

Lawn & Landscape

Business media for landscape contractors

SYNERGY SKILLS

The Bruce Company's 10 departments work independently to get the best results for the company as a whole.

From left: Seth Nicholson, vice president; Jeff Joutras, vice president; Katie Schuhmacher, HR manager; Bliss Nicholson, president and CEO; Dave Weber, vice president

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- Build a solid irrigation division, pg. 104
- Get a handle on hand-held buys, pg. 134

2010
**STATE OF THE
INDUSTRY**
REPORT

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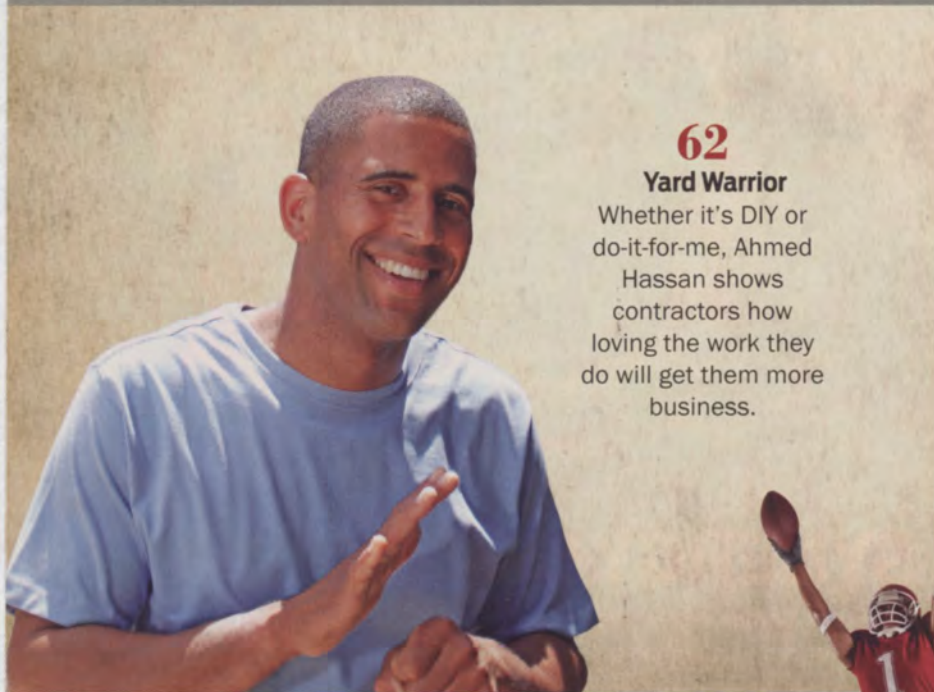
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ONLINE Contents

Check out what's now online from *Lawn & Landscape*.

L&L Twitter feed

Visit www.twitter.com/lawnlandscape to read more, or send a message to @lawnlandscape.

- A European group has ways of making your trees talk: <http://bit.ly/b8687S>
- Look for @jeffkorhan in the pages of L&L starting in October. We're happy to have him on board as our latest columnist.
- Great post on marketing from @jeffkorhan <http://bit.ly/bpthYN>
- Emerald Ash Borer quarantine expanded to all of Ohio. <http://bit.ly/cZ3Qkx>
- Run your company like a four-star restaurant: <http://bit.ly/drYFHB>
- How suburbs might save the world: <http://bit.ly/bLOkfU>
- Listen to @TheBruceCompany CEO talk about managing different divisions successfully. <http://bit.ly/daob1Z>
- Five rules for collecting late payments lawnandlandscape.com/ll-091010-rule
- From @WSJ: top 10 mistakes made by entrepreneurs <http://bit.ly/cs8Vv9>
- Great idea from @martygrunder: Help your employees buy a house. <http://bit.ly/cEmoVh>



Absolute Bliss

Bliss Nicholson, president and CEO of the Bruce Co. of Wisconsin, talks about how he runs 10 departments as individual units, but still gets them to work as a team.



ONLINE POLL

LAST MONTH'S POLL

How will you budget for advertising in 2011?

No idea. It's only September.

26%



We plan to decrease our spending.

11%

We plan to stay about the same.

16%

VISIT www.lawnandlandscape.com/Polls.aspx TO WEIGH IN ON OUR CURRENT POLLS.



Check out the latest videos posted at www.lawnandlandscape.com/multimedia

Rise of Freedom: Trees of Life

Work continues at the World Trade Center memorial site in New York – including the installation this fall of the first of hundreds of trees.



Mike Rowe on the nature of work

What the host of Dirty Jobs learned about the value of work when he circumcised a goat in Colorado.



The surprising science of motivation

Traditional rewards – like, say, more money – aren't always as effective as we think. Dan Pink explains what motivates people to do their best work.



Talking trees

A European group hooked up a 100-year-old tree to a weatherstation, a webcam and a microphone to find out what would a tree have to say if it could talk?



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Some changes around here

Things are starting to look a lot different around here. It's not just the leaves on the trees, but in the printed and digital pages of this magazine. We've been making incremental changes to *Lawn & Landscape* all year, but chose this month to roll out some of the best.

You've already seen our new website, which we continue to load up with daily headlines, multimedia and other content. And as you turn the pages of this issue, you'll see these new sections.

- Business segment icons, pg. 3 – We've added icons on our Table of Contents pages to help you quickly identify which stories apply to you.

- Online Table of Contents, pg. 6 – This new section gives you an overview of the best new content – including headlines, videos and podcasts – on our website and others.

- Industry Insight, pg. 11 – We want to hear from you. This short section poses broad questions about news and events impacting small businesses.

- Good Works, pg. 26 – This section highlights community service projects. Send yours to Associate Editor Brian Horn at bhorn@gie.net.

- Ask the Experts, pg. 30 – Draw on the expertise of PLANET's Trailblazer network to solve problems in your business. Send your questions to llexperts@gie.net.

- Columnists, pg. 34 – We've redesigned and repackaged our columns, adding technology expert Jeff Korhan to our group of industry-leading voices Marty Grunder, Jim Huston and John Ossa. Each month, they'll all offer their perspective on one subject that cuts across the entire green industry.

And you can expect even more from us in the coming months. We're rolling out a standalone product e-newsletter this month, and starting in January, we'll be launching segment-specific e-newsletters focusing on lawn care, design/build, plants and irrigation. If you want to get on those lists, send me an e-mail at cbowen@gie.net.

But even with all these tweaks to *Lawn & Landscape*, one thing hasn't changed: At the end of the day, our goal is still to help you run your business better. The information you find in these pages, in our e-newsletters and on our website is there to help you. So, if there's something that would help you more, let me know. Send me an e-mail or call me at 330-523-5330. – Chuck Bowen



See my video blog at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

Lawn & Landscape

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Does your insurance company think
“photosynthesis” is the latest
feature on a digital camera?

A man in a tropical shirt and hat, holding multiple cameras, standing in a desert landscape with a sign that says "SCENIC OVERLOOK". The man is smiling and holding a camera up to his eye. He has several other cameras hanging from his neck and around his waist. The background shows a desert landscape with a sign that says "SCENIC OVERLOOK" and a cactus.

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Magazine needs balance

I just filled out the August State of the Industry survey request. With all due respect, the questions again skew to be conservatively loaded. Isn't the magazine interested in actually determining the attitude of rank-and-file members, rather than reinforcing a

conservative agenda?

For example, the survey lists an option to check off concern regarding environmental regulations and restrictions but does not show an option for chemical dangers, phosphorus runoff or water quality. If one extreme is listed as an option to note concern

(regulation). Shouldn't the alternative also be listed (environmental degradation)? In addition, an option is noted as to concern about "the present administration." How about, alternatively, support for it?

In the end, the survey appears to be a solicitation to measure sales and cost data and determine equipment needs. It clearly skews right and does not allow for a true measure of the thinking within the landscape community. As an active member of the Lawn & Landscape community, I would like to see more options listed in your surveys to allow a fuller expression of political and environmental orientation. Thank you!

Alan Burke
Landscape architect
Classic Nursery & Landscape Company
Redmond, Wash.

Better all the time

I have been reading *Lawn & Landscape* magazine for years. I have given up on the others. Yours gets better; theirs get worse. I should acknowledge, more frequently, your contribution to our industry. I have been at it for 42 years and have progressed from kid next door, to summer job, to I'm an adult but I have no clue, to IRS problems because I wasn't priced right, to business person, to successful business person. I have gone through all the stages and hope that, somehow, I can speed up the process for some of my peers. I tell people to read everything they can about business starting with the trade magazines. You guys make me look good.

Thanks for your contribution.
Roger Sturgis
Owner/president
Roger B. Sturgis & Associates
Framingham, Mass.

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Industry Insight

Lawn & Landscape wants to know what you think. Send your thoughts on this month's question and the next: What's the best advice – for business or otherwise – you ever received? Send yours to cbowen@gie.net or [@lawnlandscape](https://twitter.com/lawnlandscape).

Q What impact will this fall's mid-term elections have on the green industry?

If there is a shift in power in Congress, and I predict there will be, that will create a glimmer of optimism in the business community. Just a glimmer.

Benton A. Foret, President
Chackbay Nursery and Landscaping
Thibodaux, La.

Elections always create fear of change. Once the election is over, regardless of the outcome, the dust will settle and the financial engines will move on. The economy should continue to grow and spending will be markedly improved in the spring.

Richard Heller, CEO
Greener By Design
New Rochelle, N.Y.

They won't have an immediate effect. We are still 1-2 years away at least from seeing any real help from the economy in helping our businesses move forward. It's related to the demand in new housing, which will create growth in jobs, which creates more spending. P.S. – Being the Republican I am, I'm all for less in taxes, which will allow me to spend more \$\$\$.

Tom Heaviland, President
Heaviland Enterprises
Vista, Calif.

It should balance out the "power" in Washington and allow some things to get done. At some point something

has to give in the economy. The results might – and I say might – give the small business owner some hope about the future and give them the confidence to invest in their entities.

Marty Grunder, President
Grunder Landscaping Co.
Miamisburg, Ohio

They will give us a little more certainty as to what we can expect from Washington regardless of the outcome. People are waiting on the sidelines to see what happens.

Andrew Blanchford, President
Blanchford Landscape Contractors,
Bozeman, Mont.

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Mission Landscape Cos. earns awards for excellence

IRVINE, Calif. – Mission Landscape Cos. received three awards for excellence by its industry peer group, the California Landscape Contractors Association.

Mission received the awards for work on the Metro Pointe property in Costa Mesa, Calif.; the Court of Appeals in Santa Ana, Calif. and Nutrilite, located in Buena Park, Calif.

The Metro Pointe site won the Best Overall Entry in the CLCA Beautification Award category. In addition to the high-end landscape design at the site, Mission Landscape recycles all of the green waste at Metro Pointe.

The Court of Appeals site in Santa Ana won first place

for the Office Category. The company installed a smart-water drip irrigation system and recycles all of the green waste at the site, saving the town money, reducing run-off and not contributing any waste to the local landfill.

Finally, Mission won the Landscape Renovation to an existing commercial site award for its work on the Nutrilite site. Mission provided a design to renovate an existing landscape, and created an ecological outdoor space where employees and visitors could meet. Mission's team-design



Mission Landscape Cos. won accolades from the CLCA for its work at Nutrilite.

aligned with the Nutrilite brand by using green and sustainable principles that reduced water usage, waste and run-off.

All five Mission Landscape Cos. integrated operating

units, which include landscape architecture, landscape development, landscape maintenance, tree care and environmental services were involved in the award winning sites.

New scholarship available for outstanding green industry students

RICHFIELD, Ohio – *Lawn & Landscape* magazine, along with the rest of the GIE Media Horticulture Group, has launched a scholarship program for students studying environmental horticulture and structural pest management.

"Students at the top horticulture programs in the United States are the future of the green industry," says Richard Foster, CEO and founder of GIE Media. "Our contributions – and those from companies and suppliers across the industry – will help support the academic and business education of these students and ensure their continued success."

The program will launch at the GIE+EXPO in Louisville, Ky., this month. Visitors to *Lawn & Landscape's* booth – No. 1084 – can pick up a green wristband that says "Founding Contributor: GIE Media's Horticultural Scholarship Fund, Louisville, KY 2010." For every wristband worn, *Lawn & Landscape* will donate \$1 to the scholarship fund.

If you're spotted wearing your wristband by *Lawn & Landscape's* roving photographer, you could win a hot air balloon rides, a Caribbean cruise or a week for two in Molokai, Hawaii.

Academic scholarships and business internships will be awarded at major industry events throughout 2011.

Scholarship, internship and donation applications can be picked up at *Lawn & Landscape's* booth. Industry companies and suppliers are encouraged to support the scholarship fund; any donations will be matched by *Lawn & Landscape*.

For more information, contact Editor Chuck Bowen at cbowen@gie.net or 330-523-5330.



Boss Snowplow launches Snowcare for Troops

IRON MOUNTAIN, Mich. – This year marks the nine-year anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks and the start of the War on Terror.

Nearly a decade later, Americans are still very much engaged in this conflict, and we continue to call upon the courage and commitment of citizen soldiers – regular, hard-working people – to do their duty and preserve our safety and freedom. And as the years have worn on, the daily dispatches from the frontlines in Iraq and Afghanistan have moved from being headline news to, many times, only brief mentions and footnotes in our daily lives.

As a way to help the families of those in the armed forces serving overseas, Boss Snowplow, in partnership with Project Evergreen, has launched SnowCare for Troops.

The SnowCare for Troops program brings together snowplow professionals and volunteers to provide free snow removal services for military families with a spouse or family member serving in our armed forces. For the professional snow removal industry, SnowCare for Troops is a way the industry can say thank you to our military personnel and their families.

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NEWS ///

probably already aware of Project Evergreen's four-year-old GreenCare for Troops initiative. That program, which serves as the template for SnowCare for Troops, has more than 10,000 military families in its database and is supported by nearly 3,000 green industry professionals and volunteers.

Lawn & Landscape and its sister publication, GIE Media's Snow magazine, are asking snow fighters to sign on as goodwill ambassadors in their communities and lend a helping hand – or plow – this winter.

Contractors can adopt military families locally by providing snow removal services throughout the winter; loan snow removal equipment to volunteers or groups; or donate money, transportation or gas cards to offset snow removal and maintenance costs.

For more information on how you can get involved with SnowCare for Troops, check out projectevergreen.com or www.bosspow.com/snowcarefortroops or call 888-611-2956.

Duo wins award for pest newsletter

ITHACA, N.Y. – Dawn Dailey O'Brien and George Hudler won an Excellence in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Award from the New York State IPM Program for their newsletter, "Branching Out," an IPM newsletter used by arborists, landscapers and growers.

"Branching Out" connects the research community with landscape professionals, supplying information to keep ornamental trees and shrubs from being ruined by insects or diseases. The newsletter not only helps arborists and landscapers identify pests, but also predicts their arrival in locations across the state. Since many insects can only be kept in check when very small, timing of when to take action is critical.



George Hudler and Dawn O'Brien

"We not only provide details of when to look and potentially treat problems, but when the window of opportunity has passed," says Hudler, chair of the department of plant pathology and director of the Northeast Plant Diagnostic Network.

O'Brien and Hudler focus on other tenets of IPM too. Selecting the optimal site for plants, using resistant varieties and paying close attention to soil health and fertility are all critical tools. Naturally occurring predators can keep destructive insects at bay, and "Branching Out" includes strategies to protect and maximize the benefits from these free, safe and battle-ready allies.

Hudler says "Branching Out" helps customers understand that some pests and pathogens, while present, pose no threat. In these cases, treatments are not required.

There is never a dull moment for O'Brien, an extension

plant pathologist. She fills the role of writer, editor, layout designer, webmaster and, most recently, videographer for "Branching Out."

To read the newsletter, go to branchingout.cornell.edu.

Ambius wins big at plantscape banquet

BUFFALO GROVE, Ill. – Ambius received eight awards at the 18th annual PIA Interior Plantscape Hall of Fame and Awards Banquet.

The awards celebrated Ambius's work for a diverse array of clients which included malls, commercial buildings, cruise ships and hospitals.

Mark Hawry accepted four awards on behalf of the Ambius National Projects Team, bringing the best of land to sea with Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas' Central Park initiative which showcases a design in which the center of the ship opens to the sky and features tropical grounds. Hawry accepted three Award of Excellence citations for Oasis of the Seas, including oversight of the Exterior Garden, the installation of Central Park and the design and provisioning of the ships' silk replica and preserved foliage. Central Park on Oasis of the



Laura Burns Lambert was honored for her work at San Francisco's Northgate Mall.

Seas also picked up the Judge's Award, which was awarded for the most outstanding overall project in 2010.

Jon LaDow's work at San Francisco's Tishman-Speyer building was recognized as an outstanding Holiday Display.

A silk replica and preserved foliage display, managed by David Baughman, at the St. Joseph's Hospital in Lutz, Fla. received an Award of Merit. An additional Award of Merit was given to Laura Burns Lambert's silk replica installation at San Francisco's Northgate Mall.

Chris Karl's design picked up an Award of Excellence for his horticultural work in the Beckman Coulter lobby.

"Our talented team consistently demonstrates exceptionally high standards of excellence and skill in the innovative design and execution of landscaped installations," said Jeff Mariola, divisional managing director for Ambius.

You can read more about the Central Park project and watch parts of the installation at www.lawnandlandscape.com.



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FMC receives federal registration for SquareOne

PHILADELPHIA – SquareOne herbicide has been registered by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for use on lawns, golf courses, sod farms and athletic fields.

SquareOne herbicide can be applied just one day before seeding or as early as seven days after emergence on most cool- and warm-season grasses. This means weed populations are reduced from the start, allowing for maximum turf density with fewer herbicide applications or the need to reseed the fol-

lowing spring, the company says.

"Many herbicides have restrictions for use around seeding, typically seven to 30 days prior to seeding or 30 days or three mowings after emergence. SquareOne shortens this window significantly, allowing turf professionals to apply up to one day before seeding or as early as seven days after emergence," said Adam Manwarren, FMC product manager for turf and ornamental products. "This means turf will grow in faster and healthier, and renovations have a better chance of success."

Designed for newly seeded turf, including interseeding and overseeding, SquareOne is a patent-pending dispersible granule formulation that features a dual-action combination of active ingredients that works primarily through foliar contact and uptake, but also continues to hold back weed competition until the new turf is established.

A non-ionic surfactant is recommended, but not required. It is labeled for crabgrass and many small broadleaf weeds, and can be used in both spring and fall turf projects on lawns, athletic fields, sod farms and golf courses.

SquareOne will be available from distributors as soon as state registrations are received. The product will be sold in a one-acre package with a measuring device that assists with proper measurement for small or large application turf renovation projects.

Residex and Turfgrass to join forces by December

ROSELLE, N.J. and NOVI, Mich. – Residex, a structural pest supply distributor based in Roselle, N.J., and Turfgrass Inc., a distributor of turf and ornamental products and services based in Novi, Mich., announced plans to merge in late September.

The distributors reported they have reached an agreement in principle and plan to conclude the merger by Dec. 1. The new company will operate under both the Turfgrass and Residex names using all the same facilities, personnel and operations of each company.

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TREES, ORNAMENTAL & BEDDING PLANT EDITORIAL SUPPLEMENT

OCTOBER

2010 VOL. 1, ISSUE 8

The editors at *Lawn & Landscape* and its sister publications – *Greenhouse Management & Production*, *Nursery Management & Production* and *Garden Center* magazines – have teamed up to bring you the latest installment of our trees, ornamental and bedding plant editorial supplement. It's specifically designed for design/build contractors looking for the latest plant varieties, hardscape trends and best practices across the entire green industry.



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- 10 Take another look at coneflowers**
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Grower Insight

Landscape thoughts for lean times

By Karen Kemp-Dockstader

Budgets may be tight and labor stretched thin, but the green industry continues to persevere and achieve success thanks to creative thinking. The creative-minded landscape contractor suggests plants that give the customer more “bang for her buck.” Installing low-maintenance cultivars that are manageable and enjoyable, with materials that provide multiple seasons of landscape interest and use, helps fulfill consumer demand.

An example: The USDA introduction *Vaccinium* ‘Pink Lemonade,’ is an excellent plant that offers multi-seasonal interest and provides additional consumer uses.

Not only does this energetic cross between *Vaccinium corymbosum* (highbush) and *ashei* (rabbiteye) make an excellent hedge or foundation planting, it produces luscious pink berries – making this selection a wonderful landscape feature, as well as a culinary delight. For that matter, any of the traditionally fruiting *Vaccinium* provides excellent features in the landscape or small garden because the berry harvest is followed by a fall color that glows in tones of peach, apricot and red. *Vaccinium*, too, serves as a great alternative for the invasive *Euonymus alatus compacta* in terms of both performance and seasonal appeal.

PLANTS FOR TODAY’S NEEDS. Think in terms of small, manageable spaces with textures, and colors, woven into the fabric of the landscape. Just because the landscape job is smaller doesn’t mean you have to compromise on quality. In fact, higher quality is greatly appreciated, even studied, in small spaces. Integration of color and texture increases this interest value. Use of grasses, or grass-like growers – *Carex*, *Festuca*, *Hakonechloa*, *Helictotrichon* and *Miscanthus* – contrast nicely with ferns and hostas.

KICK START YOUR CREATIVITY. With so many choices, how do you get the creative juices flowing?

Use trade magazines as idea factories. Take a few moments to sift through the information and tear out the pertinent information relating to the landscapes you build. Pay particular attention to phrases like “low maintenance,” “heat tolerant” and “drought resistant.”

Look at the USDA zone range of the plants you may include in your installation. Are you exploring all your options?

Attend industry trade shows, nursery tours or join a local nursery group. Take time to visit with the growers and nursery owners asking them what plants are “good production plants.” Ask them which plants are the most heat tolerant, cold hardy or disease resistant.

And always consider your audience: A happy customer is your best advertisement, ever. 🌱

The author is the sales and marketing director for Briggs Plant Propagators.

SHRUBS AND STAYCATIONS

**Jamie
Jamison Jr.**

President, Brandywine Nurseries, Wilmington, Del.

Business split:

50 percent landscape installation; 30 percent residential and commercial maintenance; 20 percent site work (environmental restoration, erosion control, etc.)

Number of employees:

30 year round

Annual revenue:

\$1.5 million

Typical annual spend on plant materials:

\$300,000-\$400,000

What plants are you most commonly installing?

Whatever is specked, that's what we install. So it's a lot of *Ilex glabras*, fothergillas and a lot of freaking liriopse. We still use a fair amount of Leylands and do a lot of spiraeas. Because of last winter with all the cold and snow we're doing a lot of shrub replacements in 2010. And people are still spending money on color replacements.

Since people are staying home more on their 'staycations,' we're seeing people spending money to upgrade their patios and backyards. Stuff like that.

Where do you buy your plants?

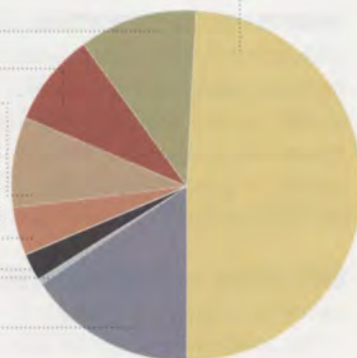
Mainly growers within a 50-mile radius. We'll have shipments of trees delivered, otherwise we'll drive out and pick up what we need.

Why do you buy them there?

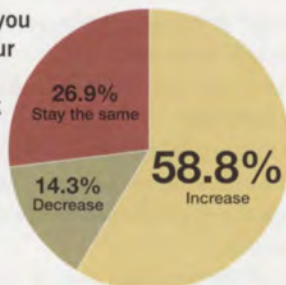
We literally have hundreds of good nursery growers within that 50-mile radius in Delaware, New Jersey and Maryland. We have long-term relationships with all of them. Each has specific products they do really well and we know where to go to get what we need.

Please indicate your total annual budget for flowering plants.

Less than \$20,000 = 49.2%
\$20,000 to \$24,999 = 11%
\$25,000 to \$29,999 = 8.5%
\$30,000 to \$34,999 = 8.5%
\$35,000 to \$39,999 = 4.2%
\$40,000 to \$44,999 = 2.5%
\$45,000 to \$49,999 = 0.8%
\$50,000 or more = 15.3%

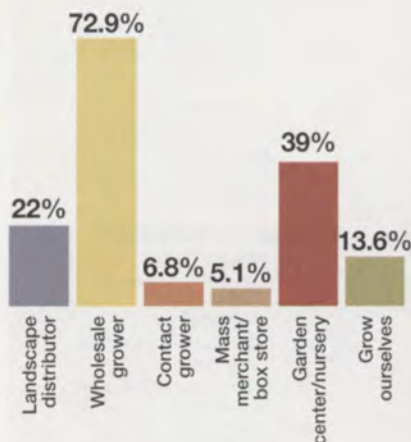


In 2010, do you anticipate your business will (please check one of the following):



Editors' note: *Lawn & Landscape* readers spend more than \$3 billion every year on plant materials – everything from seasonal color change-outs to giant tropical trees. Each month, we catch up with some of the biggest companies in the industry to ask them what plants they like to buy, what producers they work with and what makes them go back to those same suppliers year after year.

Where do you typically buy flowering plants for your projects?



A new spin on a dependable friend

Ron Cramer and the breeding team at Sakata Ornamentals have introduced genetics that offer a different take on traditional bedding plants.

by Sarah Martinez

Landscape annuals, particularly those that end up in public displays, have to stand up to the elements. Breeders are constantly working to develop plants that offer lasting beauty and minimal impact for a contractor's bottom line.

And, every once in a while, they make a real breakthrough. That's certainly the case for SunPatiens, a plant that has taken the world by storm. Finally, the look and form of impatiens can be had in sunny locations – something previously unheard of.

European countries have used SunPatiens in large-scale installations for years. But this unique genus is somewhat new to the landscape market here in the states. While gardeners throughout North America are familiar with SunPatiens, landscapers are just now realizing the benefits of this unusual genus. *Lawn & Landscape* recently spoke with Ron Cramer, global ornamental marketing manager for

Sakata Ornamentals, about the advent of SunPatiens.

Q: How are SunPatiens different from other impatiens?

A: It has to do with climate tolerance. SunPatiens can handle a broad range of weather beautifully: From cool temperatures to extreme sun and humidity. That's why they offer such a winning opportunity for landscaping contractors – they reduce the need for frequent change-outs. SunPatiens will take a cool spring, then the heat and humidity of summer, and will last through several light frosts when cooler temperatures return in autumn. While SunPatiens do tolerate a wide range of temperatures, regular irrigation is needed in the landscape for the plants to look their best. When compared to traditional New Guinea Impatiens a landscaper would need fewer plants due to the size differential between the two – a cost savings in

the long run.

Q: How did this genus evolve?

A: The initial introduction of SunPatiens featured only the vigorous series – with each plant having the ability to reach over 4 feet in the landscape. This offered a massive burst of color – but not many home gardens or landscape installations have the room for plants this large. Our initial evaluation did not give us the nice, tidy plants gardeners are looking for. But further testing showed the plant's ability to tolerate extreme heat, sun and humidity, so we continued to examine its merits.

Back in 2004 we tested SunPatiens at the University of Georgia. The plants survived through the heat, hot sun and not only one, but four hurricanes – including Ivan. The day after each hurricane the plants just stood back up, and then lasted through two or three light frosts. That was when we knew we had a unique plant in our midst.

Q: Where have the plants been trialed?

A: Probably our most well-known installation is at the Dallas Arboretum. Jimmy Turner, director of research, wrote "SunPatiens not only survived the heat, but they looked good doing it! Last summer was brutal to many plants in our trial garden. Matter of fact, I had a hard time keeping regular impatiens alive in the shade last year, but the SunPatiens just kept on growing and blooming." 🌱



Ron Cramer

OTHER INNOVATIVE PLANTS

The team at Sakata has also worked to improve other bedding plant favorites: pansies and zinnias. The breeders have focused on creating dependable and drought-tolerant selections. Majestic Giant II pansies, for example, are among the longest lasting cool weather annuals. This series' unique genetics allows this plant to bloom through winter and into late spring in several parts of the country.

Profusion zinnias offer improvements for a warm-weather staple. Breeders have created a plant that doesn't require deadheading – a canopy of new flowers rises above spent blooms. Profusion also has strong disease tolerance to *Alternaria* and powdery mildew, unlike other zinnias.





1 A tempting walkway meanders through perennial gardens at Platt Hill Nursery in Illinois.

2 Wyvale in the UK has entire landscape vignettes set up to inspire ideas.

KNOW IT AND **SHOW IT**

Looking for the ultimate sales tool? Learn why you need to be more like a garden showroom than an operations yard.

It was 7 p.m. and our intrepid landscape designer had just completed a 45-minute presentation at the kitchen table of a 30-something couple. Her plans and elevation sketches were spread out across the table with a pile of catalogs from nurseries and stone companies, together with photographs of her work and the company's showpiece client projects.

The couple was trying hard to listen and follow her explanations but with a 12-hour day behind them and a restless toddler to pacify, it wasn't easy.

The husband, who had been checking his BlackBerry every few minutes, summed up their frustration: "I think we both like your ideas. And the mod-

ern style I think you're describing is what we're looking for. You obviously know what you are talking about. But some of this is lost on me without real examples of the plants and other things you mentioned. I'm sorry I can't remember any of their names even now. Doesn't your company have a retail store, too? I've driven past it but never stopped there. Don't they have examples of your work laid out for you to talk us through it?"

With an embarrassing shrug the designer said, "That would be a great idea, but I'm afraid they don't do that. I don't think any companies in town do that."

And so goes the landscape design/

build-garden center predicament. Both industries have very visual products that take time, space, coordination and lots of information to sell. But, because of our own agendas and history, they are usually shown in catalogs or displayed like cans of soup in a supermarket.

SEPARATION ANXIETY. "Landscaping" has had an on-off relationship with garden retailing for many years. Initially, both disciplines were run by one company on the same site with the same people. Somewhere along the line most owners found they made more money and had less stress by running the two separately.



3 Wentworth Nursery in Charlotte Hall, Md., uses its vehicles to cross-market its services.



4 Canadale Nursery in Ontario uses faux house facades to spawn ideas.

This seemed to suit both divisions, with very different operations, staff, products and needs. To this day, especially in the West, many large and successful garden centers do not have an in-house design/build landscape department. They simply refer such work to other local companies. The fact is that it's quite difficult to be equally successful at design/build and retailing.

When new nursery companies start up, they usually embrace both disciplines to reach as many consumers as possible. But, eventually, things tend to separate out as already described. So, in order to have a logical, efficient green-industry company, we keep retail and landscape apart – often to the detriment of the consumers and our bottom lines.

Many readers know what I'm talking about when both divisions share a site and pull from a joint inventory. ("Yesterday those retail guys sold half of those great spirea I

just got in for the Herberg job.") On the flipside, there are customers who spend \$20,000 with a company's landscape division but don't shop at the garden center because the retail staff doesn't recognize them as good customers, or possess the same vision of their property that their landscape designer did.

LET'S END THE OBSTACLE COURSE.

As business from baby boomers declines, the next generations sees green industry companies as just another place to get help with a project. More and more consumers view us in the same light as the kitchen or bathroom contractors they use. If you go to a home improvement store you see the products used in vignettes to show customers how their new bathroom could look.

So why don't landscape companies have a large, living showroom of ideas? Why do garden centers, even those owned by someone who also owns a

landscape company, make shopping such an obstacle course with plants lined up like soldiers on parade? Why do we make consumers figure it out from a multitude of growers' labels, catalogs and signs?

