

JUNE 2012

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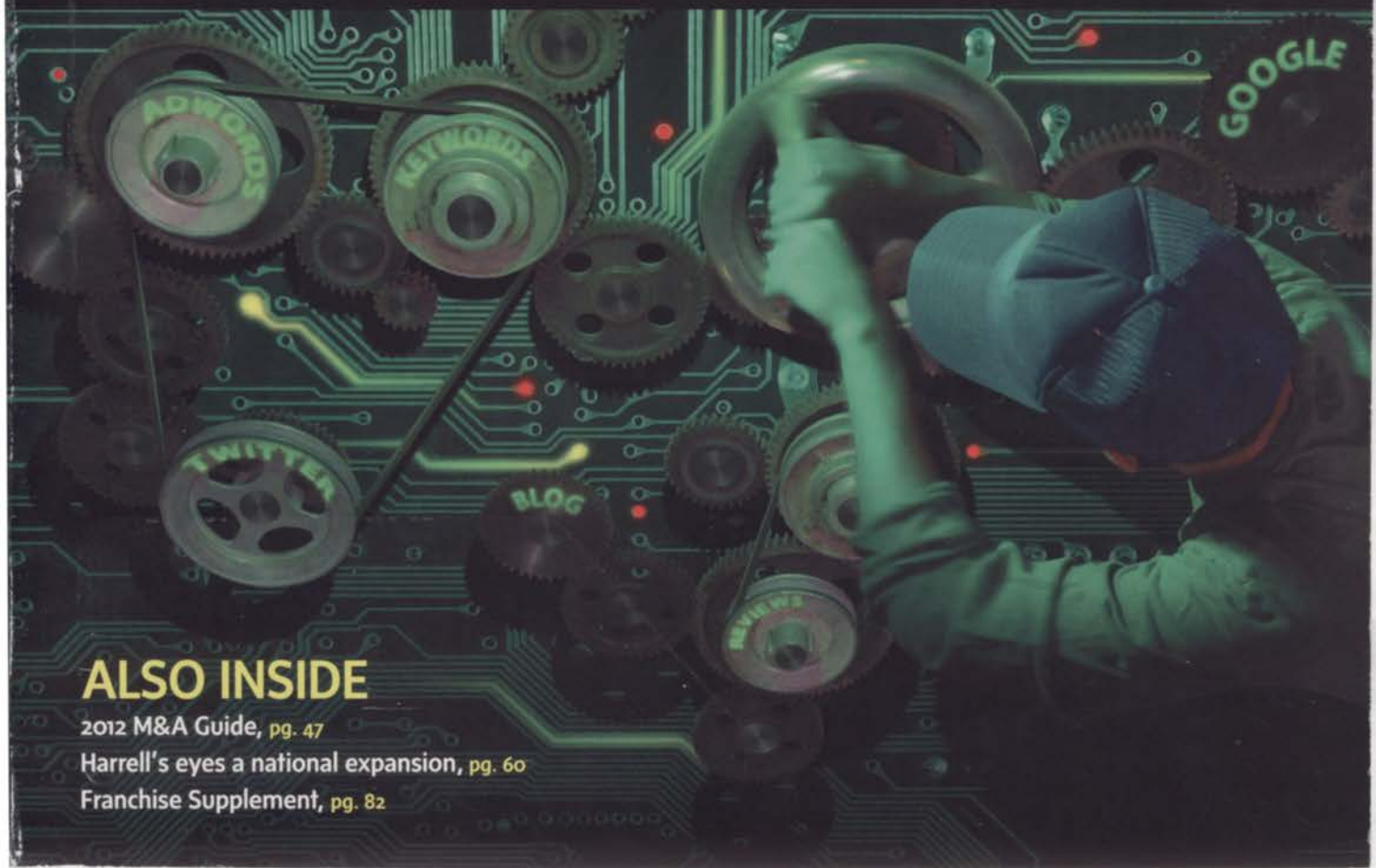
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### ALSO INSIDE

2012 M&A Guide, pg. 47

Harrell's eyes a national expansion, pg. 60

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# ONLINE Contents

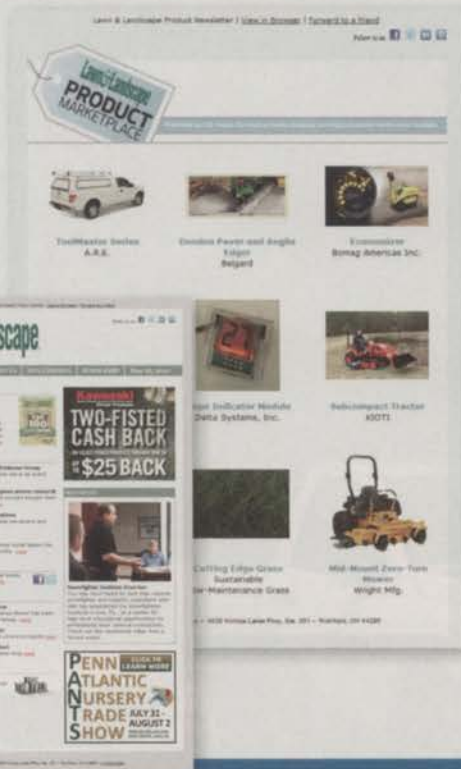
Check out what's now online from *Lawn & Landscape*.

## Fast news

We know you're busy, and, as hard as it is for us to swallow, we know you don't read every story of every issue of *Lawn & Landscape*. And we know you don't have endless hours available to click on every link of our website, [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com). Well, we have a great way for you to get quick hits of news and feature stories delivered right to your inbox – our newsletters.

We have nine newsletters delivering unique content from the latest news in the industry to the newest products to feature stories from contractors like you.

To sign up for one (or all!) of our newsletters, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and click on the E-Newsletters link on the left side of the page. All you'll need to do is create a log-in (it's easy) and click the newsletters you want to receive. Enjoy these quick hits of information ... but don't forget the magazine and website.



## POPULAR POSTS

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twitter

Here are some links our followers and friends found the most intriguing across our social media platforms.

**DIVERSIFIED LANDSCAPING FINDS A HOME IN BELLEAIR**  
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[bit.ly/diverselscape](http://bit.ly/diverselscape)

**4 LESSONS FROM AMERICAN EXPRESS ON HOW TO SELL SOCIAL INSIDE YOUR COMPANY**  
Leslie Berland, SVP, digital partnerships and development, American Express, shares 4 lessons for making social media a core competency in your company.  
[bit.ly/amexsocial](http://bit.ly/amexsocial)

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## TIMES ARE A-CHANGIN'



We've had some exciting changes in our horticulture group at GIE Media, parent company of *Lawn & Landscape*. One of those changes has been that our sister magazines that serve the rest of the green industry have focused more on their websites and social media. So, while they don't have stories about landscapers or lawn care operators, they do write about the greenhouses, nurseries and garden centers you work with. So, to get some insight into how your suppliers and colleagues work, check out *Greenhouse Management Magazine* at [www.greenhousemanagementonline.com](http://www.greenhousemanagementonline.com) and @greenhousemag; *Garden Center Magazine* at [www.gardencentermagazine.com](http://www.gardencentermagazine.com) and @gardencentermag and *Nursery Management Magazine* at [www.nurserymanagementonline.com](http://www.nurserymanagementonline.com) and @NurseryMag.

## Easy surfin'

We've also recently made a few tweaks to [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com). We'll continue to do it over the next few months, and we recently made a tweak to make browsing easier. The menu bar on the left side of our homepage is now divided into categories to give you an idea of what kind of content you will be viewing. Before we just had one long list (yuck, right?). Now it's broken up into four different sections, **Magazine**, **Interactive**, **Resources** and **Contact**. Not only is it more appealing to the eye, but it will make it easier for you to navigate the *Lawn & Landscape* site. So, take a look when you get a minute, and keep checking back for future improvements.





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## Where are you?

