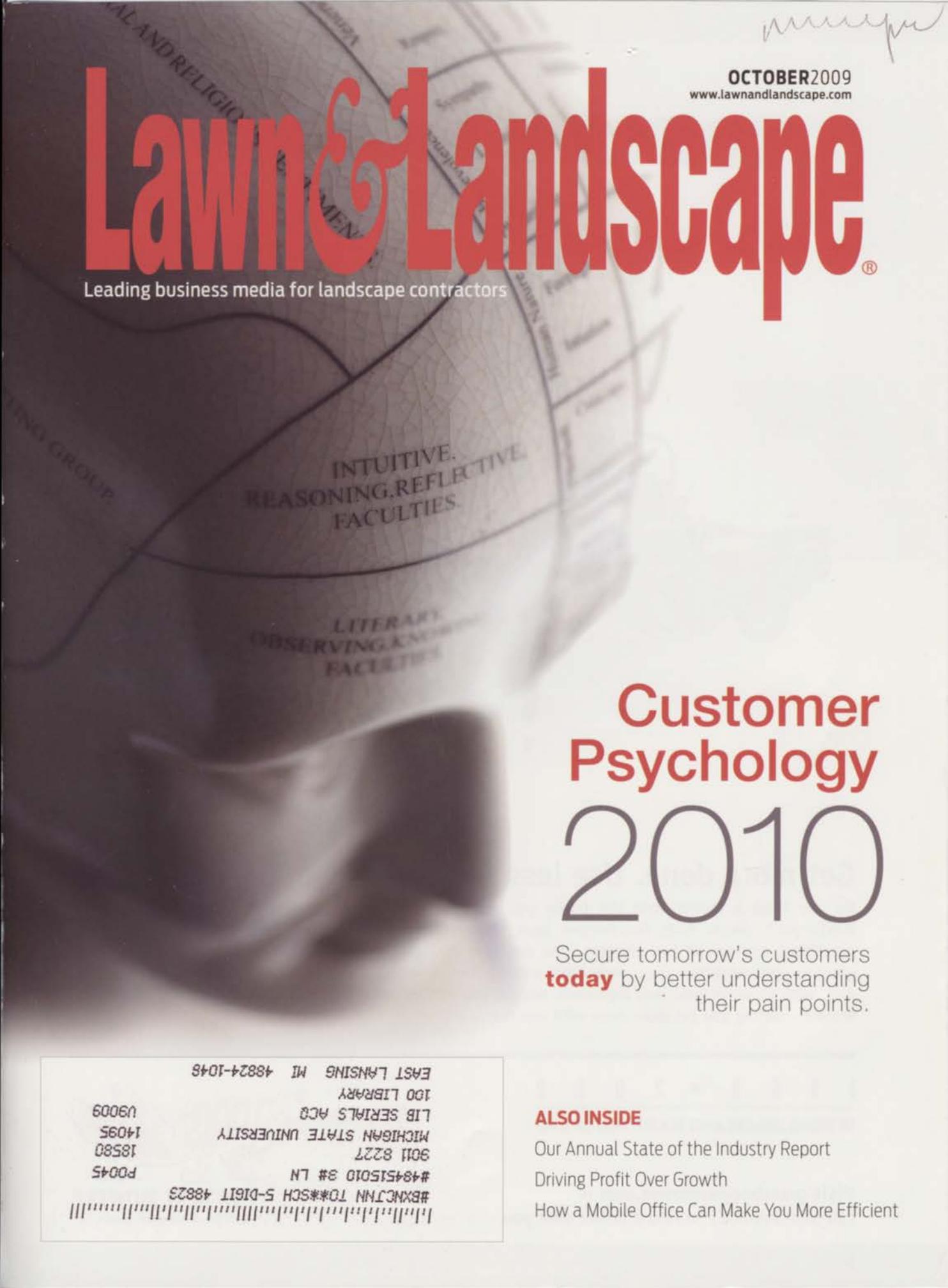


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NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Editor

Generation Next

According to a recent *Lawn & Landscape* survey, the majority of landscape business owners are between the ages of 46 and 55 (33 percent), making them Baby Boomers. No wonder they relate so well to their customers who are also made up of a majority of this age group. Fifty-four percent of contractors say the average age of their customers is between from 46 to 55, followed by 30 percent who believe the average age of their customers falls between 36 and 45.

Generally speaking, the experience of older and more seasoned entrepreneurs puts them in a better position than younger owners to manage through downturns, many experts say. However, according to the American Express OPEN Small Business Monitor, the tables have turned, and today it's younger business owners who are geared for growth. Maybe landscape Boomer business owners can learn a thing or two from their younger counterparts.

Generation Y is the most optimistic group – 80 percent of these entrepreneurs have a significantly more positive outlook on business prospects vs. Generation X and business owners overall (each 55 percent) and Baby Boomers (52 percent).

This optimism extends across a number of areas:

- They're most likely to hire (36 percent vs. 25 percent of Generation X and 20 percent of Baby Boomers).
- They're most likely to have capital investment plans (58 percent vs. 41 percent of Generation X and 39 percent of Baby Boomers).
- They're most willing to take a financial risk (67 percent vs. 52 percent of Generation X and 47 percent of Baby Boomers).
- They're least likely to have cash flow issues (53 percent vs. 59 percent for Generation X and 64 percent of Baby Boomers).
- They're least stressed out by the economy (57 percent vs. 72 percent of Generation X and 71 percent of Baby Boomers).
- They're most likely to implement employee-friendly policies to battle the recession. Generation Y will allow employees to maintain a flexible schedule (44 percent), Baby Boomers will institute a hiring freeze (41 percent) and Generation X entrepreneurs will institute a salary freeze (39 percent).

What do you think? Sound off at www.lawnandlandscape.com/forum. 

“Generally speaking, the experience of older and more seasoned entrepreneurs puts them in a better position than younger owners to manage through downturns.”

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PRICE WARS

An excerpt from the *Lawn & Landscape* Online Forum. Join the discussion at www.lawnandlandscape.com/forum.

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"I'm bidding on more commercial and association work.

"I presented my bid to the person in charge and they immediately told me my price was surprisingly high. My price was almost three times the other company's price just for the mowing.

"These guys took 13 man-hours to do this job. Their price is \$225 per cut – \$17.30 per man-hour, not including travel.

"I understand the more man-hours you have, the more you can spread your overhead and the cheaper the price can get, but you still have to pay these guys a wage. In this case, you'd barely be paying above minimum wage to make any profit. I've

heard the big companies are around \$15 to \$20 per hour. What am I missing here? How can it be done?" – Todd Patton, president of Patton Property Maintenance in Heymarket, Va.

ANSWER:

"No matter what you are selling, there are people who will be shopping the lowest price and people who are shopping quality. There is a third gray area in the middle that I personally recommend you stay away from because you wind up having to promise the world at rock bottom prices.

"If you are selling a quality product, you MUST show the client how you are different than the guy who charges half as much and why paying you more is a benefit to them. If you know your numbers and how to estimate properly, you will make money. The minute you start lowering yourself to your competitor's standards, you lose." – Gregory Slatner

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Ignoring the Fork in the Road

Absolute focus helped Mike Rorie grow his business. BY CHUCK BOWEN

Focus on standardization – that was Mike Rorie's main advice to landscape contractors logging in to Marty Grunder's early September Webinar titled "Interview with Mike Rorie."

This means contractors should focus their business models – a strategy that worked for Rorie, who started Cincinnati-based Ground Masters three decades ago, eschewing a full-service model to focus on commercial maintenance and growing the company to \$29 million before selling it to The Brickman Group in 2006. Today, Rorie is a vice president of The Brickman Group.

Rorie gave the example of McDonalds – a comparison many in the industry have made of The Brickman Group.

Everywhere you see the golden arches, the restaurant is the same. They're in similar locations, make the same food, and, in the end, make a lot of money. It's a cookie-cutter approach, but standardizing the business model means owners don't have to worry about day-to-day operations and can focus on what they want: Making more money.

DEFINE YOUR MODEL. The first step is to define your business model, Rorie suggests. Are you going to compete with large, national chains? Will you focus on hardscapes and pond installations? Commercial maintenance?

"I never struggled with the intrigue you could get yourself into, relative to

how large our industry is," Rorie says. Rather, he picked a segment – commercial maintenance – and did it over and over and over again. And while some owners enjoy, and find success, running more, smaller divisions or segments, he found it harder to get what he calls "compound leverage."

"If you're going to perfect something and be good at it, there's probably enough of it to do a \$5, \$7, \$8 million business," he says, sharing an example.



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IN THE BEGINNING. But, when Rorie started out, he was a multiple service company. His crews were mowing grass at homes, plowing snow and cutting firewood. Then, in the early 1980s, he got into commercial maintenance. He realized, after a few years of doing both, that he couldn't grow like he wanted if he didn't focus. So he sold the residential business and became solely a commercial landscape company.

"It was tough in the sense that we had to replace that income," he says. "For a couple of years, our sales didn't increase. It took a while to hit breakeven and start growing in that segment."

"We gained leverage through market share," he adds. "I don't care what we do, let's just do a lot of it," has always been my philosophy. If we're going to be hardscapers, let's bid every wall and

paver job we can in the city and work for every landscaper in town who doesn't want to keep that work in house."

Business owners are very creative people, Rorie says, and are interested in new projects and expanding their companies. But, too often, they get distracted by too many ideas and flounder. "Does that put another branch on the tree or another fork in the road?" he asks. "We're never going to get where we want to go if we keep venturing off the main road."

Rorie stresses the concept of critical mass – the idea that a business can earn more revenue than it spends in overhead. The faster a company can reach critical mass, the better.

Say a company does \$800,000 in revenue, but it's spread out over eight segments. It's more difficult to convert that total revenue to profits.

"Who's got ... the variety of equipment and the production expertise?" he asks. "You're never going to hit critical mass

in any of those categories."

By focusing on one service area, a company can standardize the equipment it buys, the prices it charges – even the employees it hires – and not spend the bulk of its revenue on overhead.

WHICH MEANS? Companies need to know, Rorie says, how much revenue a landscaping truck or a paver crew or an irrigation repair van or a salesman brings in. "Anybody in business for themselves has an ego – we want to win, we're proud and we're willing to do things the ordinary bear isn't," he says. "I want to see that scorecard and see winning results on it."

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

Learn more about Rorie's tips on networking, planning for next year and what book you should read at www.lawnandlandscape.com/webextras.



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WaterSense's One-Size-Fits-All Program Doesn't Fit

EPA program's turfgrass limitations on home building bring doubt, concern to landscape industry.

BY KRIS KISER

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is positioned to protect water in all forms, from ground water to underground sources to water coming out of the public's tap. WaterSense, a partnership program sponsored by the EPA, was set up to work with local water utilities, product manufacturers and retailers on the use of water-efficient products and practices among consumer and commercial audiences. Reinforced through a WaterSense label, WaterSense, according to the EPA, "helps consumers easily identify water-efficient products in the marketplace." WaterSense engineering standards for low-flow toilets, shower heads, irrigation equipment and other engineered products are practical and measurable.

However, a disturbing development has taken place in the WaterSense program that threatens to undermine the very water quality standards the agency was established to protect, and potentially undermine the value of the WaterSense label.

Under its WaterSense new home specification, EPA developed and released draft specifications for new home construction. Home builders that follow the specs will be able to market a WaterSense® home. The draft specs include restrictions on the amount of turfgrass that can be used on a home site. These specs are intended for implementation nation-

wide, border to border, coast to coast – with no exceptions. These specs do not take into account the fact that homes built in Seattle vs. Oklahoma City are erected in vastly different climates.

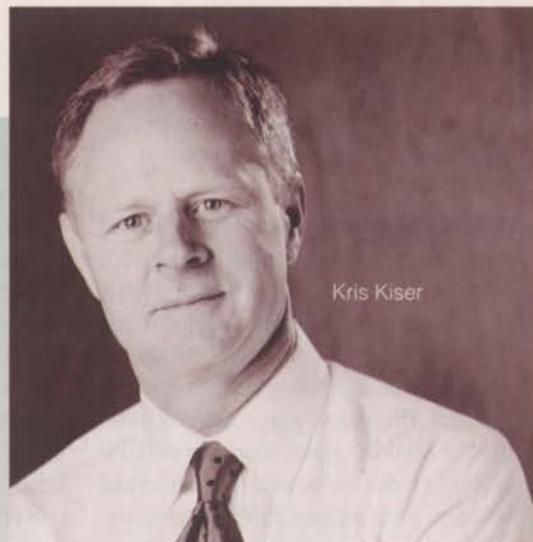
Under current specs, no allowances for regional differences in climate or turf species exists; new home sites will be limited to 40 percent grass use on the site's "landscape-able" area. It is a one size-fits-all specification. This means the amount of grass that can be planted on a Portland, Ore., home site would be the same as a home in Las

Vegas. Imagine a Tucson desert landscape in Seattle and Boston neighborhoods. And, this also means, extreme desert locales would be *allowed*

40 percent turfgrass use on a home lot where it should not be used, requiring massive watering.

Our country is simply too large and complex, climate-wise, with multiple climatic zones for a single, national government standard on grass use for home lawns.

Yes, water should be used in a responsible manner. Lush green lawns of Kentucky bluegrass may not be appropriate for desert landscapes, and the landscape industry should work toward best management practices that support maximizing environmental benefits in a conscientious manner. The key is to plant the right plant in the right place to maximize its environmental, lifestyle and economic benefits, not eliminate them.



Kris Kiser

But, with these specs, the EPA singles out turfgrass as environmentally harmful, unfairly labeling it as a "water hog," despite the fact that drought resistant turfgrasses are widely available in addition to the existence of large areas of the country that do not have rainfall or water availability issues.

Further, the myriad environmental benefits of turfgrass are ignored under these specs – from its well-documented carbon absorption and sequestering properties to superior water filtration, from its runoff and erosion control capabilities to dust and particulate matter capture properties, from its ability to combat the heat island effect to cooling our urban environments.

These benefits – along with significant lifestyle benefits associated with a home's yard for family use and pets – are completely disregarded.

Yet, despite these facts, the EPA continues to declare war on turfgrass through such erroneous specs as the current WaterSense program promotes – even recommending mulch and artificial turf over grass green space. (Mulch and plastic grass do not filter air, remove water pollutants, produce oxygen or sequester carbon dioxide. How is this better?)

Plants are real, living things not engineered or manufactured to a specific standard. But rather they are ever-changing and adaptable to variable climatic conditions, and, managed responsibly, have enormous benefits.

The EPA has held several public hearings on its WaterSense new home





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specification, where these landscape criteria have come under attack as being arbitrary, non-responsive to local and regional variances and not based on science. Turfgrass utilization has not been

evaluated in a holistic environmental assessment. Yet, while the agency has altered the draft specification to reflect other industries' concerns, the turf restrictions remain in place. EPA plans

to finalize its WaterSense new home specification in November of this year.

If these criteria are adopted in their current form, they will have adverse environmental, lifestyle and economic

What You Can Do

OPEI, the National Turfgrass Federation, and other interested parties have submitted comments to EPA, have testified at hearings, and have met repeatedly with agency staff on our concerns. These actions, while necessary, have not been productive with the agency.

However, the numerous inquiries the agency has received from members of Congress about the specification's draconian treatment of turf – the singling out, in effect, of this one type of groundcover – has earned the attention of EPA. These inquiries were prompted by letters and phone calls from constituents whose livelihood depends either directly or indirectly on turfgrass or from those who seek to maintain the lifestyle and holistic environmental benefits associated with home lawns.

We urgently recommend all interested parties to write to their congressional representative and senators asking him or her to raise these issues with EPA and ask that the agency set aside the WaterSense outdoor landscape criteria for now, evaluate the science and work with stakeholders to improve the product. Contact information for your representatives can be found at www.senate.gov and www.house.gov or you can contact Kris Kiser at OPEI at kkiser@opei.org.

Remind lawmakers that when properly managed and maintained, the benefits of turfgrass are multifold:

- **Captures Water Runoff and Dust.** Turfgrass does an excellent job of capturing water runoff and lessening dust and particulate matter pollution vs. alternatives such as hard surfaces, mulched areas and impervious or bare

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consequences, and may actually create scenarios that use more water (not less), and severely depress jobs in a host of businesses involved in the \$150 billion a year lawn and landscape industry.

The landscape criteria of the EPA's WaterSense program, which limits the amount of turfgrass on every home built in the U.S., are simply bad public policy that will produce negative outcomes for

our environment, and eliminate the green jobs the current administration has been vocally supportive of. **L**

The author is executive vice president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI).

surfaces. According to a Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) 2006 Publication, turfgrass decreases dust emissions, and for controlling soil erosion, a live, functioning grass cover, including urban lawns, is a cost-effective option, since a grass root system is one of the most effective in soil stabilization because of the fibrous, dense character of its roots.

• **Lessens 'Heat Island' Effect.** Turfgrass lessens the "heat island" effect, especially in urban areas. Urban areas generally have higher temperatures than surrounding rural areas; this is called the urban "heat island" effect. The EPA states that "the annual mean air temperature of a city with 1 million people or more can be 1.8-5.4° F (1-3° C) warmer than its surroundings. In the evening, the difference can be as high as 22° F (12° C)."

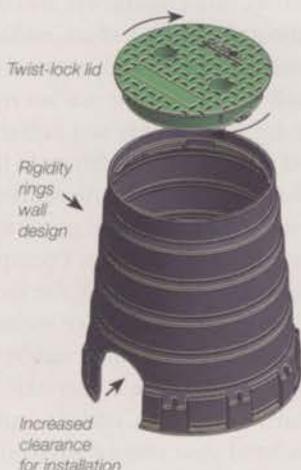
• **Captures, Stores Carbon in Roots.** Properly managed turf areas are carbon sinks. When kept in a growing state, carbon sequestration in turf areas can range anywhere from four to seven times the carbon emissions, according to the report "Technical Assessment of the Carbon Sequestration Potential of Managed Turfgrass in the United States" by Dr. Ranajit Sahu. See the study at www.opei.org.

• **Boosts the Oxygen Footprint.** Turfgrass can boost your oxygen footprint. Compared to bare ground, non-green areas and lawn substitutes, such as painted concrete or even artificial turf, actual grass and green areas generate oxygen. For example, a turf area 50 feet square produces enough oxygen to meet the everyday needs of a family of four, and each acre of grass produces enough oxygen for 64 people a day. See more at www.turfgrassod.org.

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A CHANCE OF SNOW

Expecting a strong winter, landscape contractors offering snow and ice removal services plan ahead and stock up.

BY NILES HYSSELL

Even though the summer might have been tough on your bottom line, the winter doesn't have to be. Consider expanding your deicing program to make sure you have whatever salt and ice melting blends you need for your business this winter.

Despite what you may have read about municipalities running short on salt during the last two winter seasons, supplies of deicing salt and ice melt blends should be sufficient for the upcoming winter if you make your commitment early and bring in "safety stock" as a contingency for a strong winter.

Here are some ice melt supply forecasting tips:

✓ Be realistic in your estimates for products – out of the last 20 winter seasons, eight were above average, eight below and two were average.

✓ Set up a contingency plan for extremes in either direction – either too much winter demand or too little.

✓ Make room for extra space to stock bulk or package ice melters. Realize that if you take material in early you may have to carry some over next spring, but eliminate out-of-stocks if the winter weather gets out of hand.

✓ Develop a good relationship with your ice melter supplier and let them know if you are flexible when the weather hits. Can you take deliveries after hours? On weekends? Do you have 24/7 phone contacts?

✓ Make a commitment to a supplier and work with suppliers that have good

supply-chain systems. These suppliers know what quantity of products they have available at any given time, they have planned for your winter demand, and they have allotted ample supply to customers who have committed to buy from them for the season.

According to Planalytics, the upcoming snow season in the U.S. is expected to be one influenced by both the transition to El Nino and the recent volcanic eruptions in the northern latitudes. El Nino, the warming of Pacific waters, portends a stronger southern storm track across the U.S. and has been responsible in prior years for significant snow and ice in the southern and eastern regions. In fact, this will be the strongest El Nino since 2002-2003 when East Coast cities received 150 to 200 percent of normal snowfall. Amplifying this potential are recent high latitude volcanic events, which typically produce a colder regime in the eastern half of the U.S.

The potential for increased snows will also exist in the Mountain West. While snow events across the northern tier and Midwest are expected to be robust, demand for ice melt is likely to lag record levels last year.

A salt and ice melter supplier with a strong weather service can also provide you with up-to-date forecasts of impending storms which may prompt you to order in advance to avoid the rush after the weather hits. Suppliers working with weather services also should be adjusting their production and storage

plans to anticipate trends in geographic demand so they have products available in the right places at the right times when weather hits.

In deciding what products to put on your shopping list for the upcoming season, consider the weather in your area. What is most important in Kentucky may be the melting speed of ice and snow for less frequent storms, while a lower temperature melting point for ice and snow is more critical in Michigan where winter conditions are typically colder. Your supplier should be able to offer a range of fast-melting, economical and low-temperature-melting ice melt blends and salt.

In addition, more customers are concerned about the impact of ice melters on the environment and interested in ice melt blends on the market that are safer for plants, pets and surfaces compared to plain salt. Additives in the best blends may contain ingredients that serve to minimize the impact of ice melters on paved surfaces. The types of surfaces that appear to be the most susceptible to damage from ice melters are poorly sealed pavement or concrete, new concrete (less than 1 year old) or poor quality concrete. Conduct a pre-season audit of your clients' paved surfaces and recommend properly sealing such pavement, in addition to using less harsh ice melters, as a way of protecting further damage to such surfaces. **L**

The author is the marketing product manager for Morton Salt in Chicago.

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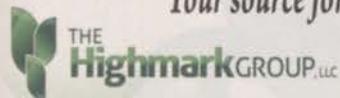
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Calling Off Enhancements

Contractors report commercial properties are forgoing flower rotations and small design/build improvements. BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Sterling, Va.'s Sunrise Lawn & Landscaping Services used to do \$20,000 to \$30,000 in enhancements annually for a condominium association that has about 70 to 80 units.

But this year, a resident who is not a professional landscape contractor, took over the job of planting annuals – and she's starting to realize the job is too big. "She even did a lot of stone work and gravel work, but now she's getting burnt out, and we're stuck dealing with whatever she planted as we maintain the property," says Joe Markell, president of the \$2.5 million company.

This is a good example of what's happening in today's economy concerning

enhancement work, Markell says. "Though we do everything – pruning, mowing and turf care, she's doing the flower rotations and replacements," he explains. Maintenance is the bigger chunk of the job at \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year, but enhancements made up a nice additional portion. The bulk of Sunrise's commercial business is maintenance, and enhancements have dropped about 50 percent this year.

Many contractors are reporting customers taking over this work or avoiding it altogether.

Lee Edwards has noticed a similar trend in his market. On commercial jobs, enhancement services have been



Hilton Head, S.C.-based The Greenery has seen enhancement work cut by 5 percent.

cut back about 5 percent for Hilton Head, S.C.-based The Greenery.

Some of it has to do with the current commercial market trends, says Jody O'Donnell, president of Carrollton, Texas-based LMI Landscapes. Texas "won't be immune" from this recession, he adds, pointing out he expects more commercial properties to foreclose or default on their loans over the next 18 months. **L**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gie.net. Chuck Bowen, associate editor, also contributed to this story.

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Financial Statements: A Necessary Evil

Your month is not over until you have accurate financial statements – period. BY KEN KAUFMAN

Do any of these statements sound familiar?

“I don’t understand why some months I make a 15 percent net income and other months I lose 7 percent. I can’t trust my financial statements.”

“Our profit is low this month because we bought a lot of inventory that we haven’t sold yet.”

“Our profit is low because we paid for the next 12 months of insurance this month.”

“Our profit is higher than normal because we invoiced our customers for work we haven’t actually done yet.”

Owners and managers of small- and medium-sized businesses often make these and other similar remarks, implying the company’s financial statements are wrong. The consequences of not having accurate monthly financial statements can be devastating. We have seen situations where millions of dollars, hundreds of jobs and entire companies were lost because of inaccurate financial statements.

Financial statements refer to the income statement, balance sheet, statement of cash flows, and any other industry-specific report that helps the company identify its successes and opportunities for improvement. While ensuring these statements are accurate may cost a little more than the company is currently spending on its accounting functions, the cost is usually well worth the expense.

A NECESSARY EVIL. Accounting personnel usually perform non-revenue generating activities, which can cause some business owners heartburn. If their activities are set-up to effectively and efficiently create accurate monthly

financial statements on time each month, the accounting staff is truly an invaluable asset to the company. Our experience shows neglecting this aspect of a business will cost an entrepreneur much more in the long run than the relatively low cost associated with producing accurate internally prepared financial statements each month.

WATCHING THE BANK ACCOUNT. A small business typically relies on the balance in the bank account as a critical measurement of performance. As a company grows and becomes more complex, this is a very ineffective way to measure the company’s real performance. Yet all too often growing firms struggle to break this habit and the philosophies associated with it.

ACCRUAL VS. CASH. In more than 90 percent of the businesses with which we have worked, one of the main causes of inaccurate financial statements is the utilization of cash-basis reporting principles. In essence, cash-based accounting puts cash coming into the business and cash going out of the business into the same accounting period, regardless of if they are related to one another. For example, if in one I buy plants to resell but I don’t receive any cash from sales of plants in the same month, then my cash-based financial statements would tell me that I lost a lot of money that month. But did I really? My cash was negatively impacted, but I still have valuable assets I will likely sell the next month. Cash-basis financial statements do not portray the performance of the firm.

Conversely, accrual-based financials strive to match revenues to related expenses, and vice-versa. This means we

shouldn’t show the expense of purchasing the plants for re-sell until the period in which we actually sell them. The results are financial reports that explain exactly how the firm is performing.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS. Accurate monthly financial statements create additional benefits. Your internal accuracy will empower your CPA to be more effective in tax return preparation, calculation of penalty-free quarterly estimated tax payments and other tax-planning activities. You will become one of their favorite clients, and you know how willing you are to go above-and-beyond for your favorite customers. Your credibility as a viable business will improve with bankers. When the time comes to value your business, accurate financial statements will ensure the valuation is complete. We have seen companies receive valuations far below their actual worth because their financial statements did not show the true picture of their businesses.

If you take care of this part of your business, you will reap short and long-term rewards. You will have better information from which to base your leadership and strategy. You will satisfy outside professionals that help you manage all aspects of your business. Organizations that do not have accurate financial information can quickly lose their competitive advantage. If you refuse to allow your month to end until you have accurate financial statements, you will empower your firm to maximize profitability, cash flow and value as well as capitalize on future business opportunities. 

The author is founder and CEO of CFOwise.com, a CFO firm for start-up, emerging and small- to medium-sized businesses.

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Hook & Ladder

Using CDs as an investment strategy can prove worthwhile if you take advantage of laddering. BY WILLIAM LYNOTT

The CD deal is simple: You lend the bank your money for specific period and get a fixed interest rate. You're dinged for early withdrawal. Terms range from 30 days to five years or longer.

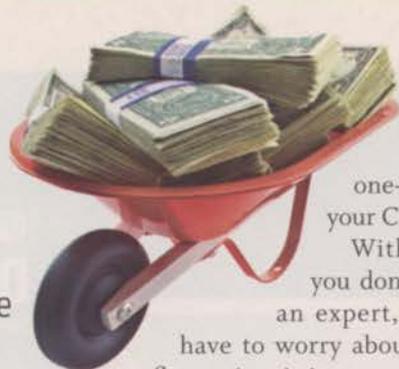
Since your interest rate will be fixed, when you're ready to buy a CD shop around for the best interest rate. Try a resource like www.bankrate.com. You may find rates are considerably higher outside your own state or an online bank registered with the FDIC.

If you decide to invest in more than one CD, take advantage of the technique known as "laddering," an effective and popular way to even out the peaks and

valleys in unpredictable interest rates while making sure penalty-free cash is never far away.

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When your one-year CD matures, you reinvest that money in a five-year CD. From that point on, as each year's CD matures, you use that money to buy a new five-year CD, thus maintaining the



one-year steps in your CD ladder.

With laddering, you don't have to be an expert, nor do you have to worry about day-to-day fluctuations in interest rates. If you've constructed a logical CD ladder, you'll be in a position to benefit no matter which road the interest rate curve decides to travel.

