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2012
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GUIDE

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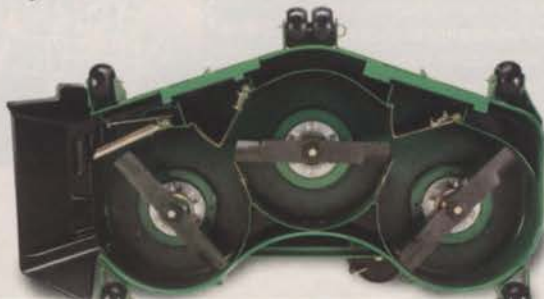
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ONLINE Contents

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Turn up the radio

We realize you have many options for entertainment on the road, but we have thrown another choice (the only choice!) in the mix. We've developed the Lawn Care Radio Network, which is sponsored by Agrium Advanced Technologies, Exmark and Valent. The network is loaded with podcasts to help you run your business and please your customers. You can download the podcasts from iTunes, and take them with you. Even better, we keep them short. And don't be fooled by the name. The shows aren't only meant for LCOs. These are podcasts for business owners across the green industry. So, turn off the boring talk radio, the bad music and the book you should be reading, and enjoy a ride in your truck listening to a quick, informative interview with an industry expert. Visit bit.ly/lawnraderadio to download them.



LAWN CARE
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On the road with BASF

Editor Chuck Bowen made a trip to Chicago to take part in the corporate conference focused on sustainability and innovation with BASF and spent some time with Jan Buberl, director of BASF's specialty products department. You can read more about the event on page 12, and read Bowen's blog about the event at bit.ly/threecoolthings. You can watch a video interview with Buberl at bit.ly/BowenBASF. Buberl talked about the company's Intrinsic line and how it will help turf remain healthy in the cold and during a drought.



Deep in the details

With only so many hours in the day, the little nuisances of your business can get away from you, if you even knew they were there in the first place. Well, have no fear. *Lawn & Landscape* has developed a white paper series, which will provide in-depth education on decisions you need to make and problems you may encounter. We rolled out the series in May with holiday lighting, which walked you through the core business components of a successful holiday lighting business and provided insight from industry pros on how to get a solid start. In June, we featured a special report on how landscape contractors across the country approach purchasing engines. Turn to page 68 on the ins and outs of water management. For all of the white papers, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/whitepapers to register for free and receive all of the information you are looking for to take your business to the next level.



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7 REASONS YOUR EMPLOYEES THINK YOU'RE A JERK

Inc.com investigates why the people who work for you, don't think too highly of you. In fact, they flat out don't like you.

bit.ly/bossjerk

BASEBALL TO WAIT

A star college baseball player delayed starting at the Brickman Group so he could finish the NCAA baseball tournament.

bit.ly/jobhold

CUSTOMER APPRECIATION

Manitou Group flew some of its customers to Spain for an event. While you may not have the budget to do that, there are ways to show customers you appreciate their business.

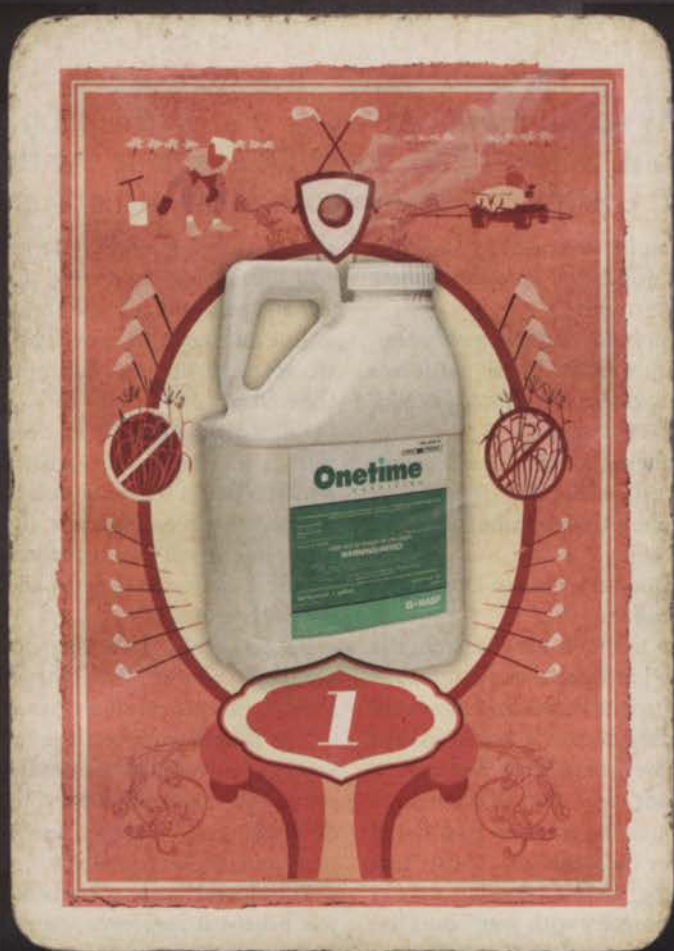
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Anti-social

Our cover package this month focuses on social media, and how you can best use it to promote and grow your business. I get a lot of questions from contractors and suppliers about what they should do with social media.

And, here on this page, is what I tell a lot of them: Don't do it.

This may seem hypocritical, especially coming from someone with a half-dozen



“My social media advice to you is this: Don't do it. Stay off Facebook. Delete your Twitter account. Unsubscribe from your LinkedIn groups.

Twitter accounts, several blogs and what is likely an unhealthy amount of time logged onto Tumblr.

It may also seem odd since we've encouraged you to adopt these platforms as the latest and greatest tools for connecting with customers.

But my advice to you is this: Don't do it. Stay off Facebook. Delete your Twitter account. Unsubscribe from your LinkedIn groups.

Wait. Let me expand that: Don't do it unless you have the time.

According to our latest research, the majority of landscape contractors – about 60% – spend between an hour and more than five hours on social media. And, a couple hours stretched over a 50- or 60-hour week isn't that much.

But, if your blog has one post dated in the winter of 2009 that reads: “Just started a blog! Excited to share more about our company with you!” or if the timestamp on your last tweet is measured in days, consider the value it's bringing your followers.

My point is this: Doing social media well takes time and attention, just like

maintaining successful relationships in real life. If you don't have the time to update, post and generally manage your online presence, it looks bad. It looks worse, even, than not being on there in the first place.

I'm a firm believer in doing fewer things, but doing them all better. That's why you'll find L&L in quite a few places online, but not on Pinterest, Google+ or Tumblr. I like all those platforms, but we just don't have the time to knock them out of the park.

So, do I really think you shouldn't be on social media? No. You absolutely should. But not because I say so.

You should do it because it validates you as a professional business to customers and potential employees. You should do it because it humanizes your company and can help focus your attention.

You should be on social media because you believe it improves your company and is another example of something you do really well.

And doing social media well is exactly what we'll cover this month, starting on page 42. – Chuck Bowen

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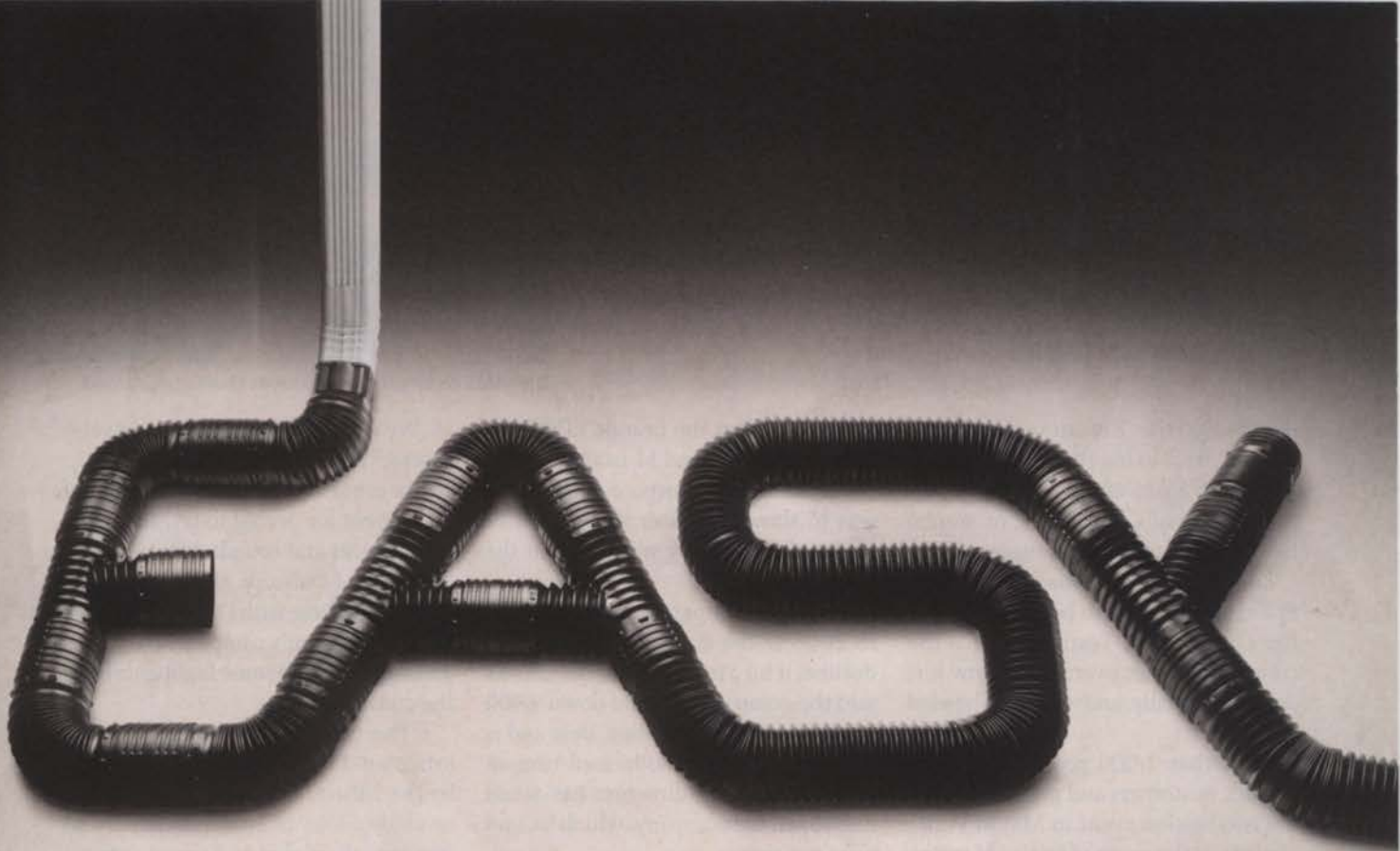
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Recovered and ready

Manitou Group says it's on the rebound after three years of doubt. By Brian Horn



Attendees could get a close look at Manitou equipment.

HUELVA, Spain – Manitou Group has turned its business around and is profitable again after a rough stretch president and CEO, Jean-Christophe Giroux, said at a recent company event.

Lawn & Landscape made the trip to Spain for two days to be part of Manitou Group's The Festival, where the company gave an overview of how it is doing financially, and where it's headed in the future.

More than 1,000 people, including dealers, customers and press, attended the two-session event in May at Punta Umbria in the south of Spain. Manitou

Group includes the brands EDGE Attachments, Gehl and Mustang.

Giroux said the purpose of the event was to show that after three years of doubt, the company was going in the right direction.

After the company acquired GEHL in 2008 at the start of the economic decline, it hit a rough patch, but Giroux said the company has paid down €400 million of its €480 million debt and is profitable. He also addressed rumors that the board of directors has asked him to sell the company, which he said were not true.

"We've adapted and adjusted everywhere," he said.

The event also included a long line of equipment for people to try, as well as conferences and roundtables.

Lawn & Landscape also spent some one-on-one time with Dan Miller, president of Manitou's compact equipment division. Here are some highlights from the conversation.

• The company intends to grow its articulated loader line for landscapers in the future. "We introduced three models of that in North America and five models of that in Europe, but we



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still plan to go even bigger in Europe," he said. "So, I think that will appeal a little more to the North American market as we get bigger equipment in that zone."

• The company officially has cut ties with Takeuchi, which will give Manitou more control over its product.

"The track loader line is really new and innovative," he said. "While we distributed Takeuchi for almost 10 years, having our own product now, we have control of our own destiny – some really good money-saving features like that (HydraTrac Automatic Track Tensioning.)

"That track is the biggest wear item on a loader and typically guys don't keep them adjusted and don't take the time. Now the useful life of that track is going to expand and their cost of ownership goes down. It also helps them in repairing that machine in the field."

• Manitou is in the process of converting to Tier IV. Miller said the cost internally doubles to go from Tier III to Tier IV interim. "That doesn't mean we're going to pass all that on, which makes it tougher," he said. "But at the end of the day that is what we see." Miller said.

He said from a fuel standpoint, converting to Tier IV interim will result in a better performance.

"Otherwise, we have taken an approach on some models, where we maintain horsepower down to stay outside of having to go to interim IV. If you were below 75 horsepower, you could do that," he said.

• Miller said dealers are seeing more rentals for skid-steers, which is different from the past. "It used to be telehandler guys would rent because they were so expensive. We're seeing a little more rental on the skid loader



Manitou's event had a film theme with lookalikes on hand. Marc Anthony and Marilyn Monroe pose for a photo.

side right now because, coming out of the recession, some people are more cautious. That being said our sales picked up dramatically in 2011 and that continued on into the first quarter of 2012." L&L

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

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New *chemical tech*

BASF is bullish on plant health and water management technologies for LCOs. By Chuck Bowen

CHICAGO – At a corporate conference focused on sustainability and innovation, BASF said it will roll out products to help plants deal with drought and heat stress in the next few years.

Jan Buberl, director of BASF's specialty products department, said the company expanded its Intrinsic line of specialty products for LCOs this year.

The product group, which includes an EPA-approved plant health label, has been shown to improve disease control, response to heat and mechanical stress and growth efficiency in plants.

BASF's Pillar G fungicide, which launched last year, is slated to get an

Intrinsic label this fall, Buberl said. And in 2014, the company plans to roll out a new fungicide with the active ingredient xemium.

The company's R&D pipeline also includes herbicides that suppress seed heads on zoysiagrass, and products that use absorbent polymer technologies to improve water use efficiency in plants.

Buberl's comments came during the company's Agriculture Media Summit, which BASF hosts every two years. It brings together about 100 editors, technical experts and end users for a day and half of research and market updates.

And while the bulk of BASF's R&D



BASF announced technical and research updates during a June conference in Chicago.

spending and investment is in the agricultural markets, that investment of time, energy and resources does impact the specialty industries.

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about two years to reach the specialty chemical business, said Tom Hill, communications manager for BASF's specialty products division.



Buberl

Annually, BASF spends \$48.4 million – or about 9 percent – of its research and development budget on the specialty turf, ornamental and pest control markets. We sat down with Buberl to get his take on the future of the lawn care market, and what LCOs can expect from the company in the next few years.

L&L: What are the main challenges you see in the turf market in the next 3-5 years?

Jan Buberl: Hopefully the economy with recover, that's number one. The key thing is the discussion around sus-

tainability. You see the discussion of water and water restrictions in places like Florida and the panhandle in Texas – it's huge. If we don't handle this, sustainability and the public pressure around this is big.

I'm on the board of RISE, so I hear a lot of things and discussion especially about new legislation in the Northeast. If we don't manage this in a proactive way, we have challenges to really make sure we, down the road, have tools in our hands to manage golf courses and lawn care. If you don't tackle sustainability proactively and change the perception in the broader population. ... People have no clue what we do. It's something we have to tackle and the industry has to tackle. It's a very long journey, but we have to start somewhere. We're convinced this is the journey we have to take and how to get the industry better perceived.

For more news from the event, visit bit.ly/basfchi



BY THE NUMBERS

- In 2011, BASF filed for **1,050** new patents worldwide, more than any other chemical company, according to PatentSight
- Last year, BASF posted global revenue of **€73.5 billion**
- By 2020, the company plans to bring in **€115 billion**
- **€30 billion** of that goal will come from products and services that are less than 10 years old
- **23 percent** of BASF's overall research and development budget is spent on new segments and businesses
- Globally, **10,000** people work in R&D

L&L: Earlier today we learned about a partnership BASF has with Monsanto to develop new crop systems. Do you look for similar partnerships in the turf markets?

JB: We work in the T&O world with



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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

A GLOBAL FOCUS

With a global population predicted to hit 9 billion by 2050, companies like BASF are working to develop new technologies to make the planet's limited supply of land produce more and more food.

"We all know the land is not growing. ... With continued innovation, we continue to get more out of the land to feed the global population," said Harald Lauke, president of biological and effect systems research at BASF. "In many cases, chemistry is the enabler."

That chemistry allows farmers to grow more corn and soybeans on the same acre of land. But Chris Mallett, corporate vice president of research and development, Cargill, said increased productivity isn't going to solve world hunger.

"One message I'd like to put up in neon if I can is that food security is a highly complicated area," Mallett said.

Citing data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Mallett said 1 billion people worldwide don't get enough to eat each day, and 38 percent of children in sub-Saharan Africa are malnourished. To feed everyone, he said, the world needs just 30 million tons of grain.

"We did produce enough calories to extinguish hunger," he said. "Did we do it? No."

some third parties, especially around equipment solutions. What we say is we want to bring product solutions to the customers. BASF doesn't have the full expertise in equipment, so we work with third parties on this piece.

Mostly we have interaction with other BASF units. We work very closely with the polymer division. When we talk about water efficiency – we work with our other division that produces a super-absorber.

We have a network in terms of third-party collaborations. I personally think we have to broaden our open innovation approach. It's a process to learn, and if you would have listened to the discussion we had a couple of years ago with Monsanto, they were key competitors. And today, it's a great collaboration. You have to find a way to work with people in a trustful environment. **L&L**

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Arrow Acquires Al Hoffer's Melbourne, Fla., Business



The cultural similarities between Arrow Exterminator and Al Hoffer's Termite, Pest and Lawn Business will make for an easier transition after the acquisition.

ATLANTA, Ga. – Atlanta-based Arrow Exterminators announced the acquisition of Al Hoffer's Termite, Pest and Lawn business located in Melbourne, Fla.

Hoffer's is a full service company, specializing in residential and commercial pest control, termite control, wildlife control and lawn and ornamental services.