A few years ago, my wife and I bought our first house. During the sales process, we went through what felt like hundreds of houses. Due to my inherent thrift, we started our search at what some would call the low end of the market. As such, we toured a lot of houses that were vacant, foreclosed, spider-infested and at least one with only three walls.

“The first thing I did was toss that stack of phone books in the recycling bin.”

As we moved up market, we went through an older home (with all its walls) that had a relic of the past anchored to the kitchen wall. In a steel box at shoulder height, next to the telephone, sat a 1960s edition of the Yellow Pages.

A few weeks later, we found a house we liked (it had all four walls and no vermin). On the counter, along with all the spare keys and the code to the garage door opener, the previous owners left us a stack of a dozen phone books, many published more than 10 years ago.

The first thing I did was toss that stack of phone books in the recycling bin.

Now, if you still advertise in the Yellow Pages or similar books, and you get a tangible return on that investment, then by all means don't stop. But, if you can't readily articulate what you get back in dollars and cents for an ad in the phone book, take a look at this month's cover story on page 40.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, out of adults who say they sought out information on local businesses, 47 percent rely most on the

internet, and 22 percent rely most on word of mouth from family and friends.

Homeowners, HOAs and property managers still need and want landscapers. But the process from that initial thought – “I think we should hire a landscaper” – to you shaking their hand at a walk-around has changed dramatically in the past 10 years.

These days, chances are pretty good that homeowner or board president will first ask his friends or colleagues for recommendations and then go to Google to find out more about those top picks.

So if you're not showing up where your prospects are looking, where are you? Missing out. The tools we give you this month will help you show up.

Just like buying a big ad in the Yellow Pages makes you stand out, having good SEO and a solid online presence makes you stand out, too. The message to customers and your ultimate goals are the same – the medium has just changed.

So put yourself in front of your new customers. They're out there looking for you. Will you be there for them to find? – *Chuck Bowen*



## Lawn & Landscape

Leading business media for landscape contractors.

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## LETTERS



### Readers respond to 'What happened to Juan'

I was made aware of your article "What Happened to Juan" via a LinkedIn posting by Andrew Smith of Reinke Manufacturing. Our group has over 400 members and a good conversation commenced.

I'd like to encourage you and L&L to post more stories of the challenges faced by practicing professionals in the green industry.

Without asking you or the magazine to focus on the negative, well-written articles of this type can be more informative and contain more practical advice to readers than "success" articles.

I own three green industry companies and for various reasons, and each is severely challenged at the moment. Articles like "What Happened to Juan" can be very therapeutic to business owners facing similar challenges – if only for a moment.

Certainly, such articles cause the attentive reader to take pause and reflect.

Keep up the good work and if you happen to visit with Mr. Vila or his son, please pass on best wishes from oth-

er sympathetic green industry employer-practitioners.

*Timothy Malooly*  
President, Water in Motion  
Minneapolis

Powerful article on Vila & Son. Most interesting quote was "We got too big." A cautionary tale. I give Mr. Vila a lot of credit for telling the story and thank him. Tough to do. So many people were impacted. Our industry can learn much from this fall from grace. Nice writing.

*Scott Jamieson*  
Vice president, Bartlett Tree  
Experts  
Northbrook, Ill.

Hello, my friend. Good job on this piece. I think this is important, and I believe it is cathartic for Juan as well. I spoke with him today and he was happy about this coming out. All the best.

*Jim McCutcheon*  
CEO, HighGrove Partners  
Austell, Ga.

Wow. You got to the core of an issue that has affected thousands of contractors, not only landscapers. What went on in the economy is incredible (and is still going on). If a person gets to a point of making big bucks he needs to be as aggressive in taking money off the table and investing it as he is in expanding his empire. Thanks again for the article.

*Jim Peterson*  
President, The Landscaping  
Network and The Concrete  
Network  
Calimesa, Calif.

I just wanted to say thank you for the article on Vila & Son. I was marketing director for VSL for 15 years and I can tell you he meant every word.

Some out there won't agree, but those who know him well will say thanks.

*Claudia Fajardo*

## On staying small and local

First, let me say how much I love your magazine. When it arrives I read it cover to cover. Great articles and plenty of information about the trade.

You run articles about lawn care operators/landscapers in each issue, and as much as I love to read and dream of being a multi-million dollar company, there are a ton of us out here that are one- maybe two-man companies pulling in \$30,000 to 40,000 a year. I would love to hear more stories of the little guy clawing his way up the ladder, tiring to make ends meet when you have nothing but used gear and a dream.

Just an idea. Keep up the great work and I look in the mailbox everyday for my next issue.

*Graham Oldreive  
Ducke's Lawn Care Services  
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia*

I enjoy your Top 100 reports very much. I am a small business lawn care owner/operator. For the past 25 years I have worked hard to build my reputation as the company to call for quality and consistent service. I enjoy working every day mowing and maintaining my customers' properties.

No, I am not the biggest in town, but my presence is unsurpassed in the local market. I do market myself on the web, keep up with the lawn care industry and use the best equipment to stay productive. I am confident of the decisions I make to stay small and local.

This is a choice, not a coincidence, that I stay small. I have seen larger growth and money driven companies go out of business. I have watched the local lawn care market go from a dozen companies to over a hundred vying for a piece of the market. I am not against growth, but I enjoy the challenges of staying small and local in the Findlay, Ohio, market.

What about doing a story on the best 100 local small companies in America?

*Ken Silvers  
Owner, Ken Silvers Residential Lawn Care  
Findlay, Ohio*



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# Helping hands

On April 20, landscapers from across the country participated in PLANET's 4<sup>th</sup> annual Day of Service. More than 2,600 volunteers from 36 states and Canada and Puerto Rico participated in 150 projects, including landscaping schools and parks. It's estimated that \$675,000 in time and services was donated during this year's Day of Service, according to PLANET.

Below are a couple of projects that show the type of work landscapers completed on the day.

For more photos of projects from the day, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and search "Day of Service."

Shadow Wood Community Association in Bonita Springs, Fla., took part by sprucing up Naples Botanical Gardens. The garden is a 170-acre and combines cultivated tropical gardens with seven restored natural habitats. About 20 people chipped in on the project. The groups worked on cleaning irrigation heads throughout the park, within the nursery area cleaning and planting trees. Volunteers also worked in the gardens placing new plantings and dead heading, and trimmed 45 trees.

"Our staff proudly wore the Planet Day of Service T-shirts and enjoyed working outside of their known property," said Deborah Owen, who works in the landscape department at Shadow Wood. "Many of our staff expressed an interest in returning to view the gardens on their own time."



Hackettstown, N.J.-based Duke's Landscape Management worked on the grounds at two locations this year – Camp Merry Heart, located in Hackettstown, and the Rockaway Memorial Gazebo, located in Rockaway Township.

Camp Merry Heart is a program of The Easter Seals New Jersey. The camp provides a wide variety of recreation and activities to people of all ages and all types of disabilities and special needs. At Camp Merry Heart, Duke's cleaned and landscaped the front entrance, cleaned and chipped down limbs along the long driveway and cleaned and landscaped common areas by the cabins.

A second crew from Duke's went to Lombardo Park in Rockaway Township, where the Rotary Memorial Gazebo is part of a multi-use outdoor park. Duke's cleaned, landscaped and mulched the area surrounding the Memorial Gazebo.



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## GIE+EXPO adds sessions

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The GIE+EXPO Workshops, expanded to six sessions for 2012, will cover timely issues to help lawn and landscape pros improve profitability.

This mini-series is available for contractors who want an introduction to the Green Industry Conference (GIC), sponsored by PLANET, and Hardscape North America (HNA) Conference, sponsored by the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute (ICPI).

Both conferences will take place in conjunction with GIE+EXPO, which will be co-located with HNA in

Louisville at the Kentucky Exposition Center.

The tradeshow is open to lawn and landscape professionals Oct. 25-26. GIC, the HNA Conference and the Professional Grounds Management Society's (PGMS) School of Grounds Management will begin Oct. 24. ICPI will offer hardscape installer and technician training Oct. 23-24.