This technique gives you the security of knowing you will be able to access at least some of your money relatively soon and without penalty while benefiting from advantageous interest rates. **L**

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

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Employee Time Card		Mountain View LANDSCAPE					
Bill Kemp							
Monday, December 14, 2009 - Friday, December 18, 2009							
JobSite Name	Cost Code	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Total
Brewers Rd 200	Imp/Gen	7:38	7:30	7:53	-	-	23:01
Creation Job	Planting	-	-	7:58	7:45	12:47	28:50
		7:38	7:30	7:53	7:58	7:48	38:53
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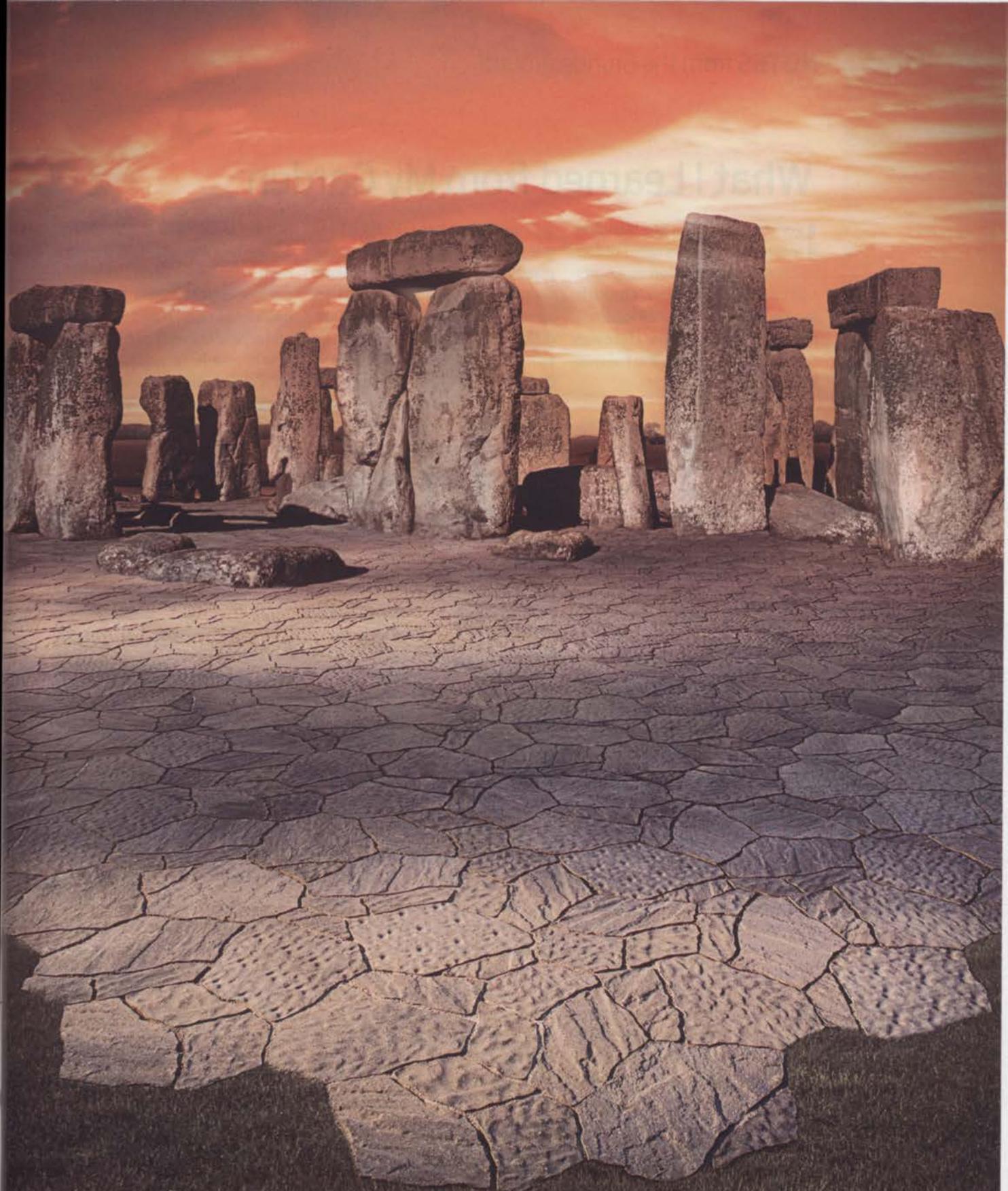
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What I Learned from My Garden

I got into the landscape business more than 25 years ago; I did so because I had a passion for plants and taking care of them. Through the years I have learned a lot from tending to my gardens. Here are the three best lessons my passion has taught me:

NO. 1 – BE PATIENT. Many times we plant things that don't look great on day one. In fact, in the months following their initial installation, you may have felt inclined to remove the plants because they don't look good. I have a beautiful red oak in my backyard that looked terrible almost immediately after I planted it. But I pruned the dead out of it, gave it a deep root feeding and today it looks fantastic.

How many times are things not going well for you and you want to quit, start over, try something else or feel sorry for yourself? Smart entrepreneurs stick with their plans. They don't take another path just because the first one isn't working out; they keep on trying. We remove obstacles; we ask for help from friends, family and other experts. We think about the solutions out there and we continue to keep one eye on the vision we have for the future.

NO. 2 – NOT ALL PLANTS DO WELL. Some plants like wet feet; some don't. Some like sun; others like shade. Plants that grow in Florida, for the most part, won't grow in Minnesota. You can't grow Christmas trees in Southern California. And some plants need to be pruned, sprayed and cared for meticulously and others can be just left alone. People have some of the same attributes.

Companies often take their best sales people and make them sales managers. It doesn't often work because the skills required to manage and motivate people are different than the skills needed to sell. Yes, some can do both, but it doesn't always work. We need to take hiring seriously and be careful about who we hire and make sure they are a fit. One question

NO. 3 – EACH YEAR IS DIFFERENT. Some years your plants thrive, and other years they don't. This year my garden looks fantastic. We've had a lot of rain, so my lawn is lush and green; I haven't had to irrigate much, and have had to prune a lot. I can't believe how much new growth there is on my hydrangeas (see photo). And my annuals look better than they ever have.



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.



Like our gardens, **our businesses will produce for us** most years, but only if we tend to them and pay attention to what they are saying.

you should always ask is, "What are your hobbies?" If they say hunting, fishing and landscaping, you are on the right track. You have to hire people who have a passion for the work at hand. Yes, once in a while, you can get lucky, but over time you will be far better served by creating a description of the traits you are looking for and finding people with those traits.

No, hiring people is not this easy, nor this cut and dried. But my garden has taught me that I dramatically increase my chances for success when I think about what I need and find that.

My business has had many good years. This year we're working hard. It's not going to be a great year, but we keep working. We're thinking about next year and how we can do better. We're not giving up, and we actually think we've learned a lot.

Like our gardens, our businesses will produce for us most years, but only if we tend to them and pay attention to what they are saying.

Growing a garden can be one of the most rewarding things you will ever do; running a business is as well. Keep tending both. **L**

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Losing **Everything**

How Bob Keating lost his entire company in a day and built it back.



Eight years after all his employees walked out and the IRS took his Escalade, Bob Keating is back in the saddle.

Everything changed in one day for Bob Keating.

Keating started a commercial landscaping company 20 years ago and grew it to 150 employees with offices throughout Florida. He had 60 trucks and a 10,000-square-foot building. His crews installed the landscaping at almost all the Home Depots in Florida, Georgia and some in Texas.

Then, late one Sunday night, the general manager called Keating and told him he quit. The next day, none of Keating's employees showed up to work. They were all working for the GM.

"He got them to quit with no notice; he hired them," Keating says. "I had no mow crews."

Then, to make matters worse, the IRS came in and started investigating the books. It seems Keating was on the hook for a lot of back taxes.

That GM had turned on Keating, selling to his client base and spreading lies that made his managers quit. Now he's in business just down the road from Keating's new office.

"I went from driving an Escalade to driving a rusty pickup that the IRS loaned me to drive home in," he says. "I lost my house that I built."

Now, Keating's new company, Liberty Land Management Group, Palm

Harbor, Fla., does \$2 million a year, all in commercial work – condos and apartments. Keating, the president, started it seven years ago with new goals: no debt, stay small, keep tabs on everything.

"I've learned – before I had 30 managers, and now I'm the manager," Keating says. "I gave a general manager way too much power."

But Keating – a former Marine and bodybuilder – took it all in stride. "Such is life," he says. "I knew I couldn't fail. I had to build it again."

So, Keating started back at zero. He hadn't run a mower in 15 years, and was now maintaining entire complexes by himself. His old irrigation manager, a 74-year-old named Earl, started helping him. Keating worked seven days a week to rebuild his business.

One account, a mobile home park with 500 units, took him and Earl a day and a half to do. For eight months, he worked with a fractured back, trimming with tears running down his face.

"We had to have money," he says.

Now, he's back to having big crews, just fewer of them. He has 20 employees, all of whom have more than a dozen years experience.

He says he still loves the work, but has learned that he needs to step away occasionally, before he starts hating it.

"You burn out. You get to a point where you hate your company. I wanted no part of that anymore. I didn't want to hate my company," he says. "I'm focused when I'm supposed to be."

Keating, a Cape Cod native, avoids burning out by heading to his boat. Three weekends a month, he, his wife and step-son go fishing for snook, trout, sharks and groupers.

"As soon as I leave my dock, I'm looking at that ocean. You take a sigh of relief," he says. "I don't think about work, I don't think about money issues. You think about doing the right thing on the boat."

Before he got the boat, his Fridays went like this: He and his wife would load up a cooler, process all the time cards and prepare for Monday. There was never any time away from the business.

"She looked at me and said, 'You need to get a boat again,'" Keating says.

So he put down \$50,000 in cash for a new 23-foot dual console Pro-Line – really a sound business investment. "It was the best thing I ever did. I'm so refreshed, I'm so focused because my mind is clear." **L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Have a great Live & Learn story? Send it to cbowen@gie.net.



Keating, a Cape Cod native, avoids burning out by heading to his boat. Three weekends a month, he, his wife and step-son go fishing for snook, trout, sharks and groupers.

What I Know

by Chuck Bowen

After four decades at the helm of Oak Creek-based KEI, Ron Kujawa knew it was time to step aside.

But the consummate businessman found it difficult. Who would take over? Would they run things the right way?

Kujawa's family has been in business for a long time – they started with a feed and seed store in the 1920s, then moved into beer distribution and, in 1968, landscaping.

A chance encounter at a Rotary club meeting put him in the landscaping business. He took over the clean up work after the electric company laid new power lines underground. And he still has clients – the local school district and archdiocese among them – that he had more than 40 years ago.

"I've never considered myself a landscaper. I consider myself a businessman whose business happens to be landscaping," he says.

LETTING GO. Early on, Kujawa relied on subcontractors to handle accounts. His colleagues couldn't believe he'd let someone else use his equipment. But he knew it was the only way he could expand his business.

"I'll have to accept that. If I were doing it all, I would be able to operate one truck and operate one loader," he says. "I would have to tolerate people being not the best operators or maybe being abusive at times. That's the way you grow. You have to be able to delegate because you can't do everything yourself."

Then, in 2003, he had to take his own advice. After heading up the company for more than four decades, it was time for him to step aside and let the next generation take a leadership role.

"I knew it couldn't go on forever," he says. But making the decision to step down and actually *stepping down* are different things. At that time, there weren't

LETTING GO

After 40 years in charge, **Ron Kujawa** passed power to the next generation.



any employees who had the skills to take over. Kujawa's wife, Sally, was CFO and his son, Chris, was executive vice president. They offered it to Chris.

"I said to my son Chris, 'You've got to make up your mind – do you want to work in the business or do you want to work on the business?'"

But Chris – a great salesman by all accounts – wasn't great at the administrative tasks he'd have to do as president. So Chris approached his brother Joe with a deal, and the two brothers took their solution to their parents: Joe would head up operations and Chris would head up sales and marketing.

"They make a pretty good team," Kujawa says.

Joe came on board in 2002, and Kujawa started to transition out about a year later. But he still comes in every day when he's in town, acting now as a mentor and adviser.

Joe is now executive vice president of operations; Chris works as executive vice president of sales and marketing. Sally is president, CFO and chairwoman of the board. Ron doesn't even hold any company stock.

And like any family run business, KEI has its share of tense moments. But the family knows how to keep business and personal business separate. "We argue like hell and we fight during a manage-

"At 45 or 50 years old, you could be washed up and old if you're not doing something and if you have no purpose in life." – RON KUJAWA

ment meeting," Kujawa says. "Then we go to lunch and everything's fine and then we come back and argue again."

STEPPING DOWN. "When Sally and Chris were doing things, I wasn't quite ready to walk away," he says. "The biggest thing that I tell everybody is you have to be ready to walk away. If you're leaving for any other reason than you want to, you're going to have a problem."

And at the outset, Kujawa did have a problem, and his problem created

Shooting an Elephant

In June, Ron Kujawa returned from his second hunting trip to Africa this year. He was there in April, and went to Mexico and China earlier this year. In April, he bagged a large elephant in Botswana with 77-inch tusks (that's how they measure elephants).

So what do you do with a dead elephant? Well, certainly not mount the head. "It's too expensive," Kujawa says. "And I have no place to put it."

He's having tusks sent back and mounted on a credenza behind his desk flanking a picture of some elephants. The skin will be used as inlay on his desk, and to make boots, shoes and purses. The tail becomes bracelets. Each of Kujawa's four children gets one foot, which can each be made into a footstool, an umbrella stand or a trash can. The ears will each have a map of Africa painted on them; he'll keep one and auction the other off for charity.

"I could easily become addicted to it if it wasn't so expensive," he says of big game hunting – stalking the animals through the savannah, getting less than 10 yards away. "It's really an adrenaline-pumper."



problems with employees. "I resented the fact that I was getting relegated or pushed out."

But in the end, it worked out, because he was comfortable with – and had confidence in – the people who were taking over.

"With Joe coming in, that kind of dissipated. I saw that someone was really do-

you comfortable doing it?" he asks. "At 45 or 50 years old, you could be washed up and old if you're not doing something and if you have no purpose in life. You've got to realize that."

"Golfing is a lot of fun right now, because I don't do it very often," he adds.

He also warns of buy-out deals built on stock and future earnings of the company. There's only one thing an owner should take for his business: "Cash. Nothing else," Kujawa says.

FILLING TIME. The 77-year-old now hunts, fishes and travels. He's been to Africa twice this year, and returned from a trip in May after bagging an elephant. He's involved with the local school board and president of the state's chapter of the Safari Club International.

"I have something that I'm looking forward to all the time," he says. "I don't want to be around old people in some senior citizen's center and singing songs and playing canasta or bridge or some crap. It may appeal to some people, but not me." **L**

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

ing the things that weren't being done," he says. "I just had a greater comfort level. I had every confidence in Chris to sell because he's terrific at it."

He advises other contractors – who are likely entrepreneurs – to try starting another business or another industry. Maybe invest your profits from the sale, and go to work for somebody else. The bottom line is: Do something.

"Is this an exit strategy for you or are you just taking it because you think you're going to get a lot of money? Are

STAND ON THE Shoulders of Giants

Three of the green industry's top business heads will deliver the keynote address at this month's GIE+EXPO.

Steal a page from their playbooks to battle business in today's tough economy.

BY LAWN & LANDSCAPE STAFF

Some of the best ideas any business can use come from other businesses. This year, three green industry leaders will take to the stage at the GIE+EXPO and give their perspective on one of the worst years in recent memory.

Craig Ruppert, owner of Ruppert Cos., Rick Ascolese, president and chief operating officer of TruGreen LandCare, and Scott Brickman, CEO of The Brickman Group, will lead the GIE+EXPO PLANET keynote session Oct. 29 in Louisville, Ky.

Lawn & Landscape talked with these three industry giants to get their insight on the current state of the green industry, as well as their suggestions for how to survive and thrive in today's challenging economy.

Scott Brickman: *Stick to Your Strengths*



Scott Brickman joined The Brickman Group, Gaithersburg, Md., in 1986, serving as a project director and a regional manager, and then assuming responsibility for the company's Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and Southeast operations. In 1998, he became a director of the company, and at the age of 35 was appointed CEO.

Through a series of strategic financial and operational decisions, Brickman and his team successfully grew the company to its current size of \$680 million in annual revenue (representing a 500 percent increase in seven years), almost 10,000 employees and 160 branches serving 29 states. Most of the growth has been organic.

Brickman has been recognized for his leadership and entrepreneurial expertise, including *Lawn & Landscape's* Leadership Award in 2004, and Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2006.

How do you feel about the current state of the green industry?

I think the industry is strong in spite of current economic conditions. Obviously, the lack of new construction hurts that end of the business, but as the economy recovers, demand for landscape services will continue to grow.

How is your business faring in today's tough economy?

Our focus on the maintenance side of the business has served us well. It has helped us renew our focus on operational quality. We have been able to remove waste and rework from our processes while improving our customer satisfaction scores.

What is one piece of business advice you received once that you did not follow – and why are you glad you didn't follow it?

I have been advised many times that we should expand into this or that line of business because it held great potential. I am glad we stuck to our knitting and the business we know best. Often the best decisions are saying "no." I believe you can only do so many things well.

If you could give a small business owner in the landscape industry one piece of advice what would it be and why?

My advice would be to focus on what it is you want to be, who it is you want to serve, and what it is you are going to provide that will make them want to hire you. I think it's real easy to try to be all things to all people and to look for the next best thing instead of staying focused on one or two things.

Who has been a mentor to you in business and why? What insight did this person provide to you?

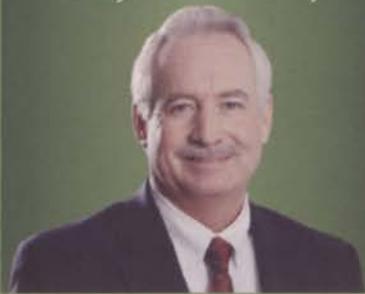
My greatest mentor has been my father, Dick Brickman, who always focused on doing great work and taking care of and empowering people. He taught me success and profit are the outcome of doing these things.

What do you foresee for the industry in the next two to three years?

I think the industry will rebound strongly as the economy comes back, and that the stronger companies will thrive with some of the weaker players exiting. I believe the demand for sustainability and green services will continue to grow and that staffing will become a big challenge as unemployment drops and the population ages.

Rick Ascolese:

*Take Care of Your People
and They'll Take Care of You*



Rick Ascolese is president and COO of TruGreen LandCare, based in Memphis, Tenn., where he oversees the operational and strategic direction of the company.

He has a bachelor's degree in sociology from Ohio's Miami University and an MBA from the University of Cincinnati.

Previously, he spent 18 years with another ServiceMaster business unit, American Home Shield. There, he held several leadership positions, including his last position of executive vice president, where he oversaw sales, marketing and operations.

How do you feel about the current state of the green industry?

It's a tough environment, but I think we're seeing a transformation of the industry and there's opportunity for businesses to emerge stronger and better equipped to meet their customers' needs. It's a very fragmented industry, but the challenges are universal. Companies are facing tremendous price pressure and being forced to re-evaluate their business models. But in light of this, they're finding innovative ways to manage the way they deliver services, looking for new services to provide, seeking ways to maintain and strengthen their relationships with their customers – all things that will make our industry stronger in the long-term.

How is your business faring in today's tough economy?

We've been working over the past two to three years to become a much more focused, efficient and innovative company. We're a much stronger, more strategic company than we were when we started down this path – and, thankfully, better prepared to weather the current economic storm. This has been a tough year for everyone; no one could have predicted how steep the market would drop. It's been unprecedented. But, it hasn't deterred us from our commitment to grow our business. We're working much smarter, more collaboratively and leaving no stone unturned.

What are your most important methods for survival in today's economy?

Focus and perseverance. You can't afford to be caught off-guard or be sidetracked or to be afraid to make some tough decisions. You've got to have a clear strategy that's driven by a balanced focus on your associates, your customers and your shareholders. When these things are aligned, your priorities are balanced, and you can focus on those things that will drive maximum return on your investment.

What do you know now that you wish you knew five or 10 years ago to better prepare your business for recession?

As I talk with others in the landscape industry, none of us have imagined the market would be where it is today. Even so, we at TruGreen LandCare made a conscious decision several years ago to be a more strategically focused operation, to better leverage our resources, to strengthen our processes – all those things that have made us a stronger, more profitable company today, even in these difficult times. Hindsight is always 20/20, but if you're following sound business principles, there will be less room for regret or second-guessing, no matter the situation.

What is your business philosophy?

Do the right thing. It's one of our core

values here at TruGreen LandCare, and at all the ServiceMaster family of brands. When you're focused on doing the right thing, the circumstances may change, but a lot of the conflict and confusion are taken out of the decision-making process. When you're committed to doing the right thing, you don't take shortcuts and you're consistent, no matter what the state of the economy is. That's always good business.

What is the most challenging situation you've encountered in your landscape business and why?

As we grow in size and maturity as a business, it's important that we develop a culture and a set of expectations that are consistent throughout the country. People in the landscape industry are pretty independent; they're used to managing their relationships with their customers at the local level. And those aren't things we want to change. But we do want to better leverage the value of working collaboratively, of sharing best practices, of standardizing processes, of working to a same set of values and a clearly aligned vision. There's a lot of change management that comes with this, but as you build trust and credibility with your team and among each other they begin to get onboard and see the value that this brings to themselves and the business as a whole.

What's the biggest lesson you've learned in business, and what makes it one you will never forget?

Very simple: Take care of your associates, and they'll take care of your customers – and your customers will take care of your financial performance. Surround yourself with smart, honest, hard-working people who are committed to doing the best job possible each day.

If you could give a small business owner in the landscape industry one piece of advice what would it be and why?

Don't take shortcuts. Define and stay disciplined to your processes and

INTERVIEW

the way you manage your team. This makes for a solid foundation that can hold the business up during stressful, challenging times. And it makes for a foundation that can handle growth without going under. If you take shortcuts along the way it weakens your foundation, which weakens your business and your future.

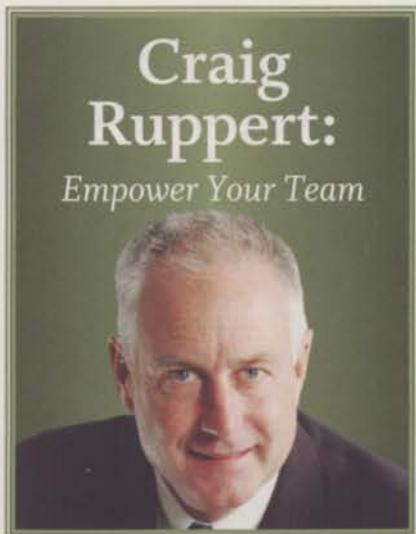
Who has been a mentor to you in business and why? What insight did this person provide to you?

I've been fortunate to have worked with several great leaders and to have learned from them all. I've learned the importance of trusting yourself and looking forward, not backward. I've learned that to be successful, you have to give part of yourself to your team. And I've learned that to be a successful leader and build a strong company, you cannot be afraid of failure. You've got to

take risks – and you're only comfortable doing that when you trust yourself and are looking ahead.

What do you foresee for the industry in the next two to three years?

We'll be a stronger industry in the long run. We'll be working more efficiently, and we'll be more focused on delivering great service and building stronger relationships with our customers. We'll have tighter margins with less room for mistakes, so we'll have to be at the top of our game each and every day. And on the environmental front, we've got an opportunity to take huge steps forward. We are the "green" industry. Our customers will be depending on us even more to not only help them navigate the myriad of environmental regulations but also to help position them as responsible and environmentally friendly through the use of landscaping.



Craig Ruppert is president of Ruppert Cos., based in Laytonsville, Md. The firm comprises five companies: Ruppert Landscape, which performs commercial landscape installation/management at

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11 branch offices in the mid-Atlantic region and employs 600; Ruppert Nurseries, a wholesale tree growing operation; Ruppert Properties, which owns, develops and manages select commercial properties on the East Coast; Ruppert Ventures, and the Ruppert Foundation. Prior to establishing Ruppert Cos., he was the founder and owner of Ruppert Landscape Co., which was sold in 1998.

What is your background? Tell our readers more about some of your experiences in the industry.

I started mowing lawns in the neighborhood I grew up in. I am one of eight children, and if you wanted a new bike you had to earn the money to pay for it. I went to high school in Washington, D.C., and after a brief stint at the University of Maryland I was working for a construction company running their insurance restoration division and keeping the landscape company going on the side with my brother Chris, who was running it day to day. In the late 1970s, the growth of the landscape company led me to quit my day job and concentrate on landscaping full time, where I have been ever since.

What are important survival methods in today's economy?

We have and will continue to try to grow our landscape management division over our landscape construction division, as it is less affected by recessions.

Spread the responsibility and accountability for your company's success widely amongst the management team. Empowering a large group of your people to overcome the challenges of a tough economy seems to work best for us.

What's the biggest lesson you've ever learned in business?

Your company is only as good as the people you've assembled and empowered to run it. And although this is a simple, clear message, to some degree every manager has to relearn it on a daily basis. Because living this philosophy can be so hard, adding structure around employee appreciation, employee recognition, company events, etc., is a fundamental tool.

If you wrote a letter today to yourself when you first started out in this business, what would it say?

Knowing the answers or the right approach is less than half the equation. Living and practicing your beliefs is the hard part. No matter how many years you're in the business you need to expend a great deal of energy to continue to learn, trust and grow every day.

What advice would you give a small business owner today?

Your purist sustainable competitive advantage over all of your competition is your ability to learn and adapt quicker than them. Every company has their own challenges, and it's the ability to learn and execute that creates success. **L**

Nicole Wisniewski, Chuck Bowen and John Torsiello, a Torrington, Conn.-based freelance writer, contributed to this story. For more information, contact nwisniewski@gie.net.

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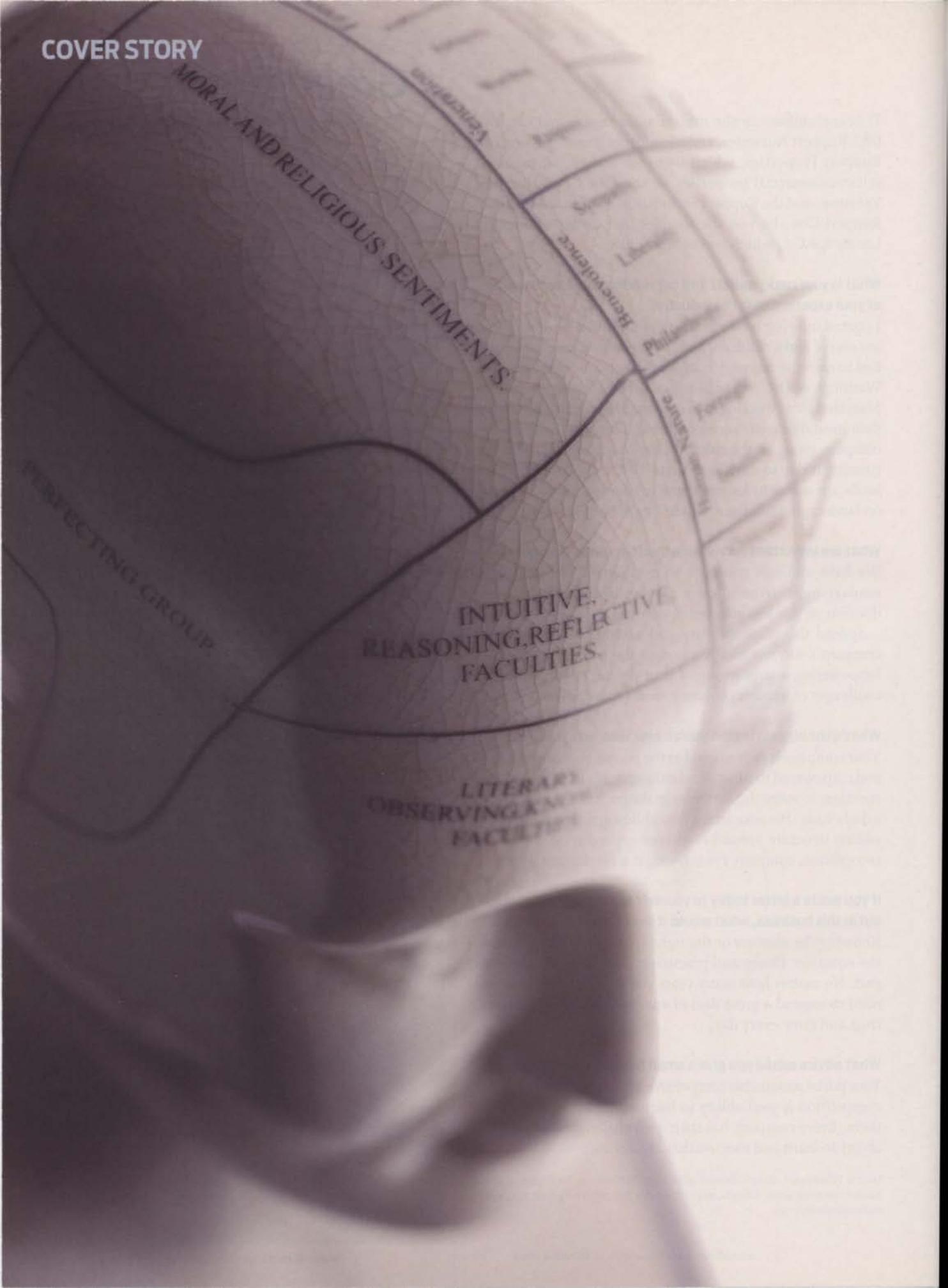


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“Invest in your landscape and it will add 15 percent to the value of your home.”

Sure, the first time a homeowner hears this research it sounds pretty good. It presents a sound investment strategy, emphasizing a service that keeps giving back, particularly today as home values have diminished.

The problem? Everyone in the industry is using it, fighting to grab a greater share of existing and dwindling demand. They are all vying for the same 35- to 55-year-old Baby Boomer customer.

The problem with this sales tactic? “It’s already old thinking,” explains Jim McCutcheon, CEO and partner, HighGrove Partners, Austell, Ga. And that thinking is even more dangerous in today’s troubled economy. “The vast majority of the world doesn’t think their equity is coming back any time soon. In fact, if you use this sales tactic on a homeowner today, they’d probably laugh at you.”

Since technology has advanced rapidly, and information is available at the click of a mouse, the typical landscape customer is much more educated.

Contractors who aren’t planning ahead may fall behind. “Too many small business owners in this industry think in the ‘now’ mode,” observes Russ Frith, president and CEO of Lawn Doctor, Holmdel, N.J. “Their energies are so consumed with doing the things necessary to make a dollar today that they forget about tomorrow.”

The current economic struggle has added an additional twist – knowing the little nuances about a business’ typical customer can mean the difference between growth and death, particularly when every penny means so much more.

The basics of understanding a customer stem from comprehending their core values, and a lot of that can be determined through looking at their generational characteristics and resulting future wants vs. needs.

As any salesperson has probably heard before, the first rule of selling is simple and steadfast: Know your customer. “With three distinct generations playing active roles in the buying decisions of companies, that tenet is increasingly difficult to fulfill,” explains Cam Mart-

son of Mobile, Ala.-based Generational Insight. “It is no longer enough to be personable and knowledgeable about your service. To succeed in today’s business climate, you need to approach each buyer with an informed generational perspective – recognizing the underlying biases, values and expectations that pave the way to ‘yes.’”

BOOM TOWN. Who wouldn’t want to fight for the Baby Boomer customer? They have an almost insatiable desire for real estate and appreciate housing as a great investment. In fact, they own and buy more real estate than not only any other generation, but also more than the national average. According to a National Association of Realtors September study, one out of four Baby Boomers own more than one property. The same survey also revealed the natural beauty of the environment they live in is on their list of top eight things they feel make the perfect retirement location – meaning landscaping is right up there with quality health care.

