When the restaurant wait staff does a good job, share with the manager how impressed you are. In trying times like these, people often take their anger and frustration out on other people. Be mindful not to do this and try to spread some cheer instead. It'll make you feel good, too.

5. Think about all that you have to be thankful for. I have a roof over my head, my family is healthy, and I live in a safe country where I can speak my mind, run a business, and call on all kinds of people for help when I need it. I'm thankful my business has enjoyed success; if one year we don't, I'll deal with it and get back on top the next. **L**

"The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth."



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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USE READER SERVICE #26

NIP/TUCK

BY LINDSEY GETZ

A tough economy teaches Blondie's Treehouse where to cut costs and enhance operations.

While nobody welcomes tough times, it often takes a downturn in the economy to learn how to operate on a tighter budget – and to find areas where savings could have been achieved all along. “It’s a terrible way to have to learn where you should tighten things up, but the downturn has given us an opportunity to refocus our business,” says Howard K. Freilich, CEO and president of Blondie’s Treehouse, a \$10-million, 30-year-old design-build firm in Mamaroneck, N.Y. “There were areas we could have been saving money all along, but you don’t think about spending a little extra here or there when times are good.”

Since the downturn, the company has taken a hard look at their expenses and looked for creative ways to cut back without having to lose employees. They determined labor and automobile expenses were their two biggest costs of doing business and have since made some significant changes. One change has meant investing more money to ultimately save in the long-run. “We have a lot of jobs where you’d send four or five guys to do an installation, and in the past our trucks could only fit a maximum of three people in the cab,” says Freilich. “So we’ve gotten some box trucks with two rows of seating. This way we aren’t sending two trucks just to send the extra guys. That’s cut 50 percent of our fuel consumption, plus tolls.”

The company is also careful to compile smart job routes with clients grouped by location. And if one area has a lot of accounts, Freilich expects his employees to finish with that area in one day. “If you have to drive back the next day when you were already there, that’s not efficient,” he says. “So even

if it means working a 12-hour day, and getting the whole area done, I’d rather they take those extra hours off later than driving the equipment back and forth twice.”

Freilich also recently shifted his employees’ 40-hour work-week from five days to four 10-hour days, which cuts fuel and toll expenses by 20 percent. “As a result of that change, we’re also finding that as we head to our accounts during the earlier hours, we’re not dealing with as much traffic,” he says. “That means my guys are accomplishing more. Even if they have extra time, I’d rather they were spending that time on our accounts than just sitting in traffic.”

And when business is slow, employees bank their hours, meaning they’ll take a paid week off knowing as soon as things get busy again, they’ll owe that time back – even if it means working the weekends. “That’s helped me not have to worry about laying employees off just because things get slow,” says Freilich.

This isn’t the first time Blondie’s has survived difficult times. In the downturn of the late 80s/early 90s, Freilich faced some challenges, but nothing has been as hard as it is today. “What we’re going through now is really a combination of all the things we’ve seen in the past, but the scale is multiplied,” he says. “Today everyone is hurting and that has meant making bigger changes than ever before. What we’ve learned in the past has helped and hopefully what we learn now will keep us strong through the tough times. Our goal is to stay ahead of the game until we’re through the worst of it.” **L**

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

Howard Freilich, president of Blondie's Treehouse, is cutting costs to better manage business in this tough economy.





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USE READER SERVICE #27

SECRET GARDEN

More than seven years after 9/11, landscape architect Amber Freda reflects on her time spent tidying Robert De Niro's ash-laden rooftop garden the week following the attacks.

BY AMBER FREDA

From Robert De Niro's rooftop garden in Manhattan, I had a clear view of the twin towers – those pyramids of the metropolis. I used to spend one day a week on his roof. I loved it up there. You could practically live there when the weather was warm. There was a mini-kitchen complete with an oven, stove, refrigerator, and a table and chairs. Next to the kitchen was a sunken cedar hot tub surrounded by pots of lush tropical hibiscus, sweet potato vines and gold trailing lantana.

One time, I showed up to work on the garden the day after De Niro's birthday party. According to all the papers, celebri-

ties like Cameron Diaz and Martin Scorsese had mixed and mingled in the garden I'd cared for. I walked past the kitchen table and saw a card that read "Happy Birthday." Someone had hung beautiful exotic orchids from the trees. There were enormous double-spiked white phalaenopsis, frilly pink and yellow cattleyas, and chocolate-scented oncidiums.

On another side of the garden, a pergola held an enormous wisteria vine with a trunk as thick as Jake LaMotta's arm. Under it was a wraparound bench covered with cushions. You could lie on that bench and look up at the sky and feel

transported, forgetting that you were even in a city. It felt peaceful there. That's why I didn't mind getting stuck up there the week after 9/11.

My husband and I watched the towers fall from the roof of our apartment building on the northern edge of Little Italy. I woke up that morning and went to work on a couple of gardens uptown. By the time the second plane struck, the streets were filling up with people.

Everyone was amazingly calm. Maybe we were all in shock, but the spirit of camaraderie evident on that day is something I never could have imagined in a



city so large. No one seemed to be taking advantage of the chaos. People were even stopping to help the elderly and disabled. We were a city united, against what or whom we still weren't sure.

Much of that time is a blur now. I do remember there were bomb threats on the subways for awhile. I was a walking mass of nerves, ready to jump at the sight of airplanes in the sky or the wail of a passing fire truck siren.

The film of ash that covered everything in downtown Manhattan had made its way to Chinatown, just a few blocks south of us. Tanks rumbled by on the street outside our apartment. This was a war zone.

Gardening felt absurd, but life had to go on. When I made my way over to De Niro's to check on the plants, a week had gone by. I needed to work again to keep myself sane. Ash was everywhere in Tribeca, De Niro's neighborhood. It covered cars with busted windows, restaurant awnings, and most of the plants in his garden.

The smell of death and office products mixed with asbestos floated through the

air. It clung to my clothes; it brushed through my hair. I knew it wasn't the best thing to be breathing in, so I wore a cloth mask and simply carried on. I couldn't let the plants die. After all, there was already too much death in this city.

When I got to De Niro's apartment, I rang the doorbell with the fake name on it. I went up to the roof and became engrossed in my tasks. I gave the plants a good soaking and cleaned the ash from their leaves. Next, I set about pruning, sweeping up dead leaves and fertilizing.

I had started to daydream, and I was so lost in thought that I was surprised when I first noticed the shadows lengthening in the garden and everything was bathed in a rich, autumnal glow. Even at this late stage in the season, the garden looked so alive and full of hope. New possibilities seemed apparent in every leaf and flower. In the face of destruction, the garden had persevered. Its beauty stood in stark contrast to the massive hole left by the terrorists. A sense of peace and calm had settled over the garden. And that was

when I noticed how quiet it was.

I hastily gathered my things and walked over to the back entrance to let myself out. It was locked. The lights were out. There was no other way out of the garden.

I fantasized for a moment that there was nothing left to do but sleep beneath the pergola under the open sky. There was plenty of food and water in the kitchen. I could even take a soak in the hot tub if I felt brave enough.

It was such a beautiful end of September night, if you ignored the stench from downtown. But, of course, who could ignore that?

The smell brought me back to reality. I pulled out my cell phone and called my husband. **L**

The author is a landscape designer with N.Y.-based Amber Freda Landscape Designs.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Do you have a personal story about finding balance in your life that you'd like to share? If so, we'd love to hear about it. Send your ideas to nwisniewski@gje.net or call 330-523-5382.



Meeting Expectations

As the long development process reaches its conclusion, end users embrace Exmark's Next Lazer Z.

Professional landscape contractors put their trust into professional-grade lawn care equipment because their reputations are on the line with every blade of grass they cut.

A contractor-grade zero-turn should meet these stringent expectations, says Ryan McCarthy, the owner of RJ Lawn Service in Grimes, Iowa. That's why McCarthy appreciates the attention to detail Exmark has put into the design of its Next Lazer Z.

Taking a new product from concept to contractor has been no small task for the Beatrice, Neb.-based mower manufacturer. The three-year process has involved vision, leadership, execution and an unprecedented degree of input from the landscape community. Throughout this process Exmark engineers focused their attention on a single philosophy that the success of the Next Lazer Z would start and end with Exmark customers – landscape contractors, distributors and

equipment dealers. And to accomplish this goal, Exmark not only revamped a best-in-class zero-turn, but also reinvented how it does business and brings products to market.

Contractors rely on the equipment they take into the field to be heavy-duty, well constructed and easy to maintain, safe and reliable and, perhaps most importantly, to provide the highest-quality cut possible, McCarthy says. Exmark's Next Lazer Z meets these criteria, he says. "My guys love it," McCarthy says. "It holds the hills really nice, has more power to cut through longer grass and is a really nice, comfortable ride. In fact, they were so happy with it they've been working on me ever since to upgrade all my units to the NLZ."

>> This is the fourth of four advertorials focusing on Exmark's development of its Next Lazer Z, from concept, to engineering and design, to production and concluding with the contractor.

Outdoor

power equipment dealers expect the Next Lazer Z will spend very little time in their showrooms this spring.

"It's the type of product contractors are asking for in a zero-turn," says Jeff Gray, owner of Trail Saw & Mower Service in Orlando, Fla. "And I expect my customers will be asking for the very first ones that come into the store."

In the end, though, choosing a zero-turn isn't just about purchasing a piece of equipment. Rather, for landscape professionals like Efrain Hernandez, it's a strategic business decision and an investment in improving their level of customer service and satisfaction. "The NLZ is a great ride," says Hernandez, owner of D'Best Lawn Care in Orlando, Fla. "Everything about it, from its design to its durability, is going to make me a better contractor."



Every feature on Exmark's Next Lazer Z is focused on making landscape contractors more efficient and profitable professionals.

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Nursing His Business Along

Jerry Faulring chucked a successful career in lawn care to start one of the most successful nurseries in the mid-Atlantic. Here's why and how. BY PAT JONES

Like so many in our market, Jerry Faulring headed off to college with absolutely no intention of becoming an innovative leader in two different segments of the green industry.

Faulring grew up in western New York in a snowbelt area south of Buffalo historically dominated by dairy farming. He loved the agricultural environment, but he wasn't too crazy about becoming a traditional farmer.

So, he headed off to Purdue University to become a veterinarian, but ended up in Purdue's famed turf program, led then by the legendary Dr. Bill Daniel. When most of the 13 turf graduates headed off to careers in golf or chemical sales, Faulring went to work in sod production at a Maryland farm. A few years later, a friend enticed Faulring to start a lawn service business. It was 1973 and ChemLawn was just emerging. When they came to town in 1976, Faulring piggybacked on their aggressive marketing and business model ("We were a little more customized and tried to do things differently, but we pretty much picked up ChemLawn's crumbs," he says). The result within a few years was Hydrolawn. The company exploded from 300 customers in 1975 to 4,200 within three years. Over the next decade, they grew to 17 locations in five states.

He was so successful that, 20 years ago, he was profiled as a young lion of the industry in the pages of *Lawn & Landscape*. The interview portrays a man at the top of his game who was pioneering and leading the then burgeoning lawn care industry. Yet, in 1990, Faulring had largely divorced himself from the business and turned his attention to the nursery mar-

ket. *Lawn & Landscape* decided that it was high time to catch up with him and find out about that decision, his life, his work and his philosophy two decades later.

What led you to leave a highly successful lawn care business for the world of growing nursery products?

The industry started to mature in the '80s and labor became a problem. Then regulatory issues started to hit us. My entrepreneurial spirit was a bit dampened. I wasn't bored, just less interested. In 1989, I went to Oregon to hunt and fish with my friend Paul Bizon who was also in the nursery and lawn care business. I decided right then – even though I didn't know how to do it – that I was going into the nursery business.

We planted our first crop the following spring on 25 acres. I still had the lawn care business, but did not work at it full-time. Basically, Hydrolawn's success allowed me to be the farmer I'd always wanted to be. I spent the next five years searching for the perfect piece of land to expand on. In late '95, I found it. From 2000 to 2007, we averaged 28 percent annual growth.

What have you done to separate Waverly Farms from the pack?

We knew we didn't want to be like everyone else, but our niche happened by accident. In the nursery business, you want to offer a variety of things all at once. You have to time the plantings to have a diverse menu for customers during the buying season. And, it's difficult to get all the varieties to become available at the same time. Early on, the shrubs matured too early. We found a lot of customers

wanted that larger look. That drove me to grow larger than usually available shrubs like hollies, viburnum and other very large, very handsome plants. Now we do it by design.

Our business today is about 90 percent shrubs and the remainder is ornamental flowering trees. We grow very few shade trees. Freight costs are now a big issue so we're starting to grow more material that would be typically sourced out of Oregon. The slower it grows the more we want to grow it. We pick things that are always in demand but never outgrow their space. We shoot for an average rotation of six or seven years with some plants requiring 10 to 12 years.

Speaking of business cycles, how have things changed for your business in the last year?

Business cycles happen, but I can say with certainty that this was the most precipitous and sudden decline in sales I've ever experienced. Our growth was OK in the spring, but we knew something was up. It all kind of happened over the course of six weeks. I honestly thought the phones were out of order the week after Labor Day.

The industry is in a tailspin right now. A lot of customers are just frozen. The next year is gonna suck. I hear people say it's going to be a "challenging" or "interesting" time. No it's not... it's just going to suck.

We cut \$750,000 in expenses, but the main thing is you try to make good choices, suck it up and weather the storm. This cycle will end – although it may be more prolonged and deeper than others I've seen. It's a fact that there



will be fewer competitors. Unfortunately, people will go bankrupt. It's painful for a while, but it's a cleansing. I hope this is the last one for me.

What did you learn from those previous downturns?

Don't trust in government. It's not a solu-

tion to all of our problems. Government is largely made up of people with big egos and greed disguised as leadership. They're not necessarily bad folks... just regular people with normal human failings.

Also, be very independent, know your own space and manage without relying on help from others. The critical thing

in small business is to have very deep pockets or to have a really good banking relationship. It's hard to know which banks will be there when things get bad, but you have to nurture and develop those relationships and, above all, be honest and don't hide things from them.

What's the No. 1 lesson you've learned from an agronomic standpoint in the past three decades?

The most important thing relates to nutrition. Contrary to what I'd learned in school and what we practiced in the lawn care business, synthetic fertilizer is not the only choice and can often be the wrong choice. Soil is the most valuable input that we can manage, and making the soil work for you is the hardest thing we do. I'm not a hippie, but you have to be cognizant of what happened before us. Synthetic fertilizers have only been around for 75 years or so, and good agriculture has been around for thousands of years. They relied on organic amendments to the soil. The soil web, microbial activity, whatever you want to call it... you can enhance it so much by increasing organic matter.

We use compost at about 100 tons per acre. We make our compost ourselves and our plan is to use zero synthetics in 2009. It took a long time to figure out the right recipe, but we finally got it right. We use deep tillage to mix the organics in. The result is we've increased growth and productivity up to 40 percent. When we realized that, it was a "light bulb" moment.

What advice do you give to young people thinking about getting into the nursery/landscape business?

First, you need to be passionate about it. If you're not, it won't be fun long-term.

Mandate time for family and leisure – you have to have recharge time.

Find a good mentor – someone you respect and admire not necessarily for how successful they are, but for how they interact with people. Find someone with good ethics who is widely respected.

Finally, don't get lost in the "sea of sameness." Too many people look at others and mimic them and become a part of that sea. Find a niche and serve a part of the marketplace that's not well-served. Make sure

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USE READER SERVICE #30

you run the idea by other people who'll be honest with you – it's too easy to fall in love with an idea and not be realistic.

There's always this romantic notion that being your own boss is really cool, and you can get rich. You have to divorce yourself from that. Do a 12-month cash flow forecast and, when you're done, cut the

income in half and double the expenses. If you can't make that work, reconsider it.

One other thing: Approach each customer with the attitude that they're your parent or someone you really love. They'll appreciate that and be there forever for you. If you're just in it for you, it'll come back to haunt you.

Twenty years from now, how will our industry be different?

I don't think it'll look much different. Sure, we'll have more regulations and new issues to deal with, but the business as a business will look pretty much the same. Small businesses are at their peak operating efficiency when an owner/operator has his feet on the ground and doesn't mind getting dirty.

Over the years, I've seen a lot of consolidation in this industry and it just hasn't worked very well because those bigger firms just don't have that on-the-ground impact. There's something about that small business relationship when customers can interact with the owner that's really special.

I learned a great lesson in the late '80s. We were doing well, but we still weren't making as much money as I thought we should. This was about the time of the savings and loan crisis and I lost my commercial bank and had a hard time finding a new one. We went without a bank for a few years and had to scale back. The outcome was that we doubled our cash flow and profit. The clear lesson was that sometimes smaller is better.

What's the biggest mistake you made through the years?

One of the biggest mistakes you can make – and I'm guilty of this too – is not preserving enough cash on hand. Some guys buy boats or vacation homes, while others, like me, tend to reinvest in the business too much. Manage your cash reserves.

Also, it's easy to begin to think you're invincible if you've had some success. Some owners can effectively manage many good managers and some can't. Find a size and scope where your skill set works best.

Final thoughts?

It's been a wonderful experience – you feel like you've been "chosen" to be a part of the green industry. We've been a part of the green revolution in this country long before it even had a name, and we should be proud of that. We haven't been perfect, but we've adapted well. In the end, I'd like to believe some day, someone new will take this place over, look around and say, "He was a pretty damn good farmer." 

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A couple of years ago, Rick Meinzer experienced a hard realization. "I fell into a trap – one I think a lot of landscapers fall into," says the owner of Platinum Landscape & Design in Cedar Hills, Utah, "I didn't pay myself what I thought I was worth." A few years of doing this and "the money just finds its way somewhere else," except for in the owner's pocket, Meinzer says.

Caught up in what he calls "the growth trap," Meinzer hired more employees than he needed to run his business because that's what other companies in his less than \$1-million revenue category were doing. Two key positions – a business partner and an office manager – cost him more than \$160,000 annually. When they both eventually left the company for unrelated reasons, it was a blessing in disguise.

"I reevaluated my staffing budget and reviewed the numbers," Meinzer says. "I realized these tasks could be better achieved with a different solution. Meinzer's wife, Debi, took the job as office manager and Meinzer absorbed the duties his previous partner had. "I just found a way to make it work," he explains. "The redistribution of work was a big savings to my bottom line."

Today, Meinzer, who has been in business since 1998, has five employees and his salary makes up approximately 10 percent of his annual revenue – a calculation method that has proven successful for him.

"At the end of the day, I own a business to make a living," Meinzer says. "If I'm not going to be able to do those things in my business to allow me to have a comfortable lifestyle, I'm really missing the boat."

Like Meinzer, a majority of contractors struggle with paying themselves a fair wage. Nearly half of contractors responding to a *Lawn & Landscape* survey said they thought they'd be making more money running their own landscape businesses when they started out. Only 21 percent say they pay themselves a fair market value salary based on industry benchmarks. Another 23 percent say they draw less than the fair market value salary and need to find a way to raise their salary to a better level. When asked how they figure their salaries, the majority of owners – 30 percent – said: "It's trial and error. I take whatever is left after expenses and bills are paid, so I'm not sure what I'm going to make each year."

The situation is a sad one, says industry consultant Marty Grunder. "They don't plan; they don't know their costs and then they hope for the best – I see it all the time," says Grunder,

“At the end of the day, I own a business to make a living. If I’m not going to be able to do those things in my business to allow me to have a comfortable lifestyle, I’m really missing the boat.” – Rick Meinzer

who is also owner of Grunder Landscaping in Miamisburg, Ohio. "Truthfully, it's hard for me to feel sorry for them. If you fail to plan, plan to fail."