An early-bird registration fee of \$10 is being offered for a tradeshow pass until September 9. Beginning Sept. 10 the fee will increase to \$25. The onsite registration fee will be \$50.

Go to [www.gie-expo.com](http://www.gie-expo.com) to register and also to reserve your place in the GIE+EXPO

Workshops, which are \$50 per session. As a bonus for signing up for Hardscape Session 1 or 2, you will receive free access to a series of live demonstrations throughout the day on Thursday and Friday. The live demos are offered through Hardscape North America.

## Bland Landscaping honored for sustainable business practices

RALEIGH, N.C. — Bland Landscaping, a full-service residential and commercial landscaping company, received two sustainability in business awards. The com-



Kurt Bland accepts the award from the city.

pany is the recipient of the 2012 Smith Seal of North Carolina Sustainable Business Award from the Greater Raleigh Chamber's Pinnacle Awards and the 2012 Market Transformation Award from Raleigh's Environmental awards.

The Smith Seal of North Carolina Sustainable Business Award recognizes the company for sustainable

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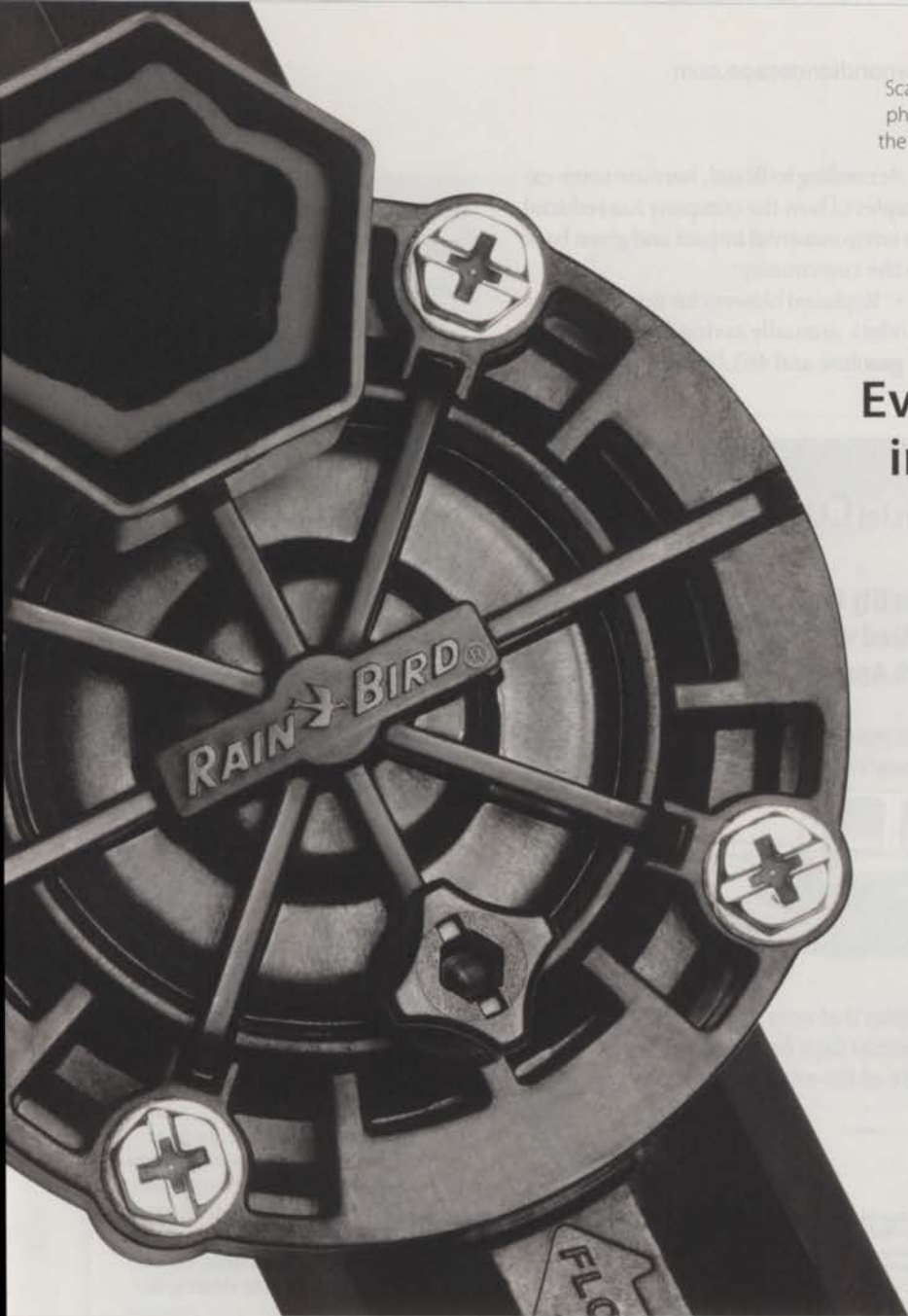


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business practices incorporated into daily operations.

The Market Transformation Award recognizes the company for its efforts in making business decisions that lessen the company's overall environmental impact.

According to Bland, here are some examples of how the company has reduced its environmental impact and given back to the community:

- Replaced blowers for more efficient models, annually saving 23,400 gallons of gasoline and 461,000 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>.

## Ruppert earns construction award

LAYTONSVILLE, Md. – Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) awarded Ruppert Landscape's work on the Barbara Truland Butz Healing Garden at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville, Md.

The project has earned the company an Eagle Award in the Sitework/Landscape – All Contract Amounts category of ABC's Excellence in Construction Awards. Ruppert Landscape representatives received the award Feb. 22 during the 22nd annual Excellence in Construction Awards celebration at the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix.



The Eagle Award

Ruppert created a healing garden on the hospital roof while adhering to noise restrictions that required all power tools to be used on the ground to avoid disturbing operating and patient rooms.

"ABC is proud to recognize Ruppert Landscape for its outstanding work on the Barbara Truland Butz Healing Garden at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital project," said Michael D. Bellaman, ABC president and CEO.

"This project embodies a commitment to innovation, safety and superior craftsmanship through creativity and skill."

The Excellence in Construction awards program is a competition developed to honor innovative and high-quality merit shop construction projects. The award honors all construction team members, including the contractor, owner, architect and engineer.

The winning projects, selected from entries submitted from across the nation, were judged on complexity, attractiveness, unique challenges overcome, completion time, workmanship, innovation, safety and cost.



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- Converted vehicles to biodiesel with an environmental savings of 121,636.05 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>, 20 percent less hydrocarbons, and 20 percent less SO<sub>2</sub>.

- Installed a 16,000-gallon rainwater cistern to capture rainwater from the roof, preventing erosion and saving gallons of potable water for other uses.

- Committed to reducing insecticide use to only those products on San Francisco Tier III list.

- Purchased hybridized 4-mix engines that generate less noise than traditional 2-cycle engines, use

fewer hydrocarbons, reduce fuel consumption and save \$40,000 annually

"We are always looking for better techniques and technologies that will help us reduce the environmental impact of our business and the services we offer," said Kurt Bland, president.

### Aquascape debuts water gardening app

ST. CHARLES, Ill. – Aquascape, a manufacturer of pond products and supplies, debuted its new smartphone app designed for pond and garden enthusiasts. The Aquascape app offers water gardening tips and information, divided into five sections, including:

- Hundreds of water photos including landscape transformations, fish, aquatic plants and outdoor living spaces.

- Latest news on Aquascape pond products and events.

- How-to videos on pond installation, maintenance, fish and plant care.

- Water gardening articles that cover fish and plant care, water quality, design tips, seasonal maintenance, and more.

- Online store that showcases a variety of pond supplies.

"The Aquascape app is like a miniature version of our website right at your fingertips," said Greg Wittstock, founder and CEO of

Aquascape. "Our goal is to provide useful information on all things related to water gardening on a convenient, easy-to-use mobile device."