"We made a strategic decision to focus on our future growth opportunities in South Florida and were looking for a home for our Melbourne, Florida business," said Al Hoffer, owner. "At Al Hoffer's Termite, Pest and Lawn, we strive for exemplary customer service and are passionate about how our customers and our employees are treated. The family values and similar culture we share with Arrow Exterminators will make this transition seamless for our employees and our customers."

"We are looking forward to serving Al Hoffer's customers and making a home for the employees in our Melbourne, Florida office," said Emily Thomas Kendrick, CEO and president of Arrow Exterminators. "Hoffer's commitment to their customers, family values and passion for customer service as well as their full service offerings is a perfect fit with us."

Valent announces Legacy Tree Project two-year results

Two years after launching the Legacy Tree Project to increase awareness about the emerald ash borer (EAB), Valent Professional Products has announced that Safari Insecticide is effectively protecting more than 1,100 ash trees from EAB in seven participating Chicagoland communities.

In May 2012, an assessment of ash trees treated with Safari in the Legacy Tree Project shows a survival rate of over 95 percent, and that treated trees are thriving. By contrast, most nearby untreated ash trees are heavily infested or have died.

"We're pretty tough when assessing the crown health of a tree. Anything with more than 20 percent crown death, we're removing," said Jim Bell, parks superintendent for the City of Elgin. "I don't think we've lost more than 5 percent of our Legacy Tree Project trees. It's been a very successful program."

The results in Elgin are consistent with those in other cities across Chicagoland.

"It's now very apparent that Safari is working – even in larger trees," said Dr. Joe Chamberlin, regional field development manager for Valent Professional Products.

There are two different EAB treatment strategies. The first is long-term treatment to preserve ash trees for their remaining service life. The second is temporary treatment to stage tree removal. Staging removal spreads out the financial burdens associated with removal and replanting and avoids the significant public safety issues associated with standing dead trees.

The difference between ash trees treated with Safari and those left untreated is particularly stark in places like Naperville, a suburb southwest of Chicago, according to M. Skeet, a certified arborist working in the Naperville office of The Care of Trees. "You can literally stand in the middle of a road, look at one side and see dead ash trees, and then look at the other side and see Legacy Tree Project ash trees alive and looking good," Skeet said.



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To hear a podcast on the latest control measures for EAB, visit bit.ly/lawnradio.



Valent says its Safari Insecticide protected more than 95 percent of ash trees from emerald ash borer.

Lush Lawn announces new lawn care franchise concept

Lush Lawn Franchising, the franchisor and licensor of Lush Lawn, has announced its new franchise concept, Lush Lawn Lawn Care, Tree Care and Pest Control, which it is preparing to roll out this year.

While Lush Lawn will be offering franchises in a number of states, its initial development focus is targeted for the Midwest, specifically Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Lush Lawn is currently seeking individual franchisees, area developers and investors. The company is currently accepting inquiries from interested parties.






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NEWS /// For more news, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com

Lush Lawn is a lawn and tree care as well as perimeter pest control service that will primarily target upscale residential homeowners and commercial property owners where appearance and service reliability are the priority. Franchisees will also be offering other value added supplemental services such as grub control, organic lawn care, aeration, seeding and other services.

At the franchisee level, the value proposition will be offering larger territories, allowing for greater single unit growth potential, utilizing contemporary marketing and selling programs tied to technology, and attention to detail at the customer level, the company said.

The concept is designed to work out the home or in nominal commercial space.

Aaron Samson, Lush Lawn and president and CEO, points to success that the operating prototype has achieved in the Southeastern Michigan despite the substantial headwinds of the Michigan economy.

"The most critical success factors are; one, caring about the franchisees and their ability to make money and, two, making absolutely certain the unit owners embrace a quality and service first approach," Samson said.

"We know the lawn care business and we understand how to acquire and take care of customers."

AccuWeather predicts average to above average snowfall

AccuWeather.com long range meteorologists, headed by Paul Pastelok, are projecting an El Niño this winter. However, the key is the strength of the feature.

"Based on what the patterns we are already seeing over the Pacific Ocean, we believe that an El Niño is beginning to set up and we may have a weak El Niño signature by late in the summer," Pastelok said.

How strong the El Niño becomes seems to have an interesting outcome for snowfall for the northern United



Snow fighters will be happy that parts of the country will see more snow than last winter.

States. Pastelok's crew is projecting a weak to moderate El Niño for this coming winter.

According to a study done by Ralph Fato, during a "weak" El Niño, many winters have brought above-normal snowfall for cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Hartford and Chicago.

However during strong El Niño winters, snowfall trends to well-below average.

During a weak El Niño, there is generally a balance between southern warmth and northern chill, resulting in ample energy and moisture for storms.

During a strong El Niño, the storm track sets up in such a way to allow warm air to overwhelm the Midwest and Northeast; therefore, storms tend to favor rain rather than snow.

NJLCA now offers a health benefits plan

The New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association has joined the Benefits Trust and Association Master Trust (AMT).

With more than 9,000 participants from 14 member associations, AMT can tap into the same benefit plans that larger employers enjoy.

NJLCA and AMT save members money by providing self-funded group benefit plans without outside broker commissions or shareholders demanding profits, the association said.

Plus, AMT contracts with Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey and the Delta Dental Plan of New Jersey



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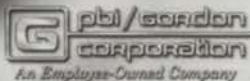
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NEWS ///

to provide members with access to one of the largest health and dental provider networks in the state; all at the lowest cost possible, the association said.

Irrigation Association achieves industry first

The Irrigation Association Certification Board announced that the Certified Ir-

rigation Contractor program has officially earned national accreditation, making it the only accredited certification program in the irrigation industry. The CIC designation is one of seven offered through IA's Select Certified program.

The certification board has been working diligently since mid-2009 on the accreditation process and first



CLIMBING THE LADDER:

Hires, promotions and career advancements

LebanonTurf announced three sales and product management appointments. **Vic Swann** has been named national sales manager, **Joe Sandock** territory sales manager and **Christopher Gray** product manager.

Swann will lead the LebanonTurf sales team in North America with an emphasis on the continued growth of the traditional and bionutritional categories as well as development of distributor relationships. Prior to joining LebanonTurf, Swann was sales manager at Astra Resources in Vero Beach, Fla., and director of North America sales for Aquatrols in Paulsboro, N.J. He assumes the position held by Tom Wentz, who will retire later this year.

As territory sales manager, Sandock will develop and implement sales and service strategies and programs for distributors and customers. Sandock was residential client services sales manager for AA Tex Lawn and is the former owner of Planters Lawn & Landscape. Both businesses are based in Charlotte, N.C. Gray's responsibilities as product manager include identifying new fertilizer products and managing existing fertilizer product offerings. Gray was business development manager for Indianapolis-based Precise Path Robotics.



Sandock



Gray

Mustard Products and Technologies has hired **Jay McCord** as US turf market development manager to lead the launch of MustGro Invest Biological Nematicide. This natural product is manufactured from 100 percent mustard seed meal that is applied directly to the soil and used to control plant parasitic nematodes including: root knot, lance, stubby root and sting.

McCord has more than 25 years of experience in the turfgrass industry and has been focused in the biological nematicide business for the past five years. After completing his formal education at State University of N.Y. in Alfred and the Ohio State University in Columbus majoring in landscape development and ornamental horticulture, McCord started his turf career with Nutri-Turf, as marketing manager of the sod farms divisions.

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submitted their application to the National Commission of Certifying Agencies in September 2011, the association said. Certification programs that receive NCCA accreditation demonstrate compliance with the NCCA's Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs, which were the first standards for professional certification programs developed by the certification industry.

The IACB's process began by performing a task analysis for the irrigation contractor job. The analysis involved surveys and an irrigation contractor focus group designed to assess the knowledge, skills and

abilities necessary to do the job correctly. Based on data they received from the focus group and surveys, the board developed the exam content outline.

The IACB received notification in late May that they had earned accreditation. The CIC program is the first in the irrigation industry to become NCCA-accredited.

"All of today's professionals benefit from the high standards of knowledge, experience and professionalism required by the Select Certified program," says Tom Wyatt, a former IACB board chair



Wyatt

NEI Holdings continues acquisition spree

NEI Holdings in Danbury, Conn., has completed one of its largest acquisitions to date. New England Irrigation has acquired the accounts and certain personnel of Oasis Irrigation, Easton, Mass., adding 800 customers to NEI's portfolio.

This is NEI's eighth acquisition since 2005, and the company is still looking at growth opportunities.

"Strengthening our presence in markets that we already service, along with organic growth and growth through acquisition, not only creates tremen-

dous opportunities for our people, but it is fundamental in continuing to drive our business plan in becoming the number one irrigation service provider of the North East," says Eric Zima, owner of NEI.

"We are currently speaking with a number of other high quality organizations regarding possible future mergers with NEI." **L&L**

Clarification:

In our May issue, we listed Weed Man's headquarters as Oshawa, Ontario. This is actually the location of Weed Man's master franchisee for the U.S., Turf Holdings. The company's world headquarters is in Mississauga, Ontario.

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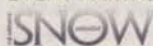
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CREDIT CARD FEES AND PINK RHODODENDRONS

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.

Q.: How are landscape companies handling charges from credit card companies for customers who choose to pay their invoice this way? Do they pass on a convenience fee to these customers? And, how do you handle this if the customer is not present (for example, customer calls into our office and we take the credit card information and manually enter it)? Recently, we received a credit card for payment of an invoice of \$30,000 for which we were hit with a 3 percent charge (around \$900) from the credit card company. Is it reasonable to ask the customer, if they are going to pay this way, to pay the entire convenience fee?

A. I definitely understand your concern about the cost of credit card processing. It can take a bite

out of your profits. We initially looked at the situation like you are, and then we weighed that cost against the cost of not collecting payment from the clients on a timely basis.

Charging a client's credit card as soon as you perform the services is much better than waiting 30, 60, or 90 days to get the money.

Not collecting on a timely basis may result in you having to borrow against your line of credit to pay vendors. I would imagine you are paying more than 3 percent for that money.

Many of our clients like the points or airline miles they get for using their credit cards, so it is becoming a standard way of doing business.

If you want to recoup that fee, I would add it to your pricing

structure rather than show it as an additional charge. I think you will get some negative feedback if you make it a separate charge.

Jud Griggs, Landscape Industry Certified Manager, Lambert Landscape Co.

Have a question for the experts? Send it to lexperts@gie.net.

Q.: I'm trying to locate a pink rhododendron for a client, and I'm in Kansas (zone 5). It seems that azaleas and rhododendrons are almost the same thing (other than deciduous vs. evergreen). So, whenever I think I've found the right rhodo, some sources will say the flowering color is pink, lavender, or pink-lavender. I'm confused. Is this an issue similar to hydrangea where you adjust the acidity of the soil to get a different flowering color?

A. Azaleas fall in the genus of rhododendron. Rhododendrons and azaleas can be tropical or hardy, deciduous or evergreen. The bloom color seems to change as the season progresses, hence the odd variation of hues within the same description. The typical way to describe their color is

by what is the predominant color. There are some azaleas (Satsuki) in particular that have multiple colored blooms that are really striking and memorable.

The Exbury azalea is a great plant for Kansas, especially in the eastern half of the state. I personally have three at our house, and they are gorgeous and thriving. Exburys are problem-free plants and easy to grow.

I recommend that you plant them in partial shade and avoid direct afternoon sunlight. They are way underused plants.

As far as rhodos go, it's difficult for this plant to thrive in Kansas. We do not have the proper soil for them, and the summers get too hot and the winters are oftentimes too dry for a broadleaf evergreen to thrive.

With that said, I have seen several nice plantings in the proper location.

My best sellers and the ones that do best are PJM, Nova Zembla, Purple Gem, Ramapo and Impeditum. I found rhododendron.org to be a really interesting website. **L&L**

Katharine Rudnyk, Monrovia Growers



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Only one in 14 Hispanic adults in the United States has been screened for skin cancer, far fewer than the one in four whites screened, a new study shows.

Research from The Cancer Institute of New Jersey (CINJ) shows socioeconomic factors such as lack of health insurance and poorer access to healthcare serve as barriers for Hispanics who might otherwise receive this check-up.

Only 7% reported ever having had a full skin examination by a physician, and 6% of participants born outside of the U.S. noted they had undergone a full skin exam, compared to 9% among those born in the U.S. Low exam rates were also noted for those who reported speaking little or no English. Of those who spoke mostly or only Spanish, four percent said they had received a skin exam.

The study appeared in the latest issue of the *Archives of Dermatology*.



BAD MONTH FOR LENDING

According to the Thomson Reuters/PayNet Small Business Lending Index, April was not a great month for small business lending as it eased for the fourth month in a row. The index, which measures the overall volume of financing to U.S. small businesses, fell to 94.1 from 96.0 in March, PayNet said.

But, accounts in moderate delinquency, or those behind by 30 days or more, fell to 1.29% from 1.39% in March.

Accounts 90 days or more behind in payments, or in severe delinquency, went down to 0.35% percent from 0.36%.

Accounts behind 180 days or more, considered to be in default and unlikely ever to be paid, eased to 0.43% from 0.48%.



7%

Small businesses don't have high hopes for a solid recovery in the near future from the economic downturn, according to a survey from the national Federation of Independent Business.

A paltry 7% of businesses surveyed said now is a good time to expand, which was the same percentage from the previous month's survey. About 6% said it was a good time to hire new employees. The percent of owners expecting better business conditions in six months was a -2% percent (a 3 point improvement).

However, more owners still expect the economy to deteriorate further than those who anticipate improvement. About 20% reported that "poor sales" are their top business problem, up 1 point from April.

Falling Further

The average price for a gallon of regular gasoline in the United States fell almost 16 cents to \$3.62 at the end of May into the first week of June due to a drop in crude oil, the Lundberg Survey showed, according to Reuters.

The national average for regular gasoline as of June 8 was down more than 11.62 cents from previous-year price of \$3.74 a gallon, according to the survey of some 2,500 gasoline stations in the continental United States.

The price was the lowest since the Feb. 10, which recorded an average of \$3.51 per gallon.

This was the fourth straight survey to show a price decline.

The average price of a gallon of diesel is down 30.61 cents over the past nine weeks since June 8, and 17.64 cents over the past three, to \$3.90.

Both gasoline and diesel prices are lower than a year ago, the survey showed.



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Showing your stuff



Dizzy Dean: Baseball player and great philosopher.

Last month we spoke about identifying what a potential client is looking for and I gave you many ideas to help find out what the prospect values. This month I want share with you some ways you can clearly show the value you bring to the table. There are three big ways to do this. There are to:

1. Tell them yourself
2. Show them yourself
3. Have your clients tell them

1 Tell them yourself. Dizzy Dean, the baseball player, once said, "It ain't braggin' if you

done did it." You must exude confidence when you are selling. You have to know and love your product and service inside and out. Again, you must know and love your product inside and out. Throwing a new graduate in landscape architecture into a car and having her call on clients is a big mistake. How many jobs has a 23-year-old L.A. grad done? How many transactions has someone that age done themselves to understand how sales work?

The biggest mistakes I've made in business were putting people into a sales role before

they were ready for it. So, you must know your product and you must love your product. If you don't, you'll never do well selling it. The issue is you need to be honest; that's the difference. Facts and results are hard to argue. Tell them!

If your work has won national awards, tell your clients. If you just finished a great job for their neighbor and you got that client from your positive reviews on Angie's List, then tell them. If you're booked up for months because people are willing to wait for your creativity and quality, tell them. It's one thing to say you are the best, but it's another to have irrefutable evidence that this is true.

2 Show them yourself. We are fortunate that, unlike a lot of other businesses, you can show your prospects photos of all the good things you've done. You've heard a picture is worth a thousand words, right? It might be worth more than that actually. With today's technology, there really is no excuse not to carry an iPad or laptop chock full of photos, letters of recommendation, and even video testimonials showing that you are who you say you are.

Be prepared for your selling efforts. Showing up with only a proposal is an easy way to lump yourself with all the "other" landscapers in the world.

If you truly want to differentiate yourself, you have to put forth the effort to show your prospects what you do and why you are better. You can even drive them around and show them your work. Showing your prospects your work is an incredibly powerful way to sell work and communicate the value you bring to the table beyond what words on a proposal

can say. We live in a busy world and you have a slim window to catch their attention; do so with technology. Show them!

3 Have your clients tell them.

What others say about you is infinitely more impressive and convincing than what you say about yourself. We literally have hundreds and hundreds of testimonials from our happy clients. Other landscapers that I work with and coach are often amazed by this. They ask me how we get them.

There are two ways. First of all, we get a ton of them without even asking for them. And we get more of them simply by asking for them.

If you are having trouble getting testimonials, I suggest you look at the quality of the product and service you are offering. If you do great work, you will get testimonials naturally.

And if you feel you do great work, but aren't getting overwhelmed with testimonials, then just ask in a survey and politely push the issue.

If you do great work, you'll get them. No one can refute the power of having your current happy clients tell prospects about your company. It works.

In fact, just last week, my sales associate Brent gave a prospect the name and number of one of our happy clients.

Brent's prospect called my client asking them if we did good work and were a company they should work with right now.

My client told Brent's prospect to come over and look for themselves. This couple spent an hour with my client and I am happy to report Brent got the job. Have your clients show them!

Prospects become clients when they see value in what you bring to the table.

If you listen well and screen your prospects like we talked about last month and tell them, show them and have your clients tell them, you can and will improve your selling efforts. **L&L**

To view last month's column from Marty, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "do your homework."

Strength from within

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Luxury garden

Barron's Dictionary of Business Terms defines a niche as a "particular specialty in which a firm or person finds they prosper. Niche strategy in marketing is to market to a small but lucrative portion of the market. The small size of the niche generally ensures efficient marketing efforts and few if any direct competitors."

A number of my clients catering to the ultra-high-end residential market have developed a niche strategy for building what many refer to as a "fine gardening" or "garden detail" service. It is a service that when clearly defined and properly presented to a potential client base can significantly supplement a company's bottom line.

However, there are caveats that the entrepreneur is wise to heed when offering such a service.

WHAT IT IS. Fine gardening is a specialized service that often entails custom hand pruning,

fertilizations, specialized plantings, water feature and pond care, and pottery and garden art purchases. It can also include low-voltage lighting care, specialized plant care and estate outdoor master planning. In the automobile industry, there's Toyota and there's Lexus. Both fill a need. Fine gardening is Lexus and you need to keep that fact clearly in mind.