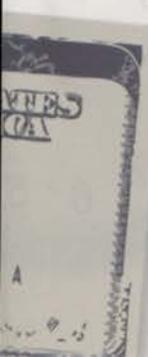
Many claim the basic lack of business and financial knowledge over horticultural knowledge is what's holding landscapers back. "Because they have no clue as to the financial aspects of running a business, they don't build a salary for themselves into their pricing," explains industry consultant Jim Huston of J.R. Huston Consulting in Englewood, Colo., "And they're not asking the important financial questions like, 'What sort of retirement will I have?'"

But the issue extends beyond this industry. Sole proprietors often determine their salaries using that very simple "leftover" calculation – what remains after all bills are paid is theirs to keep, according to the National Federation for Independent Business' Jeffrey Moses.

While some planning and simple mathematics, as well as using budgets and cash flow projections, can give you an idea of the operating capital required during the formative stages of a company's development, what happens when a business reaches breakeven and beyond? "As a small company grows and accounting becomes more sophisticated, the financing and debt structure often dictate that the owner receive a designated annual salary," Moses says.

To determine a fair salary, owners need to balance their needs against what they feel they are worth, what they need to get by, what the business will be able to sustain and how their income and business will be taxed.

THE PROBLEM. Concerning general small business, owner earnings range from losses to millions – PayScale and other salary estimators offer average annual earnings figures for small business owners ranging from \$61,919 to \$111,000. The national average salary of a small business owner with 10 to 19 years of experience (the average length of a landscape business is 15 years) is \$70,372, PayScale reports. According to *Lawn & Landscape* data, landscape business owners are on the low end



“ON” it Versus “IN” it

A key component of an owner's ability to make a fair wage lies in his or her time management. And as the business grows, the owner should spend significantly less time out in the field and more time behind the scenes.

This has not been the case according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. On average, an owner running a \$778,000-revenue business works 51 hours a week – 26 spent on the job performing landscape duties and 24 spent on dealing with owner issues or “working on the business rather than in it.”

One of the greatest mistakes owners make is believing they have to do it all rather than delegating responsibility, explains industry consultant Marty Grunder. “Working on your business is like working out,” says the owner of Miamisburg, Ohio-based Marty Grunder Inc. and Grunder Landscaping. “If you want to die young, continue doing all those bad things. If you want to live long, you have to take some time off of the mountain and get in shape to make it work better.”

He recommends business owners with more than \$1 million in revenue allocate 75 percent of their time in planning and sales, and only 25 percent working in the field.

In order to move beyond survival, business owners should spend one-third of the time selling, one-third of the time delivering what they sell, and another third of the time developing the business via marketing, says Andy Birol, owner of Birol Growth Consulting in Solon, Ohio.

Ideally the business should operate like clockwork, regardless of how active the owner is in the company, stresses David Kay, a certified financial planner with The Advisory Group in Dayton, Ohio. Every owner should aim to get his or her business to the point that it can run successfully on autopilot. He advises that 80 percent of an owner's time should be spent behind the scenes. “A good business owner is like a good football coach,” he says. “The coach won't ever throw the ball, run the ball, block, tackle or score a touchdown. But if he does his job right, his team will win the game.”

The decision of how much time owners should spend working on the business vs. working in the business can't be determined until owners ask themselves two fundamental questions – “How big do I want my business to be, and how much money do I want to make?” advises Keith Rosen, executive sales coach and author of *Coaching Salespeople into Sales Champions*. Rosen has worked with a variety of clients, from small businesses to Fortune 500 companies.

“If you're happy making \$60,000 a year and you have one employee, and you control everything, that's fine,” he says. “But if you want to make \$200,000 or \$1 million per year, you can't do it all yourself.” It's the latter scenario that subsequently prompts the time management question, he explains. And it's at that point when an owner must sit down with the financial planner and strategize for optimal time management.

Rosen suggests that owners try to assign a quantifiable dollar value to their time. When they are able to see exactly what their time is worth, they're better able to isolate activities that aren't serving them well and are more likely to relinquish them, he explains. And this is where the all-important concept of delegating comes into play.

of this range at \$57,573, according to our February survey. In last year's surveys, we recorded the average owner salary reaching \$69,629, still slightly below national U.S. averages when taking all industries into account.

Why do landscape contractors seem to fall on the low-end? “Landscapers are notorious for underpaying themselves because they don't know how to price their work properly and don't realize the value of their services,” Huston says. “If you don't truly know your numbers, this is problematic when bidding jobs because it can lead to underpayment.”

Another important reason why owners don't pay themselves a fair wage is as basic as having a lack of confidence and conviction, according to Andy Birol, owner of Birol Growth Consulting in Solon, Ohio.

Having worked with small businesses in various industries, Birol sees this as a common problem across the board. Paying yourself a fair wage is a state of mind, he says – you have to decide that you're worth it. “There's an old phrase my mother used to say: ‘If you don't think you're worth it, no one else will.’ The first sale is to yourself,” he explains. “If you don't have the confidence and conviction to stand tall and price for what you're worth and you can't make a big profit in your business, go work for someone else, let them carry the risk, pay your insurance, and let them make the profit for it.”

Jody Shilan's greatest personal challenge was convincing himself that he should earn a salary. “This helps you determine your pricing and puts a value on what you do,”

51

Average number of hours landscape business owners work

26

Number of hours spent working in the field on landscapes

24

Number of hours spent being the owner



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says the owner of \$250,000 to \$500,000 Jody Shilan Designs, Wyckoff, N.J.

Although he says his current salary, which is between \$50,000 and \$100,000, isn't ideal, he is content with the fact that he is paying himself every two weeks. He didn't use a formula to determine his salary. "It is just an annual salary that I know I can at least squeak by on," says Shilan,

who started his business in 2005 after working with an accountant to develop a business plan that included an owner salary from the beginning. "It's not based on actual sales, but on how much I can live on, pay my bills and still put money back to grow my company."

Shilan drew on past experience as a designer to determine a fair market sal-

ary. "Prior to starting my own business I worked for several design/build firms and knew what the starting and high level salaries should be. I also spoke to friends who worked at landscape architecture offices to see what their employers were paying. I even interviewed at a few companies to see what they were offering."

Using the salaries of owners in com-

Recession Putting a Wrinkle in Your Plans?

Chris Eckl's greatest business challenge is the expense load of running a company and having to pay everyone else first. He admits he doesn't think he makes a fair wage using this "leftover" method.

As the owner of \$425,000-revenue Earthtones Landscaping, based in Atlanta, Eckl says the current recession doesn't help matters. And he's not alone.

Twenty-three percent of landscape business owners admit they support the company during lean times and then repay themselves when business is good. And most would consider this is a leaner time.

According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, almost half (47 percent) of landscape business owners are taking an average 9 percent pay cut in light of economic challenges. While the majority (26.2 percent) expect their pay to return to normal by the fourth quarter of this year, 20 percent may wait until the first quarter of 2010 tied with another 20 percent who say they think they won't earn regular wages again until 2011. Another 18 percent expect to hold on until the second quarter of 2010.

This is a lot higher than the average small business. According to a November 2008 National Association for the Self-Employed survey, only 9 percent of owners reported considering temporary pay cuts for themselves and/or staff as one way to address economic challenges.

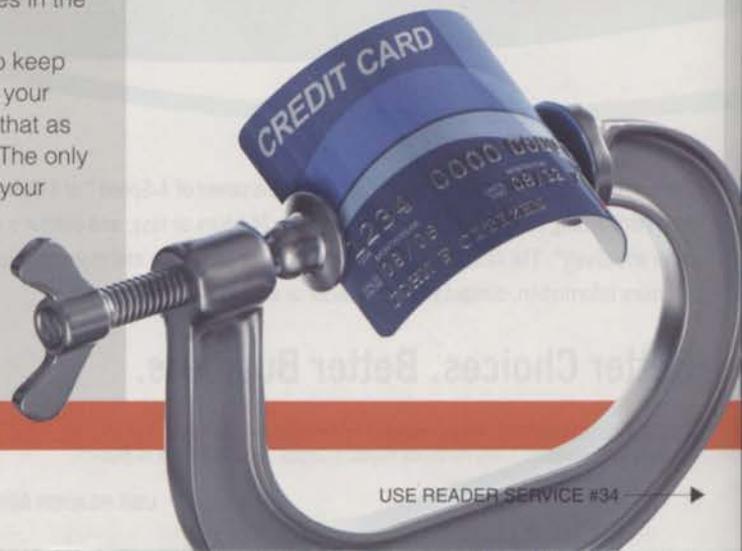
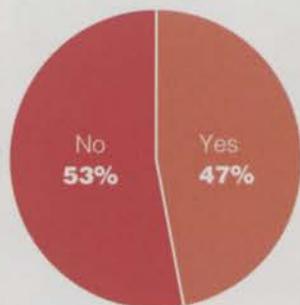
Part of the problem this year is slower paying clients. According to Discover's January Small Business Watch Survey, 30 percent of owners say they've experienced temporary cash flow issues in the previous 90 days.

SCORE Counselors to Small Business advises owners to keep their cash flow in check. "Set terms for collections. Collect your money in a maximum of 30 days. Keep the terms short so that as soon as you do the work, you're getting paid for the work. The only way to successfully pay yourself first is to get money from your clients quickly."

If you are taking a pay cut in 2009, when do you expect your salary to return to its normal rate?



Are you taking a pay cut in light of economic challenges?



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parable businesses as a benchmark is good research, Moses says. "Regions of the country also should be considered because owners on the West and East Coasts generally pay themselves more than owners in the Midwest or South," he explains, adding a caution. "And while these are important factors, they aren't as important as the actual profitability of your company. Annual total sales volumes of other companies are often used as another benchmark, but actual profitability may have little to do with total sales."

WHAT EXACTLY IS A FAIR WAGE? While experts have differing views on how to determine a small business owner's wage, they seem to concur there is no real "one-size-fits-all" method. Here, we review the most common scenarios.

According to *The Small Business Encyclopedia*, there are two methods for determining owner pay when starting a business. The first is setting a salary that lets the owner meet basic living requirements, covering bills, food and other miscellaneous living expenses, like

Shilan did above. A personal financial statement can help determine living expenses (monthly, quarterly, semiannual and annual), including credit cards with outstanding balances and short- and long-term loans.

The second method involves projecting a salary based on basic worth. While this is subjective, usually it means the owner pays him or herself a current market value minimum plus a little more.

However, once the business reaches breakeven and beyond, looking at profitability is a direct and simple approach one-third of the industry uses to determine owner salary – they budget for their salary at the beginning of the year and pay themselves a weekly fair market rate plus bonuses based on the company's profits. After all, "you can't pay yourself, or any employee, money that isn't available," Moses says.

"Assuming the company is making more than it spends, your salary should

THE INDUSTRY PICTURE

Average Owner Salary (2008): **\$57,573**

Average Owner Salary (2009 projected): **\$58,808**

As a % of sales, corporate officer, owner and partner salaries make up: **9%**

* Source: *Lawn & Landscape*

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be based on a percentage of profits over the previous two to three years (some of the previous years' profits include what you have paid yourself during that period)," he explains. "Your salary should not be based solely on projections for the upcoming year or years, although tangible contracts can be taken into account."

Shilan learned this lesson all too well. "I've tried basing my salary on how much work I'd actually sell and how much I produced, and I based it on the gross figure," he says. "That didn't work. The gross is one thing, but netting is completely different. So I was drawing a good salary but I wasn't netting enough to support the

salary that I set up for myself. I learned that, in theory, gross is OK but, in reality, net is everything."

Huston offers some industry benchmarks. According to his book *How to Price Landscape & Irrigation Projects*, the total for combined office and officer salaries should be between 8 and 12 percent of

Legal & Tax Considerations

A lot of people fail to realize that when you're self-employed, the legal form under which you operate your business directly affects the way the IRS views your tax status and, therefore, will have some bearing on how you pay yourself.

The easiest way to get into business is as a sole proprietor. A sole proprietor doesn't have any partners to worry about, nor a corporate identity to hide behind. If you get tagged with a lawsuit, you face the liability. It's as simple as that.

On the other side of the coin, if your company does well, you reap the profits. Under a sole proprietorship, profits from the business and your personal income are treated the same by the IRS. There is no distinction.

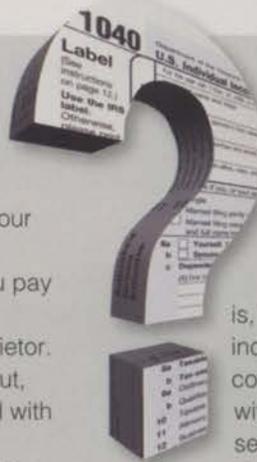
After deducting all of your overhead expenses on Schedule C of Form 1040, the resulting profit is your income and you are taxed on that portion, including a tax for social security under the Federal Insurance Contributions Act.

A partnership is a totally different vehicle from the sole proprietorship in terms of operations, but from the point of view of the IRS they are practically the same. Any profit generated through a partnership is treated as personal income. Instead of completing Schedule C of Form 1040, however, partnerships must file Form 1065, U.S. Partnership Return of Income. This lists all expenses that can be directed against income to arrive at the taxable income generated from your business. Schedule K-1 should be sent to each partner to help them report their share of the income on Form 1040. You do not need to file Schedule K-1.

If your business is organized as a corporation, you will get paid a salary like other employees. Any profit the business makes will accrue to the corporation, not to you personally. At the end of the year, you must file a corporate income tax return.

Corporate tax returns may be prepared on a calendar- or fiscal-year basis. If the tax liability of the business is calculated on a calendar year, the tax return must be filed with the IRS no later than March 15 each year.

Reporting income on a fiscal-year cycle is more convenient for most businesses because they can end their tax year in any month they choose. Pursuant to the 1986 Tax Reform



Act, a corporation whose income is primarily derived from the personal services of its shareholders must be a calendar year end for tax purposes. In addition, most Subchapter S corporations are required to use calendar year ends.

The salary you receive from the corporation is, of course, reported as your own personal income on Form 1040. As the CEO of a corporation, you'll be able to plan your salary with an eye toward tax rates. You may be able to set up a staggered fiscal year, differing from the calendar year by which individuals are typically taxed. You may accrue or defer income between the corporation and yourself so you can stay in the lower tax bracket consistently. You can zero out the income of the company. In other words, make sure the corporation doesn't have any income outstanding at the end of the year.

How can you achieve this? Pay salaries that will absorb whatever profits there are in the company. There is a limit to how much of this you can do, and in most states you have to document the process with appropriate resolutions and directors' meetings. But for most small companies not making a tremendous amount of money, it makes sense to pay income out of the corporation in the form of salary.

There is a danger to this strategy, especially when it comes to awarding big bonuses to yourself. If you're the owner of a small, privately owned C-corporation, the IRS will look closely at returns to determine if there is "excessive compensation" to lower the company's tax liability. If the IRS determined the bonus, in addition to your regular salary, is too large, they'll disallow the deduction of the bonus as an expense to the corporation. In addition to the loss of the deduction, increasing the amount of tax to be paid, the IRS will also charge you interest and, possibly, penalty fees. There is also a chance the IRS may establish the excessive bonus as a dividend payment, which will cause that payment to be "double-taxed" to both the corporation and your personal taxes.

No matter which legal form you choose, it's vital that you discuss this decision with your tax accountant or attorney to make sure you're operating legally and getting the best deal on your taxes. — *The Small Business Encyclopedia*

gross annual sales. *Lawn & Landscape* research shows owner salaries fall into this range at 9 percent on average.

"Some owners prefer to draw less than a fair market value salary (only \$400 or \$500 per week) and keep the extra money working within the company," Huston explains. "Others choose to take far more than a fair market value salary, but it's not reasonable to put all this amount into general and administrative (G&A) overhead for estimating purposes – it would make bids too high. (Even though officers' real pay may be more or less, you should still estimate G&A overhead costs using a fair market value amount in G&A overhead.)"

"For instance, I tell a contractor who's going to take \$300,000 to pocket at least \$36,000 before bonuses," Huston continues. "And after bonuses he's probably going to be pulling down close to \$48,000 plus the company is going to pay for his truck and medical expenses. Now if the company grows to \$1.5 million, the owner should be putting \$50,000 in his pocket, plus the truck, medical expenses and maybe some year-end bonuses. It really boils down to hard dollars, so I think this is one of the better methods to use – straight forward and easy to calculate."

This is when fair market value is the goal. A majority 55 percent of contractors say they draw less than the fair market value salary and keep the extra money working within the business – and that's helping them grow. This is how Greg Dynia pays himself. When he measures his salary against how much time he puts into the company, he is more inclined to say he doesn't make a fair wage, but when viewed from a long-range perspective, his wage is acceptable because it allows him to continue to grow the business.

"At this point, the strength of the business is really more important to me than my individual salary," explains the owner of \$1.2-million Grass Roots Lawn Care in Chesterfield, Va. Dynia bases his salary off of the highest paid employee – his is just a touch above that. "At the end of the road, it's more valuable to have a successful and profitable company than for me to make a certain amount while my company is hanging on by a shoe string."

Dynia admits he probably started earn-

ing more of a fair wage about four years ago when he went from a sole proprietor to a corporation. "At that point, I really had to draw a salary, whereas before I was kind of mixed in with the overall gross of the company and didn't necessarily have to write myself a check every two weeks," he says. "Money was sort of able to be used at my disposal."

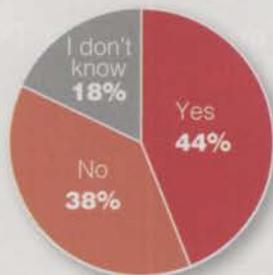
Moses also reminds owners who may be tempted to lean the other way and keep all profit for themselves to be careful. "You cannot pocket all profits because some of these must be allocated to annual increases in marketing and other operational expenses that grow the business," he explains. "If an owner takes all profits as salary, the company runs the risk of stagnating. A rule of thumb: Most owners of profitable small businesses don't take out more than 50 percent of profits for

themselves."

And, then, of course, debt has to be taken into consideration. Determining an owner's salary is a whole different ballgame when ongoing lines of credit or debt are involved. "If your company is profitable and has outstanding loans, there is always the tendency to want to pay off the loans as quickly as possible," Moses says. "This usually means that you, the owner, must reduce the amount you take out of the business."

When Glenn Mertens and his wife, Doris, purchased 17-year-old Vital and Green of Wisconsin from the original owner, they were determined not to accrue substantial debt. This was the driving decision to pay off the purchase before earning regular paychecks, and continues to be their motto today. "We didn't earn hardly anything the first year," he recalls.

Do you think you make a fair salary as a landscape business owner?



Did you think you'd be making more money as a landscape business owner when you started your company?



How would you describe your salary level?



"I don't like collecting a significant salary if I know there's instability in the debt of the company. We probably started earning a regular salary by the third year, but it wasn't until the fourth year when it was actually stable because we were paying off the company in large amounts the first three years."

Mertens, the Oconomowoc, Wis.-based company's vice president and his wife, who is the company's president, each make approximately \$60,000 annually running the \$600,000 business. It's difficult for Mertens to say whether he thinks this is fair in today's market or not, especially considering the amount of time he puts into the company - 40 to 50 hours a week in the field, plus overtime to cover owner duties. "Costs have gone up significantly in the past 10 years, so the money that my wife and I make now seemed like a crazy amount when we started, but now it's tight."