The NAR survey also shows that one-quarter of Boomers aren’t satisfied with their present homes, meaning a good portion of them may be considering a move – presenting additional opportunities for landscape renovation and installation.

Terry Kurth understands this demographic. His typical customer is between the ages of 35 and 54, lives in a two-income family with children and has a new home or one that is less than 20 years old. “They’re both working and busy – they like frequent contact with us and to build a relationship,” explains the subfranchisor/career consultant of Weed Man, who runs the \$2 million

Customer Psychology 2010

Secure tomorrow’s customers **today** by better understanding their pain points.

BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI

Generation Spending Gaps

Self-Reported Spending Per Day

Generation	2008	2009	% Change
Baby Boomers	\$98	\$64	-35%
Generation X	\$110	\$71	-35%
Generation Y	\$92	\$61	-34%

Source: Gallup Poll

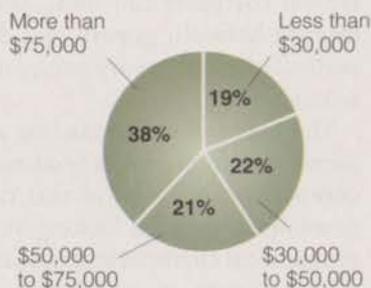


BABY BOOMERS Self-Reported Annual Household Income



Source: Gallup Poll

GENERATION X Self-Reported Annual Household Income



Source: Gallup Poll

GENERATION Y Self-Reported Annual Household Income



Source: Gallup Poll

franchise in Madison and Milwaukee, Wis. "For Baby Boomers, their single biggest asset is still their home, and so their mentality is they want to put a better moat around their castle. If they show their home is receiving care on the outside, they know potential buyers will expect the same inside."

However, this customer is becoming harder to reach than in years past. With telemarketing and direct mail that got a 2 percent response rate and closed 55 to 60 percent, the cost to acquire a customer used to be in the \$40 to \$60 range for Kurth's business. With 87 percent of his area on "do-not-call" lists, direct mail response rates down below 1 percent, postage costs rising and closing percentages dwindling, today's cost to acquire a customer is now more than \$100, Kurth says.

On top of that, the current economy has decreased overall spending. What was once 73 or 74 percent of GDP is now 69 to 70 percent of GDP, each percentage point representing about

\$900 billion, Frith shares from recent reports he's read.

Start by looking at Baby Boomers. Some experts attribute the sustained economic growth of the 1980s and 1990s, which the landscape industry certainly enjoyed, to the fact that Baby Boomers reached their peak earning and spending years during this period. As they near retirement age, the concern is they will pull back spending to make up for nest egg losses they suffered the past year. Gallup poll data suggests Boomers have already pulled back — this year, their daily spending of \$64 is down from an average of \$98 last year.

But they are not alone in pulling back on their consumption. While Boomers sheer numbers make their influence on the national economy greater than that of any other generation, their average reported spending is actually lower than that of Generation X. In 2009, average reported daily spending among Gen-Xers is \$71 compared to Boomers' \$64. Last year, the figures were \$110

and \$98, respectively. Higher spending among Generation X is not a function of greater income, as the two groups have similar income distributions.

The most likely reason for the difference is that 71 percent of Gen-Xers have children under 18, according to Gallup estimates. The presence of young children in the household can be a major predictor of reported spending (in 2008 and 2009, the difference in reported average spending between parents with children under age 18 and non-parents was about \$20, Gallup shows). By comparison, only about one in four Baby Boomers have children under age 18.

Also notable in the data is the fact that reported spending by Generation Y thus far in 2009 (\$61) is roughly on par with that of Boomers. This is the case even though Generation Y's reported income is quite a bit lower on average than Boomers'.

BEYOND GENERATIONAL DIVIDES. Based on this spending data and future predic-

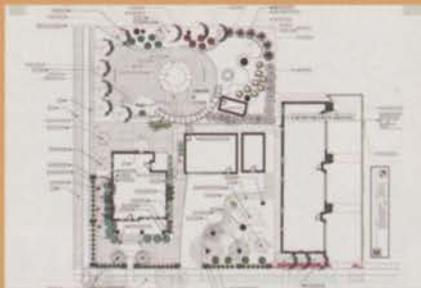
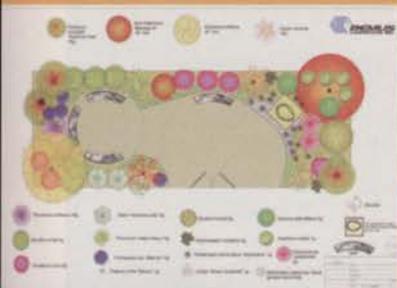
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tions, many think consumer spending can no longer carry the economy. "It's not clear how much the economy can grow unless spending increases from its current low levels," Gallup poll data reports. "But spending may not necessarily be the best course of action, particularly for Baby Boomers as they approach retirement age and prepare to rely on Social Security and their retirement savings as primary sources of income. Retirement-age Americans consistently show the lowest levels of reported spending."

Amidst all this uncertainty and change, what should a landscape contractor do to attract new customers? Appreciate the

generational differences that will change how they market and approach customers, but look for bridges from generation to generation that are universal, experts suggest.

First, regardless of generation, "no one has patience anymore," McCutcheon says, listing speed as one of his two criteria that go across all generations. "The days of apologizing for being last minute are over. You have to anticipate your customers' moves and stay ahead of the game.

"The best thing you can do is call them up and ask, 'What can I do for you?'" McCutcheon advises. HighGrove Partners tries to have more communication going out than coming in to stay ahead of this curve and lessen customer impatience and complaints. "We have good and bad days with this, but the day we do it consistently we will win."

This includes commercial customers. "I don't think a 30-year-old property manager is any different from a 50-year-old property manager," explains George Gaumer, vice president/general manager of Kent, Ohio-based Davey Commercial Landscape Services. "They all want instant response. You can't expect for them to leave you a voice mail and wait to get a call back. Voice mail is now a distant second to e-mail."

To appease this client demand over the past three years, all Davey account managers have been equipped with Blackber-

GENERATIONS NOW

Generation	Years	Population
The Silent	1925-1945	45 million
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	80 million
Generation X	1965-1976	49.1 million
Generation Y	1977-1994	73.5 million

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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ries so they can communicate instantly with their customers. "If you don't have e-mail access more frequently than at the end of the day and don't already have updated Blackberry or mobile technology, you need to think about it now."

The other important customer desire that stretches beyond generational divides is return on investment. "You have to be stewards of their money," McCutcheon says. "What do they need? In every crisis, there's an opportunity."

In McCutcheon's case, he noticed developers he worked with were all devastated by the economy. They have all let go of their staffs. "So what we've done is developed a land services company," he shares. "We expanded what we do with our landscape architects and brought on a former developer. Now we can be an adjunct staff for developers so they don't have to hire people."

The company is already getting work

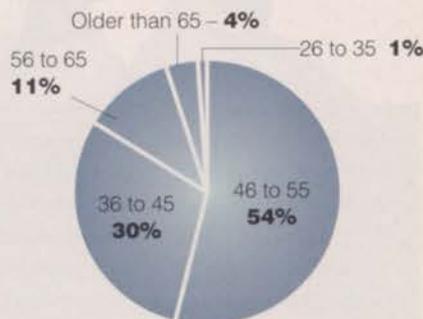
as a result of this investment – McCutcheon says the group has secured four projects. "A developer isn't going to make money again until they develop something. People will develop again – maybe not tomorrow but they will," he says. "If we position ourselves now as experts and put ourselves in the right spot, once that turnaround comes, we'll be in the right position."

Another way to stay ahead of customer need is to set up a customer advisory council, McCutcheon suggests, which HighGrove did four years ago. It's made up of seven customers who are each invited to serve a 12-month term. They provide direct and ongoing customer feedback for the company, participating in two to four lunch meetings annually that are each two to three hours long. HighGrove treats the group to lunch.

"Too often, we focus on what we think we do well and what we think custom-

The Typical Landscape Customer

What is your average customer's age?



Source: Lawn & Landscape

ers want delivered," McCutcheon says. "Before we started this council, there were things we had been doing for years that I thought our customers loved, and when I finally asked them about it



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TARGET CUSTOMERS

BABY BOOMER



Baby boomers are "aging by the minute as they worry about retirement and savings," describes Drew Stevens, president of Stevens Consulting Group, a sales consulting firm. "This group resists spending during economic uncertainty since they pay with cash not credit. To achieve sales excellence it is imperative for selling professionals to create a bond with Boomers."

Steve Howard, author of *Boomer Selling*, adds these tips about Boomers:

- * They are more selective in their spending than they were before the recession.
- * Sales tricks and pressure tactics do nothing but insult them.
- * They know the value of a dollar as well as a penny. They'll

buy a \$1,000 suit at Nordstrom's and then stop at Wal-Mart for socks.

- * They know how to bargain and haggle.
- * They know they are special and believe they should be recognized for being unique.

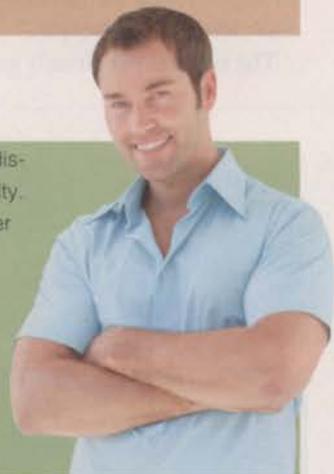
These older consumers tend to be more risk-averse and less open to new ideas, so a recent report in *Advertising Age* suggests playing up messages suggesting advantages like guarantees, safety and experience.

GENERATION X

This generation is very open to technology yet its members are also well educated – if they need information they know where to get it, so selling professionals need to illustrate differentiation, Stevens advises. "Generation X wants issues resolved expediently and deplore lengthy sales pitches in favor of solutions," he says.

According to Brand Channel, Generation X consumers are more cynical than their predecessors – they want to carefully evaluate their choices

and reach their own purchasing decisions. This discriminating pattern often discourages brand loyalty. "Target Gen-Xers by trying to convince them other Gen-Xers are doing the same thing – something they can join and to which they can belong," Brand Channel advises.



GENERATION Y



The largest and most influential group of purchasers since the Baby Boomers, Generation Y is on the minds of many selling and marketing professionals. "They are influential, have the money to spend and there are many of them," Stevens says. "They are very well educated. As a group, they believe in real time connection with the Internet – a must medium. They are all about instant connectivity and, most importantly, instant gratification."

Being the most tech-savvy of the average household, they are frequently tapped for opinions in family purchasing decisions, adding to their already considerable influence in the marketplace, Brand Channel reports, adding that they are easier targets because they grew up in a culture of pure consumerism. Get their vote, and likely the other two generations will follow. They are also less fearful of taking a risk on something they believe in.

However, remember that "they want to be treated with respect and not condescended to as know-nothing kids," Brand Channel advises. "They want to be listened to and have their needs and expectations addressed." Take a page out of Apple's or Southwest's playbooks and build services with advice from this group.

I found the opposite was true. Without this council, I would never figure out what our customers needed, especially in this uncertain economy.”

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO? Start working on a broader array of services and capabilities than just landscaping. What the generational divides have taught sellers is that customers are expecting more speed, capability and flexibility than ever before. “So now you have to do more than just be a landscape company,” McCutcheon stresses.

A solutions provider might be a better description, according to Bill Poppei, professor emeritus of finance at Chicago’s DePaul University. “Instead of putting in a landscape, appeal to these high-tech, advanced customers and put in an *intelligent* landscape,” he says. “This would be one that uses tools to tell you when they are hurting, e.g. need

water. There are sensing devices you can use now to sell this niche.”

McCutcheon laughs remembering a relevant story he recently told his sales team. He was asked to give a motivational speech and found himself staring at the old and new iPods he had sitting on his desk. “Apple created something I didn’t even know I needed with the first one, and then two or three years later they did it again,” he says. Unfortunately, “there is little innovation in the landscape industry – period. So maybe innovation isn’t looking at what we do or the way we build or maintain it, but maybe it involves more of how we redefine the landscape.”

For instance, everyone knows water is a problem today, and one that will continue. Two years ago in September, a drought in McCutcheon’s market turned off the water. That’s the same year he launched the company’s Know-

Water program – more than tripling its irrigation business in a year when other companies shut their doors. “We spoke the customers’ language, understood their pain points, and it worked for us.”

Boomer savings rates remain high – about 20 percent of their income at age 50, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey, and this has only increased in today’s economy. Where will that money go? You decide. 

The author is editor of *Law & Landscape*. Reach her at rwisniewski@gie.net.

For more on McCutcheon’s KnowWater program, the generational stats of landscapers, and a list of the 21 best retirement towns for Boomers, visit www.lawandlandscape.com/webextras.



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Well-Equipped

Contractors share equipment purchasing strategies and how they budget for 'iron' in a tough economy.

Now is prime time to buy equipment for the 2010 season, even if the equipment will not "work" until spring. Actually, Jack Snow, president, Sheffield Financial, argues now might be the best time to make a deal – and take advantage of some serious tax breaks.

"Dealers want to reduce inventory before winter, manufacturers are looking for reorders from dealers before spring and financiers want to make loans," Snow says, describing showroom business. "This means landscape contractors can get good equipment – this year's models – and not have to make payments until next year."

Thanks to incentives that began rolling out late summer, you may not have to shell out for new equipment until April. For example, Sheffield Financial offers an installment loan with fixed payments that are due only when the equipment is in use: April to October, in cooler climates.

"You'll have a much higher payment, but you'll only be paying for the equipment while it is producing revenue," Snow says. The company hasn't offered a program like this since 1993, when serious drought affected equipment sales. Expect other incentive programs to roll out during GIE+EXPO in Louisville, Ky., Oct. 29 to 31.

Meanwhile, buying equipment before year end has tax advantages, adds Snow, a former accountant. Depreciation under Section 179 of the tax code allows businesses to deduct the full purchase price of qualifying equipment purchased or financed during the tax year.

Section 179 makes buying equipment much more attractive than leasing, according to Snow. For instance,



Based on promotions introduced in late summer, landscape and lawn care professionals may not have to pay for new equipment until April.

leasing equipment with a \$10,000 loan and \$300 monthly payments means a \$3,600 annual write-off. But by buying that \$10,000 machine, you can write off the full amount this year.

"If you don't pay it off, you can still write off the whole purchase price this year and write off interest you make on payments in future years," Snow adds, advising a discussion with an accountant prior to making capital expenditures.

Buddy Rodgers, president of Buddy Rodgers & Son Professional Lawn Service in Leavenworth, Kan., takes advantage of late-season incentives through dealer from Oct. 31 through December. Last year, he paid 17 percent less for 48-inch and 36-inch mowers.

Sure, purchasing equipment in fall when bids for 2010 aren't yet locked down can be a gamble. But so is business and life, Snow points out. "We roll the

dice every day," he says.

However, careful equipment purchase planning based on account renewals and conservative projects can give a business owner the workload information needed to justify new purchases now during incentive season.

"Every manufacturer has different programs and promotions," Snow says.

And if you are concerned about how to pay for what you already have, Snow emphasizes the importance of keeping open communication with your lender and dealer. "We are here to help, not to hurt," he says.

This month, *Lawn & Landscape* asked three landscape contractors who operate companies in different revenue categories to reveal their equipment purchasing strategies. **L**

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



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SMALL – LESS THAN \$500,000

BY KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE

Treat it Right

Enforcing employee accountability for equipment condition allows Buddy Rodgers to earn back a chunk of his equipment investment.

Buddy Rodgers can recuperate a solid 40 percent of his investment in mowers, and his secret is not the color of the iron. It's keeping careful maintenance records and monitoring each operator's performance.

"We keep employees accountable," emphasizes Rodgers, president, Buddy Rodgers & Son Professional Lawn Service, Leavenworth, Kan.

He does this with a chart that lists each member of his three crews. When an "unnecessary expense" arises – such as a certain \$900 repair after a crew planted a zero-turn rider into a wrought-iron fence – that cost is recorded. "At the end of the year when we dole out



bonuses, we show employees, "This is how much could have been added to your bonus," Rodgers relates.

And Rodgers doesn't skimp on bonuses. Last year, he took his three crew leaders to Las Vegas, all expenses paid. "I have to take care of these guys because they're the gravy of the company," he says simply.

In return, his guys better take care of the equipment, allowing Rodgers to market his used machines to the general public. This takes no effort on Rodger's part. Occasionally, he says, crewmembers are stopped by people who see the yellow and orange fleet and are interested in knowing where they can get a large mower.

"They say, 'I bought a piece of property with 2 acres of lawn, and that machine would be ideal, what does it cost?'" Rodgers says, imitating how a resale opportunity happens. "We tell them how much the mower costs new, and add, 'From time to time, we have these for sale and they are in good shape.'"

Because all of his equipment is serviced by the same dealer, to whom Rodgers has been loyal since starting the business 28 years ago, Rodgers has detailed maintenance records. He constantly rotates his fleet and retires mowers once they hit 1,600 to 1,800 hours.

"At that point, they are still running, and they'll make a good new mower for an individual looking for a commercial machine that can't afford a new one," Rodgers says.

Rotating mowers is easy because Rodgers keeps a spare "twin" for every type of mower he runs. His fleet consists of 11 mowers of six different configurations. If one 60-inch zero-turn mower goes down, he has a spare of the same kind.

"Downtime is just critical," he says.

During heavy-rain weeks when crews have limited time to mow, having those spares is especially helpful. Crews are mowing frantically and machines are more likely to break down.

Rodgers applies the same philosophy to handheld equipment. "The most embarrassing thing is to have a piece of equipment that won't start while you're on a property, and you have to play and fiddle with it," Rodgers says. "If we have to do that with a piece of equipment a couple of times, it's gone."

The best equipment investment Rodgers made was ride-on sprayers. He has three of these, one for each crew. "We used to drag a hose around, but now we can produce four times the amount of business," he says.

The worst purchase decision: a trailer-mounted leaf loader. It seemed like a good idea when the city retired its leaf loaders. Today, Rodgers calls the machine a \$16,000 egg. The city replaced its leaf loaders, and Rodgers lost his niche market. Now, he advertises curb-side leaf removal "by appointment, not chance," rivaling the city's designated leaf pickup days. He uses the machine 10 to 20 percent of the time. **L**

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

Buddy Rodgers & Son Professional Lawn Service

Principal: Buddy Rodgers, president

Location: Leavenworth, Kan.

Established: 1981

2008 Revenue: \$450,000

Customers/Services: 80% residential, 20% commercial; full-service maintenance, lawn care, shrub care

Employees: 3 full-time; 8 during peak season

Equipment purchasing philosophy:

Hold employees accountable for how they treat equipment and sell used equipment when buying new replacements to recoup some of the cost.

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PLAYING IT Safe

This year's equipment purchase strategy was to maintain and make due. Next year, Granger expects more of the same.

There's no better feeling than paying half-price for a high-quality piece of equipment. That's what Brandon Granger did when he purchased his Toro Dingo for \$18,000 at a CAT Rental store. The machine had 200 hours on it and was in great condition. It came with a collection of attachments – auger, Harley box rake, bucket, pallet forks. Granger invested in a new engine for the 3-year-old machine; it was rattling at 1,200 hours. But now he's set.

"That was by far my favorite purchase – it's so useful," Granger says, noting a rental can cost \$250 per day. "Rent it for three days and you can make a payment on it and it's yours all month."

Granger is crunching numbers carefully – not something he enjoys. While business was up in late summer, he has been a cautious buyer this year, choosing to maintain and "squeak out" as many hours from equipment as possible.

It hasn't been that easy. In July, he spent \$1,100 on maintenance and parts – above average. "I'm more hesitant now mainly because last year, I bought two trucks and two new mowers," he says. This year, Granger is investing in handheld equipment, which the company can keep running for about 12 to 18 months.

"You can spend \$50 on a maintenance bill to fix them, or buy brand new for



Granger Landscapes

Principal: Brandon Granger, president

Location: Florence, S.C.

Established: 1998

2008 Revenues: \$760,000

Customers/Services: 70% residential, 30% commercial; full-service maintenance, design/installation, irrigation

Employees: 8

Equipment purchasing philosophy: Avoid equipment-thrill purchasing and focus on the budget.

\$200," he notes.

Granger doesn't ever throw away handheld equipment. "We have a nice mount of them at the shop because we use them for parts, or we'll leave them with the mechanics at the dealership so they can use the broken equipment for parts," he says.

But sometimes, retiring equipment is not an option, such as in August when three walk-behind mowers sputtered out in the same week. "I had to hold back from buying a new mower because that's \$6,000," Granger says. "So we just made due and got the machines back up and running."

Operations were behind that week, but Granger keeps a spare zero-turn

mower and one walk-behind. His crews carry extra handheld equipment on their trailers as a sort of equipment failure insurance policy. Each trailer is stocked with two edgers, two line trimmers, and three or four backpack blowers. "Equipment can break at any time," Granger points out.

Each month, he evaluates the fleet and determines which equipment is "causing trouble." He keeps track of warranty periods, and when a major part (engine, cutting deck) is no longer covered, he scrutinizes the wear-and-tear situation and either sells the mower on eBay or trades it in at the dealership. Mowers usually last two or three years at Granger Landscapes.

But if Granger takes on a big, new account, he'll consider adding to the fleet. "We evaluate the account and figure out the cost of new equipment and the cost to maintain it," Granger explains.

Historically, Granger buys a new mower every six months to keep the fleet fresh. But he expects to continue his conservative purchasing strategy through 2010. **L**

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



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Investment Protection

Hiring an asset manager to protect investments helps Kinsella get more 'return' from its machines.

Two years ago, Kinsella Landscaping made a decision to protect its estimated \$5 million in equipment by hiring an asset manager, someone to make buying decisions, oversee technicians and, in general, protect the company's significant capital investment.

"We were growing so fast and no one could keep track of all this equipment with two locations," says Greg Semmer, president.

Repairs were performed incorrectly, and the company had an upset in the service department. Basically, the four technicians were let go and Semmer needed to find someone who could manage the company iron.

"Equipment is expensive, and with growth comes growing pains," Semmer says matter-of-factly. "We wanted our trucks and equipment to last longer so we could start getting more of a return on our investment."

In 2008, Kinsella Landscaping grew 30 percent, adding \$3 million to its revenue. This year, business is down slightly, underscoring that focus on keeping equipment in tip-top shape. Kinsella Landscaping has four full-time technicians – two at each location – who perform all types of repairs. The cost of paying their salaries and benefits is less than paying a dealership for fixes, Semmer says. In fact, the company has employed at least one full-time technician for 10 years, and hired a part-time mechanic a couple of years after the business started in 1994.

The advantage of managing equipment in-house, and having an asset manager to oversee the company's fleet, is the ability to track equipment and control expenses.

"The asset manager can look at trends of what is breaking on equipment, and if certain crews or employees have a history of damaging equipment," Semmer describes. A detailed spreadsheet contains a breakdown of every piece of equipment. The asset manager reviews this document in full every month, updating it when repairs are made or new equipment is purchased.

From a wear-and-tear aspect, Kinsella Landscaping generally purchases new mowers every three to five years.

"But the issue is, we have grown for the last 15 years, so we have always had to buy new equipment to manage that new business," Semmer says. Semmer knows it costs about \$35,000 to outfit one crew. He pencils this amount in the budget, regardless of growth plans. "You never know what will happen," he says. One time, an employee drove a riding mower into a lake. Last year, three mower engines were destroyed when they were fueled with gasoline that was diluted with water. That repair cost the company \$10,000 in labor and parts.

He has admittedly spent too little on equipment in the past. Once, a large contract was delayed and the customer, last minute, asked Semmer if he could take the job. Semmer had to pull together two full crews in three days.

He got it done. "We basically went on a shopping spree," Semmer says. He maintains a strong relationship with a local dealer and always purchases the same brand of equipment. "If you are consistent with your purchases and you buy in volume, your dealer will start stocking what you want," he says.

This year, there were no shopping sprees. The company made due with its existing fleet, purchasing about 10 handheld pieces of equipment. Semmer expects to continue conservative purchase habits next year, and he'll depend on his asset manager and heads of construction, maintenance and overall operations to help him make those decisions. **L**

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

Kinsella Landscaping

Principal: Greg Semmer, president

Location: Blue Island, Ill.

Established: 1994

2008 Revenue: \$12.8 million

Customers/Services: 100% commercial; full-service maintenance, landscape design/installation, snow removal

Employees: 134

Equipment purchasing philosophy: Buy equipment out of need, not want; hire an asset manager.



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BY LINDSEY GETZ

Downsizing to Drive Profit

In this difficult economy, everyone is seeking ways they can keep their business afloat and, preferably, profitable. In order to do so, many companies have downsized, closed unprofitable divisions or even refocused their entire business strategy. Every market is different, which makes the right approach to handling these tough times differ vastly from company to company. "It's such a complex problem to solve because every business really exists in a different world from every other business – even when



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STRATEGIES

they're in the same industry," says Kevin R. Kragenbrink, Ph.D., owner and head business coach of Estrada Strategies in Knoxville, Tenn. "There's no one right answer."

One of the biggest mistakes owners can make when trying to adjust or refocus their business to handle this tough economy, warns Kragenbrink, is to simply look at what's profitable and, without delay, shift the entire business to serve that area.

Immediately cutting back on important members of your labor force before reassessing other potential alternatives can also be a long-term error. These decisions require taking a closer look at what changes will need to be made in order to be successful. For many, this is a good time to reassess and reevaluate without being rash, in the hopes that making the right changes will keep the business alive for the future.

A TIME FOR CHANGE. While it's unwise to rush into a drastic change, it is often change that is required to survive these trying times. That's what Greg Isaac, president of Cutting Edge Landscape Contractors, in Spring, Texas, began to realize after his revenue peaked in 2006, and started a steady downfall. "In 2006 we were doing around \$3.5 million per year, had 35 employees and about 13 crews on the road," he says. "We were slammed. I had a huge office with lots of people, and it was a pretty well-oiled machine." That picture from three years ago is quite different than the one today. "Where I sit right now, I have four total employees and nobody is in this office other than me," he says. "It's still the same big office, and there are lots of empty cubicles, but it's just me here."

His story is familiar to many. Isaac was having so much success with the design/build portion of his business that during the boom he got out of doing maintenance and focused entirely on landscaping for custom home building companies and some commercial accounts. But after 2006, he started noticing a decline in work and builders were really pinching his company

on pricing. Though he tried to keep everything going, he recognized the need to start scaling back. Around that same time he was approached by someone who needed herbicide spray for a railroad yard. "At the time I was so busy that I turned him down," says Isaac. "I really wasn't interested in getting back into maintenance." But as revenue continued to drop – the company did \$2.7 million in 2007 and then \$2.2 million in 2008 – he began crunching the numbers and realized that refocusing on maintenance was a wise financial design. Isaac was grateful to learn the railroad yard job was still available, and today maintenance has become virtually 100 percent of the business, with a focus on commercial accounts. "We do \$1 million a year in herbicide spray, and profits are way more than they've ever been," he reports.

His ability to be able to make this big

change when it became necessary is why Isaac says he's succeeded, despite the tough times. He refused to go down with what he considered a sinking ship. "I know so many landscape companies that are just struggling to hang on to the part of the industry that was good at the

focus of his business, that's not been the case for everyone. Jeff Reuter, president of Sonoran Landesign in Phoenix, says the company has tried to push for more maintenance work as design/build jobs began drying up, but they've found that other area landscape firms are doing

"It's important to realize that being big is not what it's all about." – GREG ISAAC

time, and they're just not willing to let go," he says. "But those jobs have dried up. It was good then, but it's not good now, and there is no sense in trying to hang on."

RETAIN CORE VALUE AND EMPLOYEES.

While Isaac was fortunate to find a lot of maintenance work to sustain a new

the exact same thing. "It's really hard to make a margin in maintenance right now because everyone is discounting their services so much," he says. What's ironic is that Reuter has found his business competing against the individuals who were displaced from companies like his own in order to downsize on labor expenses. "They're doing main-

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tenance work out of their truck, and there's just no way to compete with that," he says.

Instead, Reuter has taken this time to really focus on marketing and advertising – something that was never a necessity in the past as all their work came

through being the preferred landscaper for various new builders. "It's a new realm for us," he says. "We're getting involved with Internet placement, direct mailings and even knocking on doors. In many ways it's like starting all over again, but we've had some success."

One of the most important things Reuter plans to continue doing during this recession is to hold on to his key employees, even if it hurts financially. "Breaking even is fine with me at this point," says Reuter, who cut laborer positions but retained higher paid personnel. "My focus is on staying intact. We'll be in a great position once things do bounce back because I've kept the guys we've had for a long time and who really know our company."

Reuter realizes that building employee loyalty is often worth the cost of labor. Kragenbrink says another mistake business owners make as they downsize is distorting the company's culture. "Downsizing typically involves things like layoffs or altering employees' positions – both things that can have a significant impact on the culture of your business," he explains. "Keep your company's vision, mission and core values in mind as you restructure and refocus. You don't want to look back and wonder where your business went in the end." In other words, if you wind up with a totally different business after restructuring or downsizing, make sure that's what you wanted to do. Though his business may see significant changes, Reuter is being careful to protect his company's core values by retaining its core employees.

GROWTH ISN'T EVERYTHING. While every business wants to grow, the down economy has revealed that many companies may have grown too fast in trying to keep up with the housing boom. Reuter admits he had so much work at some points that the company wasn't able to give as much attention to each specific client as they may have liked. However, he always grew the company responsibly, he says, and never got ahead of himself or beyond his means. That strategic planning has paid off for him during this downturn.