Many landscape designers would argue that this is a personal-connection industry where, for the amount of money consumers are investing, they want the one-on-one salesperson to hold their hand as they make their decisions. No one is arguing that fact. A similar response comes from garden center owners who insist that their well-qualified and experienced sales staff is their biggest defense against the big box stores.

Laying out the plants as annuals, perennials, shrubs and so on (or worse, alphabetically by botanical name) appeals to employees (and designers sometimes!) because it makes it easy to find items.

For knowledgeable hobbyist customers this was not a big problem,



5 Otten Brothers in Minnesota has crafted a patio focus in the outside sales area.



6 Canadale Nursery in Ontario creates colorful backyard scenes.



7 Webb's in the UK has different landscape materials on display.

but now with the next generation it is going to be a *very big* problem unless we show the public our ideas and simulations. With a whole new demographic, the conventional landscape yard/office or garden center is going to have to adapt to remain relevant, or else. After all, many of the younger generation members were raised at Ikea, where vignette displays, a great system of organization and easy shopping experience prevail.

SHOW, DON'T TELL. To more easily close sales, landscape companies will either have to "rent" space in a retail facility, such as a garden center or nursery, or install their own showroom away from the dust and noise of the landscape yard.

What's it going to take to reach the next generation of consumers? Nothing less than complete landscape-size vignettes. Not just a few vendor-sponsored brick patios or retaining walls, but a whole outdoor showroom of patio, decks, balconies, herb gardens, rose gardens, cutting gardens, play areas, escape areas, exercise areas, deep tranquil shade, hot tropical sun, screening nosy neighbors, drowning out the neighbor's music and countless other suggestions. Why not use some of the space currently occupied by the mulch pile and delivery trucks as a showroom for browsing customers waiting for their appointment?

Whether it is achieved by garden centers leasing or allocating space to a landscape division or by landscapers establishing their own showroom in a retail facility, the way forward must surely be to combine both disciplines at the consumer touch-point even if the operations arising from the sale are run quite differently.

The good news is that the opportunities are huge. Even in a down economy, surveys indicate that the "do it for me" market is still alive, not to mention the many small DIY projects that homeowners are constantly shopping for.

Just think how much more business companies could land if design/build firms could combine with garden centers to adapt even a small part of the retail space from today's warehouse concept to a showroom of end-results. So let's see a reconnection of design/build and retail focused on customer success, not separated for our own efficiencies. It is there for the taking! 🌱

The author is a green industry consultant specializing in garden retail.



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By Jeanne Frett

Coneflowers

Old-time species and new hybrids make exceptional garden perennials.

Until about five years ago, most coneflowers found in gardens were selections of *Echinacea purpurea* and were purple, pink or white.

Recent breakthroughs in breeding have introduced an exciting palette of colors, sizes and garden performance to this group of perennials.

This breeding has unleashed an imaginative array of cultivar names – “Fragrant Angel,” “Fatal Attraction,” “Twilight” and “Coconut Lime” to tempt the gardening public.

Progress is occurring at such a rapid pace that cultivars considered novel in color, size or form several years ago, are now being overshadowed or replaced by the newest introductions. Contractors will see additional innovation on the horizon based on this wave of new introductions.

The new hybrid coneflowers appear to perform best in full sun and well-drained, moderately fertile soil that is slightly acid to slightly alkaline (pH 6 to pH 8).

IN THE LANDSCAPE. Although generally problem free, coneflowers are susceptible to aster yellows, a disease that causes distorted growth and deformed flowers. It is spread by the aster leafhopper and is best managed by promptly removing and discarding the infected plants.

Coneflower’s qualities make them exceptional garden perennials include large, daisylike flowers, ease of cultivation, long bloom period, drought and heat tolerance, and attractiveness to butterflies and bees. They are valuable additions to the intimate city garden, mixed perennial border or naturalistic country meadow.

Some excellent garden companions include tickseed (*Coreopsis verticillata*), early goldenrod (*Solidago juncea*), sweet goldenrod (*Solidago odora*), spike gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*), garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), scarlet beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), Joepye-weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida*), but-

terfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Stoke’s aster (*Stokesia laevis*) and grasses such as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*).

HYBRIDIZATION AND SELECTION.

The discovery that coneflower species readily hybridize when brought into cultivation resulted in new cultivars with an exciting range of variation. The inclusion of the only yellow flowered species, *E. paradoxa*, in breeding programs has resulted in hybrids that have dramatically broadened the color range available to gardeners. New cultivars display petals in a tantalizing array of colors including butter yellow, gold, orange, mango, salmon, rose red and even lime green.

A number of hybridizers have concentrated their efforts on selections from the white and magenta-purple flowered *E. purpurea*. These selections have resulted in more compact, superior branching plants, selections with creamy-white variegated leaves and plants with double, pompom flowers. Selections have also been made for width, length and degree of overlapping petals, horizontally held petals, number of petals, stem color ranging from typically green to purple-black and cone color from yellowish orange and green to reddish black.

EVALUATIONS. Mt. Cuba Center, located near Wilmington, Del., (USDA Hardiness Zone 7A/6B) conducted a three-year evaluation project (2007-2009) involving five species and 43 cultivars of coneflowers to determine their desirability for garden use in the mid-Atlantic region based on their

Mt. Cuba Center trialed coneflowers for three years.



MT. CUBA CENTER

A) *Echinacea* Pixie Meadowbrite. B) *E. purpurea* 'Coconut Lime' received high ratings at the trial in the uniquely shaped flowers category. C) *Echinacea* 'Sunrise' is a hybrid that performed well in the yellow category. D) *E. purpurea* 'Pica Bella'



ornamental attributes, adaptation to environmental conditions and resistance to insects and disease. The goal was to recommend superior taxa based on the following observations: floral display (flower color, inflorescence size, flower coverage, bloom period); habit (height, width, foliage quality, habit quality – need for staking or pinching); winter hardiness, cultural adaptability; and disease and pest resistance.

Maintenance included watering to establish the plants and as needed in times of drought, periodic weeding, and minimal dead-heading and staking. The beds were not fertilized, pesticides were not applied and the plants were given no winter protection.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED PLANTS.

Echinacea 'CBG Cone 2' Pixie Meadowbrite is a charming, extremely floriferous, compact selection that grows approximately 22 inches tall and 24 inches wide. The 2½- to 2¾-inch wide, flat-petaled flowers are a vibrant rosy-pink and contrast nicely with the showy reddish-brown cone.

It is hardy, drought tolerant, long-lived, disease and pest resistant, has a

compact, clumping habit and doesn't need staking. It offers a striking floral display and has a pleasant fragrance.

E. purpurea 'Pica Bella' has an upright, bushy habit growing approximately 24-33 inches tall and equally as wide. The clean, medium green, lanceolate foliage remains full at the base and drapes the stems.

Flowers are abundantly produced on dark, multi-branched stems. The vivid pinkish-magenta flowers are 3½-4 inches wide, and the plump, broadly conical cones are vibrant orange with each bristle tip appearing to have been dipped in red paint.

It has a sturdy, vase-shaped habit and is vigorous and needs no staking. It is a prolific bloomer; uniquely shaped and vividly colored flowers. It is disease and pest resistant, and tolerant of drought and heat.

E. purpurea Elton Knight is an upright plant growing 30 inches tall and 24 inches wide. The clean, dark-green foliage is held horizontally and densely arranged throughout the plant, giving it a busy habit.

Flowers are brilliant magenta, 4 inches wide with attractively broad petals held horizontally to just below,

and gently overlapping. The reddish-orange cone provides a striking contrast to the vibrantly colored petals.

It has a great compact, upright habit. No staking is required. It has multi-branched plants, with abundant blooms above foliage. It is disease and pest resistant.

E. purpurea Fatal Attraction is statuesque with an upright, columnar habit growing approximately 36 inches tall and 30 inches wide. This selection displays 3- to 3½-inch wide, vivid purplish-pink flowers atop deep-burgundy to nearly black stems.

The petals are held slightly above horizontal and contrasts with the reddish-orange cone. The plant has floriferous, eye-catching flower color. Flowers are held well above the foliage and have a sturdy, tight habit. It needs no staking, and is pest and disease resistant. 🌱

Jeanne Frett is the horticultural research manager at the Mt. Cuba Center in Greenville, Del.

Not satisfied? Learn about more coneflower varieties at www.lawnandlandscape.com. Just search for "coneflowers."

Sneak peek: Shrubs

Here's a sampling of plants that will garner plenty of oohs and ahs at wholesale and retail nurseries next year.

Blue Balloon bluebeard

The growth habit of Monrovia's new bluebeard (*Caryopteris* × *clandonensis* 'Korball') is spherical, like a blue balloon, when in full bloom. The deep blue flowers appear from August through September and are attractive to butterflies and bumblebees. The leaves, which are dark green with silvery hairs beneath, emit a lavender fragrance. Blue Balloon grows best in fertile, well-drained soil and full sun. It's hardy in Zones 6-9. www.monrovia.com



Endless Summer Bella Anna hydrangea

Bella Anna features large pink mophead flowers. This hardy, reliable hydrangea from Bailey Nurseries keeps blooming from early summer through fall. Breeder Michael Dirr and his team at Plant Introductions selected Bella Anna, which grows 3 feet high and wide. In the landscape, use as a standalone plant, or plant in groups for a stunning back border. It grows best in full sun to part shade and is hardy in Zones 3-9. www.baileynurseries.com





Little Lime hydrangea

Proven Winners ColorChoice released Little Lime, a dwarf form of 'Limelight.' It's one-third of the size of traditional hardy hydrangeas, growing 36-60 inches high. Little Lime's flowers open soft green in summer and turn pink and burgundy in the fall. It blooms on new wood, and grows best in full sun or part shade. It's hardy in Zones 3-9. www.provenwinners.com



Micron Holly dwarf yaupon holly

Garden Debut's Micron Holly is much more compact, growing to 20-30 inches high and 3 feet wide. It also has smaller leaves than the typical dwarf yaupon. It's hardy in Zones 5-7. It grows well in full sun to shade and in wet or dry soils. Use this deer-resistant variety as a small hedge, as foundation plantings or massed on slopes. www.gardendebut.com



Orange Rocket barberry

PlantHaven's new barberry has been trialed extensively throughout the U.S. with excellent results in all climate zones. Orange Rocket features vibrant, coral-orange new foliage that ages to mid-green. Grow it in full sun for the best foliage color. It has an unusual tight, columnar habit and grows to 4 feet tall at maturity. This rust-resistant variety is hardy to Zone 5 and is drought tolerant once established. Orange Rocket was bred by Michal Andrusiv from the Czech Republic. www.planthaven.com

By Sarah Martinez

DIY landscaping is on the rise

Results from the latest National Gardening Association survey paint a challenging picture for residential landscape contractors.

In late summer, National Gardening Association released findings from two national surveys offering insight on the lawn and garden market. Results show that more homeowners are foregoing professional services, and are choosing to take on lawns themselves.

According to NGA, roughly 1 out of 5 households nationwide spent

more time caring for their lawns and gardens last year and 16 percent less cash than in previous years.

'EDIBLES' POPULAR. Food gardening was the only category of activity that saw a significant increase in household participation and spending last year. Participation in food gardening increased by 5 million

The most important reasons why people say they participate in do-it-yourself lawn and garden activities include:

Reason	Lawn & Garden Households
To maintain the appearance of my property	64%
To improve the appearance of my property	63%
To save money by doing more for myself	57%
To enjoy the activity	57%
To grow fresh and nutritious food	48%
For exercise	45%
To make my outdoor space more livable	44%
To be more self-reliant	32%

households or 14 percent, to 41 million households last year from 36 million households the previous year. The total spent on food gardening increased by \$520 million or 21 percent, to \$2.989 billion last year from \$2.469 the previous year.

APPEAL OF DIY. These results, found in the Hard Times Lawn & Garden Survey and 2010 National Gardening Survey, show how more Americans are tightening their belts and opting to do their own lawn and garden maintenance, says Mike Metallo, president of NGA.

"It makes perfect sense that people are spending more time on do-it-yourself lawn and garden activities during this great recession because it's a simple and direct way homeowners can maintain and improve the appearance of their property and save money by doing more for themselves." Metallo goes on to say that it's clear that food garden-

ing is a significant priority for many people because health and nutrition, along with food safety, are on the forefront of their minds.

According to NGA's 2010 National Gardening Survey, household participation in all types of do-it-yourself lawn and garden activities increased by 2 million households last year, to 83 million households. The average annual amount spent per household on all lawn and garden activities decreased by \$81 from \$444 to \$363. And the total amount spent on all lawn and garden activities decreased by 16 percent to \$30.121 billion last year from \$36.060 billion the previous year.

"While the amount consumers spent on their lawns and gardens was down a little, it did not approach the level of the decline seen in their discretionary spending, which is good news," says Bruce Butterfield, NGA research director.

The author is managing editor of Garden Center magazine.

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PLANT SNAPSHOT

NAME: *Amsonia hubrichtii*

DESCRIPTION: This bushy plant produces light blue star-shaped flowers and fine, feathery ¾-inch long foliage. In the fall, leaves turn a golden yellow.

LANDSCAPE USES: Specimen, en masse or as a backdrop for fall-blooming perennials.

HARDINESS: USDA Hardiness Zones 4-9.

Amsonia hubrichtii

Blue flowers in spring and yellow fall foliage provide multi-season interest.

A*msonia hubrichtii* (blue star) is the Perennial Plant Association's 2011 Perennial Plant of the Year. Native to central Arkansas, the plant produces soft, alternate needlelike green leaves during the spring and summer. During the fall the leaves turn a bright golden yellow. In April and May plants produce 2-to 3-inch clusters of soft blue, ½-inch star-shaped flowers on 3-foot tall stems.

Plants grow to 3 feet tall and wide in the landscape. The plant's bright-yellow foliage makes it a good backdrop for fall-blooming perennials. It is hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 4-9.

This southern native's leaves line the stems like bottle brushes. Surprisingly, they are soft as silk to the touch. After flowering, it quickly grows to reach a height of about 3 feet.

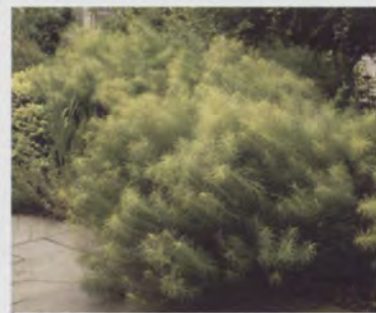
Amsonia adds a billowy, finely textured element to the landscape. It grows into a dense mass, much like a small shrub.

The cool blue flowers can be useful in toning down adjacent flower colors.

Arguably the best feature of blue star is



Amsonia hubrichtii produces 2-to 3-inch clusters of soft blue, ½-inch star-shaped flowers. Bottom: *Amsonia hubrichtii*, spring foliage.



its fall color; the entire plant turns a stunning shade of golden yellow.

Amsonia hubrichtii is native to fields and meadows in the Midwest. It can be found growing naturally in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri.

IN THE LANDSCAPE. *Amsonia* thrives in most gardens with little care. It is low maintenance and easy to grow. Plant it in full sun or partial shade and moist soil of average fertility. If grown in too much shade or very rich soil, its habit will be open and floppy.

This plant grows fairly large but it will not need to be divided for many years. Cutting the stems back to within 6-8 inches off the ground after flowering will result in fuller growth.

University of Georgia horticulture professor Allan Armitage says the plant makes an outstanding display, particularly in the fall when the leaves turn a golden yellow color.

The only pest concerns are *Mycosphaerella* leaf spot and rusts. 🌿

WALTERS GARDENS



Amsonia hubrichtii, fall foliage

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Lawn & Landscape

INSIDE

Increase crew efficiency pg. 58

Are you smarter than a landscape student? pg. 60

7 tips to hire better people pg. 62



In the combined company, Chris Donaghy will serve as CEO, and Todd Griebel will serve as president.

Valent unveils 2011 Early Order Program

WALNUT CREEK, Calif. – Ornamental growers, lawn care operators (LCOs) and arborists looking to get a jump on next year and get more mileage from their chemical budgets can do both with the 2011 Early Order Program (EOP) from Valent Professional Products.

The program runs until Nov. 30. Rebate offers apply only to qualified purchases and include a double bonus program for qualifying purchases of Safari and SureGuard.

"Ornamental growers, LCOs and arborists are already planning for 2011, and we understand that budgets will again be tight in many cases," said John Johnson, national sales manager

for Valent Professional Products. "The Early Order Program provides growers, LCOs and arborists with a value-added incentive – a great value for quality, best-in-class solutions that will yield high-quality, healthy plants and happy customers."

EOP invoices must be submitted by Dec. 8. Rebates will be distributed within 60 days of the program's close.

2010 NTEA Truck Handbook now available

FARMINGTON HILLS, Mich. – The National Truck Equipment Association recently released the 2010 edition of its Truck Equipment Handbook.

The guide features technical information on the selection of commercial vehicle components and equipment. You can learn formulas involved in matching chassis and bodies, center of gravity, wheelbase and fifthwheel location, as

PEOPLE

Jim Zwack has been named director of technical services for The Davey Institute, the technical support, research and development, education and training and environmental compliance division of The Davey Tree Expert Company.

Kristin Fasse joined the Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association as director of education and certification.

Amy Gabriellan O'Shea was recently named director, FMC Professional Solutions.

BFG Supply Co. has named **Jim Broderick** sales manager of the BFG Plant Connection.

Dave E. Wasmer, general manager of Aquamaster, has been named president of the company. He will assume the roles and responsibilities of Nicolas Nigrelli, the previous president who passed away unexpectedly in July. In addition, the board named **Gene P. Woelfel** as the CFO and treasurer.



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Diversifying Through Lawn Care

Diversity of services and a balanced customer base are common attributes of successful lawn and landscape companies. In fact, without a well-balanced portfolio, it's difficult to thrive in these economic times. The recession took its toll on companies that were too dependent on construction or one facet of the service industry. Read below to see how landscape companies grew their businesses' profitability with Weed Man.

Leadership in Action

Weed Man franchisees show growth

Industry veteran Michael Currin, owner of Greenscape, Raleigh-Durham, N.C., has successfully grown his landscape business for many years. But as he contemplated the next 30 years, he was looking for a new opportunity for the company and his son Daniel, now president.

As he watched his landscape margins decrease, and recognized the need for quality lawn care on nearly every property his crews passed daily on their service routes, he soon realized lawn care would be a great asset to his business mix. Rather than growing independently, he made a conscious decision to buy a Weed Man franchise.



Paul Brooks (left) and Michael Currin

"A lawn care business was really a natural fit," Currin said. "Unlike high-end design/build, if you own a home you are a potential lawn care customer. We drive past a tremendous number of houses on our way to our full-service maintenance or design/build customers. We needed a service to offer these people."

Currin was sold on Weed Man because of the veteran sub-franchisor group that oversees the growth and development of franchisees in the U.S. "After all of the mergers and acquisitions of the '90s, the sub group that helped bring Weed Man to the U.S. was the Who's Who of lawn care. I've known these leaders. It's an impressive group and was the deciding factor for me to buy a Weed Man franchise."

In 2004, he, Daniel and Paul Brooks became owners in a Weed Man franchise. Daniel and Brooks run the day-to-day operations of the business.

"Paul had the persistence, dedication and personality to stick with it. He was tenacious in following the systems and staying focused on the mission," Currin said. "People ask us what are you doing? It's no different than others but it comes down to execution."

Growth in any business starts with sales and Brooks aggressively hired a full-time sales team to generate leads, close contracts and grow the business to \$1.25 million.

"Weed Man has created synergy within our whole company," Currin said. "It's definitely caused us to re-think how we do things at Greenscape."



The Schlatter family

Behind Every Great Team is a System

Big or small, every successful team runs on a system. The best attract talent, tackle challenges and create sustained growth.

"We knew we were small, but with the Weed Man systems, we were able to act big," said Corbin Schlatter of Weed Man franchises in Defiance and Columbus, OH. "The benefit of a franchise is we did everything just the same as corporate but on a scaled down version."

Corbin and his wife, Audrey, started with a small operation in Defiance, OH, then expanded to Columbus. "We do the same things in both markets. However, maybe in one market we use a four-person crew and the other a 16-person crew."

The Schlatters spent their first year in business watching and learning from larger Weed Man operators. "We always wanted to be bigger than we were. We were small but we acted big," Corbin said. "It's all about systems. Once we became comfortable with the system, we gained confidence and were certain we could succeed in any size market."

The Defiance office, managed by Paul Anderson, opened in 2004 and today boasts 950 customers. The Columbus office today touts more than 1,300 customers. Combined, the two offices represent more than \$800,000 in annual revenue.

"The biggest thing for me is the tremendous support we get from our subfranchisor and our group," he said. "If we work the system right we'll get through difficult economic times with tweaks here and there," he said. "It will work. It's proven. Make adjustments, but stick to the fundamentals."

FOR FRANCHISE INFORMATION

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GIE SHOW: Visit booth #1000 to find out how Weed Man can help you grow your business!

Weed Man supports industry education and we encourage all lawn care and landscape professionals to attend the Green Industry Conference and Green Industry Expo in Louisville. This year's conference and show will be held Oct. 27-30.

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well as weights of commodities, metric conversion charts and illustrations of federal lighting standards.

NTEA members pay \$10; non-members pay \$20. To order, visit www.ntea.com or call 800-441-6832.

Ohio Turfgrass conference scheduled for December

COLUMBUS, Ohio – The 2010 Ohio Turfgrass Conference & Show will take place Dec. 6-9 at the Greater Columbus Convention Center in Columbus, Ohio.

Approximately 200 turfgrass suppliers will display the latest technology, products and services available in turf management. In addition to the two-day exhibition, more than 100 hours of educational sessions covering a broad spectrum of turf management topics will be offered.

This year's keynote presentation "Be a Difference Maker," will feature former

Ohio State basketball and NBA player Clark Kellogg.

In addition to seminars for lawn and grounds maintenance, this year's program includes sessions for lawn care business management, LCOs and also covers environmental issues and a mechanic's workshop.

For information about the conference or trade show, contact the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation at 888-683-3445, info@OhioTurfgrass.org or visit www.OhioTurfgrass.org.

Irrigation Association launches computer-based certification testing

FALLS CHURCH, Va. – Candidates seeking Irrigation Association certifications will now have more flexible and convenient testing options with the launch of computer-based testing.

"Available through hundreds of test-

ing centers across North America, the new format allows candidates to select a nearby testing center and schedule a time that suits their needs," said Wayne Eckas, chair of IA's Certification Board. "This will eliminate the need to wait months to take an exam or travel long distances, which will also reduce the time commitment required to test."

All certification exams are now available with the exception of the step four exams for certified irrigation designer (both agriculture and turf/landscape). These final exams are expected to be released in the following 30 days.

Scheduled to gradually replace pencil-and-paper testing, the computer-based tests will also expedite results reporting, and streamline and secure the testing process.

While IA will continue to partner with members, other associations and trade shows to offer education classes to prepare certification candidates, exams

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will be given at these sites only on a limited basis. The Irrigation Show will continue to offer certification testing.

The move to computer-based testing will also make the Select Certified program easier to administrate and advances its long-term goal of accreditation by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

Gehl expands equipment fleet financing options

WEST BEND, Wis. - Gehl Co. and De Lage Landen Financial Services have agreed to provide equipment finance services throughout the U.S. The agreement will provide retail financing and dealer rental fleet financing programs.

Effective, Oct. 1, De Lage Landen Financial Services will offer tailored loan and lease financing directly to registered U.S. Gehl and Mustang brand dealers and to end-user customers seeking

equipment finance solutions. Gehl has used De Lage Landen and its subsidiary AgriCredit to provide finance solutions to its dealers and customers in Canada for many years. The newly announced program will be communicated to all U.S. dealers in mid-September.

"De Lage Landen's unique global footprint offers the potential for future expansion to include equipment finance solutions to our dealers and customers outside of North America," said Daniel L. Miller, Gehl president and CEO.

"De Lage Landen values this newly developed relationship with the Gehl Company and is confident the partnership will support their equipment sales throughout the United States. We look forward to the opportunity for future program expansion and growth with Gehl Company," said Rod Versteegh, president of De Lage Landen's Construction, Transportation and Industrial global business unit.

National Green Centre offers free entry to exhibit hall

ST. LOUIS - The 2011 National Green Centre will offer a free exhibit hall-only pass to attendees.

Presented by the Western Nursery and Landscape Association, will be Jan. 9-10, 2011, at the America's Center in St. Louis.

Educational events, including panels, discussions, presentations that touch on all facets of the green industry start at \$65.

Keynote speakers and topics include: Michael Dirr, "Making sense of the new plant clutter: strategies for successfully marketing trees and shrubs"; Jeffery Bruce, "Opportunities for the landscape industry"; John Stanley, "Identify retail trends as they are incubating"; and Anna Ball, "Industry trends."

For more information, visit www.nationalgreencenter.com.

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Company's charity a homerun

Weed Pro and children crisis care center are big winners at baseball game. By Bo Gemmel

While nuns taking the mound at minor league baseball games are uncommon, the gift Sister Mary Berigan, director and co-founder of the Blessing House, received after she threw the first pitch was even more extraordinary – a \$3,000 check from Cleveland-based Weed Pro.

Weed Pro's donation to the Blessing House was just one part of its commitment to local care. Weed Pro started its campaign in the spring by distributing 100,000 door hangers in the community. The door hangers read, "Weed pro wants to build a healthier environment – both for your lawn and children in need."

They promoted Weed Pro and the Blessing House, a children's crisis care center in nearby Lorain, Ohio. Weed Pro would donate \$25 to the Blessing House for each new customer. It also offered a free fertilizer and insecticide application.



Weed Pro owner Rob Palmer presents Sister Mary Berigan with a check.

"It's a win-win situation," says owner Rob Palmer. "We win, the homeowner wins and the organization wins. Really, it's win-win-win."

Weed Pro donated the money after securing 120 new customers. Palmer looks to the company's tagline when brainstorming ways to engage with the community.

"Our tagline



Is your company working on a charitable marketing project? Tell us about it and you could appear in an upcoming issue. E-mail your story to Associate Editor Brian Horn at bhorn@gie.net.

is, 'local care, expert results,'" says Palmer. "We're always thinking about what 'local' means."

Instead of just handing the check over to Berigan, the company hosted Weed Pro Night at the Park, a family-focused event at a minor league baseball game.

Weed Pro wanted more than just baseball at the event; and featured carnival-style games with prizes, a 50/50 raffle, a silent auction, temporary tattoos and hair painting for the kids.

"We really made this a child-friendly, community activity based around baseball, the American pastime," Palmer says.

Aside from the \$3,000 presented at the game's

opening, Weed Pro raised an additional \$1,200 for the Blessing House through Night at the Park.

"We compete against national companies. We need to be branded as a caring provider – the one who cares the most," Palmer says.

After the event, some customers called with praise; one even donated memorabilia for the silent auction.

By the end of the night, Weed Pro donated \$6,300 and spread awareness about the Blessing House to about 5,000 people.

"Your reputation is built not on what you receive, but what you give," he says. "If everybody looked at it that way, it sure would be a nicer world to live in." L&L

Charity marketing

Rob Palmer gives suggestions on how to give back.

Palmer says the first step for companies interested in charity marketing is to look for non-profits in their areas because there could be tax benefits for contributing to charitable organizations.

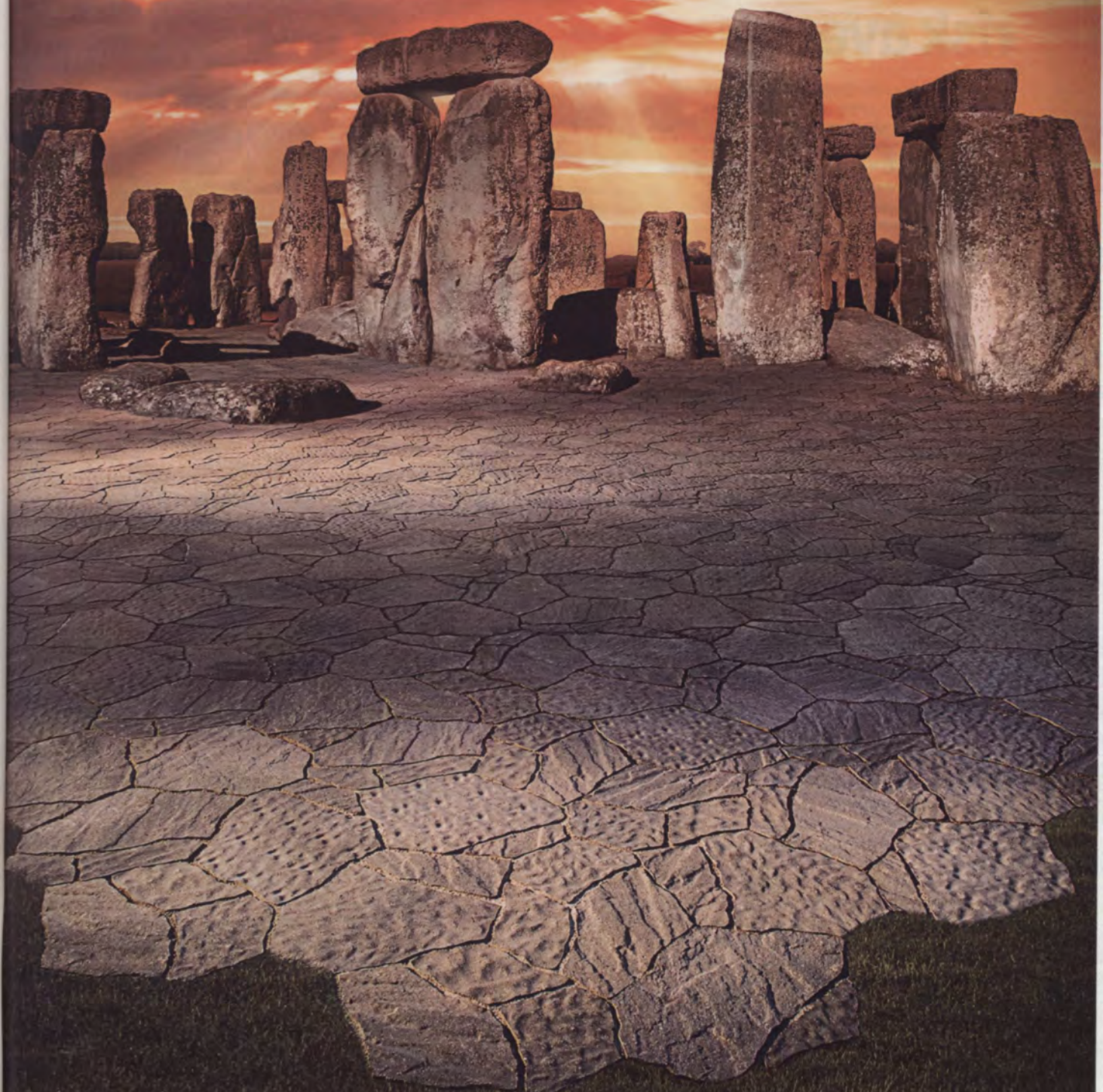
Palmer says companies that spend heavily on costly forms of advertising such as direct mail, could directly engage potential customers and direct more toward an organization with a charity event. "Instead of paying a printer, I pay a charity," he says.

He also emphasizes making the community the first priority. "We aren't focusing on Weed Pro. Sure, we want to brand our name, but it's really an investment in the community," he says.

Weed Pro currently supports local youth sports associations and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, but the awareness campaign for the Blessing House was a first.