Owners will always be concerned about

the future of their companies, Moses says, but for your sake and the sake of your family it's important that you take a comfortable amount out each year for living expenses. He advises: "Don't plow every penny back into the company at the expense of your and your family's satisfaction in life. This defeats the purpose of starting your own business."

THE PRICING ARGUMENT. While some small business experts advise owners to focus on a percent of profits to determine their salaries, other experts believe in a more unconventional view. They argue the focus should be on pricing, not salary.

Salary is what remains, but pricing is how you achieve your salary, Birol says. "Approximately 50 percent of all small businesses fail in a year, and only 20 percent of the businesses remaining last five years," he says. "Why is this? Because they didn't price higher than what it costs to make a living. It's that simple. It's not

what you make, it's what you keep."

He advises owners to charge enough from the beginning in order to pay themselves at least 125 percent of what they would make if they were working for someone else. This is key, he says, because the owners are the ones taking on all the risk.

In a small business, the owner is the engine that drives the bus. The focus should be on building the business so that it has value, maintains David Kay, certified financial planner with The Advisory Group in Dayton, Ohio. His clients have included medium-sized and small businesses in an array of industries, including the landscape industry.

One cannot truly quantify an owner's wage for the simple fact he is always on the clock, he explains. The phrase "fair wage" is ambiguous in this context because there are countless intangibles to be considered, such as client relations, good will and the like that are both im-

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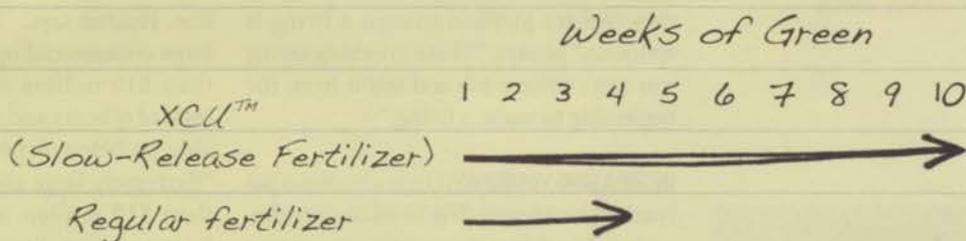
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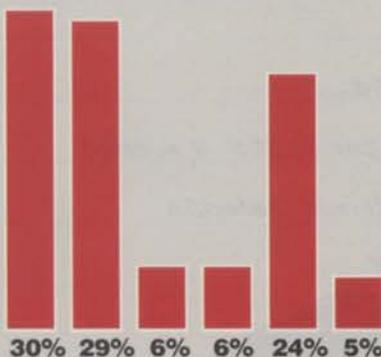


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“There’s an old phrase my mother used to say: ‘If you don’t think you’re worth it, no one else will.’ The first sale is to yourself.” – Andy Birol

How do you pay yourself?



30% It's trial and error. I take whatever is left after expenses and bills are paid, so I'm not sure what I'm going to make each year.

29% I budget for it at the beginning of the year and pay myself a weekly fair market value salary plus bonuses based on the company's profits.

24% I support the company during lean times and repay myself when business is good.

6% I pay myself hourly/weekly as the highest paid worker on a crew and bill the client for my time.

6% I look at what profit I'm making after all my expenses are paid and take a percentage of that.

5% Other

measurable and critical to the company's success.

Should an owner expect to make a "fair wage" immediately? The experts disagree on this point. Some suggest a three- to five-year time frame with flexibility to allow for adjustments. "Know what your plan is, and if something sets you off course – like a bad economy – then you have to adjust and see how you can get back on track," Kay advises.

But Birol says owners should price jobs to earn a fair wage from the get-go.

"This idea that there is some length of time a business owner should wait until they feel it's justified to earn a living is spurious," he says. "There's nothing saying you can't price a job and sell it from the beginning to make a living."

INCREASING YOUR PAY. Once a business has reached breakeven, *The Small Business Encyclopedia* advises owners tie any income above their fixed salaries to the growth of the company. Therefore, if the company grows 10 percent, take your base salary and add a 10 percent bonus to it. Retaining this bonus is fine – "Why not compensate yourself for the increased performance of your company?" the book says.

The challenge is when the rest of overhead, excluding owner compensation, grows faster than the rate of sales on a percentage basis. "Sure, you may be able to trim a little fat from the budget by removing any discretionary purchases, but the fact remains that if overhead grows at 12 percent, and sales grow 10 percent, it is only a matter of time before you find yourself in trouble," according to *The Small Business Encyclopedia*. "By increasing your base salary by 10 percent, the rate of sales growth, you are only hastening this crisis.

"In order to keep total overhead, including owner compensation, at a comfortable level in relation to income, take that rise in overhead into consideration when determining your salary level," the book continues. "To do this you need to determine how much your overhead is, excluding your salary. For instance, suppose your annual overhead minus owner salary is \$180,960, your salary is \$36,192, and sales are \$312,000. If the company's sales grow by 10 percent, but overhead

(minus owner salary) grows by 12 percent to \$202,675, or about 60 percent of total sales, your raise in pay cannot exceed 70 percent, so you will be unable to give yourself a 10-percent raise unless you want to cut into your profit. Instead, you would give yourself a 4-percent raise for a total of \$37,600 annually."

Another way to keep this in check is to look at the industry benchmark for corporate salaries (which is between 8 and 12 percent as mentioned earlier), and realize that this number will be larger when you start out and are a smaller business, but will decrease as you increase in size, Huston says. "If your company is a large commercial operation doing more than \$10 million in annual sales, the total of officers and office staff will probably be below 8 percent," he explains. "Extremely large companies, well more than \$10 million in annual sales, will be even lower. Smaller commercial and high-end residential companies will run about 12 percent. If actual pay for office staff and officers combined exceeds target percentages, don't put the excess in G&A overhead. Rather make a net profit adjustment at the bottom of your budget (after net profit margin) for additional excess salaries or bonuses. Then work on increasing sales. This will bring your percentages in line."

Keeping costs under control means checking rapid growth of overhead costs. "But no matter what you do," warns *The Small Business Encyclopedia*, "overhead will rise on annual basis due to inflation alone. Your objective is to try and keep it in line with the growth of sales."

The authors are editor of *Lawn & Landscape* and a freelancer writer based in Lakewood, Ohio.

Questions & Answers

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USE READER SERVICE #40

Pricing Up When Things Are Down

In a turbulent economy where “spend” has become a nasty word, landscape contractors struggle to price services to keep clients and still run a profitable business. *Lawn & Landscape* talks to three professionals who share their unique strategies.

By now, the phones are usually ringing. Homeowners are anxious for the spring thaw and patio BBQ days – they dream of better backyards, and they start talking installation. Residential regulars re-commit to seasonal maintenance and lawn care contracts, and commercial clients request bids. Landscape companies answer calls prepared with pricing menus, usually adjusted to cover rising costs.

This year, people are hibernating longer than usual.

“Normally, the sun comes up, spring arrives and people start spending money,” says Jim Huston, a management consultant to the green industry and president of Englewood, Colo.-based J.R. Huston Enterprises. “Right now, everyone is holding back. Customers are very slow to pull the trigger on anything new.”

In particular, “new” is residential installation, a tough sell for landscape contractors as customers examine their household budgets and trim expenses. Commercial maintenance behemoths are shopping. “Everyone is shopping,” Huston says, telling of a large corporate client that told its long-time landscape firm, “You need to lower your price, and I’m putting you out to bid.”

While Huston expects maintenance, lawn care and irrigation services to remain “somewhat resilient,” no one is

on a spending spree, regardless of stimulus packages and other carrots to stoke the economy. In fact, Huston estimates landscape installation sales will decrease by one-third this year.

“The big question is whether we are going to have any work to price,” he says, flatly.

Another question: will the industry be “back to normal” by April 1 – the official gun-start for landscape season for many operations? “Be prepared,” Huston says, responding no.

This month’s briefcase: In light of the economy, how should landscape contractors handle the delicate process of pricing this year?

Fuel surcharges won’t fly after prices dropped at the pumps, and customers won’t tolerate this add-on fee even if they do gradually hike to the \$3 range by mid-2009, Huston says. “If someone was billing a gas surcharge now, I’d expect a rebate,” he remarks.

Cost-of-living increases may not sit well with customers either. Consider corporations, such as Wal-Mart, that thrive in times of recession. Low, low prices appeal to the masses who clutch their purse strings. “With interest rates going down and most prices going hard, it would be really hard to justify an across-the-board price increase,” Huston notes.



That said, landscape contractors should identify specific cost increases – insurance, fertilizer, salt – and adjust their pricing based on these price hikes, Huston advises. This means scrutinizing the budget, analyzing every line item and striking a balance between being fair to customers and one’s business.

Lawn & Landscape talked pricing strategy with three landscape contractors who operate companies in different revenue categories. Here is how industry peers will handle the pricing game this year. **L**

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Give & Take

Appealing to a limited client base will require pricing flexibility this year for Greenough Landscapes.

George Greenough is in the estate landscape business, acting as master gardener for clients who sometimes join him outside and pull a few weeds, water some flowers or just chat while he works. One client invites Greenough over Friday evenings for a casual happy hour tour of the property to discuss what's on next week's landscape agenda.

These are atypical clients, in a market on the New England seaboard, north of Boston, where one's reputation matters as much as the price charged for services. At least, that has always been the case for Greenough, who maintains a discreet client list, just 20 accounts strong, so he can deliver personal service.

"I am the one who actually does the

work," Greenough says simply.

And Greenough sells the work, delivers invoices and befriends clients, who hire him year after year because they trust Greenough on their multi-million dollar properties.

When Greenough raises prices, he distributes a letter explaining exactly why. This communication further cements client relationships: Greenough shares a piece of his business with customers, and they take stock in his success by continuing to support his firm by purchasing services. A written explanation is only fair, Greenough relates.

"Once my customers hire someone and like the service, they don't want to change," Greenough says. He gives them

no reason to look elsewhere, and his plan is to continue this strategy by maintaining prices – and even lowering them.

Last year, Greenough raised maintenance prices 5 percent to cover fuel prices. This year, he's thinking about dropping his hourly rate by \$5 – a decrease in his \$40 rate, which is higher than other landscapers in the area. "I've talked with friends in the industry, and they aren't raising prices, so we are staying on the same page with each other," he says.

Greenough says he isn't putting his services "on sale." But he recognizes even high-end customers are shopping around, and there are plenty of fly-by-night businesses interested in picking up the type of jobs Greenough has. In these economic

times, even high rollers are counting pennies. Greenough charges a flat hourly rate and distributes invoices that detail the work performed on each property.

This year, he may institute a 12-month payment plan, offering clients an annual rate based on the average cost of service for the previous few years. "I'm going to give customers the option to pay in monthly increments, and charge for additional services and plowing," he says.

For now, he delivers weekly invoices. Collections had been steady, until November. His accounts receivables show \$2,000 outstanding that month, increasing to about \$4,000 of unpaid invoices in December, and he is not sure how quickly clients will pay their January snowplowing bills. Greenough billed about \$9,000.

Cash is king in a tough economy; Greenough knows this. He can invoice clients all he wants, but if no one is paying, then how much is he really earning for work performed? To encourage faster

payment, Greenough tested an incentive plan in January. "If you pay within 10 days with a personal check or cash, you get 10 percent off," he says, noting that 10 percent off a \$600 plowing bill "isn't bad" at \$60 less than the regular cost. He's not sure whether he will continue this discount once spring breaks.

Greenough's goal is to maintain the same number of clients, perhaps "trading up" a difficult account for a promising property that could bring higher profits.

Proponents of diversifying one's customer mix might gulp knowing that one of Greenough's clients makes up \$47,000 of his total revenue – about one-third of his business. But Greenough likes to make a difference on the properties he does service, really providing that personal touch. So far, his business plan has worked, so he's sticking to it. **L**

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

Greenough Landscapes

Principal: George Greenough

Location: Beverly Farms, Mass.

Established: 2004

2008 Revenue: \$138,000

Customer/Service mix: 20

customers; 90% maintenance, 10% design-build and snow services

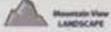
Employees: 1.5

Pricing history: Annual 5% price hikes

Pricing today: Last year, several of Greenough's loyal customers asked him to slap a fuel surcharge onto their invoices. This year, Greenough is forgoing his usual price increase – an average \$100 per month for many clients. Instead, he's starting spring with a plan to hurry in aging receivables.

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Bill Kemp
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USE READER SERVICE #42

Todd McCabe decided to raise prices by 10 percent across the board this year at first and remain flexible if clients are not receptive to the change. So far, so good.



A Question of LOYALTY

Loyal customers are the backbone of Landscapes Unlimited's business, but everyone is scrutinizing prices this year.

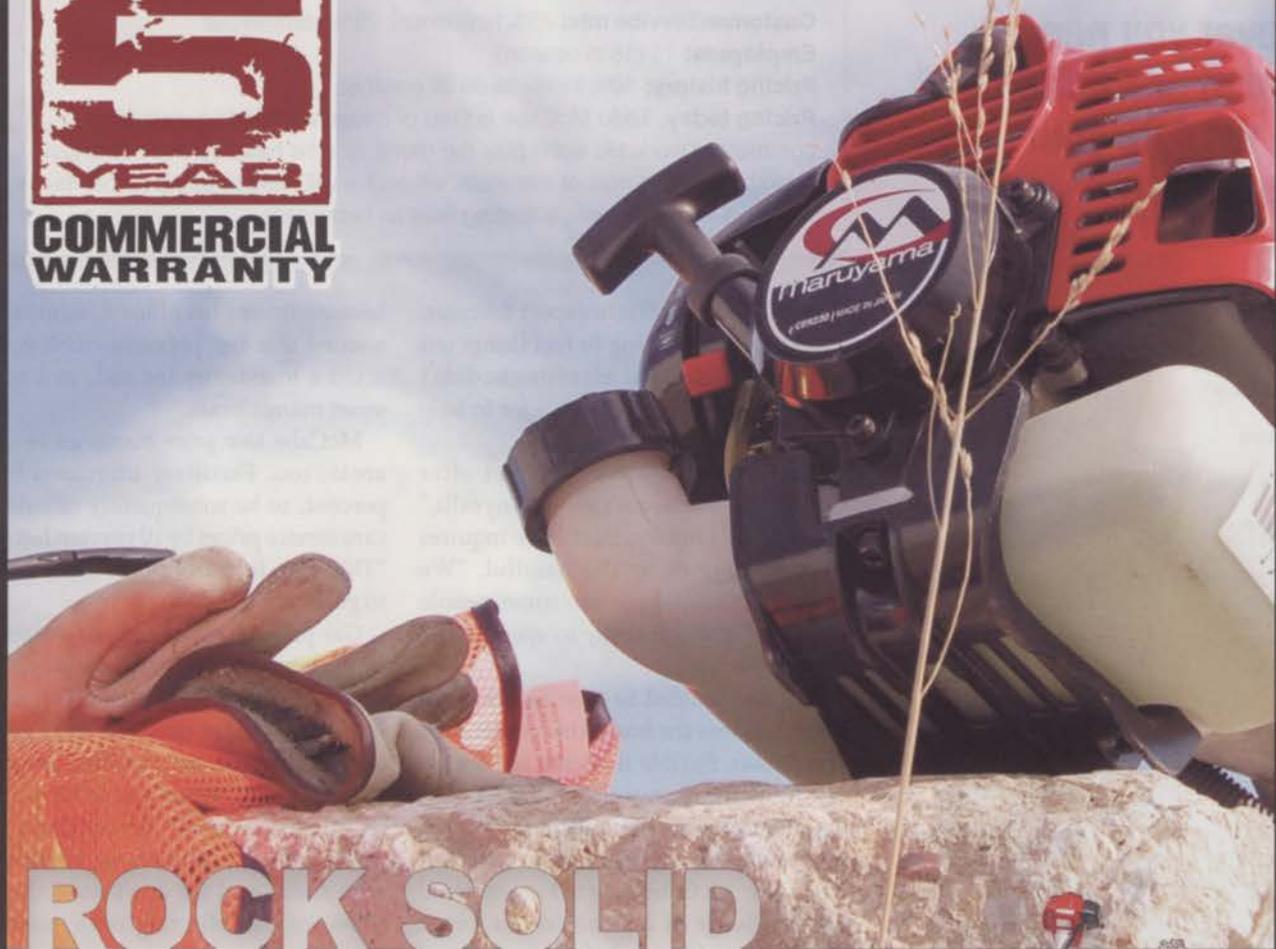
Todd McCabe held back mailing his annual letter to clients this year until January. Each year, before the holidays, he sends clients written communication explaining any rate increases and discussing other news and add-ons available from Landscapes Unlimited, Wilmington, N.C.

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USE READER SERVICE #44

BRIEFCASE /// Pricing up when things are down

Landscapes Unlimited

Principal: Todd McCabe

Location: Wilmington, N.C.

Established: 2000

2008 Revenue: \$750,000

Customer/Service mix: 75% residential; 25% commercial

Employees: 11 (16 in season)

Pricing history: 10% increase on all services

Pricing today: Todd McCabe is tired of desperate bidding wars for commercial work. He won't play the game, and he has decided not to just absorb the rising cost of materials, either. He will raise prices and maintain a wait-and-see approach, adjusting fees as necessary.

"I didn't know what to expect this year, and we put off pricing to feel things out at first," McCabe says, admitting he didn't see the "signs" he was hoping for to help guide his pricing strategy.

His business was eerily quiet after Christmas. "We weren't getting any calls," he says. By January, customer inquiries were coming in by the handful. "We thought, 'O.K., there are some people out there who are ready to spend some money,'" he quips.

McCabe decided to raise prices by 10 percent across the board this year at first, and remain flexible if clients are not receptive to the change. For the most part, his client base is sympathetic toward rising costs and accepting of additional fees. Last year, McCabe enacted an optional fuel surcharge of 2.5 percent, raising it to 3 percent of the cost of services toward the end of summer 2008 when gas prices skyrocketed.

Ninety percent of customers paid the fee, which was explained in a client newsletter. "I noted costs were going up and the fuel surcharge was voluntary," McCabe says. "If the customer felt they should pay the extra fee, great. If not, they could ignore it."

The tremendous response speaks volumes about the importance of maintaining strong customer relationships. "A lot of them knew costs were going up and came to us to say, 'We know fuel has to be killing you now - what are you doing about it?'" McCabe says, noting that he decided to make the charge voluntary

because one of his office administrators warned that her previous employer enacted a mandatory fee and, as a result, upset many clients.

McCabe saw price increases in other areas, too. Fertilizer increased by 30 percent, so he subsequently raised lawn care service prices by 10 percent last year. "This year, fertilizer prices are supposed to go down," he says.

Gas prices have already decreased, so in November 2008 McCabe wiped the optional fuel surcharges off of client invoices. "At that time, we were getting calls and people were backing off of services," he says. When one of his workers questioned the move, he explained, "this is us showing customers we are working with them, and we don't want them to think we are collecting extra money off of the deal."

Competing companies in McCabe's market have taken more drastic pricing measures, he notes. McCabe has spent the last few months watching landscape companies grossly underbid projects. While negotiating with a homeowners' association for a maintenance contract, he progressed to a point where the association president unveiled competing bids, inquiring why McCabe's was higher.

"No one's pricing made any sense," he says. "It was apparent that the other companies didn't measure the property and they were just shooting from the hip with their pricing."

McCabe won a bid for a public project - same desperate bidding story. McCabe

isn't going there.

McCabe's strategy for raising prices this year: "It's all in the presentation," he says simply. And that begins with sales and emphasizing the value of services. "Customers need more education," he says. "New customers won't realize there was a price increase, but we have to help existing customers understand why we have to raise prices."