The Aquascape App is available for Apple's iPhone and Google Android-based smartphones. To download the app, visit the iTunes Store or Google Play, then search for Aquascape Pond.

### Syngenta launches enhanced GreenCast website

GREENSBORO, N.C. – Syngenta redesigned its GreenCast online product information and support website.

These changes will help turf professionals stay up-to-

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- Industry news

"Syngenta is constantly developing innovative products and solutions to help our customers manage their businesses and do their jobs better and more efficiently," said Shawn Potter, head of marketing for Syngenta turf and landscape. *L&L*



## CLIMBING THE LADDER:

Hires, promotions and career advancements

**Adam Popenhagen** has been hired by Profile Products as regional market development manager.

As regional market development manager, Popenhagen's territory will consist of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky.

Popenhagen holds a bachelor's degree in business management from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and an associate's degree in turfgrass management from Anoka-Hennepin Technical College in Minnesota.

Prior to joining Profile, Popenhagen was a storm water specialist in the Office of Environmental Stewardship at the Minnesota Department of Transportation, where he wrote the department's

Standard Construction Specifications for Erosion and Sediment Control, as well as the standard detail sheets for construction.

Fred Marvin Associates, a manufacturer of tree tools, has promoted **Amanda Gross** from executive assistant to marketing and sales administrator.

As marketing and sales administrator, Gross will oversee the company's advertising, marketing and strategic planning, as well as manage the company's day-to-day operations and sales, reporting directly to the president, Jeffrey Mussay.

Gross is a 2008 alumna of The University of Akron.



Popenhagen

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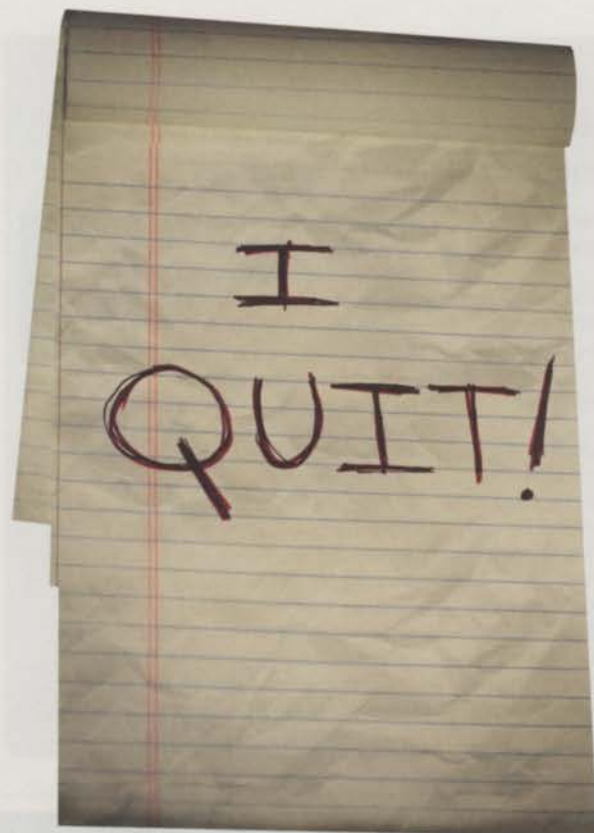
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## POOR EMPLOYEE MORALE AND FUEL SURCHARGES

**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. I am reaching out to see how others in this industry keep employee morale high. We have recently experienced a high rate of turnover in employees, especially those with drivers' licenses. Does anyone have any good ideas or ways to keep these employees?**

**A.** Before you check the morale at your company, make sure you are doing a thorough job of explaining the work details during the hiring process.

If employees are only lasting

one to two weeks, it may very well be that they simply didn't know what they were getting in to.

Be honest about the heat, cold, hard work and heavy loads.

Too many people get a job in our industry because they "like to be outside" or want to "get paid to get a tan."

Weed these people out before you hand them a uniform.

Two, company morale, especially in a small business, always starts and ends with the owner/CEO.

Have you had an assessment done of your leadership strengths and weaknesses or considered doing a blind survey of your team?

Getting a consultant in

to assess the culture of my company really shined a light on some areas I was missing.

Three, I have found the real experts on why short-term employees quit are my long-term employees. Constant turnover makes their jobs harder, too.

Take them to lunch and ask the hard questions. Why do people keep quitting my company? Is it me, is it our hiring criteria, or is it our pay/benefits? Explain that you are deeply committed to making changes that make it a better place to work for everyone.

**Terry Delany, GroundSERV**

**A.** I would start by looking at your company. Is it someplace where people want to work? Is there a good culture of quality, integrity, etc.?

What brings people to you for a job? What is your interview process like?

Perhaps you need to concentrate on the interview more in finding out if the employee is a good fit and will add something to your company.

Morale goes deeper than just getting and keeping employees.

They need to believe in what you are doing and need to feel like they are making a difference.

Maybe to attract better people you have to evaluate how you stack up to other companies.

What is your reputation? Ask your customers. Ask your employees.

Do you ask the employees why they leave? I would suggest you look at the big picture.

Morale might not be the real issue? It may just be the end result?

**Joe Markell, Sunrise Landscape & Design**

**Q. Is there a landscape industry standard for applying fuel surcharges? We instituted a 4 percent fuel surcharge on all monthly lawn care invoices which has generated a lot of inquiries.**

**We want to update our lawn maintenance contract so that it reflects industry-acceptable fuel surcharge verbiage.**

**A.** I don't think there is any such thing as "acceptable" when it comes to a fuel surcharge.

I have seen surcharges implemented based on rack rate, station averages, city averages and the price of a barrel of crude oil.

It is a hot potato topic that is sure to generate more questions and drive up your management time when people call in angry or choose not to pay it, and you are left calling them for a \$1.75 charge that didn't get paid on the invoice.

Tacking on a fuel surcharge, even with clear, concise language, is a public relations disaster.

That said, there are ways to offset fuel costs, and it is best done through fuel surcharges on enhancements or design/build.

As these proposals are job costed, you can increase your mobilization fees on these jobs much easier and can bury those fees in other areas.

It is a way to arrive at the same destination without the incendiary line item on a maintenance contract.

**Bill Leidecker, president, Five Seasons Landscape Management**

**A.** We have chosen not to implement any fuel surcharges on our maintenance contracts.

The market is very fragile, and we don't wish to give the client any reason to question an invoice. With that said, we have seen fuel costs rise a full percent as a cost of sales in 2011.

We will consider increasing our price when renegotiating the contract.

There is an online fuel index, **FuelSurchargeIndex.org**, that can be used to measure fuel price fluctuations. **L&L**

**Bruce T. Moore Sr., Eastern Land Management**

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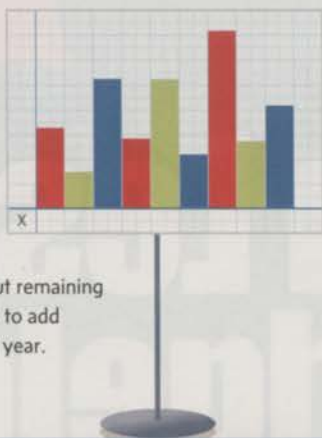
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# Slow but steady

It may not be good news, but it's not necessarily bad either. Forecasters surveyed by The Wall Street Journal expect economic growth to be so quiet this year that unemployment will barely budge.

Asked about the risks to their outlook, 70% of the economists said they think their forecasts are more likely to be too optimistic than too pessimistic.

On average, the 50 respondents, not all of whom answer every question, expect slow but steady growth in 2012, with gross domestic product expanding faster than the first-quarter's 2.2% pace but remaining at less than 3%. The economy is expected to add about 185,000 jobs a month over the next year.