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It's the Great American Dream: Setting out on your own with little to no safety net and making your way in the world. Most people, though, aren't foolhardy enough to start their own business. That's just for crazy people, right? Well, entrepreneurs sometimes do have a few screws loose, but they're more conservative than some folks think.

That is, when it comes to their money. A new report from the Kauffman Foundation – "Business Owners, Financial Risk and Wealth" – suggests those self-made men and women play it closer to the vest with their cash than their personalities might indicate.

Here are some key findings from the report:

- While entrepreneurs are typically portrayed as financial risk-takers, when it comes to saving and borrowing, they are actually more conservative than non-business owners. **Forty-five percent of business owners said it was important to them to save for retirement;** just 32 percent of non-business owners said the same.
- Business owners were **focused on saving for the long term;** they were more likely than non-business owners to say their savings horizon was five or more years in the future.
- Whether investing, saving or borrowing, business owners were **more thorough than non-business owners in investigating their financial options.** Ninety-one percent said they spent a "moderate" amount of time or more shopping for the best investment or borrowing terms; just 82 percent of non-business owners said the same.



1 in 5 small business owners don't use any credit, survey determines

According to a new survey released by the U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, one in five small businesses nationwide don't use any form of credit at all, the Dallas Morning News reported.

The results are consistent with similar reports done in 2003, 1998 and 1993.

Such firms are significantly smaller, more profitable, more liquid and more creditworthy than firms that use some form of credit, the report said. They also tend to be in the service, retail and wholesale trade industries.

Most firms in the survey – 40 percent – use both bank credit and trade credit (buying goods or services on an account without an immediate cash payment). Those firms tend to be larger.

The 20 percent of firms that use bank credit only tend to be less profitable and less liquid. And the 20 percent of firms that use trade credit only are more liquid, but less creditworthy.



Steady and ready

The Kauffman Foundation report also shows that business owners accumulate more wealth over time than non-business owners. Business owners were less likely to say that an important reason for saving is having liquid cash available. However, they were substantially more likely than non-business owners to say they could borrow \$3,000 from family or friends if needed.

They are also **more likely to borrow from other sources.** In the past five years, 84 percent of owners had applied for a loan, compared to just 64 percent of non-owners. And only 23 percent of them had been declined, compared to 31 percent of non-business owners.



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RETIREMENT PLANNING AND CLIENT SCHEDULING

ASK THE EXPERTS is presented in partnership with PLANET's Trailblazers On Call program. Trailblazers are industry leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to give back to the industry. Have a question for the experts? Send it to llexperts@glo.net.

Q: I'm trying to figure out my net worth for future retirement planning. How do I come up with a ballpark figure on how much my company is worth at the present time?

A: First, calculating your net worth is certainly not rocket science. You merely add up the value of all of your assets (cash, bank savings, stocks, bonds, accounts and notes receivable, real estate including your personal residence, vested interests in pension/profit sharing and deferred compensation programs, IRA/Keogh accounts, equity

interests in any businesses, personal property, etc.) and deduct all of your liabilities (credit card debt, both secured and non-secured notes payable, unpaid taxes, mortgages, accounts payable, etc.). That is your current net worth.

It is really quite difficult to tell anyone what their business is worth or what it might bring in a sale as there are various approaches to valuation and many factors to consider.

Generally accepted valuation principles require an appraiser to rely upon three basic approaches to value: market, income and

cost. The market approach is a valuation technique in which the estimated value is based on market prices in actual transactions. The income approach is a valuation technique that capitalizes the anticipated income stream from the appraised entity. The cost approach is a technique that uses the concept of replacement as a value indicator. The use of more than one approach is desirable because it provides a check on the other approaches. Weights may be given to each approach and may vary directly with the amount of information available.

Academically speaking, fair market value is defined as the dollar amount at which the assets acquired would equitably exchange between a willing seller and a willing buyer, if neither is under compulsion and both have reasonable knowledge of all relevant facts.

Among the many factors which could affect valuations include:

- The nature and mix of your business, your overall volume, the percentage of recurring income and future growth opportunity
- The outlook for the economy in general; the specific economic conditions in your region and the outlook for your type of business
- Your current financial condition, the historical trend of your earnings and future earning potential
- The financial history of your company as reflected in your financial statements and their comparison to industry averages
- The extent, if any, of goodwill or any intangible or off-balance-sheet assets
- Your client list, including the tenure of key clients, and your retention rate
- The market price of other businesses comparable to yours
- The number and quality of potential buyers for your business
- The quality of your managers and workforce

• The risk involved in the investment as related to earning stability, capital structure, the strength and number of competitors and the overall potential.

But always remember, no two businesses are exactly alike.

The best advice I can give to anyone contemplating retirement and/or the sale of your business is if you do not have an accountant, attorney and financial planner, get them. The financial planner can help you determine how much you need to retire and a good tax attorney working with your accountant will be able to arrange your finances and structure the sale in a manner most favorable to your estate.

Ron Kujawa, CCLP
Kujawa Enterprises
Oak Creek, Wis.

Q: Could you recommend a simple or technology based means of scheduling appointments from the office to the sales person for new clients?

A: I typically use Microsoft Outlook to schedule new appointments. If you grant access to your calendar to the receptionist, that person can then schedule the new appointments directly into your calendar. This requires some coordination up front though. For example, you will have to give the receptionist some parameters as to how many new calls can you handle in a week. You may also want to designate certain days to handling calls in certain areas of your market area (e.g., Tuesdays you cover the North side, Wednesdays the South side, etc.). That way you are not wasting a lot of time driving from one end of town to the other.

Judson Griggs, LICM
Lambert Landscape Co., Dallas

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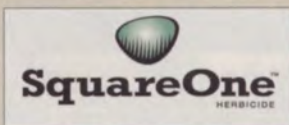
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The target: Lawn care professionals

Specs:

- Weed populations are reduced from the start, allowing for maximum turf density with fewer herbicide applications or the need to reseed the following spring.
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Contact: www.fmcprosolutions.com



Nexus LED Landscape Lighting System

The pitch: Consumes about 75 percent less electricity than similar incandescent halogen systems.

The target: Lighting contractors

Specs:

- A separate 15-volt, DC driver reduces excessive heat that could damage or diminish the LED performance.
- Each element is built of solid aluminum with 350-degree head rotation, and is available in a heavy duty bronze powder-coated marine grade finish.
- Assembly options include an elbow, T-connector, mini-bollard or swivel option.

Contact: www.hinkleylighting.com



Morton EcoSafe Ice Melt

The pitch: Ice melt contains fertilizer to promote seed germination in soil and reduce run off.

The target: Snow removal contractors

Specs:

- As effective as rock salt at melting ice and snow.
- Contains fertilizer to promote seed germination in soil and reduce run off – making it safe for plants and lawns.
- Uses HEC to help protect concrete from winter damage.

Contact: www.mortonsalt.com



K-Rain personalized rotary sprinklers

The pitch: Contractors can personalize rotary sprinklers with their company logo, phone number and website.

The target: Irrigation companies

Specs:

- Each rotor comes with simplified adjustments, a rack of 12 standard and low-angle nozzles, easy retrofit compatibility and a five-year warranty.
- Customized rotors reinforce the contractor's total professional image, carrying the same logo as the company's trucks, uniforms and marketing materials.
- There is no set-up charge for custom orders.

Contact: www.krain.com



Elvex safety glasses

The pitch: Safety glasses that meet the U.S. military's ballistic Vo rating.

The target: Any green industry company.

Specs:

- Safety glasses that meet the U.S. military's ballistic Vo rating have to pass a high velocity shot that is four times the velocity required by ANSI X87.1-2010.
- The ANSI impact speed is 150 feet/second, while the military speed is 640-660 feet/minute.

Contact: www.elvex.com



Pro-Tech Switchblade

The pitch: Able to switch between a rubber and steel trip edges, can handle changing weather and jobsite conditions without having to change plows.

The target: Snow removal contractors

Specs:

- Features IST technology, which includes a steel edge mounted on a specially blended memory urethane.
- Uses a cutting edge that spans the entire width of the unit, eliminating snow trails at its sides.
- Can be easily flipped to push with a rubber edge.

Contact: www.snopusher.com



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The State of the Industry



Marty Grunder

Our industry, like just about all others, is struggling. Entrepreneurs have been given very little to feel optimistic about. Unemployment is up because companies just don't have enough business to hire more people. The word *lean* has become one of the most used terms in business and we've all learned some valuable lessons. Here are the top five lessons I've learned as I reflect back on the past two years and think about the state of our industry:

THE CLIENT IS STILL THE BOSS! Where there are a lot of companies struggling, there are many that are thriving. The ones that are thriving listen to their clients and make adjustments accordingly. Smart companies are looking for more things they can do for their clients. They realize that their current clients are the best source of business, present and future. They visit with their clients in person and work very, very hard to not give any of them a reason to even look anywhere else. Be careful – many times



we hear from our clients that our prices are too high and they are going to make a switch. When I hear that, I think I must have failed to show them all the value we bring to the table and have not done a good job in some way, big or small. Arrogance can kill a business. Listen to your clients; this worked when things were good and it works when things are bad.

STOP COMPLAINING. If we spent as much time cold calling as we do complaining, we could sell a lot of work. I do it; you do it – complain, that is. And we all know it really doesn't do any good. Every time I make some cold calls, I make some sales. When you do nothing, what happens? Nothing. How about you make it a goal to contact at least one person each day every week? If you do that, you will contact more than 250 folks a year. People want to know you want their business; it makes them feel good. Don't sit around and wait for the phone to ring; get out and do some cold calls. Cold calling worked two years ago and it works today.

RAMP UP YOUR MARKETING. My friend owns an HVAC business. This year he's spent more on marketing than ever and his business is up more than 40 percent! Marketing now, when done right, tells clients and prospects you are alive and well. If you have to, cut expenses; don't cut your marketing. Do more. Do some door hangers, postcards, newsletters and try to get some press in your local paper for your business. Marketing worked two years ago; today, it still works.

YOUR PEOPLE ARE SCARED. Now is the time that you, as a leader, need to be talking to your people. On a daily basis you need to reinforce the behaviors you know will lead to your success and correct the behaviors that hurt profitability, client satisfaction and morale. What is your mission statement? Do your people know what it is? What does an ideal client look like for your company? Do your people know what that client

(continued on page 60)

John Ossa



In a relatively short time the irrigation segment of the landscape industry has experienced substantial change. In the October 2002 issue of *Irrigation Business Technology*, the former official publication of the Irrigation Association, is a report entitled "Annual State of Landscape Irrigation Report, 2002."

The introductory paragraph says "... lingering effects of the events of September 11, 2001. A struggling stock market, rocked by corporate scandal, was further cause for the closing of checkbooks..." And: "2002 – the worst

(continued on page 59)

Jim Huston



The state of the economy can be described in one word – stagnant. However, the state of the green industry is anything but stagnant. The fifteen contractors with whom I've visited this summer are engaged, proactive and planning to grow. They are anything but placid and, in some cases, their assertiveness is paying big dividends. Here's a general snapshot of what I've been seeing.

Commercial installation is flat or non-existent in many parts of the country. Where there is work, it's not uncommon to see 20-30 bidders submit prices.

Residential installation is stronger than commercial work but it is still anemic. Jobs are much smaller and margins are down a minimum of ten percent. Contractors are accepting \$1,000-\$2,000 jobs when the past minimum was \$5,000-\$10,000.

Public works projects are few and far between. Government bailout funds do not seem to have trickled down to the green industry. I guess we need more lobbyists in Washington.

Commercial and residential maintenance has become extremely competitive. Installation contractors have realized the brilliance of having a maintenance base. They've jumped into this market but have driven prices down. Property managers smell blood in the water and are working contractors against one another.

Enhancement/extras work is up considerably. In lieu of larger installation projects, many maintenance clients are approving small incremental improvements. This work tends to be more profitable with higher margins than larger installation projects.

Fine gardening, garden detail or classical gardening is an area of growth in the high-end residential market. As Lexus differentiated itself from Toyota, contractors, in many cases, are rebranding themselves to take advantage of this opportunity.

Irrigation service has been a strong component of the market this year. However, the weather has been a major factor contributing to this success.

Lawn fertilization and weed control have been fairly stable sectors of the industry. However, like maintenance

and other service sectors, these areas have become more competitive as clients shop around and contractors compete for market share.

Small comfort jobs seem to be popular. Big jobs are out but small ones are in. I call them comfort jobs – they're the jobs that make the consumer feel good. Some extra flowers here, a small patio there – they are small, incremental improvements that provide a psychological boost.

CONCLUSION. The economy may be flat but the green industry contractors that I've visited are not being tepid about growing their businesses. They are vigorously working on internal efficiencies and external marketing opportunities. Many have reinvented themselves or key areas of their existing product and service mix.

I hate to say it, but the current lackluster economy has been the best thing to happen to many of my clients. They've had to rethink everything. And this has been a good thing!

JIM HUSTON runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm. See www.jrhuston.biz; mail huston@gie.net.

(continued from page 34)
drought on record in some areas."

It is fascinating to not see any reference to a "green" or sustainability movement. I did not see the words *ecology* or *carbon footprint*. The only instance where I saw the word *evapotranspiration* was in an advertisement for a weather station. The report predated WaterSense; there was no reference to any contractor group certification or training initiatives, or the IA's own certification programs.

Of particular interest in this issue is then-president of the Irrigation Association Rex Dixon's column, where he wrote: "Residential and commercial irrigation systems are not efficient users of water." And: "The facts are, the land-

scape irrigation industry is a very visible user and abuser of water, with irrigation systems operating in the rain ... with most irrigation controllers set to over-water." His overview of our industry was "we in the landscape irrigation industry have hidden behind this 'agriculture is the issue' umbrella for too long."

Dixon outlined how the IA was responding to the increasing scrutiny our industry was facing by hosting an open forum with major water purveyors from all over the country invited to participate. This forum was the beginning of engagement with non-industry stakeholders to develop a collective focus on landscape water management efficiency.

The actions outlined by Dixon stand as a good example of industry leadership.

He told the painful truth, represented the disparate constituencies of agriculture and landscape, and sought to advance the best interests of both.

Fast forward to 2010. Manufacturers have responded by developing products aimed at efficiency. Contractors are facing up to their need for increased education.

Going forward, our industry will operate in an increasingly complex regulatory environment. Critical needs are: insightful and resolute industry leadership, high efficiency products, and a higher level of education, training and professionalism in contractors.

JOHN OSSA owns Irrigation Essentials, a web-based irrigation consulting firm. See www.irrigationessentials.com; mail ossa@gie.net.

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looks like? What types of jobs does your company make the most money on? Does your sales team know what those jobs are? When was the last time you told your team thanks? Tell your people the truth and get them together at least once a quarter and talk to them. Share your plan with them. You can't expect people to help you achieve the goals if they don't know what the goals are and how they can directly contribute. Communication helped two years ago and it helps now.

EMBRACE WHAT YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN. Our industry has been hit but if you look at it in a positive way, it's a great time to learn. How do you learn how to deal with difficult clients? By dealing with difficult clients, right? The easy-going clients really don't teach us much; it's the tough, demanding ones that do. How do you learn how to deal with difficult team members? By dealing with difficult team members.

So, how do we learn how to really run our businesses better? Going through tough times. Challenges make us stronger and smarter. I have learned a new, permanent way to run my business. During the last two years I have found out a lot about myself and my people. I have been able, with the help of my team, to improve my company. I'd love to see the stock market rolling and unemployment at 3 percent, but I can't really control that. So, I have to try and stay positive and deal with the hand I've been dealt.

The state of our industry is not pretty right now. But things will improve. I hope we've learned that success in business is more about doing a lot of little things very, very well over the long term time than anything else. Hopefully we'll carry these lessons with us forever.

MARTY GRUNDER is a speaker, consultant and author; he owns Grunder Landscaping Co. See www.martygrunder.com; mail marty@gie.net.

Jeff Korhan



Small businesses have a tendency to adopt best practices that work for the most successful companies in their industry. This helps get a young business going, but at some point you get comfortable. That's when it's most important to innovate. Looking outside of the green industry is one way to compare and contrast your best practices to be sure they are still valid.

This year I've worked with small businesses in a number of industries, including real estate, health care, transportation and agriculture. Not surprisingly, they are all dealing with many of the same issues we face here in the green industry. Nevertheless, here are a couple of interesting observations: 1. Sustainability and social media marketing are the two universally hot topics. 2. Despite that, the rate of adoption is not only variable, but often quite low.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA. Sustainability and social media marketing have a lot in common. They are both difficult to define, and therefore, they are often misunderstood. Still, when I speak to companies about social media marketing I hear: "We need to be doing this." I suspect that holds true for sustainability, too. So, what is holding everyone back?

There is always reluctance to change when work is involved. And it gets even more difficult when the payoff is long-term or difficult to quantify. Yet, these trends are here to stay, and it's a big mistake to ignore them.

CHANGE REQUIRES LEADERSHIP. We are entering an extended period where the general mindset is one of *less is more*. This is why green or sustainable business practices are in vogue. And as a low-cost marketing medium that delivers sustainable results, social media dovetails nicely with the concept of sustainability. But, you do need a willingness to change and do the work.

Change can be scary, but that fear helps you to identify the areas where you most need to innovate. What makes you uncomfortable is usually important; otherwise you wouldn't notice it at all. This is a time to trust your gut and take the lead in order to avoid the risk of becoming irrelevant.

ENGAGE WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS. From a practical standpoint, why not also consider using this to help your customers? What is making them uncomfortable? Are they concerned about green practices? Social media can help you to learn a lot if you use it to listen, engage more frequently and collaborate intensively. All it takes is an investment of 20 minutes each day.

The challenge with social media is to recognize that it is not marketing in a traditional sense. Marketing supports your selling efforts. Social media is another layer that supports both marketing and selling by building and enhancing relationships. Staying in touch with clients, influencers and friends will always be a business and personal best practice.

My take on the state of the green industry is much the same as for other small businesses: To be relevant in the future, you will have to make significant changes in how you market, how you operate and, consequently, how you will lead your company. The key is recognizing that any reluctance you have is just an indication of what you already know: *You need to be doing this.*

JEFF KORHAN is a speaker, consultant and top-ranked blogger on new media and small business marketing at www.jeffkorhan.com. Mail korhan@gie.net.



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“If you don’t want to do a project, don’t do it, because it’s probably going to go bad.”

Ahmed Hassan does everything fast. Listening to a recorded conversation with him in slow mode, he’s still so excited that it’s hard to keep up.

Hassan – who hosts *Yard Crashers* and *Turf War* for the DIY Network, cramming two weeks of landscaping into two days – spent his formative years watching his father work as a landscaper. Then, when he was 15 in California, he started his own full-service company and ran it until this summer. Now 36, he spends his time hosting television shows, speaking to industry associations and home shows and raising three kids.

“I’m also an astronaut,” he says, laughing. “I have an anxious personality. I figured out how to take all this energy I have – all of these wants and desires and ideas and fantasies that I conjure up in my mind – and get out there and make them a reality.”

Lawn & Landscape caught up with Hassan in between shoots to talk about how other contractors can connect with their local media, why DIY is good for the industry and the importance of doing what you love.

Whether it’s DIY or do-it-for-me, **Ahmed Hassan** shows contractors how loving the work they do will get them more business.



Yard War

How would you respond to people who don't want homeowners doing it themselves?

That's just ridiculous. *[laughs]* That's the mentality for people who think there's a shortage of work in this country. There's no shortage of work in this country. There's no shortage of money in this country. We live in a country where people spend \$40 on a plate of food and throw out half of it. We live in a country that's abundant, we live in a world that's abundant. I don't get that mentality. You want them to call you? They'll call you on the next one. We teach. You don't get to take that knowledge with you when you die. Give it up. Help people out. I love that.

I've worked with some guys like that – I've worked with guys who didn't want to show me certain pieces of equipment or how to do certain things. I heard the comments a couple times: 'If I teach you how to do that, you won't need me.' Well, it's not about needing you. At some point, I'm going to learn

this. You can be the Yoda in my life or you don't get to. You're not going to stop me from learning.

It's like you teaching your kid how to make a sandwich, because then they won't need you anymore. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. But you're right. People do have that mentality. Those are the people who have more of a fear-based mentality.

How did you get involved with DIY Network?

A friend of mine was a landscape designer. She got featured on a show on HGTV called Landscape Smart about 12 years ago. I did a show, and was featured.

At the time I was just running a gardening business – I wasn't even a landscape contractor. I was knowledgeable about what I was doing, I was totally passionate about what I was doing and therein lies the reason I do television.

I love what I do, I'm excited about it and I have all that energy around landscaping and designing and working with people and working outside. When you're totally

into what you're doing, when you're totally crazy about it, you have a different energy than someone who's just doing it to make a buck. People are crazy about what they're doing, who are fanatics about it – they start talking about what excites them and they start to almost vibrate. And I brought that energy to the first show I did, and from then on I had producers telling me 'you have to host shows.' I said, 'I have a full-time job. I have to pay my rent. I need to take care of my family. I'm not on TV, I'm a landscaper.'

I'm just living my life now, and I let the cameras roll on it. *[laughs]* It's a pretty easy gig. It's because I love what I'm doing. You can't fake love. You can't fake being passionate about something. Anybody can see through that after a period of time. I basically do what I love and the money caught up to me, and the fame caught up to me.

Describe a typical day on set when you're in production.

We get to the set, we do the drive up scenes. We make sure everyone's in the right place so everyone can see them. We're limited to two

cameras, typically, as opposed to five or six, which I'd love to have, where you catch everything. Once we intro that, I love that part of the show where it says, 'it's time for demolition.' When it's time for demolition that means I can finally walk away from the camera and I can start working.

Because nothing is scripted, I'm just trying to make sure I'm giving really good directions. We get homeowners and we get friends. I'm always asking homeowners to bring a dozen friends. My job is to facilitate them. It's like I got 12 new employees, I have no idea who they are or what they know, what skills they possess or not, and my job is to not only have them have fun but be as productive as possible. I basically wear them out – that's my job, to wear them out.

How many people are you managing at that point?

Everybody's managing a piece of that, but my job is to oversee what's happening with the entire thing, make sure all the timing is done right and the producers are getting what they need for television, and we all get it done by the end of day two, without running into huge amounts of overtime, which we do every time.

By Chuck Bowen

d arrior





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Before I was doing television, I did production landscaping for a little while, slamming new homes. Every fourth house looked the same. Lawn, tree, seven shrubs, move on. But I had a 40-man crew. When you have a 40 man crew – we were working with six yards at a time, just half the block, and we'd just slam them. All irrigation in one day, all grading in one day, all the lawns in one day and move on to the next block.

That's all my job is – keep everybody productive and make sure they have a good time.

What's your advice for contractors who want to get more involved with their local or regional media?

I got media savvy only because I was doing it. First, you have to be inspired. You have to really love what you're doing. If you don't really love it, you're not going to keep doing it. I've done landscaping since I was 15. I didn't start doing television shows until I was 31. Do the math.

Figure out what your niche is – you might like to be a landscaper. But a landscaper does a lot of things: do you like working with plants, doing irrigation work? Are you interested in learning about soils and nutrition – what is it that you're specifically interested in? Do you just like to draw pictures? Or do you like selling? What is truly your niche? Out of all the things you have to do with your job, what gives you the most happiness? Stick with that.

Watch it now

Get a dose of Hassan's infectious energy and check out his shows at www.diynetwork.com.



Then you have to use your sales skills. The best thing I can sell is me – that's my product. The way you sell yourself is, you've got to be able to sell a producer, someone in the media, a writer, with an idea, and they've got to be able to pick up your vision.

Landscape Smart was the first show I ever did. There had to be something smart or interesting about the project. And I had to be articulate enough to sell that idea. You have to love what you're doing and sell it to someone. Every design – we've done 60 on the show – has to be different. Nobody wants to see something ho-hum.

Any final thoughts?

Were all so stimulated and driven by money. What it doesn't allow us to do is tap into inspiration. There are so many facets of a contractor's life that make you feel like you're doing this mundane thing. I call that circling the dream. Just live the dream.

If you don't want to do a project, don't do it, because it's probably going to go bad. Figure out what you like doing and who you like working for, and do those kinds of projects. If clients seem like they're a headache, listen to that inner voice and move on. I tell homeowners the same thing. We should be interviewing our clients just like they're interviewing us.

The bottom line is, we all know how to make money. Let's figure out what you enjoy doing, and you're going to shine and get referrals, please customers and have long-term customers. You've got nothing to lose, just try it. If you keep doing work you don't enjoy, is that what you want to keep doing? But you have to figure that out. It's getting out of that mentality of getting out and chasing dollars. Do what you love and the money will catch up with you.

We all work for ourselves because we don't want to work in the rat race, we don't want to be a dumb monkey and work on the assembly line. We want more control over our own lives. Figure out where you're valuable. **L&L**

The author is editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Send him an e-mail at cbowen@gie.net.

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RAIN BIRD

Synergy skills

The Bruce Company's 10 departments work independently to get the best results for the company as a whole.

By Brian Horn

Every morning, Bliss Nicholson would stop at The Bruce Company of Wisconsin's nursery. It's a habit that started more than 30 years ago when the nursery opened. Whether he needed to or not, he would swing by and see what was happening.

But, as the company grew, Nicholson, the president and CEO, had to cut back on his trips. There was too much to do managing the company's 10 departments. More importantly, he had eight managers to run the different departments, and by stopping in he was disrupting the organization's flow.

"The only way I could finally get to the point of not having my nose in it and being involved in it – I had to quit stopping at the nursery every day," he says.

And quitting meant changing the route he took to work every day. Instead of making a right out of his driveway, he'd hang a left, and go in the opposite direction of the nursery.

"It was like you're programmed," he says. "Your car just goes in that direction. And I really had to reprogram my whole thinking."

About a year ago, Nicholson was able to take a big step back and

now he can go two weeks without making a stop. By making a left turn instead of a right turn, he learned a valuable lesson.

"Finally, I found out it could function better and it was running better when I didn't stop every day. They had a plan and

The Bruce Company of Wisconsin

Principals Bliss Nicholson, Lee Bruce, Steve Short, Dave Weber, Jeff Jourtras, Seth Nicholson and Don Jenson. **LOCATION** Middleton, Wis. **YEAR FOUNDED** 1952 **2009 REVENUE** \$32 million **EMPLOYEES** 500 **CUSTOMER BREAKDOWN** Commercial 75% percent, 25% residential. **SERVICES** Garden center; residential & commercial design/build landscape; irrigation; water features & pond construction; nursery; landscape maintenance; golf course construction; golf course maintenance; snow removal; holiday decorating.

From left: Seth Nicholson, vice president; Jeff Jourtras, vice president; Katie Schuhmacher, HR manager; Bliss Nicholson, president and CEO; Dave Weber, vice president

2010 **BREAKTHROUGH**

2010 Breakthrough is an ongoing series of success stories from the green industry. Each month, *Lawn & Landscape* and its sister horticulture publications – *Nursery Management and Production*, *Greenhouse Management and Production* and *Garden Center* – will profile businesses that have found success by working across the industry. To see more Breakthrough stories from the rest of the green industry, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/2010breakthrough. How are you working across the green industry to succeed in 2010? Send your stories to Editor Chuck Bowen at cbowen@gie.net or call 330-523-5330 and you could be featured in an upcoming issue of *Lawn & Landscape*.





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they were able to work their plan. When I stopped, I disrupted things," he says.

KEEP 'EM SEPARATED. Nicholson is clear that he wants each department to run as a separate entity. Employees used to bounce back and forth between departments, but he learned that the flexibility of the departments caused problems.

At one time, employees worked for both the nursery and landscaping departments, but sometimes when they needed to get a landscaping job done, employees were busy in the nursery.

"We just couldn't ... count on it and make a commitment to do the things we needed to do in the other departments," Nicholson says. "So, it was very hard to hold those people accountable when their people were someplace else, instead of saying, 'Hey, listen, you guys go out and sell the work you need to keep that department busy.'"

Once employees were separated into departments, management had to drive home that the department they were assigned was the department where they would work. If temporary help was needed elsewhere, an employee would pitch in, but he would still report to the manager of his assigned department.

"Sometimes you even get frustration because you might have the landscape division that all of a sudden has a ton

The Bruce Company of Wisconsin is a one-stop shop for customers because of the company's 10 departments: nursery; residential and commercial design/build landscape; irrigation; holiday decorating; garden center; landscape maintenance; water features and pond construction; golf course construction; golf course maintenance and snow removal. Managers operate each department like an independent business.

of work and the irrigation division isn't quite as busy," he says. "So, you've got guys in one area working 60 hours and guys in the other are working 40 hours. Every now and then you get people that say 'Oh, I want to go over there.' They forget that last year, it was the other way around."

Nicholson says the best way to keep departments operating separately is by putting someone in charge. Someone needs to lead the department if you want to show employees you are serious about them working as an individual unit.

"It just can't be one of these things — oh, we're going to create a division, and start the maintenance department and you half-heartedly do it," he says. "It doesn't work. You have to have somebody that has a passion and loves it and is going to want to make it work."



Nicholson says you then have to give managers the tools and support so they can run the department effectively.

"You can't be every place," he says. "You can't oversee everything. You've got to have some trust in that manager, so you've got to find the right person to let it grow. Give it to him, let him have the responsibility, give him the guidelines and the help he needs, but let him make it work."

BUT WORK TOGETHER. Nicholson wants the entities to operate separately, but still work as one. Sounds a bit contradictory, but it's really not. Yes, you want each department to succeed on its own, but everyone has the same priority.

"We have a philosophy here that first of all, we have one customer and there's one company, and we have one bottom line," he says. "So in the end, everything that everybody can do for everybody else benefits everybody."

In a perfect world, Nicholson says he wants every department to cross-sell. For example, the company's landscape

“It's when you don't do what you say you are going to do that you get yourself in trouble.”

— Bliss Nicholson



Having all the answers

The Bruce Company wants customers to know they can help with anything landscaping related.

When it comes to cross marketing departments within a company, there really aren't any negatives, says Thomas F. Raemisch II, marketing manager of The Bruce Company of Wisconsin.

After all, if someone walked into your retail center, why wouldn't you want to let them know that you can also do landscape maintenance. Or, if you have an eight-page flyer for the garden center, there really isn't any downside to mentioning your landscaping services on the inside cover.

"We feel our biggest asset is our customer base," he says. "If we can cross-promote to them, that's where we can really get a lot of

bang for our buck because the people that are coming into the door are already familiar with the Bruce Company as a kind of 'We can do it for you' type of thing."

Raemisch says the only drawback to cross marketing is you may lose some room on the page for the product or service that was the main purpose for the advertisement. But that really isn't a problem because it all promotes the Bruce Company, Raemisch says.

"What it does is it continues to keep your message out there," he says. "Obviously you are going to lose some of your space if you have some more specials that you wanted to have on the retail flyer that you are not getting across."

department creates 60 to 70 percent of the irrigation department's business.

But working together and referring other departments to a customer can cause problems. If a customer isn't happy with the work a referred department did, then it becomes everyone's problem. Again, the departments have to work together to solve it because, if the nursery recommends the landscaping department to a customer, and the landscaping department does a bad job, then both departments could lose the customer.

A Bruce Company customer service representative or someone from the department that caused the problem will normally meet with the unhappy customer.

"Part of it is to be candid with whoever the sales person (was) or whatever happened. Say, 'Hey, here's what happened.' Talk about how expectations weren't met and come up with a plan and make sure we respond quickly to that customer so they know we take it very seriously and it's not an accepted thing that we do," he says.

Once the customer is satisfied, you have to address any tension that might occur between the two departments because of the incident, he says.

You should avoid finger pointing, Nicholson says, but sometimes you do have to take sides in the argument. Mainly he has to coach the party at fault and help them understand what they did wrong.