WHAT IT IS NOT. Fine gardening is not maintenance and it is certainly not "mow-blow-n-go." Garden detail is a specialty service set apart from the service provided by a typical maintenance crew. There's a place for maintenance and there's a place for fine gardening. However, you do not want to blur the distinctions between the two. You don't market, sell and service a Ford the same way you do a Ferrari.

WHO IS IT FOR? A specialized garden service is for the discriminating client who

appreciates and desires an artful approach to the landscape needs of his estate. This service is not cheap, primarily due to the necessary qualifications of those providing the service. While just about everyone might desire to have such a service, not everyone is willing to pay the price for the high quality standards and attention to detail that fine gardening provides.

WHO PROVIDES THE SERVICE?

The individual who runs this division for the company must have specific skills as well as certain personality traits. If any of these skills or traits is missing, it probably won't work. This individual must: have excellent horticultural skills, be passionate about gardening and be able to communicate effectively and enthusiastically to the client regarding fine gardening. She must also be able to sell, be able to pay strict attention to detail, be very good at building and maintaining relationships, be organized, be excellent at following up and following through with details and, finally, must be very customer-service oriented.

In my experience, 90 percent of the people who excel at this position are women who love gardening. It isn't that men can't effectively manage this type of division. Many do. However, the fact is that the majority of the time, it is a woman who champions fine gardening.

PRICING. Due to the highly specialized skill set of fine gardening personnel and the high level of service required by clients, the hourly rate for fine gardening is not cheap. Throughout North America the price for such services ranges from \$45 to \$65 per man-hour. A gardener working an eight-hour day will usually generate between

\$400 and \$500 per day just for labor. Materials are usually marked up to equal retail pricing, sometimes more.

HOW IT WORKS. I have dozens of clients throughout North America who provide a fine gardening service. One client in Southern California saw his residential installation sales decrease in excess of sixty percent the last four years. It's his fine gardening division that is pulling him through the current tough economic times. Another client in the Northern California market decided to start such a division. He studied it, met with other contractors offering fine gardening services, updated his website appropriately and announced his new service for his high-end residential clients with a very formal introductory invitation – not unlike a wedding invitation.

Two clients in the Northeast provide their fine gardening clients with a base contract for specified services (cleanups, pruning, deadheading, fertilizations, etc.). These contracts average tens of thousands of dollars. Account managers normally add another 25-50 percent more than the base contract in enhancements.

SUMMARY. Fine gardening or garden detail services can be a very lucrative niche for the landscape contractor who has the right personnel and is prepared to provide such a service. However, you need the kind of client base that appreciates such a service and is prepared to pay for it. Many clients are willing to pay a premium price if service is consistent. Contractors see dollar signs and attempt to enter the major leagues with little league personnel. If that's the case, they're better off sitting out a game or two until they get their act together. **L&L**

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The 3 Rs OF STAFFING

Most landscapers believe staffing is a solitary function aimed at filling vacant positions. That isolated interpretation fails to consider the causes of the vacancy and the consequences of the staffing decision. In contrast, an advanced perspective views staffing as a three-step process: retention, recruitment and review. This aligned sequence enables landscapers to address root causes of employee turnover, generate an ample talent pool of qualified candidates and ensure performance expectations are met by the new employee.

RETENTION. Effective staffing is premised on employee retention; employee retention is based on minimizing employee turnover. Employees leave organizations for reasons that are either external (e.g., family relocation, economic conditions, personal issues) or internal (e.g., lack of advancement, poor fit with company culture, supervisor conflict) to the company.

Ironically, most companies are their own worst enemies in that they don't proactively eliminate their internal causes of turnover. In short, retention prevents turnover.

Companies can collect turnover-related information from current and former employees in multiple forms: interviews with new employees after being on the job for 30 days, annual employee surveys, exit interviews and a 30-day follow-up telephone interview with former employees.

By collecting information from all of these sources, a company can garner significant insight into the actual causes of turnover (e.g., insufficient training, poor morale, supervisory incompatibility, dysfunctional culture, job stress, unchallenging work, inadequate pay/benefits).

Once identified, the company can then design a retention program targeting its most problematic drivers of employee turnover.

In brief, a "best practices" retention program maximizes employee engagement by routinely clarifying how the employee's job performance contributes to organizational success, ensures its supervisors are well trained (e.g., goal setting, delegation, coaching) and leverages a company culture



that fosters employees being valued, meritocracy, and morale.

RECRUITMENT. Unfortunately, many companies have a reactive view of staffing. They only recruit candidates when vacancies exist. That approach is desperate, ineffective and irresponsible.

As my colleague Bill Arman explains in his book "The Harvest Way for Recruiting and Hiring the Right People," recruitment must be done continuously. Rather than only interviewing for current vacancies, clairvoyant landscapers routinely interview candidates even when vacancies don't exist (e.g., employee upgrades, **bench strength**, "tag and release"). To support that staffing equation, recruitment interviews should be conducted every week.

The goal of an effective recruitment plan is to establish a large pool of qualified candidates.

This goal is likely to occur by implementing an integrated set of recruitment initiatives: a rewarding employee referral program, community partnerships (e.g., vendors, agencies, local businesses) and appropriate advertisements (e.g., newspapers, website, flyers).

Landscapers relying on this proactive recruitment approach, incorporating all of the aforementioned recruitment activities, will likely fill their vacancies with higher-caliber candidates in shorter timeframes, at less cost, than other companies that simply respond to vacancies as they occur.

REVIEW. Staffing does not end when the new employee is hired. Many landscapers believe the goal of the staffing sequence is to fill every vacancy. That is an incomplete criterion.

The actual goal of the staffing sequence is to fill every vacancy with an effective employee capable of improving organizational results. To validate that outcome, all new hires should receive a formal performance review after 30 and 90 days on the job.

The 30-day review typically addresses fundamental performance standards like punctuality, appearance, cultural fit, training aptitude, team player, initiative, policy compliance and safety focus.

The 90-day review evaluates employees on applied performance indices like efficiency, functional skills, equipment operation, planning, communication skills, work quality and value proposition.

In keeping with the formal nature of this behaviorally-documented performance management process, the new hire should be informed of the results of the 30-day review, receive complimentary or constructive coaching as necessary and be informed of the specific expectations for the next performance review scheduled to occur in 60 days.

If the employee fails to demonstrate immediate, significant, and sustained progress toward being an effective performer, a timely decision to terminate should be made as appropriate. **L&L**

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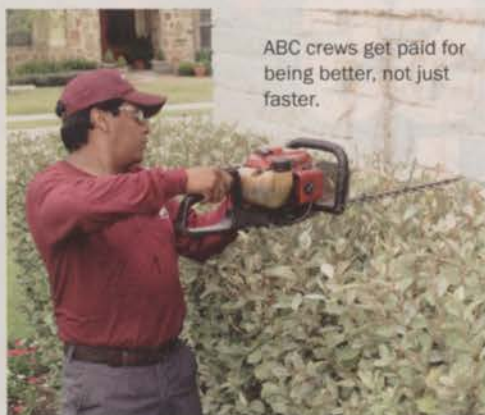


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{ By Kristen Hampshire }

The ABCs of commission pay

ABC Home & Commercial Services compensates maintenance crews on a commission-based pay plan. Here's how it works and why workers stay on board.



The more crews work, the more they get paid at ABC Home & Commercial Services, which targets the Austin, San Antonio and College Station, Texas, markets. That's because maintenance employees get paid on commission rather than taking home a base salary – a system that owner Bobby Jenkins brought over from the pest control side of his business.

"In every analysis of business processes we do, I am trying to make sure that there are three entities that win: customers, employees and the company," Jenkins says. "I firmly believe that commission-based pay is in the best interest of all three entities."

To prove this to crewmembers before rolling out the system to all maintenance employees in all locations, Jenkins tested the pay model with just one crew. "We didn't

Read more about Jenkins and his commission culture and sign up for the A Cut Above newsletter at www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters



just ram it down everyone's throat," he says. "We ran the pay plans side by side, and we told them, 'We'll pay whichever one is better.' After several pay periods of seeing the commission-based crew getting paid more, everyone else was happy to go on that plan."

Gaining buy-in was critical for rolling out the commission-based pay model, Jenkins says. "You have to demonstrate that commission-based pay is better for everyone involved."

Employees get paid more, and in return, the company gets focused, driven workers. Quality delivery is the real barometer of whether the system works, though. Commission-based pay isn't all about rushing through a route to complete more jobs in a day. At ABC, hours are tracked and detailed route sheets are distributed that denote a production value for the day.

"There's a fixed commission for the revenue generated per job, per day and at the end of the day, those commission revenues always prove to be higher than if employees were paid on an hourly rate, even with time-and-a-half," Jenkins says.

DIVERSIFYING THE CORE. ABC Home & Commercial Services was founded as a pest control company and began offering complementary lawn care services 12 years ago. Shortly after that, the firm branched out into lawn maintenance, landscaping and irrigation. "We saw that model of diversifying our service offering seemed to work well," Jenkins says.

So ABC delved into the handyman business, then heating and air conditioning, plumbing and electrical. Now it also offers tree trimming, pool cleaning and other repair and maintenance services.



WEATHERING THE DROUGHT

Location is everything, and Bobby Jenkins is pretty proud to be based in central Texas, where the economy has been in a better position than most areas of the country. "We consider ourselves very fortunate to be in Texas, and even more so in central Texas," says Jenkins, president of ABC Home & Commercial Services with offices Austin, San Antonio and College Station.

But weather is a different story. Central Texas was bone dry last year, and this had a "huge impact" on Jenkins' business, he says. "We were so hot and dry, turfgrass just stopped growing," he says. "People abandoned their yards because we were under such stringent water restrictions that they couldn't keep their lawns alive. So we lost a lot of business."

Clients cancelled lawn service contracts. "There was nothing growing," Jenkins says.

This is where diversity worked to ABC Home & Commercial's benefit. While water rationing was in full effect and the Dust Bowl went months without rain, wildlife went rampant. "The drought put a lot of wildlife under tremendous stress," Jenkins says. "Our rodent and wildlife business went through the roof."

While insect pressure wasn't as great because of lack of moisture, the rodent and wildlife business made up for those losses. And the sweltering hot, dry conditions opened up opportunities to expand into new service lines.

"What a great year to go into the air conditioning business," Jenkins says.

Overall, ABC Home & Commercial Services grew by 14 percent last year. And this year, the weather looks wetter. "We have had rain so far," Jenkins reports. "Our business is up nicely right now, so I'm guardedly optimistic."

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Ahead of the game

Hunt Irrigation picked up clients from competitors who dropped the ball on water efficiency.



New construction has stalled for Hunt Irrigation, but fixing poorly designed installs has grown.

In 1997, Jeremy Hunt decided that he wanted to start his own business.

One of the catalysts was the fact that he really wanted to focus on water conservation before anything else.

"Back then it wasn't something that people were talking about, and when I presented those ideas to the company I was working for, it wasn't something they wanted to focus on," says Hunt, owner of Hunt Irrigation in Lincoln, Neb.

Being ahead of the curve has worked out well for Hunt's company. "Today water conservation is a very popular concept and we've been doing it longer than our competitors," Hunt says.

"We've already examined our de-

sign and worked on modifications and changes to ensure our systems are as efficient as possible."

Since 1997, a lot has changed that has made focusing on water conservation even easier.

Hunt says that the advent of smart controllers has really changed the game.

"When smart controllers came on to the market, it made our job easier to do," he says.

"Every system we install has a smart controller on the residential side. Obviously with commercial work you need to abide by the specification.

"But we always bring it to the project manager's attention that we can save the owner money by making changes

or modifications to the spec." While new construction has slumped off, Hunt says that he's found a niche in making poorly designed sprinkler systems more efficient for customers.

The company does about 60 percent residential work on average.

"A large majority of the new clients we pick up are systems we didn't originally install but for whatever reason the original company doesn't want to or isn't following up on service," he says.

"This works out well because 90 percent of the time those systems weren't the best installation in the first place so that creates an opportunity to offer the client a more efficient system."

Whether an area is receiving poor coverage or is being over-watered, Hunt says that these situations create opportunities to modify the original design and bring the system up to a higher standard.

Learn how Hunt stays ahead of trends and sign up for the Water Works e-newsletter at www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters



TIME MANAGEMENT

Own his business for nearly 15 years, Jeremy Hunt says that, at times, he may micro-manage. But he says it's difficult not to have his hands in everything.

As owner, he likes being out in the field, which is why he stuck with the industry in the first place. And, as the owner, he's very hands on. "I wore a lot of hats when I started this company and I still do today," he says. "I not only do the invoicing and pay the bills, but I spend long days in the field. When I went into this line of work it wasn't because the APs and ARs excited me - it was because I enjoyed doing the construction of the sprinkler systems and truly like the service end. I enjoy the diagnostic work - trying to figure out why something doesn't work and coming up with a solution. That's where I find the most enjoyment within this company, so I tend to do the majority of my work with the

installation crew and service techs." Still, Hunt says that this is the first year in business that he's started to back off on his involvement with the field operations and concentrate more on management. It's largely because business has grown and made this a necessity.

"I'll admit I am still a much bigger fan of being out in the field. In fact, sometimes the office manager has to hit me over the head with a big pile of paperwork to remind me it's time to get back to the office," he laughs.

And while Hunt says he's making an attempt to be in the office a bit more, he also says it makes a difference to his clients when they see him in the field.

"Clients tend to like seeing the owner take a hands-on approach and being involved throughout the process," he says.

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Thornton was mainly design/build, until maintenance was added.

BEST PRACTICES DESIGN BUILD



Moving into maintenance

Thornton Landscape celebrates 50 years in business and shares how the firm has evolved to meet market demands.

People make a business. That's why in 2007, when Thornton Landscape in Cincinnati decided to add maintenance to the design/build firm's services, the owners purchased a small maintenance firm and brought on its energetic leader.

"He gave us the foundation of what we have today," says Rick Doesburg, company owner. "We weren't buying the (business) portfolio as much as his expertise."

Timing couldn't have been better for starting a maintenance division, though Rick doesn't take credit for that.

"We didn't know in 2007 what was going to happen in 2008, 2009 and 2010," he says.

"We like to think we (started this division) because we saw the economic downturn coming, but that would be a lie. We made the right decision at the right time."

Transitioning the design/build firm into a full-service company that offers

maintenance went smoothly because of the company's processes, which had been passed down from the Thornton family – and because of the dedicated staff members, who take ownership in the across the business.

The company added one full-time manager, and over time, hired 10 crewmembers. But running a maintenance business wasn't all that easy. It's quite a different animal to tame than operating a design/build firm, the Doesburgs learned.

"It's down and dirty competition in commercial maintenance," Rick says bluntly.

"A lot of times, it's about price," Thornton Landscape leverages its ability to deliver a positive customer experience to win new maintenance contracts.

Crews do more than get in, get out. "We have been successful by doing a cut above what others might be doing, using our expertise in design as needed and treating customers like we want to be treated ourselves," Rick says.

The maintenance division is relatively humble in size: three crews in a small market, Rick says. But those crews produce \$1 million in revenue for Thornton Landscape, and the landscape design crews stay busier during slower winter times because of extra maintenance jobs like spring cleanup and mulching.

Maintenance provides Thornton Landscape with a service cushion for times when design/build business is lean.

MAINTENANCE POINTERS

Considering adding a maintenance division to your design/build firm? Andy Doesburg, who heads up the department at Thornton Landscape in Cincinnati, shares some of his lessons learned in the trenches.



Andy and Rick Doesburg lead Thornton Landscape.

Cross-train. Thornton Landscape brought on new field labor to manage mowing, but the company relied on its landscape crews to pick up spring services, such as mulching and pruning. "Cross-training is a good way to keep everyone busy," he says.

Expect a different pace. A focus on efficiency is critical when operating a maintenance division because jobs are short-term compared to longer-term design/build endeavors. "With maintenance, you must deliver everything quickly while still delivering quality," Doesburg says.

Know the politics. Especially when working with homeowners associations (HOAs), remember who's signing the contract. That's not always easy because a housing development with a hundred clients can mean a hundred different opinions.

Thornton Landscape is a 50-year-old company. Learn more about its best practices and sign up for the Business Builder e-newsletter at www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters.





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Virtual reach

Chris Kozol uses video blogs to educate and communicate with customers.

The days when Chris Kozol was able to personally meet with every customer to educate them on lawn care treatment options and discuss their service plans are long gone. Since founding Forest Green Lawn and Landscape in Omaha, Neb., nearly 15 years ago, Kozol has hired a team of salespeople to interface with his loyal customers.

Nonetheless, in the past few years, he has begun using a low cost, tech-savvy marketing tool to reach out to customers – at least, in a virtual sense. Through creating video blogs that he emails out to every customer in his database, Kozol is able to provide lawn care tips, company updates and, of course, sell his services.

"It's impossible for me to be out on every yard, so this is another way of touching my customers," he says. "Video blogs are becoming increasingly popular."



Chris Kozol uses video blogs to reach customers.

This is a nice way for my customers to see from the owner of the company, to hear from me."

To create the short, 2-3 minute videos, Kozol hired a local Omaha blogger. He decided not to hire a professional marketing firm after noticing that some of the most popular content on Internet sites like YouTube is shot and edited by amateurs.

"I knew that I didn't need to hire a production company," Kozol says. "People get bombarded with stuff every day, so I wanted the videos to be quick and easy – something to brighten their day, give them knowledge and let them know we're here."

As he began to develop the videos, Kozol jotted down a list of topics that he wanted to address throughout the course of the year. He took his cues from frequently asked questions and seasonal topics such as shoveling a driveway in the winter.

"It just started snowing here, so we had a little blog on snow safety," Kozol says. "When it's time for pre-emergent in the spring, then we'll do something on that."

Forest Green's video blogs are delivered in an engaging, off-the-cuff style, yet Kozol still devotes time beforehand to developing ideas and listing what he wants to say. "The person that films me throws in his two cents, and we work on it together," he says. "I think the most we've ever done is three takes, and they're quick. I will say a lot of different things – they don't have to be in the perfect order – and he'll edit it." **L&L**

To read more about the investment Kozol made and how he reaches customers, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters. While there, you can also sign up for the Growing Green e-newsletter.