## 2.3 MILLION

Homeowners are choosing to hold off on selling their homes until buying prices improve, according to a Bloomberg Businessweek report. The number of homes listed for sale in the U.S. fell 22 percent to 2.3 million in March from a year earlier, according to the National Association of Realtors. That's a 6.3-month supply at the current sales pace, which is considered by the association to be a balance between buyers and sellers.

In April, inventories fell to less than a three-month supply in markets including San Francisco, Silicon Valley, Denver, Phoenix, San Diego, Los Angeles, northern Virginia and Seattle, according to online brokerage Redfin.

## 4 YEARS

One way to gauge how strong the economy is right now is by the feelings of consumers. And that sentiment is at its highest level in more than four years in early May as Americans were upbeat about the job market and buying plans improved, a survey showed.

The Thomson Reuters/University of Michigan's preliminary May reading on the overall index on consumer sentiment improved to 77.8 from 76.4 in April.

It was the highest level since January 2008.

While job growth has slowed, nearly twice as many consumers reported hearing about new job gains than said they heard about recent job losses, according to the survey.

But, consumers were only slightly more optimistic about declines in the unemployment rate than they were a year ago, with only one in four expecting it to fall in the year ahead, the survey said.

Employers cut back on hiring in April and March after an acceleration at the start of the year. April's unemployment rate eased to 8.1 percent as more people dropped out of the work force.



## SMALL BUSINESS STALL

Small businesses haven't looked for as many loan opportunities in April, and banks haven't been approving as many either.

The Biz2Credit Small Business Lending Index found that loan approvals by banks with more than \$10 billion in assets dropped from 10.9% in March to 10.6% in April. In March 2011, the approval rate was 11.6%, according to *Forbes*.

Loan approvals at banks with less than \$10 billion in assets also fell, which is not a good sign because smaller banks are normally more willing to lend to small businesses. In April however small bank lending fell to 45.9% from 47.6% in March.

Credit unions told a similar story, where loan approvals decreased by 0.5% to 46.6%.

## WEST COAST WOES



While a dip in prices for crude oil saved most of the nation money at the pump, that was not the case for drivers on the West Coast.

In fact, retail gasoline prices rose in May, according to USA Today. The blame for increase is due to a refinery slowdown in Western states.

In California and Oregon, the average price of regular gas increased 20 cents a gallon in May, AAA reports. Average pump prices were down 19 cents in Florida and 18 cents in Virginia.

California's average price of \$4.37 is well above Florida's \$3.59, and higher than any state except Hawaii and Alaska.



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**Dan Cheslock**  
Mountaineer Lawn Care  
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# Do your homework



**O**f all the questions I get asked, the one I get asked the most is: How can I get the job even if my price is higher? This month's column will focus on how you communicate the value you bring to the table.

For starters, it is a big mistake to say, "I lost that job because our price was too high."

Why?

What do you learn if you assume that is the reason you did not get the job? I feel you learn nothing from accepting that as the reason. If you accept that your price was too high and that's just the way it is, all you can do to improve is lower your price to combat that issue.

Sure, you could figure out a way to be more efficient; you could cut costs by using cheaper materials and the like. To be blunt, there's not a landscaper in America that can't find a way to lower their costs and be more competitive.

That should be a daily quest. It should be standard operating procedure to look for new, better and consequently cheaper ways to do business. A better answer to losing a job to price

is to say, "I must not have fully communicated the value I bring to the table and that's why I lost the job." Smart green industry sales professionals know, first and foremost, clients do business with people they know, like and trust. As I often say, when you make friends, you make sales. But those relationships are kept rock solid by a daily dose of value.

The foundation to winning a job is to deliver exactly what the client wants on your proposal and the only way you can find out what that is would be to ask them what they want at the initial visit. I see many landscapers that really mess this up. When you initially engage someone about your company, you need to ask them the following questions:

1. Where did you hear about us? (The answer to this question lends insight into the mindset of the prospect.)
2. What timeframe do you want to complete this job?
3. And the most important question: What is the process you are going to go through in hiring a contractor?

And then you need to be quiet and listen.

The questions should be asked on the phone call. No appointments should be set up on the phone without this screening. To improve your closing ratio, you have to make sure you are meeting with buyers that fit the definition of your "ideal client." Just running out to see every person that calls you might be a big part of your problem. Improve your chances for success by meeting with prospects who fit what you are looking for.

The biggest part of being successful in sales is knowing who your ideal client is and then methodically going about finding those people who fit that mold. In the short term, the hardest word for a landscape sales professional to say is "no."

In the long run, it's the easiest word to say when you find out how much more successful you will be by spending time with

the prospects that best match your criteria. If you find while screening they are a good fit for an appointment, then you set it up but not before then. Hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars are wasted annually by green industry selling professionals who just go out and meet with anyone.

Just the other day I went through my whole process and as I got down to setting up the appointment, I told them our minimum job was \$1,500. She replied, "Oh, no way, we only have \$1,000 to spend."

This was after she told me she wanted a paver patio and a fire pit. Now, maybe I scared her off with my minimum, but who in their right state of mind thinks you can get a patio and a fire pit for \$1,000? Had I gone on that call, I might have been able to convince them to do more but it was not likely.

To find that out, you must screen the leads you get. The above-mentioned questions will enable you to do just that and to come up with a plan that will touch on what the buyers' needs are and have a successful transaction. **L&L**

**Read Marty's column next month where he will prepare you to present irrefutable evidence to every prospect and client that you are the best choice for landscaping.**



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To learn more about this topic, turn to our M&A guide on [page 47](#).

# Going slightly M.A.D.

**A** number of years ago, a \$1 million commercial lawn maintenance contractor in Colorado called me. He was interested in possibly selling his business. His net profit margin after all bills and a reasonable salary to him were paid was 10 percent. I gave him a ballpark value of around \$0.75 per revenue dollar – \$750,000.

This figure included his equipment, inventory at fair market value (FMV) but no real estate. He then told me that his CPA, using various evaluation models, told him he should get around \$2 million for his business. "Gee!" I said to him, "This makes me look stupid, doesn't it?" However, I then went on to tell him that he had better get all of his money, the entire \$2 million, up front. Otherwise, he'd never see it, but I'll get to that later.

The point is that mergers and acquisitions take a lot of work, but can also be a great boost to your bottom line. Many companies in the U.S. and Canada are growing their revenue in the current economy by means of mergers and acquisitions. You get M.A.D. when you add sellers to this equation (divestitures). Donald Trump's 2004 best seller, *The Art of the Deal*, recognizes an important aspect of a deal. It is as much art as it is arithmetic.

The current trend in such deals focuses primarily on the somewhat constant revenue streams of the maintenance and service sectors. M.A.D. transactions involving construction revenue streams are not common, but do happen. The buyer is betting that future revenue streams and profits

generated from the purchased book of business will more than offset its price. This is often the case but even the big boys, the large consolidators, get burned now and then.

**THE PROCESS.** You need to assemble a team of professionals to assist you in any transaction. First, you need a good attorney, who specializes in such matters. This person should review correspondence; contracts; non-compete, confidentiality and non-disclosure documents; to name a few.

Second, you need a certified public accountant (CPA) who is familiar with buying and selling companies. He or she will evaluate the tax and financial implications of a deal. A business broker may also be involved but beware, such a broker is often a real estate broker who "brokers" businesses – any business.

Green industry businesses have their unique aspects and a generic evaluation approach can be detrimental. You may want to involve a consultant who is familiar with such deals within the green industry. While not a broker, this person can coach you through the M.A.D. process.

**PLACING A VALUE.** Once you have your team assembled and have identified a potential M.A.D. target, you then need to evaluate the target business. There are basically two models commonly used for doing so. I evaluate a company or book of business using two models when determining value. This value is what is commonly called "blue sky" or "goodwill" and it excludes hard assets such as equipment, inventory and real estate.

Combining the two provides a larger perspective or "value parameters," so to speak. You could call it a value range or grid.

While value, like beauty, may be somewhat in the eye of the beholder, there are limits. FMV is what a willing buyer will pay a willing seller in a free market. How much a willing buyer will pay is often anybody's guess.