"You've got to get those people together, and you've got to let both of them express their feelings and you've got to be open enough to understand why the retail person feels the way they do. The other person has to be open enough to understand the other side," he says.

"If you've got the right people in place, they will. Then, I'll be honest with you, it's a trust factor. That person then needs to make sure he goes out and does what he says he's going to do."

While it may sound like a lot of hard work to develop and operate 10 departments, Nicholson says it's worth the time – and changing his route to work.

"I think our growth would have been 30 percent less than it has over the years if we would have just been focused on one area because we've been able to bring all these together and build on them," he says. We have that balance in there that if one area it's a little slow, the other areas have been able to supplement it." **L&L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. You can reach him at bhorn@gje.net

Hear Nicholson talk about some of the mistakes he made when adding departments at www.lawnandlandscape.com. Just search for "Bliss Nicholson."



He said what?

Gossip can be a culture killer.

Internal competition – teams within an organization competing to make each other better – can produce great results. But, it can also cause some pettiness if one team isn't carrying their weight.

A snide comment in the garage or holding yard about a team's weak performance can start gossip and cause disruption within the company.

Bliss Nicholson has run into this problem as president and CEO of The Bruce Company of Wisconsin. Having his 10 departments operate as independent companies while still serving one bottom line can cause friction from time to time.

"Sometimes it's just a verbal comment. If somebody said, 'Hey, that department, they aren't carrying their load. They're not doing this.' I'm a firm believer that if you have a comment to make, make it to somebody who can make a difference," he says. "Don't stand around the water cooler talking about everything. If you've got a problem with somebody in another division, and they're not doing something, first of all, go to that person."

"If that can't work, go to their manager and talk about it in the right way – some things you are experiencing and seeing – and then talk it through. Don't go to the water cooler and talk about it to everybody else because that accomplishes nothing, except wasting everybody's time."

When Nicholson is in a meeting, a lot of times he'll ask his managers what people are saying at the water cooler. His goal is to create an atmosphere where people can be open and honest. He says employees have to know that you will listen to them.

"They've got to get to know you and get to know that you are open and willing, that you're not going to jump on them every time, that you need that input to make things work," he says. "And if you never hear those things you cannot do anything about it. And that, when they share something with you, it's confidential and that you can find a way to help and make it better but you don't always have to go out and say, 'Well I sat down with so and so and they said this.' No, there's other ways to approach that and do that."

When Nicholson hears of a problem, he says his first instinct is to solve it himself. But, he says it's best to get more details from the employee, not necessarily the names of the people involved, and ask them how they would solve it. In the rare occasion he hears a suggested solution he doesn't like, Nicholson will suggest another way to handle the situation.

"Nine out of 10 times, they know what to do. They just need a little encouragement about doing it," he says.



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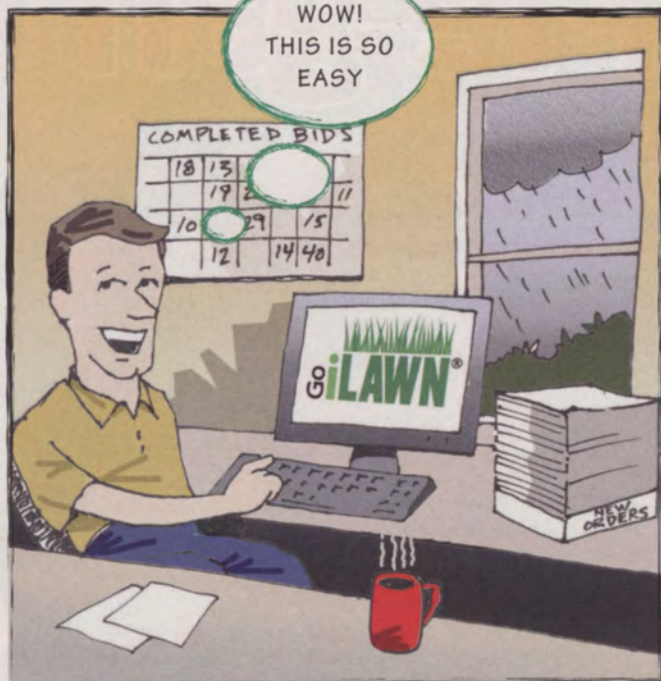
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Kick off your Pre-game sales

Encouraging customers who pay for services monthly to pay in full is a win-win.

By Kristen Hampshire

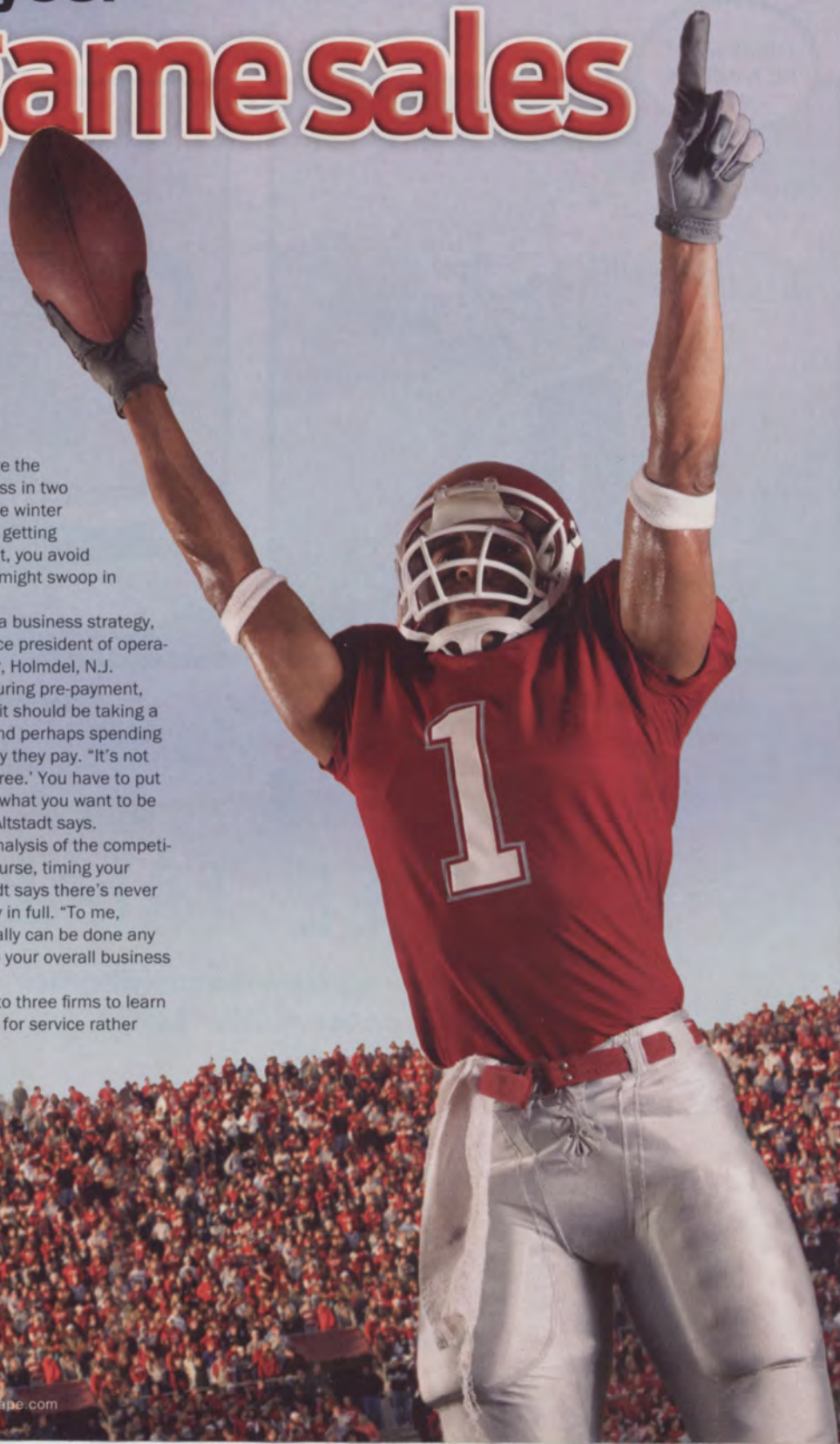
Collecting payment for services before the season starts can build your business in two ways. First, that cash flow shot in the winter helps stoke spring operations. Second, by getting customers complete financial commitment, you avoid risking their business to competitors who might swoop in with glittery pre-season offers.

"Getting more paid-in-full customers is a business strategy, no doubt about it," says Ewald Altstadt, vice president of operations and support services at Lawn Doctor, Holmdel, N.J.

Execution and timing are critical to securing pre-payment, but before a business can talk discounts, it should be taking a serious look at historical customer data and perhaps spending some time surveying clients to find out why they pay. "It's not just, 'Let's give customers something for free.' You have to put thought into where your business stands, what you want to be and what steps you'll take to get there," Altstadt says.

He recommends conducting a sound analysis of the competition and their billing processes. And, of course, timing your pre-pay offer is everything. Though Altstadt says there's never a bad time to encourage customers to pay in full. "To me, paid-in-full is a sales opportunity and it really can be done any month depending on what works best into your overall business strategy," he says.

This month, *Lawn & Landscape* spoke to three firms to learn how they encourage customers to pre-pay for service rather than billing accounts monthly.



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Ice Melting Solutions

The pre-pay graduate

Asking customers for pre-payment is part of the company culture at Weed Man Cleveland.

"You're always asking for referrals, and same goes for pre-payment," says Phil Fogarty, president.

The franchise offers customers three big chances to save on their annual lawn care services, and pokes them with this offer at every opportunity – through e-mail, mailings, on renewal letters and in person when technicians are servicing accounts.

About 35 percent of Weed Man Cleveland's customers pre-pay for services before spring. Fogarty begins marketing discounts in October, offering up to 10 percent off for early birds who pay before Christmas. Once the calendar year turns, the discount drops to about 7 percent. Finally, after the first service, customers can pay for the rest of the season and save about 5 percent.

Graduated discounts encourage customers to buy early and pay in full.

"There is a certain population of customers who will pre-pay for any discount and just by offering one,

you'll get as much as 5 to 7 percent" of customers to pre-pay, Fogarty says.

Then there is the population of customers who want vendors to show them the money – they expect bigger discounts, better offers. Fogarty plays to this group by giving pre-pay customers a discount plus a free service, such as aeration or grub control. Or, he'll buy restaurant gift certificates in bulk and give \$25 gift cards (he pays just \$20 per card) to clients who agree to pre-pay.

The graduated discounts plus extra incentives capture 10 percent of customers before Jan. 1, and the remaining 25 percent or so of pre-pay customers trickle in at the beginning of the year.

The sooner Fogarty can get customers to commit to service and pay for it, the better. Pre-pay is a great way to lock in loyalty.

"We know they'll get mail, phone calls and knock on the door from the competition, so if I can get them off the market and have their money six months in advance, it's a huge incentive," Fogarty says.

He makes it easy for customers to pay a lump sum by accepting credit cards. While a business can pay an average 3 percent for each credit card transaction, "It's still worthwhile to



Fogarty

Weed Man Cleveland

PRINCIPAL Phil Fogarty, president
LOCATION Cleveland **ESTABLISHED** 1970
(Weed Man corporate) **2009 REVENUES**
\$105 million (Weed Man corporate)
CUSTOMERS 95% residential; 5% commercial **SERVICES** lawn care

get the customer's money into your account," Fogarty says.

Credit cards might buy a customer a year's time interest free to pay off the service, and Fogarty gets the payment immediately and can direct that cash flow toward spring expenses.

Despite the economy, Fogarty says pre-pay is still appealing to customers – and perhaps more so today because customers are looking for ways to save. "We found that people were looking for the best bargain," Fogarty says. "People have become more savvy shoppers in the last few years, and they're looking for ways to achieve the best price and get the brand they want."

Pre-pay accomplishes both and gives Fogarty a strong indication of the company's retention rate.

"Whenever we have a higher pre-payment rate, we save in billing costs and our customer retention rate is higher," he says.

QUICK TIPS

Offer graduating discounts. Start with the largest price break before Christmas to get customers "off the market." Let clients know the discount will decrease the longer they wait to pre-pay.

Spruce up the offer. Try bundling a discount with a restaurant gift card or another non-lawn care incentive that clients will view as a treat.

Accept credit cards. Sure, there's a fee to process credit card transactions. But what costs more: that 3 percent, or the time spent and money lost while chasing down past-due accounts receivables?

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The early bird

Don't wait until February to send out pre-pay offers to customers. By then, the competition might have lured away your clients.

"Pre-pay letters are probably the most valuable part of your mailing campaign," says Mike Dauer, marketing coordinator for the Scotts LawnService franchise owned by Joe Kucik in Lansing, Mich. "You need a decent offer to get customers to pre-pay, and you need to make sure your timing is correct."

Timing those letters is different now than it was five years ago, according to Dauer. But then, the driver for getting customers to pay early is also different. "Five years ago, pre-pays were important for us to generate revenue in January to keep the cash flow coming into the business because we didn't do any servicing in December, January and February," Dauer explains. "By generating pre-pay dollars, we didn't have to lay off people for those three months and we had some marketing money to use prior to our season."

Now, pre-pay is a vehicle for securing client loyalty. Period. "We want to lock in our customers so our competitors can't steal them," Dauer says bluntly.

By sending pre-pay letters to existing clients before Thanksgiving that offer to lock in services at the current price plus a 5 percent discount, the franchise generally gets 10 percent of its 9,000 customer base to pay before year-end. Clients who don't respond get another offer letter in January and can save 3 percent on services. At that

Scotts LawnService (franchise)

PRINCIPAL Joe Kucik, owner **LOCATION** Lansing, Mich.

ESTABLISHED 2004 **2009 REVENUES** \$2.7 million

EMPLOYEES 23 **CUSTOMERS** 98% residential; 2% commercial **SERVICES** full-service lawn care

point, another 10 percent of customers generally pay and save.

The letter's language is key for encouraging customers to pay early, Dauer says. "You want to thank them for being a valued customer," he says. "Let them know how important they are to your success."

Next, the letter reminds customers that services are recurring. Clients won't receive another contract to continue services. (At least in Michigan. Some states, like New York, require customers to resign a contract each year.) The letter also includes an upsell offer. "We take that opportunity to let customers know that they don't have aeration or grub control," Dauer says.

Finally, the letter spells out how much customers will save by pre-paying. Giving customers exact numbers helps them make the decision to commit financially before the season starts. Because prices do increase each year, that offer to "lock in" pricing is a real incentive for clients, Dauer adds.

Dauer says the pre-pay letters go out earlier every year. "I think pre-pay letters can go out any time after the last application is done," he says.

Getting that money in the bank gives the franchise reassurance that its customer base will remain strong, and that operations will continue comfortably in the off-season. "It helps our cash flow," Dauer says. "But in today's world, the No. 1 reason for pre-pays is to lock in our customers so the competition won't take them away."

QUICK TIPS

Draft a luring letter. This is the most important letter of the year. Remember to express thanks, clearly define the discount, explain why pre-pay helps business and spell out the win-win. (Conclude with an upsell!)

Offer to lock in prices. If you'll increase prices the next season, let clients know that by pre-paying, they can beat inflation.

Be persistent. No response from the first letter campaign? Follow up, and continue to extend the pre-pay offer at the beginning of the season.



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The smart shopper

When customers pre-pay for services, Mark Baker can pre-pay for lawn care products. "By getting money in early, that gives us an extra lump sum in our account so we can turn around and buy our fertilizers at a discount," says Baker, owner of Turfmaster in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Baker's customers get a 5 percent discount on services, or 10 percent off if they agree to add a pesticide treatment or grub control service. Baker's vendors give him a similar discount on fertilizer and other products he pays for before spring.

That way, if Baker needs a new piece of equipment, he can pay for it in cash rather than racking up a line of credit. "It's always a plus if we can pay cash for something rather than financing it," he says, adding that he prefers to do business the conservative way, and keeping a healthy cash flow is the key.

After a rough winter for snow services, those lawn care pre-pays are a "super shot" to the bank account, Baker relates. "If times are a little bit tight, we might need that extra boost to get us up and going in the spring."

About 10 to 15 percent of Baker's customers are willing to pay for lawn care services before February. Baker spells out the details of potential savings on a form he distributes to each client at the end of the season, along with renewal letters. The forms compare how much the service costs with and without the discount. If customers add a service, they get that boosted 10 percent discount, which can amount to a free service depending on the size of the property.

The sheer convenience of pre-pay is appealing to his loyal customer base. "They can write one check so they don't have to worry about payment anymore," Baker says.

Baker isn't too worried about his clients jumping ship, though he has started to send renewal letters out before New Year's Eve to be

Turfmaster

PRINCIPAL Mark Baker, president
LOCATION Fort Wayne, Ind.
ESTABLISHED 1996 2009
REVENUES \$120,000 **EMPLOYEES** 2 to 10 **CUSTOMERS** 80% residential; 20% commercial
SERVICES lawn care, perimeter pest control, commercial maintenance, snow removal

QUICK TIPS

Pre-pay for products. Earn back the discount you offered customers by cashing in on vendors' savings. Use pre-pay dollars to buy products from vendors at pre-season discounts.

Spell out the savings. Create a form that shows the price difference between paying in full before the season, and paying monthly.

Build loyalty. Getting customers to pre-pay involves much more than tossing out a discount. Clients grow their trust in you over time, and then they are more likely to pay in a lump sum. So make customer service a year-long priority.



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sure his customers aren't tempted by other offers.

"We have such tight-knit clientele, and they're comfortable with us," Baker says. "They know we aren't going to be here today, gone tomorrow."

Customers believe that their pre-payment is a value. "It goes back to them trusting that we are going to do what we say we are going to do," Baker says.

On the other hand, selling pre-pay services for snow and maintenance is much more difficult, Baker says. When snow customers thought a lump-sum price paid at the beginning of the season would buy them unlimited snowplowing – whatever it took to get the job done – they were happy to cut a check before the white stuff started falling.

But once Baker outlined that the snow package included up to 15 plows – and that more plowing required more payment – then customers shied away from pre-pay.

"If they didn't know they'd be ahead of the game, they didn't want to play," Baker remarks.

So Baker focuses pre-pay mostly on lawn care, where he finds the most success with customers. Because the service schedule is not sporadic like snow – Baker's crews visit lawns seven times for applications – his customers know exactly how much and what they're getting. There are no variables.

Feeling comfortable with the offer is the ultimate key to selling the service early for Baker. And for clients who aren't sure, the pre-pay form that spells out the discount helps seal the deal. "The forms spell everything out, and once customers see that large savings, they know they'll eventually pay for the service anyway, so they figure, 'Why not pay for it now?'" L&L

The author is a frequent contributor to *Lawn & Landscape*.



Brandon Phillippie
Bland Landscaping
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Editor's note: This is the second in a two-part series on how companies can best focus their sales and marketing efforts. You can read the first part at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

Keep your marketing and sales on track

Match your marketing tools to your target to get results.

By Cynthia Paul and Hoyt Lowder

Not all marketing tools are equal. Each tool has a specific objective, and each has one or two purposes. One of the initial marketing tools might be advertising. The purpose of advertising is to take a group of people and inform them, moving them from "unaware" to "aware." The purpose of a webinar is to move a customer from "aware" to "informed."

The objective of a sales call is to secure work from a customer who is "convinced." Using a sales call to move a customer from "unaware" to "aware" is not only expensive, but it is also tough on your sales team. Sales people sell the most effectively when customers are either "convinced" or "aware" of who you are and what your company does.

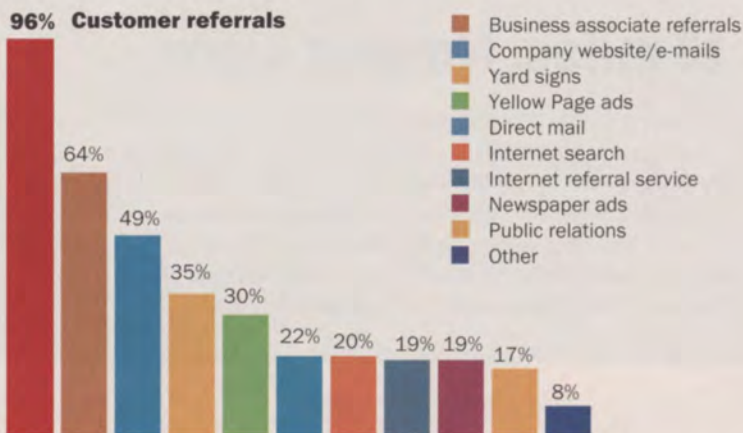
Sales calls work very effectively on moving a customer from "convinced" to "preferred." Of course, operations also have a role in moving a customer from "convinced" to "preferred." Customers that prefer your organization to the competition have had successful projects working with your team.

Other marketing tools might be presentations, participation in associations, direct sales, direct mail or radio advertising. List all of the possible tools and think through their potential impact. The key is touching a customer with multiple marketing tools at the right time in their progression down the tracks. Choose the correct tools to achieve your desired objectives.


MOST EFFECTIVE MARKETING. The most effective marketing takes place between two groups of people: the customer and the provider. Both groups need to have

Top marketing methods

What marketing methods do you use to obtain new business?



SOURCE: 2010 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

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MARKETING AND SALES

mutual respect for each other's capabilities and clearly believe that they will be better off as an organization by doing business together. This enables customers to understand their own needs and enables you to assess your ability to satisfy those needs. It creates good reasons for doing business together. That is why waiting to educate a customer until after

a project hits the table is so difficult.

The railroad tracks outline a marketing and selling process that gets the right tools to the right customer in order for you to achieve your vision as a firm (see Fig. 1, right). It takes a selective group of customers and moves them from "unaware" to "aware," to "informed" to "convinced." It is a process of matching

FIGURE 1



their needs with your capabilities. Not every customer or potential customer will make it all the way through the process, let alone in a timeframe that fits your business plan. You need to ensure that you have sufficient customers that you are working down the tracks.

CONCLUSION. The marketing and selling process is the systematic approach of taking all of the targeted customers in your market down the track from "unaware" to being "convinced" that you are the best service provider around. Picking the right tools for the right segment of the track is critical. You need to be clear on what you are trying to accomplish and only then pick the marketing and selling tools that best fit the objective. Too often companies fall in love with a tool and overuse it. They frequently expect their sales or business development teams to call on people who have never heard of them and find a project on which to compete. The best you can hope for in such a situation is getting the chance to compete on price.

Effective use of tools will get customers and prospective customers to recognize your value and select you accordingly. Of course, you still need to have a sensible price. In today's market, the difference between being selected solely on price, versus being recognized as adding value, is the difference between making a profit this year and needing to lay off additional staff. **L&L**

Cynthia Paul is a managing director at FMI Corporation. She may be reached at 303-398-7206 or at cpaul@fminet.com. Hoyt Lowder is retired senior vice president. He may be reached at 813-636-1242 or at hlowder@fminet.com.



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By Brian Horn

What are you waiting for?

Don't take the economy lying down.

Here are **5 things** you can start today to improve your business.



If you went and told someone the U.S. economy is going to turn around, you might hear a chuckle. Marty Grunder wouldn't be laughing though. He has faith the economy will bounce back, but says contractors still have to do their part to help their own businesses.

"You could look at this recession and this temporary downturn as a problem. I choose to look at this as an opportunity," he told attendees at a recent conference he put on in Dayton, Ohio.

Here are five ways Grunder says you can get your business pointed in the right direction.

1. LEAD BY EXAMPLE. You need to throw the old adage, "Do as I say, not as I do," out the window because your employees won't buy it. If you're struggling and you realize customer service has to be a priority, then you as the leader better deliver good customer service yourself, Grunder says. Instead of having employees greet

customers at the front door, do it yourself.

"The lesson that I learned, and it took me a long time to learn it, was that, as a leader we are far better served to just go out and do it, than to have some companywide meeting and tell everybody what you're going to do," Grunder says. "You back yourself into a corner. You have no way out. You have no options."

Leading by example is also a way to get your employees engaged. Grunder was working with a landscaper whose company was growing, just not as fast as it could grow. The landscaper couldn't figure out why he couldn't get his employees engaged and excited about the company. Grunder watched as the landscaper walked into the office in the morning, didn't greet anyone or make eye contact.

Grunder suggested the landscaper buy his secretary a muffin and a Diet Coke, which she liked to drink, and tell her to have a great day.

Grunder's point was that if the landscaper wanted his

people to be engaged and upbeat, then he has to take action first.

"Take an interest in others and they will take an interest in you," Grunder says.

2. HAVE INTEGRITY. If Grunder taught a course on honesty and integrity, he says it would take him five minutes. He'd tell the students that if they thought they were doing something wrong, they probably were, and they should stop doing it. He'd then advise them to talk to someone who has experience in what they are trying to accomplish.

That's it, class dismissed.

But that doesn't mean Grunder wants to diminish the role integrity plays in today's business world. "It's incredibly (important), especially in these times, that we live a life of integrity and we show zero tolerance for those who don't show integrity," he says. "And we always tell the truth even if it hurts."

That means if someone sends you a check for \$200 more than she should have,

send it back.

"The dishonest guy who won't be around for a long time says, 'Hot dog, I'm not telling him that.' The honest guy calls him back and says, 'Hey, you sent me too much money,'" Grunder explains.

3. BE ENTHUSIASTIC. Grunder gets frustrated with all the negative news he sees. So instead of just complaining about it, he did his part to fix it. He helped start "Good News in Dayton," a website and a one-minute radio spot that features, you guessed it, the good news happening in Dayton, Ohio.

Since August 2008, he has sold a quarter of a million dollars worth of work to people who have heard the spots. He's had people call him and thank him for his positive approach to business.


"I think it's important that we wake up every day try-



You back yourself into a corner. You have no way out. You have no options." – Marty Grunder

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KEY DECISIONS

GET SOME GOOD NEWS

Learn more about Marty Grunder's Good News in Dayton program – and get some ideas for your own version – at www.goodnewsindayton.com.



ing to find a new and better way to do things," he says.

If you don't want to take to the airwaves, Grunder says you can do it by speaking highly of your employees. When congratulating someone for doing a good job, be specific and mention details about what you liked about their performance.

4. COMMUNICATE WELL. Sitting at home or in your office might be the easy thing to do when it comes to running a company, but that's not how you generate ideas. You've got to get out, speak with your staff and start sharing ideas, Grunder says.

To get your employees communicating with each other, bring the team together and give them a blank 3-by-5 index card. On the front, ask them to write down how they think the company makes money and on the back have them write down what they think the company's purpose is.

"It will help you understand what your team's perception is of where you're going, where you're headed and how the company is effective," he says. "It's a very important, little exercise you could do."

You could also start reading positive customer feedback to employees to get people talking. The stand-out employees will be proud, and others will want to get their own clients' praise for the next meeting.

The more people are communicating with each other, the less chance you have of being surprised with something you didn't know about, Grunder says.

5. DO A LITTLE BIT MORE. Grunder started an irrigation division this year, even though some people questioned him on the timing. Grunder didn't really worry about all the questions because he knew he could make it work.

He took a calculated risk and the irrigation division was the second most profitable department in the company this year. While the revenue numbers are small, he still has it in the black.

Grunder compares taking a risk in business to betting on a horse race.

"I don't bet on a 30-1 horse or a 40-1 horse or a 50-1 horse ... I don't even bet on the even money horse. I bet on a 2, 3 or 4-1 horse that's got a legitimate shot at winning," he says.

And by following these five steps, you'll have a good shot at winning, too. **L&L**

The author is associate editor at *Lawn & Landscape*. Send him an e-mail at bhorn@gie.net.

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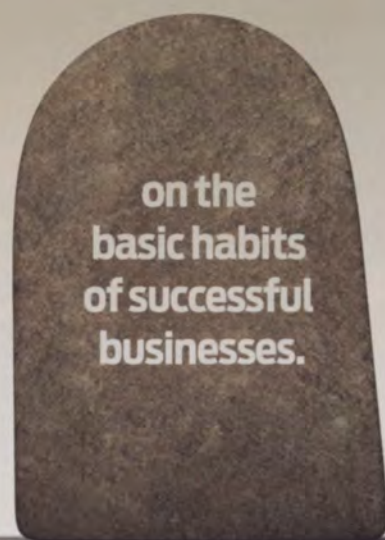
JOHN DEERE

Stay focused

By William J. Lynott

The upheaval in today's economy has given a re-birth to the basic dynamics of successful business management. Easy to ignore in good times, the time-honored rules of profitable business management are a critical component in the recipe for building sales and profits when the going gets tough.

Here are nine commandments of successful business operations that can help you and your landscaping business survive and prosper in any economy.



1 NEVER ALLOW ANY OF YOUR MONEY TO LIE IDLE. Making the sale and collecting your bill is only half of the job of professional money management.

Once you have collected your money, it's important to manage it skillfully.

If you don't already have one, open a money market account at your bank and link it to your business checking account for telephone or online transfers.

Deposit all of your daily receipts into the money market account, where they will immediately start drawing interest. Never deposit receipts directly into your checking account. Keep a minimum balance in the checking account and transfer cash by phone or online only as needed to cover checks written. The banks have made this technique so easy to use that there is no longer any reasonable excuse for not using it.

The worst money sin of all is allowing

cash and checks to sit in a drawer until it's convenient for you to visit the bank. Keeping all of your money working for you all of the time is an important part of professional business management.

2 BE AGGRESSIVE COLLECTING ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE. It's important not to allow your accounts receivables to go untended. You've earned that money, you have a right to it and you need it.

Dunning late-paying clients may not be your favorite pastime, but setting up an accounts receivable file and following through on late payments is as important to your financial success as the quality of the services you offer.

If your customers learn that you are cavalier about money owed to you, then you can be certain they will stretch your patience (and your cash flow) to the limit.

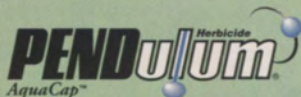
3 DON'T BE IN A HURRY TO PAY YOUR BILLS. But, there's good reason why checks are slow to come in from people who owe you money.

It's because hanging on to cash as long as possible keeps that money available to draw interest or put to work in the business.

That's why it's important for you to set up a system to pay your bills only when they come due. It's easy to do and it moves you up on the ladder of professional cash management.

Don't jeopardize your credit standing by paying bills late. Pay your bills just before they're due – not before, not after.

It's especially important to avoid late payment on credit card bills because of the oppressive penalties that most banks are now putting into place.



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BACK TO BASICS

4

ADOPT A MARKETING MENTALITY. If customer satisfaction is the mashed potatoes, marketing is the gravy.

But keep in mind: Marketing involves far more than an ad in the Yellow Pages or passing out your business cards. Marketing is a complex challenge, all the more so in a business operating in a specialized niche such as yours. If you are to achieve optimum success in marketing your landscaping business, you must be willing to spend time studying, reading and analyzing your market and your competition, whether your business is residential, commercial or both.

Keeping your business healthy and profitable requires an ongoing marketing program. There is no other way. Competitive prices alone won't do it; dependability alone won't do it.

Marketing embraces all facets of your operation. To be an effective marketer,

“

The worst money sin of all is allowing cash and checks to sit in a drawer until it's convenient for you to visit the bank.

you must nurture and promote your business image, sell yourself as well as your business and concentrate on making your services the best choice for discriminating clients.

5

DETERMINE THAT YOU WILL NEVER LOSE A CLIENT TO A COMPETITOR.


Numerous studies over the years have shown that, on average, it costs five times as much for a business to find a new customer than to keep an old one. Focus on the significance of that statement; it is one of the most powerful concepts in the world of business.