Letters are important, as is personal contact. McCabe is encouraging even more face-to-face interaction between staff and customers this year. And if his client base hesitates to sign contracts, he will revisit his pricing plan. "I'm not planning on dropping prices by any means," he says. "But if we are not selling any work, then we'll have to do something different."

For now, McCabe increased the hourly rate by \$1. "I think a lot of companies will try to lower prices to be competitive, and that's not going to help anyone," he says. "We need to keep pushing for what we should get paid."

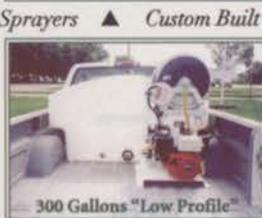
McCabe is tightening internal operations so every dollar he collects from customers will count this year. "We are forcing ourselves to be super-efficient," he says. For instance, McCabe purchased used trucks instead of new vehicles last year. "We can't afford to be wasteful," he says.

McCabe will run leaner, running two maintenance crews rather than three, if necessary. He had hoped to ramp up his operation to include four crews. "We're just going to push harder in maintenance," he says. "The problem is we are in a really small market and there are a lot of landscaping companies - a lot of aggressive ones. We'll all be fighting for work."

McCabe won't balk on pricing for now. "We are all neck-and-neck," he says of his rates compared to others in the area. Of course, that's withstanding the commercial bidding wars he has experienced. Still, McCabe sees a bright side: "Commercial customers are still spending money." **L**

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

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INCOME Over Increase

High profit margins reign over a high customer count at Kinnucan Co.

People in Lake Bluff, Ill., know the Kinnucan name. “The key factors to our success are recognition and reputation in our market,” notes Bob Kinnucan, president, Kinnucan Co. He has run into customers on the golf course or during travels who ask him, “Is this a family business?”

“People think we’ve been here since the beginning of time,” Kinnucan says, remarking that the 38-year old firm relies on customer referrals and word-of-mouth advertising, mostly. “We have consistently found that our business comes from market presence – our equipment on the street and customer referrals,” Kinnucan says.

Service diversity helps the company penetrate its existing customer base more deeply and maintain steady business. Kinnucan Co. provides the full spectrum of landscape offerings, so when one service takes a hit, another can pick up the slack. This year, Kinnucan says design/build is “dropping off,” but numbers are solid thanks to consistent maintenance, snow, holiday and lawn care services.

Meanwhile, Kinnucan Co. has maintained “adequate” profit margins, which translates to about 15 percent net profit in 2008. This year, Kinnucan expects that number to slump to 9 percent – still strong, given the economic climate. He won’t raise prices this year, he decided.

“Over the years, we have lost some clients due to the annual increases, but those losses have not been significant,” Kinnucan says. Healthy attrition makes room for new, quality customers, after all. “We have always been concerned about profitability rather than volume,” he says.

To be sure every job falls within the company’s “target numbers,” Kinnucan Co. employs an internal cost accounting method that involves each manager analyzing daily reports that detail every job completed and billed. The target Kinnucan refers to is profit margin. At year-end, managers study each customer account and adjust fees if they are below the target.

“Some people opt to not renew, but again, our philosophy is to only do work that is profitable as opposed to buying work or going out and bidding work to fill volume,” Kinnucan says.

Sometimes, other landscape companies’ bids are one-half or one-third what Kinnucan Co. estimates for a large job. Kinnucan blames vast cost discrepancies on desperation, not necessarily the economy, though he admits companies are more prone to bid low when their schedules are empty.

“Over the years, more companies have entered the industry, and it has grown exponentially,” Kinnucan relates, noting 2009 is a judgment

Kinnucan Co.

Principal: Bob Kinnucan

Location: Lake Bluff, Ill.

Established: 1970

2008 Revenue: \$4 million

Customer/Service mix: 90% residential and 10% commercial; landscape maintenance, design/build installation, lawn and tree care

Employees: 28 (50 in season)

Pricing history: 3-5% increases

Pricing today: What keeps industry veteran Bob Kinnucan up at night? “Desperate competition under-pricing their services.” Not swaying from the company philosophy to value quality rather than volume, the Kinnucan Co. will maintain last year’s prices and buckle down for a tough year.



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year for unstable firms that compromise profit and have ignored the importance of maintaining a healthy profit margin. Kinnucan doesn't understand how companies bid multi-year contracts with prices that decrease in succeeding years – \$100,000 for the job in 2006, \$90,000 in 2007, \$80,000 in 2008 and so on. "That is foolish," he says. "Why give your profit away?"

Kinnucan's quality-not-quantity philosophy allows him more control over pricing, and the ability to increase fees to cover the rising cost of materials, he says. Quality customers don't mind paying for premium service. "Our clients appreciate our level of service and they understand that to maintain that, we have to increase our prices," Kinnucan says.

When his sales team questions annual price increases, Kinnucan reminds them the company must feed knowledge to price-shopping customers. "Instead of mailing out a bid, we'll present it in

person," Kinnucan says, enforcing an education mission this year, in particular. "The key is to sell your work before, during and after the sale," he reminds. "We must impress upon clients the value of doing business with us, our longevity in the marketplace, quality of what we do, and our ability to back up guarantees."

Kinnucan will adhere to his 2008 pricing structure this season, but he is tightening the reins in-house, and for the first time will not offer salary increases to employees. He also will not put his services "on sale" or compromise his company's golden reputation by caving at the bid negotiation table. He'll continue to cover his costs and then some.

"Labor is any service business' primary cost component, and I don't see what we pay our employees ever going down, barring a major depression," says Kinnucan, who has an economics degree and anticipated that fuel would increase to at least \$100 a barrel two years ago. He was

right, and wrong. Fuel did increase – to \$140 per barrel. Rather than tagging fuel surcharges on to invoices, Kinnucan adjusted his pricing. "With the type of client we have, we just don't like to nickel and dime them," he remarks.

Kinnucan doesn't like the desperation he sees one bit – or across-the-market price drops, which he says indicate the onset of a full-blown depression. "Deflation is worse than inflation," he explains simply, sidetracking into an economics lesson on how economies respond after deflation. The picture isn't pretty.

As for the landscape industry, companies that compromise pricing completely are essentially putting their businesses up for sale. They won't last. "Our industry is so over-capacitated," Kinnucan predicts, "that I believe we'll see about 30 percent of the companies gone in the next 18 to 24 months." **L**

The author is a freelancer based in Bay Village, Ohio.

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New Show, Old Tricks

New administration could cause floodtide of new and renewed pesticide regulations. BY TOM CRAIN

For the past eight years under President George W. Bush's watch, the pesticide industry has enjoyed mostly calm waters. But now that a new administration under President Barack Obama is marching in with a political brigade of some proven industry adversaries and a newly-published report by 28 influential environmental groups containing strong anti-pesticide rhetoric, Washington insiders are forecasting the spigots to open up on churning seas ahead.

The combination of a Democratic Administration and Congress will no doubt revisit the regulatory focus on a number of industries, products and environmental issues, including the use of pesticides.

Just ask Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), an international association headquartered in Washington, D.C. PLANET represents the professional lawn care industry before the U.S. Congress and federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection



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Agency (EPA), Department of Labor, Department of Transportation and the Federal Trade Commission.

"The past eight years under President Bush have been fair and less radical, but the industry is expecting a shift back toward more pressure on pesticides

under an Obama administration," says Delaney.

Allen James, executive director for Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) agrees. RISE is a national not-for-profit trade association representing producers and suppliers of

specialty pesticides and fertilizers based in Washington, D.C. "The players are more aggressive and more biased against our industry," he explains. "We anticipate increased pressures with legislative changes. If there are, they will begin at the congressional level. If it goes to

THE NOT SO MAGNIFICENT 7

1. For the past two years, **Debra Edwards**, Ph.D., Director of the EPA's Office of Pesticide Programs (OPP), has proven to be a competent scientist and reasonable person, according to pesticide industry representatives who've maintained a good working relationship with her. Although she is not a political appointee, most political industry insiders believe she could be influenced by increased pressures from recent political appointees above her who are not favorable toward the pesticide industry.

2. Former EPA Administrator **Carol Browner** will serve as Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change. During her tenure leading the Bill Clinton EPA, Browner was instrumental in the passage of the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA) which broadened the standards that govern the use of pesticides and specifically addressed their effects on human health, particularly that of children.



3. **Lisa Jackson**, President Obama's pick to head the EPA, is a protégé of Carol Browner whom she previously served while at the EPA working in the federal Superfund site remediation program. In Jackson's confirmation testimony before the Senate, she outlined the key objectives of her environmental initiatives, which include a hard look at toxic chemicals.

4. Los Angeles Deputy Mayor **Nancy Sutley**, a former member of the California State Water Resources Control Board, has been nominated to lead the White House Council on Environmental Quality. She has a long record of working on environmental and natural resources policy.



5. U.S. Senator **Barbara Boxer** chairs the Environment and Public Works Committee and advocates for greater regulation of chemicals. Boxer said Jackson's nomination marks a "turning point" for the EPA. "The EPA has hurt people and made them less safe over the last eight years,"

Boxer says of the agency under President Bush. "We have an agency and a set of laws that are already in place to do what must be done. But that agency as it was conceived of by President Nixon needs to be awakened from a deep and nightmarish sleep."



6. U.S. Representative **Henry Waxman** of the 30th District in Los Angeles is the newly-elected chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Like Boxer, he also advocates for greater regulation of chemicals. Waxman has placed toxins under the jurisdiction of the Committee's consumer protection panel. He was instrumental in the passage of The Food Quality Protection Act (Public Law 104-170) which establishes a comprehensive food regulatory system.



7. U.S. Representative **Dennis Cardoza** of the 18th District in Central California is expected again to chair the House Agriculture Committee's Subcommittee on Horticulture and Organic Agriculture, which has jurisdiction over pesticides.



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Want to take the first step in being proactive on pesticide regulation this year? PLANET provides a Legislation Overview section of its Web site (www.landcarenetwork.org/cms/legislation/overview.html) that contains information on federal and state legislation, industry position statements, a representative contact page, and a Lawn and Landscape Issues Communication Toolkit for contractors to use to address concerns in their states.

For information on pesticide products, including manufacturers, pests/weeds/diseases they control, usable locations and states permitted for use, visit *Lawn & Landscape's* MSDS page at www.lawnandlandscape.com/msds.

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hearings, then legislation may come out of that."

The jury is still out on how President Obama himself may act when it comes to pesticide regulations. But the good news is most political experts in the pesticides industry agree any legislative actions that would constrict small businesses or increase their costs won't be catching the light of the President's day while the economy is in the tank.

A PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH. President Obama's administration will be the fourth James has worked with on pesticide issues. "Throughout the four administrations, one thing has remained fairly consistent – the EPA has continued to take a science-based approach to regulation."

Amy Simpson, spokesperson for TruGreen ChemLawn confirms that "Obama and his incoming administration have emphasized how important it is for policy decisions by the EPA, FDA and other related regulatory agencies to be 'science based.'"

This is one of the reasons that Memphis-based TruGreen ChemLawn, the largest U.S. lawn care company, knows pesticide manufacturers must continue to provide sound and compelling science on safety issues regarding their products.

TruGreen is making a number of proactive efforts to ensure it's prepared, including the establishment of extensive, formal environmental stewardship principles, backed by regular monthly and annual audits within each of its regions; joining the EPA's Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program (PESP), a voluntary partnership designed to reduce any potential health and environmental risks associated with pesticide use; introducing a new targeted lawn care program designed to limit the amount of pesticides used in applications; and introducing organic lawn care offerings nationwide in 2010.

"Make no mistake, the green industry is often misrepresented and underrepresented," warns Delaney. "Pesticides, in particular, take a beating in the press and in public opinion. And because of that, any more sympathetic ears to anti-pesticide legislation, no matter how slight, can have a large impact."

A good example lies with *The Transition to Green* report endorsed by 28 leading environmental organizations presented to President Obama's transition team. The report delivered a one-two punch directly to the pesticides industry with its top environmental recommendations including environmental affects on water

and children. As a direct result of this report, The Kids Safe Chemical Act (KSCA) and the Clean Water Restoration Act (CWRA) are bills that are expected to be reintroduced early on in the new session of Congress.

Changes just in the definition of what is "navigable" could affect any application near any small water areas such as man-made lakes and ponds, drainage ditches, and the like. The group also points to storm water in urban areas as a problem that needs more regulation. The goal of KSCA is to produce a strong health-based law that presumes industrial chemicals "are guilty of producing a toxic body burden unless proven otherwise." Both these bills have much better chances of being passed this year.

President Obama has signaled that water quality will be a priority with increased funding for water clean-up and restoration efforts and tougher standards for drinking water. Congressional leaders including U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., began last year by examining a wide range of drinking water contaminants. Some environmental groups are pushing for increased regulatory efforts to reduce pesticide and fertilizer runoff.

"With a year where there is a change in administration, it is more important to be concerned about killing any proposed bills and stopping regulations than focusing efforts on any introductions of new ones concerned with pesticides," says Delaney. "One of the ways that small businesses need to be proactive on these issues is to reach out to the new members of Congress and check out their backgrounds to see if there are any industry connections."

One good example is the election of U.S. Representative Kathy Dahlkemper of Pennsylvania's Third District. She is part owner of Dahlkemper Landscape Architects and Contractors, a major landscaping firm in Erie, Penn., and a PLANET member. For the past 11 years, Rep. Dahlkemper worked as the human resources manager and director of special projects for the firm. She is also cofounder and director of the Lake Erie Arboretum at Frontier Park.



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"We always hear that small business owners don't have the time to be actively involved in pesticide legislation issues," James says. "Instead, they may just hope for the best while focusing on their business. In light of what is going on with increasing pressures (on pesticide legislation and the new administration), hoping for the best won't be enough."

"Anti-pesticide advocates know how to play up emotions," agrees Paul McDonough, chair of PLANET's Government Affairs Committee. "For whatever reason, the green industry tends to shy away from playing that card."

McDonough believes that, for example, if the industry would paint a scenario where the urban dwellers' precious green space would stop being managed by pesticides and other critical tools like they are now, property values, environmental quality, safety and desired aesthetics would be in jeopardy, severely affecting urban quality of life. "That's the type of thing we need to trumpet in front of the media and our legislators," he says.

Both PLANET and RISE advocate that lawn care businesses, particularly now, need to get seriously involved. This means being part of their local lawn care association, becoming active in planning and keeping a thumb in what is going on with the industry.

When lawn care businesses are tuned



out, it can have devastating results, industry experts say. "We have already seen a situation where neighborhood notification for residential pesticide application has become mandatory," James explains. "Do you know what a hassle in cost and time that is for lawn care operators working in this community? If there was pressure from the other side on the local councilperson when the ordinance was being introduced, this probably would never have happened."

Many states in the northeast, particularly Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland and New York, are trying to get legislation passed to start allowing local jurisdictions to regulate pesticides. The Long Island Neighborhood Network helped draft and for the past nine years fought for the passage of neighbor notification of pesticide spraying legislation. As a result, New York State enacted a first-in-the-nation Neighbor Notice law. This legislation requires commercial pesticide applicators to notify homeowners living adjacent to the property being sprayed prior to application. The notice must include the location and date of the application, the name of the pesticide(s) being used, and the company's name, telephone number and business registration number.

"Any of the states that border Canada are of particular concern to us," says

have risen to power at the national level (see "The Not So Magnificent 7" on page 76.). Currently in California, state law preempts local governments from creating their own regulations regarding pesticide use; however, there has been a recent attempt by the legislature to eliminate or modify this statewide preemption to allow localized regulation of pesticide use. Additionally, California has passed legislation to eliminate the use of specified pesticides on school sites (AB 405, Montanez, 2005).

With respect to pesticides generally, California's Green Chemistry Initiative aims to minimize the use of toxins and develop "safer" alternatives and, additionally, provide greater information on the use of chemicals in products. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger recently signed into law regulations authorizing the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) to identify and prioritize chemicals of concern and develop safer alternatives. Another new law would establish an online Toxics Information Clearinghouse.

Delaney cautions: "Those to watch out for are the career people (within the EPA or other related regulatory agencies) who have had a record of being less balanced on regulating pesticides. If they haven't been successful in the past, they may now have new support from newly-appointed

"Pesticides take a beating in the press and in public opinion. Because of that, any more sympathetic ears to anti-pesticide legislation can have a large impact." – Tom Delaney

James. "Canada has been successful in severely restricting pesticides even when it comes to residential lawns. Because these states share borders, they are influenced by decisions made by their northern neighbor."

As is often the case, California may well serve as a bellwether for legislative efforts at the federal level.

The Golden State has created its own EPA with its own independent review of pesticides. Many home-grown "anti-pesticide" legislators

political officials above them.

"We could see renewed efforts to ban such pesticides as 2,4-D or herbicides such as monosodium methanearsonate (MSMA); however, what could throw a monkey wrench into this type of action is how it could affect small businesses by killing jobs or costing too much," Delaney adds. "That's the industry's ace in the hole for now." (L)

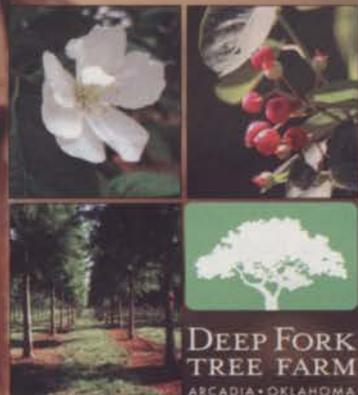
The author is a freelance writer based in Akron, Ohio.

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USE READER SERVICE #54

A FE Investment

Are hazards lurking at your job sites? Effective safety inspections can save your company both money and lives.

BY BARBARA MULHERN



A maintenance worker is in a rush and doesn't check the condition of the slope he's mowing. His mower overturns on a slope still wet from morning dew.

Another crewmember begins work at a job site without carefully checking for rocks, stones and other debris. The rapidly moving blades of his mower shoot a couple of large stones toward his eyes.

These incidents and others can easily occur at a job site when time isn't taken to perform a safety inspection and a job site hazard assessment before work begins. Requiring these can reduce the risk of serious injuries and job-related injury costs.

SAFE START. Although landscape service workers make up less than 1 percent of the total U.S. workforce, they experience 3.5 percent of all occupational injuries. That means an average of 197 workers in the landscape industry die from job-related injuries each year.

This finding comes from a new fact



sheet, "Fatal Injuries Among Landscape Services Workers," developed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

The sheet defines landscape services workers as those who complete such jobs as landscape and irrigation installation, lawn care, tree removal, general landscape maintenance and snow removal.

Since landscaping is such a high hazard profession, making safety a high priority is critical. "With any safety program, if you're proactive vs. reactive, you are preventing an accident before it happens rather than waiting for it to happen and then reacting to it," says Rick Rollo, vice-president of Kujawa Enterprises, Inc. in Oak Creek, Wis. KEI, an \$11-million firm, promotes a companywide safety climate for employees.

If you don't already have a formal program in place, here are some tips on where to begin.

- ✓ Require employees to promptly report all hazards and potential hazards. These can be reported to a crew leader or other manager. Make sure you follow up by taking prompt action and document all corrective actions in writing.

- ✓ Designate certain persons to conduct job site hazard assessments and safety inspections. These can be crew leaders, other supervisors or company managers. Also train your crewmembers to be on the

lookout for hazards at all times. Certain hazards, such as weather conditions or additional equipment entering the job site, can change at any time.

- ✓ Develop checklists or other tools. Have management review any findings.