SERVICE STRATEGY

Over the past 15 years, Chris Kozol has grown Forest Green Lawn and Landscaping in Omaha, Neb., into a full-service maintenance, design and installation company. During that time, he has also nurtured his customer base, added new, loyal clients and built a roster of 28 full-time and seasonal employees. Now, as he retraces his path to success, he can point to a core strategy that's kept Forest Green growing.

"Above all, we really believe in taking care of our foundation first," says the entrepreneur. "If we can't take care of the customers we already have, how can we take care of somebody new? Over time, we've grown our services based on that."

Kozol's strategy of layering new services atop a solid foundation of

content customers may sound simple enough. Yet when he decided to add landscape design and installation to his list of services five years ago, the transition was complex.

"There have definitely been ups and downs," he says. "I already knew the mowing, maintenance and fertilization business, yet there was a learning curve for landscape design and installation. A lot more things need to go correctly to be successful."

Although the initial investments of time and money to add these new services was quite substantial, Kozol says that it's paid off and allowed Forest Green to enjoy another growth spurt. "We had a good client base to build off of, and they already trust us," he says. "So we let them know we'd added these services, and we grew from there."



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This month, we've brought together the latest research and expert analysis on social media in the green industry. Read on to learn how you can use social media to improve your marketing, employee retention and bottom line.

GET! SOCIAL!

What it takes to build a social media team

11 guidelines for engaging your employees in your social media marketing. By Chris Heiler

Many companies in the green industry are beginning to embrace the idea of using what is commonly referred to as an "online community manager." This could be an in-house employee, outside consultant or agency.

Responsibilities can range from website development and search engine optimization (SEO) to content creation and social media management.

As time goes on, this community manager role is going to become more and more critical within our organizations. It will also become more difficult for a single person to manage as technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace. Even more importantly, the need for real-time par-

ticipation will be an absolute requirement of you. The big brands of the world have already learned this. Green industry businesses will eventually have to come to grips with the idea that business is 24/7, and not 9 to 5.

Because of this, I advocate a team approach to managing your company's online presence.

Below are 11 guidelines to follow when building an internal team that will contribute to your company's online presence and social media efforts.

1 Ask for help, don't demand it. As you know, not everyone is into social media or active online. That's perfectly fine. Don't demand anything of these people.

You'll only get pushback.

You want enthusiastic people who are genuinely interested in social media and how it can help your business. Of course, it doesn't hurt if these folks are tech-savvy as well.

You don't need every employee on board with your efforts. Find the few who are truly interested in exploring what social media can do for your business.

2 Set your company's organizational chart on fire. A person's position in your company, or their experience, should not be a factor in selecting your team. Why does the CEO or vice president need to be involved if they have absolutely no interest in social media? They shouldn't. At the same

time, why would you exclude someone near the bottom of your organizational chart if they truly want to help your social media efforts?

Shayne Newman, president of Yardapes in New Milford, Conn., recently shared with me that one of his H-2B workers is a Facebook fanatic, constantly sharing images and videos of the landscape work they are doing on his personal Facebook profile. Make this guy a part of your social media team right now!

And, please, do not play the age card. That college grad or high school kid you just hired doesn't automatically qualify as a social media expert. Nor does she necessarily want to help in your efforts. On the flip side, don't underestimate or disqualify someone

because they are over the age of 40 (that's an arbitrary number, folks). Age has nothing to do with enthusiasm and the willingness to help your business.

3 Include voices from all departments. My personal background is in landscape design and construction, so I naturally gravitate toward design/build topics. I'm not as well informed when it comes to lawn care, tree care, irrigation or a half dozen other green industry topics or services.

Your company can't have gaps in the topics you cover and content you create. Having voices from each department within your company enables you to tell a complete story about your company.

At Neave Group Outdoor Solutions in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., we've created a team that keeps me updated on everything happening in the company from community events to seasonal maintenance considerations to unique projects they are currently working on. The team gives me the information I need to tell an accurate story about Neave Group.

4 Explain why social media is important to your company and why you want your people to play a critical role. This can be a tough one because many business owners don't fully understand how social media positively impacts their business and bottom line.

But in order to get your people fully invested in your initiatives, you better be able to sell them on why exactly

you are doing this, and why you want them to play an important role.

5 Clearly outline your objectives. Everyone within your company who is involved in your social media efforts needs to be shooting at the same target. What are the big-picture objectives and specific goals you are trying to achieve?

Is the objective to build customer loyalty or to drive direct sales? Is the objective to build brand awareness within a specific geographic area? These are three very different objectives that require unique strategies.

Your people need to understand your social strategy and what you are trying to achieve.

6 Give your people an incentive to participate. As I mentioned above, don't demand that your people participate in your social efforts—you'll only get push-back. You want people on board who truly want to help. And when you find these folks you need to reward them. I suggest creating a formal rewards program.

We've put a program in place at Neave Group that provides an incentive to actively participate and keeps our team motivated, invested and informed (Neave employees are rewarded for creating engaging content like blog posts as well as sharing pictures).

7 Give your team the tools to succeed. Would you send your crews out each day without the proper tools and

RESEARCH REPORT

We asked our readers how they use social media - what platforms they like, why they use it and how much time they spend on it. Take a look and see how you measure up.

63% of landscape contractors and lawn care operators use social media for personal and business use.

Where are you?

Facebook	95%
LinkedIn	70%
Twitter	39%
Blogs	27%
Pinterest	14%

How much time do you spend on social media?

Less than an hour	40%
1-3 hours	37%
3-5 hours	9%
More than 5 hours	14%

Why do you use social media?

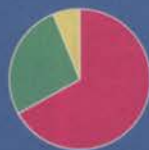
To market their business to customers and prospects	80%
To network with other green industry professionals	59%
To find employees	12%
To create an online portfolio	65%

How do you use it with customers?

To market company as a whole	88%
To find new business	57%
To market specific deals/promotions	43%
To get feedback on projects	36%

Who posts?

- 67% is the owner
- 27% is someone else at the company
- 6% is an outside consultant



Top phones used:



iPhone



Droid



Regular phone (non-smart)



Blackberry (a distant fourth)

equipment to complete the job? Of course not. Would you let an inexperienced laborer build a patio without the proper training? I sure hope not.

You need to give your social team every opportunity to succeed. This means providing them with the organization, systems, training and tools they are going to need to be effective. You can't

simply ask your employees to take pictures for you, or write a blog post, or tweet for the company without giving them the proper tools and instruction. You need to enable them by making the process as frictionless as possible.

8 Provide your team with oversight. Whether you keep it in-house, hire an independent consultant or retain

an agency, someone needs to be held responsible for providing oversight. Remember, this is a team you're putting together. And all successful teams have a coach roaming the sideline calling the shots.

You will need one person in charge of keeping your social media program organized and running smoothly.

9 Start small, then build on success. Your social

team might start out with two employees managing your company Facebook page. Then, perhaps, six months later, you add another member to the team who manages your company Twitter

account. This is perfectly acceptable.

It's best to start any program slowly and build on your successes. Gain some momentum with one initiative like a Facebook page or blog before jumping into something else.

10 Set expectations, but let your people fail and make mistakes. We

are just at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to social media. No one in the green industry has this completely figured out. Let your team experiment and try out new ideas, programs and plans.

It's important to let them have some fun. This is how you keep them engaged.

But, at the same time, set expectations for your team. I recommend introducing a "two strike" rule for team members.

One inappropriate photo or status update, not a big deal. But make the same mistake twice and you're off the team.

11 Keep your team updated. You must

maintain your team's interest and engagement if you want your social media efforts to pay off. You need to keep them updated by sharing your successes with them.

Has your website traffic increased significantly since putting together your social team? Is your blog generating more qualified leads? This progress needs to be shared with your team.

We maintain a monthly Leaderboard for Neave Group's social team which tallies each team members'

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contribution for the month. Not only does this keep the team updated, it creates competition that drives more participation.

A single person cannot effectively manage your company's social media and online marketing efforts without

strong support internally. Engage your employees in your efforts and empower them to tell a compelling story about your business.

Chris Heiler is the founder and president of Landscape Leadership. Visit www.LandscapeLeadership.com to learn more.

Be yourself

Social experts Jason Cupp, Paige Worthy and Jess Ostroff come together to discuss what to share and what to keep to yourself when it comes to social media.

By Lyndsey Frey

Online personalities and social experts Jason Cupp, Paige Worthy and Jess Ostroff have been online since the very beginning – before the term, “social media,” was even coined. They reminisce about the good ‘ole days when Prodigy online services were a hit and Facebook was made available across their college campuses.

Some of you probably know Cupp. He’s been in the landscape industry for more than 20 years, starting out with just a lawn mower back in high school. Now, as a Kolbe Certified growth consultant, team-building expert and motivational speaker, he consults with some of the biggest companies in the landscape industry.

Worthy is a freelance writer, blogger and all-around social junkie with experience in the green industry’s retail sector.

And, finally, Ostroff is somewhat of a digital nomad working from various locales as a virtual assistant for some of the biggest names in the social media universe. Plus, she recently launched, Don’t Panic Management, a creative management company that specializes in niche genres.

Chris Heiler brought these three unique personalities together recently to discuss adding authenticity, while blending personality and fun when it comes to social media.

What is your personal approach to social media?

Cupp: I’ve always believed in the merging of the worlds. I really don’t have a lot of lines between what I do personally and what I do professionally. I prefer



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to express the fact that I'm going to dinner here, or on vacation there, and in the same token, talk about business practices and principles that drive my core business.

There's no replacement to personal relationships. But to add that authenticity and who you are personally to your online presence, I do believe allows you to get to know people better in ways you wouldn't normally do when you're sitting face to face.

Ostroff: I really believe that people strive for personal connections in any way, which is why I think it's important for us to share (personal things) because people just want to connect and find some way to relate to other people.

I use different networks for different things. I don't like to be friends with people on Facebook that I haven't met or don't have at least a pretty good relationship with them in real life. I just feel like it's more personal. There are certain things I don't share on Twitter that I might share on Facebook. Not because I'm worried about people seeing it, it's just a different audience. My Twitter account has more professional connections than my Facebook account.

Any topics off limits?

Cupp: I do think about it, but I wouldn't say that I have a topic that's offline. I will touch politics, religion, the economy, but I do pay attention to what I'm (writing). I will put anything up that I'm thinking about. Sometimes it has gotten me in a little bit of trouble, but at the end of the day, I believe that authenticity and transparency is critical to develop who I am in those who may be paying attention to what I say.

Worthy: I don't really have limits to what I'll talk about. But that sure has come back and bitten me in the butt. I dealt with it about a year ago and again a few months ago. It's stuff I've mentioned off-handedly and it's gotten blown, in my mind, out of proportion. I have close to 3,500 followers on Twitter. So, there are a lot of people on there who don't know me like my friends know me, and that is my biggest crippling factor, I think.

Ostroff: With the Internet comes a lack of tone – so no one can really tell if you're being sarcastic or not. My friends and I always (joke) about Twitter having a sarcasm font – it should!

I don't necessarily have a certain topic that I don't talk about, but if I'm having a

bad day or I'm in a bad mood, I try to stay away from social networks in general. I don't think it adds value to anyone.

Why is authenticity important online for businesses?

Ostroff: People want to connect with

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people, like we were talking about before. They don't really want to connect with brands. I think the beauty of social media is just that – it allows you as an employee or someone who represents a company to directly interact with your customers and the people who really care about your brand.

I've seen companies use (branded) handles, like JessAT&T. A person may follow you on your company account and see that you are a person working for AT&T, but also going to the beach, or doing something cool that they're interested in. It's not necessarily measureable, but often it gives customers

the chance to see you as a human and improves their view on your brand, which is invaluable.

Do you think businesses are missing an opportunity by not being authentic?

Cupp: Yeah. I just wish companies when they've made a mistake, especially in the eyes of the consumer, that they have the ability to acknowledge that mistake.

I believe that they kind of hide behind that Twitter handle, rather than just say, "Businesses aren't perfect either." So to be able to acknowledge that I do believe moves the ball forward in that customer confidence

role, which is so important in today's element of business.

What's the best medium for adding personality?

Worthy: I think people in this industry need to go to a graphical interface like Facebook or a blog.

But, you have to do a good job of alerting people to your efforts.

If it is all about interaction, then you have to go to where your people are and find the ways they're interesting in talking to you, not in how you want to talk to them.

Things that show off the beauty of what you do are crucial. Take pictures of your projects and invest resources.



Check out our case study on page 70 to learn how to best market your company with social media.

Go out into your garden center when you're newly restocked and take a picture of all the new stuff you have in, or get a video when people are in your garden center for a workshop.

Show there's a reason for people to come in and interact with you – show your personality; show your authenticity. I think people just want to see that there's a person behind the business. *L&L*

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"I was amazed at the size of the show and the technologies presented there. The hardscape technology was very interesting, and we found some new methods for installing."

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Darryl Orr
Pacific Landscapes
Sebastopol, CA

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By Kristen Hampshire

Perfect time to buy

Take these purchasing pointers from landscape firms with smooth systems in place, and you won't be flushing your revenue down the toilet.

Purchasing is a timing game. Early-season materials requirements can really stress your budget – you need to order mulch and annuals before clients start paying the bills, especially with such an early spring. Plus, there are tricky logistics with timing deliveries: How just-in-time can you get? And will your vendor drop off materials at a job site to save your yard some storage space?

For larger capital purchases like zero-turn mowers and trucks, there's the decision to push the time limits on a machine or retire it and buy new. Will your maintenance expenses skyrocket if you keep an old-timer working in the fleet?

This month, *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with three landscape firms about how they manage purchasing and what systems they have in place to make the process go smoothly.

For even more tips on how to improve your company's purchasing, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "perfect time to buy."

Value driven

Stano Landscaping

Matthew Stano, president **LOCATION** Milwaukee **ESTABLISHED** 1963 **EMPLOYEES** 70 **2011 REVENUES** more than \$4 million **CUSTOMERS** design/build is 60% commercial, 40% residential; maintenance is 50% commercial, 50% residential **SERVICES** design/build, landscape/horticulture management, snow removal

Spending more money upfront on equipment and customized vehicles actually costs Stano Landscaping less in the long run. Take the Milwaukee-based company's landscaping trucks. For years, crews were loading heavy equipment on to smaller vehicles. And come winter, those trucks couldn't work double-duty in snow removal.

So a few years ago, Matthew Stano, president, decided to switch to a heavier-duty landscape truck. "That vehicle is the basis for running our landscape construction business because it converts very easily to our snow operations in the winter and we have to use those trucks 12 months out of the year," he says.

The Ford 550s fill every service need for Stano Landscaping. "They give us the weight capacity we need, the turning radius we need for snowplowing and the capacity in terms of bed length for handling more materials," he says.

Not only are these trucks outfitted to suit Stano's needs, he chipped in more for industrial Imron paint jobs on each vehicle. "It doesn't wear off in two years – it lasts four or five," he says. "Those things we do upfront to avoid costs in the future."

Already, the company has cut down on vehicle maintenance costs. "We were repairing brakes and running up more maintenance bills than we should

have been," Stano says, attributing the excess weight on smaller trucks to the premature wear-and-tear.

Stano says the company has been spending more on trucks and equipment in the past several years, mainly because of the vehicle switch-out. "We liquidated some of our units and standardized them," he says.

Stano usually expects to get 10 to 12 years out of a dump truck and five to seven years out of a pickup truck. "If you use it for 10-12 years, it has no resale value," he says.

He tends to push back mower purchases to every five to seven years, as well. But there's a fine line between making due with a piece of equipment and flat out doing it in. "If you're putting 400 to 500 hours on a mower, that's a lot of hours – at 2,000 to 2,500 hours you want that mower gone," he says. "Things start to break when they get old."

Materials purchasing is a little trick-

QUICK TIPS

Invest in quality. By spending more upfront on customized vehicles and opting for features like industrial paint, Stano can make vehicles last longer and work harder for the business. "By spending more money upfront, we actually spend less," he says.

Mind the shelf life. Sure, Stano could get 10-12 years out of a pick-up truck, but then the vehicle would be worthless come time for resale. Instead, he prefers to replace vehicles before they require excessive maintenance and become a company eyesore. "We want our equipment looking up-to-date and clean, and after eight, nine, 10 years, things just start to rot," he says.

Have the money talk. Can't pay a vendor on time? Tell the rep as soon as possible, and be honest. Need 60-day financing? Ask for it. Better to discuss money matters with vendors and let them know where you stand with getting paid by your clients so you don't incur service charges.

beginning of the season, and tapers ordering as the season progresses. "You want to draw down your inventory so you're more careful about purchasing in October and November," Stano says. "You want to have just enough on hand to use until the season ends."

Two-way street

Eastern Land Management

Bruce Moore Sr., president **LOCATION** Stamford, Conn.

ESTABLISHED 1976 **EMPLOYEES** 45 **2011 REVENUES** \$6.7 million

CUSTOMERS 100% commercial **SERVICES** landscape management, enhancement, snow removal

A supplier is just as important to your business as a customer, says Bruce Moore Sr., president of Eastern Land Management in Stamford, Conn. "If they make a mistake, it's hard for you to convey a good service to your customers," Moore says. That's why Eastern Land Management nurtures those vendor relationships by giving its key plant supplier a tour of commercial sites where the grower's annuals are installed. "He'll see how we are using them and what they look like," Moore says.

But most of all, Moore works hard to give his suppliers orders well in advance so they can plan for the season. Aside

ier. It's a timing game, Stano says – submitting purchase orders for large commercial installation jobs in advance, but getting just-in-time delivery straight from the nursery to the job site. "We don't want a lot of plant material in our yard," Stano says, adding that his vendors accommodate this request. Stano has two delivery trucks with drivers whose sole job is to pick up materials from vendors and deliver them to job sites. "It's much more efficient this way because it keeps the crews on the jobs and the delivery guys on the trucks."

Stano Landscaping's yard is reserved for storing materials like mulch, stone products, crushed granite and plant starter. He places larger orders toward the

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from budgeting purchases, timing is the most challenging aspect of materials ordering. This year, Eastern Land Management is trying something new that will hopefully help with pre-ordering annuals in the future. Production managers are taking photos of the beds and creating notebooks that detail the annual flowering program for each property.

"They will document by photo where the beds are, what the dimensions are, and how many pots are required for each bed," Moore says. "That way, we'll have an annual history of what the displays look like so we can use that for ordering purposes and managing production crews."