With competitors standing ready and anxious to snatch away your clients and

prospective clients, and your awareness of the cost of replacing a lost client with a new one, it should be easy for you to understand the importance of never giving even one client a reason to stray.

Once a client uses your services for the first time, you've done the hard part. Now, your job is to instill the notion that doing business with you will always be a satisfying experience.

You and your employees must never lose sight of the fact that developing a new customer is a costly and difficult job. Once a stranger becomes your customer, a major part of your overall marketing program must center on ways to make sure that he or she never has reason to leave you for a competitor.



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BACK TO BASICS

6 **KEEP LEASING IN MIND.** Most financial advisers agree that leasing products like trucks or vans for personal use is usually not financially advantageous. But business is a different animal entirely.

The nature of business accounting is such that leasing can be the most sensible approach to many types of capital

investment. It usually makes sense to lease if you will be able to use the cash in your business or investments to earn a better return than the cost of leasing.

Talk to your own tax adviser about this the next time you're considering a large capital purchase.

GO THE EXTRA MILE. Never forget that

7 a complaint from a client can easily feel unreasonable. When that happens, think of the cost in time and money as an investment in your future.

Once you've sold yourself and your employees on why you are the best choice for clients who require the utmost in dependability and know-how, you must focus your marketing efforts on ways to promote this image to both clients and prospects.

8 **SET YOUR BUSINESS APART.** America's most successful entrepreneurs are those who have carefully developed an identity all their own. Your job is to evaluate your strengths and then combine them to form a unique identity.

Perhaps you've been in business longer than your nearest competitors; or maybe you have a reputation for especially skillful workmanship at competitive prices.

Whatever your marketable strengths, you should write them all down, study them and then determine how to separate yourself from your competitors – how to motivate potential clients to seek you out, and existing clients to feel fortunate to have discovered you.

9 **DEVELOP A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR BANKER.** Handling money is a banker's job, and most are very good at it. Even if your operation is relatively small, it's a good idea to develop a personal relationship with the manager at your bank. Discuss your financial picture honestly with the manager of your local branch. You'll get some good ideas and a favorable ear should you ever need a little financial help or advice.

CONCLUSION. To some landscape contractors, a tight economy means hibernating. To others, it's a time to increase client loyalty, solidify market position and attract new clients. Following these nine commandments will help you turn tough times into good times. **L&L**

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



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The reality I see is that landscapers don't understand their customers.

Profitable partnerships

Get close to your customers – or someone else will. By Ed LaFlamme

Jack Welch, the former chairman and CEO of General Electric, was one of my customers when I owned my landscaping business. I got to know him from my dealings maintaining his home and the corporate headquarters in Fairfield, Conn., along with reading his many books.

One of the things I learned from him and his writings was that business people must face reality. He felt that not facing the reality of a situation was a serious weakness.

Today, the reality is the economy. The pressure is on with increased competition, price reductions and almost non-existent customer loyalty. So if you want to protect your customers you better get close to them. We know what we want our reality to become: customer loyalty with high retention rates and 80 percent of new business coming from referrals.

But how do we achieve it?

Although there is tremendous pressure to lower prices, and we can't ignore this reality (we need to be competitive), landscaping is still a service business, and a relationship business. But the reality I see is that landscapers don't understand their customers.

THE THREE CUSTOMER GROUPS. Look at your client list. Your relationship with every person and company on that list can be divided into one of three groups – vendor, trusted adviser and partner.

If you're just a vendor to your customers, you have no relationship. It's all price or it's a brand new account.

If you're a trusted adviser to them, you've probably developed a relationship where they feel comfortable in asking your opinion regarding their landscaping and budget. Usually they won't leave unless there is a compelling reason.

The ultimate position is partner. They

have real confidence in you. More than a trusted adviser, you're viewed as an integral part of their business; they trust you. You are really going to have to mess up to lose this account.

MAKE ANOTHER LIST. Once you know where you stand with all your customers, figure out what you did to get the clients into the partner and trusted adviser groups.

Then create two simple plans – one to keep the partners as partners, and one to identify who in the other two groups could be moved up to partner status. Then get working to move them up.

Remember though, there will always be three groups. So, don't get frustrated if you can't move them all up. This work will take time, planning and a lot of communicating, but it will be worth it. **L&L**

The author is a consultant with The Harvest Group.

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The Edge You Need

Don't be afraid to ask

By Kristen Hampshire

Selling additional services can boost the bottom line and build client loyalty.



Meeting sales goals is challenging enough in a tough year – but selling above and beyond the basics? Add-on services sometimes lose sales priority in times when companies are focused on getting clients to renew or simply sign on for a regular lawn care program.

But don't discount the revenues add-on services can deliver. Aeration, grub control, lime application, organic topdressing, perimeter pest control – these extras appeal to existing customers and give companies a way to dig deeper to an existing client base.

TOP DRESSING. Jeff Kollenkark, owner of Weed Man Fresno, Calif., made about \$40,000 this summer selling organic topdressing at \$100 to \$200 per application, depending on property size. "We'll probably do more this fall, and the service is fairly significant to our bottom line in a year where we're looking for anything we can grab on to," he says. "It's a good thing."

Kollenkark is actually a little surprised that the topdressing service has gone over so well. "To me, this is a little more discretionary than feeding the lawn and keeping out crabgrass, but we're still selling quite a bit," he says.

Marketing strategy has a lot to do with why Kollenkark

Extra, extra

John Sanders and Jeff Kollenkark give pointers on how to sell add-ons in a tough economy.

- **Create awareness.** Explain why the customer needs the service, and make it easy for the client to opt-in. Sanders sends out annual renewal letters that list basic lawn care components and all the extras. From there, Sanders highlights one add-on service on each invoice with a marketing note that goes something like this: "According to our records, you haven't applied lime to your lawn for two years." Clients can elect the service by checking a box on the invoice they mail in with payment.
- **Be the expert.** Clients trust technicians to help them understand problems in the lawn and how these issues can be fixed. When technicians serve as teachers, they're actually doing their part to sell add-on services, Kollenkark says. But these interactions must be sincere. "It's about doing the right thing for their lawn – building long-term relationships and trust," Kollenkark says. So when a technician suggests topdressing as a soil-building alternative, customers listen up. "Technicians have relationships with customers."
- **Layer your approach.** E-mail, bill stuffers, phone calls, face-to-face discussions – vary your marketing approach because messages resonate differently with each client. One prefers e-mail contact and another would rather read a brochure about a service. Sanders launches an annual calling campaign, stuffs invoices with four, color information sheets about grubs and other relevant pests and reminds technicians to suggest add-ons.

E-mails market in a helpful way, which is important for all marketing, Sanders says. "In all of our efforts, our approach is informational so customers feel like they are opting in as opposed to being sold a service," he says.
- **Prevent buyer fatigue.** Sanders limits marketing phone calls to twice per season.

"You do start to get some pushback (if you go overboard)," he says. And he's careful not to market every add-on service to every customer. Marketing notes on invoices focus on one service at a time, and these notes are stuffed in invoices three to five times per year. "We are careful not to overwhelm customers, especially new ones, with all these extra services," Sanders says.

By respecting customers' pocketbooks, Sanders says customers value the company and take its recommendations seriously. "The advice of the technician is the most valuable (sales tool)," he says. "If he recommends an add-on service, the client will most likely buy it."



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ADD-ON SERVICES

is ringing up sales on top-dressing and aeration, which will net the company about \$50,000 this year. Every add-on sale is approached with an authentic, soft pitch and real concern for what's best for customers' lawns.

"We really stress education, building a relationship with the customer and not selling them something they don't need," Kollenkark says. "We treat their lawns as if they were our own. If the service is a good fit, we offer it."

Specifically, Kollenkark contacts customers three

ways – a newsletter that provides tips on watering along with information about pests and disease pressure; a technician recommending the service on site; and e-mails.

PEST CONTROL. Meanwhile, in Main Line, Pa., John Sanders' Weed Man location is finding success with a new perimeter pest control service thanks to his multi-pronged marketing approach. To start, he launched the service because of customer demand, which meant a ready audience for buying the add-on. "More

people are creating outdoor living spaces that include cooking, so nuisance ants become a problem," Sanders says.

As with other add-ons Sanders offers – grub control, aeration, liming, flea and tick control – he is careful not to bombard customers with too many extras. Otherwise, they'll choose to buy nothing. Sanders markets perimeter pest control to customers who already chose other add-ons, such as grub control or lime application. Since he's not marketing grub control to this population, he's free to sell perimeter pest control without bugging them.



Kollenkark

"If you push too hard on one service, the concern is that you could cannibalize other sales," Sanders says, not wanting perimeter pest control to take

precedence over standard add-ons like grub control.

So, rather than sending out a blanket marketing piece, Sanders selectively introduced the new service through the company's e-mail messages.

The key to selling add-ons is to layer messages, Sanders says, avoid overwhelming customers and explain the real value of each service. **L&L**

The author is a frequent contributor to *Lawn & Landscape*.

“If you push too hard on one service, the concern is that you could cannibalize other sales.” — John Sanders, Weed Man

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Water works

Tailor an irrigation division that flows smoothly and profitably.

By Kristen Hampshire



Having detail-oriented and highly skilled technicians helps ensure your irrigation division's success.

Water work can be lucrative when an irrigation division is well-equipped and staffed with experienced technicians. With bidding smarts and well-laid field plans to ensure smooth installation, and prevent maintenance down the road, contractors like Steven Allen, president, Allen Outdoor Solutions, St. Louis, see profits edge toward 20 percent for installation and up to 40 percent for service calls.

"Just like any construction job, if you're not job costing, checking your pricing and constantly making changes to your bidding process, you won't make it," Allen says.

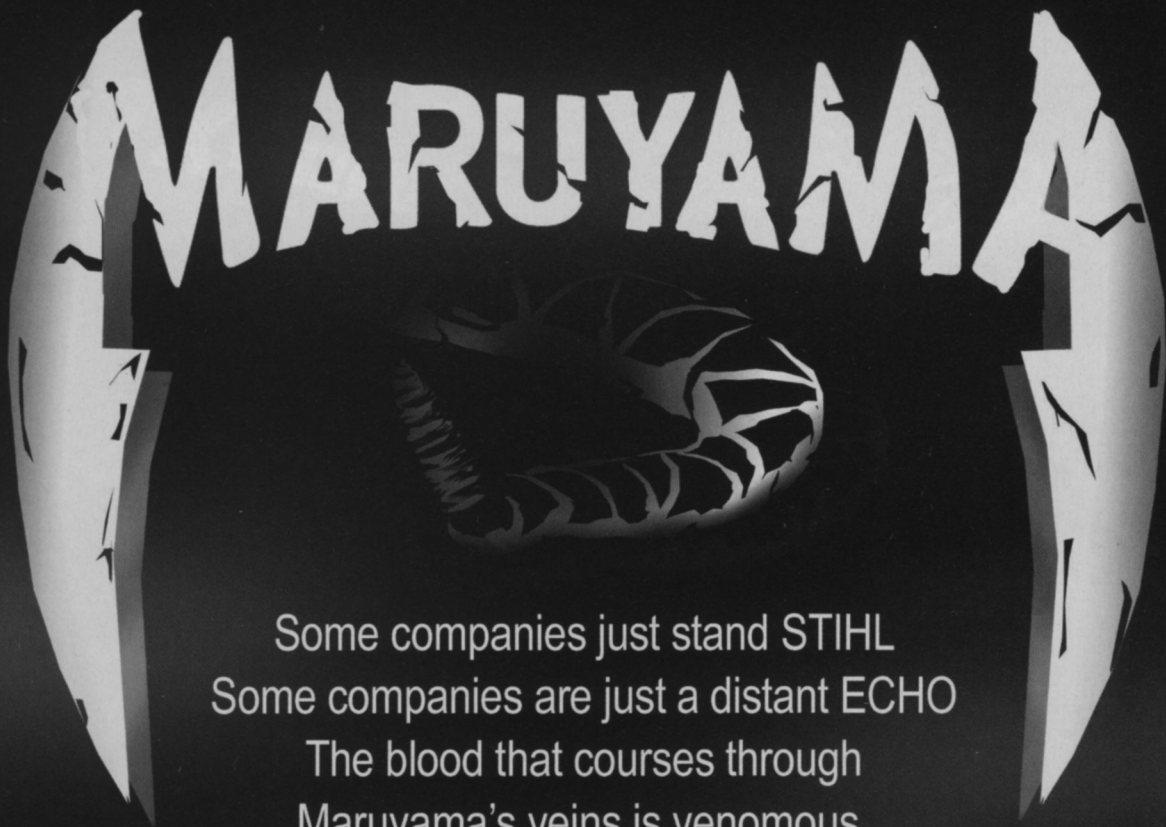
After 21 years in the field, Allen's operation has come a long way from the startup he launched after deciding to leave his first job out of college – a sales position at an irrigation company. "I ended up really liking it, so I eventually started a company of my own," he says. Gradually, Allen acquired labor-saving equipment like a trencher, and he slowly built a customer base by reigniting rela-

tionships with customers who knew him from his days knocking on doors.

Today, Allen Outdoor Solutions is a diversified full-service landscape firm, and the eight technicians in its robust irrigation division service 3,000 accounts. The key to running an efficient, profitable operation is two-fold, Allen says. "The most important things are to make sure you're overseeing the job and job-costing projects," he says.

Danny Ross of Foliage Factory in Fort Worth, Texas, adds that an investment in the best equipment, parts and employees will pay off with time savings and, as a result, better profits. "If you have good guys who take pride in their work and install the job right the first time, you won't have callbacks – (which) leads to bad PR and money out the door," he says.

PROFITABLE PEOPLE. A job-costing rule of "thirds" works for Dean Hirsh, president, Turf Industries, Lake Zurich, Ill. He figures one-third of a job's total cost



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is for materials, one-third is for labor and one-third is profit. "If you follow that trend, after a while you realize what you should be charging and that irrigation can be pretty profitable," says Hirsh, adding, "And the faster you work, the more profit you make."

Of course, the thirds rule only works if the materials and labor are high quality. Otherwise, you'll take a slice out of the profit piece to pay for callbacks to unsatisfied customers. Hirsh says that job-site supervision is integral to ensuring productivity and profit. "If you don't have a good foreman, to be honest, guys will take advantage of that situation," he says.

Hirsh works to keep the best employees on board with fair pay and priority treatment. "We make sure they feel not just like they are employed, but like they are family," he says. Essentially, that involves respecting technicians and asking foreman to do the same.

After all, those employees are an investment – one that costs about \$1,500 to \$2,000 in training if you

42% of landscape contractors offer irrigation services.

SOURCE: LAWN & LANDSCAPE RESEARCH

figure in the cost of licensure classes and test fees, Allen says. In Missouri, technicians must be licensed through the Department of Natural Resources to test back-

flow preventers and system safety valves. "In the St. Louis County limits, you have to be called a 'master sprinkler installer' to turn in these (system) tests, and employees doing the testing have to be certified irrigation installers," Allen says.

He says St. Louis County is working to elevate irrigation practitioners to the status of comparable tradespeople such as plumber or electrician. "The only way the (county) can police it at this point is through the testing," Allen says, adding that up to two-thirds of so-called irrigation installers are not licensed.

The paperwork and class time might seem a hassle, but Allen says that having a competent crew of technicians keeps his operation flowing smoothly, profitably and ethically. "Mrs. Jones doesn't want to see tattoos and earrings," he says, adding that he hires employees who can wear the company logo without spoiling the business' reputation – and that goes for attitude, too.

Meanwhile, Allen keeps maintenance crewmembers honest by not offering commission, so they only fix what's broken on a job site. That way, employees don't spend unnecessary time on a property, he says.

Starting an irrigation division from scratch? Hire on the subcontractors who have performed irrigation work for your company before like Ross did. Foliage Factory subcontracted irrigation services for about 25 years before creating its own division eight years ago. "We were doing all the work – sales, follow-up on jobs – and we

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EXPANDING IRRIGATION



Keeping techs well-equipped helps avoid costly callbacks (and frustrated employees).

weren't making much money on it," Ross says.

By bringing irrigation installation in-house, his crews work together and save time on a site. "Our subcontractors wouldn't always clean up so well because they wanted to get in and out, so we would have to do their cleanup for them," Ross says. "Now, our irrigators work with the landscape divisions that comes on to the job next and they help each other with grade work."

EQUIPPED FOR EFFICIENCY. Allen's trucks are "rolling warehouses" stocked with an array of materials: fittings, pipe, and other irrigation parts needed to complete a repair, plus the equipment to get the job done. "If a service tech gets on site and has to reschedule (because he doesn't have the part), customers are unhappy and will go elsewhere," Allen says.

"And if a technician is trying to please a customer and is driving back and forth

to the shop all the time for parts, he won't make the company any money," he says.

Eight service trucks are assigned to crews, who keep them year-round.

Installation trucks are stocked differently and stay on site an entire day, so they are equipped for a specific job.

Hirsh orders a week's worth of equipment at one time, and foremen are responsible for taking inventory in trucks every morning and restocking supplies as needed. He gives foremen authority to submit purchase orders at the parts distributor, so technicians can keep working on a job if they need a part in a pinch. "If we have to go back the next day to finish a job, that screws up our schedule," he says, emphasizing why such a mundane task as stocking a truck can make or break an irrigation division's productivity.

And speaking of broken, when equipment is down with no backup plan, that's

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really a time killer. That's why Ross has a backup truck, trailer, trencher and other key pieces of equipment. If this seems like too much capital to keep in-house, make a rental plan B, he suggests.

"Always have a backup plan – be ready," Ross says. "You don't want to have five guys out in the field twiddling their thumbs, waiting to get a trencher you could rent for \$100 bucks to keep things going."

MASTERING THE PLAN. Running a smooth operation in the field requires careful planning of installation jobs – detailed system designs, accompanying supplies lists, a game plan. Perfecting the process takes practice, Hirsh says. He started his irrigation division by offering the service to 20 or so clients, only charging them for parts. "We gave them labor for free and we practiced on them one full summer," Hirsh says of the old days.

For companies new to the field, the

Of companies that offer irrigation services, 12% saw their gross revenues increase from 2009.

23% expect irrigation sales to increase in 2011.

SOURCE: LAWN & LANDSCAPE RESEARCH

best way to gain that experience is to bring on technicians or division managers with irrigation on their resumes.

This might include upgrading a scheduling and routing system to improve efficiency, like Allen did. A \$6,000 investment in system that runs out of Microsoft Outlook replaces the handwritten schedules Allen Outdoor Services used several years ago. "Trying to hand-sort and hand-schedule and hand-route customers really cost the office and technicians a lot of misguided time driving to and from areas," Allen says. "Drive time takes away the profitability of the service department."

Now, the computer system figures the best route. Routes are printed every morning and job tickets are handed to

each crew. For service calls, Allen tries assigns crews to the same route because customers like to see familiar faces. In a round-about-way, this reduces callbacks and improves customer satisfaction. "We're constantly trying to make sure we get the right match with technicians and customers," he says.

A comment box on invoices left with each customer provides a space to sound off any complaints or compliments.

Ross has found over the years that worker pride, plain and simple, is the key to staving off customer callbacks and keeping clients happy. He prioritizes the three keys to profitability and success like this: proud workers, quality equipment and a backup plan.

"You need qualified personnel who want to work and are proud of the job – people who take care of equipment and properly maintain it," he says. **L&L**

The author is a frequent contributor to *Lawn & Landscape*.

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Time for a change

Making a transition in services or clientele can seem simple enough for you, but it might not be as easy for your employees.

When your company's main source of revenue comes from large commercial construction, it's time to mix things up.

That was the situation facing Donnie Garritano and his Las Vegas-based company, D&K Landscape.

"Our main bloodline has been severed to some degree very significantly," says Garritano, the president and CEO.

In 2010, Garritano wanted to focus more on residential and consumer-based landscape and maintenance services, but still maintain a commercial main-

tenance presence. While it would be a challenge to communicate the changes to the market, Garritano would also have to drive the change internally.

But with 15 years in the industry, D&K's workers could use disciplines they developed doing commercial construction and transfer them to the residential side with no problem, right?

Wrong.

FIND THE RESISTERS. Even with the basic disciplines in place, the change wasn't going through without some complications. Proactively sitting down with people and explaining why things are changing and what their role will be is a good first step, Garritano says.

"It should take you 30 days to get your arms around it, at least that I can see that you have gotten through it and gotten your head around it," he says. "Then you kind of watch the process evolve and if they get better, then you let it go."

If someone continues to make the same mistakes and continues to refer to how they did things in their old role, it might be time to part ways, Garritano says.

"They just can't get it out of their mind that they aren't doing that job anymore," he says. "So, when you start seeing that there is going to be a long road or a very difficult task getting someone to do that, then you just have to identify that to them and sometimes that change is as good for them as it is for us."

KEEP IN TOUCH. One of the first actions Garritano took after making the announcement in January was holding operations and business development meetings weekly instead of monthly. Garritano facilitates all the meetings and uses them to make sure the employees



A shift to residential services buoyed D&K this year, but it took some retraining for employees used to dealing with commercial clients.



Garritano



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NEW SERVICES

D&K Landscape

Principal: Donnie Garritano, president and CEO **LOCATION** Las Vegas **YEAR FOUNDED** 1996 **2009 REVENUE** \$9.2 million **EMPLOYEES** 80 **CUSTOMER BREAKDOWN** 70% commercial, 30% residential **SERVICES OFFERED** Design, consultation, installation, maintenance

are sticking with the plan.

"Otherwise, people sometimes tend to want to just fall back to their old roles," he says. "We have to keep emphasizing the strategy and keep identifying what we're doing, and keep that direction moving forward."

Garritano also recently began holding

one-on-one meetings with supervisors and above on the organization chart. He tries to do four per week, and asks employees to come prepared with ideas or problems. But he also asks that they come with suggestions on how to solve the problems they present.

"They need to be open to exploration

Branding

When D&K Landscape rolled out its new services, Donnie Garritano, president and CEO, wanted to do something more than simply announce the company was now offering residential landscape and maintenance services.

He wanted consumers to differentiate between his established company and some of the smaller competitors who don't have the track record D&K does in the green industry.

"It's a lot of mom and pops and it's a lot of owner/operators - a lot of guys with pick-up trucks and trailers that do residential work," he says. "So as a homeowner here, it's really a coin toss as to when you pick up the phonebook or get a flyer on your door or however you may acquire the name of a landscape company, that you are going to get somebody that is reputable, that has a long track record of good business practices and all the things you'd come to expect in any other major industry."

Though the company has established its brand in the commercial marketplace, Marisa Finetti, director of marketing and public relations, says the company would still have to make a mark in the residential market. The company branded its new services with short names, which will help attract customers' attention.

"The benefit of branding each signature service allows us to create marketing messages that are targeted and concise," she says. "We can distribute marketing messages with an easy-to-identify brand that consists of two words explaining the service in its simplest form."

Finetti says the challenge in developing a series of brands is clearly getting the name out there to consumers that have the potential to make a connection with it. But remember, your message isn't going to be accepted in one day.

"This takes time, but we're patient and diligent with our marketing messages," she says. "We're excited about our company's progress, and this fuels our drive to get the word out through all means, from conventional marketing to social media tactics."



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NEW SERVICES

— so willing to discuss it and put all their cards on the table and look at all different angles,” he says.

Scheduling a weekly time makes it easier on the employee because it creates a more relaxed setting. It can help remove the employees’ feeling that they are walking to the principal’s office.

“It gives an open invitation and it’s more of a proactive strategy for getting employees to come in and talk about their issues,” he says.

It’s worked so well that Garritano plans on continuing the meetings.

Though the company had to make adjustments, it was worth it. In the first five

months of offering the new services, the company generated between \$75,000 and \$100,000 in additional revenue that the company never had before, Garritano says.

“It’s evolved nicely because everybody here is doing something different than they were 12 months ago,” he says. “And they are doing it well.” **L&L**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape*. Send him an e-mail at bhorn@gie.net.

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Be patient

Even though Donnie Garritano and D&K Landscape had years of commercial landscaping experience, rolling out new services geared toward residential customers would still be a challenge. Providing services to residential customers wasn't the same as dealing with a property manager who didn't need everything explained. Homeowners are more particular and don't understand that the process from turning the property from bad to good is an evolution, Garritano says. So, when working with residential customers, you need to be more patient and explain what you are doing.

Here is a list of D&K's services:

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PropertyGuard – Commercial property landscape maintenance with emphasis on irrigation management and high-end detail services that promotes curbside appeal

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GardenMedic – Plant health care nurtures plants and trees to encourage beauty and longevity

ArborMaster – Tree care by licensed arborists ensures proper growth and protection of trees

Parks & Playgrounds – Along with its sister company, Creative Play, D&K can supply playground equipment and landscape services

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Back to basics

How Del Reynolds has built Spring-Green Lawn Care on simple principles of good customer service.

By Matt LaWell

Del Reynolds walked up and down the streets of Louisiana, every one of them identical under the murky cover of water and trash and lives put on hold. He talked with hundreds of people and listened to their stories. He wondered how all this could have really happened. He closed his eyes to push back tears, but couldn't.

Reynolds arrived in the state in late August 2005, the day after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, then rattled across the state and uprooted so many families and so much history. He was working for State Farm Insurance then as an adjuster. He had been handed a list of more than 100 claims, each of which represented a real person, a real family, a real story of heartbreak.

He had just 24 hours to listen to them all.

"I heard so many stories and cried with so many people," Reynolds says. "I like helping people, but it just took a toll."

Katrina broke him. He wanted out.

Reynolds had worked in the insurance industry for almost six years before that last trip to Louisiana. He had talked with thousands and thousands of people, had listened to thousands and thousands of sad stories. He was good, and when you're good, you listen to more sad stories than most people ever will. But Katrina broke him.

He wanted out.

FROM ADJUSTER TO LCO. Those days and weeks and months in Louisiana changed Reynolds and so many other people. Even if time heals all wounds, it cannot wipe away the images and the stories seared in Reynolds' mind now when he talks with another customer or mows another lawn.

Reynolds owns and operates a Spring-Green Lawn Care franchise now in Hendersonville, Tenn., about 20 minutes northeast of Nashville. He has lived and worked there for more than four years, building a business again from the ground up. Why lawn care? Well, he's no industry rookie. He always wanted to make yards look good – he always wanted to help people, after all, no matter his industry – and had started his own mowing business at 18.

Of course, when Reynolds was in his teens and early 20s, he was a young businessman comfortable with the accomplishments he had managed and didn't have much of a plan to increase customers or revenues or market share. He often failed to call customers back in any sort of a timely manner. After his years with State Farm, he instituted a practice that each call was to be returned within 24 hours, if not the same day. Those six years provided him with a fresh perspective on how to build a business and interact with customers. "When I started back in lawn care," he says, "I just thought it was great again."

Reynolds started Spring-Green in 2007 and within the first year had more than 120 customers on his list – impressive, yes, but hardly an indication of



Spring-Green Lawn Care

PRINCIPAL Del Reynolds

LOCATION Hendersonville, Tenn.

YEAR FOUNDED 2007 **2009 REVENUE** around

\$200,000 **EMPLOYEES** 2 **CUSTOMER**

BREAKDOWN 90% residential, 10%

commercial **SERVICES OFFERED** Fertilizer, weed control, lawn insect control, core and overseeding, tree and shrub care, lawn disease control, maintenance



Whether as an insurance adjuster in post-Katrina Louisiana or an LCO in Tennessee, Del Reynolds is motivated by a desire to help people.

future success. The business counted more than 230 customers near the end of the second year, more than 500 near the end of the third year and more than 600 earlier this year, after less than four years. "We could have had 200 more new customers, too," Reynolds says, "but we couldn't do that. Too much growth too fast really can hurt a business."

HOW HE DID IT. How did Reynolds and Spring-Green manage to grow so much so quickly? Well, a plan helped. Reynolds always knew what sort of growth he wanted during each of his first years back in the industry – about double the number of customers during each of his first two years before an eventual plateau – but effective marketing played just as important a role. Forget direct mail and all sorts of fliers. Reynolds and his sales

team turned to knocking on doors and talking with folks about their lawns.

"Some people aren't going to like it, but some people are," Reynolds says. "We're getting in front of them and showing them what's wrong with their yard, rather than them just getting something in the mail and chucking it in the trash. They see a truck, they see a person, they put a face with Spring-Green." It's a lot more difficult to chuck a person, after all, than it is to chuck another flier.

A FOCUSED APPROACH. But marketing and sales aren't the only factors in the tremendous growth Reynolds and Spring-Green have enjoyed. A more focused approach has been key – the business moved away from just lawn care and more toward a package approach that allows customers more services and

only one invoice – as has an increased attention on customer service. Returning those calls is important, but customer service is now far more than picking up the phone.

"We try to educate our customers," Reynolds says. "We want them to know what's going to happen before it happens. Like this year, for instance, we had 15 inches of rain in two days, so we tried to inform as many people as we could that we were going to have a bad crab grass season this year. We sent out e-mails, text messages, whatever we could, so they're not surprised and they're not calling us and canceling because they have crab grass coming up or they have nutsedge or they have brown patch and it's dying because of a lack of water. Education is a big key."

Reynolds and his employees also look the part. They wear long sleeves and khaki pants, a uniform that some customers say is almost too nice. They keep their trucks clean to project a neat appearance. They knock before they start to mow or treat any lawn, and talk with customers if they answer the door. And they answer calls as soon as possible.

Reynolds still likes to help people. He always wants to help people.

"If we're around that area, we get out there that day and do it," Reynolds says. "We just go by and get it done. That's what they like. They don't want to sit around and wait and wonder if that got done. We just get out there as quick as we can for the customer." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

Hit the road

New truck models offer more power and more payload.

If you need a new ride, check out this preview of the 2011 passenger and medium-duty trucks. Manufacturers offer increased horsepower and cleaner engines for tougher air quality standards.



1 CHEVROLET SILVERADO 3500HD

Chevrolet's new 2011 Silverado 3500HD chassis cab trucks offer a more powerful 6.6L Duramax diesel, as well as increased gross vehicle weight ratings (GVWR) of up to 13,200 pounds and a gross combined weight rating of up to 27,500 pounds on dual rear wheel models.

www.chevrolet.com/silverado-family

at 6,500 rpm; 278 lb.-ft. of torque at 4,000 rpm; and 6,100 pounds maximum trailer tow capacity.

The 5-liter V-8 gives 360 horsepower at 5,500 rpm; 380 lb.-ft. of torque at 4,250 rpm; and 10,000 pounds maximum trailer tow capacity.

The 6.2-liter V-8 gives 411 horsepower at 5,500 rpm; 434 lb.-ft. of torque at 4,500 rpm; and 11,300 pounds maximum trailer tow capacity.

www.fordvehicles.com/trucks



2 FORD F-SERIES SUPER DUTY AND F-150

The 2011 F-Series Super Duty boasts all-new powertrains, led by the Ford-built 6.7-liter Power Stroke V-8 turbocharged diesel engine, which delivers best-in-class torque of 800 lb.-ft. (at 1,600 rpm) and best-in-class 400 horsepower (at 2,800 rpm) and biodiesel compatibility up to B20. It has a towing capability of 24,400 pounds and a payload capability of 7,070 pounds.

The new Ford F-150 offers four new truck engines: a 3.7-liter V-6, 5.0-liter and 6.2-liter V-8s and a twin-turbocharged 3.5-liter EcoBoost. Each engine is mated to a six-speed automatic transmission.