- ✓ Hold your crew leaders/supervisors who are responsible for following up on hazards accountable. Make this a formal part of his or her job duties, and include a review of that person's safety responsibilities in annual performance reviews.

At the Acres Group, a \$46-million full-service firm, managers who run multiple crews and facility human resources representatives are responsible for completing written safety inspections. They turn checklists into the human resources department, and alert shop personnel to truck or trailer issues.

"The biggest thing in having our managers do these inspections is that they have the most impact on the crew leader. It promotes more dialog and that raises their safety awareness," says Maureen Scheitz the Wauconda, Ill.-based company's vice-president of human resources.

At KEI, the company has developed job safety analyses (JSA) worksheets. The JSA worksheet on mowing grass, for example, includes a listing of the basic job steps, potential accidents or hazards, and recommended safe job procedures. (For more information or a sample JSA worksheet, contact Rick Rollo at rick.rollo@keiorange.com.)

Fernando Delgado, an employee at KEI in Oak Creek, Wis., checks his knee pads before starting work at a residential site.

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STRATEGIES

FAIL SAFE

Both NIOSH (www.cdc.gov/niosh) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA – www.osha.gov) have many English and Spanish training resources available. The new fact sheet, "Fatal Injuries Among Landscape Services Workers," NIOSH publication No. 2008-144, can be downloaded in English at no cost from www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2008-144/pdfs/2008-144.pdf and in Spanish from www.cdc.gov/spanish/niosh/topics/jardineria.html.

Two other good sources for bilingual safety training materials are the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET – www.LandcareNetwork.org) and the Ohio State University Tailgate Safety Training for Landscape and Horticultural Services tailgate training lessons (http://www.cete.org/Tailgate_List.asp?list=All&Mode=Trainer).

Training supervisors and others who perform job site hazard assessments so they know what to look for is what makes a safety program successful. "It is important to explain to them what you are trying to accomplish and why so they look at the job site with a different critical analysis and not just at the condition of the turf or the trees," Rollo says. "They have to look at hazards. Doing both at once doesn't work.

They will immediately flip into 'quality' rather than 'safety.'"

At the Acres Group, safety inspection checklists are reviewed at monthly company safety committee meetings to ensure identified problems are taken care of. If an identified hazard hasn't been taken care of by the time the checklist is reviewed by the safety committee, it will continue to be addressed at subsequent meetings.

Many good, free resources are available to help you train your crew leaders, crewmembers and other employees in safety-related issues, including hazards that may turn up at job sites. An excellent place to start is with your insurer. Find out what resources that person has available and if he or she would periodically conduct random, unannounced job site hazard assessments as part of the cost of your insurance premium. **L**

The author is a Wisconsin-based writer who has specialized in green industry safety issues the past 15 years. She has provided safety-related services to the Professional Landcare Network and Turfgrass Producers International. She also speaks at green industry conferences nationwide on safety and OSHA compliance issues. Reach her at bamu100@aol.com.

Learn more online



For a sample safety inspection checklist, visit the March Online Exclusives at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

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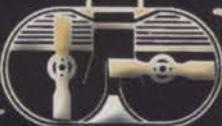
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USE READER SERVICE #57

Varying plant height, texture and color enhance this home's facade.



Center Stage

Landscape Design's new outdoor staging service appeals to homeowners in a pinch to sell. BY LINDSEY GETZ

With the failing economy, selling a home has become more challenging than ever. The most recent statistics from the National Association of Realtors show there are 3.68 million existing homes available for sale, representing a total housing inventory of a 9.3-month supply at the current sales pace. And the national median existing home price for all housing types dropped from \$207,000 in December 2007 to \$175,400 in December 2008 – a 15.3 percent decline.

As oversupply affects price, competition to sell becomes increasingly fierce.

That's why Chris Cipriano is offering home sellers an edge – an exterior home staging service.

While many homeowners use interior home staging techniques to try and sell their homes faster in this tough market, by ignoring the exterior, Cipriano, the founder and CEO of Mahwah, N.J.-based Landscape Design, a custom landscape and swimming pool firm, says they may be missing more than one opportunity to unload their current abodes.

"When it comes to selling a home, the first impression is *everything*," Cipriano stresses. "The outside of a home is the first thing potential buyers see – a home buyer has to drive by the property and then cross the landscape to get inside. It's such a great selling point to have a well-prepared exterior. A homeowner needs to make any effort they can so their home stands apart from the rest."

Pricing for the outdoor home staging service has an extensive range, based on each client's specific needs. For do-it-yourselfers who are just looking for professional advice on what landscape elements would make their home more attractive, the pricing starts at \$300 for a consultation. A basic outdoor staging project incorporates the same elements as an indoor staging project would – removing the clutter and cleaning up the overall appearance. But home staging can include bigger projects as well. Cipriano says his company just recently completed a \$30,000 masonry and pool repair for a seller looking to make their home more

marketable to house hunters.

To date, the service has been quite successful and requests continue to grow. Cipriano is marketing the service through multiple channels. He is creating press releases, sharing information through the company's monthly newsletter, and even marketing directly to realtors. Plus, word-of-mouth through Cipriano's current client base has also been productive – especially after a staged home sells. A home in Allendale, N.J., for instance, was sold within a month of implementing some of the landscape recommendations Cipriano and his crew recommended. The homeowners were relocating and under a time constraint, so selling in a timely manner was worth their investment in outdoor staging services.

Cipriano says for his business, offering this new service has also been an effective way to meet new clientele. "They may be a seller now, but at some point they will be a buyer, and when they move into their new homes and need to upgrade the landscaping, I've already built a relationship with them," he explains. "We've found a way to make a minimal investment while still making a great connection with the homeowner."

While reports are saying the economy may not turn around for a year or more, Cipriano isn't worried about the life of this new service once things do begin to brighten up. Even when competition in the market slows, there will always be sellers out there who want to ensure they get their full asking price. Cipriano believes outdoor staging will continue to be an easy way to make that happen.

The author is a freelancer based in Royersford, Pa.



Overflowing plantings add depth to this Cresskill, N.J. landscape.



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On Productivity Patrol

Measuring your company's overall field productivity can be somewhat perplexing. Are your crews getting better and becoming more efficient? Is the training you are investing in paying off? How do you stack up compared to other companies within the green industry? And how do you go about measuring your company's field productivity? Let me give you some techniques to think about.

Three companies come to mind that will help us understand how to use this information. The first is a commercial installation company in New England that I have tracked for more than 20 years. In 1990, installation crewmembers generated approximately \$90,000 in revenue per year. By 1996, this figure had risen to \$120,000 and today it hovers between \$150,000 to 160,000. Put another way, a 10-person crew for this company would have billed roughly \$900,000 in 1990, \$1.2 million in 1996 and \$1.5 million today.

The two other companies are in the same geographical market. Both install high-end design-build projects. One company produces about \$170,000 in revenue annually per full-time field employee while the other only produces about \$115,000 per full-time field employee.

Why did the company in New England experience a 65-percent-plus improvement in productivity over an 18-year period? And why does the one residential design-build firm bill \$55,000 more per field employee per year than its competitor?

The answer to both questions is two-fold. Both of the high-production companies have mechanized effectively. They not only have the right equipment on the jobs, but they also have the right people on the equipment. To use a phrase from Jim Collin's book, *Good to Great*, these CEOs have gotten the wrong people off of the bus, the right people on the bus and the right people in the right seats. The crews for both of these companies get things done right the first time. They also require minimal supervision. Crewmembers are highly mechanized, highly skilled, highly motivated, highly paid and extremely efficient.

Measuring your company's productivity can be simpler than you might imagine. Multiply the average number of field crew members that you had during the 2008 year by the benchmarks above. Then compare the revenue that you actually had to the benchmark figures. They should be close. Remember not to include revenue generated by subcontractors working for you as it will not accurately reflect your crew's production. Track these figures from year-to-year to see if they are improving. The trend line can tell you an awful lot about the direction of your company's productivity and the effectiveness of your training program. 



JIM HUSTON

presides over J.R. Huston Consulting, a firm specializing in construction and services management in the green industry. For more information, call 800-451-5588, e-mail huston@gje.net or visit www.jrhuston.biz.

INDUSTRY TARGETS



There are some standard benchmarks for employees and what they should bring in revenue-wise. A full-time installation crewmember should generate a minimum of **\$100,000** in revenue per year (or nine months for seasonal companies). A three-person crew should therefore produce a minimum of **\$300,000** in annual revenue. This revenue figure includes materials, equipment, etc. but it does not include any subcontractor work. A full-time maintenance crewmember should generate approximately **\$55,000 to \$65,000** in annual revenue. An irrigation technician should generate just more than **\$100,000** per year while a lawn care technician should generate in the neighborhood of **\$120,000 to \$140,000** per year. These figures will vary somewhat but they are pretty accurate for most parts of North America where the season is at least nine months in duration. Regions with shorter seasons will see these annual numbers decrease accordingly.

This article was adapted from James Huston's books, *How to Price Landscape & Irrigation Projects* and *A Critical Analysis of the MOORS Estimating System*. Huston is a member of the American Society of Professional Estimators and is one of only two certified professional landscape estimators in the world. To purchase Huston's books, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/store.

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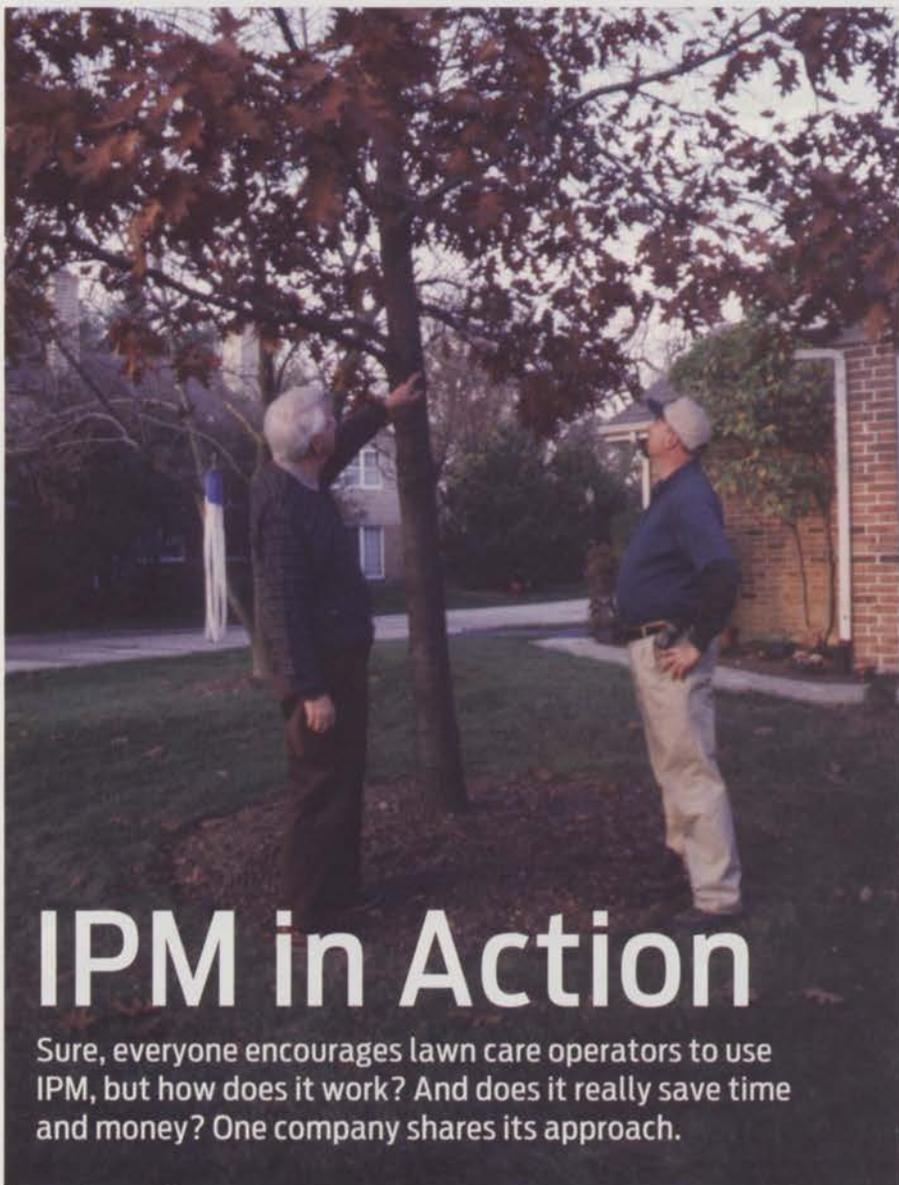
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Scouting for pests before application is one trademark of IPM. Photo: L&L files

IPM in Action

Sure, everyone encourages lawn care operators to use IPM, but how does it work? And does it really save time and money? One company shares its approach.

Following IPM practices for grub management prevents the application of more than 16,000 pounds of product for a total cost savings of \$17,000. – Broccolo Tree & Lawncare

BY TOM CRAIN

Broccolo Tree and Lawncare's steady annual 10 percent revenue growth isn't the expected result of heaping tons of advertising dollars into the local media (it's all word of mouth); offering rock-bottom pricing (although they are competitive); or cutting labor costs (employees are paid much higher than the industry standard).

Rather, Broccolo's success is due largely to its mastery over and commitment to IPM that it has enjoyed since its first employee, founder and owner Laurie Broccolo, scouted her first grub 19 years ago. Even the last four digits of its phone number is "4-IPM."

Fully 50 percent of Broccolo's revenue

is attributed to IPM. Maintenance and landscape design rounds out the rest. Since the company opened up shop in Upstate New York, it has served 2,500 clients. During the peak of the growing season, a dozen technicians each handle between 20 to 25 lawns per day with an average payout of \$500 per year.

"More people are calling us because of our environmental practices," says Terry Schmitz, IPM Manager for Broccolo. "They are looking for different approaches to protect and beautify their lawns and landscapes. With that, we can then forge a partnership between them, ourselves and the environment... all three working together."

Even though many of Broccolo's customers have an environmental-consciousness, they still want to see competitive rates. "We will make comparisons to traditional methods vs. IPM to show our customers just how competitive we can be," says Schmitz. "Most often, it's a 50/50 split in cost between inspection and application. But, as the season progresses, there can be huge variables."

Most years, Broccolo treats on average no more than 5 percent of its clients' lawns for grubs. Schmitz figures that following IPM practices for grub management prevents the application of more than 16,000 pounds of product for a total cost savings to the company of \$17,000. They reserve

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SUSTAINABILITY

the cost savings for paying their employees, who have to conduct additional scouting and training to practice IPM, higher wages.

Most of Broccolo's IPM clients are residential. Schmitz explains one of the reasons why Broccolo doesn't have many commercial customers is due to the huge turnover of the grounds managers who need to buy into and be familiar with IPM over a period of time. "Most are in and out within two years or so," he says. "Also, many budgets are run by committees and committees can change often."

Broccolo's employee turnover stays below 5 percent for many reasons (the industry average is 20 to 30 percent). Its 20 staff members are well paid for their environmental expertise and persuasive communication skills on IPM. They are also empowered with strategic planning, enjoy flexible scheduling and work in teams (sometimes as many as five technicians are assigned to a property at one time), Schmitz says.

Broccolo's extensive ongoing employee training and research is closely attached to the horticultural (IPM) program at nearby Cornell Cooperative Extension, a leading institution for IPM training and R&D. The company generally hires Cornell horticulture students as interns for seasonal work. To handle its steady growth in maintenance and landscape design, it hires out eight to 10 subcontractors.

Broccolo attributes a mere 10 percent of new clients calling them specifically because they want to align themselves with a company that offers environmental alternatives in lawn care. "One of our biggest challenges is educating new customers about IPM," says Schmitz. "The concept of a good lawn care program with a goal to minimize spraying is still difficult for the customer to grasp," says Schmitz. "Many of our new customers still believe they have to blanket their entire lawns with insecticides to be effective. They are unaware of other alternatives. When we explain that on average only 3 to 5 percent of the entire square footage of their property is necessary to treat for grubs every year, they are taken aback." The highest spike for treatment was 27 percent during a severe drought period during the late '90s.

Despite Broccolo's success embracing IPM, Schmitz believes that IPM (to the majority of the industry and its customers) is still not taking hold the way it should be. "There is still the mentality that 'you have to spray or its not going to work,'" he says. "Those habits are hard to break. There is still room for growth on everyone's part." **L**

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

AN EXPERT WEIGHS IN

While almost everyone uses at least some aspects of IPM in their business, the full integration of all concepts, starting with annual planning to monitoring to scouting to implementing solutions is where this principle really begins to show its impact.

Keeping your IPM plan current makes good sense because IPM is knowledge based. The more you know about the pest you are trying to manage, the more efficient and environmentally friendly your plan will be. That makes good sense in both good times and bad. Remember, IPM is not about eliminating pesticides, but rather it is all about using all the tools available.



Many of the new products are not only effective against one or two pests, but in many cases they are broad spectrum and one well-timed application can remedy a myriad of problems. In addition, some of the newer products provide excellent residual activity. This may contribute to the broad spectrum of control

by providing protection over a longer period of time when a variety of pests may occur throughout the season. As a result, a good working knowledge of pest biology and the factors that increase the likelihood of an outbreak can be used in combination with the improved performance of many of today's products to essentially get "more bang for your buck." This might be through the use of lower application rates, fewer site visits and applications, and fewer call backs. I believe that "efficiency" may be one of the biggest attributes of IPM.

Also, I think we can fairly safely say that with the new administration in the White House and the array of science advisors who have been selected, environmental issues are going to be even more in the forefront. I think IPM helps address these issues in several ways. First, it considers all options for pest control from traditional synthetic products to organic and/or biological products, and cultural practices, such as mowing height and fertility. It ensures that whatever the product selection, it is used only when necessary and used properly.

Finally, we can look at the driving force behind IPM – knowledge. We can use our knowledge to give clients and homeowners a sense of confidence that we are professionals who utilize the latest research and technology to do the job right. This is an important selling point to consumers and an equally important business plan to be cutting edge, economically solvent, and on target with the direction the industry is moving.

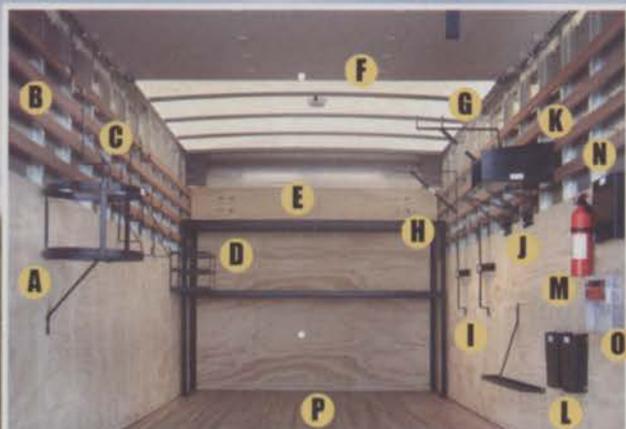
Utilizing valid IPM concepts will keep you up to speed and current in your operation regardless of the economy, the latest fad, or the who's in the White House. IPM is good business.

Rick Brandenburg is an entomology professor at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, N.C. He has more than 30 years of experience in the turf industry.