Rick Christensen, landscape division manager, Teufel Nursery, a company with offices in Oregon, Washington and Idaho, says the company was on a steady, strong growth curve for most of

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the last 25 years. And, at the recommendation of an outside consultant, they accelerated their growth starting in 2002 and peaked in 2006. "We were unable to sustain that volume in 2007 and slid further in 2008," he says. "So for 2009 we actually put in a plan for reduced revenue and will follow that same plan for 2010. By planning for a reduction in revenue it has allowed us to show a modest profit." This plan was achieved by scaling back through a reduction of employee head count. "Fortunately, because we had a plan in place, rather than layoffs and terminations, we were able to do most of this by not replacing open positions and being very cautious in hiring new, seasonal employees," adds Christensen, who says although the company is now smaller in size, they have been able to remain competitive by scaling back.

For Anil Hiremath, CEO of The Groundskeeper, a commercial company that brought in \$38 million in 2008, consolidating operations from three branches to just one main branch in Tucson, Ariz., was a way to gain efficiencies and present more consistent face to the customers in that region.

Initially, The Groundskeeper consolidated to two branches – Phoenix and Tucson – after which the company's profit margin nearly doubled. But, ultimately, Hiremath chose to focus solely on the Tucson branch, as there were many more competitors in the Phoenix area.

With this further consolidation at the end of 2008, the company expects to see continued bottom line improvement this year. "When we opened up as just one key office, we were leaner and meaner," says Hiremath. "You have to

find a balance. You want to find ways to be competitive but you also don't want to trim to the point where customer service is affected."

There's no question it can be hard for companies to consider scaling back in any manner, especially after long periods of growth, but in this economy it's becoming a necessity for many. No matter what changes lay ahead, it's important to keep things in perspective.

"Everyone wants a big company and to have a lot of trucks out there," says Isaac. "It seems like one of the first questions people often ask is, 'How many trucks do you have?' But that's really just another feather in the hat. It's rewarding for the ego, but not for the bank account. In the end, it's important to realize that being big is not what it's all about." **L**

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

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A Speedy Recovery

How to bounce back from a bad customer service experience. BY GREGORY SMITH

If you want to increase sales, grow a loyal customer base that is the envy of your competitors, and provide service that is worth thousands of dollars in advertising and marketing, you must make a commitment to solving your customer's problems – and to doing so quickly.

So says John Tschohl, founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, which develops and delivers customer service training programs.

"Every company, no matter how excellent its products or employees, occasionally makes a mistake," he says. "How those companies and their employees respond to their mistakes, however, is what separates successful, customer-service driven organizations from the rest of the pack. Service recovery is the key."

Tschohl defines service recovery as solving a customer's problem and sending that customer out the door feeling as if he's just done business with the greatest company on Earth.

Unfortunately, he says, most companies handcuff their employees with inflexible policies and procedures that discourage them from making empowered decisions to solve a customer's problem.

"Empowerment is the

backbone of service recovery," Tschohl says. "Employees must be allowed to solve a customer's problem on the spot.

"Research also shows that there is nothing as powerful – or inexpensive – as word-of-mouth advertising," Tschohl says. "Happy customers will tell everyone they know about how well your company treated them, which will drive your business. You must care for them, nurture them, and do whatever it takes to earn their undying loyalty.

Advertising will bring a customer through your doors once, but the challenge is to keep them coming back to you." Tschohl recommends taking these four steps to provide service recovery that will grow your business:

1. Take responsibility. "Admit that the company made a mistake and tell the customer you're sorry for the problem," Tschohl says. "It's human nature to want to blame someone else for a mistake. But the customer doesn't care who made the mistake; she just wants the employee standing in front of her to correct it. That employee must own the problem, apologize on behalf of the company, and then take the necessary steps to solve it."

2. Act quickly. "Service recovery should happen in

60 seconds or less," Tschohl says. "Great service recovery is not moved up the ladder or passed to a supervisor to be handled another day. The cost of a delay is dramatic because most customers won't wait; they will simply leave you. The longer it takes for a complaint to be resolved, the angrier the customer will get and the more likely he will be to take his business – and his money – elsewhere."

3. Be empowered. "If you don't have empowered employees, you will never have service recovery," Tschohl says. "And, if you don't have service recovery, you won't have loyal customers. The magic of service recovery occurs when it happens with a frontline employee. Identify and eliminate policies and procedures that tie your employees' hands and then reward employees who make empowered decisions that satisfy – and retain – your customers."

4. Compensate.

"Service recovery doesn't end when you solve a customer's problem," Tschohl says. "You must give him something of value, something that lets him know you value his business and that will keep him coming back to you.

"Every organization has something it can give a customer who has experienced a problem," he says, adding that a gift doesn't have to cost a lot. "Identify 10 products or services you can give to a customer who has experienced a problem with your company. For example, a restaurant can give a customer a free dessert, an airline can upgrade a passenger to first class, a cell phone company can give a disgruntled customer 1,000 minutes."

The purpose of service recovery is to prevent customer defections. "If you solve your customers' problems and resolve their complaints, they will stay with you," Tschohl says. "In each customer complaint is an opportunity to win that customer's long-term loyalty. In the process, you will prevent customer defections, create word-of-mouth advertising." 

The author is the founder and lead navigator of Chart Your Course International, Conyers, Ga. Reach him at www.chartcourse.com.



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Should you maintain your commercial auto insurance in the off-season? Insurance covers more than just daily use.

BY RYAN FURMICK



A Comprehensive Guide

Have you ever mowed a lawn on a snowy January day? Probably not. Most landscapers probably aren't working in the same capacity during the off-season, so the insurance coverages you carry during peak season should be different than what you carry off-season.

As you're wrapping up your season, talk with your insurance agent about off-season insurance coverages. Asking the right questions can help you make sure you save money and stay protected.

COMPREHENSIVE-ONLY POLICIES. Season after season, many landscapers are left wondering if they need coverage at all during the off-season. After all, your vehicles are parked, and you probably won't be driving them again until next spring. You might think it's better to cancel the vehicle's insurance during the winter months to save some money, right? Wrong.

A lot can happen to a vehicle in storage, even if it's covered in a garage, it's still at risk. Your work truck could be stolen, vandalized or even slightly damaged, and those damages could end up costing more than you might expect.

Business owners who want to save some money during the off-season shouldn't let their vehicle insurance coverages lapse. It's in your best interest to protect all work-related vehicles, regardless of whether they are in use or not.

Talk to your agent to identify what coverage options are right for you and your landscape business throughout the year. For example, instead of eliminating coverage altogether, seasonal businesses can simply switch over to a comprehensive only policy. This provides basic protection against incidents like theft, vandalism, falling tree branches and windstorms year round.

Another reason to maintain a comprehensive only policy is most insurance companies want to see proof of continuous coverage when you purchase a policy. So, when you drop insurance completely during the off-season, it may seem like you're saving money in the short term, but when spring rolls around you'll end up paying more to get the coverage you need. Seasonal businesses can save as much as 10 percent by maintaining continuous coverage throughout the off-season, and it also

eliminates the hassle of reinstating your policy each year.

USING WORK TRUCKS TO PLOW SNOW.

If you're planning to plow driveways with your work truck this winter, you'll need to make sure your policy includes liability coverage. Even if you only plow occasionally, maintaining your liability coverage will not only keep you legal, it will protect your business and your vehicle in the event of an accident or other incident.

Bottom line: Talk to your carrier. Your local independent agent will be happy to take the time to review your vehicles, evaluate your specific needs and determine the most cost-effective options for your business. Many offer a variety of coverage options that can help you and your business customize a commercial auto insurance policy to fully protect you when your business is running on all cylinders *and* when it's not. **L**

The author is a business auto product manager for Progressive commercial auto insurance. For more information, go to <http://www.progressivecommercial.com>.

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STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT



TAKING CONTROL

Despite myriad challenges, many landscape company owners buckled down, focused on the numbers and learned a lesson or two about improving their businesses.

BY NICOLE WISNIEWSKI



ROB JOHNSON

Ask a landscape contractor how business is going in 2009 and you may be greeted with any number of answers ranging from "stagnant," as Todd Felinczak, owner of Aspen Landscapes in Grayslake, Ill., calls it, to "encouraging," according to Aaron Smith, general manager of Essex, Vt.-based S&D Landscapes.

It depends on a host of factors, from the services the company offers to the types of clients the company has to location. Yet the general consensus, according to the majority of the more than 600 landscape contractors we surveyed and 20 we interviewed for *Lawn & Landscape's* annual State of the Industry Report, conducted by ABR Research, is that things could be a lot better.

"We're pretty lucky," shares Linda Grieve, owner of Perennial Gardens in Des Moines, Iowa, explaining that instead of a typical 10 percent growth rate her business is looking at a decline of 30 percent this year. "It's a little bit of a slowdown, but it's not

being shot dead I guess."

"Things aren't like they were 18 months ago – we have been affected," adds Jeff Berghoff, president of Jeff Berghoff Design Group in Scottsdale, Ariz. "We're optimistic, but we've made significant changes to adjust with this economy and are still staying busy by the grace of God."

Although companies are struggling – and likely will be for some time – others, like Grieve and Berghoff, are finding ways to adapt and remain stable. Business owners are working harder and longer, keeping a tight grip on the company purse strings, and boosting marketing efforts as much as possible to stay ahead of the game.

UNPREDICTABLE BUT STABLE. This year "is a rollercoaster – you don't know which way is up or where you're going," Berghoff says. It's a sentiment shared by many.

What is going on out there? The average landscape company grew 2 percent this year, 8 percent

down from last year's 10 percent average. In addition to diminished growth, revenue per employee figures decreased this year from \$46,378 on average to \$41,193. So while contractors are focusing on improving efficiency, the decrease in growth happened fast enough that they couldn't keep up with this pace.

That's the bad news, which considering the number could have been in the red isn't as bad as it could be, but it's not making landscape business owners feel any better.

"We still maintained sales and number of customers but this is the first time in 10 years we haven't been a little bit ahead," Felinczak shares of his \$1.3 million company.

Certain services performed worse than others. Those down included construction/design-build at negative 6.5 percent, and chemical lawn care and nursery/grower services both at negative 1.6 percent. But lawn mowing/maintenance net revenue was up an average of 6.3 percent, arbor/

The Typical Landscape Contractor

Gross sales	\$788,778 (2009), \$866,920 (2010 expected)
Total employees	19.1 (9.6 year-round, 9.5 seasonal)
Years in business	16.2
Average growth	2% (2009), 16.5% (2010 expected)
Net profit	9.6% (2009), 11.1% (2010 expected)
Net operating cost change	3.4% (2009), 7.3% (2010 expected)
Revenue per employee	\$41,193 (considering 19.1 employees)

Avg. # of Customers By Service

Residential mowing	72
Commercial mowing	26
Residential design/build/installation	41
Commercial design/build/installation	15
Residential chemical/fertilizer	207
Commercial chemical/fertilizer	55



tree care was up 7 percent, snow and ice control was up 5.4 percent and irrigation services were up 4 percent. They aren't enjoying the double digit growth of years past, but they are up.

Many are using this year as a chance to regain focus and improve business practices.

Larry Ryan, owner of Kansas City, Mo.'s Ryan Lawn & Tree refers to it as "a wake-up call." We won't grow 15 percent every year guaranteed - I needed to realize that," he says, adding that this year he's looking at about 5 percent growth to his \$14.8 million business, which he considers flat due to inflation.

Everett Hendrixon of Hico, W. Va.-based Artistrees agrees. "It's do or die time - I'd say you've got to get with it or you're gone," he says, explaining that last year's \$400,000 revenue will be closer to \$250,000 this year. "If you survived in 2009, you have to thrive in 2010."

Here's where the picture improves. Net profit only dropped 0.7 percent from last year to 9.6 on average. This means contractors held steady profit despite decreasing growth. Next year, the average contractor expects 11.1 percent net profit.

And to supplement this positive,

Where the Growth Is

Business Area	2009 Net % Growth	2010 Expected Net % Growth
Total revenue	2	16.5
Lawn mowing/maintenance	6.3	13.2
Chemical lawn care	-1.6	11.9
Irrigation services	4	11
Snow and ice control	5.4	9.6
Design/build/installation	-6.5	8.7
Arbor/tree care	7	6.9
Nursery/grower	-1.6	4.1

Source: Lawn & Landscape

average 2009 operating costs dropped dramatically, from an average of 16.2 percent per company to only 3.4 percent. When separating companies by the mean of \$200,000 in revenue, average small companies had operating cost increases of only 1.8 percent and average larger businesses experienced 3.8 percent rises. For 2010, the average company overall expects this to be 7.3 percent, with large businesses expecting 10.4 percent and small businesses expecting only 4 percent.

With profits steady and costs down,

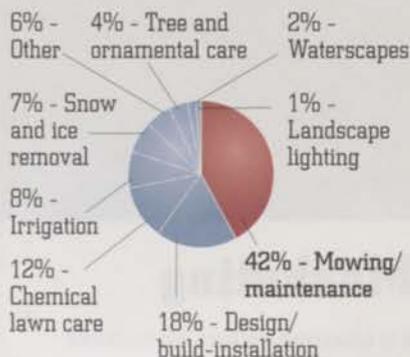
overall growth declines don't pinch as much. And this also is preventing contractors from what Jon Sternfels of Detroit-based Jonboy Landscaping calls "growing broke." "Just because you're growing doesn't mean you're growing in the right direction or are successful," says the owner of the \$445,000 company that is enjoying growth from \$395,000 in 2008. Sternfels credits this to an office manager who measures profitability on each crew each day, alerting him as to whether the company is maintaining a certain ratio of overhead to revenue

Industry Overview

2009 GROSS SALES	% of the Industry	SALES FROM						SALES FROM	
		Lawn mowing/maint.	Lawn care	Design/Build/Installation	Irrigation	Tree & ornamental care	Snow & ice removal	Single-family residential	Multi-family structures
Less than \$50,000	17.7	67.2	6.8	7.0	3.9	5.1	5.5	75.1	5.6
\$50,000 - \$99,999	14.9	43.2	11.3	18.4	7.3	5.1	5.0	68.0	2.9
\$100,000 - \$199,999	14.9	43.5	18.4	19.7	4.9	4.1	7.2	64.1	6.2
\$200,000 - \$499,999	24.2	40.2	7.3	22.7	7.0	3.5	6.1	59.1	6.8
\$500,000 - \$999,999	11.6	25.7	5.1	32.4	11.7	2.5	5.0	60.8	8.0
\$1 million or more	16.8	31.4	9.6	28.1	7.6	8.4	5.1	42.7	15.1
% of Respondents		43%	12%	21%	7%	5%	6%	61%	7%

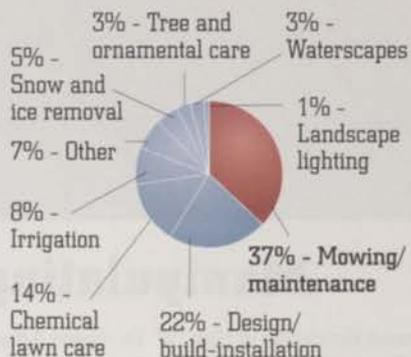
SERVICES: FAST FACTS

What was your fastest growing service in 2009?



Source: Lawn & Landscape

What do you predict will be your fastest growing service in 2010?



Source: Lawn & Landscape

Top 5 new services contractors plan to offer in 2010:

1. Green/sustainability services
2. Landscape lighting
3. Irrigation/water management
4. Holiday lighting
5. Waterscapes

Source: Lawn & Landscape



brought in so changes can be made to routes or jobs to continue operating profitably. "The focus needs to be on positive growth moving forward."

SERVICE GROWTH. A majority 42.3 percent of contractors reported that their fastest growing service this year was mowing/maintenance. Design/build ranked next with 18 percent of contractors reporting, which might seem surprising considering trends to move out of that business due to

home building market challenges. However, historically, contractors report design/build as a much more profitable industry service.

For instance, Felinczak says he still has small- and medium-sized design/build jobs coming in where he's maintaining, improving or redoing landscaping on existing home properties, but hasn't had those two or three big new installation jobs that he usually gets every year. Another trend he's noticed on the design/build

side is that his business has shifted from 75 percent plantings and 25 percent hardscapes to the reverse. "A lot of people are putting more money into hardscapes and patios instead of plantings," he says.

Next year, contractors expect a little bit more balance to restore to these two services. Thirty-seven percent predict mowing/maintenance will be their fastest growing service, while 22.2 percent put design/build in this spot.

		REGION			# OF EMPLOYEES					
Commercial/Industrial	Government/Institutional	West/Southwest	East/Midwest	South/Southeast	1 - 2	3 - 4	5 - 9	10 - 24	25 or more	
15.8	2.7	16.8	15.7	22.7	43.5	20.9	9.9	3.5	0.0	
25.0	2.9	12.6	16.8	14.3	32.6	23.9	9.9	7.1	0.0	
26.8	2.4	14.0	15.3	15.6	23.9	31.3	20.7	9.4	0.0	
29.8	3.2	25.2	23.5	22.7	0.0	20.9	49.5	28.2	12.0	
23.5	6.9	11.9	11.6	11.0	0.0	3.0	9.9	29.4	16.0	
35.0	7.1	19.6	17.2	13.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.4	72.0	
27%	4%	25%	47%	28%	12.1%	17.2%	29.0%	16.0%	19.3%	
		Average sales	\$869,755	\$818,097	\$653,896	\$71,196	\$150,000	\$272,748	\$1,059,536	\$2,944,667

Source: Lawn & Landscape

While maintenance will remain in the top growth position with 13.2 percent net percent growth predicted on average in 2010, contractors predict second and third place will go to chemical lawn care at 11.9 percent and irrigation services at 11 percent.

ONWARD & UPWARD.

According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, contractors are being very confident looking ahead to 2010 growth – predicting a net average of 16.5 percent.

Compared to the general small business community, this is extremely positive. Forty-one percent of small business owners say their top priority over the next six months is maintaining current revenue sources and only 26 percent say they are focused on growing their businesses, according to the American Express OPEN September Small Business Monitor.

While contractors certainly seem more confident of growth compared to other small businesses, many, like Berghoff, say 2010 is more about conservative vs. fast growth. “We’re not going to gear up and go zero to 60 in three seconds – we’re going to take time again and ramp back up,” he shares. “For so many years, we’ve sprinted. This year, we’ll pick up our pace and go for a nice jog before we sprint again; I think everybody has learned a lesson. You just have to keep your head down and keep your legs moving in forward motion so you don’t get run over.” **SB**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gie.net. Lincoln, Ill.-based freelance writer Julie Collins contributed to this story.



Manipulating Marketing

Everett Hendrixon of Hico, W. Va.-based Artistrees is concerned because his customer pool isn’t as large as it used to be. In order to generate more business, his company is boosting its marketing efforts. “We did a lot of home shows in the past but we need to try something new – promote our Web site more, get involved in the community,” he says.

Hendrixon is not alone. Many landscape contractors are increasing marketing efforts or changing their marketing practices as a means of boosting business.

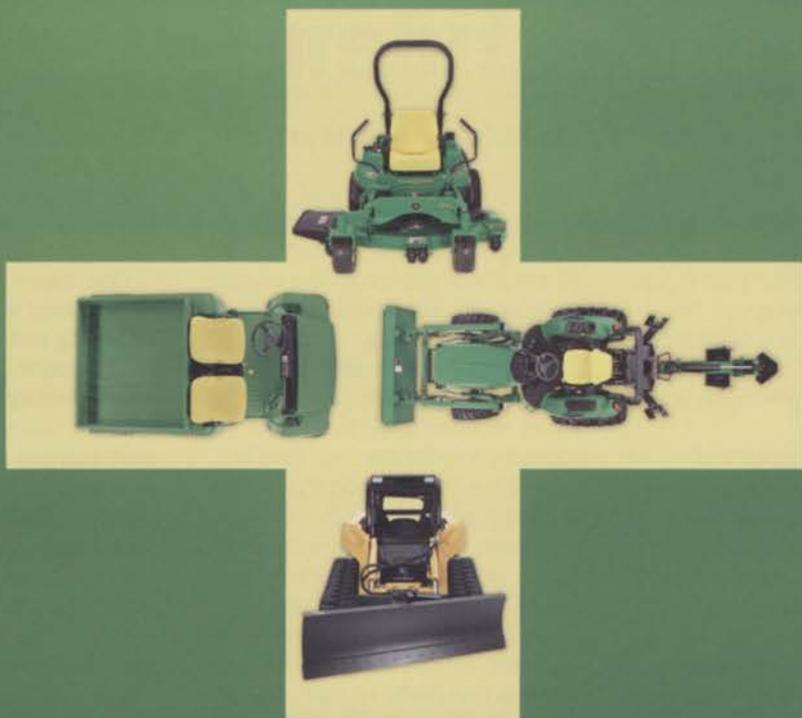
The biggest jump in marketing happened in the company Web site/e-mail category with 7 percent more contractors using this method over last year. Then came public relations and Internet searches, both with 6 percent more contractors reporting they used these this year. The next three marketing methods to experience the most activity this year – at 5 percent increases over last year – were Internet referral services, door-to-door sales and yard signs.

What marketing methods do you use to obtain new business?

MARKETING METHOD	2009 % OF CONTRACTORS	2010 % OF CONTRACTORS
Customer referrals	95%	93%
Business associate referrals	65%	60%
Company Web site/e-mails	39%	46%
Internet referral service	16%	21%
Newspaper ads	22%	21%
Yellow Pages ads	37%	37%
Television ad	3%	4%
Radio ads	5%	6%
Telemarketing	3%	3%
Direct mail	23%	25%
Public relations	16%	22%
Cold call sales/canvassing	18%	20%
Company retail store	4%	2%
Home & garden shows	11%	14%
Door-to-door sales	14%	19%
Internet search	15%	21%
Yard signs	34%	39%
Other	8%	5%

Source: *Lawn & Landscape*

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Owner Confidence Climbs

Focusing on profit and efficiency drives landscape contractors' confidence levels. By Nicole Wisniewski

No one has ever said landscape and lawn care business owners weren't a confident, optimistic group. And during a challenging year like 2009, that confidence is playing a big role in how these contractors are reacting to economic pressures and business challenges.

Approximately 87 percent of contractors are confident the landscape industry will rebound in 2010 compared to 78 percent last year, with 32 percent of them feeling very confident (also an increase from last year's 25 percent).

Only 10 percent of landscape contractors lacked confidence going into 2010, down 5 percent from last year. This coincides with national small business figures. According to Discover Small Business Watch's August survey, economic confidence

among small business owners jumped to its highest level in 18 months, and 30 percent of small business owners see economic conditions for their businesses improving.

The National Federation of Independent Business September survey reported small business optimism rose for the third time in the last five months, and this is also consistent with the steady increases happening in Moody's Economy.com's weekly survey on business sentiment.

And, finally, more than half (55 percent) of entrepreneurs have an optimistic outlook on near-term business prospects, up from 45 percent in March 2009, according to the American Express OPEN Small Business Monitor's September survey. One quarter (26 percent) even report expanding opportunities for their

businesses, up from 15 percent one year ago.

One reason for businesses' more upbeat view is the quickly improving profit picture. Decelerating compensation growth, combined with strong productivity growth, is leading to falling unit labor costs and high profit margins – one reason to expect an improving trend in profit growth, along with GDP growth and a better revenue picture, according to Aaron Smith, a senior economist for Moody's Economy.com.

"Improving profits and revenue give firms a signal to start hiring and

Focus on Service Businesses

Today, owners of service businesses like landscape contractors are more optimistic than their manufacturing and retail counterparts. Fifty-eight percent maintain a positive outlook vs. only 51 percent of manufacturers and 47 percent of retailers, according to the American Express OPEN September Small Business Monitor. Here are some other ways service businesses compare to their manufacturer and retail counterparts:

- Retailers are more likely to have hiring plans, due to the upcoming holiday season (27 percent), when compared to other industry sectors (22 percent of manufacturers and 17 percent of service businesses).
- Services businesses are more concerned with cash flow issues (63 percent) versus other industries (60 percent of retailers and 61 percent of manufacturers).
- The services sector is more likely than other industry sectors to have capital investment plans (39 percent compared to 36 percent of manufacturers and 34 percent of retailers).
- The manufacturing sector is more likely to say that the worst of U.S. economic woes are not over compared to other industry sectors (64 percent of retailers and 56 percent of services).
- Manufacturers and retailers are the most likely to be willing to take a financial risk (each 55 percent) when compared to service businesses (40 percent).



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

investing," Smith explains. "This is important since slower wage growth, while positive for profits, is negative for households. It is also important to realize that wage growth is not the same thing as household labor income growth, as the latter also depends on hours worked. Thus, the pickup in GDP helps labor income strengthen even in the face of slowing wage growth. This is starting to happen, with the rise in earnings thus far this quarter nearly matching a smaller drop in hours worked, implying stable

total wage income.

"This is how a virtuous circle begins," Smith continues. "As labor income grows, it provides a sustainable base for consumer spending and makes it less dependent on support from the government stimulus. This circle is becoming more entrenched as the manufacturing rebound and the recovery in financial conditions gather steam, reinforcing our view that growth can be sustained in 2010."

Moody's Economy.com chief

economist and cofounder Mark Zandi agrees with Smith.

"Business sentiment generally reflects economic conditions and does not drive them, save at turning points in the business cycle," Zandi says. "Recessions occur when businesses lose faith that their customers will purchase what they produce; they respond by cutting their investment and payrolls. Recoveries begin when that faith is restored." **SOI**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gle.net.

CAUSES FOR CONCERN

The top 10 concerns landscape contractors have about business in 2010 are:

1. Rising fuel prices

2. Low-ball competitors
3. Consumer confidence
4. New presidential administration
5. Generating quality leads
6. Overworked/stressed owners
7. Inflation and interest rates/Health insurance increases
8. Delinquent client payments/Workers' compensation costs
9. Customers cancelling services
10. Rising fertilizer prices

Source: Lawn & Landscape

Though average fuel prices in the mid-\$2 range have been reasonable considering the past few years of more extreme fluctuations, contractors still rank high fuel prices highest on their top concerns list. This is the fifth year in a row fuel prices top the list. However, low-ball competitors, consumer confidence and the new presidential administration aren't far behind.

To further delve into this question this year, *Lawn & Landscape* asked contractors if they could fix one economic problem, which would it be, and consumer confidence ranked highest, followed by tax concerns, giving more emphasis to the Nos. 3 and 4 spots on this year's Top 10 List.

If landscape business owners thought they were stressed in 2008, these feelings reached a new level in 2009. Though in roughly the same spot as last year on contractors' top concerns list, overworked/stressed owners are expressing their stress more freely this

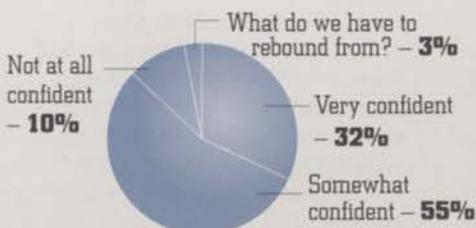
year. To make this year work, "it's taken more hard work by me – the owner and president – and more focus," shares Scott Boyles of Arbor Design in Ohio. In 2010, he says his focus is business commitment.

"You've got to get down and dirty and focus and get efficient. We spent more in marketing in 2009 than combined in the last five years. It's been tough without a doubt – a lot of sleepless nights," he says.

The general small business community feels the same. According to the American Express OPEN September Small Business Monitor, as business owners work to navigate their firms through the current economic climate, they are plagued by cash flow concerns and the overall stress a challenging economy creates. Nearly seven in 10 entrepreneurs (68 percent) are "stressed out" by the economy and three in 10 (31 percent) say the current economy has caused them to question their decision to become entrepreneurs.

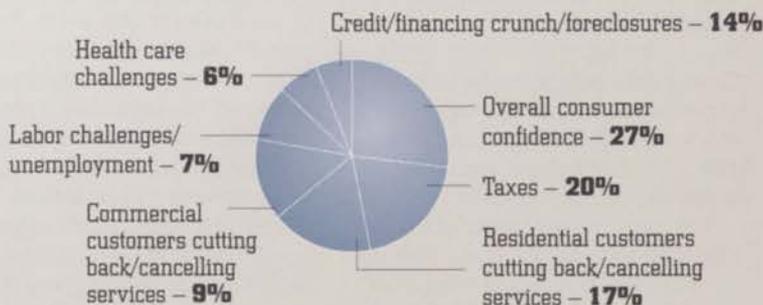
A Confidence Game

How confident are you that the landscape industry will rebound in 2010?

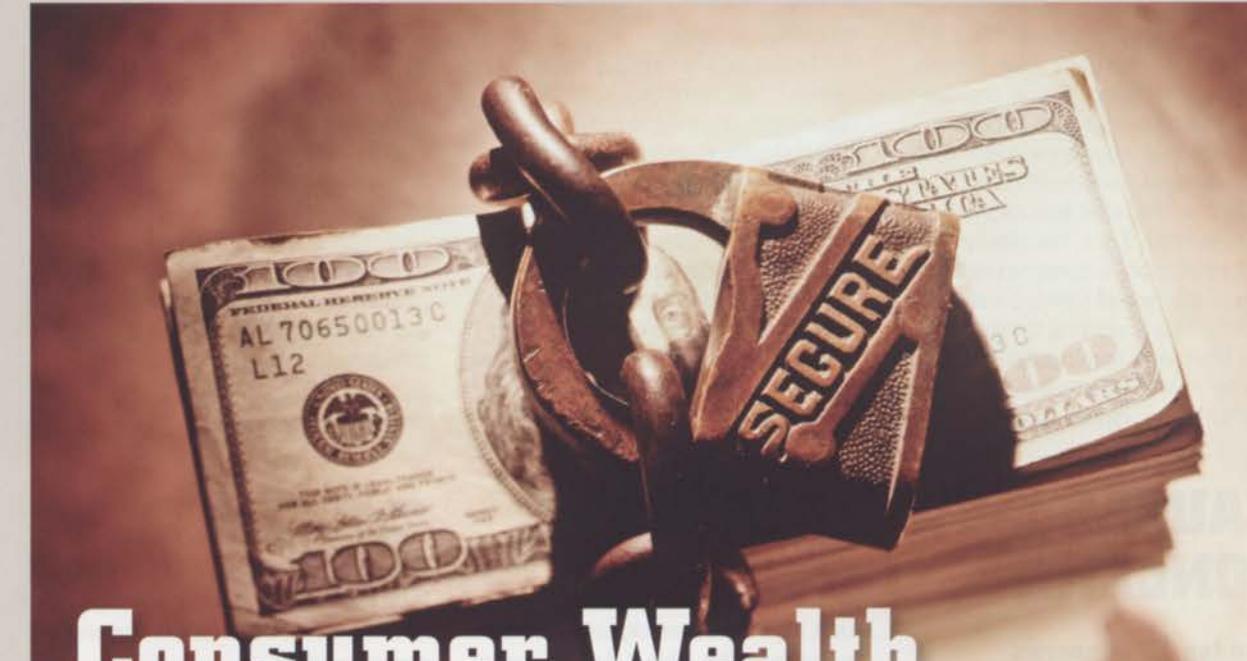


Source: Lawn & Landscape

If you could fix one economic challenge to help your business in 2010, what would it be?