The 3.7 liter V-6 gives 302 horsepower

3 GMC SIERRA DENALI

GMC Sierra Denali 2500HD and 3500HD – the first offerings of the exclusive Denali line on a heavy-duty GMC pickup – features the most powerful diesel engine in the segment – a new 6.6L Duramax turbo diesel that delivers 397 horsepower at 3,000 rpm and 765 lb.-ft. of torque at 1,600 rpm.

www.gmc.com/2011sierra



4 HINO 268

The Hino 268 features a standard 12,000-pound front suspension, which provides the durability needed for front-



heavy equipment. The J08E-VC diesel 4-cycle, 6-cylinder engine offers 220HP at 2,500 rpm and 520 lb.-ft. torque at 1,500 rpm. GVW is 25,950 pounds.

www.hino.com

5 INTERNATIONAL TERRASTAR

The International TerraStar Class 4/5 features a commercial-duty MaxxForce 7 V-8 diesel engine with 300 horsepower, delivering 660 lb.-ft. torque. The MaxxForce 7 is matched with a commercial-duty Allison 1000 transmission and MaxxForce Advanced EGR emissions technology. The 2011 model offers a 4x4 drivetrain.

www.internationaltrucks.com

6 ISUZU N-SERIES

The 2011 Isuzu N-Series trucks are the first medium-duty low-cab-forward trucks on the market to offer Selective Catalytic Reduction technology with Diesel Exhaust Fluid injection to meet these exacting and stringent requirements:

Compliance with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 2010 emissions standards (EPA 2010), which require reductions in NOx; and clean-idle certified.

www.isuzucv.com

7 KENWORTH T170

The Kenworth T170 is a straight truck in a 4x2 configuration with a GVWR up to 19,500 pounds. Standard features include the PACCAR PX-6 engine, 8,000-pound front axle and 11,500-pound rear axle and hydraulic brakes.

More standard equipment includes low-frame height chassis with 19.5-inch wheels and tires, power door locks and passenger-side electric windows (these are optional on driver's side). Customers can choose a manual or automatic transmission.

www.kenworth.com

8 UD TRUCKS

The 2011 UD Trucks product line fea-

tures an all new cab and operator's environment, and the new 7-litre GH7 diesel engine with performance ratings of 245 and 280 horsepower, which was jointly developed by UD Trucks Corporation and Volvo Powertrain Development. By using selective catalytic reduction (SCR) and diesel particulate filter (DPF) emissions technology, the GH7 is compliant with the stringent 2010 EPA standards and is clean idle certified. The new model line-up covers Class 5 (17,995 GVW) through Class 7 (32,900 GVW).

www.udtrucksna.com

9 DODGE RAM CHASIS CAB

The 2011 Ram Chassis Cab includes a 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 or 6.7-liter Cummins Turbo Diesel engines, integrated diesel exhaust brake, a commercial-grade frame, six-speed manual transmission and a diesel exhaust fluid (DEF) system to improve emissions.

www.dodge.com

Lawn & Landscape congratulates

the semi-finalists in the 2010 Landscaper's Challenge, sponsored by New Holland Construction.



To find out which design/build contractor is the grand-prize winner of the New Holland L170 skid steer loader worth more than \$32,000, stop by the New Holland booth #1054 at the GIE+EXPO in Louisville, Ky.

And while you're there, pick up your entry for the 2011 Landscaper's Challenge!

Eric Buzzatto

Rain Men Landscaping
and Irrigation, McDonald, Pa.

Scott Edmondson

C&S Landscaping of
Virginia, Strasburg, Va.

Keith Morris

K. Morris Landscape Design,
Oakdale, Pa.

Victor Coppola

GreenWorks Environmental,
Allenwood, N.J.

Christopher Haldeman

Sycamore Springs Landscape,
Reading, Pa.

Greg Semmer

Kinsella Landscape,
Blue Island, Ill.

Making a splash

Don't be afraid of waterscapes – the right designs and sales strategies get the job done.



Big or small, with waterfalls or fountains, pond-ed or pondless, water features make people feel better – and using that angle makes them easier to sell.

In the wake of our housing market crash, I've seen a renewed commitment among many homeowners to stay in their property for the foreseeable future. This leads to a decision to invest in their homes by creating outdoor living spaces that are pleasing to look at, fun for the family and offer a retreat from the routines of everyday life.

This is the opportunity for you to offer

a unique outdoor space using waterscape features to create a natural, serene environment while adding incredible value and profit to your company.

SELLING A FEELING. Ponds, waterfalls and decorative water features have been around since nearly the beginning of civilization. People gravitate to these features because they link the beauty

of stone, plants and the sound of running water to pleasure, stillness and tranquility.

There are people who spend years in therapy trying to capture these same feelings. I would suggest a return to nature can be a simple, more immediate way to restore a positive, happier demeanor. No, I'm not a psychologist. I'm a landscape contractor. But when I sell a project on how it will make a homeowner *feel* versus anything else, my close ratio goes up. That is something I can track and measure.

IMPORTANCE OF DESIGN. The term "water feature" refers to anything from a bird bath to a large, multi-tier waterfall. The most common water features include containers, raised or sunken ponds, pondless, bog, fountain, wall fountain and waterfall. Most designs will build off these basic concepts and grow to incorporate a nearly limitless selection of vegetation, aquatic life, lighting and more. A waterscape takes into account the entire project, including adjacent seating, lawn or entertainment areas.

Your design is a sales tool and an opportunity to demonstrate your unique talent of blending the beauty, sounds and nature with the best selection of landscape materials. The goal is to help clients visualize themselves enjoying this new retreat and create the emotional connection needed to earn their business and eliminate the competition.

A small natural stone patio or nearby brick pathway would offer an inviting place for a bench or seating area where they can read a book or sip a glass of wine. Maybe a nearby hammock with a bamboo backdrop would give the family a place to retreat on a warm afternoon.

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DESIGN/BUILD

allow guests to gather near the comfort of a waterfall or fountain wall.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Like several of the services we offer at Sarros Landscaping, waterscapes grew from the demand of our client base. When several clients asked me if I could provide this service, I was not going to ignore the knock of opportunity.

I sifted through the expanse of knowledge available through online forums, local and online suppliers and national organizations. I found incredible value in seeking out pond supply stores, equipment manufacturers and other companies. Nearly every local pond supply store offers pond construction classes to help you learn.

The construction process proved to be much easier than I imagined. I'm not implying that a contractor should just jump into a large project after attending

one pond building class. But starting with a small pond or water feature will give you the necessary confidence to build up to larger and more complex designs.

Education is the first step in adding waterscapes to your line of services. Experience is the logical second step; you simply have to build one. Perhaps practice on your home, or better yet, your mother-in-law's home. Regardless of where you start, putting the wheels in motion and taking that first step to become educated will open doors to new opportunity, adding great value and income to your bottom line.


There is a common misconception that waterscapes are expensive to build



You can add water features to almost any project of any size.

and difficult to maintain. Many contractors struggle to construct water features in a timely and efficient manner. Building a water feature is easy. Constructing a water feature that is beautiful, appears very natural and is free of leaks, problems or headaches, though, is an art.




The most common construction pitfalls include leaks, improper equipment

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and pump sizing and overall aesthetic appearance. Poorly built water features are often plagued with leaks and endless call-backs, leading a contractor to lose money and confidence.

PLAN CAREFULLY. I'll emphasize again the importance of starting small and working your way up to larger projects. The best time to reach out to a supplier, contractor or manufacturer is while you're still in the planning and design phases of the project. It's quite painful to you and your client when you are in the middle of a project or completely done that you realize your design is not turning out as you had expected. Remember, this is a value-added service designed to leave you feeling more confident while adding profit to your bottom line, not the other way around.

To add value to your service, commit the necessary time and resources to develop a design that not only fits within your client's budget, but also captures the feelings your client is looking for. Don't rush.

Beautiful water features, whether small or large, do not just happen by accident. Nor are they the product of someone simply buying a kit and some rocks. The best built water features are purely a function of effort in the design and planning phases. This begins by gathering detailed site information to be sure pumps, filters, skimmers, piping and other features are sized appropriately.

Knowing the volume of water along with the height that the water will fall are two very crucial measurements. You'll need to think about how the feature will be maintained. People are becoming increasingly aware of the value of "green" technology. The correct use of biofilters, plants and aquatic life can ensure your design will not introduce unnecessary toxins and chemicals into their system.

Seek out a designer with experience in water features to communicate the finished product to a potential client. Charge reasonable fees for the design to not only ensure compensation for your time and talent, but to further identify serious homeowners from those who are just kicking the tires.

Nearly every pond supply company is willing to take your field data, design and measurements and help you select the appropriate equipment. Don't be afraid to let them know that you don't have all the answers. These learning opportunities are what will ultimately make you an expert, which will further elevate your offerings above those of your competition.

You may stumble upon larger opportunities that are either a greater challenge you feel confident you are prepared for, or simply beyond your skill level. Contracting with a more experienced company will allow you to serve your client while minimizing the risk of getting involved with a project that could cost you time and profit. By embracing the learning process and continually asking questions in the quest for more knowledge, you will undoubtedly open doors to new, larger and more complex opportunities, allowing you to build an impressive portfolio of waterscape projects. **L&L**

The author is president of Sarros Landscaping, Cumming, Ga.

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Part 3 of 3

Is your technical IQ up to snuff these days?
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Can you rattle off plants' botanical and common names? And spell them correctly to boot? Whether you learned the technical side of the green industry from text books or on the fly in the early days of your business, at some point you learned to identify pests and plants out in the field. (Or maybe you hired someone who can!)

At PLANET's Student Career Days event, which takes place every spring, green industry college students compete in ID competitions – and other events equipment operations, cost estimating and more.

We drew inspiration from these student competitions to create our "Are you smarter than a landscape student?" quizzes. This month: annual and perennial plant ID. For the previous quizzes in the series – turf/turf pest ID and woody plant ID, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com. – Marisa Palmieri

Student Career Days competition

How it works

A maximum of two students per school enter each ID competition and are required to identify a group of 50 annual and perennial plants by botanical name (genus and species) and common name. A master list of plants that could appear in the competition is posted on the website before the event. The competition is 1 hour and 50 minutes long (55 minute per participant).

How to score

Following the Student Career Days' scoring conventions, for each specimen give yourself:

0.5 point for correct spelling

0.5 point for genus

0.5 point for species (and cultivar, if applicable)

0.5 point for common name

Then multiply your total by 5 (since we only have 10 specimens and not 50).

Did you beat this year's student winners in the annual and perennial plant ID competition? They are:

1. Chattahoochee Technical College's Cassie Templeton **87.50**
2. North Carolina State University's Katie Pound **87**
3. Chattahoochee Technical College's Cheryl Gress **83.50**
4. Penn State's Margaret Hoffman **83**
5. Columbus State Community College's Amanda Boggs **82.50**
6. University of Maryland's Todd Colvin **81.50**



1.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



2.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



3.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



4.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



5.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



6.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



7.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



8.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



9.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME



10.

COMMON NAME

BOTANICAL NAME

Answers on page 145 – don't cheat!

By DAVID SHETLAR

More than meets the eye

During the last two decades, various environmental groups have been claiming that turfgrass, while a green carpet of grass, is devoid of biodiversity and should be replaced with native plants or other, more diverse systems. The term "green desert" is commonly used to emphasize this lack of diversity. As a biologist, I take issue with the idea that deserts are devoid of living things, let alone diversity.

I contend that our urban turfgrass systems, whether lawns, athletic fields or golf courses, are also surprisingly diverse.

Too many people believe that biodiversity is strictly related to the large things that they can see – birds, mammals, frogs, trees, shrubs and flowers. I can't think of any park that doesn't emphasize these plants and animals in their construction, informational brochures and nature

walks. While these organisms are an important part of these ecosystems, the real biodiversity is found in the Lilliputian scale: Entomologists will point out that there are more species of insects, spiders, mites, millipedes, centipedes and crustaceans in these habitats than any other group.

While I can agree to this (being an entomologist), other biologists are pointing out that there is even more biodiversity at





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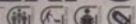
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TURF RESEARCH

an even smaller microscopic scale – bacteria, fungi, nematodes, protozoa, etc.

Recently developed genetic techniques that allow us to mass-extract DNA from soil, water, wood, etc., and identify unique organisms, indicate there are hundreds of thousands of these microscopic organisms, most of which haven't been properly identified and described.

It's appearing that the small things in our world are the real contributors to biodiversity (distinct groups and species of genetic material).

to all the trees, shrubs, perennials and annual flowers that are used, managed urban landscapes are actually turning out to be more biodiverse than nearby "natural stands."

I've even claimed that most turf stands are actually miniature "rain forests." Turf is constantly renewing its foliage and roots. Turf often has a daily dew event (the equivalent of rain that keeps the humidity high), but what is interesting is that this "rain" also has some nutrients in it. Turf often is subjected to wet and dry seasons and

Many would state that this claimed arthropod diversity is mere conjecture, but recent studies in Quebec, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio are finally showing the true magnitude of arthropod diversity in managed turf.

As part of a project to determine if lawn turf could be managed without pesticides, Sophie Rochfort, a graduate student at Laval University at the time of the study, surveyed the pests and other arthropods in lawns that received: 1) standard care (e.g., regular herbicide, insecticide and fertilizer applications); 2) an Integrated Pest Management program (e.g., pesticides only after sampling determined a need, plus regular fertilizer applications); 3) an ecological management program (corn gluten meal plus organic fertilizer and bio-herbicides); and 4) control plots that only received fertilizer applications.

These plots were sampled on a regular basis using pitfall traps (cups placed within the plots that trap any little critter crawling through the turf). During the three years of the study, there were no significant differences – in terms of total numbers of arthropods – between the treatments. Numbers captured ranged from 450 arthropods per trap during the growing season (June through August) down to 50 to 100 arthropods per trap in October and November.

Since these traps are about one-tenth of a square foot, these numbers would equate to 500 to 4,500 arthropods per square foot, or 4,500 to 40,500 arthropods per square yard. These numbers are certainly comparable to temperate forest and prairie habitats.

But, what about diversity? You can have a lot of arthropods, but if they are all the same species, then you have low diversity. In Rochfort's study, she found that mites accounted for 23 percent to 42 percent of the totals trapped; ants were 38 percent to 51 percent; carabids

“ Too many people believe that biodiversity is strictly related to the large things that they can see.

TURF'S DIVERSITY. So, how diverse is a turfgrass stand? One would think that most turf stands are really a monoculture of grasses. Technically, this is correct (as long as you have eliminated the broadleaf weeds, though their seeds remain in the system).

But if we look at the species and gene level, most turf stands consist of a mix of grass species (even a planting of PennEagle bentgrass or Tiffdarf Bermuda on a golf green will soon contain *Poa annua*), and even where a single species has been planted, the seed supplier has often blended several cultivars to provide greater genetic diversity that can deal with environmental conditions.

Whether sodded, seeded or sprigged, over time, turf stands segregate out (you see patches of turf that have different color, texture and uprightness) and other grass species can become established. So, turf stands are definitely not as biodiverse as a natural prairie or forest stand, but they are not monocultures of a single genome either. If the turf is considered as a part of an urban and suburban landscape, adding turf

it can respond like the trees in a rain forest (going dormant, reproducing at specific times of the year, producing protective chemicals at different times of the year, etc.). Why are rain forests so diverse? Productivity.

They produce a lot of organic matter that is utilized by a complex web of consumers and decomposers which are also fed upon by predators, parasites and diseases. Turf produces a lot of organic matter (recent studies are showing that it is a pretty good carbon sink), which is then eaten by consumers and decomposers, which are themselves then eaten by predators, parasites and diseases.

ARTHROPOD BIODIVERSITY IN TURF. Most turf managers would likely be able to only list half dozen arthropods that inhabit turfgrass systems. As you would likely guess, these are arthropods that commonly reach pest status – white grubs, cutworms, sod webworms, billbugs and chinch bugs. In reality, there are thousands of other arthropods that inhabit turf stands and most of these never reach pest status.



(ground beetles) were 2 percent to 6 percent; staphylinids (rove beetles) were 5 percent; millipeds were 4 percent to 9 percent; centipedes were 1 percent to 2 percent; plant bugs were 0.3 percent to 2 percent; and weevils were 0.3 percent to 1 percent. The problem is that these are large groups and don't tell us about the total biodiversity. So, Rochfort looked at two important groups which are commonly used in biodiversity studies – the springtails (Collembola) and the ground beetles (Carabidae).

STUDY RESULTS. The springtails had to be sampled using a different technique (a Berlese funnel in which a plug of the turf and underlying soil is placed in a funnel and a light is placed overhead to drive down the arthropods into preservative below). In this study, 21 species representing 17 genera and nine families were found. This is comparable to published

studies of springtail diversity in tall grass prairies (27 species in Michigan and Illinois) and dry grasslands (23 species in Austria), but is considerably lower than what is in forest habitats (75 species in Vancouver temperate forests). So, turf is comparable in springtail species richness as other grass-covered habitats.

An analysis of the ground beetles found in the pitfall traps revealed 17 species representing 10 genera and seven tribes. Each turf area had slightly different abundances of the primary species. What was surprising was the fact that many of these ground beetles were seed eaters, but predatory groups were also prominent. Studies from analogous habitats (urban-rural gradients) have found from 21 to 77 species (mainly European studies), so the Quebec numbers would appear to be a bit low, but are likely close to what is found in comparable habitats.

In Ohio, Dan Digman and I undertook a “non-target” study where we looked at the potential non-target effects of new insecticide categories on lawn turf arthropods. To perform these studies, like Rochfort's studies, we had to take periodic cores out of the turf and extracted those using Berlese funnels. Without going into all the details about the minimal effects of the pesticide applications, the bottom line was that we found incredible numbers of arthropods in the turf.

Sampling in 2002 and 2003, the primarily Kentucky bluegrass lawns (which received broadleaf weed control and normal fertilizations) yielded: 73.9

To read more about Shetlar's research on the impact of insecticides on biodiversity in turfgrass, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search for “Shetlar.”



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TURF RESEARCH

percent mites, 18.6 percent springtails, 4 percent ground beetles (larvae and adults), 1.7 percent diplurans (little primitive, blind insects), 0.5 percent spiders, 0.5 percent bees, wasps and ants, 0.4 percent thrips, 0.3 percent true bugs and 0.2 percent flies.

Now, you'll probably say that having more than 70 percent of the arthropods being mites is not very diverse. Not true. Mites range from primary turf feeders (e.g., clover mites and winter grain mites are only two such mites), decomposers (something has to eat the grass clippings and grass blades and stems that die naturally), fungivores (eating the molds and fungi that are in the thatch), predators (some eat other insects; mites and one group even eats nematodes), to parasites (some feed on the blood of other arthropods and some feed on the blood of animals – chiggers and ticks).

In fact, we estimated that nearly half

of the mites we recovered may be new species and most species are poorly known, biologically. There are probably 100 to 300 different mite species in this sampling.

We also saw considerable diversity among the other arthropod groups, even though they were not necessarily numerous.

When you multiply the numbers, we found between 21,000 and 45,000 arthropods per square meter of turf. So not only is there considerable biodiversity, there are incredible numbers of individuals present.

Dan Peck, with Cornell University, has also completed a study on the non-target effects of turfgrass insecticides on the fauna found in turfgrass lawns in upstate New York. In his studies, he found the following arthropods: 67.8 percent mites, 17.5 percent springtails, 6.5 percent bees, wasps, ants, 3.6 per-

cent true bugs, 1.1 percent thrips, 0.8 percent flies, 1.1 percent beetles (adults plus larvae). Does this look familiar? Indeed, Peck found nearly the same groupings in the same proportions that we found in Ohio.

His calculated numbers also yielded between 20,000 and 50,000 arthropods per square meter of turf.

CONCLUSIONS. Turf is not a green desert. It is actually a largely unexplored environment. There are likely hundreds of new species of animals that will be found, but most of these are mites and they are very small.

It is easy to see, identify and count birds, mammals, frogs and the other animals that most biologists count in their biodiversity studies, but the real biodiversity is on a microscopic scale. **L&L**

The author is professor of urban landscape entomology at Ohio State University.

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Getting a handle on smart buys

Comfort and the environment rank high among the new-product rollouts and improvements hitting the handheld market.

Oh, and power is still important, too.

By Heather Taylor

As landscape contractors continue to tighten their belts to keep their businesses above water, they're becoming more discerning shoppers when it comes to new purchases.

"What we're finding is that people are buying smarter," says Mark Dyos, general manager at Maruyama U.S.

So when Dyos and other outdoor power equipment makers introduce their latest and greatest products, they're trying to woo potential users that are more interested than ever in getting the most for their money.

The manufacturers are taking the latest technologies and trying to use them in a way that's going to be most appealing to the end users and their desire for a smart, lasting product. And from the various developments, it's evident that there are several ways to achieve it. But while the ways manufacturers choose to improve their products vary, a few common themes reappear: power, comfort and the environment.



Improvements in handhelds will make performing jobs easier for landscapers.

POWER HUNGRY. One of the most important factors for contractors is whether a trimmer, blower or other powered tool can effectively get the job done.

"We see an emphasis on product design to gain greater performance efficiencies," says Bob Stanley, product manager, Echo/Shindaiwa, adding that a more efficiently designed fan and housing on some of the new Echo equipment has resulted in higher performance without increasing engine displacement.

Stanley also mentions the Hybrid 4, the latest in engine innovation at Shindaiwa, as an example of what manufacturers are doing to beef up power in equipment without sacrificing in other areas, such as fuel costs.

"Higher quality components and

close-tolerance engineering for long engine life are also keys to gaining efficiencies and improving existing products," he says.

Power and better mileage with fuel are the goals of Maruyama's forthcoming Venom series engines, Dyos says.

TAKE A LOAD OFF. Landscape contractors are figuring out that in addition to having some force behind the equipment, they need an ever-fresh workforce to ensure the maximum level of productivity and, as a result, profit.

"From a company owner's point of view," Dyos says, "they're looking at the employees and the equipment and saying, 'What is the best bang for the buck?' If an employee is worn down

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HANDHELDS

because of the work, that's not going to benefit him."

Manufacturers are answering with products that inflict less impact on the user. In recent years, much development and engineering focus has been placed upon improving the ease of use of power

user comfort by taking the weight of the engines on handheld equipment and placing it on the operator's back. The company took a note from the service industry, where housekeeping workers battle fatigue by wearing vacuum cleaners on their backs instead of pushing the weight back and forth, Dyos says.

While this type of setup has been seen for years with leaf blowers, Maruyama's backpack units have hookups to attach to many other pieces of what's normally carried by hand, including pruners, edging heads, hedge trimmer heads and fertilizer spreaders.

Echo manufactures a backpack blower with a vented back pad that draws air in around the user for comfortable operation, Stanley says. If it's cold outside, a vent cover can block this function.

And just having power behind handheld equipment makes the work easier, especially compared to the old way of

doing things, Stanley adds.

"Flower bed and mulch bed edges erode over time and need to be redefined to maintain a fresh, welcome appearance," he says. "The old way to redefine the edge was to use a shovel, but it's tough, time-consuming work."

Echo's solution to the problem includes adding a 28.1 cc Power Boost Vortex engine-powered Bed Redefiner to help achieve a professional, manicured edge in less time than it would take to use a shovel. Also, unlike a shovel, an adjustable-height wheel accommodates variable depths and a 59-inch straight shaft is designed for easy use under trees or other obstacles.

THE ECO ADVANTAGE. Other buzz words that usually pop up on the topic of equipment innovation include *efficient*, *green* or *eco-friendly*. The increasing focus on the environment is just as

“What we're finding is that people are buying smarter.”

— Mark Dyos, Maruyama U.S.

products, says Rock Reed, assistant vice president, Honda Power Equipment. Ergonomically designed handles allow the user to easily vary mowing speed, and engines that reduce vibration allow workers to perform longer with less fatigue, he says.

Maruyama aims to achieve greater

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HANDHELDS

present with equipment manufacturers as anywhere.

"Large corporations now are exceedingly requiring service providers to meet their codes as far as what their green standards are," says Bernardo Herzer, owner and CEO of Lehr. "We're seeing more of that happening. They want certain vendors to meet certain green requirements. I think you'll be seeing more and more of that."

Stricter laws are also a driving force behind going green. Emissions standards continue to get tighter in some states.

Manufacturers are working to make sure their engines comply with the EPA's latest regulations.

Stanley adds that an engine such as Shindaiwa's Hybrid 4 is an option for green-conscious landscapers because they're designed to decrease emissions, increase fuel economy and provide high torque and a low tone.

Other equipment makers are thinking and developing in a slightly different direction. For example, Lehr's line of landscaping products includes the Lehr Eco Trimmer, a propane-powered handheld trimmer. Propane as a source of fuel has many benefits, but the main plus is what it's not, Herzer says.

"The real win comes in just not using gasoline," Herzer says, explaining that evaporative emissions and spilled fuel going into the soil and groundwater are a couple of the risks that come with fueling equipment with gasoline.

Propane eliminates a lot of the malfunctions that other fuel can cause in small handheld equipment, Herzer says. Disposable, one-pound propane cylinders are available at most stores and often are more cost effective than gasoline, Herzer says, adding that the propane usually delivers 1½ to two hours of operation.

While Lehr offers its alternative fuel-powered options, other manufacturers offer alternatives to fuel with new handheld equipment they're introducing. Maruyama is rolling out battery-powered equipment in the next few months. It typically runs for 25 to 40 minutes on one charged ion-lithium battery.

The company is entertaining a battery-operated chainsaw, as well as a pruner and hedge trimmer.

Other companies say they're working on the technology for new or updated handheld products for introduction in the near future, but they're being more tight-lipped about it. Reed did offer some clue of what it might look like.

"We believe more products with improved fuel efficiency and reduced emissions will come to market in the future," he says. **L&L**

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



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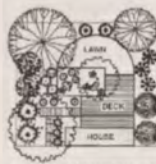
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"Are you smarter than a landscape student?" quiz answers

(continued from page 127)

1. Common name: elephant ear
Botanical name: *Caladium*
2. Common name: blanket flower
Botanical name: *Gaillardia*
3. Common name: coral bells
Botanical name: *Heuchera*
4. Common name: hosta
Botanical name: *Hosta*
5. Common name: purple fountain grass
Botanical name: *Pennisetum setaceum rubrum*
6. Common name: lantana
Botanical name: *Lantana*
7. Common name: begonia
Botanical name: *Begonia semperflorens*
8. Common name: periwinkle
Botanical name: *Catharanthus roseus*
9. Common name: coleus
Botanical name: *Coleus*
10. Common name: spider flower
Botanical name: *Cleome*



John Gibson

President, Swingle Lawn,
Tree & Landscape Care

What have you been up to since you won the Leadership Award in 2006?

From a business standpoint, that was '06, so the biggest thing I was starting on that year was our technology review at Swingle. And we actually went through something we called a S.U.M.M.I.T project – an acronym we used for Swingle Uniting to Measure and Map our Information Technology. We set off on this big process to evaluate how we were using technology within the business. We went and purchased a new software package and implemented a new CRM software as well as a new finance package, and are still on the journey. But, we've implemented handhelds in all of our crews in the field and are still working on a couple of final pieces of putting together our sales reps doing entry in the field.

That's been a big process, going out and searching for a vendor and selecting a ven-

dor and doing the conversion for a company our size.

What is your take on how the industry will recover from the economic troubles of the last couple of years?

Most businesses have learned to diversify their business portfolio. They may have been in one specific service line but they can't afford to do that anymore. Based on the current economic conditions, we're all trying to do different business lines and/or enhance different business lines to give us the best chance of survival. The lean management concepts that were becoming a key part of our business as early as '06 and '07, they are a part of everyday life today with people trying to stay as lean as they can with an uncertain future. I think that's the challenge. People are getting used to having less profit.

What advice would you give another leader on how to diversify their business?

I think really understanding their financials is a key part of it. Understanding where they make money and how they make money. While the economy was

rocking, I think people did well even though they were making a lot of mistakes. Today is a different world. Everything is a lot tighter, so you really have to pay attention to your financials and understand it down to a detailed level. In the past, you probably didn't have to do that as much.

Where do you see the industry in 2020?

Our industry continues to get more professional. In this cycle of the recession, one thing I am seeing is, we always say we have a low cost of entry into our industry and so anybody and their brother can go get a pick up and go to work. What we are finding is there are many higher level executives or senior management people that have been let go in other industries that are now saying, "Hey, if I am going to make a career change, I'm going to get into an outdoor industry." Maybe it's the landscape industry and they are bringing a wealth of business knowledge that we haven't seen in our industry before because they are part of a different kind of profession and they are bringing that now to the

landscaping industry. So, that alone is going to improve the professionalism of our industry.

Depending on what happens in Congress, the environmental restrictions that are on our industry can continue to be more difficult. We're already putting in different landscape and maintaining different landscapes today than we were 10 years ago.

You said in your 2006 profile that the challenge in the next 25 years is delivering the right people and helping them realize they can have a great career and life. Do you still feel that way?

Absolutely. I see it today when we look at the programs of the four-year colleges and the two-year colleges for our industry. Some of those programs are shrinking and or disappearing. One of our largest issues going into the next 25 years is the people within our industry.

We don't have jobs that can be outsourced, in most cases. People have to be on the property doing the work – so, developing great people, finding people who want to do this work. It's amazing even at 8 or 9 or 10 percent unemployment across the country, how difficult it is to find people who really want to do this work. **L&L**

john gibson



Read more from Gibson, including his 2006 Leadership profile, at www.lawnandlandscape.com/leadershiplessons.



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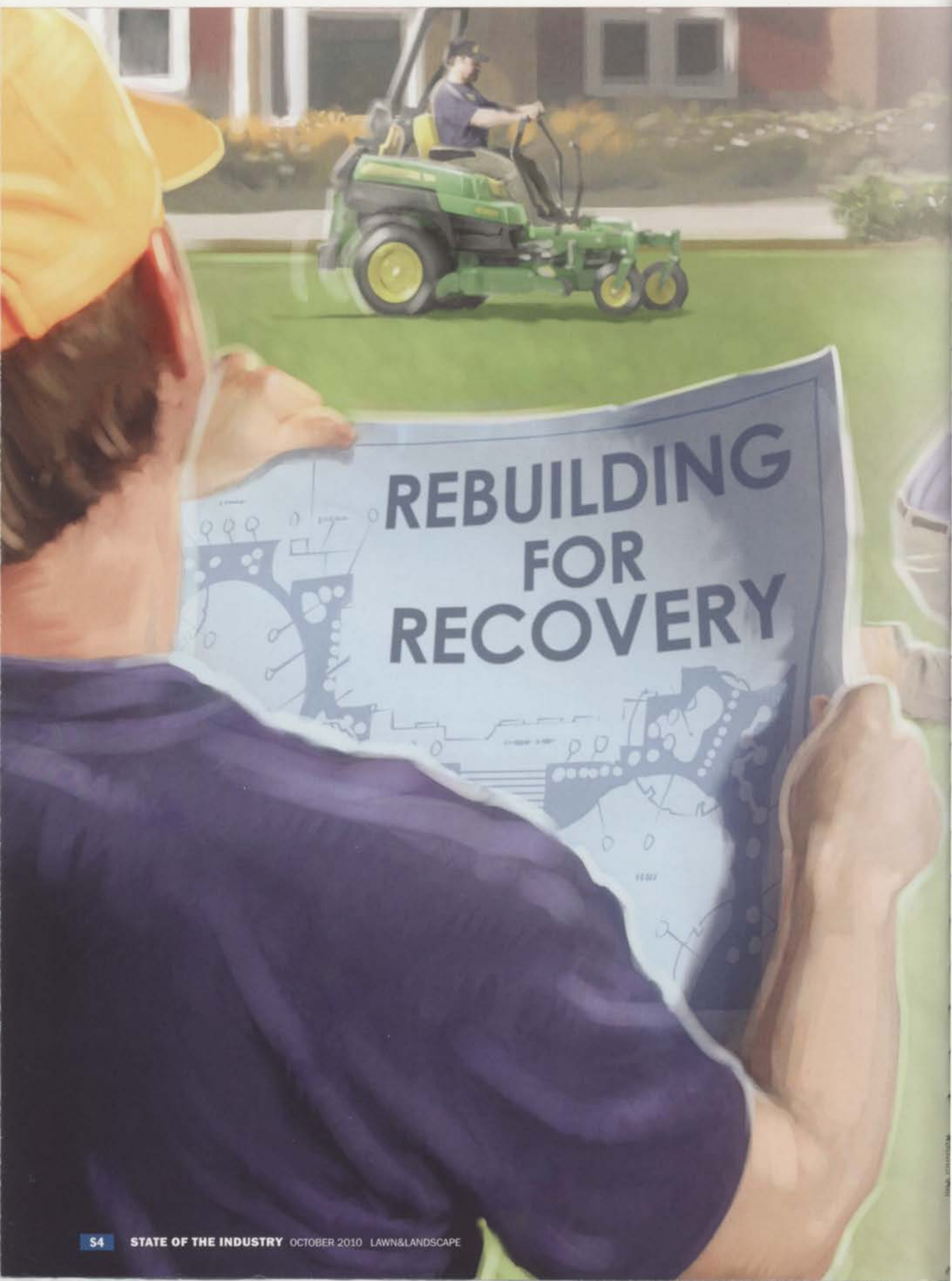
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We've summarized the best of our research on two pages for your quick analysis. Check out the top 11 marketing methods used across the industry, our contractor confidence index and net profit projections for 2010 and 2011.