On the other hand, evaluation models, trends and industry benchmarks can be helpful, but they must be considered within the greater context of what motivates the buyer or seller to pursue such a deal.

Without doing so, you could miss an opportunity or leave a lot of cash on the table.

**GPM MODEL.** Many buyers are willing to pay one year's worth of gross profit for a book of maintenance or service business. To see the formula for GPM visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and search "Huston GPM."

**THE EBIDTA MODEL.** EBIDTA is an acronym for earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization. This model is generally used for larger, multi-million dollar deals and/or public stock offerings.

Except for highly profitable companies, ones with net profit margins (NPM) exceeding 15 percent, the EBIDTA evaluation results are very similar to the GPM model.

To see Huston's benchmark evaluation chart, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and search "Huston benchmark."



**HOW IT WORKS.** So, remember my client from the beginning of this column. Think about this deal. Even if a buyer pays \$1 million as a down payment, and the seller finances the remaining \$1 million for ten years at 10 percent interest, the interest payment wipes out the entire net profit margin for ten years.

There's nothing left to pay off the principal. This deal simply will not work. This is not Monopoly. There are parameters for these deals.

A highly profitable maintenance company (NPM over 20 percent for many years) with annual revenues exceeding \$7 million, calculated a value for his business of about \$2.45 million using the GPM model.

I recommended that he and his CPA use the EBIDTA method. Using it, the value calculated to be roughly \$5 million, double the GPM amount. In the final analysis, he used the EBIDTA model and sold his business for over \$5 million.

**CONCLUSION.** As Trump says, determining value is as much art as it is mathematics. You must do your homework – due diligence – but don't get lost in the numbers. Value is determined as much by the buyer or seller's motivation to do a deal as it is by the numbers.

Remember, before you attempt to do a deal, assemble a M.A.D. team that will provide essential counsel regarding any transaction. Going M.A.D. can be a tool to help you grow.

Or, if pursued rashly, it can result in a "shotgun wedding" where you spend what seems like an eternity with Roseanne Barr as a mother-in-law. I wouldn't wish that on anybody. **L&L**



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## Tactful termination

**E**mployee terminations generate a lot of questions asked of me every month. Fears of discrimination, wrongful termination and retaliation weigh so heavily on landscapers that I have compiled some thoughts on what to consider before terminating an employee. This article outlines the fundamental process for conducting an employee termination fairly, correctly and consistently.

**MEETING PREPARATION.** Prior to the termination meeting, make sure the facts (e.g., details, witnesses, policies) of the disciplinary investigation have been collected, reviewed and interpreted objectively. Beyond that premise, employee terminations should never be conducted one-on-one.

Always have another person (e.g., human resources, account manager, branch manager) present as a witness should

legal action occur. The person conducting the meeting must have all administrative documents (e.g., termination form, final paycheck, termination checklist) well organized to keep the meeting efficient. Ideally, the entire termination meeting should last less than 20 minutes.

**THE DECISION.** The meeting should be conducted in a secluded area, away from other employees or distractions.

Upon employee arrival, the person conducting the meeting must explain the precise purpose of the session, remain calm and confident and show appropriate eye contact to the employee. In general, the less this person says, the better the result will be.

Terminations typically occur for one of two reasons: A chronic performance problem or a major policy violation.

If the termination is due to a chronic performance problem, the following fundamental script

should be used as an outline to follow:

- "As you know, you and I have had several meetings over the past several weeks/months to discuss your performance-related issues (e.g., interpersonal skills, accuracy of work, not wearing PPE). Despite that documented coaching, your performance has not improved to the required level of your position and is having an impact on company operations. Due to that fact, today will be your last day of employment with this company."

If the termination is due to a major policy violation, the following fundamental script should be used as an outline:

- "An investigation has provided us with evidence that you violated company policy (e.g., sexual harassment, alcohol use, timecard fraud) on (specify date). As stated in the employee handbook that you signed on (specify date), that policy violation has the consequence of employee termination. Due to that fact, today will be your last day of employment with this company."

**EMPLOYEE RESPONSE.** Once the decision has been conveyed, the person conducting the meeting and the witness should be prepared for any possible response from the employee (e.g., swearing, verbal attack, crying).

Regardless of the response, let the employee vent, express shock, or ask questions, all the while remaining calm no matter what the employee says. While stressful to the person conducting the meeting, this decision is potentially catastrophic for the employee (e.g., lack of income, pride, future employment). The person conducting the meeting must not respond emotionally to the employee or be led onto a tangential topic.

Stay focused only on the meeting purpose. When in

doubt, the person conducting the meeting must remain quiet. When challenged he/she should simply restate the evidence and the decision. Any misstatement will be documented by the employee, which could lead to a wrongful termination claim.

### ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESS.

After the responses have occurred, the person conducting the meeting must introduce the administrative process: (a) request all company materials from the employee (e.g., keys, cell phone, files, tools); (b) present relevant documents (e.g., paychecks, COBRA, 401(k) information) to the employee and (c) have the employee sign a termination form acknowledging administrative details.

Regardless of whether the terminated employee consents, refuses or continues to respond (e.g., explanation, victimization, sarcasm), the person conducting the meeting must maintain poise at all times.

**EXIT.** As the meeting approaches closure, the person conducting the meeting should state "I wish you the best as you continue in your career." The person conducting the meeting must then escort the employee to retrieve any personal belongings or to the exit. Under no circumstances should the terminated employee be left unattended.

Once the terminated employee has left the premises, the person conducting the meeting and the witness should debrief the event, documenting any noteworthy comments, responses, and/or actions. Finally, all documentation should be filed in the employee's personnel folder.

**SUMMARY.** Employee terminations are difficult and risky events. While no process is perfect, this outline will improve the company's procedural efficiency, legal protection and professional consistency. **L&L**

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{ By Kristen Hampshire }

## Morning zoo

Professional Grounds have procedures in place to get crews out the door before the hectic D.C. morning commute.

**P**rofessional Grounds is located in a sweet spot of the greater Washington, D.C., area. Its modest property, little more than an acre in size, is about 12 miles from the capitol and situated along Interstate 95, a main traffic artery.

"A lot of our competition is further out, so we have a niche here close in," says Bill Trimmer, president of the Springfield, Va.-based company, which he co-founded in 1974 as a maintenance firm. In 1992, the company added a landscape division, and gradually the company has grown from a start-up to 100 employees and \$6 million in annual revenues.

"Other companies are within a 20 to 25 mile radius of the city, so to come in and do this work during the day, it could take them an hour to get to jobs we can drive to in 10 minutes."

Location is a big deal when traffic can kill drive-time productivity. And efficient operations are critical for making the most of precious morning time, when a 5-minute slow-down at the shop can mean an extra hour on the road.

That's why over the years, Professional Grounds has implemented efficiency measures to make the most of its small parking space, perfectly time the morning rush out of the shop and manage precious labor hours, which are one of the biggest expenses for a landscape company.

"Labor is everything if you are doing maintenance work," Trimmer says.

Find out more about the internal workings of Professional Grounds by visiting [www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters) where you can sign up for the A Cut Above newsletter.



An efficient roll out keeps the company's team on point and means better customer service.

**THE MORNING RUSH.** A sign posted on the gate lets crews know if I-95 is a logjam. It's a simple system: The board says I-95, and a "no" or "yes" sign below it instructs crews to take the interstate or local roads.

And as soon as crews arrive at work, they unlock their assigned truck (labeled with an "M" for maintenance, a number and the driver's name), start the engine and head out of the gate. All of the preparation, including gassing up the truck and all equipment on-site, is completed the night before. "Crews are expected to be loaded up and ready to go in the morning, so all they need to do is get in the truck and leave," Trimmer says. "It's so important for us to get on the road early here because of traffic problems."

## MASTERING THE MARKET

**B**ill Trimmer says, "We don't make excuses here." He's talking about the economy in the greater Washington, D.C., area, where his business Professional Grounds is based. "We feel that people have to spend money regardless of the economy, especially in this area, we just have to educate them," he says.