Source: Lawn & Landscape



Consumer Wealth and Worries

Contractors adapt to residential customers' reduction in spending as a result of high debt loads and diminishing nest eggs. By Nicole Wisniewski

It's no wonder consumer confidence ranked No. 1 on the average landscape contractor's list of economic challenges they would choose to fix if given the chance in 2010. Seventy-eight percent of contractors said clients reduced services/spending this year and 72 percent said clients cancelled services this year. As a percentage of revenue, this amounted to 11 and 7 percent on average, respectively.

And economic data support what contractors are seeing out there. The latest Census report shows damage done to U.S. households by the recession. "Poverty rose, incomes fell ... even more disconcerting, the Census data suggest households are at best no better off financially than they were a decade ago," says Mark Zandi, chief economist and cofounder of Moody's Economy.com.

The most telling statistic is the nearly \$2,000 decline in real median household income to just more than \$50,000 last year (in 2008 dollars),

Zandi says. "This was the largest decline in the 40 years that Census has been doing this calculation ... the decline is representative of households' severe financial stress. Real median incomes have fallen all the way back to where they were in the late 1990s."

This affects residential landscape sales most. Contractors reported a drop in their average annual sales that came from single-family residential customers, from 63 to 61 percent. What has increased in its place are commercial/industrial and multi-family structures – going from 25.2 to 26.4 percent and 6.4 to 7.4 percent, respectively, from 2008 to 2009. Government/institutional work remained the same at 4.1 percent.

In addition to incomes shrinking, debt loads are also heavy, weighing on lower- and middle-income households most. "Many of these households borrowed heavily earlier in this decade because they thought they were growing wealthier as their

homes appreciated and to supplement constrained incomes," Zandi reports. "The record high and rising number of consumer defaults and foreclosures is the result of these high debt service burdens."

For the higher income Americans, the problem is vanishing nest eggs. According to the Federal Reserve's "Flow of Funds" report, household net worth (the difference between household assets and liabilities) has dropped by \$14 trillion since peaking nearly two years ago. Housing wealth is off about \$5 trillion from its peak, stocks have lost nearly \$6 trillion and other assets have fallen by \$3 trillion.

This all means consumers are no longer in a position to power the U.S. economy, Zandi says. "With incomes under pressure, debt loads overwhelming and nest eggs diminished, it will be difficult for consumers to simply do their part in contributing to economic growth."

The good news for landscape and lawn care professionals is that

even with diminishing funds, busy Americans still value landscape services – basic maintenance and tree care rose above the others this year, showing 2009 net percent growth at 6.3 and 7 percent, respectively.

The reason? Residential customers who are more overworked in today's economy than in the past still value their time, and look at landscape maintenance as a small expense compared to others they may consider cutting. And, they view it as a service that adds value to homes they may want to sell in the future. This year, with home values diminishing, homeowners want to do everything they can to boost worth.

Commercially, keeping vacancies down and tenants happy is something to which property maintenance contributes. Basic maintenance is

a requirement, while enhancement services like seasonal color are being cut back in order to save some money on overall property aesthetics.

When contractors were asked which services their companies offered, many categories remained just slightly up while others jumped more considerably and are worth noting, including all irrigation services, some turf maintenance services – aeration, hydroseeding, turf weed and disease control; waterscapes, retaining walls and other hardscapes; and a few tree care-related services, including installation, fertilization, and insect and disease control. Product purchases correspond with these trends. (For more on equipment buying, see page 18.) **sm**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gje.net.

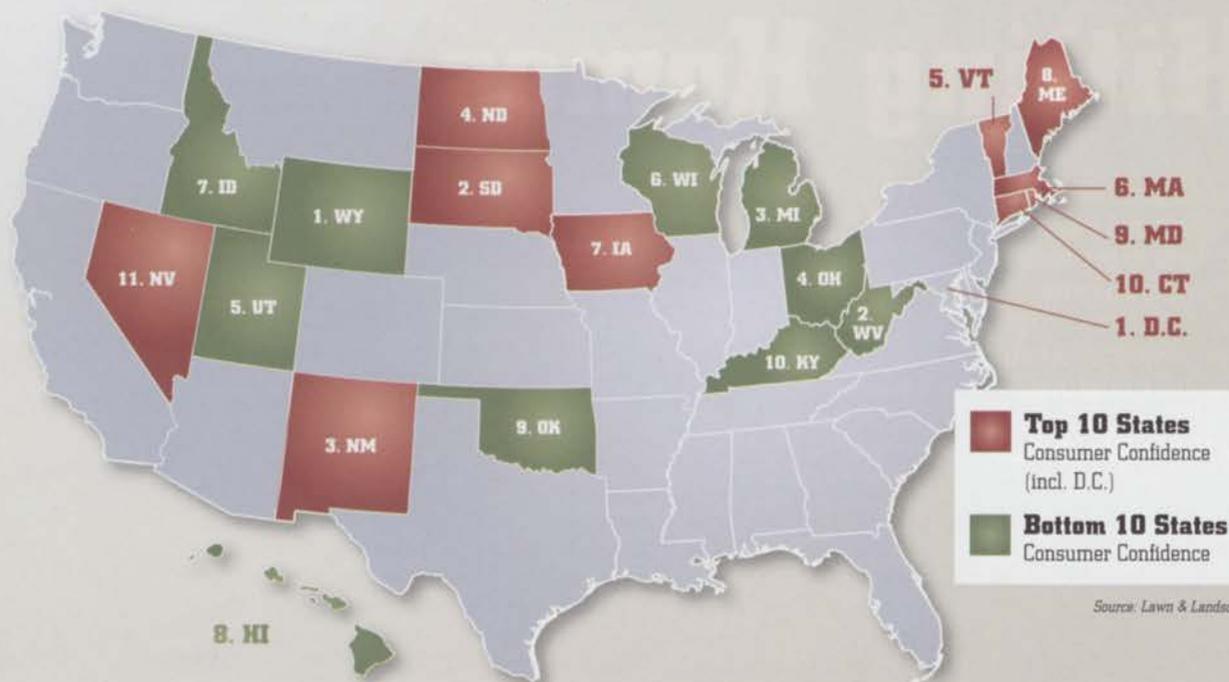
Confidence State-by-State

Though Americans remain cautious about the future of the U.S. economy, they are more optimistic in 2009 than 2008, according to a recent Gallup survey.

In mid-September, consumer confidence jumped back up to its 20-month high with 41 percent of Americans saying the economy is getting better. Confidence was just 16 percent one year ago. Additionally, only 53 percent of consumers said the economy is getting worse, compared to 77 percent one year ago.

At the same time, however, Americans' pessimism about the current economy is a little worse today than it was a year ago: 44 percent rate it poor compared to 41 percent last September.

How is consumer confidence faring regionally? Here is the Gallup's list of the top 10 and bottom 10 states based on consumer confidence poll results.



ACTION, REACTION

Did you experience client service/spending reductions this year?



Did you experience client cancellations this year?



What percent of your clients cut back or cancelled services spending this year?



Source: *Lawn & Landscape*



Hitting Homes

Residential home building and sales markets experience major slowdowns.

As contractors adapt, the housing situation gradually improves.

By Nicole Wisniewski

When the residential building industry crumbled, the aftershocks rocked landscape professionals like Jeff Berghoff, president of Jeff Berghoff Design Group in Scottsdale, Ariz. Calls for the residential, estate-type homes Berghoff's design-build company specializes in nearly came to a stop.

As a result, the company laid off a number of designers and cut its construction group in half. Many of the construction employees were moved to the maintenance side of the company so they could stay on the payroll, and workweeks for the designers that remained were cut to 32 hours. "We've adjusted our scale and the way we do things this year, so the company still should do fine overall, but it's not as profitable as it has been in the past," Berghoff explains.

And Berghoff isn't the only one feeling the pinch. "This year there are just not a lot of homes being built," says Ted Bentz of Second Nature in Rapid City, S.D. Because fewer houses require landscape design and construction, Bentz says the companies that get the nod must have

The Commercial Wild Card

Despite the fact that commercial property maintenance is keeping some contractors afloat as they switch gears from residential, the commercial market remains a "big wild card" for landscape contractors in today's economy,



according to Lawrence Yun, chief economist for the National Association of Realtors.

Unlike residential real estate, commercial real estate did not receive much of a stimulus. So, Yun says this sector still faces strenuous challenges, particularly related to the issuance of commercial mortgage securities.

Moody's Economy.com notes that nonresidential construction started declining since May and likely has a ways to fall, though smaller declines over the next few quarters are expected, in addition to a return to growth in the second half of next year.

"On the positive side, the Federal Reserve has put more focus to the issue and it is likely more credit could flow into the currently frozen market," Yun says. "Recent improvements in bank profits and reserves should lead to more lending for small businesses and for commercial real estate. In addition, the improving economy will steadily induce companies to demand new commercial spaces."

a working relationship with the builder or homeowner, come up with incredibly competitive pricing or do something to stand out above the rest. "You certainly aren't just handed the project, that's for sure," Bentz says.

Many of these business owners have found that more, smaller design/build/installation projects are paying the bills, as well as expansion into maintenance services vs. a total reliance on design/build.

In the meantime, the housing situation is improving, albeit slowly.

Economists claim housing and manufacturing – two cyclical industries that contribute to the landscape market – are leading the economic rebound.

According to Aaron Smith, senior economist for Moody's Economy.com, the U.S. economy is on track to grow 3 percent or more in the third quarter of 2009 with "the initial phase of growth being driven

by rapid recoveries in housing and manufacturing, diminishing drags from equipment spending and nonresidential construction, and government support."

Other research backs this theory, particularly where housing is concerned. Most housing indicators – home sales, housing starts, building permits, pending home sales – point to a turnaround.

Bolstered by affordable interest rates and low prices, nationwide housing affordability during the second quarter of 2009 continued to hover near its highest level since the statistic was tracked 18 years ago, according to the National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo Housing Opportunity Index.

Specifically, 72.3 percent of all new and existing homes sold in the second quarter of 2009 were affordable to families earning the national median income of \$64,000, up from 55

Back By Popular Demand

U.S. demand for outdoor landscaping products is forecast to increase 6.1 percent per year to 2013 – an acceleration from the pace set during the 2003 to 2008 period, according to a 2009 Freedonia Group study.

Although growth in the residential market will be modest in the short term, by 2013 demand will benefit from a turnaround in housing completions. As the report concludes: "Individuals are expected to spend more time and energy in and around their homes, desiring outdoor living spaces that often include patios or outdoor structures such as gazebos or pergolas for relaxation and entertainment purposes."



Product	2003-2008 Annual Growth In Demand	2008-2013 Annual Growth In Demand
Landscaping Products	4.5%	6.1%
Decorative Products	3.4%	5.2%
Hardscape Products	6.1%	6.7%
Outdoor Structures	3.3%	6.2%

Source: The Freedonia Group

percent during the second quarter of 2008.

This recovery in housing appears to have been largely driven by the \$8,000 federal tax credit for first-time home buyers, making smaller, less expensive housing the strongest sector of the market. July's existing home sales were 5 percent above the rate of one year ago – the first time in five years existing homes have shown a positive year over year increase. An estimated 1.5 million taxpayers are expected to claim the credit that went into effect in February, according to NAHB. "In the process a chain reaction has been unleashed," explains Lawrence Yun, chief economist for the National Association of Realtors, adding that the number include 350,000 buyers who would not have purchased a home without the credit. "Many existing homeowners were able to sell their homes to first-timers and thus purchase their next home."

The flipside of this coin is that a share of the sales are distressed or foreclosed properties – another factor pushing down median existing home prices, NAHB reports. Although home prices may have stabilized, they are still down significantly. The S&P/Case-Shiller 20-city and 10-city Home Price Indexes were both down 15 percent from one year ago. The 20-city index is down 31 percent from its peak in July 2006. All 20 cities were down from last year. Only five cities – Denver, Boston, Charlotte, N.C., Cleveland and Dallas – had year-over-year price declines of less than 10 percent. The inventory of 3.3 million existing homes for sale, an 8.6 months' supply, seems tolerable, though elevated, NAHB says, adding analysis predicting many homeowners who would put their houses on the market if they thought they could sell them within a relatively short period at reasonable prices.

So while the tax credit helped stabilize the housing market, falling home prices are the real reason why sales are rebounding, according to Mike Larson, real estate and interest rate analyst at Weiss Research. "I believe the tax credit is the icing on the cake of this housing market

Where It's At

Landscape contractors looking for residential customers with new homes and landscapes to maintain or renovate might pay attention to these lists of the most and least affordable cities in which to purchase homes today based on recent average home price and income drops.

Most Affordable Cities to Buy a House

1. Indianapolis
2. Youngstown, Ohio
3. Detroit
4. Dayton, Ohio
5. Grand Rapids, Mich.



Least Affordable Cities to Buy a House

1. New York
2. San Francisco
3. Honolulu
4. Los Angeles
5. Santa Ana, Calif.

SOURCE: CNNMONEY.COM



recovery – not the cake itself," he says.

When it comes to new homes, NAHB says single-family new home sales are down 13.4 percent from a year ago. The median square footage of homes that have been started has fallen from a peak of 2,309 square feet in the first quarter of 2007 to 2,091 square feet in the second quarter of this year. Median new home prices have fallen from a peak of \$262,600 in March 2007 to \$210,100 in July 2009. What is most troubling is that the median number of months for a sale after the completion of a new home rose to 12.4 months in July, a record high for this measure since the Census Bureau began tracking it in 1975.

Fortunately for landscape professionals and residential builders alike, things may be improving in this segment of the market – though more slowly than other housing segments. Home builder confidence rose to its highest level in more than a year, according to the August reading of the National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo Housing Market Index. In October 2008, most contractors (73 percent) and equipment distributors (63 percent) surveyed for Wells Fargo's Construction Industry Forecast for 2009 expected to see a turnaround coming within 12, 18 or 24 months, which means, if their instincts are right, the building market is headed for an upswing any day now.

Though the numbers aren't all positive, the improving picture of housing is the most important factor helping to kick-start the economy, Yun says.

What can aid the housing market toward continued improvement? According to NAHB Chairman Joe Robson, who is also a home builder from Tulsa, Okla., "to keep the recent upturn in home sales going into next year, Congress will need to extend the tax credit for another year and make it available to all buyers in an effort to encourage activity in the trade-up market." **soi**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gje.net. Lincoln, Ill.-based freelance writer Julie Collins contributed to this story.



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Price Pride

Despite pressure from customers looking for a deal and from competitors looking to score the lowest bid, not all landscape professionals slashed prices this year. In fact, they insist, 'We cannot work for free.'

By Nicole Wisniewski

Customers trying to be fiscally responsible are "jumping on the cheap bandwagon" in today's economy, going for 65 to 85 cents on the dollar pricing, says Mark Lay, president of Charlotte, N.C.'s AA Tex Lawn Co., and that's been the challenge: "Trying to offer our quality of work at a fair price," he says.

But, as the owner of the 50- to 65-employee company points out, "We cannot work for free. We've tried to make prices a little tighter, but we are watching the gross profit every week and job costing everything to make sure we're making our numbers. We haven't fallen into the low-balling game. There's a certain type of customer who will take the lowest bid, but I have found that the smartest person out there won't."

Ted Bentz, owner of \$485,000 Second Nature in Rapid City, S.D., agrees. "You have to be really careful of someone coming in and putting a number on a project that doesn't make sense," he stresses. "You just have to monitor costs for yourself and provide the best number so hopefully you are the one doing the project and still turning a profit."

"I guess there are people out there cut-throat pricing and giving

stuff away, and I just won't do that," adds Jeff Berghoff, president of Jeff Berghoff Design Group in Scottsdale, Ariz. "We're talented, and I still think people should pay for what we do. But it's a negotiation with clients today. We're breaking projects into bite-size, chewable, digestible pieces so we can compete more with people who are really giving stuff away."

People don't think twice about paying a premium for an electrician or plumber, so why should landscaping be any different, Bentz questions. "With landscaping, they always think, 'I could do that myself so why is it going to cost me that much?' So it seems like there's a lot of education we need to do with clients about what we do and how we do it. It all boils down to selling ourselves better industrywide. We need to be very professional dealing with new and existing clients to improve our overall

image. We have to portray ourselves as high-quality individuals."

That's this year's pricing game. Whether contractors raised prices, kept them stable or lowered them, they've had to keep sharp eyes on numbers and, then to stretch dollars further, focus on becoming more efficient internally to maximize profit.

Lay, for instance, looked at scheduling, routing, crew size and equipment, and then brainstormed ways to trim time and costs. "We redesigned our shop and how people come in, we try and be more prepared so we're here about 15 minutes earlier to get people out the door quicker," he says. "Internally we have tried to communicate better so we are able to handle complaints and issues while our crews are in the area rather than have them go back. We've



tried to up the communication of our management team and employed picture phones so issues can be e-mailed and we can look at them."

The end result is that even though Lay predicts a dip in sales from between zero to 10 percent, his business is more profitable. From maintaining existing equipment and keeping an eye on how employees treat machines to eliminating office cleaning services and shopping out cell phones and insurance to get the best prices, Lay calls his business today "lean and mean."

"It's easy to talk about money when you're making it, but to get in a situation where people are thinking about selling and keeping costs down and doing it less expensively – that has been valuable from a business owner's standpoint," he says. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to really hone in on that 'where cheap is cool' concept."

"Before we were making money and spending money and it was all good," Lay adds, "but this is better." **SLI**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gie.net. Lincoln, Ill.-based freelance writer Julie Collins contributed to this story.

An Alternate Approach to the Price Slice

Pricing guru Mark Burton, coauthor of "Pricing with Confidence: 10 Ways to Stop Leaving Money on the Table," has a lot of concerns about price slashing across the board in a recession. "You're not running a charitable organization," he says.

And such a move can come back to haunt you. Burton remembers companies cutting prices in the 1980s for those struggling during tough times, and when the economy turned around, customers refused to pay for price hikes. "If you think cutting prices earns you goodwill, you have to be careful about that," he says. "Some customers have short memories."

The best approach, he advises, is creating a new tier of products and services – one that offers customers less-expensive options with fewer bells and whistles. That way, a landscape business owner doesn't cannibalize his or her existing offerings.

Financing FACTS

Do you offer financing for your customers?



Average cost of project financed:

\$7,533 (2009)

\$12,940 (2008)

Average number of finance options offered:

2.5

Source: Lawn & Landscape

FOUR YEARS OF PRICING



Service	2009 Price	2010 Price	% Change	2008 to 2009 Change	2007 to 2008 Change
Residential mowing	\$41.70 per hour	\$44.10 per hour	5.4%	-13%	12.2%
Commercial mowing	\$49.50 per hour	\$52.60 per hour	6.3%	-10%	14.3%
Residential chemical lawn care	\$18.90 per 1,000 square feet	\$20 per 1,000 square feet	5.8%	2%	10.8%
Commercial chemical lawn care	\$58.10 per 1,000 square feet	\$60 per 1,000 square feet	3.3%	-3%	12.2%
Residential design/build	\$5,563.50 (avg. project cost)	\$6,419.70 (avg. project cost)	15.4%	-5%	13.3%
Commercial design/build	\$9,918.40 (avg. project cost)	\$11,042.50 (avg. project cost)	11.3%	-8%	19%

Source: Lawn & Landscape

Making Do or Buying New?

Some contractors repair vs. replace, while others continue to buy. However, most try to become smarter shoppers.

By Julie Collins & Nicole Wisniewski

Jon Sternfels of Jonboy Landscaping in Detroit knows all too well how expensive running a landscape company can get. In the past two years, he purchased a lot of new equipment to keep up with his company's growth from \$395,000 in 2008 to \$445,000 expected this year. But as the economy suffered, Sternfels realized buying new every time was going to get too pricey.

Now an extensive repair-maintenance program ensures existing equipment lasts as long as possible. "One of our biggest expenses was repairs, and a lot of repairs were due to negligence," Sternfels says. So the company started training employees on proper use, maintenance and repair. "Since we've instilled that, we've cut in half the number of things getting broken or breaking down, which saves the company a lot of money."

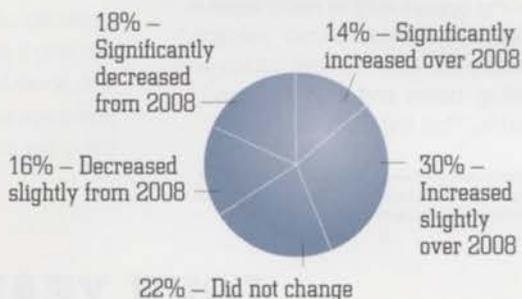
"Before, if the guys needed a small tool, they'd just go and buy it. It's amazing how much you spend when you have so much work. We were making money so it was acceptable in a way to have a few inefficiencies," says the owner of Scottsdale, Ariz.'s Jeff Berghoff Design Group, adding that this included buying new pruners or blades instead of sharpening them. "Nowadays we've put a freeze on that – everything has to be approved and we're really watching our bottom line. We have to buy smart and take advantage of deals when we see them." For the same reasons, the company purchases items in bulk through wholesalers and cut additional costs by negotiating better cell phone rates.

In addition to smarter purchasing, "repair before replace" has become the mantra of many landscape contractors now that money is tight. In fact, 70 percent of contractors said they are holding on to equipment longer than usual compared to two years ago. Only 29 percent said they are replacing equipment as often as they usually do and 1 percent say they are replacing it more frequently.

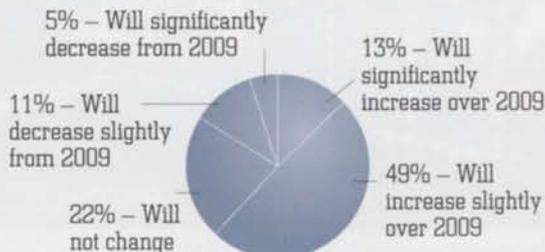
In-house repairs have become key for many pros. William Prout of Fallen Leaf Lawn & Yard Care in Stamford, Conn., makes most repairs himself, unless it's a complicated fix he doesn't have the tools to tackle. Mark Lay of AA Tex Lawn Co. in Charlotte, N.C., beefed up the company's mechanic staff. "We hired an excellent mechanic last year and brought all repairs – changing tires, rebuilding engines – in-house," Lay says.

Eye on Equipment

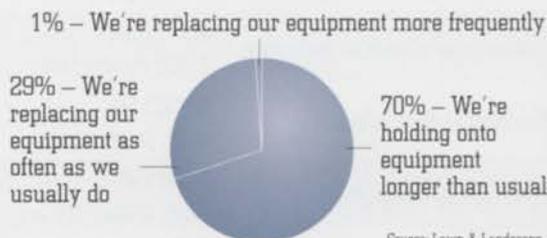
How would you characterize your 2009 equipment budget?



What do you project for your 2010 equipment budget?



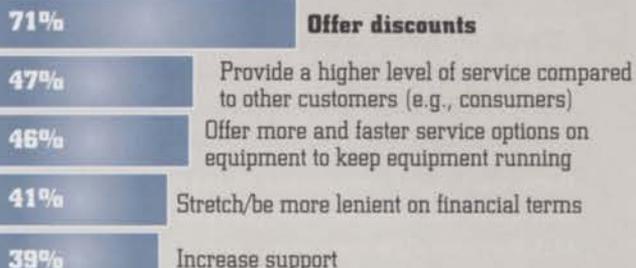
How long are you holding on to equipment today vs. two years ago?



Source: Lawn & Landscape

Seeking Support

In today's economy, what do you expect from your equipment dealers/suppliers/distributors?



Source: Lawn & Landscape

However, not all contractors reported frozen or decreased equipment budgets. In some cases, buying new equipment ended up saving a company in the long run. For instance, Berghoff recently purchased a reach-out forklift. "Over the years, we have spent a lot of money renting one to move big trees around sites," he says. "Why keep renting or paying someone else to do what we could be doing in-house?"

Decisions like this could explain why a number of contractors – 44 percent – increased equipment budgets this year, 34 percent decreased them and 22 percent held them steady. Compare this to the general small business community – only 16 percent of which plan to make capital expenditures over the next three to six months, according to the NFIB's September Small Business Survey. According to American Express OPEN's September Small Business Monitor, only 27 percent of small business owners say the plan to increase spending on business development, such as advertising, inventory and capital expenditures, which is up from 23 percent in July, while 43 percent plan to decrease spending. Among those general small business owners reporting growth for their firms, 13 percent say these opportunities came because they had the ability to renegotiate equipment leases and supply contracts.

In 2010, 62 percent of contractors plan to increase equipment budgets, 16 percent say they will decrease them and 22 percent won't change them at all. **soi**

Where the Money Went

EQUIPMENT TYPE	2009 AVG. EXPENDITURE	% CHANGE FROM 2008
Mowers (riding and walk-behind)	\$19,372	-0.4%
Construction equipment (skid-steers and attachments, mini skid-steers, excavators, trenchers)	\$74,439	2%
Sprayers & Spreaders	\$3,647	37%
Trucks & Trailers	\$45,619	-13%
Handheld equipment (backpack/handheld/walk-behind blowers, trimmers/edgers, chainsaws, landscape tools)	\$5,387	-26%
Equipment rentals	\$4,668	4%
Trees/shrubs/plants/seed/sod	\$65,834	-8%
Design/build (landscape lighting, retaining walls, paver/patio products, water features)	\$48,483	-27%
Irrigation products	\$27,265	-3%
Chemical products (herbicides, insecticides, fertilizers, fungicides, PGRs, tree care products, perimeter pest products, organic fertilizers, biologicals)	\$34,446	4%
Snow & ice melting products	\$22,181	2%
Technology (computers, business/design software, GPS systems/software)	\$6,120	-29%

Source: Lawn & Landscape

The authors are editor of *Lawn & Landscape* and a Lincoln, Ill.-based freelance writer. Send questions about this report to nwisniewski@gie.net.

Trend Watch

Each year, *Lawn & Landscape* asks contractors what equipment they purchased in the past year and their plans for purchases during the coming year. Most years, these percentages are relatively similar. This year, however, there were some percentage changes that stood out considerably (despite the fact that overall money spent was down), reflecting some interesting trends that coincide with the changing percentages of contractors offering related services.

In purchases from 2008 to 2009:

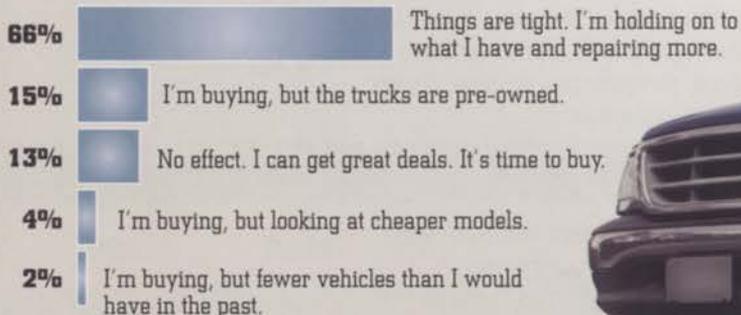
- Contractors increased irrigation product purchases the most. Irrigation services also ranked fourth in terms of fastest growth, and irrigation water management ranked third as a new service contractors plan to offer in 2010, not to mention green/sustainability services ranked first – a segment into which some may insert water management.
- Percentages of riding and walk-behind mower purchases increased, reflecting the rise in contractors offering this service, as well as its stability in today's economy. Mowing/maintenance also ranked first in terms of fastest growing service in 2009, as well as predicted for 2010.
- Retaining walls and landscape lighting product purchases increased, showing the trend toward hardscape and small design/build project installations.
- GPS systems/software and engine purchases rose highlighting the equipment replacement and maintenance preference over new purchases, as well as the drive to decrease costs via increased efficiency on the road.

In purchases planned for 2010:

- Riding and walk-behind mower purchases will continue to rise, as well as investments in backpack blowers and trimmers/edgers, showing a continued boost in maintenance services.
- Truck purchases will also increase, possibly showing a need for replacements that were not made in 2009.
- There is a boost in equipment parts purchases expected.
- Many contractors are confident design/build and renovation services will increase, predicting a rise in their spending on bed edging, trees/shrubs/plants, sod, turf seed, paver/patio products and annuals/perennials.
- Irrigation product purchases will continue to improve.
- Chemical lawn care product investments, as well as purchases of the equipment used to apply them (sprayers and spreaders), will increase, revealing a potential boost in lawn care service sales.

Truck Stop

How has the economy affected your truck purchasing decisions this year?



Source: Lawn & Landscape



Power Play

As the number of professional landscape firms continues to rise, benefitting from an aging U.S. population keen on using their services, so too will their need for power equipment through 2013, according to a 2009 Fredonia Group report.

In the short term, replacement sales will be the key driver of demand, therefore manufacturers who offer new product enhancements as a means of stimulating replacement demand for existing equipment – and who market these – will benefit most, the report predicts. Opportunities in the commercial market will be strongest in the landscape industry.