Companies have been roughed up by a rocky economy, but are preparing for the turnaround they know is coming.

By Chuck Bowen

This year can be summed up in one word: maintain. Flat is the new up. It seems every positive report of hiring increasing or consumer confidence creeping up was followed by another contradicting it: Housing starts were down; unemployment is up; it's a double-dip recession.

LCOs and landscape contractors responded to the uncertainty in the market and found pockets of growth. Many moved to maintenance and away from the stabilizing (but still shaky) design/build segment. Maintenance services were the fastest growing segment for 36 percent of companies in 2010, and 39 percent predict it will outpace other services in 2011, too.

Owners – who say they're confident in the industry's ability to bounce back and improve in 2011 – still are hesitant to invest in equipment. Forty-six percent say they'll increase their equipment budgets slightly. Owners fret over their clients' worries: 38 percent say they would fix consumer confidence if they could change one thing to turn the economy around.

After an up-and-down year, owners are left to rebuild. More companies are making less: A majority make less than \$200,000 a year. Many have fewer people and fewer clients. But some – at least the ones who have a good handle on their numbers – have

been able to expand into new services and achieve higher profits.

Lawn & Landscape surveyed more than 400 landscape and lawn care company owners and spoke with dozens more to compile the 2010 State of the Industry Report. In this story and on the pages that follow, we take a look at some of the major trends impacting owners today – and what they can expect for 2011.

LOSING ON PRICE. Tom Heaviland, president of Heaviland Enterprises, Vista, Calif., has seen prices drop to a level he hasn't seen in a decade – thanks to construction companies entering the maintenance market – and that's had a direct impact on his bottom line.

"We're seeing extreme price pressure. We're 30 to 40 percent off our existing price," he says. "We started losing contracts that went to bid, and we didn't make the price adjustment and we were just getting smoked. Our first reaction was 'We can't do it for that.' Then we decided that somebody's doing it for this."

Heaviland, who does 100 percent commercial maintenance work, says he's been forced to drop his prices by property managers who know they can get similar results for a lot less.

His response? Cut costs, find ways to do the same work faster or cheaper, and pocket the difference. Heaviland has been able to hold things together, but it's hurt. Heaviland went from \$10 million in 2008 to \$6 million in 2010. He cut pay to management, restructured crews to have fewer high-wage employees and laid off workers.

"I feel like I'm building it again at \$6 million," he says. "I always am optimistic. I'm not fighting in Afghanistan, for crying out loud. I'm fighting in San Diego. It's hard work. Other than those first years starting out, I can't remember a recent year that's been this hard."

GETTING SMALLER. Andy Blanchford, Blanchford Landscape Contractors, runs a small design/build company in Bozeman, Montana. Things have been slow, and in the summer, his backlog had dwindled.

"We're not real comfortable with where we're at," he says.

He's eschewed the cutthroat commercial market to focus on what he does best: high-end residential work. But price is still key.

"People have a real hard time looking past the price, even when they know what they're going to get with us, because the market has softened so much. They know there's a better price out there," Blanchford says.

Blanchford also got out of the commercial snow business, which was breaking even. Now he only does snow removal for his residential customers, and makes a profit.

And, he's leaned out his operation. Revenue is up more than 10 percent to about \$1 million with 14 employees. In 2007, he grossed \$1.5 million, but had 35 people on the payroll. Now, he's the only year-round full-time employee.

TRAINING DAY. Steve Pattie, CEO of the Pattie Group in suburban Cleveland, has had to combine sales and design jobs, which can limit his qualified labor pool.

He says his customers – high-end residential or corporate estate clients – are phasing more projects in over several years, and are also hounding him for price breaks.

"We'll bend, but we try not to break," Pattie says.

He's also started a commercial maintenance division, and expanded his residential teams into what he calls "super crews" – a dedicated team that handles everything on a property. For 2011, he's focused on more training for crews and targeting jobs that are most profitable.

ValleyCrest Landscape Cos. has also invested in training its people, as well as refining its processes to increase efficiency.

Burton Sperber, chairman, founder and co-CEO of the nearly \$1 billion Calabasas, Calif.-based firm says this "will allow us to serve customers even better once the economy improves. This approach worked in past economic slowdowns, and ultimately we came out stronger when work became more plentiful." **SOI**

Despite the government's efforts to shore up banks, the credit crunch is on, and contractors are feeling it.

CRUNCH TIME

By Lee Chilcote



In 2002, Paul Fraynd started his landscaping business, Omaha Friendly Services of Omaha, Neb., with a \$50 used mower and a line of credit worth significantly more.

"I was nineteen years old, and I went to the bank and got a \$20,000 line of credit," says Fraynd. "I enjoyed mowing lawns in high school and I didn't want to work for anyone else. It was the freedom of the whole thing."

What a difference a decade makes. In the past nine years, Omaha Friendly Services has grown into a full-service company with \$750,000 in annual revenue. Fraynd doesn't mow lawns anymore. Instead, he spends most of his time in the office, preparing bids for new jobs, collecting past due bills from customers, and purchasing supplies and equipment.

Despite the recession, business is decent and Fraynd remains upbeat about 2011. Yet his life has become considerably more complicated since he started the business, in part because of banks' reluctance to lend money.

"Our previous growth was carefree, but keeping up with volume has definitely become an issue for us," says Fraynd. "When I started the business, anyone could get a line of credit. Yet despite the growth in our business, I've been turned down for an expansion of our credit line. It's hurt our cash flow."

"We're to the point of living almost paycheck to paycheck," he adds.

Lack of credit has had a widespread impact on U.S. small businesses. A recent study by the National Small Business Association found that 41% of small business owners can't obtain adequate financing, the highest level in 17 years. Landscape businesses are no exception.

Even seasoned companies that don't rely on credit for equipment needs or day-to-day expenses are not immune to the credit crunch's far-reaching impacts.

"We're not seeing jobs of the scale or magnitude that we're used to," says Tommy Gresley of Gresley Landscapes in LaGrange, Ga. He says that large projects are on hold in part because it's tougher for businesses to get financing.

As a result of the credit crunch, firms report delaying expansion plans, putting tougher collection procedures in place, passing up bids on larger projects and delaying equipment purchases. They also say they've been impacted by their customers' credit woes, and that slower payments make it harder to pay their bills.

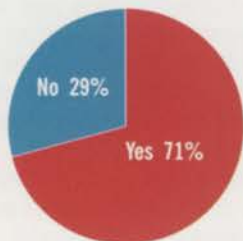
WORRIES

We asked contractors to rate issues affecting their business success in 2011. Twelve percent rate delinquent payments and 9.5% rate customers canceling services as a high concern.

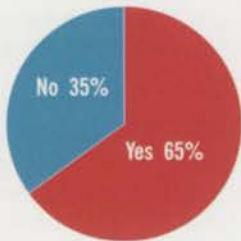
If you could fix one economic challenge to help your business in 2011, what would it be?



Did you experience client cutbacks/service reductions/spending reductions this year?



Did you experience client cancellations this year?



Like other businesses, landscape companies typically use credit for short-term expenses such as purchasing fertilizer and other supplies, long-term expenses such as buying a truck or other equipment and to seize opportunities for growth when cash isn't available.

CONTRACTOR CREDIT. Some owners also report difficulty obtaining credit from suppliers, making it tough for them to keep up with their own business demands.

Jason Reinke, a former automotive technician who started BPI Lawn Care in Livonia, Mich., after getting laid off from two different jobs last year, says that he plans to expand gradually, in part because of lack of credit.

"I have a small limit on my business credit card, which limits the amount of supplies or equipment that I can purchase at any one time," says Reinke. He has applied for additional credit, but has not yet been approved.

Fraynd agrees. "Many of our vendors

don't offer contractor credit anymore, which means we have to pay them in cash," he says. "That's a triple whammy because our customers are paying more slowly and we haven't been able to expand our credit line."

Other contractors report that they've delayed equipment purchases due to the fact that it's tougher to get credit these days.

"With some larger purchases, the percentage rates on the credit that's being offered are higher than they were a few years ago," making credit more expensive, says Ben Carter, who owns Carter Land Services in Jesup, Ga.

CUSTOMER CREDIT. Slow payments from customers pose another challenge. Fraynd used to waive late fees if his clients were a few weeks late; now he's cracking down.

"We used to be lax and let our customers go forty or fifty days," says Fraynd. "Now we call when it's due, and we've stepped up our collections."

To avoid getting stuck with the bill, Fraynd says he's gotten more selective about new clients and is more likely to ask for a down payment.

While Carter says that most of his clients are reliable in making payments, he's noticed a steady decline in the scale of many jobs.

"The homebuilders and commercial clients that I've been working with are cutting corners like crazy," he says. "After it's dumbed down, a \$20,000 landscape plan might become a \$14,000 plan."

Tyler Boac of Boac Lawn Care in Galesburg, Ill., says that while he hasn't had collections trouble, he has lost customers due to the economy.

"I've had customers ... hire a neighbor that's out of work to do it for ten or fifteen bucks," says Boac.

CURBING GROWTH. Jason Reinke looks around at his hard-hit neighbors in Livonia, Mich., and is grateful to be his own boss. He's set his sights on expansion. For now, his plans remain modest out of necessity.

"I'm being conservative right now, but I might expand more quickly if the economy were better and if credit were more available," says Reinke, who has no employees and about twenty customers.

The credit crunch has had an upside because it forced Omaha Friendly Services to "grow in a planned way, not willy-nilly," says Paul Fraynd. Yet he's also frustrated because he sees the opportunity to expand yet lacks the resources.

"Lack of available credit has handcuffed us," he says.

Other companies report that they don't miss the additional business – in fact, they'd rather focus on keeping their existing customers happy.

"There's not a lot of new construction happening right now, and in most cases I don't want to mess with it anyway," says Rich Moreman of Four Seasons Landscaping in Auburn, Ala. "There's a lot of competition and people willing to work for cheap. I'd rather focus on taking care of the customers I've got." **soi**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

SERVICE SHIFT

A move to maintenance has buoyed many companies hit hard by the economy. **By Brian Horn**

Joe Talamantes was desperate. His main source of income was drying up, and he needed to do something to generate some cash.

So, the owner of Arbor-tech Tree Experts and Talamantes Door Designs did what a lot of landscape company owners are doing these days. He developed new services to open up new markets, and hopefully new sources of income.

"I'm selling and surviving and that's what is keeping me a float, that little extra money," Talamantes says.

Instead of just landscaping, Talamantes bought a lumber mill and now takes down trees and makes his own wood. He also rented a piece of land and on weekends he tries to sell the doors and furniture he made from the trees he took down.

"I said, 'Instead of throwing this trash away, let's be green,'" he says.

Talamantes even called on his family to help. His family aided him in different aspects of the business,

including developing websites to help advertise his new services.

"If there is one buyer, if he's in Wyoming, by God I want him," Talamantes says. "If I can make a door for him or whatever he needs, I need to send it to this guy because I need his money just like he needs my door."

But even with adding new services, revenue isn't guaranteed. "There is no such thing as main income anymore," he says. "You're one week here, one week there."

FROM D/B TO MAINTENANCE. Like Talamantes, Donnie Garritano also had to diversify his services. As president and CEO of D&K Landscape, he had to switch his focus from the dwindling commercial landscape construction business to residential landscape maintenance.

The company is branding a whole new offering of residential services to try and grab that service market, which doesn't have a household name



attached to it, Garritano says. But, there are still companies that have been in the residential services market much longer than D&K, so it will be a challenge to become recognized in that segment.

Garritano says one of the toughest parts of the transition will be going from dealing with commercial property managers who understand how landscaping works, to homeowners who need to be educated.

"So, it's how we deal with some of our new customer base in terms of not just selling them a product, but consulting with them, educating them and walking them through this process and helping to grow their expectations of how things work," he says.

Because customers don't always see – or fully appreciate – a lot of the work that is done, such as irrigation or trimming a tree to grow correctly, Garritano and his staff have to be patient with their new customers.

"There's a lot more hand-holding that goes on with consumers than there is with professionals that understand," he says.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH. Joel Jones, co-owner, along with his wife Jennifer, of The Growing Concern in El Paso Texas, says he hasn't changed his services and has no plans on doing so for 2011. Jones says he hasn't raised prices in two years and would rather focus on keeping his current

Which of the following does your company offer?

TOP 5

- 1 **Mowing 75%**
- 2 Edging/trimming.....73%
- 3 Spring/fall cleanup.....69%
- 4 Seeding.....68%
- 5 Fertilization.....67%

BOTTOM 5

- 1 **Nursery/grower 5.3%**
- 2 Interior landscaping.....5.8%
- 3 Macro/micro injection.....9.0%
- 4 Sports turf.....9.3%
- 5 Perimeter pest control.....9.3%

Which of the following does your company plan to offer in the next five years?

- 1 **Mowing 53%**
- 2 Fertilization 52%
- 3 Weed control 50%
- 4 Seeding 48%
- 5 Edging/trimming 47%
- 6 Aeration 45%
- 7 Maintenance 45%
- 8 Spring/fall cleanup 43%
- 9 Lawn renovation 41%
- 10 Sodding 40%

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

customers than attracting new ones.

"We kind of have a niche market they we operate in," he says. "We've been in business 31 years and that's worked for us and even though we are kind of at a standstill with regards to growth, I really blame that on the economy. I don't think we need to change our formula. I think we need to keep the customers we have now and grow slowly."

Things are slightly different for Joe Markell, principal of Sunrise Landscape + Design in Sterling, Va. While the company hasn't added any new services for 2010 or 2011, it is staying ready for what services the public might need.

"Whatever the market really is dictating is what we're focusing on," he says.

He says the company has been doing a lot of paver repair work and may focus more on lighting in 2011.

"It seems a lot of customers are starting to really realize the benefits of a good system," Markell says. "They start off with some cheaper system that they kind of like, it's just not up to par. The fixtures aren't as sturdy. They just don't put out the light out they should."

Markell says when the company does work on someone's property, crews let the customer know about the lighting options.

"Typically, a lot of what we do is when we design a landscape, we design the lighting whether the customer asks for it or not – just to put it out there to them," Markell says. "Because a lot of times what we find out is that they never even thought about that aspect of it."

Markell is also keeping an eye on the regulations put on commercial properties and the standards to which they must maintain retention ponds.

"The maintenance, a lot of people either aren't doing it or don't know how to do it," he says. "And, certain counties and jurisdictions are requiring certain levels of maintenance and people find out that they need to do things they're not."

MONEY IN REGULATIONS. The regulations have already meant more

business for BT Carawan Lawn Care in Greenville, N.C.

Brian Carawan, owner of the company, says he has gone to a new base of customers informing them of the new regulations regarding retention ponds.

"That's something that we added that's doing really well for us," he says. "Not a lot of people know about it, so there's actually not a lot of people in the marketplace that know how to deal with those situations."

The biggest challenge with offering new services is finding dependable employees. He isn't worried much about their skill level, he says,

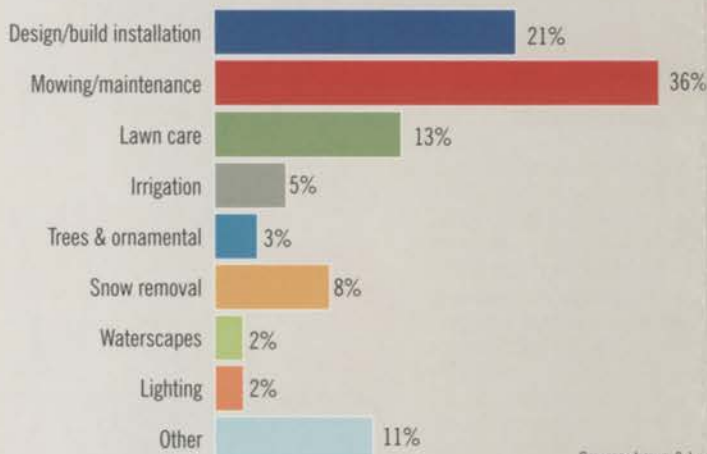
because he can teach them what they need to know. It's just getting them to show up that's a problem – but not big enough to force him to scale back his services.

In 2011, Carawan plans to step-up his residential lawn care because more customers are asking for it.

"What we're finding out in our region is that homeowners, they might not pay to get their grass cut every week or every two weeks, but they are still willing to get their yard sprayed by a company even though they are cutting the grass," Carawan says. **SOI**

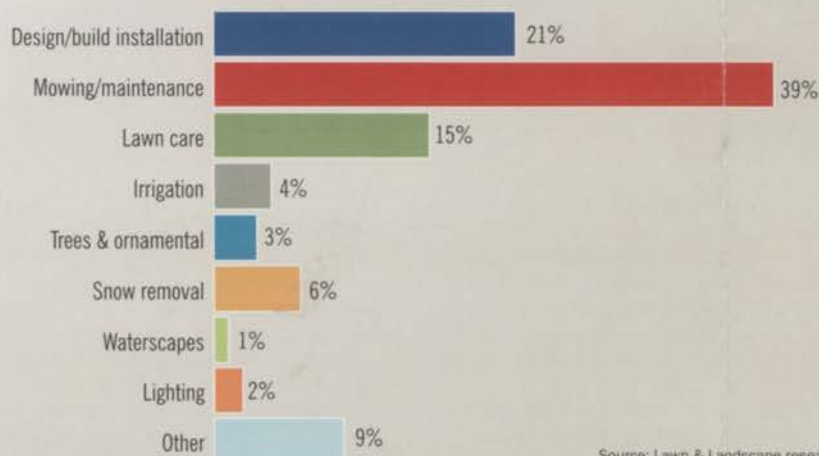
The author is associate editor for Lawn & Landscape. Send him an e-mail at bhorn@gie.net.

What was the fastest growing service for your business in 2010?



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

What do you predict will be the fastest growing service in 2011?



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

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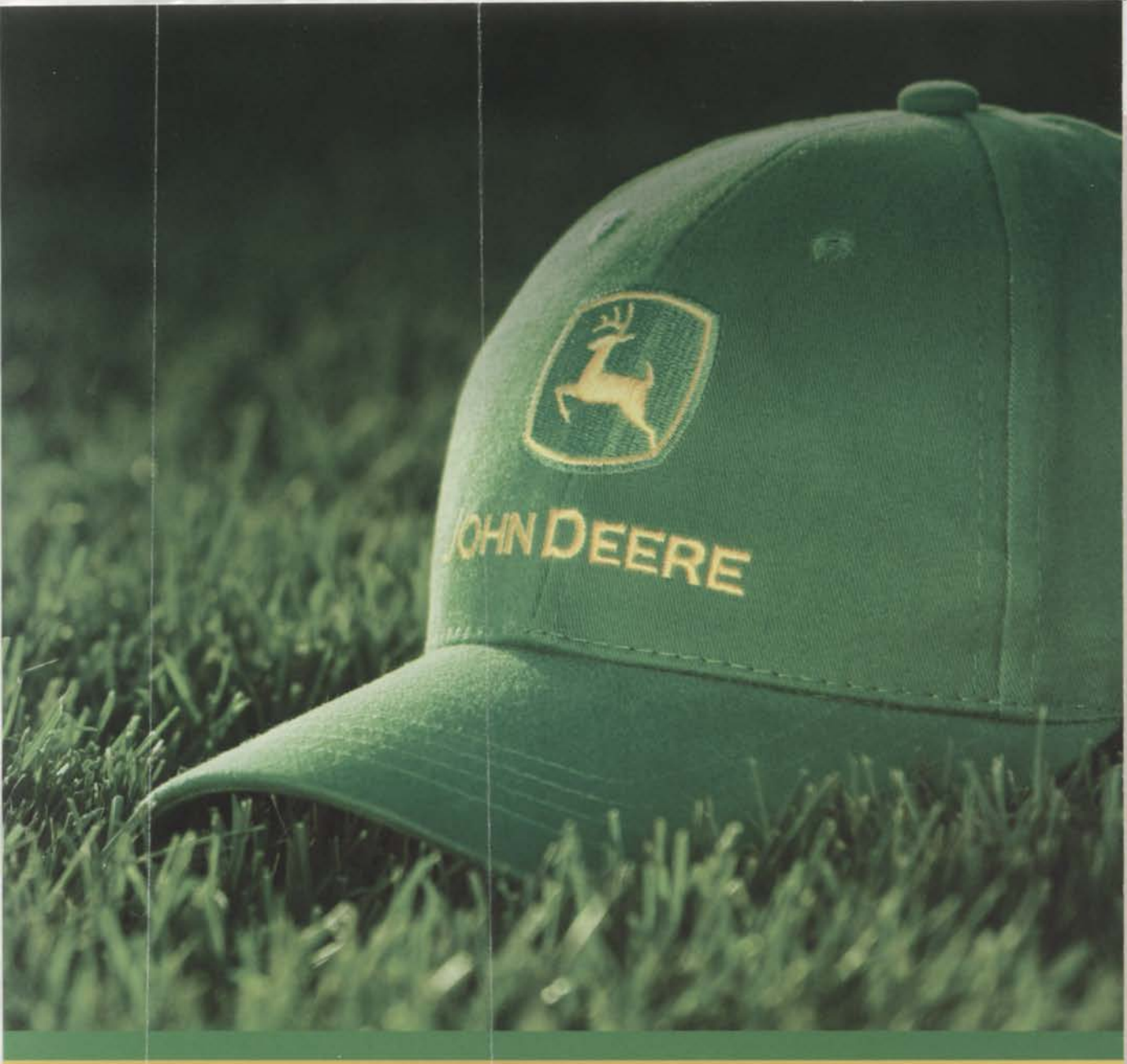
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TALK OF THE NATION

Our editors drop in on contractors in the best – and worst – areas of the country's economic landscape and take the pulse of the green industry.

By Brian Horn, Lindsey Getz,
Matt LaWell and Kelly Pickerel

If America is anything, it's wonderfully big. Our country has 300 million people spread out over an almost never-ending expanse of land.

The sheer size of our country – and its economy – also give rise to pockets of prosperity and poverty. This report takes the pulse of the green industry in the places where the economy is doing great (nice work, Omaha!) and not so great (keep trying, Las Vegas!).

Lawn & Landscape drew from data in the August 2010 issue of *Money* magazine that assessed the strength of the economy and the housing market in the nation's 100 biggest metro areas.

We picked eight locations across the country and dropped in on contractors there to hear how they're doing. – *Chuck Bowen*

Stockton, Calif.

California gives you the odd ability to move from among the richest people in the country to some of the poorest in an hour's drive. To wit: Stockton, Calif., home of Holt Manufacturing Co., the Caterpillar tractor and the country's highest unemployment rate, 16.2 percent.

That high rate can push those feeling the pinch toward the landscape industry.

"Because of the economy being so bad here and nobody having a job, anybody who can push a mower can do what I'm doing," says Mike Valles, owner of AAA Gardening.

Companies operating under the table – not paying taxes or hiring legal workers – complicate things further.

"No one is paying taxes, and I have to every year," Valles says. "Some guy can come and do the job without paying any taxes so the job is less money. The competition is very high here. It's hard. Nobody is doing landscaping anymore. Business is real slow right now."

Joe Hollaway, president of California Green Hyrdoseed, agrees that times are a little rocky right now for Stockton.

"It's brutal. It's a mess," he says. "I'm paying almost \$500 a month for advertising. (Business) in the last two years has dropped off 60 percent. It hurts all the way around."

Not only is business down, but it's sometimes difficult to even find good seasonal employees.

"A lot of the guys you used to use (for work) have moved out of county or out of state," Hollaway says. "It's a trickle effect. If people don't work, they move on. I don't see that changing any time soon."

Valles sees Stockton's current economic stress as a Catch-22. The only way to come out of the depression is if the economy turns around. But if people aren't working, the economy can't change. And while AAA Gardening has held on to steady business, Valles' side work, like irrigation installation, has come to a standstill.

"We're just doing service to the yards," he says. "People just don't have any money to spend right now." – *Kelly Pickerel*

Las Vegas

With one in every 70 houses being foreclosed on in Las Vegas, it isn't shocking to hear local landscapers say the market is not doing very well. Construction dried up – and has stayed dried up – and the jobs that are left seem to all go to the lowest bidder.

"We've probably lost half the companies in this town," says Don Teal, owner of Perennial Land Care.

With a statement like that, it's clear there aren't that many positives in the market.

"From an economic standpoint, to me positive is staying in business. We've been able to maintain our business and stay alive," says John Mortensen, president of U.S. Landscape.

"There's a few public works jobs going out and there's probably maybe 1 to 5 percent of private construction going on. Unless it's like a bank or something specific, we don't see any building going on."

To cope, companies have shifted to maintenance. "It's very cut-throat competitive," Teal says. "People are bidding this stuff at 1 or 2 percent profit, which it doesn't take much and then you have a major loss."

Mortensen says because companies are going out of business there is some more work available, but the low bids aren't making it worth his time.

"Jobs that we would bid for a \$1,000 ... two or three years ago, they bid for \$500 now," Mortensen says. "I think a lot of guys have been bidding thinking that if they could just have cash flow they would be OK, but I think that is running out of steam. A lot of these guys are losing it after three years of doing that."

With all the low bids, Teal is getting some business from people who realized the mistake they made by accepting a low bid.

"Unfortunately, a lot of landscape companies who never did maintenance now all of a sudden think their experts at it," Teal says. "It doesn't take long before we get a call back saying, 'Do you want to take this over?'"

But, not all customers are learning from their mistakes. Mortensen put a bid out to a developer and, while going through the property, the developer said he had a 50 percent plant mortality rate, admitting that it was the result of taking a low bid.

Mortensen put in his bid, but never heard back.

"So I gotta think it's going to continue to be the same thing until these guys are so disgusted with it that they can't take it," Mortensen says. – *Brian Horn*

Austin

Austin, San Antonio, and the rest of southern Texas have fared well compared to the rest of the nation. Last summer, a report from Wells Fargo showed that the Austin economy had already stopped declining and was perhaps even on the mend. But it's not out of the woods yet: the housing market has flattened out, making things challenging for many in the landscape industry.

Jonathan Quick, owner of Great Scapes Landscaping in Round Rock, Texas, says that though property values haven't declined in the Austin area as much as in other parts of the country, homeowners aren't spending as much as they used to. That's made competition fierce. "I used to go to bid on projects with one or two guys," he says. "Now I'm bidding against seven or eight. We're just not lining up residential work like we used

to." As a result, Quick says he's started to add more commercial work to his lineup. He's doing what he can to make up for those lost residential jobs.

Being diversified and adapting to change has also helped South Texas Growers, based in Bulverde, survive the drop off in residential work. "We offer landscaping and irrigation but also have a wholesale and retail nursery and have found that our plant sales have actually gone up," says Joanne Hall, vice president. "Those new projects on brand new homes aren't out there anymore, but we've found that residential clients want to put money into existing landscapes. One area may not be as lucrative as it used to be, but another area has taken its place."

Of course the sometimes-extreme weather also has an impact on the state of the industry. Hall says this past winter was colder

than average, so come spring, homeowners invested more in replanting.

Drought and water issues also plague the region, which can be good and bad. It's made drought-resistant and native plants a more popular trend in the area and Hall says she's certainly seen homeowners more interested in purchasing these. But it also makes certain landscaping efforts virtually impossible when the land is in such poor shape.

Kevin McCormick, president, Botanical Designs in San Antonio says he's seen a trend toward more people renting in his area than ever before. "Homeowners aren't necessarily getting foreclosed on, but they're just saying they don't want the hassle or the worry of owning anymore and they wind up renting," he says. "That's definitely impacted the amount of residential work available."

Lindsey Getz

El Paso, Texas

While the rest of the country has been hit hard by the economy, El Paso, Texas has fared well—in some regards. The city has the lowest foreclosure rate in the country, one in 6,000 homes, and for a stretch of more than a year, the local unemployment rate has been below the national average. But in September, the city's 10.2 percent unemployment rate was higher than the rest of Texas and the national average.

That up-and-down news goes along with what most local landscape contractors are saying about the market—for some it's good, for others, not so much.

"It's down a bit but it's not terrible," says Joel Jones, co-owner of The Growing Concern. "Our company is off about 8 percent from last year. Last year was a better year for us than most I would suppose."

A big part of the city's economic boom is thanks to Fort Bliss. The 34,000 families expected to move in by November 2012 means there could be a lot of landscaping work to be had.

But companies still have problems, such as using healthcare costs and changes to the taxes they'll pay.

"The fact that we don't know how much anything is going to cost anymore—we don't know what our overheads are going to be, we don't know how the government is going to apply taxes and restrictions, so that's made it difficult," Jones says.

Jones says he hasn't laid-off anyone in his 30 years of business, but he now is looking at the option of letting go of employees during the slow season.

Pattie Fell, owner of Ransom Lawn Services, says she's looking forward to 2011, but Joe Talamantes, owner of Arbor-tech Tree Experts and Talamantes Door Designs, doesn't have such a rosy outlook.

"Any other little needle that punctures a hole in this flat tire makes it harder to pump it back up," Talamantes says. "I'm telling you we have a difficult, difficult time right now. I know guys that come around here and beg me for work." —BH

↑ Highest unemployment rate (16.2%)

↑ Highest monthly foreclosure rate (1 in 70)

FOR SALE

↓ Lowest monthly foreclosure rate (1 in 6,000)

↑ Highest projected income growth (4.2%) \$

Omaha

Omaha, Nebraska – what's not to love? The world's third wealthiest person – Warren Buffett – likes it enough to call it home. Fred Astaire grew up there. So did President Gerald Ford. And plenty of other, less-famous people enjoy its unemployment rate – at 5.1 percent, the lowest in the nation.

Those odds seem great if you have a business in the area, but Bryan Kinghorn, owner of Kinghorn Gardens, doesn't agree. He believes Omaha has the lowest unemployment rate because there are fewer people in Nebraska than other states, which skew the stats.

"Nebraska isn't that populated of a state. As you go west, it's pretty scattered. The state's economy is more diversified in that way so we don't go through cycles, so there's a little more stability," he says. "But by the same token, people in the Midwest are fairly

conservative. Even though the economy is more stable, it's not like they're overly eager to be loose with their disposable income. There's a tendency of us to be more even-keeled."