Specifically, Moore says the photo history will help clients see what their beds looked like the previous year and hopefully make faster decisions on what to install the following year. "We need

(to place annual orders) in February and March because the plants have to be grown," Moore says, noting that his supplier does a lot of contract growing for Eastern Land Management.

"We can't just run to the local garden center to buy material for those large jobs, so we need to get a jump on it. That allows the grower to plant and it hopefully helps us in the pricing of the materials."

Contract growing has helped bring down the cost of materials, Moore says. "But the key is to make sure they get that order on time," Moore says.

As far as equipment, the company purchases all of its mowers and aims to replace them every three years. Again, the vendor relationship here is key.

"When a machine is down or we are having problems, they are right there to support us," he says.

QUICK TIPS

Grow relationships. By nurturing supplier relationships, Eastern Land Management gains flexibility to access materials in a pinch, if needed. "We've had cases where a client says they want one thing and when we put it in they don't like it, so we have to change it," Moore says. "Our growers understand the importance of the situation and that makes the change much easier."

Think small. By being a large customer to smaller vendors, Moore believes his company has more influence. He has followed this same rule with other relationships, such as banking. "They pay attention to us more," he says.

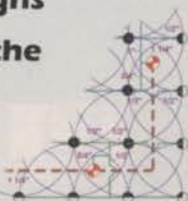
Budget smart. Moore incurs about 40 percent of his costs in the first two months of the season, but maintenance customers pay a monthly flat fee. This requires a careful 12-month budget to ensure adequate cash flow to purchase materials. "We work from the bottom up on the financial statement rather than the top down," Moore says.

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Just-in-time order

Jack Robertson Lawn Care

Jack Robertson, president **LOCATION** Springfield, Ill. **ESTABLISHED** 1977 **EMPLOYEES** 14 **2011 REVENUES:** not available **CUSTOMERS** 90% residential; 10% commercial **SERVICES** lawn care

The two commodities Jack Robertson deals with in his business are fertilizer and gasoline. Both costs are unpredictable. Both costs are rising. Both are costs his business, Jack Robertson Lawn Care in Springfield, Ill., must wisely absorb because there's no going back to ask for a raise from customers who have already pre-paid.

The positive about having a client base where half of them pre-pay for the season is the cash flow infusion that gives the company in winter and early spring

when the business is ramping up for first applications. The down side is that those customer prices are fixed – and commodity prices are not.

"We have to charge enough to the customer that we can absorb that," Robertson says. "If you are working on such a tight balance sheet that you can't do that, you'll be in trouble. Then, what has to give is service or quality or products. We are still using the same high-quality products that we always have and our pricing structure has decreased somewhat because of that, but that's part of doing business."

And the way Robertson prefers to do business with vendors is just-in-time. He doesn't want to fill his warehouse with a season's worth of product. He isn't interested in carrying the insurance or shouldering the liability associated with keeping so much inventory on hand.

"If you have \$100,000 worth of product in your warehouse, you then have to pay insurance on that," he says.

And consider the worst-case scenarios: A tornado hits the warehouse and blows off the roof (this really happened to Robertson). The product is fine, but a creek nearby poses a threat. Imagine if those bags had ripped open, and torrential downpours (typical after a tornado) washed that product right into the water stream. Now you've got an environmental risk. That's more responsibility, more risk.

So Robertson's service managers order product from their vendor every few days. Product is delivered directly to Robertson's place of business, which is conveniently located around the corner from this vendor. Since Robertson has done business with this supplier for many years, the rep knows how much

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Robertson will likely order each year – and they mix special product blends just for Jack Robertson Lawn Care.

As for pricing, it doesn't cost more for Robertson to manage his product supply this way. He doesn't lose by not ordering in bulk at the beginning of the season, he says. Though, this year he did place a bulk order of summer product since he knew that prices were going to increase in June.

It's all about flexibility. "We are constantly in touch with our vendor about the pricing structure of the product," Robertson says. If it is advantageous to buy more than five or so pallets at a time, he'll act on that. Otherwise, he doesn't want to fill his warehouse with product.

The key to ordering just-in-time is to manage the orders, maintain a strong vendor relationship and ensure in-house accountability of product. Robertson

does this by relying on service managers to take stock of the product in the warehouse, what is required for jobs that week and how much product has moved out of the company's door each day, week and so far that season.

"If we get to the end of a run on a certain product, we figure out how many bags or tonnage we need and let (the vendor) know," Robertson says, adding that the service managers actually place orders with the vendor. Robertson's wife manages vendor invoices and tracks year-to-year comparisons. At any time, Robertson knows how much product the company is using in the current season and how that compares to past years.

"There are question marks with the products we use today because of pricing – if corn prices stay where they are, we know nitrogen prices will be higher," he says. L&L

QUICK TIPS

Reduce liability. Is it worth storing loads of product if you must pay for insurance and carry the burden of any environmental damage that could occur? Robertson has discovered that just-in-time pricing is competitive and he doesn't have to pay for insurance or worry about what could possibly happen in a worst-case scenario with product in storage.

Project costs. Who knows what gas prices will look like in six months? And what about corn prices – if those continue increasing, up goes the price of nitrogen and the price tags on fertilizers. Guessing prices in the commodities world requires some research. So do your homework and make sensible projections that will give your balance sheet some cushion.

Manage the process. Who is accountable for taking inventory of product that's in-house? Who orders, and who pays the vendor bills? Work out a tight system so none of the pieces of the purchasing puzzle are left out.



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More than a pretty picture

Today's software design programs can be instrumental in improving efficiency and driving sales.

By Lindsey Getz

The days of showing up to a client's property with a pad and pencil are fading. Instead, companies are using design software to give a customer a much more personal view at what a job will look like when it's finished. This is especially popular in the design/build and irrigation markets. *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with contractors to get insight on the current design software products out there and how they use them in those markets.

LANDSCAPE DESIGN

Pictures are worth a thousand words, and they could be worth thousands of dollars.

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome in selling landscape design is helping the client to visualize the final product. With the various design

software programs on the market, this obstacle can be eliminated.

"I can say with confidence that once people can actually see the job, it is much easier to sell it," says Michael Pickel, owner of LawnScapes of Southern Chester County. "As landscapers who design and build, we know what it will look like in our head but the client can't see it the way we do. We use Google SketchUp to make it an even playing field where they can see what we're seeing."

PICKING A PACKAGE. With so many software programs available, part of the challenge is determining which package to use. Peter Rhyne, designer for Sunrise Landscape + Design in Sterling, Va., says the three main programs he uses on a daily basis are Photoshop, DynaSCAPE, and Google SketchUp. Each of the three



DESIGN SOFTWARE

Design software gives potential customers a better idea of what their dream backyard will look like.



has different functions that Rhyne finds helpful, and together they offer the complete package. The company's designs are handled by Rhyne as well as company president Joe Markell and an additional designer who still uses the traditional methods of a drawing board and hand drawing.

Jason Isenberg, owner/principle designer at Tucson-based Realm, an outdoor sustainability-based landscape company, says that they've started using Revit more than the combination of AutoCAD, SketchUp Pro and Photoshop, which they've long used as they find that Revit is more of a one-stop shop. "It allows for a more seamless design process rather than bouncing back and forth between CAD and other programs as we've done in the past," Isenberg says. "It's closer to an all-in-one system than what we've tried before."

Isenberg says that a highly professional

design program is important to their sales approach. Their niche is customized work. "When we're designing a landscape such as a particular fountain, we then retire that design once it's done and installed," he says. "Our work is totally custom. Because we're a sustainability-based company, our saying is that the 'only thing we don't recycle is our designs.' We require a highly-nuanced software set in order to create designs that we aren't going to repeat again."

TIME AND MONEY. As much as the programs vary in what they offer, they also vary in cost. While Google SketchUp is free, upgrading to SketchUp Pro is \$495. That's still much cheaper than programs like DynaSCAPE, which not only has a one-time purchase fee but also a monthly subscription cost. Pickel says he selected AutoCAD largely because it was less expensive than the DynaSCAPE

package. "We are a young company with only two installation crews and we really have to watch our money so the big price difference between AutoCAD and DynaSCAPE was significant to us," he says.

Before hiring a landscape designer, Pickel was doing the drawings by hand on his free nights and weekends. He says that took away from growing the business. "In order to grow my company, I had to hire someone who was proficient in design," he says. "We have become so much more efficient now. If we have to make a change to the drawing, instead of erasing the entire thing or starting over, the designer can make a few clicks and keep going. The turnaround goes from several days to telling the client you can make the changes and be back to them by tomorrow."

Implementation is also an important consideration. "I'd say that in order for someone new to Google SketchUp to become fairly competent, they can expect it to take about a month," Rhyne says. "In the future, this learning curve won't be as big an issue as new designers like myself are now being taught these programs in school."

When it comes to the future of design, Lisa Meddin, landscape designer and owner of Harmony Design Northwest, based in Portland, Ore., says the iPad is the way to go. "I really think the iPhone and iPad are the best way to sell design work," says Meddin, who currently uses Drafix PRO Landscape for her designs. "It's portable and efficient and there is a lot you can do with apps including a measuring tool that saves a lot of time."

When it comes to making the sale, sources are in agreement that a 3-D modeling can really drive it home. "It's one thing to look at a 2-D rendering where you're hovering 40,000 feet above the space," Isenberg says. "But to actually produce a 3-D model that lets the client 'walk through' the space is huge. They now see exactly what that built-in seating around the firepit looks like and they can see those margaritas sitting on the table near a bowl of chips and salsa. You're creating the reality for

them to visualize the final product. It's no longer a flat element that is going to cost them \$20,000. It's a sexy outdoor living space that justifies the cost. That can make the sale."

IRRIGATION DESIGN

Design software is also incredibly important in the irrigation field. It can drastically reduce the amount of time involved in putting together a design while also making a sale more likely. While the design programs can have a steep learning curve, our sources agree that investment really pays off.

IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY. Timothy Malooly, president of Water in Motion in Minneapolis says his company does almost all of their design work on Autodesk AutoCAD and uses two different irrigation add-in programs that overlay onto the AutoCAD engine, sharing AutoCAD elements and the special elements of the add-in program. One is RainCAD by Software Republic and the other is Land F/X. "The combination of AutoCAD and an add-in program gives us a complete package," Malooly says. "We've found Land F/X to be an outstanding program as it's designed by professionals who understand the best practices involved in CAD-based design work."

Malooly says that using CAD-based technology produces a "more professional outcome" and also speeds up the process of implementing design or project specification changes. "Changes are easier to make once it's committed to the computer as a pen and paper drawing would need to be erased and redrawn," he says. "Also, with a CAD-based design approach you can use color symbols and other tools to highlight particular noteworthy elements."

Tony Serwatuk, owner of Hydro-Sense Irrigation Design & Consulting in Toronto agrees that efficiency is a key benefit. He uses AutoCAD with RainCAD and says it speeds things up greatly. "Irrigation design is very time consuming and detailed when it comes

to figuring out pipe sizes, flow rates, and more," Serwatuk says. "But with RainCAD, the calculations and math involved gets expedited."

Serwatuk says he appreciates the flexibility of the platform and finds that it has done a lot to help increase the productivity of his business. "That's really the bottom line as to why it's so important," he says. "We're always looking for ways to help increase our revenues by reducing the amount of time to do a job and this product certainly does that."

MAKING THE SALE. That "visual help" of a detailed design is also important for the client, says Russ Proffit, irrigation and water management director

for the south division of The Brickman Group. "RainCAD allows you to do a complete plan that is easy for homeowners to understand," adds Proffit, who teaches courses and trains others to use RainCAD. "You can color code each zone so that the homeowner can get a look and see what zones come on together. Maybe red will all come on at one time and then green will come on at another time. That visual really helps because anyone outside of the industry who is trying to look at plans will likely have a hard time understanding what they're looking at."

This makes the selling process much easier, adds Proffit. "Presentation has a lot to do with making the sale," he says.

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DynaSCAPE

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- DynaSCAPE ShaderLight: Make 3D models come to life with rendering capabilities
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Autodesk AutoCAD

usa.autodesk.com

- Design in 2D or using 3D design tools
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RainCAD

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DESIGN SOFTWARE

"If you can show a clear, precise plan and present that to the client with an easy-to-understand design, then you are automatically separated from the guy who just walks in with a business card and a price."

Still, it's important to remember that any software program is still just a tool. It will only aid you if you really understand what you're doing.

"You have to have a good understanding of irrigation design and how things work together in order to be successful with the software," Proffit says. "The learning curve is more doable if you truly understand irrigation design."

Proffit says he likes the fact that RainCAD offers multiple platforms. This may be beneficial for the beginner. "They have one called Pro Contractor that is a monthly fee and good for those at entry level," he says. "It may be more

HOW TO CHOOSE

With so many software design programs on the market it may seem overwhelming to choose one. We rounded up some of the key features that were most important to our expert sources.

Cost. Many landscape contractors are successfully using the free version of Google SketchUp to create their designs. That's because for some, cost may be a big factor in choosing a design program. Michael Pickel, owner of LawnScapes of Southern Chester County, says that cost was a deciding factor in choosing AutoCAD over DynaSCAPE.

Professionalism. Jason Isenberg, owner/principle designer at Tucson-based Realm says that the most important thing they're looking for out of a design program is "polish and sophistication." "Anyone can go to Office Max and get a \$39.99 software program to do some design," he says. "We are looking for something highly professional that sets us apart."

Compatibility. Lisa Meddin landscape designer and owner of Harmony Design Northwest, based in Portland, Ore., has been happy with Drafix PRO Landscape but says if she had it to do over she'd like to be trained in DynaSCAPE because of its compatibility with AutoCAD.

Learning Curve. Russ Proffit, irrigation and water management director for the south division of The Brickman Group, says that RainCAD has a number of training opportunities including face-to-face or online classes. "Everyone learns differently so you need to figure out where your skill level is and what works best for you," he adds.

Time. Just as the learning curve takes time, so does design – even once you're proficient, admits Peter Rhyne, designer for Sunrise Landscape + Design in Sterling, Va. Which program makes most sense for you might come down to how much time you plan to invest in your designs. The more detailed a program allows you to be, the more time consuming it can also become.

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affordable for someone starting out, and is not terribly hard to learn."

Malooly also says it's important to remember it's the contractor's duty to put together the most detailed and professional design possible.

"The bottom line is that a landscape irrigation system is a complicated network of pipes, fittings, sprinklers, and wiring and like any other mechanical system, it should be properly committed and recorded as such," he says.

"That's where professional design becomes so important. It's simply the right thing to do." **L&L**

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

Toro Launches AquaFlow 3.0 Drip Irrigation System Design Software

The new dashboard platform allows designers to view system design choices live.

Toro's AquaFlow 3.0, the company's newest drip irrigation system design software, is now available for user registration and download. AquaFlow 3.0 provides irrigation designers with the functionality of previous Toro software programs, and more. AquaFlow 3.0 provides designers with a tool to

configure drip irrigation systems for using Toro's Aqua-Traxx and Aqua-Traxx PC drip tape, as well as BlueLine Classic and BlueLine PC dripline. Some of the features of the new software include:

- A dashboard format with tiled graphs
- Comparison of two different lateral selections
- Pull-down menus for easy viewing
- Multiple slopes in both the lateral and mainline programs
- Choice of multiple sub-main and mainline pipe types and sizes
- Lateral and sub-main flushing calculations

"The dashboard approach is a unique innovation that has been well received during beta-trials," says Claude Corcos, senior marketing manager for Toro's Micro-Irrigation Business. "It enables designers to dynamically view any changes they make

associated with the selection and sizing of laterals, sub-mains and mainlines.

Cocos says this helps save time and leads to better design selections.

"The ability to properly flush a drip irrigation system is often just as important as high system irrigation uniformity," Corcos says. "Aqua-Flow 3.0 allows designers to view multiple aspects of flushing and irrigation at the same time, easing the decision making process."

And to help bring the numbers and data to life, the software instantly generates color-coded block maps that depict system uniformity, and are included in reports that may be customized and saved in multiple formats.

AquaFlow 3.0 is currently available in English and Spanish.

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Beyond visual

Adding color enhancement as a service can please clients and boost your bottom line.

By Brian Horn

Using color in a landscape installation can improve the look of a job and help your bottom line.

Selling enhancements is a great way to not only keep your revenue growing, but it also gives you another way to stay in touch with your customer. And nothing says enhancement like a design/build project filled with color. At home, commercial properties or multi-family housing, beds and beds of colorful plants make any property look nicer – a lot nicer.

“Color is a big, big part of the landscape,” says Jeff Miller, president of Creativexteriors in Denver. “It’s a very critical element especially to most people who are visual.”

But not every contractor wants deal with the amount of maintenance it takes to get the most out of seasonal color. It’s year-round work, and, while you will enjoy the regular revenue the enhancement sales produce, customers might be turned off by the recurring cost. *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with three contractors who specialize in the niche about the ins and outs of the color game.

SLOW AND STEADY SALES. Miller has been dealing in color for more than 20 years, and doesn’t plan on slowing down. Miller started his work with municipalities, and says working with color is a great way to keep revenue coming into the business on a regular basis.

“You can incorporate color into all landscapes,” he says. “So, if you are a landscaper first and foremost, you can design color into the spaces. The nice thing about color is it’s a reoccurring income. If you do it and do it well, it is

For more on selling color, sign up for our quarterly Ornamental Insider by visiting www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters.



something that comes back every single year."

But because of its recurring nature, Miller doesn't throw his whole pitch at a customer up front. Instead, he takes it slow, and gets a feel for what they want before suggesting seasonal additions.

"I typically ask them up front, 'How important is color to you in the landscape and specifically, how important is annual color realizing there is a reoccurring annual cost to replant these things every year?' A lot of times people will divulge to me what they are willing to do," says Miller, who does 65 percent commercial and 35 percent residential work.

"If you just start designing a lot of residential color ... with no regard of what these people are willing to spend, then you are kind of shooting yourself in the foot so to speak. If you start designing color for people, you need to work them into it. You go in with a minimal program, then you capture their attention with the color and the next thing you know they are saying, 'I want to do more next year, I love what you did here, but now I want more on this side.'"

And those contractors looking to make an immediate splash on the balance sheet might want to keep expectations low. Enhancement sales don't take off overnight, but they do add up over time.

If you are patient, color can make a long-lasting impression to the bottom line.

"Eventually, you can double, triple, quadruple their order over time," Miller says.