Product	2003-2008 Annual Growth In Demand	2008-2013 Annual Growth In Demand
Lawn & Garden Equipment	-0.7%	2.7%
Mowers	-2.5%	3.5%
Turf & Grounds Equipment Hardscape Products	1.4%	3.1%
Trimmers & Edgers	2.2%	2.8%
Garden Tractors & Rotary Tillers	-9.4%	2.2%
Snow Throwers	-1.5%	-6.1%
Other Equipment & Parts	3.4%	3.0%

Source: The Fredonia Group

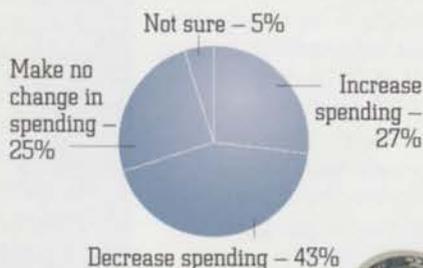
Cash Flow Concerns

The number of general small business owners experiencing cash flow issues this fall (60 percent) is up slightly over both the previous fall (55 percent) and this spring (57 percent), according to the American Express OPEN September Small Business Monitor. The biggest cash flow worry for business owners is the ability to pay bills on time (26 percent).

When cash flow concerns arise, owners are most likely to dip into their own pockets: 32 percent of business owners will use personal or private funds, and one in four (25 percent) will put off purchases. Others will use credit or charge cards (13 percent), obtain and use a line of credit (12 percent), lease rather than purchase equipment (4 percent) or get a short-term loan in order to improve cash flow (3 percent).

Looking beyond the basic issue of cash flow, nearly half of entrepreneurs (45 percent) are looking to access capital from external sources in order to run their businesses. One out of five business owners (19 percent) say they are experiencing difficulty accessing capital. To secure the funds they need, business owners are tapping a variety of sources, including using a bank loan (14 percent), using business or personal credit cards (each 13 percent), tapping personal savings (10 percent), borrowing from a friend or family member (3 percent), and private equity/venture capital or home equity (each 2 percent).

Concerning business development expenses, such as advertising, inventory and capital expenditures, what action do you plan to take moving forward?



Source: American Express
Open Small Business Monitor
September 2009

Hiring Comes to a Halt



Small business employers are hesitant to add workers; landscape employee pay in most categories shrinks. By Nicole Wisniewski

Although small business optimism is on the upswing after hitting its all-time low one year ago and job cuts have abated, hiring is close to a standstill as most employers are still hesitant to add workers. The number of new hires remains near an all-time low, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and almost 70 percent of companies expect no change in their fourth-quarter hiring plans, according to a recent study by employment services company Manpower.

The American Express OPEN September Small Business Monitor shows only 23 percent of small business owners plan to hire, which is the lowest reading in the history of the Monitor (falling below the fall 2002 recession level of 26 percent).

In general, deteriorating employee morale has plateaued. Only 12 percent say morale has worsened over the last six months (down from 25 percent for the preceding six-month period), the Monitor reports. Three-quarters say morale has stayed the same, and 9 percent say it has improved. In addition, approximately 28 percent of business owners see offering financial incentives such as bonuses and paid time off as a way to increase employee morale, and 23 percent see more regular communication about the business as the key to improving morale.

Ted Bentz agrees with this. As the owner of \$485,000 Second Nature in Rapid City, S.D., finding and retaining quality employees is his No. 1 concern. Paying attention to prospective employees who walk in the door and observing and listening to those employees who are on the payroll is how Bentz does it. A job-based incentive program also helps keep employees motivated.

Also, fewer business owners are laying people off (15 percent, down from 23 percent in March) or cutting

benefits (8 percent versus 16 percent in March), according to the Monitor. One in 10 business owners (11 percent) say they have recently hired someone who was laid off.

"We've hired a bunch of really quality people who had other jobs like construction and got laid off during these hard times," shares Mark Lay, owner of AA Tex Lawn Co., a 50- to 65-employee company based in

Charlotte, N.C. The goal is to train them in the landscape industry so they can thrive in their new positions.

According to the Monitor, small businesses in the South are most willing to hire (31 percent vs. 22 percent in the West, 17 percent in the Northeast and 15 percent in north central states). **soi**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Reach her at nwisniewski@gje.net.

Pay Cuts

The double-digit pay increases of 2008 are not in the cards this year for landscape employees. In fact, when it comes to hourly wages, only spray technicians received 6 and 7 percent increases, while everyone else experienced wage reductions.

As for salaried employees, only owners/presidents and crew foremen/leaders enjoyed between 2 and 4 percent hikes in pay, while supervisors, account managers, and landscape designers and architects received between 1 and 4 percent wage cuts.

Cuts make it tough on owners. "These guys still want to get paid what they were paid in the past, even though it's not as busy," says Todd Felinczak of Aspen Landscapes. "I think industry pay is going to be low for a while."

POSITION	HOURLY WAGE 2008	HOURLY WAGE 2009	% CHANGE
Mower operator (entry-level)	\$9.00	\$8.90	-1%
Mower operator (experienced)	\$11.80	\$11.50	-2.5%
Spray technician (entry-level)	\$9.60	\$10.20	6.25%
Spray technician (experienced)	\$12.70	\$13.60	7%
Construction worker (entry-level)	\$9.50	\$9.10	-4.2%
Construction worker (experienced)	\$13.70	\$13.00	-5.1%
Irrigation technician (entry-level)	n/a	\$9.20	n/a
Irrigation technician (experienced)	n/a	\$13.80	n/a
POSITION	SALARY 2008	SALARY 2009	% CHANGE
Owner/president	\$69,620	\$71,439	2.6%
Supervisor	\$42,355	\$40,964	-3.3%
Account manager	\$40,132	\$39,847	-1%
Crew foreman/leader	\$29,908	\$31,004	3.7%
Landscape architect	\$50,857	\$48,833	-4%
Landscape designer	\$42,577	\$40,888	-4%



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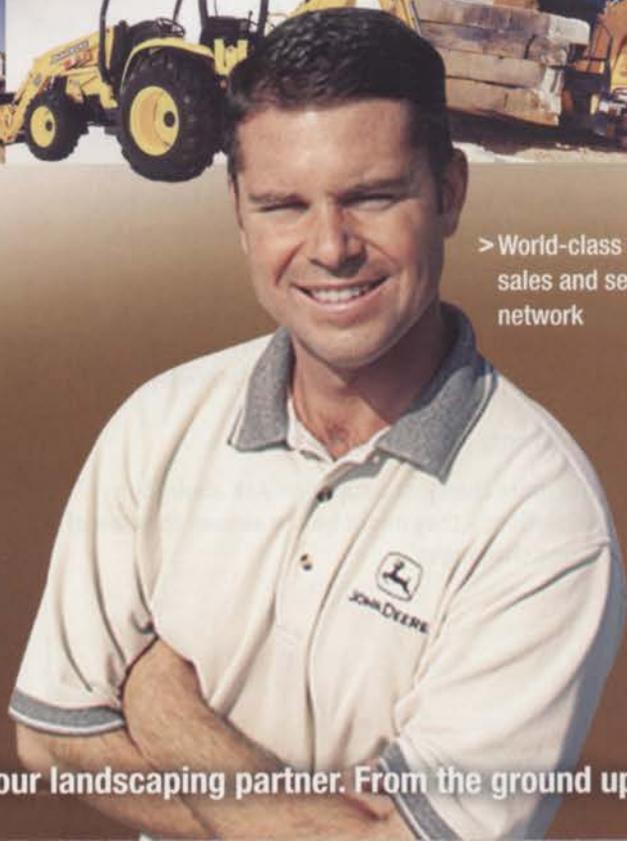
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When Business Affects Your Personal Credit

Small business debt hasn't normally been reported to consumer credit bureaus, but the rules of the game are changing. BY DAVID GASS

Small business borrowing is generally not reported on owners' consumer credit reports unless they fail to pay on time. But with banks facing rising defaults, at least one lender – Capital One – is moving to add small business loans to borrowers' consumer credit files, meaning small business owners could soon find their business debts are affecting their personal credit, according to a recent *BusinessWeek* article. Any debt owners personally guarantee – including many business loans and credit cards – could be reported.

Because of the complexity behind credit scoring, it's hard to predict how the shift will affect any one borrower's credit score. Tim Klein, spokesman for Equifax, one of the three major consumer credit bureaus, says business owners generally won't see their credit hurt if they're current on payments. Borrowers with strong repayment histories could even see scores improve, adds Sharon O'Connor Clarke, a principal consultant with FICO, a credit scoring company.

Lending institutions don't always tell you all the requirements and where they go to qualify you and your landscape or lawn care business before you apply for financing. A significant step is to pull your personal and business credit.

Fewer than 10 percent of entrepreneurs know about or truly understand how business credit is established and tracked, and how it affects their lives and businesses everyday.

Last month I spoke with a potential client who had questions about his credit situation. He is a typical small business owner in southern California and generates a decent profit.

In the good years he is able to take his family on a trip to Hawaii for a week – something they all love to do. He told me

he just applied for a mortgage on a new home and was denied. He started his business three years ago and never had previous credit problems. He couldn't understand why he was refused since he paid his personal bills on time.

I asked if he had opened any lines of credit for the business in the last three years. He had one line of credit with a bank for \$60,000, but nothing else. I then asked if he had received credit or terms to pay suppliers any time since starting the company. "Of course," he said. Here is where the problem arose. His company needed several suppliers for all of the products he sells. Unfortunately, he applied for credit with each of these suppliers under his personal name during the last year. I asked if he paid all of those bills on time. "Not all the time, but the latest I ever paid someone was 60 days late."

I cautioned this entrepreneur that obviously not paying bills on time would damage his credit and that there were many other variables that determined his personal credit score. If you want just a simple system to keep your credit in good standing, consider this one simple rule: Make sure your debt load is no more than 25 percent of your gross income, even though many banks will lend at 33 to 38 percent.

WHY YOUR CREDIT SCORE IS LOW. FICO, the company previously known as Fair Isaac that develops the formula to determine credit scores, looks at the average statistics of consumers and factors that into business credit scores.

- According to FICO, the average consumer will have:
 - One inquiry on their personal credit report in a given year.
 - 54 percent of credit holders carry a

balance of less than \$5,000 on all debts other than a mortgage.

- Have access to \$12,190 on all credit cards combined.

The entrepreneur, on the other hand, will have several more credit needs than the average consumer. So when the personal credit bureaus compare us to the average consumer, our credit consumption is not normal.

Let's look at that same specific business situation. This small business client applied several times with suppliers for various credit lines over the last year. Each inquiry will likely drop his credit score approximately five to 10 points. The credit bureaus are supposed to lump three together and only drop five to 10 for the three. He also has a \$60,000 line of credit available and carries a balance of \$42,000. Both the amount of credit and balance are more than the consumer average, which can hurt his score as well. This is without looking at anything else in his business or personal life.

If this small business owner had just taken the time to develop a business credit profile and start establishing basic lines of credit in the business name and then slowly build the businesses credit over time, he may never have ended up without the ability to buy the home he and his family wanted. This is why entrepreneurs must become like the typical consumer again and separate their personal and business lives. 

The author is president of Business Credit Services. Reach him at www.businesscreditbuilder.net.

To learn more about why small business owners don't have average credit scores, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/webextras



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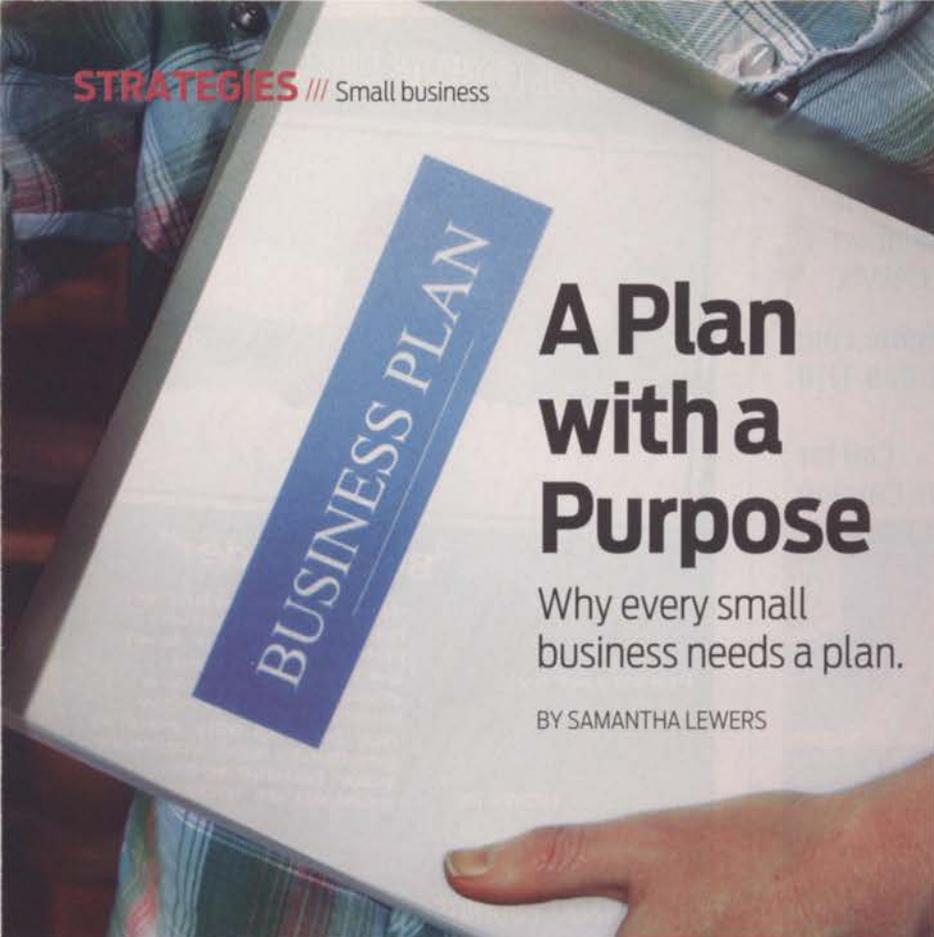
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BUSINESS PLAN

A Plan with a Purpose

Why every small business needs a plan.

BY SAMANTHA LEWERS

Every small business needs a plan. Even if it is only a one-page piece of paper on the fridge, some form of plan is critical to business success. The business plan purpose is primarily to force small business owners like lawn care and landscape professionals to look at their industry, services, operations, management and finances. From here they can set business goals and objectives.

While the process of analysis is extremely beneficial, the business plan purpose also extends into other areas, including using the plan to monitor and grow the business, obtain financing, sell the business and even motivate employees.

PURPOSE NO. 1: CRITICAL ANALYSIS. Simply undertaking the planning process itself forces you to critically analyze all aspects of the business. You may already think you do this regularly (although not formally with pen and paper), but do you truly cover all of the facets of your business?

Do you continually look to your cus-

tomers, competitors and industry for new trends, ideas and opportunities?

Are you on top of your finances and cash flow position?

Have you set goals and objectives and put in place the planning for your business for the next six months? 12 months? Three years?

Do you know what marketing is working for your business and have forward planning in place for advertising, promotion and Web marketing?

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, it's time to implement or revise your business plan. All of these questions, plus many more should be answered in the plan.

Even if you are a solo, home-based business, you need to critically analyze your business and have a plan. Like anything, if you don't have a map, you won't get to your destination.

PURPOSE NO. 2: MONITOR BUSINESS. Now that you have your small business plan in place, it needs to be reviewed regularly. Another key business plan purpose is to

provide a tool to help monitor, maintain and grow your business.

Set business objectives, put plans in place, monitor results and make adjustments as necessary. Taking the time to regularly spend on your plan and revising it will go a long way to ensuring your business growth and success.

PURPOSE NO. 3: FUNDING & INVESTMENT. Many small businesses require bank funding or seek investment. In this situation, the business plan purpose is to act as a financing proposal.

Just having a plan will put you in front of many other small business owners and certainly be viewed favorably by lenders and investors. In fact, some will not even give you a second glance without this information.

PURPOSE NO. 4: BUSINESS SALE. Although it may seem pointless if you have reached this stage in your business, a well-written business plan will help not only sell your business, but could result in a higher price. It will indicate to prospective purchasers that the business is well-planned and give some security that a road map is in place for the future.

PURPOSE NO. 5: EMPLOYEE MORALE. Another underestimated business plan purpose is to use the plan to keep employees informed about the business. While some business owners may cringe at this thought, it is a great way to get staff involved in the business, encourage feedback and help implement the plan.

It is not necessary to give employees the full plan if you don't want to include sensitive information, such as financial details. Whatever format you present it in, staff will gain an instant sense of ownership and involvement that could prove very valuable. **L**

The author is the founder of the Small Business Champions Club, an online small business resource. Reach her via www.smallbusinesschampionsclub.com.

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A Direct Hit

Better management of direct vs. indirect costs lets you bid more aggressively in a competitive market. BY BRUCE HUNTER

There are two types of costs – direct and indirect.

Direct costs are also called “variable costs” and refer to costs that are a direct result of performing your landscape or lawn care service. Examples of these are materials and labor needed to provide the service.

Indirect costs are also called “fixed costs” and refer to expenses your business will have regardless of sales volume. Examples of these are rent, utilities, wages that are not based on commission, interest expenses, advertising, vehicles, etc. The tricky aspect of these are that a cost may increase with increased sales, e.g. an increase in sales may require overtime or the addition of staff but the relationship is not direct.

A good tool for managing direct and indirect costs is to monitor the costs on your monthly income statement as a percentage of sales. Divide the cost by total sales.

Direct costs as a percentage of sales will remain within a narrow margin. For instance, if materials costs are typically 30 percent of sales, then when the actual dollar amount of materials used to perform more services goes up, as a percent of sales, it will remain close to 30 percent. What would lower the percentage is if you got a better deal from your supplier.

Your indirect costs when monitored as a percentage of sales will respond differently. For example, \$500-a-month rent remains \$500 per month even if your sales increase to \$5,000. \$500 divided by \$1,000 in sales equals

50 percent. \$500 divided by \$5,000 in sales equals 10 percent.

This provides you with a two valuable management tools – break-even analysis and your contribution margin. Break-even analysis helps quickly determine if a solution is feasible. Contribution margin is the remaining profit after direct costs are taken out of a sale. For example, if you sell a bookcase for \$250 and it cost you \$75 to make, your contribution margin is \$175, or 70 percent. The contribution pays for all the fixed expenses/overhead.

A good way of organizing these costs is to put all the direct costs in the “cost of goods” section and the indirect costs in the expense area of your income statement. By doing this, gross profit equals contribution margin and is automatically calculated for you.

Identifying your direct costs also helps you bid in a competitive environment. Imagine you know you have covered your overhead expenses for the month with normally bid projects and a job comes up for bid around the 15th of the month. You figure it will be very competitive and if you use your usual estimating process on it, you will not get the project.

Since you have already covered all of your expenses for the month and any margin above your direct costs is profit. You can then aggressively go after the project with a bid slightly above your direct costs. **L**

The author is the CEO of *CORE Magazine*.

For industry consultant Jim Huston's take on various cost estimating systems and why some are useful and others aren't when pricing landscape industry work, visit www.lawnandlandscape/webextras.



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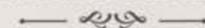
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Stimulus = Sales Tool

Highland Outdoor creates its own economic stimulus package to drive business.

BY CHUCK BOWEN



Jason Cupp doesn't like to follow the herd. So when he comes up with marketing ideas or people want him to advertise, he asks if his competition is doing the same thing.

"If our competitors are doing it, we probably won't," says Cupp, CEO of Olathe, Kan.-based Highland Outdoor.

Enter his latest program: The 2009 Stimulus Package. The program offers a lifetime warranty on all projects, two free trees, once-a-month landscape maintenance and a 5 percent discount if clients prepay their entire design/build contract. It runs through the end of the year.

Cupp got the idea after talking with a friend of his in the industry. He wanted to create a value proposition that set himself apart from his competition. He floated the stimulus package idea to a sort of advisory council – a group of friends and clients he calls "the boys" – and they loved it.

"The boys are clients of mine, and we share business stuff," Cupp says. "They said, 'We think it's brilliant.'"

While some contractors might blanch at that offering, Cupp says it really doesn't cost him much. Take the warranty: In 2008, the company's charges for warranty claims were .01 percent of its total sales, Cupp says.

"We looked at what our exposure claims were over the past years. At the end of the day, we don't have too many clients call us for warranty issues," he says. "We could offer it with little additional exposure. It's not really that big of a number. That tells me we've got the

right people out in the field installing things the right way, and people are happy with what we do."

He also has an interest in a tree farm, so he already has a supply of trees on his balance sheet. Having a crew to maintain new landscaping gives him many sets of eyes at that account to make sure everything else looks right and to catch problems early on. And the company already offers a lifetime warranty on hardscaping materials anyway.

"We're creating something that's hard to say no to."

– JASON CUPP



"It's not that hard. If you're an inferior contractor and you don't have good management out in the field, then you do create issues – you create perpetual issues," Cupp says. "This isn't for the faint of heart. You've got to look at real numbers and understand what it's going to be."

In an industry that can become commoditized – especially in a recession – the package is aimed at pushing potential purchases over the edge.

"We never have been this bold about telling our clients about what we can do and what we can't do," Cupp says. "We compete regularly with five contractors in town, and we all offer the

same things. This is something grossly different than what our competitors are offering."

The program also helps Highland fight against another unfortunate result of a tight economy: Falling prices.

"What we're trying to combat is ... frankly, we're dealing with some ridiculous price competition. We're dealing with competitors who don't know how to price. They're offering pricing they cannot make any money off of, frankly," Cupp says.

And while the program is just a few of months old, Cupp's seen an uptick in sales and interest. Just a few weeks after announcing it, he had two meetings for projects – totaling \$300,000 – that were a direct result of the stimulus package. "We have sold two jobs as a result of it, and we've received many leads," he says. "I just want it to be one of the things that tips the project over the line."

The goal of the package – besides making more money – is to give clients more value for their money, and to increase spending in the local economy, Cupp says. "We're creating something that's hard to say no to," he says.

Cupp says the company doesn't have a goal for revenue from the stimulus package, and he's not sure what the ultimate result will be. But, he says that even in just a short time, it's been a good source of leads and jobs. "Even if we stopped the program today," he says, "I'd be happy with the results." **L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Have a great What's Your Niche? story? Send it to nwisenewski@gie.net and cbowen@gie.net.

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Putting Green Spaces to Work

A note landscape and lawn care professionals can give their customers: Your lawns help offset your carbon footprint. BY THOMAS RUFFY AND NICK HAMON

Nearly everyone in our society values green space. People give a series of predictable responses when asked what makes lawns and gardens important: Landscapes bring beauty into our lives. They provide a connection with nature. They lift the spirit. Some people offer a more utilitarian answer like, "Green spaces provide a place for children to play and families to gather." And, of course, most people know plants help to cool the immediate area and remove pollutants from the air while releasing oxygen.

We are now learning there are additional benefits from the managed landscapes that collectively make up green spaces in our cities and towns. These benefits are linked with a move toward sustainability. Economics, depletion of natural resources, environmental pollution and climate change are collectively pushing societies throughout the world to take a holistic view and develop sustainable living systems. Our lawns and landscapes play an important role in the sustainability movement.

OUR CARBON FOOTPRINT. Global warming is particularly of interest. Most in the scientific community agree that increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations stemming from burning of fossil fuels are driving a "greenhouse effect," where global temperatures may increase as much as 6 to 7 degrees in the decades ahead, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Temperature changes of this magnitude will adversely impact societies worldwide by causing drastic

changes in agriculture, energy use and water supplies – not to mention the inevitable flooding of coastal communities as sea levels rise.

It has become increasingly apparent that the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, our "carbon footprint," must be reduced. A recent study by U.S. and European scientists predict in *The Open Atmospheric Science Journal* that stabilizing atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations at the current level of 385 parts per million (ppm) or lower is essential for maintaining the world climate as we know it. This can be done in two ways. The first is to generate less carbon dioxide, e.g., using less energy and driving more fuel-efficient cars. The other is to help offset our carbon release by storing or sequestering carbon in plant systems. This is where green spaces become important. The plants in lawns and landscapes can store large quantities of carbon.

TREES + TURF = CARBON STORAGE. Plants grow by removing carbon dioxide from the air during photosynthesis and incorporating the carbon into above and below ground tissues. In the eastern and northwestern regions of the U.S., trees often are a major component of the urban landscape and the most obvious potential reservoirs for carbon storage. It has been estimated by the journal *Oecologia* that healthy trees store about 3,200 pounds of carbon per acre annually, or about 7.4 pounds per 100 square feet of space.

It has just recently been recognized that turfgrasses also play an important

role in carbon sequestration. In many urban settings, turfgrasses are the major part of the landscape, particularly when recreation areas are considered. It is estimated that turfgrasses occupy about 165,000 square kilometers in the continental U.S., according to the *Agronomy Journal* and *Environmental Management*. Healthy turfgrass can store almost 800 pounds of carbon per acre below ground in soil each year, the *Agronomy Journal* also reports, which equates to almost 1.85 pounds per 100 square feet of lawn or about one-quarter the rate for trees.

Keeping plants in a healthy state is essential for carbon storage to occur, though. Photosynthesis and growth are the carbon generators. To operate at high efficiencies, they require plants to have minimal problems with diseases and have adequate fertility. With turfgrass, for example, maximal productivity has been linked with regular mowing and leaving clippings in place, reports *J. Environ. Quality*. At the same time, it's important to manage fungal diseases and insect pests because they can negatively impact the potential of turfgrass to sequester carbon. While less is currently known about the ability of horticultural landscape plants to store carbon, one can safely assume they too will contribute to the carbon storage pool but must be kept in a healthy condition.

HOMEOWNER HELP. Healthy, growing landscape plants can offset some of the carbon being generated by individual homeowners. Here is a hypothetical example: A typical gas-powered automobile driven 12,500 miles annually might

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be expected to release about 2,500 pounds of carbon a year, according to Environmental Protection Agency Emission Facts. A half-acre residence with roughly 50 percent covered in trees could store about 800 pounds of carbon a year. If the remainder of the landscape were turfgrass, it would store another 200 pounds. So, this hypothetical homeowner could offset 1,000 pounds of carbon – 40 percent of their automobile footprint – just by maintaining a healthy landscape.

A common question being posed about green spaces is whether the release of carbon dioxide during maintenance will negate the carbon storage advantages gained with landscapes. With turfgrasses, for example, would gas-powered mowers generate substantial amounts of carbon dioxide and compromise below ground carbon storage? Estimates of carbon use by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute indicate about 50 pounds of carbon dioxide would be released with frequent mowing over the span of a year. That is a quarter of the carbon being stored in the turfgrass, and a fifth of the total 1,000 pounds of carbon sequestered in the hypothetical lawn cited previously. Bottom line, the system stays positive on balance.

GREEN SPACES. Green space actually may have a monetary value in the future. Recently, the Obama administration announced it would be pursuing regulations that cap the amount of carbon dioxide released in the U.S. If a carbon dioxide cap were put into place, it would be accompanied by a national trading system that would buy and sell carbon credits.

The U.S. system could resemble the one in the European Union. Mandated by the European Parliament and facilitated through private market platforms, such as the European Climate Exchange (ECX), a cap and trade system has evolved. The EU has placed caps on carbon dioxide emissions by energy-intensive industries. If companies exceed caps, stiff penalties can be avoided only if they purchase “allowances” or “credits” in the market. A similar voluntary system already is in place in the U.S. – the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCX). Importantly, the CCX includes a carbon offset program, where carbon sequestration contracts are bought and sold. If caps on carbon dioxide emissions are put into place by federal legislation, as expected, carbon sequestered in landscapes may well qualify as a credit activity and have a market value that could be traded.

A COLLECTIVE EFFORT. But it will take active participation from all fronts of the green industry to make a positive impact.

Tackling large-scale issues like atmospheric carbon dioxide requires new collaborations between the private sector and public institutions. Recently, Bayer Environmental Science formalized a relationship with North Carolina State University to examine the carbon sequestration potential of well-maintained turfgrass systems in the southeast. Lawn care professionals will play a crucial role as ambassadors to homeowners and local officials. Organizations like PLANET and Project Evergreen will continue to inform and advocate to audiences.

To change public perception of lawns and landscapes as purely aesthetic and utilitarian will require a collective effort. Studying green spaces and carbon sequestration is one step toward sustainability. 

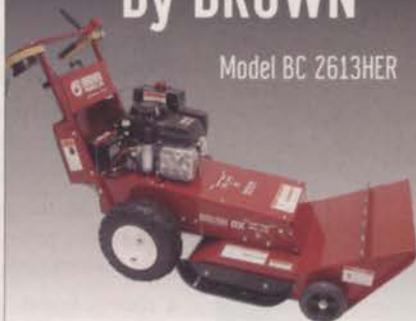
Rufty is a professor of environmental plant physiology at North Carolina State University. Harmon is vice president, product development and global sustainable development, Bayer Environmental Science, and an adjunct professor of entomology at NCSU.

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Plan Now to Move Forward in 2010

Needless to say, 2009 has been the year the air was left out of the global financial balloon. But there are signs of hope for 2010. Home sales have been up 9 percent in the past two months. Car sales, primarily due to the Cash for Clunkers program, saw a recent boost. An Aug. 13 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed read, "The Fed is keeping the money pumping ... which is an acknowledgement that the recession is all but over."

What does all of this mean for 2010? Your guess is probably as good as mine. There simply remains too much uncertainty to predict next year's fortunes (or lack thereof) at this time. Health care reform alone, if not done properly, could seriously dampen our economic future. The effect of the huge deficits our country has incurred are mostly unknown. It is quite possible that 2010 could be a repeat of 2009.

So what do you do about it? I suggest you focus on things you can control and that includes your estimating budget for 2010.

THE STRATEGY. Now is the time to start preparing your estimating or fair-market value budget for 2010. You may not have all of the data (end-of-year financial statements, latest state unemployment rates and insurance rates, etc.) but that shouldn't stop you from thinking about the future. You can update your 2010 budget as more current data comes available. It can help you deal with the uncertainty. You can calculate your pricing and what you need to charge for your products, services and labor rates. It will also allow you to

analyze what happened and did not happen in 2009. In short, it should boost your confidence and clarify your options if you go about it properly.