Trimmer admits that the D.C. region is less volatile than the rest of the country. With federal jobs aplenty, the "recession" looked different in his area. In fact, business continued to thrive and people were still buying.

"This economy in this area has been good to us," he says.

That's not to say Professional Grounds has continued on automatic pilot. The company is constantly tweaking its marketing efforts, tapping into technology, embracing social media and implementing systems like charging a \$50 design consultation fee.

"Two years ago when we did take a hit in design/build work, Melissa [our marketing director] had the idea that we should start charging a \$50 design consultation fee," Trimmer says. "Initially, we thought, 'In this economy, you think you can charge people for an estimate?' But it's the best thing we ever did."

Professional Grounds doesn't get as many leads this way. But design/build sales closing ratios shot up. "And we are a lot better off because of it," Trimmer says.

That's because those customers willing to pay the \$50 fee are serious about doing business with Professional Grounds and moving forward on a project. The company waives the fee for referrals and customers that find Professional Grounds through Angie's List, which is another beneficial marketing tool for the company that has brought business to the door.



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{ By Lindsey Getz }

## BEST PRACTICES IRRIGATION

# Watering lessons

A successful sustainable landscape involves the right irrigation as well as the right plants.



**F**ran Lambert got her start in tree conservation, but this certified arborist is also a certified landscape irrigation auditor and certified water manager.

She also helps her clients at Mariposa Landscape & Tree Service create sustainable landscapes. Lambert says a beautiful and sustainable project comes down to customer education, and offers the following tips to create successful sustainable landscapes.

**THINK AHEAD.** As an arborist, Lambert is trained to think of trees on a long-term basis – not just a year, but decades. Lambert says this is a great way to think of landscaping as well – plan for a sustainable landscape that will still look beautiful in the years to come. “I urge landscapers not to look at the landscape for today but to think about what it will look like in five or 10 years from now – then plan accordingly from the beginning,” she says.

“Then you truly get the client a return on their investment. Teach them what it will take to sustain this landscape for the long-haul and you’ll sell them on it because it’s protecting their future property value.”

**LEARN SMART CONTROLLERS.** Lambert says she typically can save a tree most effectively with the use of a smart controller, and she’d encourage those landscapers who haven’t learned about them to get educated.

She believes they’re the way of the near future. “I do believe there are many people in the industry who still haven’t taken the time to really learn how smart controllers work,” she says. “I’ve seen them go into a system and not be operated properly, and that’s unfortunate because it gives the controller a bad name when it was really the operator. You do need to know what you’re doing before you use them.”

**FIX THE SYSTEM FIRST.** On the same token, Lambert says she’s seen smart controllers installed on broken irrigation systems. “You’re not going to get the full benefit of the controller,” she says. “Right now we still have rebates in California for smart controllers so there’s a lot of interest, but people need to realize that you cannot make up for an inefficient system simply by installing a smart controller. Landscapers need to make the commitment to get educated and go to classes that are available through vendors or manufacturers. Then they should teach their crews and send them to classes as well.”

Read more about how Lambert is educating customers these days and sign up for our Water Works e-newsletters at [www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters).



## CONNECTED TO THE LAND

**I**n Southern California, water conservation is of increasing importance as the area faces a strain on its imported water supply. “We have an increasing population and that’s made it even more important to focus on saving water,” Lambert says. “Water is going to get scarcer and more expensive as time goes on, so we need to learn now how to conserve better and how to live with less water.”

Lambert says that trees are really a good value for the amount of water they use. “Trees give you a lot of plant material for the comparatively small amount of water they actually use,” she says. “They are incredibly efficient at water use, and you can get a great deal of landscape benefit if you make trees your top priority.”

Her appreciation for water’s importance began as a child, says Lambert, whose father was a civil engineer for the county of San Diego. He worked on a lot of projects that dealt with water and Lambert credits him for her understanding of water’s value. Having grown up in the region, she says she’s also developed an appreciation for the native plants that live and grow naturally in her area. “I’ve spent my whole life hiking around the local mountains and deserts and have developed a sense of how important our water supply is, that’s always stuck with me,” she says. “That’s why I believe that re-landscaping and using more trees or native plants that don’t consume as much water makes sense. You can still have a pleasing landscape with a variety of water-wise plant life. It’s not really a sacrifice.”

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# BEST PRACTICES DESIGN BUILD



## Betting on supply-side economics

Dave Stracka launched a landscape center in a bad economy, and is ready to reap the benefits.

Sure, launching a landscape center in a tough economy is risky – betting the farm on the success of a startup when, in general, business is declining takes entrepreneurial guts. But Dave Stracka, owner of D.S. Enterprises Lawn & Landscaping in Rockford, Ill., figured last year was prime time to begin building a new operation.

“The price was right because of the economy,” he says of the 7-acre property he had been eyeing for a few years before purchasing it in December 2010. “People wonder, ‘Why would someone start a business in a bad economy’ and, well, things are cheaper, so that helps.”

And Stracka had a strong feeling that his landscape center would appeal to other contractors who spent significant windshield time driving from one supplier to the next to gather nursery stock, hard-scape materials, equipment parts and everything else required for a design/build or maintenance firm. In fact, it was during one of Stracka’s materials runs that he got the

idea for Cherry Valley Landscape Center, which opened its doors in spring 2011.

“After about a dozen stops at different places, I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if there was one place to go to get all of our materials and equipment and service?’” says Stracka, who has run his design/build firm for 15 years.

“That’s when I came up with the idea to start a landscape center,” he continues.

There’s really no place to go to pick up all of the supplies a landscaper needs. “There are places to go to get plant material, and places to get stone and pavers and boulders ... but there is not one place where you can go and get everything,” Stracka says.

Basically, Stracka’s business model for Cherry Valley Landscape Center is to be all things for landscapers and homeowners who are look-



A one-stop shop helps Dave Stracka’s customers.

ing for an array of products and services but don’t want to spend the time sourcing products from multiple locations.

So Stracka built a business plan, remodeled the existing building on the property, added a service shop and began bringing in lines of equipment. He hired six more employees, adding to his staff of 12 that run the landscape design/build and maintenance crews. And since opening Cherry Valley, he has discovered that the two businesses feed each other and the visibility of Cherry Valley’s location puts D.S. Enterprises in the spotlight. Plus, with a collection of snow equipment for sale that takes the business through winter, the operation is viable year-round. “People don’t forget about us over the winter,” Stracka says.

Continue reading how Stracka has grown his design/build company by starting a supply center at [www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters). While there, you can sign up for the Business Builder e-newsletter.



## STARTING UP SMART

Dave Stracka, president, D.S. Enterprises Lawn & Landscaping and Cherry Valley Landscape Center shares his tips for growing a business in tough times – or any time, for that matter.

**1.** Keep credit shiny. When opportunity knocks, the bank will back you if your credit is squeaky clean. Otherwise, good luck. “I don’t think a lot of business owners understand how important credit is,” Stracka says. “If you want to grow your business, you have to have good credit because there will be a time when you need equipment or materials for a big job.” No credit, no sale – no work.

**2.** Charge premium prices. Customers who value quality are willing to pay for it, that’s what Stracka has found. So he doesn’t play in the price-cutter arena. Instead, he focuses on working harder and doing the best job possible. “And, we watch our overhead expenses, of course,” he adds.

**3.** Take measurable risks. Without risk there is no gain. But Stracka didn’t go into his landscape center plan blindly. He knew he’d have a market advantage because there was no competition in the area with his one-stop-shop model.

**4.** Think like your customer. For Stracka, figuring out what customers would want from a landscape center was easy. He had been a customer of a good dozen for 15 years as a landscape professional. So when he began to play on the supplier side, he focused on what he knew was important to him and fellow landscapers: variety, quality, fast service and reliability.



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# Focused service

Tiedeman grew its profit by decreasing services and becoming a niche company.