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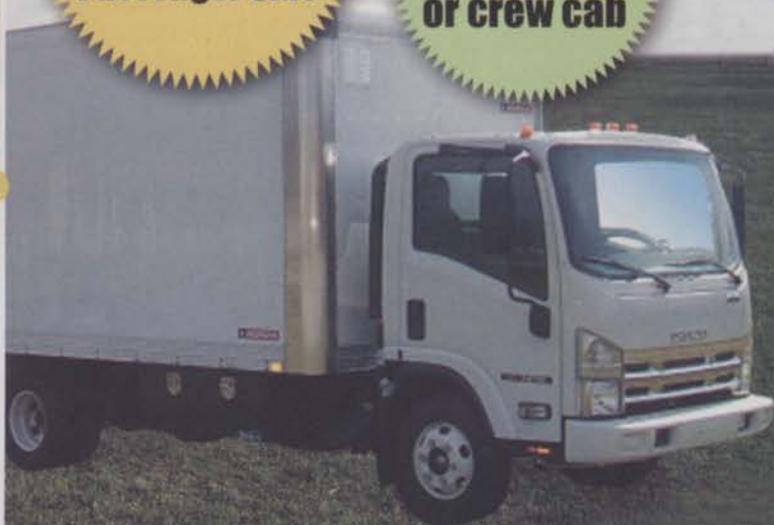
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Irrigation professionals in Georgia seek profit while battling drought, water restrictions and a faltering economy.

It was June 2007, and irrigation contractor Edward Klaas was in a great position – he was turning down business because he had too much work to do. And this was despite a watering restriction limiting homeowners to irrigating three days per week.

In a very short amount of time, however, the picture changed drastically, according to the owner/vice president of Roswell, Ga.-based Southern Sprinkler Systems and the current president of the Georgia Irrigation Association.

“We haven’t lost market share to other companies, but people can’t use their irrigation systems and, as a result, have to cancel their contracts.”

In fall 2007, Klaas’ business averaged 47 calls per day. That fell to only three calls per day in the fall of 2008. “We laid off staff; we had no choice,” he says. “People just aren’t thinking about irrigation systems. This has been devastating to our business.”

The Georgia landscaping industry lost a third of its market share value, decreasing from \$8 billion to \$3 billion after the implementation of severe water restrictions in September 2007, says Jim McCutcheon, CEO of Austell, Ga.-based HighGrove Partners. And the UGA Center for Urban Agriculture reported a 20-percent reduction in industry sales over the first six months of 2008, adding that employers in the industry have shed an estimated 24,000 full-time, year-round employees and 15,600 part-time workers.

Add up these variables: a drought, water restrictions and a faltering economy that seems to be getting worse before it gets better. If this sounds like the perfect storm to kill an entire industry in one state, it should. However the question remains: Is the irrigation industry dead or simply on life support, particularly in Georgia where conditions are the worst? Experts have varying opinions but seem to agree those in the industry shouldn’t give up yet.



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BY ANGELA DYER

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They do need to look for other opportunities in the meantime, continue to educate their customers, and see what the 2009 irrigation season has up its sleeve.

RESTRICTIONS & TROUBLE SPOTS. The northern half of Georgia is currently under a level IV drought response and has been since September 2007. This basically means there is no outside watering allowed with a few exceptions. One exception is for new landscape installation, but contractors and homeowners have to register with the state in order to water new installations. (See sidebar *Reality Bites* on page 99.)

"There is a 10-week establishment period for plant material and then after that you can do hand watering between midnight and 10 a.m.," says Bob Scott, president of Conyers, Ga.-based Irrigation Consultant Services and current president of the Rochester, Mass.-based American Society of Irrigation Consultants.

The Georgia Green Industry Association has hopes of changing the permitted uses in this level to include drip and low-flow irrigation, says Chris Butts, director of environmental, legislative and public relations for the Epworth, Ga.-based organization.

"The restrictions in Georgia are still status quo," explains Andy Smith, external affairs director for the Irrigation Association, Falls Church, Va. "If you are in the northern part of Georgia, the watering ban is still in effect because of Lake Lanier. It is still about 22 feet down from its rim elevation and right now it should be higher."

Other areas are feeling the squeeze from restrictions as well. According to Smith, another battleground to watch is the South Florida Water Management District. "They have established a desire to have a year round one-day-per-week water restriction," he says. "I'm not convinced that one day a week will work given the

specifics of the sandy soil base they are in – a situation where light frequent water applications would give you the best water conservation."

South Florida is not alone. Smith says other states to watch for trouble include Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Also Colorado and Utah rely on the snow pack for water, and they could be hard hit if they do not get the snow pack they need.

It's not always just drought that can cause these water shortages. Sometimes the water utilities are struggling to manufacture water and ship it out to the consumer. "There hasn't been a lot of money for investment in infrastructure, so some of this is a production and conveyance problem as well," Smith says.

He added that ultimately contractors and homeowners are using a lot of drinking water for irrigation and that is not necessary. However, there is no secondary supply, so drinking-quality water has to be

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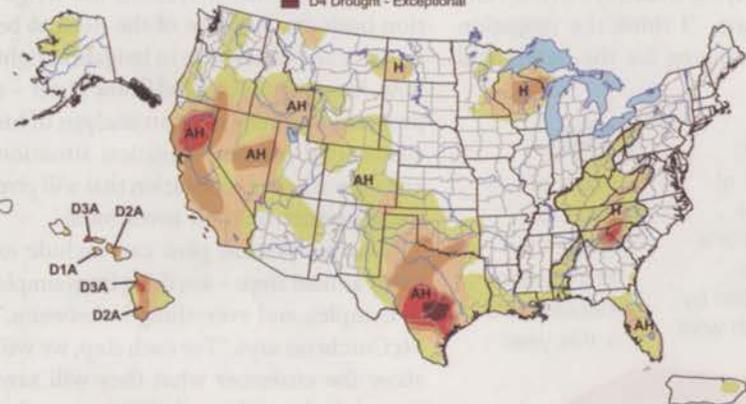
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Reality Bites

Portions of Georgia and other areas of the country are under Level IV Drought Restrictions, and the rules can be confusing. According to the Georgia Green Industry Association, the following is allowed under these restrictions:

Intensity:	Drought Impact Types:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> D0 Abnormally Dry D1 Drought - Moderate D2 Drought - Severe D3 Drought - Extreme D4 Drought - Exceptional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Delineates dominant impacts A = Agricultural (crops, pastures, grasslands) H = Hydrological (water)



1. Established landscapes can be hand-watered by any person:

- For 25 minutes between midnight and 10 a.m. (one person with one garden hose that has a spray nozzle that shuts off automatically).
- Odd-numbered addresses: Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday
- Even-numbered addresses: Monday, Wednesday and Saturday

2. Newly installed landscapes may be watered by any person (contractor or homeowner) who has registered with the Outdoor Water Use Registration Program (must receive a new certificate after first 10 weeks expire).

- Watering is allowed for 30 days during a period of 10 weeks.
- Watering is restricted to the hours of midnight and 10 a.m.
- Can water three days/week for 10 consecutive weeks on an odd/even schedule (above).
- During the installation, new landscapes may be watered in at any time of the day.
- Installed irrigation systems may be used to water only new landscape installation areas.

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used for landscape needs. "As an industry, we have no control over where we get our water," Smith says.

THE CHANGING CONTRACTOR. Restrictions and a tough economy mean contractors in drought areas are being hit hard.

Although situations like Klaas' are extremely grim, others in the field are not calling the industry dead by any means.

"High-end residential is still active and there is some activity with commercial and municipal clients," Scott says. "Where

it is really hurting is with homeowners and builders, and that is hurting everybody."

A contractor in North Carolina with no water restrictions sees the industry developing and changing but not dying. Todd McCabe, president, Landscapes Unlimited, Wilmington, N.C., saw some restrictions in his area last fall but he is under no water restrictions currently.

"It's not a dying industry here by any means," he says. "I think the irrigation industry is changing for the better and

becoming more efficient."

McCabe's company is now using more drip irrigation as he has realized it is the most efficient method. Scheduling is also an area where they are saving water. "I'd say we've cut back as much as 50 percent of water that we are using just by cutting the schedule," he says.

Making changes and saving their customers money is exactly the way McCutcheon has increased his irrigation business. Because of the need to be creative and innovative in irrigation right now, his company created KnowWater – a program where he does an analysis of his customer's current irrigation situation and offers them a renovation that will give them a return on their investment.

"Our renovation plan can include as many as nine steps – anything from simple to complex and everything in between," McCutcheon says. "For each step, we will show the customer what they will save over time by making the recommended



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changes. We make all kinds of recommendations from pressure reductions to switching to drip irrigation, and more."

After implementing KnowWater last year his company actually doubled to tripled the amount of irrigation work they did since the previous year, "even in a time when we're not allowed to turn on the systems full time," McCutcheon adds. "Irrigation business is not dead in Georgia or anywhere else."

With a program like this, educating the customer is crucial. Recently, McCutcheon held a symposium to educate his clients on the drought situation, what they can do to conserve water, and what this means for their irrigation systems.

There are opportunities out there, he says. "I think people have to understand where their customers are feeling pain and what is driving customer decisions," McCutcheon explains. "Talk to your customers and find out where other contractors are coming up short."

Sherry Loudermilk, executive director of the Georgia Green Industry Association in Epworth, Ga., agrees that educating the consumer is key. Because of the media using terms such as "water bans" instead of "restrictions," many consumers assume they cannot use water at all or are so confused they just turn it off. "It's important for irrigation professionals to educate consumers because there are things they can do, especially if you are planning a new installation."

As McCutcheon says, "if everybody plans to run their businesses the same way they did in 2007 and 2008, they won't be here - they won't survive."

ON THE HORIZON. With all of the problems from 2008 continuing into this year - drought, economy, and restrictions - many wonder if 2009 will bring any relief at all.

"It all depends on what happens with the restrictions, and we've been given

indications from the environmental protection division that we're going to have very little if any relief at all this year," Klaas says.

The one thing that could offer a bit of relief is if drip, microspray and low-flow irrigation became exempt uses to the restrictions as they have in some states, Butts says, adding, "if we can't turn the water on even a little bit, then this is all kind of futile."

Scott believes there is a chance to see some improvement later in the year with more money availability, but it will take quite awhile for the building sector to see any economic improvements.

Most agree this year will prove to be rough, and no matter what happens irrigation professionals will need to be prepared to make changes, educate their clients, be innovators and become more efficient in their water use. **L**

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

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Can Irrigation Really Be Smart?

The Irrigation Association has announced their new tag line, "Smart practices, sustainable solutions." It has declared July "Smart Irrigation Month." Their Smart Water Applications Technologies (SWAT) initiative tests and markets water conserving products. Members of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants provide "smart water solutions."

The American Heritage dictionary defines "smart" as: "characterized by sharp, quick thought; bright." From an irrigation system standpoint, that would require the products to provide some independent thinking.

An irrigation system is made up of different components that when properly installed irrigate the landscape. You can install "smart" products but unless each part of the system is well-thought-out, the system will not be "smart" as a whole. Each component and each decision that goes into the design and installation as well as management, needs to be a smart one. Only in this way will there be "smart" irrigation systems.

Today, we hear a lot about smart controllers. Beginning Jan. 1, 2012, the State of California has mandated their installation and the California Model Water Ordinance could move that up to the beginning of 2010. Other states, such as Texas, are considering it as well.

Recently, there have been a lot of studies performed on smart controllers to determine how much water they save and, not surprisingly, the results have been mixed. First of all, we should not be measuring whether the controller saves water, but whether it operates the system efficiently. If a system has poor uniformity and after the smart controller is installed the lawn shows brown spots, is that the controller's fault? It still operates the controller for the proper time period in an efficient way, but it can't anticipate the bad uniformity or coverage. Putting a smart controller on a dumb irrigation system will not make the system smart. In reality, it will usually use more water, not less.

Secondly, smart controllers will not be effective if they are not installed properly. These controllers require input to make logical decisions, including soil type, plant type, crop coefficients, slopes, root zone depth, precipitation rates and more. Default settings also need to be customized for each site. This takes time and education. Training is imperative and constant, requiring an investment of both time and money by the irrigator and the customer. Because of their sophistication, controllers also need to be adjusted to maximize efficiency and water savings.

Although an irrigation system can be made up of smart products, the designer, installer and manager of the system all need to be making "smart" decisions. By designing, installing and managing a complete system with water efficient products, proper hydro-zoning, correct hydraulics and a customized schedule, you can have a smart irrigation system. So maybe it should be "July is the month to make smart irrigation decisions," but, in actuality, you should be practicing smart irrigation all the time. It's not only the right thing to do, it will make you a better irrigator and increase your bottom line. **L**

"You can install 'smart' products, but unless each part of the system is well-thought-out, the system will not be 'smart.'"



BRIAN VINCHESI

is president of Irrigation Consulting, Inc., an irrigation design and consulting firm that designs irrigation systems throughout the world. He can be reached at irrigation@gie.net or 978-433-8972.

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USE READER SERVICE #67



Deep Freeze

Don't let winter injury from numerous cold weather culprits get the best of your customers' lawns. Follow these tips for coaxing turf out of hibernation.

Many think lawns go dormant and just rest over the winter months, unscathed, until spring when they awaken to the sunshine and warmth and perk up in their typical lush, green fashion. That's not always the case, however, depending on the type of winter the lawn endured. The 2008-2009 winter in many areas had some above average snowfall. And a persistent snow cover can create warmer, insulated conditions near the soil surface, resulting in fungal activity – snow mold, for instance.

Then there's the ice – freezing and thawing does a number on a lawn, especially if the ice lingers for a period of time.

Even voles, or meadow mice, are known to create turf destruction during the winter.

But all hope is not lost if you encounter some winter damage on your clients' lawns this spring. There are some ways to coax these jade carpets into recovery, as well as some preventive measures you can follow in fall to prepare turf for tough winters.

ICY HOT. Periods of snow, followed by warm temperatures, then freezing temperatures, can create a thick layer of ice on a lawn. Most cool-season turfgrasses can handle these conditions. "But extended ice cover of 45 to 60 days can lead to turfgrass death," says Steve Rackliffe, extension instructor, department of plant science, University of Connecticut.

Ice problems usually occur in shaded areas or in depressions found throughout the lawn. Once ice damage occurs, give the lawn time to recover. "Often times the top growth can experience die back while the

crown and roots remain healthy," Rackliffe says. "To determine if the turf is alive, examine the roots to see if they are white and succulent."

To reduce the potential for ice damage on properties susceptible to it, Rackliffe recommends contractors choose turf varieties that exhibit a higher degree of cold hardiness, such as Kentucky bluegrass or tall fescue over perennial ryegrass. Also, installing drainage tiles in low areas of the property can help remove surface water.

MOLDY MESS. Areas with snow drifts or that suffer the burden of deposited snow from snow plows are usually those that experience snow mold. Other culprits that contribute to this fungus include excessive thatch, shade and debris (such as leaves or straw), and poor drainage, according to the University of Illinois Extension.

During the wet, cold weather of early spring, snow mold may be highly visible as matted, crusty looking areas. As conditions dry out, snow mold will gradually disappear but infected areas may remain in the form of weak or even dead turf.

The two most common snow mold diseases are pink and gray snow mold, the latter being of greater importance to residential and commercial lawns.

To encourage rapid recovery of infected areas, aggressively rake or brush the unsightly matted patches in early spring, Rackliffe suggests. And to help reduce the incidence of snow mold the following year, use slow-release forms of nitrogen when applying fall fertilizer treatments, mow

lawns until completely dormant and manage thatch via aeration or dethatching.

VILE VOLES. Voles like to make runways or winding trails under the snow in lawns as they feed on grass blades and roots and remain protected from hungry predators; these paths can be seen as damage once snow melts. Voles are about 4 to 6 inches long and brownish-gray in color. Damage is frequently mistaken as mole damage, but moles are not active during winter and actually tunnel below the soil surface.

Lawns usually fill-in as conditions warm in spring, the University of Illinois Extension says, but severe damage may require some overseeding.

Prevent vole damage in your clients lawns by mowing lawns until they are dormant and leaving a final height of about 2 inches. Also, clean up any excessive leaves and vegetation on or near lawns as these provide cover for voles.

WINTERKILL. According to Kevin Frank at the department of crop and soil sciences, Michigan State University, winterkill is a general term used to define turf loss during cold months. Winterkill can be caused by a combination of factors including crown hydration, desiccation, low temperature kill, ice sheets and snow mold.

Keys to success for renovating winterkilled areas, Frank advises, are to divert traffic from newly seeded areas, apply light fertilizer applications to stimulate growth, and irrigate to ensure the seedbed or sod is moist throughout the establishment period.

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Start Your Bidding

Landscape business owner launches an online auction for the green industry.

Todd Graus' mind is constantly active. During the spring and summer months in Jackson, Wyo., he can focus on Green Turf Lawns, his 25-year-old, \$1-million revenue lawn and tree care business. But Graus gets antsy once winter arrives. "There's snow on the ground six months out of the year in Jackson, and I'm a multitasker and can't sit still," he says, admitting while many other landscapers in the area turn to snowplowing to curb their restless tendencies, he does not.

But he does have an outlet for his unrest – Green Applicator Auctions (www.greenapplicatorauctions.com), which many are starting to call the eBay for the landscape industry.

Graus launched the green industry-specific equipment auction site – his wife Holly's idea – on Jan. 1, after getting charged expensive fees for listing equipment like a tree-trimming truck, chain saws and motors on traditional auction

sites like eBay. These sites charge for everything – \$4 extra if a listing is more than \$500, 15 cents each for more than one photo, and then eBay takes an 8.75 percent commission off of the sale. But his site allows contractors to list any industry-related products with three pictures for free (additional photos are 10 cents each), and once that item sells, his business takes only a 3 percent commission. Add-ons like placing a listing on the home page or creating a storefront (a Web page of all your auction items grouped together) are reasonably priced next to sites like eBay. For instance, a listing on the homepage of Green Applicator Auctions costs \$9.99, compared to \$59.99 on eBay.

While Graus is making Green Applicator Auctions different from eBay, users familiar with online auction sites will recognize the software as similarly easy to use.



In addition to his auction site, Graus runs a training site called Green Applicator (www.greenapplicator.com). Both Web sites have cost Graus more than \$20,000 to create and keep up. He admits he was naïve in thinking the cost was going to be minimal. "Technology is expensive and that was a shocking learning curve for us," he says. "I thought, 'It's going to be easy – just a couple thousand dollars.' And now we're in pretty deep, but we don't dare turn back."

Graus hopes his sites will help the industry. He understands selling used equipment can often be a struggle. "We're heading into tough times," he says. "Anything we can do to keep the industry alive and help people sell their equipment without losing so much money is our goal." 

The author is a freelancer based in Royersford, Pa.

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Idle Chatter

Improved idling, routing and maintenance can save more fuel than you think.



It's inevitable that \$4 gas prices will return, so why not be prepared when they do? Landscape professionals should build a strategy now to effectively understand and optimize vehicle and equipment fuel usage in the long-term.

GPS vehicle tracking services and fleet management systems can help landscapers eliminate common efficiency killers.

IDLING ISSUES. An hour's worth of idling can use up 1 to 1.75 gallons of fuel in typical commercial vehicles, according to GPS tracking systems provider Navtrak, based in Salisbury, Md. "But having the ability to measure this idle time alone won't help you translate it into savings – you need to know where the idling events are occurring," the company reports. "A GPS tracking service should provide you with reports that can identify the location of the idling events along with the time, and help you to analyze the information so you can determine wasteful patterns."

Similarly, with large equipment, a 20-ton excavator will burn about 1 gallon of fuel per hour idling, according to Ken Calvert, director of IT support at Rolling Meadows, Ill.-based Komatsu America Corp. The company's KOMTRAX wireless equipment monitoring system can be installed on any equipment using a 12- or 24-volt electrical system to collect basic

operating information. This way, a contractor can differentiate between idling and working and track the daily amount of idling, allowing him or her to measure improvement.