THE PROCESS. I use an Excel worksheet to prepare budgets for my clients. First, I estimate 2010 revenue for the various divisions of the company. Immediately a problem surfaces because we have little or no idea what is going to happen next year. To deal with this problem, I recommend putting together two budgets – one is a best-case scenario and the other is a worst-case scenario. This allows you to bracket your future even in the midst of much uncertainty. You might call this a hand grenade approach as compared to a sharpshooter one. You don't know precisely what is going to happen, but it's probably somewhere between your best- and worst-case scenarios.

Next, based on past experience, I fill in the projected direct costs for materials, field labor, labor burden, equipment, rental equipment and subcontractors. I do this by division if the company has multiple divisions.

Then I fill in the general and administrative (G&A) costs for the upcoming year. These are all of the costs I cannot apply directly to individual jobs or services. There are about 30 categories for G&A costs. They include such things as rent, advertising, office staff salaries, computers, consultants, etc., and they take up about 25 percent of sales.

Labor burden for both the field and office staff is an important

category. It includes such things as FICA, FUTA, SUTA, workers' compensation and general liability insurances, etc.

The objective is to identify all of your reasonable or fair-market value costs and ensure they are passed on to your clients in your pricing for your jobs and services. We want your clients to pay for these costs, not you.

WHAT YOU GET. This gives you the tools you need to estimate your costs in 2010. They are labor burden and G&A overhead costs that need to be calculated into your pricing. It also lets you calculate critical numbers to benchmark your operation. The projected sales number (or numbers if we have two scenarios) gives you a sales target for the season.

Now you can control your company and your destiny. You have the critical estimating numbers to *price it right*. The field crew should be able to *produce it right*. And the projected sales figures give you the ability to monitor if you are able to *produce enough of it*.

CONCLUSION. You may have little control over what the bureaucrats and politicians in Washington do with the big picture. But you certainly can take control of your part of the equation and work the little picture. While there still remains a lot of uncertainty concerning 2010, there is much you can do about it. 

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Adopt a **Neighborhood**

The Green Scene secures one job in a community and then works on gaining additional jobs in the same area. This project was a result of that marketing initiative. BY LINDSEY GETZ

Scott Cohen, garden artisan, The Green Scene, says he always assumes his next project will come from the company's last project. It's sort of the mantra of what the company calls their "Adopt a Neighborhood" program. The Green Scene makes it their objective to secure multiple jobs from the same neighborhood. "It's likely that the neighbors will fall into the same demographic of the project we're working on, and are just the type of new clients we want to target," says Cohen. "So whenever we take on a new project, we like to think of it as adopting the entire neighborhood."

First, the company puts a "Coming Soon" sign in the client's yard. The sign shows a rendering of the finished project and a box with company brochures. "It costs around \$70 to set up each time, but has been such a wise investment," Cohen says. "Neighbors love to know what their fellow neighbors are up to, so we capitalize on that with this sign."

The Adopt a Neighborhood program is how The Green Scene secured a high-end design/build project, which was featured on HGTV. The Freimann family, a California couple, had seen another project in their neighborhood and set up a

design consultation to go over their own ideas. The goals were extensive and meant transforming a barren backyard into one with multiple points of interest, including an infinity edge pool, a large outdoor fireplace, an outdoor living area, a fire and water feature, and an outdoor kitchen.

With such an extensive wish list, the company's primary challenges were design-oriented, says Cohen. "It was important that we meet all of our clients' needs, without making the yard too busy or obstructing their view," he explains. A pass-through fireplace kept the beautiful panoramic view, despite the large size of the structure.

The new design also incorporates an outdoor kitchen, a feature that has become popular in the last five years. In fact, Cohen just authored a book on the subject entitled *Outdoor Kitchen Design Workbook*. While many of these spaces can become cookie-cutter due to their popularity, Cohen made the Freimann's installation stand out by incorporating a cast-in-place concrete tri-level counter with table seating set at 30 inches, a prep counter at 36 inches, and a serve bar at 44 inches.



The project's goals were extensive, and meant transforming a barren backyard into one with multiple points of interest, including an infinity edge pool, a large outdoor fireplace, an outdoor living area, a fire and water feature, and an outdoor kitchen.

In terms of landscaping, the Freimann's requested a moon garden, which is a garden comprising of all-white flowering plants that can be best appreciated on nights with a full moon when the flowers are said to glow. The homeowners also wanted a bistro patio with a water feature, which Cohen gave some pizzazz by creating a water/fire combination design. Flames shoot up through crushed glass while water weeps down a stacked stone waterfall directly behind the fire.

Cohen says one of the biggest lessons he learned from this job is that when you're working for a husband and wife team, it's critical to involve both parties in every step of the design and build process. "We had a few what I call 'battle of the sexes' issues that came up," he explains. "This has happened before – the husband thinks he knows what the wife wants and vice-versa, but that turns out not to be the case. It's just a smoother project from start to finish if the husband and wife are both available

to speak with the contractor and you involve both parties in the design process and any site meetings."

But despite any hang-ups, the finished product was exactly what the couple wanted, and Cohen continues to get work from that neighborhood. He says the company has been fortunate to get regular work, and attributes it largely to successful marketing programs like the Adopt a Neighborhood program. **L**

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

Design Details

COMPANY The Green Scene

Headquarters: Canoga Park, Calif. **Revenue:** \$5 to \$6 million **Client/Service**

Mix: High-end residential design/build **No. of employees:** 50

THE FREIMANN PROJECT

Project area (square feet): 6,000 square feet

Total labor hours: 5 men, 6 months

Total design hours: 20

Subcontracted services: 20%

Initial project estimate: \$420,000

Final project cost: \$485,000

Key plant materials used: The family wanted a moon garden: All white blooming plantings including Gardenias (radi-

cans and Mystery), Mock Orange – Pittosporum tobira, White Solanum vines, Star Jasmine, Abutilon- Chinese Lantern, Iceberg Roses, White blooming Bougainvillea, Osmanthus – Sweet Olive

Key hardscape materials used: Cast concrete countertops by Scott Cohen, Belgard concrete pavers

Equipment used: Jandy Pool Products pool and spa equipment, Alfresco BBQ appliances, Hearth Products Controls Co. fire and water features, and gas plumbing

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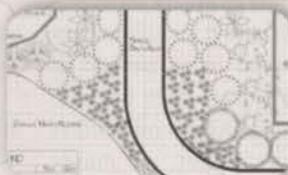
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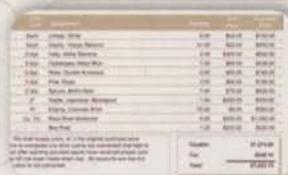
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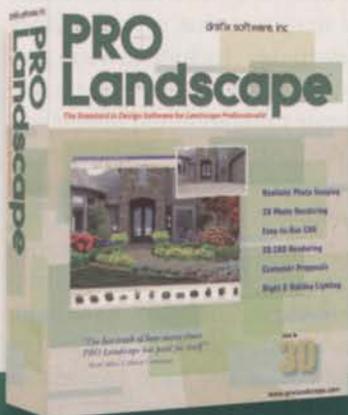
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Smart Controllers Are No Silver Bullet

High-efficiency landscape water management can be critical to growing your irrigation and landscape business. All over the country, increasing demands on unpredictable or scarce water supplies require the landscape industry use water more efficiently. As a nation we have great faith in technology and love a quick fix. Seeing a need, technology entrepreneurs have contributed to developing so-called SMART controllers. Once programmed with key, site-specific parameters, these controllers are self-adjusting according to weather inputs gathered from weather stations via the Internet or on-site weather or soil moisture sensors.

Now that these controllers have been deployed for a period of time, some things have become very clear. SMART controllers are no silver bullet, no magic box. There is no way around the need for irrigation and landscape professionals to understand the basics of landscape water management. More specifically, if a contractor does not understand the basics of soil/plant/water relationships, and does not truly understand the actual inefficiencies in how water is distributed by any irrigation system, installing a SMART controller will only automate a sub optimum result.

The recent study released in May 2009 by the California Department of Water Resources entitled "Evaluation of California Weather-Based 'SMART' Irrigation Controller Programs" made this very clear. Quoting from the

report: "While the overall findings show reductions in water use through the installation of smart controllers, it is also significant that 41.8 percent of study sites experienced an increase in weather-normalized irrigation application after the installation of a smart controller." Without understanding, any tool can be used incorrectly. The new tools are potentially wonderful in the hands of knowledgeable operators, but we cannot skip the step

- The second portion of the proposal could be optional, although depending on the existing system, highly recommended. Propose doing a system renovation targeting correct operating pressure and head spacing. Pressure and spacing are often the two greatest opportunities to improve distribution uniformity.

- The third part of your proposal is installing a SMART controller to make daily adjustments to irrigation scheduling to hit the

"We cannot skip the step of understanding the basics in the rush to deploy a silver bullet."

of understanding the basics in the rush to deploy a silver bullet.

What are the basics that will help a landscape professional get the most out of the new technology and thereby build his or her business? Start with shaping the expectation of the customer. Accurately defining the expected outcome can be half the battle. The desired outcome is higher system efficiency, which leads to reduction in water use and a healthier landscape. Explain to the customer all of the areas for potential efficiency gain are part of this equation. Consider a three-part proposal:

- The first part is to ensure that all of the existing hardware is operating at its best on the system. In other words, do a diagnostic of existing system condition and repair broken or dysfunctional hardware.

moving target of changing plant water requirements dictated by weather.

Spend time explaining to your customer that their landscape has a variety of plants with differing plant water requirements. Those same plants have water needs that increase to a peak need during June/July, and decrease toward fall and winter. What that means is there is never a fixed schedule of irrigation that is "right" from day to day. Include in your proposal plenty of time for the accurate calibration and subsequent fine-tuning and adjustment of parameters such as soil type, root depth and system efficiency (this is a critical step and may require multiple site visits). Once accurate "base-line" data have been installed, you have completed the basics and have reasonable assurance of success. **L**



JOHN OSSA

is the owner of Irrigation Essentials, a Web-based irrigation resource and consulting firm located in San Rafael, Calif. Reach him at john@irrigationessentials.com or via his Web site at www.irrigationessentials.com.

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Growing Government Work

Government jobs present a business opportunity in today's market. Having the right person in place to help secure and maintain this work is half the battle. BY LINDSEY GETZ

Austin Outdoor, a Florida-based landscape firm, had always focused primarily on designing, constructing and maintaining landscaping for resorts and commercial office buildings. But as the effects of the recession began to hit, they wanted to start establishing more government work.

"We recognized traditional commercial real estate development was slowing down and government projects offered us another opportunity," says William Dellecker, executive vice president. "But when looking at the market, there were many unique aspects when dealing with government entities, as compared to our traditional work. There were enough differences that it was evident a specialized business development manager, who had a statewide focus on securing government work, would be needed."

In order to start serving this market, Austin Outdoor added the new position, "business development manager – government services," to its business development team in February of this year. Charles Granger was hired for the

position, someone the company had worked with before while he served as a horticulture professor at nearby Daytona State College.

Granger says the beauty of his job is there is no such thing as a typical day. "I may end up at a pre-bid one day, which could be anywhere in the state," he says. "Or I may have to turn in a bid which requires working with the estimating department and landscape architects. Essentially every day is different, but a big part of the job is research so that means office days, too."

Keeping up with research and finding leads may be one of the most time-consuming and challenging aspects of the job, adds Granger, but it's also one of the most important. "When you're dealing with government entities, you're literally talking thousands of them – and that's just for Florida," he explains. "We also have to be tuned in every day as to what's going on from a stimulus standpoint. So there's just a lot to keep up with, and trying to gather information is a huge part of the job."

Since hiring Granger, the company

has bid on a wide variety of projects, including everything from streetscape maintenance to national cemeteries and port terminals.

Selecting the jobs that are best fit for Austin Outdoor to bid on is another challenging part of Granger's position. "With so much work out there, it's important that we find jobs that are suitable for our company," he says. While it may serve as a challenge, Granger says the variety of jobs out there keeps his work interesting, too.

Since this is a whole new ballgame for the entire company, it's been a learning experience for everyone. Granger says the company is learning that every government agency works differently, meaning specs and bids can differ vastly from job to job. Taking on government work also requires new considerations that Granger is responsible for handling on an as-needed basis. For example, security clearances could be a part of his position. "This is much different than anything the company has had to deal with in the past when doing resort work," he says. "But if you look at doing something like sub stations in this post-9/11 era, all the guys working on that type of job now have to get security clearance. It'd be the same case if we had work with a cruise terminal or airport. So there's even a human resource management component to this position."

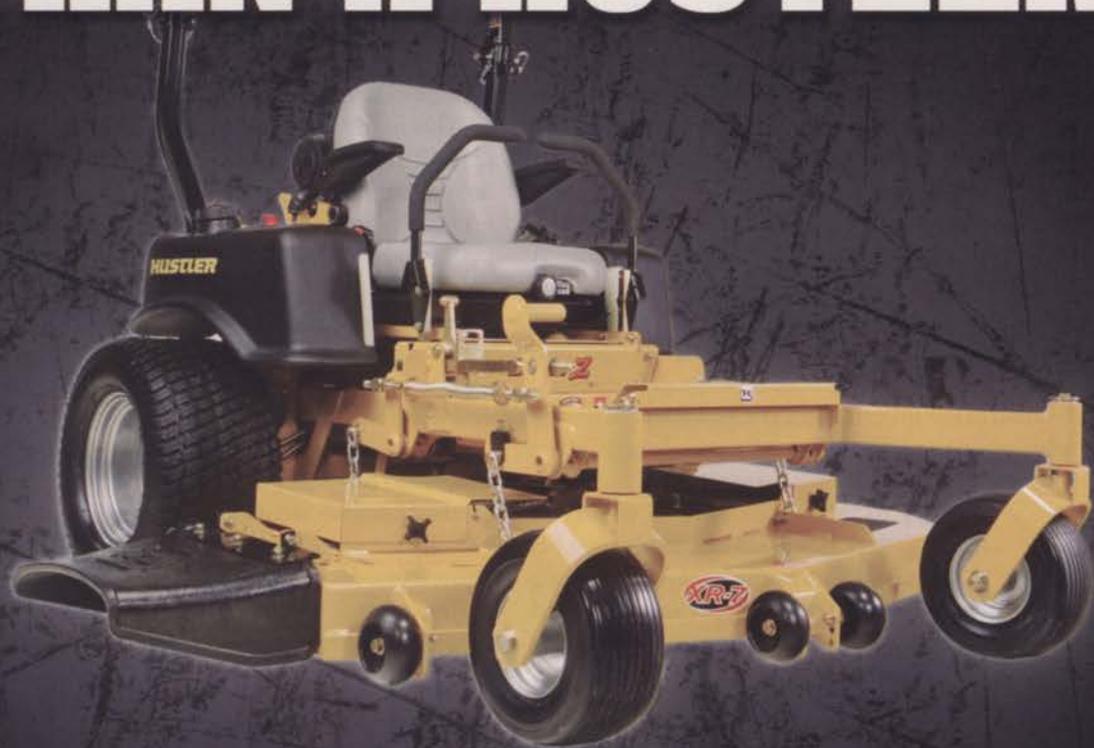
Granger also has had to learn about getting prequalified – which was never an issue with their previous work.

While it's all still very new for the company, Dellecker says the position has already paid off in terms of securing new work. Before hiring a business development manager specializing in government work, the company was rarely even aware of government jobs coming up for bid.

"We also didn't have the necessary requirements in place to competitively bid on some of that work," Dellecker adds. "But Charles' position adds to the strength of our business development efforts." **L**

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

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Put Your Network to Work

Landscape contractors use social media to reach out to customers. BY CHUCK BOWEN

One of Steve Hoogenakker's competitors had just run into some problems with a property management company. So Hoogenakker, vice president at Taylor Made Landscape in Minneapolis, saw an opportunity and jumped on it.

But instead of cold-calling the company, he sat down at his computer and sent the company's vice president and two property managers a direct message through LinkedIn: "I heard you were looking for new vendors for this spring. We still have time to analyze your site."

Instead of a blind call (which likely wouldn't get him through to the VP) or an e-mail message (which could get routed to the spam folder), Hoogenakker's message went right through the social network and to the three decision makers.

"The key to this whole thing is to just be helpful," says Hoogenakker, explaining his social media strategy is more about being useful to his clients and not a hard sell. His 6-year-old company does only commer-

cial work, servicing townhomes and other managed properties. He says LinkedIn and a host of blogs he maintains help him stay in front of his clients.

"This morning, I was out bidding a big condominium place. I've never talked to the property manager's boss before, but he's on my LinkedIn group. I got a nice condo lead there," he says. "I got another one with four apartment buildings that came from my contacts on LinkedIn."

LinkedIn and other social networking and social media tools like Facebook, Twitter and blogs, are increasingly seeing activity from businesses as companies search for new ways to reach out to customers, and as customers seek out new ways to find companies.

SELLING BY NOT SELLING. Hoogenakker operates a group on the business-oriented social networking site specifically for property managers, and contributes to two others. He compiles articles about general business topics – some of which he writes and others he receives from Google alerts – and sends them to his contacts. These articles



"Clients are using our blog to make a deciding factor on whether to hire us or not. **We're getting business we wouldn't have gotten otherwise.**"

– Jason Cupp, Highland Outdoor

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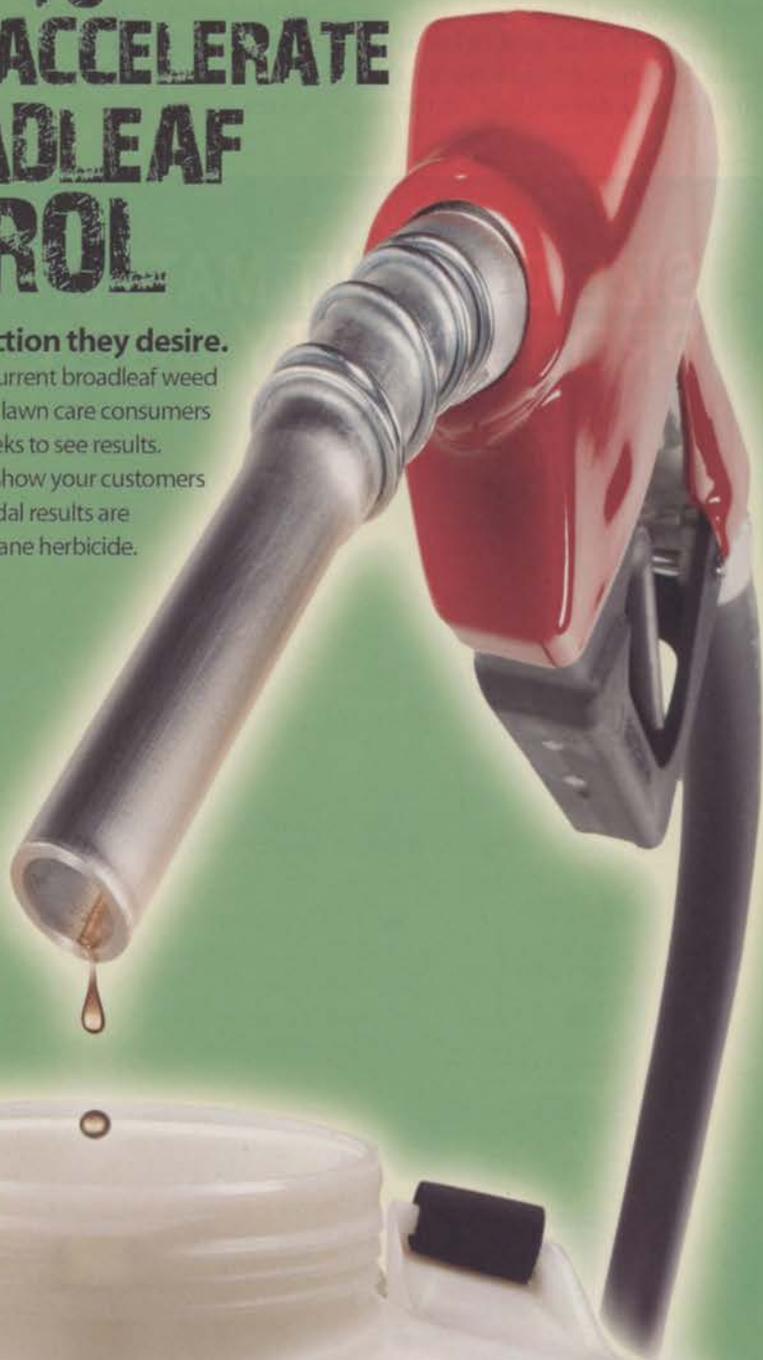


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keep his name – and contact information – in front of the people who make the decision to hire his \$500,000 a year, eight-employee firm.

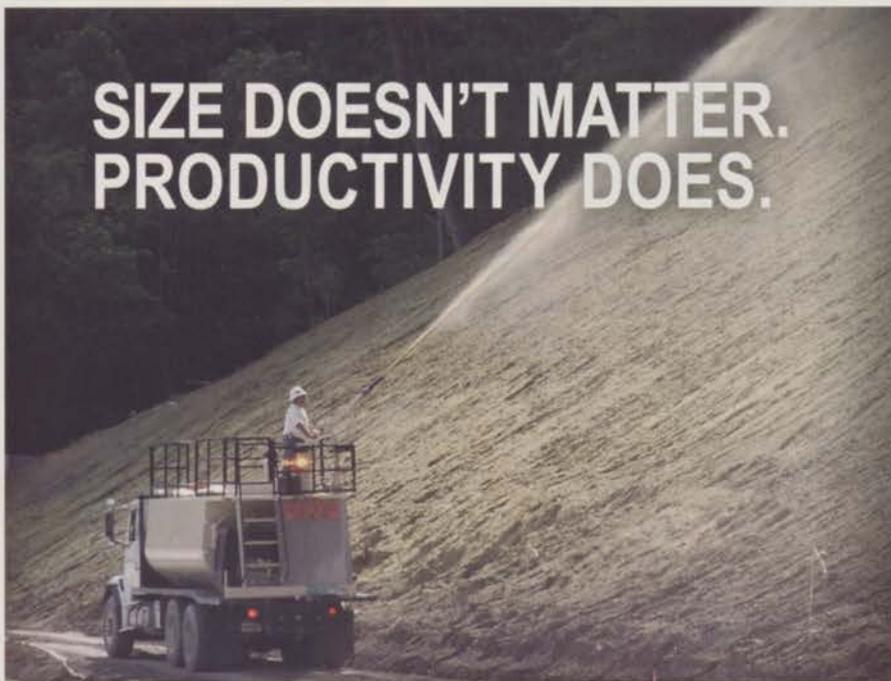
“It’s mostly lead generation at this point,” he says, adding he spends about 10 minutes a day working on the site.

“If I’m writing articles, they’re getting posted on different sites. If you’ve already got a couple articles in the can, why not get it on the Web?”

Social networks like LinkedIn and other social media blogs can offer businesses a new, low-cost way to reach

customers. They allow a company to publish information – articles, videos or podcasts – and share them with a large number of people, who can then comment on them and share them easily with more people.

“It really is an outstanding way for small businesses to have an impact in their marketing campaigns,” says Bill Sledzik, a professor of public relations at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.



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SPREAD THE WORD

Landscape contractors rank social media marketing tools in this order, based on business value and usefulness.

- 1 **facebook**
- 2 **LinkedIn**
- 3 **blogs**
- 4 **twitter**

Why do you use social media?

To build customer relationships and increase our number of customers – **72%**

To network with other landscape contractors – **36%**

To find employees and build future employee relationships – **17%**



How much time do you spend each week developing social media marketing tools?

More than 3 hours – **5%**

1 to 3 hours – **24%**

Less than one hour – **71%**



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Landscape contractors can give their clients valuable information – how to protect shrubs from a cold snap, tips on ways to save money in the landscape, etc. – and position themselves as experts in the minds of their clients.

And while social media might not

have yet caught on throughout the entire green industry – 62 percent of respondents to a *Lawn & Landscape* survey say they don't use social media marketing tools – the tools can be useful. The majority of contractors using social media – 71 percent – use them to build

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Ready to jump in?
Not so fast.

Here are some tips from industry experts on how to best take advantage of social media marketing.

There are a lot of options out there. Don't jump into all of them at once. Choose one venue – a blog, a Facebook page – and do it well before you move on to another.

You don't have to publish constantly, but you have to publish consistently.

Stay involved. Social media work because they allow users to spread useful information quickly.

Be a team player. Don't saddle one poor office worker with all the responsibility. Put a few people in charge of your social media efforts.

consumer relationships and increase their number of customers. Thirty-five percent use the tools to network with other contractors, and 17 percent use them to find employees.

And these tools are increasingly popular among consumers. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project's December 2008 tracking survey, adult internet users who have a profile on an online social network site have more than quadrupled in the past four years – from 8 percent in 2005 to 35 percent.

Facebook now says it has 300 million users; the fastest-growing demographic is people older than 35.

But Sledzik cautioned against companies thinking of their blog or Facebook fan page as just another way to advertise their services. "It's not necessarily a sales pitch," he says. "And that's part of the challenge that we have in getting people to embrace social media."

CHANGING CUSTOMERS' MINDS. Jason Cupp, CEO of Highland Outdoor and Southwest Greens of Kansas City, and his staff use Facebook, Twitter, a blog and text messages to stay in front of their clients and bring them valuable information.

"We define it as an opportunity for us to connect with people who we're doing

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business with – clients, employees, potential employees – and do it in a unique way,” Cupp says.

And as for taking time from his day, Cupp says he spends about 10 hours a week on the blog and other social media.

But, they are an extension of things he was doing – Twittering, blogging – already. “I can do Twitter, Facebook and blog all from my iPhone,” he says.

Cupp says the Highland Outdoor site (www.highland-outdoor.com/blog) gets

between 10,000 and 15,000 hits each month, and much of that traffic comes from the company’s blog, Outdoor Connect. The site covers topics like upcoming winter weather, news about the company and tips for how to save money around the house. The blog, and the galleries of project photos, draw much of the traffic to the company’s site, Cupp says.

“It’s not the ‘About Us’ page or our staff bios ... it’s our blog,” he says. “Clients are using that to make a deciding factor on whether to hire us or not. We’re getting business we wouldn’t have gotten otherwise.” **L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. He’s on Twitter at @lawnlandscape.

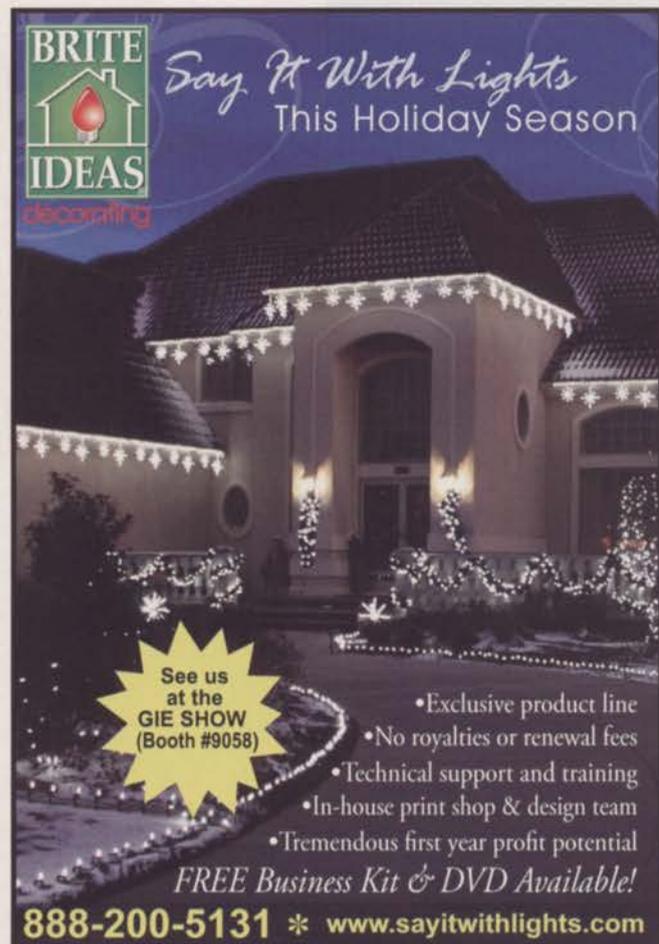
More than Drinks and Chips

In the company’s first e-newsletter, CEO Jason Cupp wrote a letter to customers in which he mentioned a local Mexican restaurant. He goes there every Friday with some friends and clients, and he included a link to their Web site. Thirty percent of the newsletter recipients clicked on that link.

The next time Cupp saw the restaurant’s owner, he said customers had been coming in and mentioning they heard about his place through Highland’s e-newsletter.

“Don’t you think Kevin is going to be talking about our business in a different way now? Was that my intent? No. Did it happen that way? Yes. Am I happy that it did? Yes,” Cupp says. “I’m not just some guy out with his buddies drinking beers and eating tortilla chips. Those are the neat things you get to do and some of the byproducts you don’t realize as you’re engaging in these social media-type things.”

For social media tips and common mistakes to avoid, check out www.lawnandlandscape.com/webextras.



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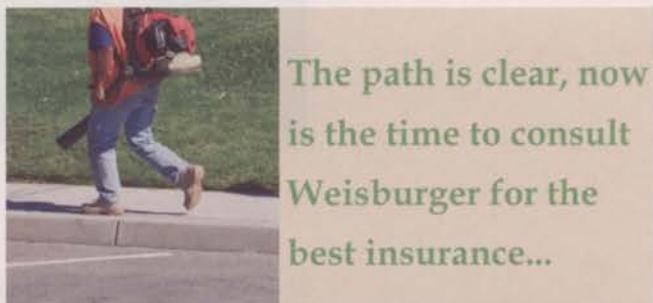
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Getting things done
Contractors are turning to
technology to make their crews
more productive and profitable

Office Spaces

Companies are using mobile technology to cut loose from their brick-and-mortar offices to be more productive – and more profitable. BY CHUCK BOWEN

As time gets tight, lawn and landscape professionals need to squeeze every bit of work out of each day that they can. But some days, there's more to do than hours to do it, so resourceful business owners find out how to be more productive. These days, that means mobile technology – smartphones, mobile offices and laptops – that allow sales teams and crews to stay in constant contact with customers and each other.