While employment may be up, the housing crunch is very much alive, says Dan Mulhall, which complicates things even more.

"There aren't any new houses going up so a lot of it is the lack of new home construction, the lack of people changing homes, the lack of subdivisions being built. All of that has translated into less landscaping," says the vice president of Mulhall's, which offers customers a landscaping service, nursery and garden center.

Because Mulhall's grows its own plant material, it has tried to incorporate landscaping deals with the nursery and garden center to generate more revenue.

"We have reduced the prices (on plants)," Mulhall says. "We're trying to encourage people to buy."

Kinghorn hopes that will change.

"People take great pride in their homes here," he says. "They're given a reason to do what needs to be done to have their properties look good and retain their values through our services and products. They're going to probably invest some dollars in that direction."

But as of now, Mulhall doesn't see much changing any time soon.

"From a landscaping perspective it's going to stay the same," he says. "We're not seeing things being dug and steel coming out of the ground. That will tell us if we're turning the corner on the landscaping side."

While Kinghorn thinks business will stay consistent for now, he also says competition among landscape businesses in the area will continue to increase thanks to Midwesterners' conservative and cautious natures.

"(Customers) are going to think twice about (services) and check prices and see where you fall in the competition. It's going to help us all be better businesses," he says. — KP

Lowest unemployment rate (5.1%)

Worst projected one-year income decrease (-1.4%)



Highest one-year projected increase in median home price (1.6%)



Worst one-year projected median home price (-36.2%)



Miami

Big gray clouds clustered high in the sky over Miami late one morning during the first days of September. A hurricane roared just up the coast, its eye over the Atlantic but coming fast for the edges of North Carolina, the residual rain on its way south toward the otherwise beautiful white sands of South Beach.

The rain has been some sort of constant this summer in Miami, almost always around – figuratively, at least, if not literally. The unemployment rate in and around the city checked in at 12.8 percent in June, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost 2 percent higher than in January and, in fact, the highest rate for a single month during the last two decades. The projected decrease in median home price is a staggering 36.2 percent. Factor in foreclosures – only two states in the nation have a higher rate of foreclosure than Florida, and only one has a higher rate of foreclosure filings – and the market is as challenging as possible for those in the local lawn and land care industry.

Charleston

So much has changed in and around and about Charleston, S.C., since it was founded some 340 years ago. The city population has swelled, of course, as has the number of businesses that line its streets. It is home now to multiple colleges and universities. Even its location has changed since the 17th century.

But one thing has remained the same in Charleston for so long: The pace of the day, the pace of life, is a little slower here. And unfortunately for area landscape contractors, that slow pace no longer refers only to folks strolling down Market Street after dinner. No, now it refers to the number of calls received, to the amount of work requested, to the flow of money into the system. There is still plenty of work in Charleston, but folks are just a little slower to pick up the phone and call because of the recession.

"I think it's still very slow," says Burt Rhodes, owner of Earth Care in Mount Pleasant. "And I don't think we've hit the bottom. I hope I'm wrong."

The unemployment rate in Charleston peaked at 10.5 percent in January, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, then dropped all the way to 8.1 percent in April before a slight bump back to 8.6 percent in May. Each of those numbers is slightly lower than the national figures, which means Charleston was hit hard, but not as hard as some cities, and not as hard, in fact, as most cities. Median home prices in the city are actually expected to increase about 1.6 percent during the course of the next year.

The fact that Charleston is a popular tourist destination has helped, of course, as has the fact that the median household income is well above the national average. But even with a comfortable middle class in the suburbs, the industry has taken a hit.

"I see everything holding (at) about what it is now," says Marc Baudet, president and owner of Forever Green Landscaping in Pawleys Island. "A lot of people are trying to sustain what they have."

But there are reasons for optimism: Boeing announced late last year that North Charleston would be the home to its second 787 Dreamliner production facility, and could open the door to as many as 4,000 permanent new jobs. Will that change everything? No, but by the time the first planes from that facility prepare for takeoff in 2012, the local economy could be on its way to a little higher altitude. Until then, local professionals can only keep offering top services and competitive bids.

"If you do the good work, you get the job," Baudet says. "You can't price yourself too high, because it's very competitive here – but you can be better than everybody else." – Matt LaWell

"No one's been doing anything," says Scott Snoddy, president of C & S Landscaping in Loxahatchee. "There hasn't been a lot of major landscaping and everyone's just trying to maintain what they have. I don't see any major changes coming on."

The goal now in Miami is not to bulk up with new customers or even to persuade current customers to add more services. No, the goal is to survive. Survive and outlast and advance. Survive and be there in 2011 and 2012 and 2020.

Just survive.

The goal is the same for area homeowners. About one of every 32 homes from the panhandle on south has

wound up in the hands of the banks during the first six months of the year. That figure is even higher in Miami-Dade County, where about one of every 26 homes has been foreclosed during the same period, and Broward County, where the number is about one of every 21 homes.

With that many foreclosures – seemingly one around every corner, certainly a dozen or so in just about every suburb – contractors need to consider if a homeowner will be around to pay.

"You have to be very careful about foreclosures," says James Borden, the owner of Borden Lawn Care & Landscaping in Hollywood. "You have to screen all your accounts very closely."

Detroit

Like many Rust Belt cities still reeling from the recession, Detroit has taken its share of lumps. As housing market prices continued their downward spiral this year, Detroit was the hardest hit – the monthly decline was at 4.1 percent in May. For those in the green industry, it's meant the residential landscape market for new developments has dried up.

"Back in 2007 and even 2008 there was still a lot of new development in the area and people would spend \$10,000 or \$20,000 on landscaping," says Kim Lucas, manager and buyer of Lucas Nursery & Landscaping in Superior Township, Mich. "Now we're doing a lot of redo work, like tearing out old bushes and shrubbery. Customers are choosing the smallest packages we offer and we're doing \$1,500 jobs just to weather the storm."

Tim Travis, owner of Goldner Walsh Garden & Home in Pontiac, Mich., agrees that people are spending money, just not nearly as much as they used to. "We're doing a lot of smaller jobs, which ultimately take as much time, so we're working harder for less – but at least we're still working," he says, adding that aggressive marketing and community involvement has helped his business survive the downfall.

While she's lost the new development work she used to do, Denise Putnam, owner of Hands to Work Hearts to God, a small residential maintenance firm, says that in some ways the housing situation has helped bolster work from other clients. "The housing market in this area is so bad that nobody can sell their homes," she says. "So instead they're staying put and investing a little more money in making them look nice."

But overall, Putnam, like Travis and Lucas – and so many others in this region – is finding that her customers' tight hold on their purse strings is becoming the norm.

"It used to be that people were doing a big outlay of different annuals each spring," she says. "Now the shift is toward perennials. People don't want to pay for the install and the removal, only to start over with new flowers the next year. They see perennials or flowering shrubs as more of an investment for their money's worth." – LG

There are success stories, of course. Even in the darkest of proverbial storms, there are success stories. Some businesses have been able to maintain their full roster of customers and most of their services. Wayne Young of Young Landscapes in South West Ranches said his business had even seen a bit of a bump during the first quarter of the year, though those numbers had, as expected, regressed during the second quarter.

"There's hardly any work," says Patrick Granat, the owner of Ace Sprinkler & Pump in Miami.

Because when it rains in Miami, it pours. And when it pours, there is so little work. – ML

10%

of contractors say that, if they could fix one economic challenge to help them in 2011, they'd fix labor/unemployment.

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

(GOOD) HELP WANTED

Landscape company owners are seeing an overall increase in applicants, but they're wondering where the skilled workers are.

By Heather Taylor

Talk of the nation's dire employment situation is in the news daily.

The U.S. Department of Labor paints the picture: Unemployment has hovered above 9 percent since May 2009. Millions of Americans rely on extended unemployment benefits because they've been out of work for so long.

The good news for those job seekers is that more companies say they're looking to hire during the second half of 2010 and the first half of 2011, according to *BusinessWeek's* recent survey of economists.

For many lawn care and landscaping companies, this is old news. They've long been looking to add to their ranks and intend to continue to grow in the coming year. With so many out-of-work Americans, it would seem that there are even more workers to choose from, but owners are having just as much trouble as before. The labor pool is full, but not with the right folks.

TREADING WATER. Some landscape companies are weathering the storm by maintaining the status quo.

Bruce Johnson, who operates Performance Landscaping in Winnipeg, Manitoba, reports that his revenue for 2010 will end up at about \$450,000 – the same as last year.

Matt Marks runs Town and Country Land Works in Fishers, Ind. His business, which serves 35 percent commercial clients and 65 percent residential clients, will bring in about \$150,000 this year, which marks 15 percent growth every year for the past three years.

While he wanted to hire more workers in 2010, Marks didn't win as many bids as he'd hoped, so he nixed those plans. He employs two full-time and as many as five part-time workers, depending on the season.

But back east, Paul Rapoza had an unexpectedly busy year.

"We had more demand for work this spring than we anticipated for enhancement projects," says the



MIBPHOTO, INC.

56%

of companies ranked H-2B program challenges as a low concern for issues affecting their 2011 success.

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

owner of the 100 percent residential Rapoza Landscape in East Falmouth, Mass. "We were conservatively projecting a year – and, specifically, a spring – like 2009. It was quite a bit busier. So we hired more field people but we got a late start because we had underestimated demand."

Rapoza had reason to budget conservatively following 2009 when his revenue was down, but this year he predicts it will be even or slightly above 2009 – about \$1.5 million. His next hire will be a business development/sales person to increase maintenance sales, he says.

CASTING THE NET. While the pool of eager lawn care and landscaping workers might already be small, companies or recruiters then have to look at those candidates and determine which ones will be quality employees. Some contractors have methods that have worked well, while others continue to explore ways to find recruits that will work out in the long run.

Johnson started hiring subcontractors to work for him in 2010, and he's still working out how he'll approach hiring in 2011. He is considering using a temp agency to fill any gaps.

Rapoza has found success taking his search online. In addition to referrals, he says his company has had a good experience using Craigslist and generally has a good response to its help wanted ads on the free classified website.

"The types of applicants have to be computer literate, which is usually a plus, and they can read and write in

order to be able to respond to the ad with a resume or just e-mail reply," Rapoza says.

He has found that the number of job seekers has increased over the last couple of years. When he began using Craigslist in 2007, he received about 10 replies over a two-week period. Now he usually gets as many as 50 within a week.

Marks agrees that the number of applicants seems to have increased within the past year, but there haven't been as many skilled or experienced workers as he'd hoped.

"Most applicants were high-schoolers or college students looking for a summer job without experience or very little experience," he says. Like Rapoza, he's trying to find more qualified people through current employees' friends and networking in the local area. He plans to compensate for the lack of skilled workers by cultivating leaner, more experienced crews.

"I'm focusing on the labor that I have now and training them and retaining them for years to come," he says.

H-2B OR NOT TO BE.

"It's hard to find *reliable* workers who will work these conditions," Marks says, adding, "It's tough to find *better* because our industry doesn't pay enough to compensate for weather, on-off hours, etc."

That's why many companies turn to the H-2B guest worker program. Recruiters often claim that the guest workers are more eager to do the work and more willing to accept the green industry's accepted rate of pay.

Employers complain that one of the downsides is that the program cap limits the number of approved guest workers to 66,000 per year – or a 33,000 for each half of the year – and as a result they don't get the number of employees they request.

None of the contractors who spoke to *Lawn & Landscape* use the program, but Rapoza says he uses a legal immigrant work force from an economically depressed area about 50 minutes from his headquarters.

A FOCUS ON RETENTION. Many lawn and landscape business owners have a positive outlook for their companies in the near future, indicating they might be seeking to recruit more skilled workers a year from now. While Johnson expects to maintain his current revenue stream in 2011, Rapoza predicts an increase

"I'm focusing on the labor that I have now and training them and retaining them for years to come."

— Matt Marks, Town and Country Land Works

in business of 10 percent across the board – which would give him some room to hire.

Marks agrees that the industry is about to start rebounding, and when they're ready, business owners will look to hire for the long-term. While unskilled laborers might accept the minimum-wage jobs, the companies that are willing to pay higher wages are especially looking to hire workers with experience in hardscaping or landscape installation, he says.

"Employers will seek skilled and experienced laborers and pay them more money to stay around for years to come," Marks says. "Employers will be very careful on who they hire." **SOI**

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

35%

of companies ranked a labor shortage as a low concern.

Source: Lawn & Landscape research

The average landscape company employs:
**10 PEOPLE
YEAR-ROUND
7 SEASONALLY**

Source: Lawn & Landscape research



PRICE WARS

By Lindsey Getz

Top-notch quality and service is helping businesses remain steady in the face of undercutters and lowballers.

Many landscape contractors say the competition in their area has grown tremendously and has led to the emergence of pricing wars. They also report that new people are jumping into the field – many unlicensed and uncertified – and are undercutting businesses that have been around for years.

"When the economy turned, we definitely found contractors from other fields who thought it'd be an easy moneymaker to buy a mower and throw it in the back of their pickup truck," says Eric Tarr, owner of Eden Landscaping in Langhorne, Pa. Though some worry the price war

will hurt their bottom line, most report that established customer loyalty and top quality work is keeping them on top of the game.

In Moodus, Conn., Evan Groom, co-owner of Groom Landscape & Tree Service, has definitely seen pricing become ultra-competitive. "More and more I see new guys with cheap equipment calling themselves landscapers and offering pricing that is undercutting all of us full-time guys making a living," he says. "I actually lost an account that was pretty low-paying to start with to a guy on a homeowner-type lawn tractor. He must be making about \$5 an hour mowing that lawn."

Mark Burgess, owner of Mark's Lawn Care in Mandeville, La., a company that does 90 percent residential maintenance work and 10 percent commercial, adds that every spring it gets worse, with more one-man operations emerging in his area. "I think the economy is making it worse than ever before," he says. "People need to make money fast and they think it looks like an easy job, so they go out and try to do it."

QUALITY COUNTS. Though he's certainly seen the competition swell, Groom, like many others, says he hasn't changed his pricing. Instead, he's focused on

continuing to offer top quality work. "I hope my efforts are noticed by my customers and their neighbors, and that they understand you get what you pay for," he says.

It's been the same for Dan McDonald, owner of Bone's Yard Care Solutions in Denver, N.C., a company that does 90 percent maintenance work for a split mix of residential and commercial customers. He's actually picked up some new jobs after clients received poor quality work from companies that were offering rock bottom pricing to make a quick buck.

Landscape contractors agree that retaining clients in a low pricing

environment has come down to good quality work and top-notch service. Tarr, who has been in business for 42 years, says that his level of knowledge and expertise has made a big difference. "I have a lot more answers than the 'blow-and-go' guys," he says, "and customers appreciate that."

What customers also like is the opportunity for one-stop shopping that a small, one man-with-a-mower type of operation can't supply. "We offer a variety of maintenance work, not just lawn cutting," says Tarr. "Offering a broad spectrum of services definitely helps

To keep that momentum going, contractors say they'll continue to work on building client relationships and loyalty. Tarr says that as owner/operator of his business, he makes a point to be on-site as often as he can. "And if I don't see my clients face-to-face, then I'll talk to them on the phone on a semi-regular basis," he says. "It's important to not only do the job well, but to be a good businessman and build a good rapport with your customers."

Burgess says he's always talking to his clients, too. "I definitely keep in touch with them on a regular basis — some at least once a month, others every

competition out there, and as a result, aren't willing to pay more than they already do. Burgess says he recently tried to raise his price on a \$40,000 commercial account. "They wouldn't budge," he says. "They told me that if I really wanted that price, that they may need to go out to bid. I didn't want to risk losing the account so I agreed to hold my prices and I got another year contract signed." Among his residential clients, Burgess says he hasn't raised prices in three years. But he's been happy about staying firm on existing prices and has no plans to lower them.

In addition to offering

their spending. "I do not charge interest if things are paid in a reasonable amount of time and mostly only offer this opportunity to existing clients that I know will pay," he says. "My customers have appreciated my understanding and allowing them to pay over a few months or more."

It's a win-win situation, Groom says. It allows him to keep the ongoing work and also keep his clients happy. "If I didn't offer this, they would have found someone who did — or a company that accepts credit cards, which I don't," he says. "As long as I can receive payment for my out-of-pocket costs when the

PLAYING LOW-BALL: **33%** of contractors rank low-ball competitors as their **highest concern** for their success in 2011.

combat those pricing wars. A lot of people don't want to have to use a bunch of different companies to get the job done."

Burgess has seen trust and win out when it comes to price. "I do my yards pretty much the same day and same time every week because I run my routes the same," he says. "If I'm a day late — maybe because of the weather — I have people checking on me to see if I'm sick or something because they're so used to that dependability. I think that wins out over a low price. It's the trust factor that a dependable business can offer."

week," he says. "I never let it get to a point where I haven't talked to one of my customers in over a month."

SOME GIVE AND TAKE.

While many have been successful at maintaining current prices, they say that raising prices right now is a challenge. McDonald says this is especially the case with homeowners, who he says are "willing to play the game." "They know there are people out there who will do it for a lot less, and they'll use that to negotiate," he says.

In many areas the commercial clients are also aware of the fierce

good service, some businesses are also becoming more flexible with payment structures to keep clients happy. "For maintenance work I used to always bill in advance," says McDonald. "Now I'm billing more at the end of the month, after the work is already completed. I'm stretching terms out and giving customers some flexibility."

Groom has also become more flexible and this year began offering payment plans for some of his larger projects. He believes he'll need to continue to do so in the next few years, as his clients continue to curb

job is done, I can wait for the profits to come in."

There's no question that the current state of the market has helped pricing wars thrive, but most feel fortunate that their quality work and service has allowed them to hold steady. Though it can be frustrating, Groom tries to keep a positive attitude.

"There will always be competitive pricing and low-ball guys out there," he says, "but I choose to believe that quality and professionalism will always win out over a low pricing battle." **SOI**

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

IDLING ENGINES

Landscaping companies are not breaking the bank for equipment purchases in 2011. By Brian Horn

Landscaping companies have different opinions when it comes to their equipment purchases in 2011 – some are buying as they normally would, but others are cutting back on expenses.

Eric K. Weishaar, owner of Breckenridge Landscape, Design, Installation & Maintenance in New Berlin Wis., says he plans on buying another vehicle, a plow and a salt spreader – and maybe more.

"Depending on what happens here at the end of this year, what kind of maintenance contracts we get back, we may end up equipping another crew so that would include a truck, trailer, a large mower, small mower and all the other small equipment," Weishaar says.

Weishaar says he spent \$57,000 on equipment in 2010 and plans on spending \$30,000 in 2011. Because the company is growing, Weishaar needs the equipment, and he ranks equipment purchases high on his priority list of where to spend money.

"I definitely want to make sure the guys have everything they need to get things done," he says.

Weishaar has the capital if he needs to buy more equipment but he says, "We're just buying as needed kind of thing. As we see volume of work increase then we'll go ahead and get what we need."

Weishaar doesn't need to buy new skid steers this year because his have less than 3,000 hours on them. But he keeps an eye on the amount of maintenance the equipment requires, and will replace equipment if repairs become a burden.

"There's a point of diminishing returns where you look at equipment and you say, 'Well, if I've got to put another 1,500 bucks into this mower that I could probably buy a new one for X amount, then it's probably worth getting a new one.' So, it just depends on the age and the wear and tear on it," he says.

Pattie Fell, owner of Ransom Lawn Services, says business is going well for her El Paso, Texas-based company, and she doesn't plan to change her equipment purchasing plans. Fell says she purchases about 70 pieces of equipment a year because the company has a large volume of work.

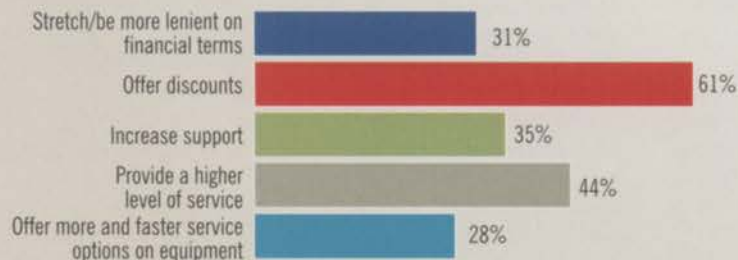
She plans on spending between \$20,000 and \$25,000 on equipment in 2011, and is considering adding a leaf blower and a chipper, a purchase she put off this year.

Brad Gelo, owner of Green Scene, also in El Paso, Texas, says he will also spend the same amount of money on equipment as he did in 2010. He estimates the company spends about \$45,000 to \$50,000 on lawn care equipment a year. That doesn't include vehicles, but he hopes to only have to buy one truck this year, since he bought four trucks last year that cost about \$22,000 each.

He plans on buying three tractors this year and about 30 pieces of smaller equipment that have to be replaced due to wear and tear. While he expects the company grow by about five percent in revenue, he says that doesn't affect the type or amount of equipment he would buy. In fact, he says he'd put any extra money toward raises for his employees before he sunk it into buying more iron.

"If things get really good, I'm going to buy the same amount of trucks, the same amount of tools, but we would

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



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

How would you characterize your equipment budgets in 2010?



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

start working up some increases especially to our crew chiefs," Gelo says.

Gelo says dealer loyalty plays a big role in his purchasing practices.

"My theory is the more business I do with one person, I become very important to them," he says.

He also likes to buy the same brands so he can use the good parts as the machine wears down.

"I buy pretty much all steel equipment because as it gets old we can rip a carburetor off and we can use it," Gelo says. "So that's why I stay with the same thing. There might be some better stuff but having a bunch of old pieces we can rip down for nuts and bolts, it's amazing how much that helps you."

DEALER LOYALTY. In Browns Summit, N.C., Todd Huffines, owner of Start 2 Finish, found that staying loyal to one dealer is a great way to do business, and one he will continue to practice in 2011. Huffines will check prices on bigger equipment or a special product but always finds his dealer is close to the average price. Beyond price, Huffines says it's the service and relationship that keep him going back to a dealer.

"If my tractor broke and I need to demo a new one to get me through a job ... he'll bring it out there to me," he says.

Huffines says he still has customers who call him and ask him questions even though he is done with the job.

He expects the same service from the people he buys from.

"It's hard for me to sell a quality service and the things that matter after the sale and then not have that same mentality with the people I do business with that I'm a customer of," he says. "It's not necessarily about the bottom line. It's piece of mind."

As far as how much equipment he plans to buy in 2011, Huffines says it all depends on how his balance sheet

Don Teal, owner of Las Vegas-based Perennial Land Care, says he's taking a wait-and-see approach on how the economy will do before deciding what equipment to purchase.

"We are actually growing slightly," Teal says. "We are going to be up about 10 to 15 percent over last year, but we're not putting on new equipment and we are not putting on manpower. We're just trying to work smarter."

"It's very tough to get credit, unless you are paying cash ... That's one of the predominant reasons. And we don't trust the economy right now." — Don Teal, Perennial Land Care

looks at the end of 2010. He plans to purchase between \$50,000 and \$100,000 of equipment, which he'll try to find used when he can instead of purchasing it new.

"We're going to find something that's not wore out, but we're not going to buy new equipment," Huffines says.

SEEKING VERSATILITY. Along with buying used equipment, Huffines also wants versatile equipment. The more versatile a piece of equipment is the more assurance the company will have work to do every day.

"Whatever we purchase, it's got to be dual-purpose," he says. "Something we can use to do what we're doing now, but also add another service."

And why isn't buying additional equipment a way of working smarter?

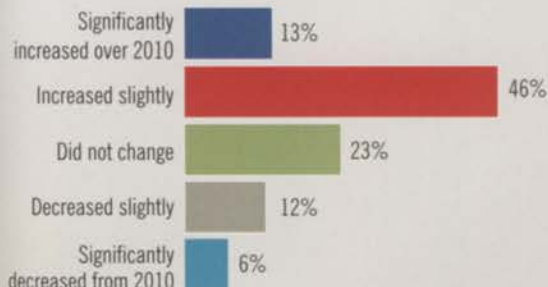
"It's very tough to get credit, unless you are paying cash That's one of the predominant reasons," he says. "And we don't trust the economy right now."

Teal says the company does rent equipment as needed, which has the benefit of not having to perform maintenance on the piece of equipment. He says they rent equipment about once a month, depending on how much construction they have to do.

"We don't have enough demand to justify the upkeep on them," he says. "That's why we lease those anywhere from a day to a week at a time." **soi**

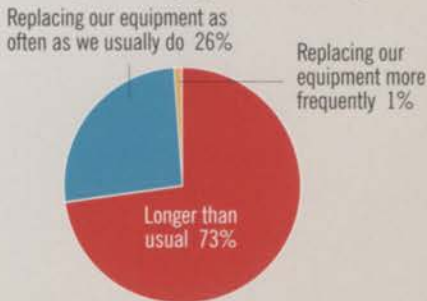
The author is associate editor for *Lawn & Landscape*. Send him an e-mail at bhorn@gie.net.

How would you project your equipment budgets in 2011?



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

In today's economy, how long are you holding on to equipment vs. two years ago?



Source: Lawn & Landscape research



MR. FIX-IT

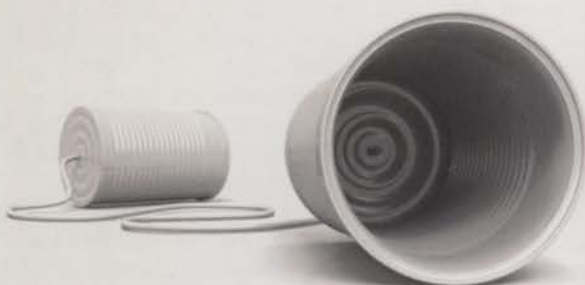
If you could fix one economic challenge to help your business in 2011, what would it be?



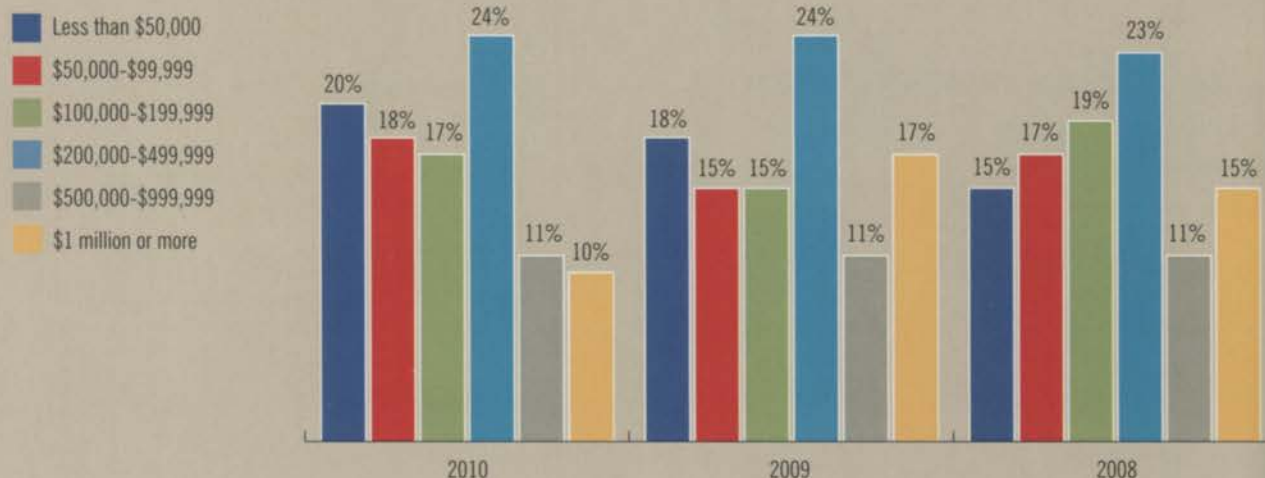
TOP 11 MARKETING METHODS

What marketing methods do you use to obtain new business?

- 96% Customer referrals
- 64% Business associate referral
- 49% Company website/e-mails
- 35% Yard signs
- 30% Yellow Page ads
- 22% Direct mail
- 20% Internet search
- 19% Internet referral service
- 19% Newspaper ads
- 17% Public relations
- 17% Door-to-door

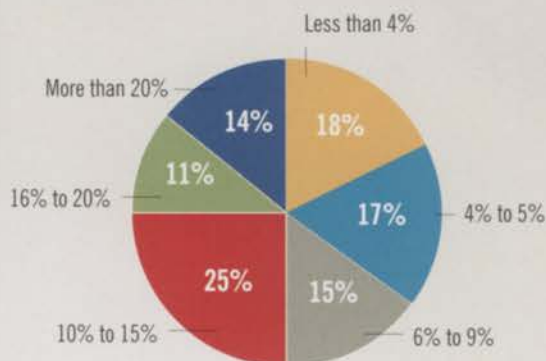


In what range will your company's gross sales be for 2010?

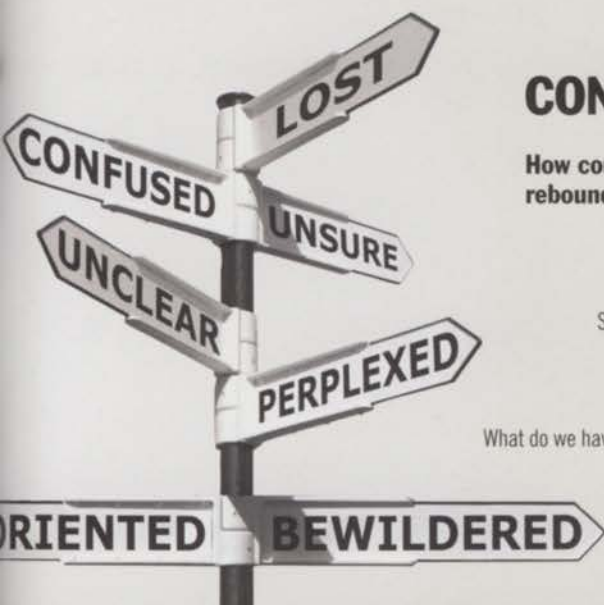
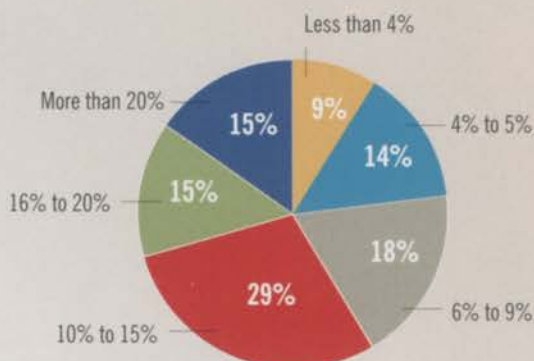


NET PROFIT PROJECTIONS

What do you expect your 2010 net profit to be?

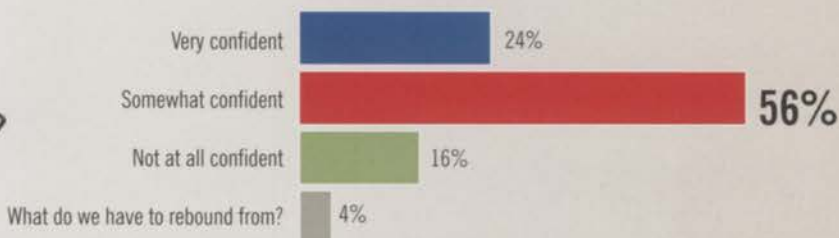


What do you expect your 2011 net profit to be?



CONTRACTOR CONFIDENCE INDEX

How confident are you in the ability of the landscape industry to rebound next year?



How many years has your company been in business?





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