While Miller won't divulge specifics, he says the margins are "relatively good" when doing color installs and maintenance. But again, it's the steady work that is attractive, especially for a company that does a lot of design/build jobs and they may not get paid for a while.

"We have a lot of employees to do the work for more minimal type margins, but it is reoccurring, and because it is maintenance, it does improve cash flow in the company," he says.

FIFTY-FIVE PERCENT MARGINS.

Sure, everyone enjoys the end result of a great color install, but there's a lot of work that goes into knowing what looks good in what places, and in what conditions. If you are selling color as an enhancement, you better make sure you have strong grasp of the products you are putting in the ground.

Casey Vickery, president of Benchmark Landscapes in Austin, Texas, studies his products thoroughly and tests them out before ever making them the main event of a color install.

He says every plant performs differently in each environment, and some are

more disease tolerant and need more maintenance.

"We've learned it just from trial and error over many, many years," he says.

Crews will set up different test sites on properties, and will put small numbers of new products in beds and monitor them.

"If it works well, then it's something we'll use more extensively the next year. The best way to learn about the products itself is look around

and see what's working for everybody else and use your local growers as resources," Vickery says.

He adds that Benchmark has customers who will do 400 or 500 flats per change out and they'll spend \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year on annual color.

"We'll have test sites on their large, large, job sites or we'll create beds for clients for free or make a bed a little larger and have test sites," he



If you are going to sell color to customers, you'll have to know what flowers complement each other best.

ORNAMENTALS



An eye-catching bed of color can spruce up a commercial property's entrance.

says. "That way it doesn't cost the client anything for us to try it out."

Vickery says contractors in his market can expect about 55 percent gross margin on color work, but the results will vary between residential and commercial customers.

"The residential landscapers are going to have a higher profit margin in it because they are using less quantity," he says. "Commercial landscapers will have a little lower profit margin in it but they are doing larger quantities."

CLIENT EDUCATION. Every contractor, without fail, will come across clients who know more than they do.

That's very much the case when selling an enhancement like color installation, where a property manager or homeowner can be very passionate – and persistent – about the finished project.

"Color selections are al-

ways personal," says Melissa Scherb, vice president of business development for the Chicago branch of Landscape Concepts Management. "I can usually make any color selection work. However, if clients are tied to certain plants, that's where an issue comes in."

But the margins on the work help Scherb get past that problem. She says you can expect a net profit margin of 20-50 percent depending on what you sell.

"Using color to boost bottom line numbers is a great way to increase the value of your contracts, season after season," she says. "My first tip is to encourage your client to see the value in color."

Adding planters or annual beds to storefronts or main entrances not only attracts customers and/or future tenants, but it also gives their site recognition from their neighbors or competitors. It

is the easiest way to increase the value of your contract year round."

Education and managing expectations of clients is critical. For example, Scherb says, you wouldn't want to put a dark purple flower up against a dark granite building. Instead, push a client toward a lighter-colored plant that will pop.

"Or if a client wants to put in petunias in a shady location where they don't fertilize, educating them as to why they won't work is extremely important," she says.

"I always try to bring with me color selections in advance or give them cuttings of maybe two options for their site for each season. That way, they feel like they have made a decision yet we have pretty much directed them as to what direction we may or may not want to go."

But you're bound to encounter clients who do know

what they are talking about, and it's important to recognize when that's the case, and use their knowledge to improve the design.

"I say things like, 'Wow, you really know your stuff. Have you heard about this new plant, or have you ever tried this?' Usually, I come up with a new plant they may not be as familiar with. This takes them off track and refocuses their attention on something else," Scherb says.

But, if your client is married to a plant or color, and you can't change his mind, Scherb says, "I simply say that 'It's clear that you have chosen your plant palette, but with all due respect, I am not sure that I can stand behind your plant selections.'"

If a client wants to plant seed impatiens for the third year in a row, and there are downy mildew issues with that plant, she will educate them and advise them to avoid using that flower.

"The last thing they want to do is have a mass planting of species that won't perform to the level they are expecting."

Even with the difficulties that will happen with selling color, it's a service you want to investigate adding.

"I have personally seen color making a comeback," she says. "I have seen spring color, fall color, bulbs and winter installations on the rise. If you provide your clients with budgets and proposals ahead of their budget time, they can work these numbers into their overall budgets." L&L

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

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Extended Life

Contractors emphasize the importance of proper spreader and sprayer upkeep throughout the season.

By Heather Taylor

Ken Silvers' lawn care operation consists of himself and a couple of part-time helpers, so most of the daily tasks fall on his shoulders.

"I do the work of two to three people every day," says Silvers, owner of Ken Silvers Residential Lawn Care in Findlay, Ohio.

He has little by way of backup equipment or manpower to fill a gap if something goes awry on a job site, so he considers it especially important to do what he can to keep his equipment running smoothly.

Preventive maintenance practices might have gotten cut short this year for Silvers and many other lawn care operators because of the

unseasonably warm winter and spring, prompting earlier customer calls. But even with the chaos of the season being in full-swing, contractors should remember to keep their spreaders and sprayers well maintained to avoid problems in the field.

SPREADERS

WHAT TO DO NOW. Silvers and other lawn care operators make it a point to clean out fertilizer spreaders every day to prevent a number of problems that could lead to uneven applications or equipment breakdowns.

Graham Oldreive, owner of Ducke's Lawn Care Services in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, says regular cleaning can have a huge impact on a spreader's lifespan and effectiveness.

"I found that if you leave the fertilizer in there (between jobs), parts corrode, and then the spreader is basically garbage," he says.

Silvers estimates that when he makes 20 applications a day, he blows out the spreader with a leaf blower two to three times a day. He notes that it's important to stand back and wear protective eye gear when blowing the spreader to guard against flying fertilizer pellets.

Harold Fox, owner of Town Pride Lawn Service in Medford, N.J., says crews regularly clean out their spreaders, though usually not in the middle of a work day, unless it rains and the product gets wet.

"I try to keep as much moisture away from the fertilizer grain as possible," he

says. Regular tune-ups are a key part of spreader longevity as well – especially the motorized models, Fox says.

He adds that tuning up the spreaders after each round of 50-100 hours of use will suffice, but to consult the equipment's owner's manual to be sure.

Usually at the end of the day and on Sundays, Oldreive performs routine maintenance on his spreaders to keep them running at their maximum efficiency level.

This can include greasing the axles, wheels and spinner, when needed. It's also imperative to clean the air filter regularly, Fox adds.

"You'd be surprised how much pollen and fertilizer-dust these things pull out of the air," he says. "Even though you don't see it, it's

there and when you clean the air filter, you know it's there."

Silvers also keeps assorted spare parts with him in his truck. If he has an equipment malfunction that is beyond his control, he's got his bases covered.

He works with three different local mechanics, so there's almost always one that's close to his job site. If he needs equipment fixed in a pinch or has to pick up a spare part, it's done quickly.

WHAT TO DO LATER. After the season's last round of fertilizer applications, store the clean spreaders in a dry place.

"When you store the spreader in a damp area

without cleaning it out, the materials can eat through the steel," Silvers says.

Oldreive applies a coat of rust-inhibiting lubricant to the moving parts to make next year's startup easier.

Fox finds that films or coatings used to maintain boats in saltwater environments also work well for guarding against the materials used in spreaders.

SPRAYERS

WHAT TO DO NOW. At Town Pride Lawn Service, the employee who is using the equipment on any particular day is responsible for inspecting it before use, Fox says.

If the sprayer is motorized,

maintenance guidelines similar to the motorized spreader apply – regularly change the sprayer's oil, clean or replace the air filter, and oil any moving parts, Fox says.

Silvers cleans the nozzle screens on his backpack sprayers often to keep them from clogging. Likewise, he checks the T-jets in the motorized spreader to make sure they're clean.

Fox doesn't completely flush out the sprayer's tank and hose during the season unless he's switching the contents from a herbicide to a non-herbicide product for ornamentals.

This is rare though; he tries to keep dedicated sprayers for

each material to avoid having the chemicals mix.

WHAT TO DO LATER. In preparation for cold temperatures in the offseason, Fox and his crew empty the material out of the sprayer. They then pump just enough antifreeze to get all the way through the equipment and keep liquid from freezing.

When in doubt about best winter preparation practices, contractors can always consult the owner's manual or trust their best guesses. "A lot of it is common sense," Oldreive says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer in Lakewood, Ohio.

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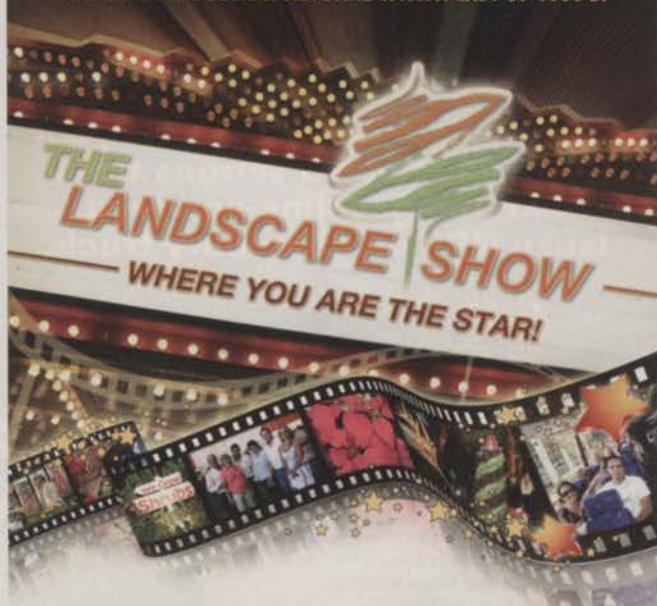


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SPRAYER/SPREADER PRODUCTS

Grasshopper Shielded Sprayer

The pitch:

Apply products more efficiently with a Shielded Sprayer for Grasshopper zero-turn mowers.

- The independent suspension and dolly wheels follow ground contours for even-spray application.
- Each spray chamber features four spray nozzles which provide uniform coverage.
- Zero-turn maneuverability eliminates wasted motion, spraying up to 5.5 acres per tank.

For more information:

www.grasshoppermower.com



PK Products Zero-Turn Mounted Sprayers

The pitch:

PK Products has introduced a line of newly designed sprayers featuring aluminum-framed zero-turn mounted units.

- Aluminum framed sprayers feature a 25-gallon capacity.
- Users can choose from 2 or 5 GPM self priming pumps.
- The 5 GPM models are available in 2-nozzle, 3-nozzle and 2-nozzle boomless configurations.

For more information:

www.pkproductline.com



SourceOne TurfSavr

The

pitch:

The SourceOne TurfSavr is a machine for slicing, spreading and dethatching.

- Operators can put seed in the hopper and engage the heat treated carbon steel knives while spreading to improve seed penetration.
- You can also change from seed to fertilizer and use the TurfSavr as a spreader only.
- The ergonomic handle and weight-balanced design reduce operator fatigue.

For more information:

www.sourceoneope.com



TurfEx RS7200 Spread-N-Spray

The pitch:

TurfEx's RS7200 Spread-N-Spray boast high-performance handling.

- The Spread-N-Spray is powered by a 200-cc Honda GX200 engine with a 2:1 ratio gear reducer.
- It comes with a hand-operated transmission disc brake, and a foot-controlled sulky band brake.
- The low-pressure nozzles offer multiple spray patterns to apply liquid up to 11-feet wide.

For more information:

www.trynexusfactory.com



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MOWER attachments

EDGE Brush Mower

The pitch:

Cut through heavy weeds, undergrowth, thick brush and small saplings up to 3 inches in diameter and in areas normally inaccessible with the EDGE Brush Mower.



- Direct drive hydraulic motor requiring 14-40 GPM.
- Features quarter-inch steel deck and heavy-duty stump jumper for rough terrain.
- Available in 60-, 66-, 72-, 78- and 90-inch widths.
- Offered for standard or high-flow hydraulic systems.

For more information:

www.ceattachments.com

Grasshopper AERA-vator

The pitch: Aerate and loosen compacted soil in less time with less labor with a Grasshopper AERA-vator coreless lawn aerator.



- The PTO-driven AERA-vator works without slicing or cutting, improving turf development and water absorption with little surface disruption.
- The vibrating tines deep-fracture soil instead of plugging cores, which means turf areas are immediately available for use.
- The AERA-vator attaches in place of the out-front mower deck for zero-turn maneuverability.

For more information:

www.grasshoppermower.com/aerate

Gravelly Traillette

The pitch:

Gravelly offers the Traillette tow-behind lawn sweeper for residential and light commercial use. The 36-inch sweeping width easily clears medium to large lawns of grass, leaves, twigs and debris.



- Has a 10-cubic foot capacity and a solid-bottomed basket.
- It is towed by a front engine turf and garden tractor, zero-turn riding mower or an ATV with a rear hitch.
- Additional features include heavy-duty rear casters, sintered pinion gears, sealed ball bearings on the brush axle for extended life and tubular steel frames.

For more information:

www.gravelly.com

Husqvarna mulching kits

The pitch:

The kit includes everything needed to convert the lawn tractor to a mulching application.



- Mulching converts clippings into very small particles.
- Clippings that are mulched are sent back into the lawn as nutrients.
- Husqvarna offers mulch kits that fit all of our lawn tractors, including those with 38-, 42-, 46-, 48- and 54-inch decks.

For more information:

www.husqvarna.com

TurfEx Spreader Attachment

The pitch: TurfEx introduces the TS200 spreader, which is capable of spreading seed, fertilizer and ice melt.



- The spreader comes with a universal mount, which helps it attach quickly to most available zero-turn mowers.
- It holds up to 2.5 cubic feet of material and features a corrosion-resistant polyethylene hopper to reduce weight and maintenance concerns.
- The spreading operation is controlled via the manual flow gate and electric-powered spinner, both of which can be actuated from the mower's seat.

For more information:

www.trynexusfactory.com

Wright Velke SuperPro Sully

The pitch:

Wright Manufacturing's line of Velke sulkies includes a comfortable, heavy-duty SuperPro model.



- Mono-spring suspension and a protective rubber fender over the top of the wheel provide the operator with cushioning.
- The larger, wider, non-pneumatic tire can never go flat, increasing the sully's productivity.
- The Velke SuperPro ruggedness can be seen in the extra-wide hitch and seven-gauge steel construction. Yet it folds compactly, just like Wright's Velke Pro 1 and Velke X2.

For more information:

www.wrightmfg.com

Moisture Management, a Profitable Solution

Water restrictions don't have to dry up business. Landscapers are realizing the bottom-line benefits of offering a product that genuinely reduces the watering requirements of turf and plants.

After installing landscapes on commercial properties, the real challenge began for Michael MacLeod and his business Precision Landscape Maintenance in greater Orlando.

"The properties we maintained were starting to show drought stress shortly after installation," he says, noting how water restrictions in his county have intensified during the last few years.

MacLeod would talk to the water management boards of homeowners associations, his primary client base, to find out if there was more he could do for the property. But usually, he ended up having to go back to customers with bad news. "It's difficult to tell a client, 'Work with it,'" he says.

And that's no way to retain business either. "We had to find an alternative," MacLeod says.

Moisture management was the answer: Providing customers a service using a product that reduces the water requirements of turf and plants. That's what Ecologel's Hydretain does.

MacLeod discovered that beyond keeping customers happy, Hydretain provides a brand-new revenue stream that earns him about a 75 percent profit. The referrals keep rolling in. He can retain existing clients by providing them a valuable service – and it's an easy sell.

"People's homes are their greatest investments, and this is a long-term solution that can help protect their



The addition of Hydretain to turf and plant applications can keep lawns green during drought.

investments in light of where water restrictions are today and where they are headed," MacLeod says.

Moisture management is smart business for landscape contractors who are under constant pressure to reduce water usage, conform to stringent restrictions and please customers who want to lower their water usage and utility bills, particularly in regions where the cost of water is exorbitant.

Also, landscape contractors can grow their bottom lines and protect their client base by offering a moisture management service using Hydretain.

"Hydretain can provide a whole new revenue stream for landscape professionals, and the product is unique in its ability to pay for itself, reduce customer callbacks and lower water bills," says Rick Irwin, president of Ecologel,

the Ocala, Fla.-based company that makes Hydretain. "In areas with high water costs or where water restrictions are in place, it's a no brainer."

And in areas where water savings is not yet an issue, Hydretain minimizes drought-stress cycles between rainfall or irrigation, promotes healthier plants and ultimately delivers a better quality landscape. "Hydretain reduces wilt and isolated dry spots that are many times the source of customer complaints," Irwin points out.

Does it really work? That's the question Irwin gets from those who are newly exposed to Ecologel's Hydretain technology and wonder how it could enhance their landscape businesses. Irwin's advice: Try it on your own lawn and monitor the results. "That way, you can grow a comfort level with the product," he says.

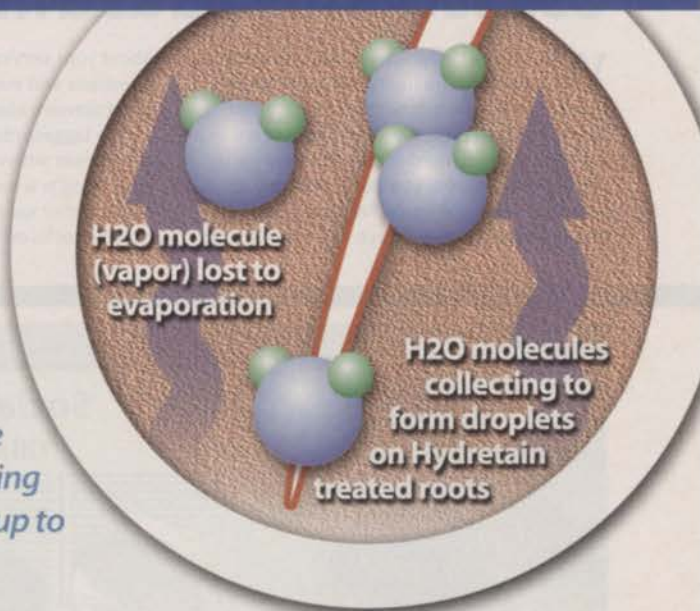
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Use social media as a marketing tool

When Chris Heiler speaks with landscaping companies, he hears the same thing – they get 90 percent of their clients from word-of-mouth referrals. Well, there is a way you can aid your word-of-mouth referrals aside from the work you do. “Social media amplifies word-of-mouth. Five years ago, a happy customer might have told a few friends

about your services. Today they can easily tell hundreds and even thousands of their friends and followers about how much they love you.”