STAND BY YOUR VAN. Three years ago, David Van Zelst realized he was spend-

ing too much time in front of his windshield and not in front of his customers. So he moved his office into a van.

His company, Illinois-based Van Zelst, covers the northern Chicago suburbs and parts of Wisconsin, so he was driving. A lot.

His custom Ford Econoline had a swivel chair, desk, computer and a printer in the rear cabin. A driver (one of his employees) would pick Van Zelst up every morning at his house and drop him off again in the evening.

He was a little concerned about what customers might think – *An office in a*

van? Really? – but they all liked it. “I had many compliments in terms of what a great idea it was,” he says. “As a whole, people really liked it and embraced it because they were able to interact with me personally and have me more involved.”

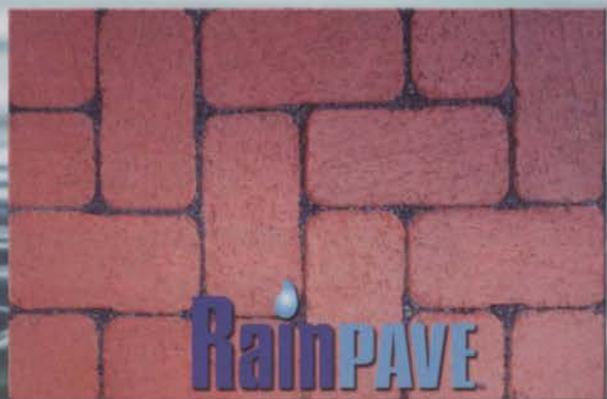
“When using this truck, I am never concerned about sitting in traffic or the length of time from client to client,” Van Zelst adds. “When I am in that truck, I have everything: Laptop, printer, flat screen. I have everything with me during any given point during the day.”



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Van Zelst says his clientele – CEOs and business owners with very high-end homes in the northern Chicago suburbs – are used to communicating instantly with all kinds of digital media, so his sales force has to oblige.

“It came out of necessity,” he says. “The types of clients we’re dealing with are very service-oriented with high expectations regarding quick communication. For me to cover the range we needed, I needed a solution that allowed me to work and have the appropriate level of time and interaction with clients.”

The \$35,000 he spent on the van paid for itself during the last couple of years. Without the van, he says, he would need to work 20-hour days to maintain the same levels of productivity. And now he’s not driving down the interstate trying to talk on the phone and take notes about a potential job.

EXPANDING OPTIONS. Each year, more of Van Zelst’s customers are moving to e-mail or text-based communications. Half to three-quarters of his customers prefer getting materials in PDFs e-mailed to them. So the company now uses Blackberries, digital cameras and laptops, and has ramped up its use of mobile technology in the past two years.

Van Zelst says his crews already all had radios with “the normal bells and whistles,” but this year all project managers and salespeople are equipped with Nextel-integrated Blackberries, which allow them to stay in much closer contact with each other – and with clients.

“What we’re finding in our business, despite the economic climate, people are still very demanding. Their expectation of service hasn’t gone down. It’s actually gone up,” he says. “Having the

capabilities to interact with people on a fast basis is absolutely essential.”

PUSHING PAPER. Paul Atkinson, director of sales and marketing for ULS Landscaping in Rocky View, Alberta, Canada, has equipped his entire sales team with netbooks so they can put proposals and estimates together in the field. He’s also bidding out a program for handheld devices to track crews and manage workflow digitally that he’ll roll out this winter.

“We’re very mobile,” he says. “It’s a huge labor savings. You can do way more with less. The city is a large place to be driving around; it saves tons of drive time.”

ULS, which does mostly full-service commercial work, has about 110 employees. In the winter, a lot of snow subcontractors come on board, and that number jumps to about 300.



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The netbooks – small, stripped down laptops that run about \$300 – let his sales team produce estimates on site. They can e-mail the documents to

clients, or print them with mobile printers. Handhelds, which would also include GPS tracking software, will allow the company to move away from

paper-based work orders and keep track of crew times better, Atkinson says.

“Right now, its paper for work orders,” he says, adding that a move to

App-Tastic

It's not all Twitter and texting: Smartphones like the iPhone and Blackberries also have other tools to make small businesses more productive. You can use them to access maps, get instant weather updates and find the cheapest gas in the city. One application for the iPhone called Gas Cubby allows you to track scheduled maintenance on your vehicles, mileage and the cost of service.

Turfgrass Management, released in August, was designed by a turf researcher at the University of Georgia. It's chock full of searchable information about turf diseases, weeds and pests. Contractors in the field can scroll through photos of



weeds, and then find information about what pre- or post-emergent herbicides would work best.

The app was designed by Patrick McCullough, extension turf weed specialist at UGA, Clint Watzl, extension turfgrass management specialist; Alfredo Martinez, turfgrass pathologist; and Will Hudson, turfgrass entomologist. All proceeds from the sale of the app go to the university's turfgrass research program.

McCullough says he's working on a database that compiles all available pesticides, herbicides and fungicides by both their common name and trade name.

“That way when you're in the field, you can pull up this program, scroll through pictures, read about it and get a control recommendation,” he says.

The data, he says, come from the university's databases and textbooks. “We're trying to make it very general, very basic,” he says. “It's basically a reference tool.”

The UGA app is compatible with the iPhone and Blackberries. You can download it at www.apple.com/store.

PATRICK MCCULLOUGH

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more mobile technology would make the company more productive. "We can manage way more people with way less. With our snow removal operations, it's essential we have more real-time feedback for finding crews."

EVERYTHING IN ONE PLACE. This summer, Aaron Smith, general manager at Vermont-based S&D Landscapes, turned in his old cell phone for a PDA, which allows him to do more business while he's on the road.

"We can do pretty much everything with one device," he says. The new phone lets him send and receive e-mail, and put rough designs together for clients on site, then upload them to his main design program back at the office. He's also going to use it to track his hours.

"What typically was done on paper

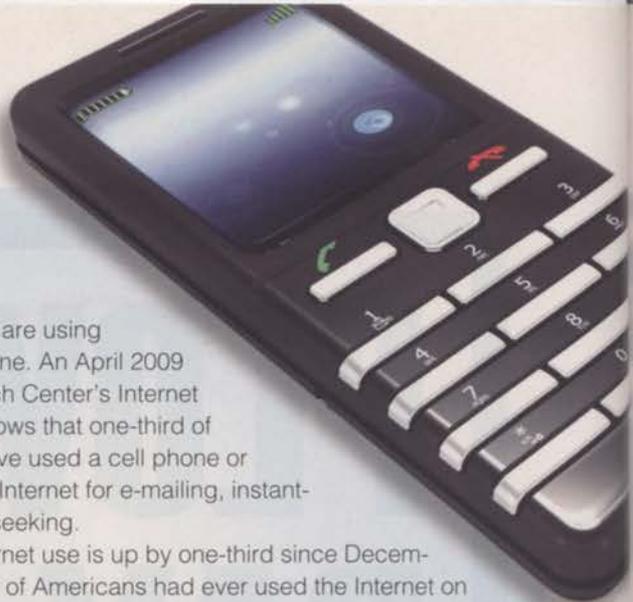
Connected Clients

More and more Americans are using mobile handsets to get online. An April 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project shows that one-third of Americans (32 percent) have used a cell phone or Smartphone to access the Internet for e-mailing, instant-messaging or information-seeking.

This level of mobile Internet use is up by one-third since December 2007, when 24 percent of Americans had ever used the Internet on a mobile device.

On the typical day, nearly one-fifth (19 percent) of Americans use the Internet on a mobile device, up substantially from the 11 percent level recorded in December 2007. That's a growth of 73 percent in the 16-month interval between the surveys.

And American are more connected at home, too. The same Pew study shows 63 percent of adult Americans now have broadband Internet connections at home, a 15 percent increase from just a year earlier.



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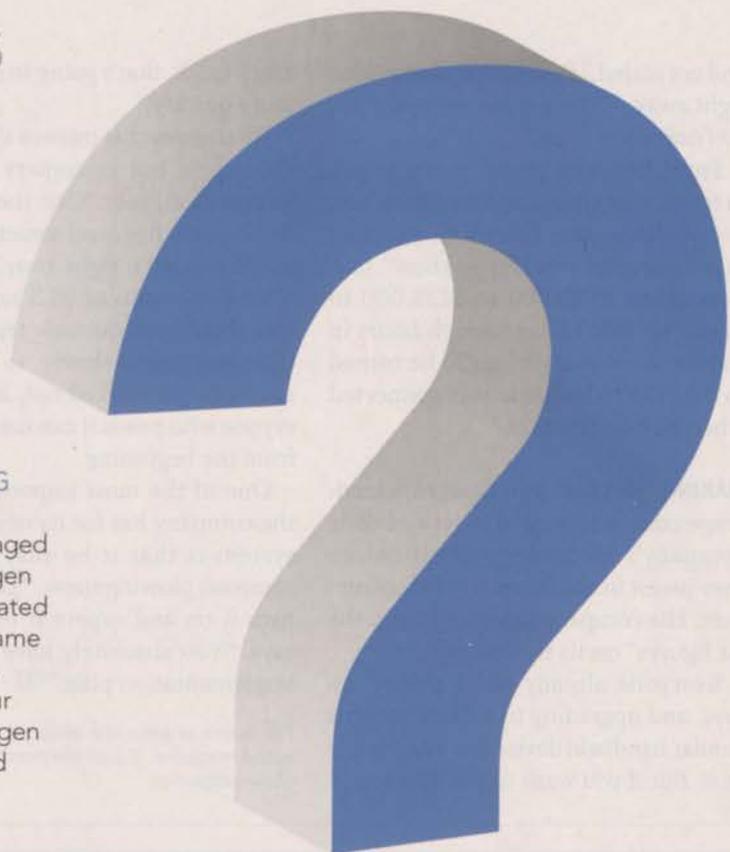
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and not scaled," Smith says, is now done right away. "It cuts down a whole step; you only do it once."

Smith had used his cell phone to stay in touch with clients and suppliers, but, as a small company (which he describes as a "man-and-a-half-type show" that does about \$100,000 to \$125,000 in sales), he didn't have enough hours in the day to do everything. So he turned to the PDA to help him stay connected when he's on the road.

MAKING THE LEAP. Van Zelst says landscape contractors need to look at their company's technology needs before they invest in any expensive infrastructure. His company has spent "into the six figures" on its technology.

Everyone already has a phone, he says, and upgrading to a Blackberry or similar handheld device has a negligible cost. But if you want to put a laptop in

every truck, that's going to add up a lot more quickly.

He stresses that owners should think about how fast customers want their information, too: "Can they wait two hours until they send something out or can they send it right away?" he asks.

Paul Atkinson of ULS says contractors should roll out new technology to their workforce slowly, to make sure any bugs get worked out, and that everyone who needs it can use it properly from the beginning.

One of the most important criteria the company has for its new handheld system is that it be easy to use for someone plowing snow. "You can't just turn it on and expect it to work," he says. "You absolutely have to have an implementation plan." **L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine. E-mail him from your phone at cbowen@gie.net.

High-Tech Trucks

Two major truck manufacturers are rolling out new models equipped with wireless capabilities that truly turn a truck into an office.

For 2010, Dodge's heavy-duty 2500 and 3500 models can come with a wireless router that turns the truck into a hotspot for up to six computers.

And contractors driving Ford F-150s can choose a four-gigabyte in-dash computer. Ford Work Solutions comprises a touch screen in the middle of the dash, a wireless keyboard and a printer. It also includes hands-free calling and a Garmin navigation system.



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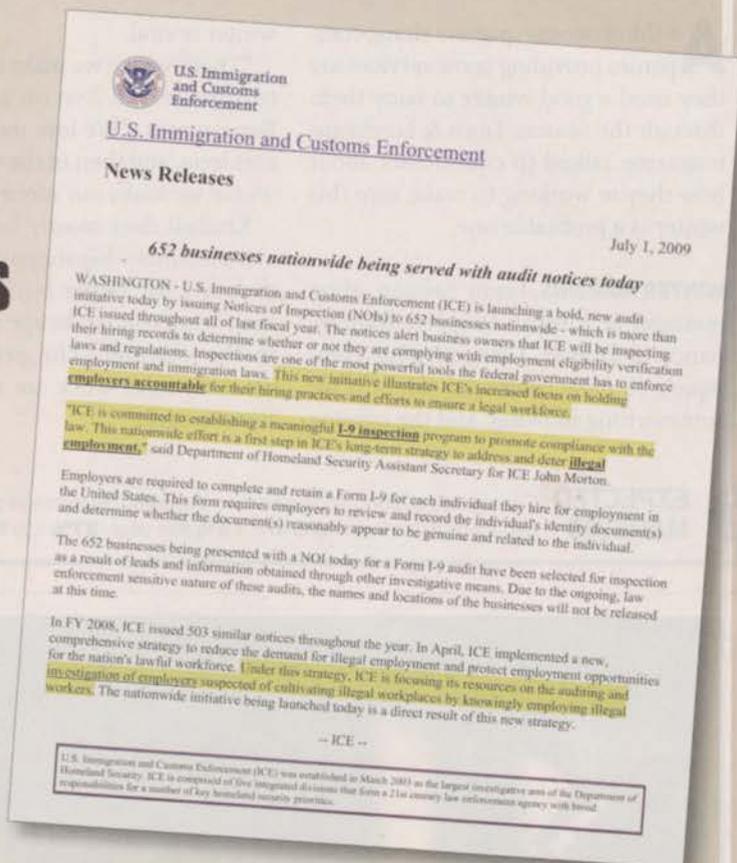
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“ A primary driver of illegal immigration is the labor market and you have to go after the pull that market has created. That means you have to go after the employers who are hiring illegal labor. ”

- U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security
Janet Napolitano

Snow Days

With a tight economy, contractors are depending on a solid winter.

BY CHUCK BOWEN

As the economy sputters along, companies providing snow services say they need a good winter to buoy them through the season. *Lawn & Landscape* magazine talked to contractors about how they're working to make sure this winter is a profitable one.

WINTER MARGINS. Jason Benson, shop manager at Kimball Property Maintenance in Draper, Utah, says his company's 45 plow trucks pay the bills for summertime mowing, and the coming

winter is vital.

"That's where we make all our money to survive and live on all summer," Benson says. "We lose money all summer long, and then in the wintertime is where we make our money."

Kimball does mostly large commercial accounts – big shopping plazas and property for larger businesses – and then works on landscape maintenance in the summer. The profit margins on the winter work are much better, Benson says.



The company brought in \$11 million last year on a mild Utah winter. They were able to bring in the same revenue as 2007, he says, but had to get more accounts. "It was fair. It wasn't as good as the winter before. The winter before was record-breaking for us," he says.

Benson says he equips his fleet with



EXPECTED MARGINS

Companies offering snow services expected an average profit margin of **9.3%** this year. Nearly half of contractors say they expect profit between **6%** and **15%** this year. **27%** say they expect profit margins of between **10%** and **15%**.



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Boss plows and SnowEx spreaders.

The company uses about 100 subcontractors for snow removal in season and rents a lot of equipment – back hoes, skid steers and wheel loaders. In all, Kimball has up to 250 in the winter. To keep tabs on that many employees, the company has managers for specific areas.

“They’re in charge of a certain area for sidewalk guys,” Benson says. At large commercial sites, one also manages the crews. “He’s the guy who babysits and makes sure they sign in and sign out and makes sure they get paid.”

i SNOW STATS

38% of landscape companies say they offer snow removal services. On average, **5%** of a company’s revenue comes from snow and ice removal. Understandably, firms in the East and Midwest do more – **8%**.

On average, companies saw gross revenues from snow services jump **20%** from 2007 to

WORKING FOR THE RAILROAD. Paul Cove is depending on a good winter, too. Snow removal makes up 90 percent of his business – he clears a terminal for CSX railroad that houses 5,500 automobiles as they wait to be shipped across the country by truck.

He uses mostly Avalanche plows – he likes the steel edges, he says – and has been plowing snow since 1972. He and his crew, between four and 12 employees in the winter, gather the snow up in the aisles and then use huge blowers to send it over the fence.

2008. The net change was **12%**.

Companies spend, on average, more than \$21,000 a year on plows, snow throwers, salt and spreaders.

2.6% of firms said snow removal would be their fastest-growing service in 2009.

Cove’s business, East Brookfield, Mass.-based Paul Cove Enterprises, is almost entirely for the railroad and reliant on the struggling auto industry. This winter is paramount. “It’s very important. It wasn’t as important before the economy was so bad,” he says. “Snow is becoming a bigger part of my business than it used to be. Our client list keeps declining.”

He pulls in between \$150,000 and \$350,000 a year.

And as business stays slow, he’s not buying new equipment, and is relying on his 16-year relationship with the railroad to get him through.

“When the economy is a little bit better, people are less apt to go looking,” he says. “The bean counters aren’t on them as much.” **L**

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

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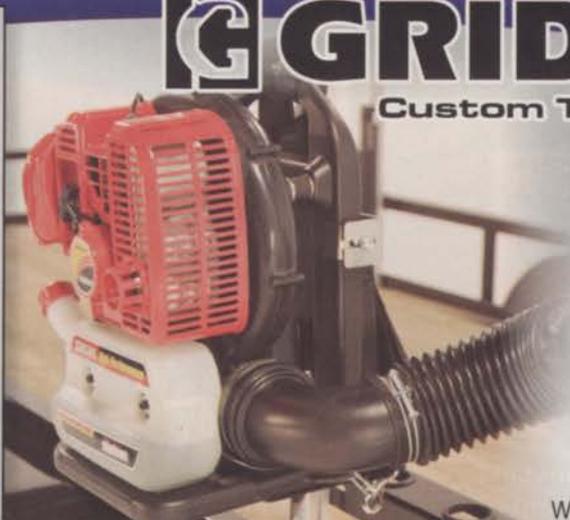
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Talking Tow-Behinds

Two contractors take a different tack when buying trailers. BY CHUCK BOWEN

Open or enclosed, custom or off-the-rack, trailers are integral to any green industry operation. Here's how two companies approach buying.

TRIED AND TRUE. After working at another landscape company for years, Scott Anderson decided to head out on his own. He founded Vivid Scenery in Leesburg, Ind., and one of the first things he purchased was a new, custom trailer from Wells Cargo.

"The first thing I bought, other than a truck, was that enclosed trailer. I ordered that trailer right out of the chute and it was by far the best thing I ever did," Anderson says. "For functionality

and representing a company with an image, it was huge."

And Anderson says he's planning on buying two more trailers soon.

Anderson's current trailer – a long, black model with dark red flowers and the Vivid logo emblazoned on the sides – gets used for most everything the company needs, but the bulk of the work is transporting plant material from suppliers to job sites. To avoid damage to the trees, Anderson had Wells Cargo bump up the ceiling to 6½ feet.

"The majority of it is definitely head-room," he says. "By transporting plant material, we need some decent height in there. I wanted to do it this way be-



cause when we carry ornamental trees we want to be able to bring the material up and set it up straight, so we can put more material in there."

He also added equipment racks inside, and bulked up the torsion axel strength and reinforced the real tailgate to handle the added weight of more trees. His supplier was two hours away, and he wanted to be sure the equipment could handle the strain. "Other trailers we would overload often, especially with

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plant material," he says. "I know we've bent axels."

And while the added height of the trailer adds headroom inside, it also adds display space outside. "We use our trailer a lot for advertising, so I plastered our logo all over the side of it," he says. "Image is everything. If you're

traveling down the road with a moving billboard, it's free advertising."

Vivid, a full-service property management company, does mostly landscape and hardscape installations. The firm has 10 employees and pulls in about \$1.5 million a year.

SIGNS OF SAFETY. Lilburn, Ga.-based Nature Scapes, does mostly lawn maintenance, employs 150 people in season and does \$6-7 million a year. It runs 60

trucks and seven trailers of different designs: tandem-axel models for heavy equipment, vacuum trailers for leaf pickup and enclosed box trailers for floral work. The trailers also come from disparate manufacturers: Track Vac for leaves and Haul Mark for the box models. Now-defunct Mobile Trailer Manufacturing did the flatbeds.

Mike Cates, fleet manager, says he looks for safety when he's buying. And he has a leg up: He spent almost 30 years running a large equipment rental operation in Atlanta.

"It's just the way it's made. If a person was out looking for a trailer, I think it's a roll of the dice. They don't really



TALKING TRAILERS

31% of companies say they will purchase trailers this year. Bigger companies are more likely: Only **25%** of firms making less than \$200,000 a year say they'll buy a tow-behind;

40% of companies making more say they will.

know what to look for," he says.

He recommends contractors examine the trailer's construction. "You look at the way they're built – the welding they use, thickness of materials, what it's made of in the first place," he says.

He also urges contractors to examine a trailer's vital systems. Look for enclosed wiring, sound

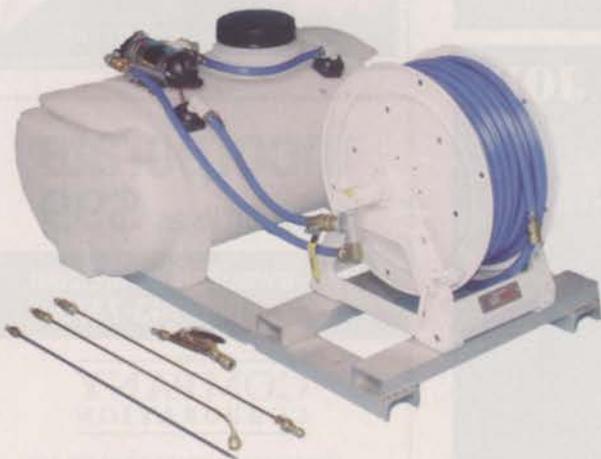
tires and a weight rating suited to your intended payload.

"It's really dangerous out there on the interstate," he says. "If they've got a John Deere backhoe on there and they're hauling butt down 285 ... that trailer could disintegrate at any minute." 

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

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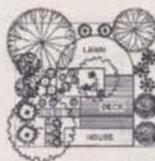
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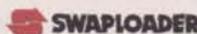
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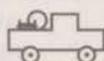
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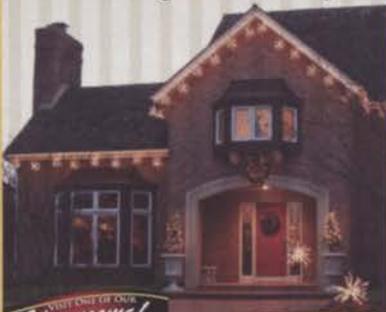


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OCTOBER 09



FAKE OUT

As climate change accelerates, scientists keep coming up with increasingly fanciful schemes to fight it. The latest comes from a study by the Institute of Mechanical Engineers reporting forests of artificial trees could potentially soak up carbon dioxide.

According to the study, 100,000 synthetic trees spread across the U.K. could remove the CO₂ emissions of all cars, trucks and buses in the country. The trees, which are two-thirds as tall as average wind turbines, are coated with materials that absorb CO₂. Once the trees capture carbon dioxide, it can be stored underground in empty oil and natural gas reserves.

The plan isn't cheap or problem-free – each tree costs \$24,313. And what happens to the stored CO₂ in the event of an earthquake?

Can fake trees really be more efficient at capturing CO₂ – and as aesthetically pleasing – than those pesky real trees? Tell us what you think. Send a note to nwnisniewski@gie.net or call 330-523-5382. You can also sound off on our online forum at www.lawnandlandscape.com/forum.



IF YOU'RE HAPPY AND YOU KNOW IT ...

Business owners outrank 10 other occupational groups in overall well-being, based on a September Gallup survey of more than 100,000 working adults. The survey measured contentment, emotional and physical health, job satisfaction and overall life quality.

Business owners may seem unlikely winners, considering half of the nation's full-time small businesses typically fail within five years of start-up (and considering that rate's risen in the recession). They are also more likely to work extremely long hours than people in any other occupation group, other Gallup research shows.

However, "despite the recession, it still pays to be your own boss," says Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallup Poll. The survey, adds John Howard, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, "reaffirms my view that the more control you have over your work, the happier you are."



LESSONS From other industries

Air Support

"Unless all employees are fully engaged and empowered to solve problems, you'll never be able to think your way out of a financial morass," say Cyndi Laurin and Craig Morningstar in their book *The Rudolph Factor*. The authors use the holiday character Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer as an analogy to share lessons The Boeing Co., one of America's oldest aircraft manufacturers, learned about innovation – lessons that can be applied and replicated in any business.

Rudolphs, explain the authors, are the 10 percent of any organization's people who are agents of innovation – people who can shine the light exactly where a company needs to go. Since they tend to identify causes of problems (rather than symptoms), they generate sustainable solutions more quickly and efficiently than their counterparts.

Here are a few of the book's insights:

1. Company leaders must be more participative than autocratic. Once you give up your illusion of control, more ideas will percolate from the ground up.
2. Learn to recognize Rudolphs. They spend time involuntarily thinking about things they are most passionate about; acquiring the capabilities to manifest their thoughts into reality and taking action.
3. Identify and meet your Rudolphs' needs. Boeing provided theirs with an outlet to share ideas, protection from their direct manager and ill-willed peers (because Rudolphs are commonly seen as a threat), permission to take risks and share unconventional ideas, access to collaborative teams including non-Rudolphs, and the ability to execute their ideas.
4. Put systems in place to encourage innovative thinking. Boeing's Creative Edge Program, designed to make the C-17 cargo aircraft more affordable, paid employees for their cost-saving ideas. In return, employees have generated more \$90 million with their ideas over the past decade and continue to impact the bottom line in significant ways. Every year, hundreds of employees contribute their innovative ideas and are awarded from \$50 to \$250 per employee plus 1 to 2 percent of the first year's net savings. "The prospect of earning some extra money tends to sharpen and refine the creative process, which results in better conceived, more workable ideas," Morningstar says.

Rudolphs are already lurking somewhere on the sidelines at your company, waiting for you to find the on switch that illuminates their guiding beacon. That's great news for cash-strapped companies that can ill-afford to hire expensive superstars.

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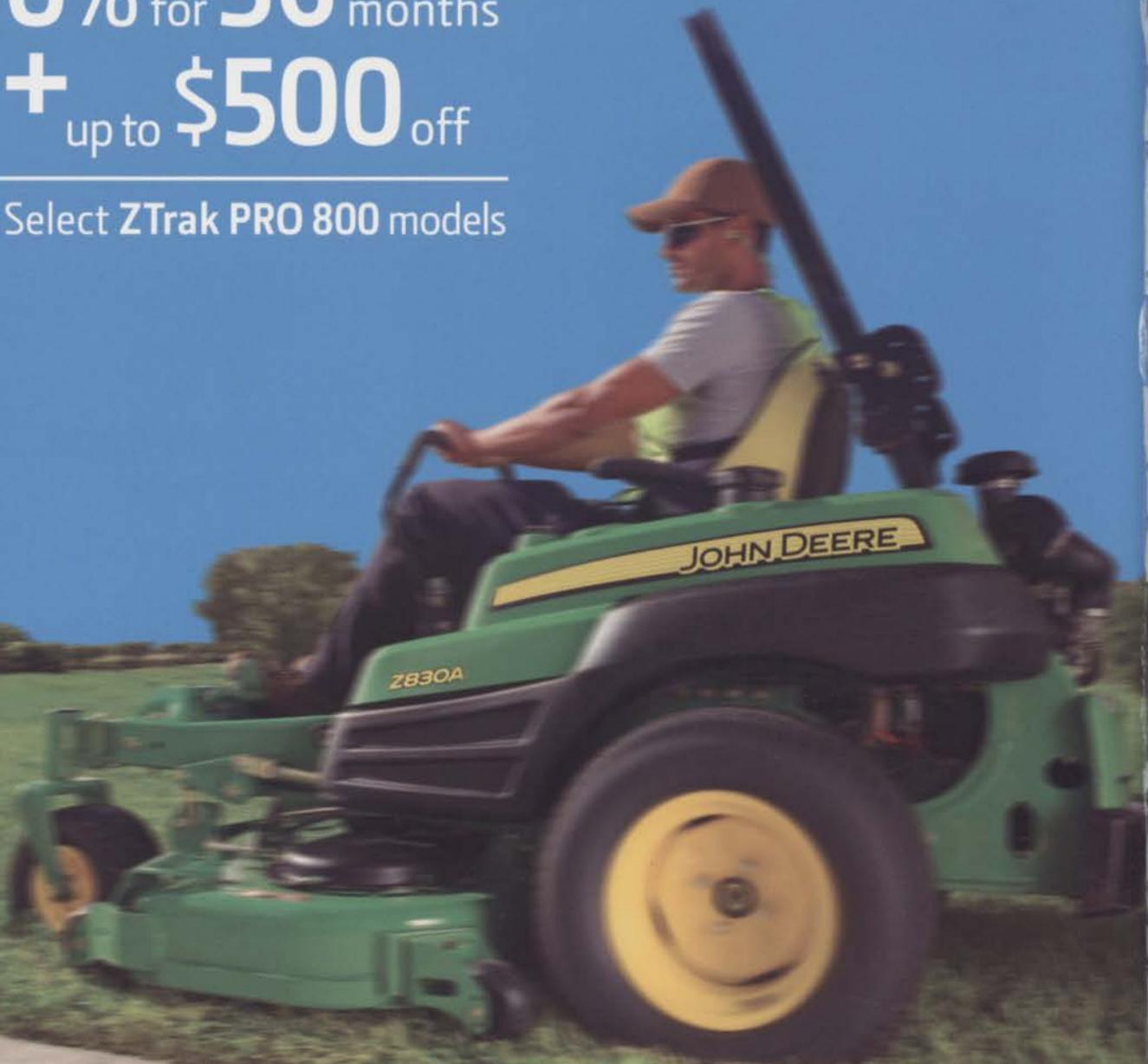
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