ROUTING RIGHT. In today's economy, can you afford to be paying for driving that's not related to work? As little as 4 miles "off-route" for a vehicle can translate to 1 gallon of wasted fuel, Navtrak reports. "When evaluating GPS tracking vendors, make sure you will be able to use location-based information to plan and create new routes, as well as analyze historical ones," the company advises. "Detailed vehicle activity reports should be available to show productive vs. unproductive stops, so you can identify patterns of excess."

MAINTENANCE MATTERS. The U.S. Department of Energy reports that simple vehicle maintenance can have a major impact on fuel costs over time. Keeping tires properly inflated and aligned improves gas mileage by 3.3 percent, and replacing clogged air filters improves gas mileage by as much as 10 percent, Navtrak estimates, adding that excessive speeding can lower highway

gas mileage by as much as 30 percent. "Your vehicle tracking service should let you manage and schedule maintenance as part of a complete fleet management solution," the company says.

For equipment, the rule of thumb is 60 minutes of idle time equals 1 gallon of wasted fuel, and 60 minutes also equals one hour of available service meter reading (SMR, which is similar to a car's odometer). This, in turn, results in \$3 in

maintenance costs. "If a machine depreciates 50 percent in the first 5,000 SMR, an hour of idling equals \$16 of unnecessary depreciation," Calvert explains, adding that one hour of idle time on a 20-ton excavator costs a total of

\$22 (\$3 in fuel, \$3 in maintenance and \$16 in depreciation). "Most landscape contractors might be very surprised at how few hours their equipment is actually working vs. idling. But this waiting time may well be a good trade-off when compared to a work crew's productivity when an under-used machine is readily available."

Analyzing the performance of your mobile workforce from every angle can help you identify where you can be more efficient and more productive. **L**

TRACKING TRENDS

Approximately 21 percent of landscape professionals purchased GPS systems this year, spending an average of \$2,344.

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USE READER SERVICE #71



From Push to Pull

BY CHESTIN SALISBURY

Tired of Yellow Pages ads? Try an online search marketing method that only requires you to pay when a customer clicks on your link.

Push marketing methods have seen a steady decrease in effectiveness over the years – the principle reason being consumers have become immune to the continuous barrage of sales pitches, annoying jingles and junk mail that gets “pushed” in their faces.

In the meantime, several “pull” marketing methods have been proving themselves effective on the Internet. Instead of throwing a message into the marketplace unrequested, pull marketing methods allow a business to position its sales message in places where prospects are looking for the message and are in a position to take action.

One of these methods is called Pay Per Click (PPC) advertising, aptly named for the fact that you don’t pay until you generate the desired result – in this case, a click. A business pays only when its ad works, and the benefit is customers come looking for them instead of the other way around.

While there are many PPC advertising choices available, the most popular is Google AdWords™. When a prospect goes looking for a particular service provider in Google, they start by entering the search term(s) they want to gather information about into the search box. As an example, let’s say they type in the term “landscape design.”

Two types of results are displayed. The first is called the ‘organic search results’ – these take up the majority of the page. These are the Web pages Google’s formulas determine to be the most relevant based on what the prospect was searching for. While every Web site should strive to be on page one of these organic search re-

sults, getting there is part art, part science, and it’s not something that happens overnight or without a great deal of effort.

The second type of listing is the paid listings, or “Sponsored Links.” These typically are at the top and down the right hand side of the results page. Unlike achieving a high listing in the organic results, these paid listings are open to anyone willing to bid high enough on the respective keywords.

To maximize your investment of time and money in PPC advertising, first you must conduct keyword research. The keywords are what your prospects type in when they want to find you, so it’s important to put yourself in the shoes of your prospects and brainstorm a lengthy list of possible terms they might use. Also keep in mind any variations of these terms. For example, in addition to “lawn care” they may search for “lawn maintenance,” “lawn service,” “grass cutting,” or “yard maintenance.” The more search terms you have, the more opportunity you have that your prospects will find your ad and click on it to get more information. The more popular the search terms, the higher your bid price will need to be in order to get a high listing. Bid prices range from a minimum of 5 cents per click to \$15 to \$20 per click for terms like “lawn care services.” So try to think of as many less popular, yet still searched for terms so you can keep the per click price down.

When creating your ad, give your prospects a reason to click your ad by using catchy phrases and graphics.

Also, always limit the geographic reach of your ads. If you’re in Ohio or Oregon, you’re absolutely wasting your money if

you have ads displaying in North Carolina or Florida.

Finally, take advantage of all the testing and tracking tools these services offer. Test and compare different headlines, landing pages, display URLs, offers, and anything else you think might make an impact. You may think you know what’s going to work best, but only your marketplace can tell you that.

Chad Evans of Independence Landscape & Lawn in Alexandria, Va., started using PPC advertising five months ago and has seen roughly 25 to 30 percent of all calls, in some months as much as 50 percent, come in as a result of their PPC ads on Google.

“It’s definitely the way of the future,” Evans says. “And it’s extremely cost effective for us because we’re only paying for results. Plus, it’s easy to setup and manage, and we can adjust our campaigns as needed, either up or down, depending on our capacity to handle more clients.”

So, as the economy continues its gymnastics routine and you look for ways to grow your business as efficiently and cost effectively as possible, maybe it’s time to shift some of your advertising dollars to PPC marketing. After all, wouldn’t you love to be able to tell the Yellow Pages rep that from here on out you’ll only be paying when someone actually calls as a result of the ad? **L**

The author is a green industry marketing coach and consultant. He can be reached at chestin@lawncaremarketingmagic.com.

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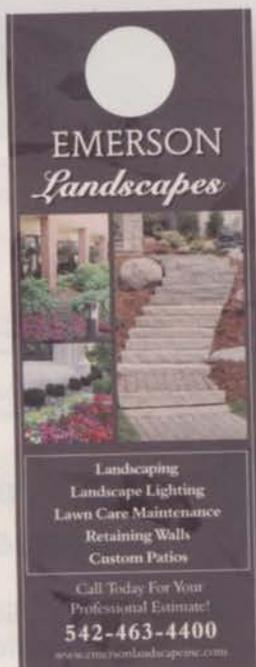
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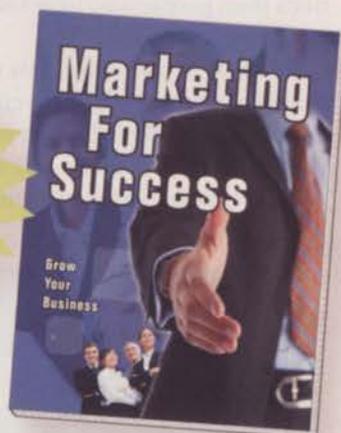
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Economy slows renewals for New Jersey business, but as spring warms clients' lawns and spirits, spot applications and other lawn care services should pick up.

Ninety-five percent of Hillsborough, N.J.-based Fairway Green's business comes from residential lawn care. And during the brutal 2008-2009 winter, customers weren't thinking about their lawns.

And with a struggling economy, they were also hesitant to spend money. After sending out prepayment offers to sign up customers in January, company President Bob Windish was disappointed to find out cancellations were up 18 percent. "I understand cancellations from people who have lost jobs, but I think others need to stop panicking," he says.

Needless to say, Windish is optimistic – only 40 customers have cancelled services out of a customer base of 5,000, and with 35 employees and \$5 million in revenue, Windish still has a job to do, despite these early delays. Fairway Green's services include fertilization, integrated pest management (IPM) and weed treatments, and



Fairway Green uses backpack sprayers for spot treatments to prevent wasting product when an all-over application is unnecessary.

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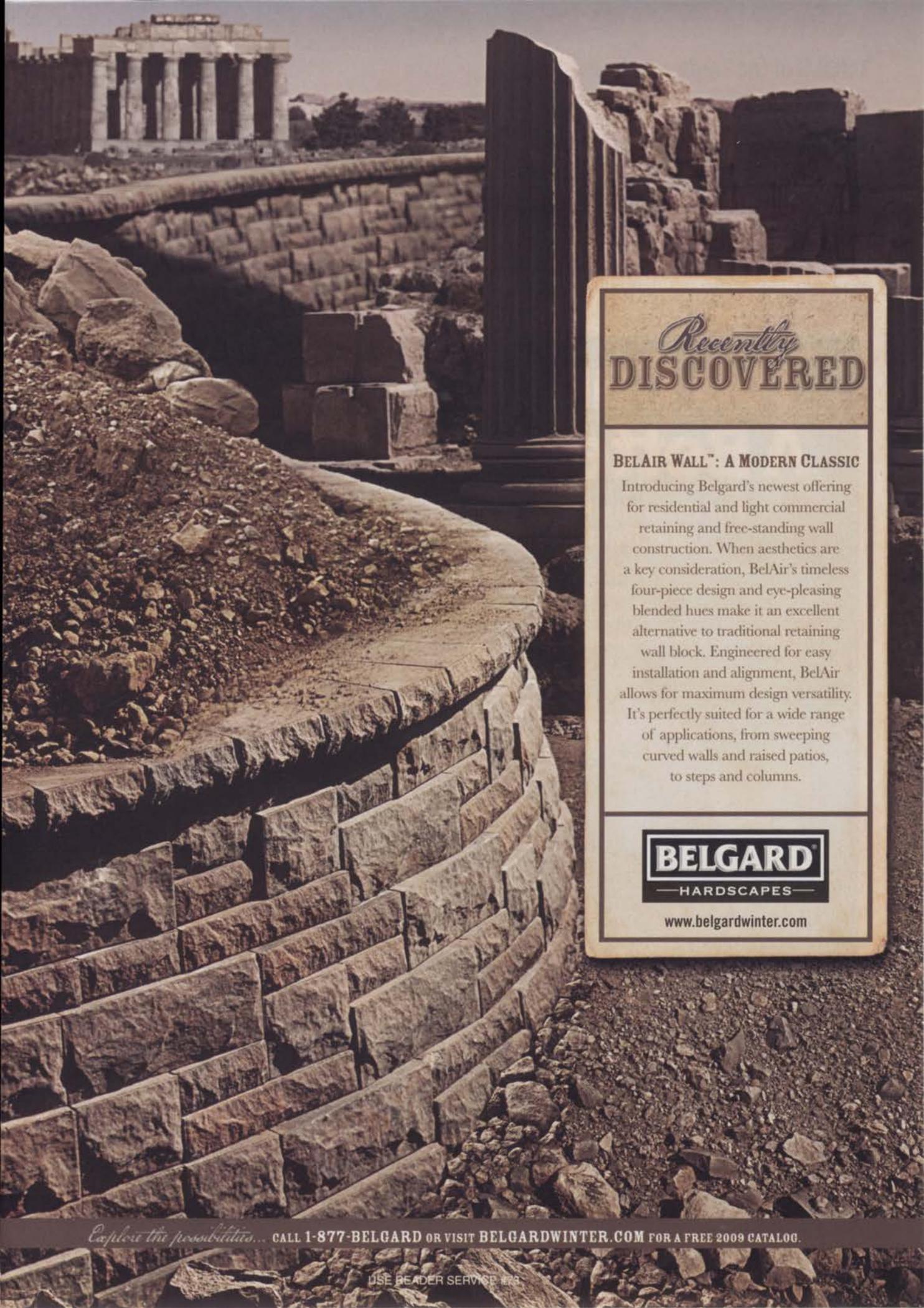


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USE READER SERVICE #29

handheld sprayers come in handy for spot treatments on all three.

When it comes to handheld sprayers, Windish prefers 2- and 3-gallon Chapin sprayers because they are made of polycylinder and therefore weigh and cost about half of the weight and price of comparable metal units. Each sprayer costs between

\$25 and \$60. When full, the larger 3-gallon sprayer weighs close to 25 pounds, so "it is still a good weight to carry around, but you wouldn't want it much heavier," Windish says.

Since each job calls for a different solution, Fairway Green keeps concentrated solutions on its company vehicles. When

Spray & Go

Nearly 40 percent of landscape professionals purchased sprayers this year, spending an average of \$1,635.

a lawn care technician determines a treatment is needed, he mixes the granular or liquid concentrate with water in the appropriate sprayer on site. The sprayers are separated and labeled so herbicides are not put into a sprayer used earlier for fungicides. Windish says technicians usually keep a broadleaf weed control product, a crabgrass treatment, a grub control product and a fungicide available as they go from job to job. If another pest is present, another sprayer is added. The technicians also treat shrubs with their handheld sprayers.

Handheld sprayers are perfect for these spot treatments because they save the company from wasting product on an application over an entire lawn. The issue is a trade-off between the cost of materials and the cost of labor, Windish says. "We start with a treatment of the entire yard if it is especially weedy and then go to spot treatments to hit troublesome areas during later trips to the property."

While Chapin sprayers work well for Fairway Green, Windish does modify the spray nozzles based on the pesticide he's using. The manufactured tips do not have the right pattern and droplet size for all of his needs. "They are too generic," he says. The added tips ensure the pesticide is applied only to the spot desired. Windish also adds pressure regulators to his sprayers to improve spray control.

Sprayer maintenance is fairly simple. The company cleans the strainer screens and nozzles regularly, based on use. They also check pressure seals annually.

When he needs new sprayers, a Chapin dealer is 10 minutes away – this is where Windish purchases all his sprayers.

Though business dropped slightly earlier this year, Windish expects calm to set in soon and expects by spring "customers will realize they would rather have me take care of their lawns than add the task to their already busy schedules." **L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Colorado Springs, Colo.

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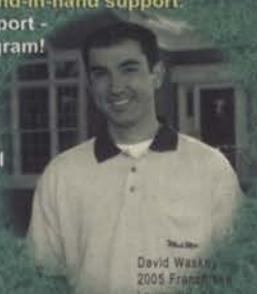
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Middle Man

Eric Zars treats jobs too large for backpack sprayers and too small for full-blown sprayer units, so he uses an in-between product to maintain his medium-sized jobs.

What does a lawn care operator do when he can't cover the job productively with a backpack sprayer, yet the job is too small for a ride-on sprayer or larger unit?

Eric Zars faced this question in 2000. He had been using a machine that dispenses liquid pesticides through holes in rubber tires. "This was a disaster, offering me little control over the amount of pesticide I applied," says Zars, the superintendent for buildings and grounds for an exclusive athletic club in Connecticut. A backpack sprayer would have been inefficient, requiring three times the refills of a larger sprayer and taking too long to complete the job in a timely manner. And since he tends tennis courts and other smaller sports turf areas, he didn't see the need for a larger or more expensive sprayer machine.



On his typical 9,000-square-foot jobs, Eric Zars uses the Spreader-Mate, a 9-gallon unit that he drops into a spreader, turning it into a walk-behind sprayer. Photo: Gregson-Clark

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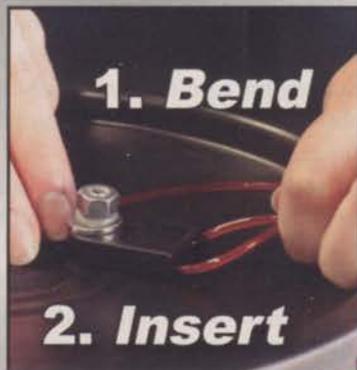
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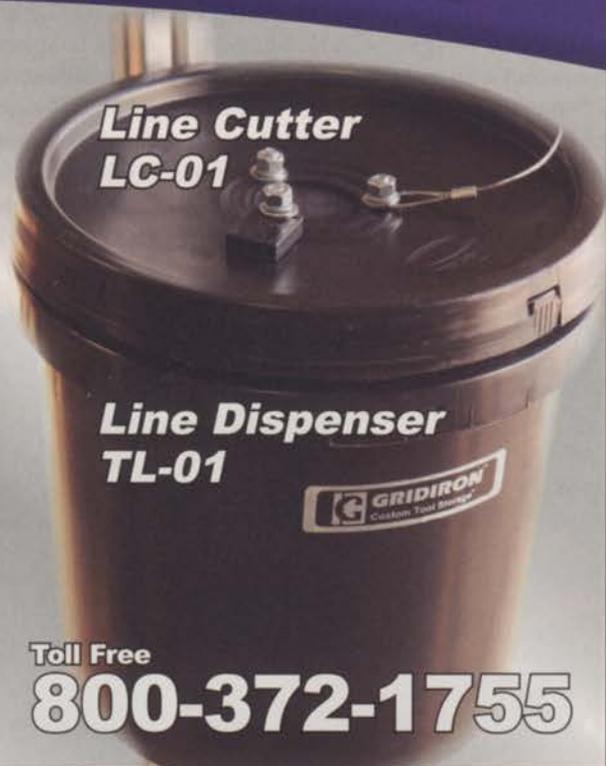
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USE READER SERVICE #81

So, Zars, who uses spreaders regularly, tried Gregson-Clark Spraying Equipment's Spreader-Mate, which is a self-contained 9-gallon sprayer unit that can be dropped into a spreader, turning it into a walk-behind sprayer. The pump, battery, filter, valves and pressure regulator are attached to the tank, so once Zars

mounts the boom and hose the unit is ready to spray. The corrosion-resistant polyethylene tank carries enough solution for 30,000-square-foot applications. Since Zars' usual treatment areas are about 9,000 square feet, this works well.

To save on product usage, Zars customizes each load to apply just the amount of

product necessary. And the quick-attach boom has four dripless nozzles that Zars operates with a handlebar switch. A hand spray wand attachment is also an option that Zars doesn't use currently but said he can use for hard-to-reach places like shrubs when the need arises. The price for the product starts at \$520.

For tending sports turf and playing surfaces, Zars uses three Spreader-Mates. One is used to apply calcium chloride to tennis courts, another handles applications for sports turf, and the third is usually filled with compost tea. Zars has not had problems with weeds on these turf areas, so he has not used the Spreader-Mate for herbicide applications.

One challenge Zars has with the Spreader-Mate is that mixing the product in the unit takes too long, particularly with powders. "I'm putting four or five products in to be mixed - more than the capacity of the agitator in the unit," he says. He used to stir the mixture of pesticides and water in the Spreader-Mate with a drill and paint mixer. That was before he started premixing the products in a 20-gallon stationary tank that has a more powerful pump, and then loading them in the sprayer unit. With this method, he can mix products while he is doing other things, saving him time.

Zars uses the sprayer on mostly flat or level surfaces, a good environment for the Spreader-Mate. An area with hills or valleys might not be as appropriate for this equipment, since 9 gallons of liquid is a heavy load to push up a hill, Zars explains.

Since Zars tends sports turf areas that are typically busy with athletes during normal daytime hours, he finds the silence of the Spreader-Mate sprayer to work to his advantage. This way he can spray in the early morning or evening hours and avoid bothering club members or nearby neighbors.