The biggest challenge he hears from companies when it comes to social media marketing is a lack of time to dedicate to it. But Heiler said a lack of time is just an excuse not to do it. “The real challenge is in

understanding how to get started,” Heiler says. “Most companies are unsure of how to begin. There is no rule book or road map so it can be a little scary – especially when you’re putting your company on display for the whole world to see.” Below are some of Heiler’s tips on using social media as a marketing tool. – *Brian Horn*



1

1. Determine your objective. Always begin by asking, “Why is your business using social media?” To be successful with social media, and to get buy-in from your organization, clear objectives need to be defined. There are typically three objectives: Increase brand awareness, generate direct sales and build customer loyalty. Each requires a unique social strategy.

2

2. Develop a theme and strategy around your objective. What makes your company unique? This is your social theme which should permeate all aspects of your social media strategy from the stories you tell to the content you create and share. When you have a clear objective and overall theme to guide you, then you can develop a well thought out social strategy and step-by-step plan.

3

3. Listen. Pay attention to the online chatter revolving around your company. Next, monitor what is being said about your top competitors. How does the conversation about you compare to that of your competitors? If you only monitored online conversations involving your brand and your competitors, you would be off to a great start.

4

4. Participate. Do one thing really well as opposed to a bunch of things average. For instance, if your objective is to increase customer loyalty, create a Facebook page where you can engage your current customers and business partners. Once you prove that you can participate consistently on one platform, then consider creating a presence on another.

5

5. Create a social team. Your employees can be your greatest brand ambassadors. Encourage your employees to photograph and document not only your landscape work, but also what happens “behind the curtain.” This real-world, behind the scenes view builds a more personal, intimate connection between you and your customers.

Michael Cook, TruGreen

Interviewed By Brian Horn

Michael Cook has served in a couple of roles with TruGreen, both giving him a unique perspective on the business. He's been CFO of the company and is now a franchisee with locations in Jackson, Tenn., Tupelo, Miss., and Baton Rouge, La. *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with him about the differences working as an executive and working as a franchisee.

What was it like to transition from executive to owning franchises?

There were some practical things like wanting to have enough employees to create a group to purchase health insurance.

On the other hand, it was my sense at the time, and remember, this is sort of at the end of the 1990s and the great investment gains in the stock market, it seemed to me it would be more likely if I put my time and effort into a small business that it might yield better results than marketable securities would for the foreseeable future. I think that turned out to be right.

What were the challenges in being an executive to becoming a franchisee? Moving from the type of job where there is a staff and you are trying to supervise the other people and getting the other things done. Your primary job is to be in that role of helping train them and to get other people to do work for you.

It's being responsible for it, but not really putting your fingers on the keyboard as much as somebody else would.

How do you manage your current employees?

I know they are all working as hard as I could ask them to. I find there's an awful lot of stuff that I need to do because of my skill set and there's really nobody that can do what I do the same way that I can do it.

It doesn't make sense for me to add someone to the staff just so I could have someone do my job.

It's a completely different thing. In some ways, it's plainly better. And some days at the end of the day, you are



Cook

thinking, "Man, I wish I had somebody to help me do this stuff."

Is there anything you'd do differently now compared to when you started out? I was attempting to manage it more as an investor rather than as a day-by-day participant in the business. I was here, but I wasn't as involved as I am now. That was a big mistake on my part. If you are going to put your money in a small business, you have to be there every day and work it every day. I didn't do that at first. It took me a while to catch on to that and I was wrong. My advice would be to get involved and stay involved. I bought an existing franchise, and it was close to Memphis.

So, I was able to sort of act like, 'I'll go up once a week and check on this person and check on the manager that was in the business and we'll just do it that way,' and that wasn't a good solution.

After a while, I asked my wife to join me in the business. And rather than driving an hour every day, we sold our home in Memphis and moved to Jackson and now we're here earlier than almost everybody, and we stay later than almost everybody.

Why do you think you are having fun and working harder?

I worked for some great people and particularly during the 1990s we had a great thing going, but I got to a point where I feel like I went in reverse in my career.

I started as an executive and I keep working my way back closer and closer to being on the sharp end of things.

But there's just a piece of me that wanted to prove that I could do this part.

For the full story, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "Cook."



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Aquascape Second Generation IonGen System

The pitch: Aquascape has released the second generation of its IonGen System, an electronic water clarifier solution for ponds, pondless waterfalls and decorative water features.



- Is not toxic to any animals that may drink from the water feature, and eliminates unsightly water conditions without the use of chemicals.
- The automatic control panel sends signals that slowly dissolve a replaceable, copper probe.
- Enhanced design of the flow chamber and probe reduces the chance of the probe bars clogging, thereby decreasing required maintenance.

For more information: www.aquascapeinc.com

Deep Aire Diffuser

The pitch: The Deep Aire bottom-mounted air diffuser creates a healthy pond by taking oxygen to the pond's lowest depth along the bottom.



- The Deep Aire diffused aeration systems are designed as an alternative source of aeration.
- Diffused air systems utilize an air compressor, located on the shore, which delivers oxygen through a hose to a special diffuser lying on the pond bottom.
- Depending on the body of water depth and shape, various motors and models are available with a deluxe kit that includes a lockable cabinet with electrical box/outlet, shock mounts, pressure gauge and cooling fan.

For more products: www.airolator.com

Gravely Diesel Pro-Turn 400 XDZ Series

The pitch: Gravely has expanded its Pro-Turn 400 series commercial lineup with the introduction of a new diesel zero-turn mower.



- Features a 25-hp Kubota engine to deliver superior performance and efficiency and is available in a 60- and 72-inch deck.
- The mowers feature an air-suspension seat with added seat isolation, and the air pressure can be adjusted with the touch of a button.
- The unit also includes standard foldable ROP, designated front and rear tie-down points, double-sided anti-scalp brackets and heavy-duty side-discharge chute.

For more information: www.gravely.com

Arctic Frostbite System

The pitch: The Frostbite System provides selective post-emergent control for broadleaf and grassy weeds without using conventional chemical herbicides.



- The Frostbite System uses man-made frost to control weeds naturally.
- Through the controlled expansion of compressed air, the system kills any frost-susceptible weeds while leaving cool-season grasses unharmed.
- Frostbite is effective with a single application and can be used in hot (greater than 85°C) or cold temperatures and in wet or rainy conditions.

For more information: www.frostkills.com

EDGE Inverted Log Splitter

The pitch: CEAttachments' new EDGE Inverted Log Splitter attachment for skid steer and track loaders is designed to make splitting wood easier by allowing the operator to remain in the seat and operate all of the controls for lifting, transporting and splitting wood.



- Can split logs up to 24 inches long on the ground.
- The cylinder drives 20 tons of force to its splitting wedge, and runs on 10-20 GPM standard hydraulic flow.
- The splitter can also be unbolted from the quick attach and flipped 180 degrees for upright splitting applications.

For more information: www.ceattachments.com

Hortech LiveWall

The pitch: Hortech has introduced the LiveWall, the planted wall system that transforms ordinary walls into vertical green landscapes.



- The LiveWall system's WallTer planter modules slide into the RainRail mounting tracks, which secure them in place and include hidden conduits and built-in nozzles for integrated mist irrigation.
- The WallTers, manufactured in recycled architectural grade plastic, are six-inches deep and five-inches wide and come in 8-inch and 16-inch lengths.
- They are available in six colors: beige, cool gray, wheat, cedar, sage and salsa.

For more information: www.livewall.com

PlantHaven Geum 'Totally Tangerine'

The pitch: Geum 'Totally Tangerine' is a new Geum cultivar that is sterile and blooms from early summer through the heat into fall.

- Flower production is up to five times that of the normal genus.
- Produces hundreds of tangerine-orange single flowers over the course of the growing season.
- The green, fuzzy foliage forms a compact mound which measures about 14-inches tall. In full bloom, the plants measure 30 inches tall.



For more information: www.planthaven.com

Steiner 440 4x4 Tractor

The pitch: The new Steiner 440 Tractor utilizes 4-wheel drive and all-wheel, and articulating power steering with an oscillating frame to maintain compact agility.

- Features non-permeable all-steel fuel tank and oversized filler neck with tethered fuel cap and 200-watt halogen quartz front headlights.
- Three wheel offerings (bar, turf and field trax tread) with five-bolt, 10-inch rims.
- Large 12-volt 525 CCA Battery (630 CCA on diesel engine model).



For more information: www.steinerturf.com

V-Angle Wire Brush

The pitch: The V-Angle Wire Brush cleans tight paver joints

- The V-angle and tough wire bristles of this brush make cleaning mud and dirt from tight paver joints easier.
- The stiff bristles measure 1 1/4 inches for good reach into the joint.
- Bon's brush is equipped with a 4-foot handle.



For more information: www.bontool.com

Profile Products ProMatrix

The pitch: ProMatrix provides benefits for contractors with 20 percent less tank loads per job because of the high loading formulation.

- ProMatrix with Engineered Fiber Matrix (EFM) technology was created to give contractors an edge when bidding on jobs requiring BFM/SMM hydraulic products.
- Recommended 60 pounds per 100 gallons of water.
- Proprietary dispersion granules facilitate the even distribution of the fibers and chemistry to optimize product performance.
- A consistent slurry pumps out easily to assume smooth and efficient application.



For more information: www.profileproducts.com

Talbert Manufacturing 50CC/RP Hybrid Trailer

The pitch: Combining the benefits of a close couple lowbed design with a roller paver model, the 50CC/RP offers a longer loading incline.

- With a deck length of 26-feet, the new 50CC/RP offers the space for full construction fleet loads.
- The design slopes from the bottom up to create a more moderate incline over a greater distance, approximately a third of the deck length.
- The 50-ton-capacity trailer offers a deck width of 8 feet, 6 inches and a low deck height of 20 inches.



For more information: www.talbertmft.com

WeatherTRAK LC Central

The pitch: The LC Central controller features six-, 12- or 18-station modular configurations and is ideal for light commercial or high-end residential installations.

- Plug-and-play installation of the LC Central controller includes WeatherTRAK ET Everywhere daily hi-resolution weather service with no onsite weather stations required.
- Wireless transmission of site-specific weather data to the controller's built in transceiver enables the WeatherTRAK Scheduling Engine to adjust irrigation run times for each landscape zone.
- Gain instant access to WeatherTRAK Central Internet Management Service minutes after installation of the controller.



For more information: www.hydpoint.com

A different perspective

The greatest impact the Accredited Snow Contractors Association will have on the professional snow removal industry is changing the attitudes of those outside the industry. By Mike Zawacki



Kevin Gilbride is not used to being the new guy in the room, let alone a newcomer in a room full of people – lawyers, nonetheless – who he doesn't know, and who don't know him.

But that's where the former Snow Magazine publisher and current executive director of the Accredited Snow Contractors Association (ASCA) found himself about a year ago. Gilbride was invited to attend a tort-reform conference to receive a frank, crash course on what it was going to take for a fledgling association to facilitate major change on how the industry deals with baseless slip-and-fall claims – a plague that costs contractors and insurance companies millions of dollars each year.

"You could say I was a bit out of my comfort zone," Gilbride says. "But that's not really a bad thing. I mean, you take a look at the inroads we've made as an association, the new relationships we're fostering and some of the change that we're beginning to see and it's all come from

taking our industry – as a whole – out of its collective comfort zone.

"Change isn't always a process that we like to engage," he adds. "But you've got to remember, change is a good thing... and it was time for our industry to experience some real change."

Gilbride laughs when asked how many elevator speeches he's given over the last year exalting the ASCA's mission, the merits of membership and the virtues of committee involvement.

"I've spent the better part of the last decade in and around the professional snow removal industry," he says. "I thought I knew a lot. But the last year has really opened my eyes to many of the deeper issues this industry faces. Sure, this industry faces a lot of challenges, but none of them are insurmountable.

"The last year also gave me a newfound appreciation for just how many people really want change for our industry," he adds. "So much so that they're more than willing to volunteer their time – in many cases, time from

already stretched schedules – to play a significant role in that change."

I'm going to play devil's advocate for a moment. When you look at how the professional snow removal industry breaks down, nearly three-quarters of contractors are snow-only landscape contractors, construction/pavement guys or some other closely related service-oriented outfit. When you look at those individual industry segments, there are a lot of representative associations within those groups. How is the ASCA different and why should snow contractors take notice and, more importantly, get involved? There are a couple of things that differentiate the ASCA. We are exclusively focused on the snow and ice management operations of their businesses and the risks associated with that portion of the business. In doing so, we are taking a completely different approach to this.

This industry – which, granted, is often the most profitable portion of their businesses – also carries the most risk. As we all know, the

majority of that risk stems from slip-and-fall lawsuits. It's apparent that, as an industry, we cannot change these trends from within.

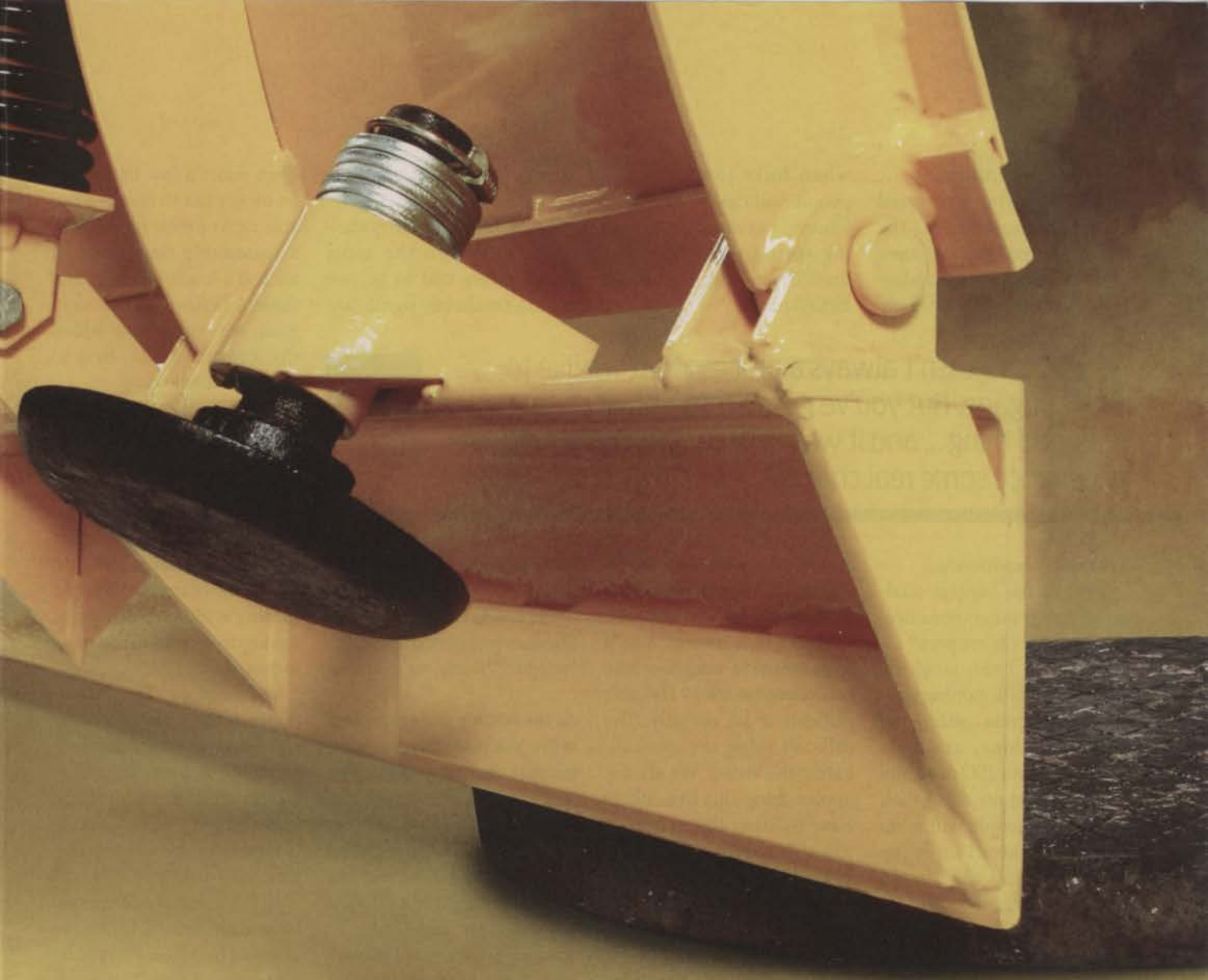
Therefore, the ASCA is focusing its energies on changing the external factors so that we might influence the outside world to view our industry differently.

Launching an association is no small feat. What's been the biggest challenge for the fledgling ASCA? What's been your biggest challenge as the group's executive director? Frankly, it's like launching any new business venture.

We are short on people and have a many tasks to accomplish. We needed industry participation to get started and generate momentum. Then, we needed to lay the association's groundwork.

This process started with developing a draft set of industry standards. We couldn't move ahead with education and ISO certification without those on the books.

And I'll admit, the time it took to get these standards to where we needed them



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was the most frustrating. ... However, having a finalized set of industry standards – the first for the professional snow and ice management industry – has been an extremely

when folks joined. Many people indicated they were joining, but didn't join until the spring when revenues from their other businesses kicked in.

simply because of what we needed to do.

For example, industry standards has been the most active. They had to be, we couldn't make any significant

They enact a law that states an owner has to take reasonable care of their property in a reasonable timeframe. If we had a louder voice at that time, I believe, at the very least, we could have added that consumers also have to take reasonable care.

“Change isn't always a process that we like to engage. But you've got to remember, change is a good thing ... and it was time for our industry to experience some real change.”



Gilbride

rewarding experience.

I think the biggest challenge has been communication, at least on my part.

We have been working extremely hard, gaining traction in Congress, getting the standards done, and now completing our ISO program.

In working on all of that, sometimes people will wonder what the heck I am doing.

Why haven't they heard from me? I think it will be better now that we have the programs in place.

What impact did the recent low-snow winter have on the association's first formative year? Great timing, right? We launched the ASCA and there was all of this positive momentum and excitement from people in the industry... how they could get involved and how soon they could become members.

Then it didn't snow and, I suspect, contractors were more focused on making ends meet and keeping their operations afloat.

So I'd say it probably stymied the initial membership surge we were hoping for early on.

It certainly influenced

You have a pretty impressive lineup of industry leaders serving on various ASCA committees. How difficult was it to get them to volunteer time for committee work? It wasn't difficult at all, actually. The difficult thing is communicating the vision. We are not approaching this like others have in other industries, or like this industry has in the past. Once they heard the vision, they jumped on immediately.

Over the last year, how have you managed and, perhaps more importantly, maintained the momentum of the industry leaders who were working on ASCA committees. The committee members have passion. They know where we are going and what we need to do to get there. They are amazing at giving their time.

I have led all of the committees to-date, so I think structure helped. That being said, some of the committees have been more engaged,

forward progress without those. Membership, on the other hand, had to wait a bit because we needed to get our "product" ready, so to speak.

As the ASCA's main representative, you really left your snow industry comfort zone over the last year to network with lobbyists, small-business groups and other allied-industry associations. Why did you feel this was necessary? First off, that has been an incredibly rewarding experience. I haven't had to go to a conference where I didn't know anyone for 15 years. I got to get out my comfort zone, as you say, but also I was exposed to a lot of new concepts and ideas.

This was necessary because this industry can do all it wants internally, but until the outside world recognizes what our industry is about and what we do, then the things that hold our businesses back will never change.

If outside influences are going to manage our industry, why not go outside and show them how to manage it the right way.

This way, we control the outcome. Look at what happened in Massachusetts.

Describe what the ASCA will look like in five years, in 10 years? Hopefully we'll have more staff. I envision an organization that continues to fight for what is right. In five years, I can see the world looking at ISO certification as the key to success in the snow industry.

We need to continue to monitor the program. Make changes where they are needed. Adapt to technology. That will be a key function to the organization. I see us making progress on the legislative side.

In five years I hope that we have made positive legislative changes based on everything else we are doing. This needs to be done mostly at the state level. I hope to be the guy leading that charge to change the laws, and having a team that is managing the ship, which includes monitoring ISO and standards, creating and supply the latest in education.

Ten years from now, we will be facing different issues. I hope at that point we are defending legislation that we have helped create, continuing to raise the bar on professionalism and representing our industry in the greatest light to those outside. **L&L**

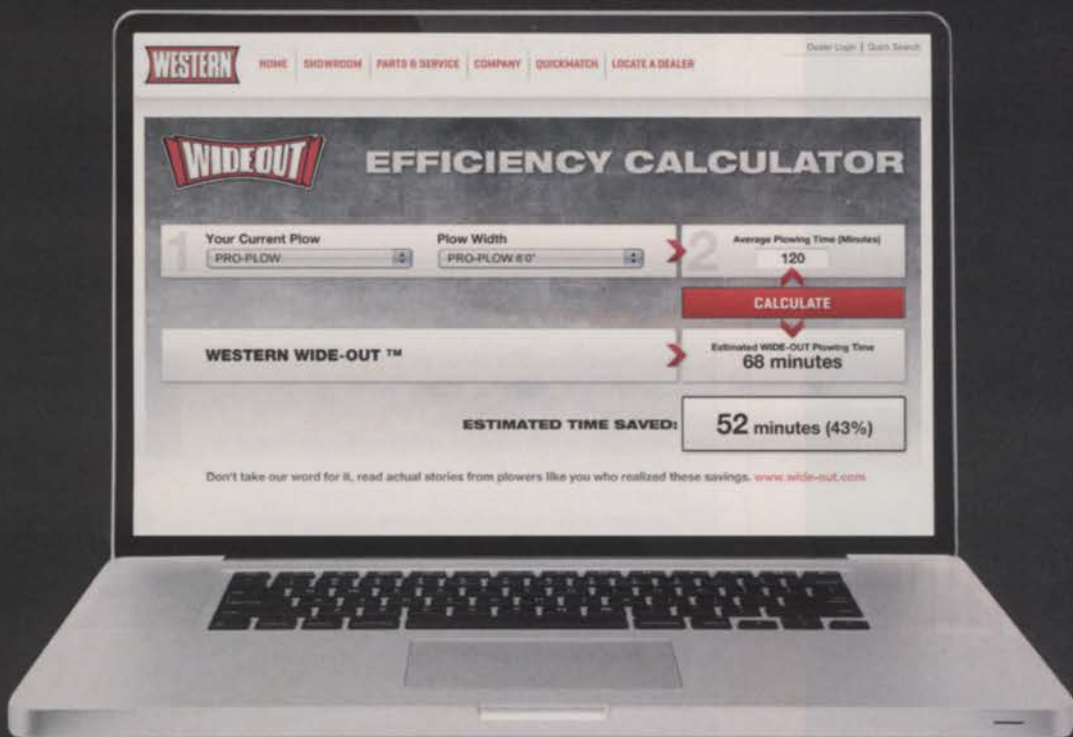
The author is editor at Snow Magazine. He can be reached at mzawacki@gie.net.

For the complete interview, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "ASCA."



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- Features a steel roof with textured powered-coat paint and acoustic headliner.
- Accessories include heaters, work lights, plows and spreaders.

For more information: www.curtisindustries.net



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- 10- to 20-foot loader models are capable of pushing 12 to 26 cubic yards of snow in one pass.
- Fully welded, and they use horizontal and vertical channeling made of thick steel.

For more information: www.protechcorp.com



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The pitch: The SnowEx ground drive spreaders can be used on sidewalks, parking lots and other off-road applications.

- Equipped with lawn-and-garden style hitches, designed to tow behind compact tractors, ATVs and utility vehicles.
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- Feature corrosion-resistant polyethylene hoppers and 12-inch, adjustable stainless-steel spinners.
- Capable of handling bagged rock salt and ice melters.
- Spread up to 30 feet wide at 5 miles per hour and are available with a deflector skirt kit for narrowing the spread width on sidewalks.

For more information: www.trynexusfactory.com



Wacker Neuson WL 37

The pitch: The WL 37 features excellent fuel efficiency and minimal tire wear compared to a skid-steer loader.

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Make that SALE

You know how to sell landscape maintenance or lawn care.
But can you sell **holiday lighting**? By Jason Stahl

One of the biggest mistakes business owners make when starting a new profit center or add-on business is not fully dedicating themselves to marketing, managing and selling it. It's almost as if they expect to buy the equipment, tools or supplies, and then magically see revenue shoot skyward with no effort.

Holiday lighting is no exception. You'll only get out of it what you put into it. It also helps to work with an experienced professional.

"Partner with someone who has done it before, otherwise it becomes a quick headache for you and your organization," says Scott Heese, president/owner of Holidynamics. "Not only will you not be generating the profits that you should, you're going to have an unhappy staff."

SALES IS SALES. To really promote your holiday light-

ing service, place a logo for the new business on clothing, hand out catalogues of the products and promote a professional-looking website by sending out a hyperlink to customers.

But you also need a go-to person, who can come from within the company.

"Have someone on staff who's dedicated to this service in-season, but also off-season to keep it going year-round," Heese says.

"Not that they're living, breathing and eating Christmas in the middle of summer, but they're a person who the staff knows they can go to if they have any questions, whether they be related to sales or installation."

Heese says that if someone has the right attitude and determination to succeed, they can easily be taught how to estimate lighting jobs as well, which is part of the sales process.

"If they're measuring a yard for chemicals, they can easily measure for installing Christmas lights," he says. "But again, it's knowing your products and installation methods."

Paul Sessel, president of Creative Displays, says the personnel question relates more to the size of your company.

"But one of their people should be able to do it because typically the Christmas season starts when their other seasons slow down," Sessel says.

The sales process isn't any different, either, from lawn or landscaping, says Mike Streb, director of sales for Christmas Lights, Etc.

Streb has spent his whole career in sales for a variety

of different businesses, and the one thing he has learned is: sales is sales.

"It's about how much knowledge you have and finding out who your competition is," Streb says.

TRAINING. Teaching is a crucial component to learning how to sell holiday lighting, and some vendors, such as Holidynamics, offer this tool to those landscape/lawn care professionals who purchase their products. That's what helped Chris Beneduce of Impressions Holiday Lighting and Décor of Warwick in Rhode Island.

"Holidynamics trained us on sales, installation and marketing," Beneduce says.

"They told us what to expect, and since holiday lighting is something they've done for awhile, they knew what worked and what didn't."

When Beneduce added holiday lighting to his business four years ago, he had already been going strong as a landscape lighting company.

So, he simply used the existing staff he had to sell his new service.

From his second to third year selling holiday lighting, Beneduce increased his sales 400 percent.

"It was a perfect add-on because there was only a month overlap on seasons and so it was easy for the existing salespeople to take it on," he says.

The bottom line? Your salespeople can sell lights too. **L&L**

Jason Stahl is a freelancer based in Cleveland.

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Converting customers

You already have an established list of customers, and you can use those contacts to your benefit. By Jason Stahl

You've grown your landscape or lawn care business successfully and now have a long client list that rivals Santa Claus'. But how can you use that list to start a successful holiday lighting business?

Mike Streb, director of sales for Christmas Lights, Etc., says a survey of customers is in order first before anything else. And that can actually serve as a way to promote the business, too.

"Survey people who might be interested in it," Streb says. "Once you find out that enough people are interested in it, then put a business plan together – here is the marketing side, purchasing, personnel, etc. Then it's time to inexpensively market through postcards and fliers, or make the decision to pitch the service via a PowerPoint presentation to a decision maker."

Without a survey, it's simply up to the lead salesperson to figure out how to capture the business, Streb says. "I have this client list of 500 accounts, half of which are commercial and the other half is high-end residential. And gosh, this

For a business primer on how to succeed in holiday lighting, read L&L's 2012 whitepaper series at www.lawnandlandscape.com/whitepapers.

guy, Joe Homeowner, also does Christmas over the top, so what do I need to do to sell him on this? Why have I given up this business in the past when I already had an 'in' by doing other work for this client?"

Scott Heese, president and owner of Holidynamics, recommends sending

current customers a personal letter, then a "statement stuffer" followed up with a scripted phone call. To generate new business on top of that, he recommends participating in a direct mail campaign.

"Once you get on board with us as an affiliate, those are all the benefits you receive on the back end, including a discounted direct mail program," Heese says. Timing is critical, too, since holiday lighting tends to be a seasonal business.

"A lot of decisions with budgets for holidays are made before summer," Streb says.

Paul Sessel, president of Creative Displays, says, "The earlier you plant the seed and the more often, the more

realistic chance you have of getting the deal." Tony Snider, owner of Holiday Lights Decorating in Phoenix, has been doing holiday lighting for 18 years, so he has a rock-solid client list to work from. He puts out an e-mail blast to all of them four times a year to promote his services.

As far as finding new clients, word-of-mouth works best. When people call to inquire about his services, he directs them to his website. In his first year doing holiday lighting, Chris Beneduce, owner of Impressions Holiday Lighting and Décor of Warwick in Rhode Island, opted to send fliers to only a select group of customers in certain geographic areas.

"I wanted to make sure I could handle that volume of potential business because I didn't want to become a victim of my own success," he says. "So we took it on gradually and grew the business from there to see exactly what I needed to handle that side of the business."

Sessel also recommends a simple and cheap approach before mailing every client on the list. "(Crews) should mention that they do holiday lighting while they're out doing whatever service they're already doing," he says. L&L

You can use your landscaping customers as a starting point when adding holiday lighting. High-end clients are especially interested in the service.



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DYNAMIC GRADE
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Light up your year

Successful landscape lighting companies sell holiday lighting services year-round to make it a 12-month profit center. By Jason Stahl



It's easy to see holiday lighting as only a Christmas-time business. But smart and dedicated operators know there are many more opportunities throughout the year to keep the cash flowing.

At first, Chris Beneduce, owner of Impressions Holiday Lighting and Décor of Warwick in Rhode Island, only focused on Christmas. But then, as word of mouth increased, he saw additional opportunities like for Fourth of July displays. After that,

he began to see demand from Halloween stores for commercial decorating. He even supplies green-and-white bulbs now for St. Patrick's Day. A catalogue available to customers has assisted in promoting the fact that he does more than just Christmas lighting.

"The majority of our business occurs during the holiday season, but for some customers, it's year-round," Beneduce says.

Commitment is huge

to make holiday lighting a 12-month operation. It takes that much more sales effort and promotion, not to mention keeping on workers to install the lights, take them down and store them. Paul Sessel, president of Creative Displays, admits that the challenges go up when looking to extend the business throughout the calendar.

"To make holiday lighting a 12-month deal is probably a hard sale, but we do see party tent lighting and decorative lighting opportunities for patios and backyards," he says.

Scott Heese, president/owner of Holidynamics, says that networking with the right team is crucial for land-

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scape and lawn care companies looking to extend the life of their new holiday lighting business.

"For example, we offer hearts, shamrocks, birthday stuff, party signs, summer-themed displays such as flamingoes, anchors and palm trees, and birth-announcement displays with storks that have light-up signs that say 'It's a Boy!'" Heese says.

"I've had off-season sales for weddings, too. One of our affiliates recently did a \$60,000 lighting project for a concert. And now we're starting to see a big increase in demand at Halloween."

But Heese cautions that those who want to go gung-

ho with year-round lighting opportunities need to understand the commitment it involves. For example, he recommends making sure you have four to five months of the year dedicated to the service side – taking down the lights, properly storing them, etc.

"Everything that goes up that season has to come back down and get stored," he says. "As you build your residual income, you're going to find yourself taking down your lights through January and February, packing them away properly and putting them in storage."

"Your big ticket is building that residual income where

when you take down stuff and put it in storage, you already know you have residual income of 'X' dollars, because you rarely lose that contract if you have their goods in storage."

Mike Streb, director of sales for Christmas Lights, Etc., also sees other opportunities for lighting besides Christmas. A lot of the lighting products his company offers, such as white wire, perimeter lighting and patio lighting, lend themselves to year-round display.

He believes there is more potential for year-round lighting demand from commercial properties, which can lead to solid second and third quarter

sales, if the landscaper has the right business mix. "In the off-season, a lot of non-holiday, non-Christmas lighting is commercial – restaurants, hotels, motels, park districts, cities and towns," Streb says.

"You drive by high-end, upper-crust homes and there is not a lot of white lighting."

Streb says one of his largest customers is a rental supply company that deemed holiday lighting a natural transition because they already had all of the equipment necessary to install lights.

"Next thing you know," Streb says, "he's not only doing Christmas lighting but Jiffy Lubes and shopping centers year-round." L&L

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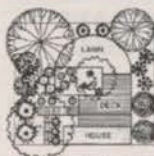
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- Design and implement Market Research insuring full understanding of end user behaviors, requirements and product needs
- Develop and implement training programs and training delivery to insure leading performance of distribution and field sales personnel
- Manage product research for current and future products working with internal research personnel and university/industry resources
- Develop product offering annually including rationalization of the offering and enhancing the offering to lead the market
- Develop and implement sales programs to achieve sales volume objectives and profit performance
- Lead annual and quarterly market plan activity
- Maintain excellent interdepartmental communication
- Develop and maintain detail reporting of sales, profit and competitive market position
- Development of the content in brand/product marketing materials, trade show materials, advertising strategy materials and web promotion

Position Qualifications

- Superior interpersonal skills required
 - 4 year degree in Agronomy, Horticulture, Turf Management Ag Sciences or Ag Business required
 - Minimum 5-8 years Product Management and/or Product Development experience desired
 - Prefer 2-4 years experience with Organic/bio-stimulant products
 - Minimum 2 years of B2B sales experience required
 - Strong analytical, computer, web skills required: Fully capable in Word, Power Point, Excel, Access needed along with capability to learn in house systems quickly
 - Periodic travel required (Approx. 20% of the work time)
- *Position is based at corporate headquarters in Lebanon, PA

All qualified applicants, please forward your resume and cover letter to: David Dell, Director of Marketing, ddell@lebsea.com

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Jim Cali

COO, Southern Botanical

There's a first time for everything – the first sale, the first expansion, the first mistake and maybe even the first award. To help gain insight into the successes and lessons learned by successful business owners, every month *Lawn & Landscape* will talk to companies who have surpassed those milestones and have become some of the newest members of our Top 100 list.

COMPANY: Southern Botanical

LOCATION: Dallas

TOP 100 RANKING: 86

2011 REVENUE: \$13.8 million



What does being a Top 100 company mean to you?

It means that our team is working really hard to provide a record-level service that is being recognized by our clients. If we weren't doing that, we wouldn't be growing like we have been.

What kind of training do you provide to make your client service top notch?

We train 52 weeks a year for an hour every week. We spend time on horticulture practices, safety practices and client services. We make sure that the crews know the clients' names, that we move the newspapers to the front doors, providing our clients a customized personal service. Our clientele is very high-end, and so we do training based on being a white glove service. We've read books on the Ritz-Carlton and other service based corporations and we take their practices into the field. We make

sure that team members are in clean uniforms and the trucks are spotless. Everything we do is crisp, clean and on time.

As your company has grown, what has been one of your most difficult decision to make as a leader?

Our most difficult decision was probably to not lay anyone off during the recession. That was really, really tough for us, because from a business perspective, we should have laid a number of people off. But we knew that what we were building for the future and layoffs would have lessened our ability to come out of the recession – we had worked so hard to recruit our talent to begin with.

Choosing to live in a loss situation by keeping the entire team on board during some of the toughest times is really hard to do. But I can tell you now post recession that keeping the team is

the best decision we've ever made. We're not short-term thinkers around here, we're long-term thinkers. Since 1995, we still have the first four team members working for us.

What has changed about your company as it has grown?

Something that's changed is our use of technology. For a number of years, we've been working on the same operational platform based on meeting our client's needs. And we've built that platform based on client service leaders that we strive to emulate like FedEx and Ritz-Carlton.

In addition, there's no company like us that leads in irrigation technology. All of our clients will be on remote control irrigation controllers if we haven't installed it already. We installed technology that could save the client water while driving our own operational efficiencies – and it is working.

Is there any one aspect of your company that you'd like to change?

We're always changing. There's not one thing that will remain stagnant at this company. In the next three years innovation is truly going to help us grow.

We're always evolving; I think the only thing that will stay the same is our core principle of being a benchmark in everything that we do. We're going to do everything that we can do to make sure we are tops in class and tops in landscaping, not just in Texas but nation-wide.

What advice would you give to leaders who want to grow their companies?

It's all about your ability to execute on your core principles of your business plan and your ability to always innovate to make yourself better.

I think that's why nothing stays static around here very long. L&L

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