For maintenance on each sprayer, Zars washes out the tank and boom, cleans the filters and tip screens and recharges the battery regularly. In his specific niche where much of his work is done solo, he takes care of sprayer repairs himself. **L**



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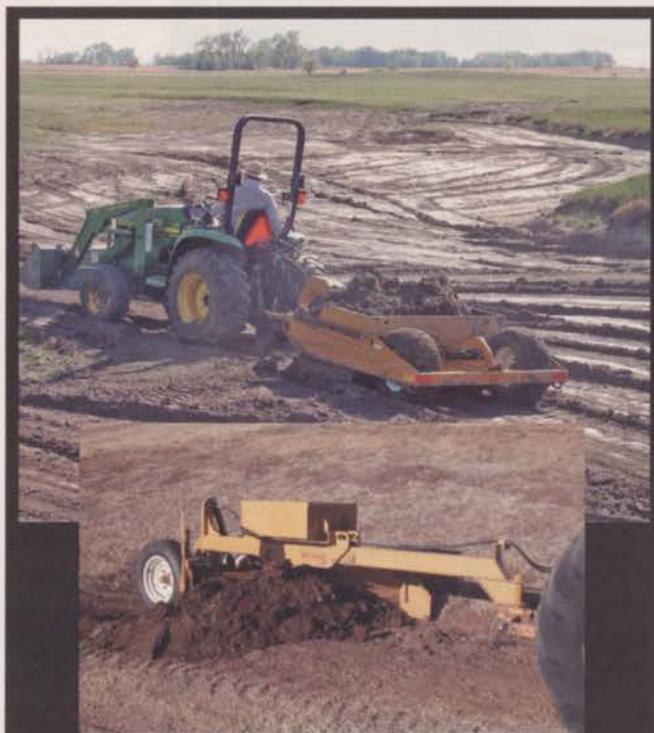
BY ROBERTA BAXTER

Economic challenges aren't stopping Green Care customers from renewing services and giving the company an unexpected chance to expand.

This January, Jeremy Tweten went about renewing his commercial lawn care customers for the 2009 season, and despite grim economic headlines he was pleasantly surprised. Most customers continued their contracts with his company, Mankato, Minn.-based Green Care.

Though Tweten is maintaining prices at his 2008 rates despite the rise in fertilizer costs, he didn't expect the boost. In fact, his business is ex-

Leavenworth, Kan.-based Buddy Rodgers & Son prefers to replace equipment every two to four years. "Having newer equipment keeps us looking more professional and means fewer breakdowns," says Buddy Rodgers, the owner of the \$450,000 business.



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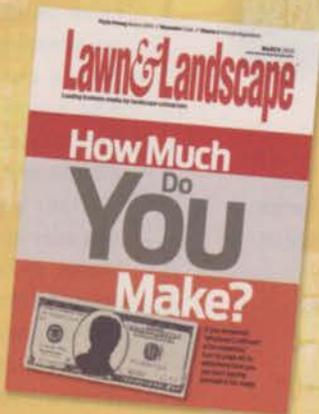
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panding to the point of adding another LT Rich Z-Max ride-on sprayer-spreader unit to his existing four-unit equipment fleet, as well as an employee to run it. This will add to his nine full-time employees and 25 to 30 seasonal staffers. Green Care provides grounds maintenance, lawn care and irrigation system installation

and maintenance to both commercial and residential customers – specifically apartment complexes, athletic fields, parks and large residential properties.

This means the areas Green Care treats are large – usually 30,000 square feet and up. This is why five years ago Tweten went searching for a spreader-sprayer

that could tackle large sites efficiently. He found the Z-Max, which carries 50 gallons of product in two 25-gallon tanks, which means Tweten can apply two separate treatments in the same run, as well as spread dry fertilizer from the back of the unit. Tweten says for many applications he can treat close to 2 acres without reloading the sprayer.

Before buying a Z-Max, the company applied product by hand or with a four-wheel unit Tweten built himself. Now with each of Tweten's four units, one man is able to cover 20 to 30 jobs in one day.

Green Care's trucks are typically stocked with 1 ton of fertilizer, concentrates of liquid treatments and water. Each lawn care technician also stocks extra pesticides in case they are needed on the job – these vary based on the time of year. In April, Green Care applies a dry fertilizer and a crabgrass treatment. Then three times during the summer months the company applies liquid fertilizers and herbicides. In the early fall, Green Care puts down a granular compound. The pesticides Green Care uses are water soluble, so they are mixed in the truck and then loaded into the Z-Max. It takes two to three weeks for one of Tweten's employees to learn how to operate the machine.

The time saved using the ride-on machine vs. using a hose to spray a property are considerable, according to Ralph Rodgers, a crew leader with Leavenworth, Kan.-based Buddy Rodgers & Son. "What took two hours to do with a hose only took 25 minutes with the Z-Max," he says.

Other features Tweten likes about his spreader-sprayer include its tight turning radius so he can apply liquid pesticides around corners, as well as the pump and low-drip nozzles for even application.

For maintenance, Tweten follows basic oil and hydraulic changes, checks belts periodically and cleans spray units and pumps regularly. He keeps a toolbox with nozzles and boom fittings with each unit to alleviate time wasted going back to the shop for something that could be fixed on site. Each technician runs the same machine daily, so they are responsible for keeping it in good working condition. 

The author is a freelance writer based in Colorado Springs, Colo.



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121



Albert Godec extends the life of his Husqvarna saws by making crews check them out of the shop when they are needed on the job. Photo: Husqvarna

BY ROBERTA BAXTER

Money Does Grow on **Trees**

Ice and wind storms create profit potential for tree care companies.

Raymond Lienau, owner of Royal Tree Care, hates to see trees damaged by ice storms that are not uncommon during Yorktown, N.Y. winters. But he's been wishing for them this year.

"Business has dropped off a cliff," Lienau says of early 2009 sales, adding his 40 years of experience in the tree care industry have taught him that a couple of good ice and wind storms can always boost a tree care company's bottom line.

Albert Godec wholeheartedly agrees. As president of Colorado Springs, Colo.-based Rundo Tree Surgeon, and a 33-year veteran in the industry, he's seen slow seasons before, and he knows situations can change practically overnight. A December 2008 windstorm increased his income by approximately \$15,000, despite the fact that he only has about 75 percent of the staff he had at this time last year. While he's expecting flat profit this year, he's hopeful to increase his \$500,000 revenue

as people stay home more this summer, spending money to improve their backyards vs. travel.

Notwithstanding slow starts, both companies have specific purchasing and maintenance preferences when it comes to their bread-and-butter equipment for the work they do most – chain saws for tree pruning and removal.

Royal Tree Care employs 18 people, who are divided into five crews. To handle pruning or removal on trees of various sizes, Royal crews use Stihl chain saws – typically four models per truck, including one topping saw (the Stihl 200T), one light-duty saw for ground cutting (a Stihl 290) and two medium to large chain saws for cross-cutting logs (a Stihl 046 and 044). This ensures crews don't waste time going back to the shop for the right chain saw to complete a specific or unusual job.

Rundo Tree Surgeon also prefers to use

a variety of saws. During the season, the company will have up to 18 people in the field – each two- or three-man crew will take three top-handle saws (one as backup in case the first one is damaged) and one medium, 18-inch saw on the job. Godec prefers Husqvarna saws for handling large trees – these more expensive saws are kept in the shop and then checked out if a job requires it. For everyday pruning, top handle saws manufactured by RedMax and Echo fill the bill.

While Echo and RedMax chain saws have less power than comparable Stihl or Husqvarna saws, according to Godec, the biggest reason he uses them daily is because of their lower overall costs. When repair costs are as much as 60 percent of the price of a new saw, Godec would rather buy new and then save the old equipment in case he can use the parts for repairs to his other saws. "Saws can be easily damaged during climbing or

through carelessness on the job," he says, adding that he usually gets 12 to 18 months of use out of these saws without significant maintenance problems. "Replacing a chain saw costing around \$120, like the RedMax or Echo, is much easier on the budget than buying a more expensive one."

Godec is partial to the top handle variety saw because the weight of the saw is underneath the hand, giving the user the ability to make cuts on top of a tree, all while putting less stress on his or her joints. "You can use a wrist action with much less strain," he says, adding that while both his Echo and RedMax saws are about 8 pounds in weight, his Echo 360T has a 16-inch bar, while his RedMax has a 12-inch bar. The latter with a shorter bar comes in especially handy in confined spaces.

Since chain saws keep his business growing, Lineau requires his crews perform daily maintenance on each saw at the end of every shift. They blow out the air filter and the areas around the engine, sharpen or replace the chains, and check for any other problems. By performing daily maintenance, the company can keep the equipment in top condition and also enhance the lifetime of use for each chain saw.

Keeping the chain sharp is a critical safety issue, so Lineau adds that to the daily maintenance routine. Chains are replaced before their dullness can endanger the user or force a crew to return to the shop for a new one. Lienau buys chains in bulk, keeping several hundred in stock.

Ron Greene also never waits until the chain is completely worn to replace it – preferring to sharpen chains when they are 75 percent worn. "I don't want any problems, especially with safety," says Greene, the fleet supervisor for Walpole, Mass.-based D. Foley Landscape, who uses 353 model Husqvarna chain saws in the 16-inch and 18-inch bar sizes. By performing this maintenance, Greene says the lifetime of a saw can easily be four or five years.

To ensure daily and quarterly chain saw maintenance is completed, Rundo Tree Surgeon adds daily maintenance to the end of crews' shifts and schedules a date or week on the calendar to perform overall inspections every four or five months. High wind or rainy days that happen near these dates are perfect for fitting in this necessary maintenance. 

The author is a freelance writer based in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Rayal Tree Care uses the Stihl 290 chain saw for ground cutting. They keep four different models in each truck to enable crews to tackle any task they encounter on the job site. Photo: Stihl



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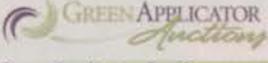
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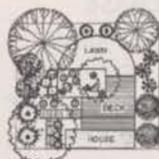
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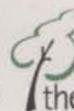
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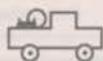
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Advertiser	Web site	Page #	RS #
Agrium Advanced Technologies	www.agriumat.com	57	39
Agrotain	www.agrotain.com	73	48
All Pro Putting Greens	www.allprogreens.com	51	34
AlturnaMats	www.alturnamats.com	68	44
AquaMaster	www.aquamasterfountains.com	72	47
Ariens/Gravelly	www.gravelly.com	53	37
BASF	www.betterturf.com	35	27
Belgard	www.belgardwinter.com	75, 111	49, 73
BOB-CAT	www.bobcatturf.com	77	50
Brillion Iron Works	www.brillionironworks.com	52	36
Burchland Manufacturing	www.burchlandmfg.com	84	56
C&S Turf Care Equipment	www.csturfequip.com	26	21
Carl Black GMC	www.carlblackgmc.com	113	75
Carson - Oldcastle Precast Enclosure Solutions	www.oldcastleprecast.com/enclosuresolutions	98	66
CLIP Software	www.clip.com	80	53
Coxreels	www.coxreels.com	115	81
Cub Cadet Commercial	www.cubcadetcommercial.com	33	26
Deep Fork Tree Farm	www.dftrees.com	81	54
DIG Irrigation Products	www.digcorp.com	96	64
Dow AgroSciences	www.dowagro.com/turf	29, 89	
Dupont Professional Products	www.proproducts.dupont.com	24-25, 43	20, 30
Earth Turf Products	www.earthandturf.com	107	71
EarthWay Products	www.earthway.com	113	76
Echo	www.echo-usa.com	42	29
Ewing Irrigation Products	www.ewing1.com	80	52
Exakttime	www.jobclock.com	63	59
Exmark	www.exmark.com	38-39	28
Fabriscape	www.fabriscape.com	114	79
Finn Corp.	www.finncorp.com	116	83
GRASS Landscaper Billing	www.obexdata.com	52	35
Gregson-Clark	www.gregsonclark.com	123	91
Ground Logic	www.groundlogicinc.com	119	87
Hannay Reels	www.hannay.com	112	74
Hoelscher	www.hoelscherinc.com	118	84
Horizon	www.horizononline.com	44	31
Hunter Industries	www.hunterindustries.com	95	62
Husqvarna	www.usa.husqvarna.com	59	40
Hustler Turf Equipment	www.hustlerturfequip.com	91	60
J.J. Mauget	www.mauget.com	5	11
John Deere	www.johndeere.com	21	18
John Deere Construction	www.johndeere.com	45	32

Advertiser	Web site	Page #	RS #
JRCO	www.jrcoinc.com	115	82
Kawasaki	www.kawpowr.com	31	25
Kohler	www.kohler.com	132	93
L.T. Rich	www.z-spray.com	17	65
Landscape Safety	www.landscapesafety.com	121	89
Lebanon Turf	www.lebanonturf.com	9	13
Little Beaver	www.littlebeaver.com	27	24
Maruyama	www.maryuama-us.com	67	43
Middle Georgia Freightliner	www.gatrucks.com	93	61
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Mulch Mule	www.mulchmule.com	110	72
Neely Coble Co.	www.neelycoble.com	105	70
Novae Corp.	www.novaeorp.com	115	80
Nufarm	www.nufarm.com/usto	49, 83	33, 55
PBI Gordon	www.pbigordon.com	79	51
PrimerTurf	www.primeraturf.com	61	41
PRO Landscape/Drafix	www.drafix.com	2	10
Quali-Pro	www.quali-pro.com	64-65	42
RAIN BIRD	www.rainbird.com	6-7, 15, 131	12, 16, 92
RealGreen Systems	www.realgreen.com	119	86
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} Industry journalist Pat Jones presents both sides from his sometimes twisted point of view.

Think small...but be big



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

If you've ever played Devil's Advocate with yourself, you've probably considered just bailing out of this crazy business and doing something different.

After all, according to Lawn & Landscape's research, about three out of four of you reading this operate businesses with less than \$500,000 a year in revenues. You work your butt off, over-deliver for customers, keep a few good people employed and pay your taxes (unlike your average presidential cabinet secretary). It's rewarding and often enjoyable work.

Yet, you're killing yourself to clear maybe \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year. I'll bet some of you pay yourself even less.

The next six to 18 months will test the mettle of everyone in this business, but it's going to be toughest on the small guys like you. Folks up here in the frigid climes got a temporary break thanks to snow-pushing revenues courtesy of Old Man Winter, but the spring will tell the tale for the majority. Will clients renew? Will those planned investments in landscape upgrades or irrigation systems happen? Forget federal bailouts and other such nonsense. The question is: will your local "micro-economy" be healthy enough to support you?

Such is the nature of recession. Some survive, some don't. In that vein, I sincerely hope you'll be among those who follow the advice of Jerry Faulring, an industry legend profiled earlier in this issue, and "try to make good choices, suck it up and weather the storm."

I was most impressed with Faul-

ring, a man I've never met in person but who – even over the phone – resonates wisdom, patience and thoughtfulness. This is a guy who gave up a multi-million-dollar landscape business because he had a burning desire to be successful in his first love, farming, and started one of the Mid-Atlantic's most successful nurseries.

Here are a few observations based on my conversation with him that might be useful to you as you grapple with that Devil within and decide what your course of action should be:

- Cash may be king, but cash reserves are the emperor of small-business economics. At a time when banks are loathe to extend lines of credit to most, cash management – setting aside enough to survive the lulls that will happen – is a skill you simply have to have. Those who don't are the most likely to be looking into another way of making a living very soon.

- Small can be good. With experience, Faulring realized that size and profitability aren't necessarily directly linked. He contradicted what I have written previously on this page by stating flatly that the bottom line can be bigger for a smaller company that's being managed in the owner's comfort zone.

- Speaking of which, the not-so-secret secret to success for the small operator is the fact that they are managing in the field and keeping face-to-face contact with customers almost every day. He reminds us that, "Small businesses are at their peak operating

efficiency when an owner/operator has his feet on the ground and they don't mind getting dirty." In other words, clean fingernails and wearing a necktie to work aren't necessarily signs that your business is bound to be successful.

- Don't be afraid to follow your heart into another field. If you're as skilled at growing a business as you are at growing turf and plants, you'll be fine.

- Finally, don't forget that this isn't the first – or likely last – downturn this market has seen. Seek advice and expertise from the wise old owls in the market. One of the great things about this business is that colleagues are rarely afraid to share advice or ideas, even if they occasionally compete against each other. Faulring counsels others to think independently, but do so with input and validation from others. In short, be yourself but be cognizant that you're not alone.

Faulring is no longer directly in the landscape business, but the lessons he learned from the time in our market and in the decades since he turned his attention to growing ornamentals are no less valuable. It is, as he reminds us, not a business for everyone. The strong, well-managed companies that find a niche and serve it well will survive.

The Devil in you might think you can trudge along and defy the odds, but let your better business angels steer you in the right direction and you may just be the next Jerry Faulring. With luck, he might just be calling you for advice someday. **L**

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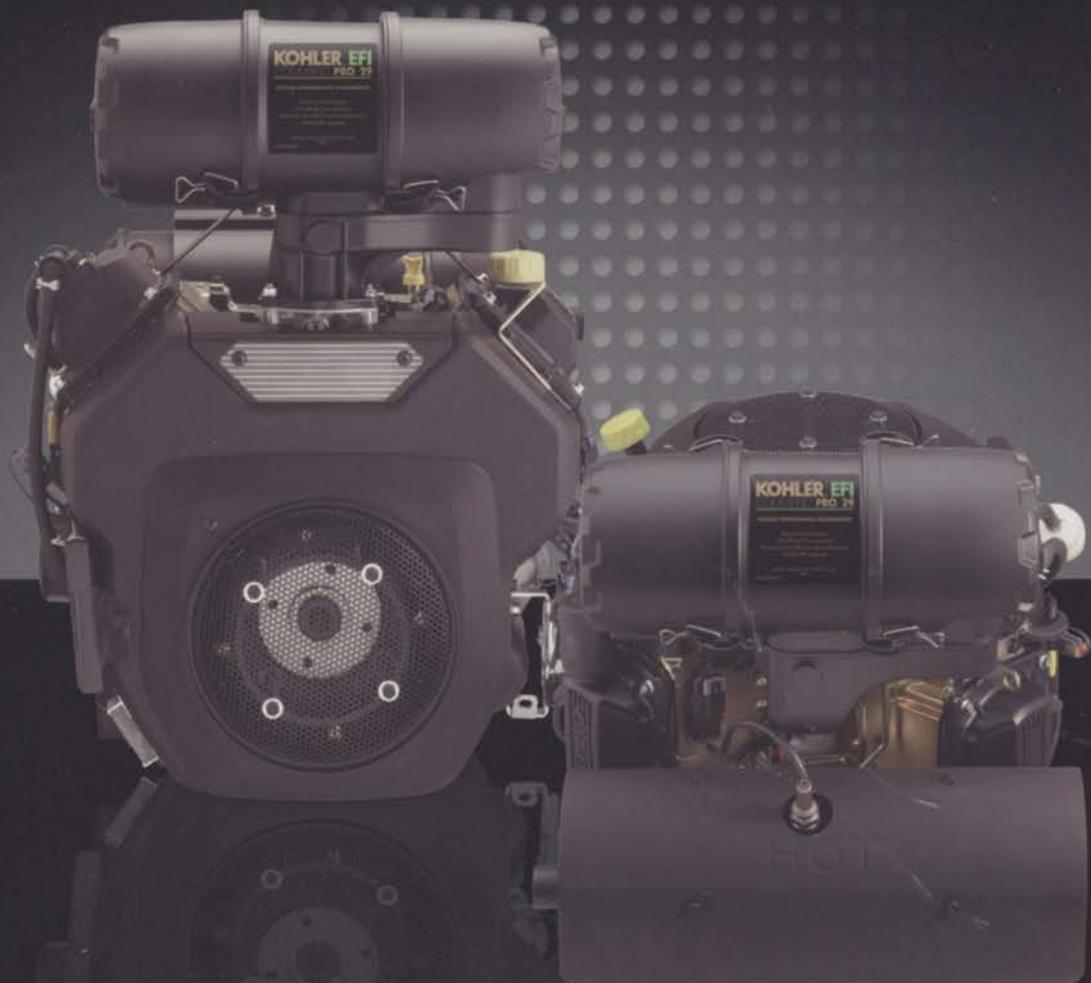
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