**W**hen Troy Tiedeman launched Tiedeman LLC in Clare, Mich., in 2001, his goal from the start was to keep it small and focused. His goal with a niche market was to provide better customer service and earn higher profit margins.

"I'm a firm, firm believer in specializing, because it allows you to compete with the national companies on both service and price," he says. "You have systems in place, you're faster and you know more about the area, so you can respond quickly."

Given this core philosophy, it made sense when Tiedeman dropped his landscape maintenance and installation services over the past

few years to focus on pest management. After all, he'd always earned 60 percent of his revenues from this area, with the rest coming from maintenance, installation and snow removal.

And although this momentous decision was in keeping with Tiedeman's approach, he still endured several grueling seasons of headaches and scheduling nightmares before he was ready to pull the switch.

"We made it through one installation this spring – an absolute killer because we lost money when our supplier fell through – and I finally said enough," he says.

But today, Tiedeman has a lot fewer headaches – and



Troy Tiedeman focused his services to better connect with customers.

higher profit margins. Not bad for a small company with three full-time employees and \$200,000 in annual revenues. Through it all, Tiedeman attributes his success to keeping a strategic focus.

"Overall, the margins are higher in a specialized industry," he says. "There are more stringent requirements and you have to be licensed, which means less competition."

Like others, Tiedeman got started in as a young man, mowing his neighbors' yards for extra money. He soon found that he enjoyed work-

ing with customers and had a natural affinity for the lawn care business. So he started asking family members if they knew anyone that needed help with their turf.

And though Tiedeman now faces competition from larger, national companies that also provide pest management services, he's not worried about it. "Smaller companies can compete by specializing," he says. "There are so many acquisitions that are happening right now, but the big companies try to do everything and spread themselves too thin." **L&L**

Read how Tiedeman shifted its marketing when it became a pest-management-only company and sign up for the Growing Green e-newsletter at [www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters).



## SELL ATTENTION AND DETAIL

**T**he key to building a great pest management company is to cultivate a small group of clients and nurture them with attentive, personal service, says Tiedeman.

That may sound counterintuitive, Tiedeman admits. Yet he argues that his company not only provides better service this way – his residential customers are willing to pay more, too.

"By running a smaller company with a limited number of clients, I can give them a lot more attention," he says. "If a problem arises, I can be there the next day to treat it."

Although Tiedeman says he typically charges 5-10 percent more than larger, national companies for pest management services, he has not lost customers due to pricing.

On the contrary, some new customers have actually switched from larger companies to Tiedeman because they recognize that his firm offers better service.

One of the problems with other companies, says Tiedeman, is that they often take 4-6 weeks between applications at a given property. Serious problems can crop up during that time, and by the time these firms get around to treating it, it may be too late.

"My costs may be a little bit higher, but I can be there more often," he says. To market his company, Tiedeman has tapped into what he says is customers' increased interest in both buying local and supporting small businesses. "What it comes down to is that if you give clients personal attention, they'll stay with you."

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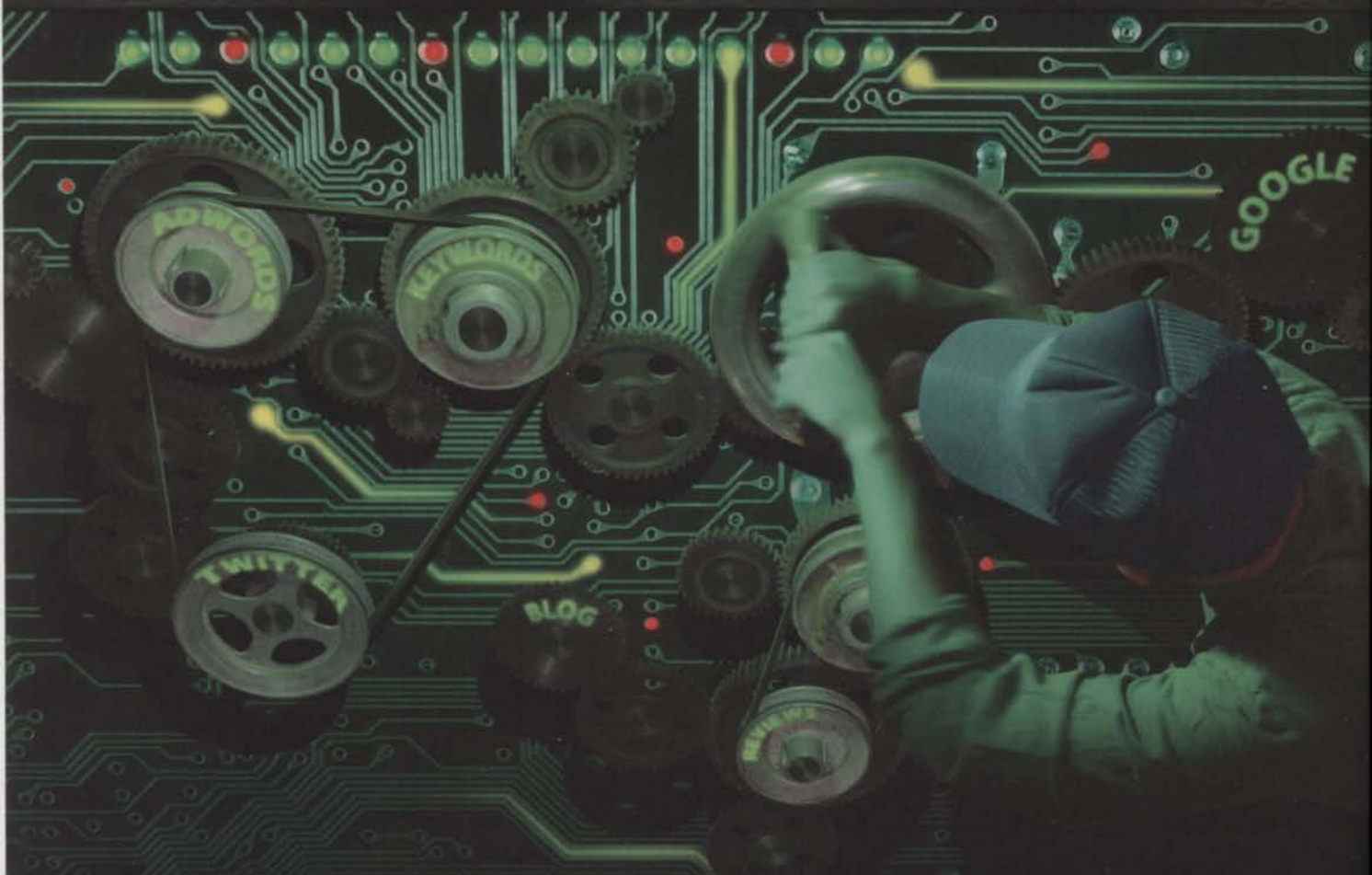


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By Cami Clarke

# DIY SEO





**T**hese days, saying “we’re out there somewhere” isn’t enough. A web presence is as important to your bottom line as your physical presence in the community. Your website not only showcases what your business is about online, but also has the ability to perform for you 24/7.

An investment in your digital presence is important, but how do you get that hard work in front of your customers and prospects? A site that is search engine optimized shows up high in search engine results pages. If people have never heard about your business, they

won’t trust you. Same thing online: If Google has never “heard” about your website, Google will think it’s not relevant and won’t make it findable in search engine results pages. How often do you look past the first page of results when you search?

To help get you to the top of the heap, we’ve put together a clear, ready-made three-month plan that you can implement yourself. But keep in mind that search engine optimization is just one part of an integrated marketing plan (along with social media, marketing and networking) that will drive traffic, leads and sales.

**THIS WEEK**



**1. Link with your partners.** Get quality websites, related to your industry only, to link to your website. The easy way to do this is by having a web page where you list all the websites of partners you work with – think associations you’re a part of, chambers of commerce, the Better Business Bureau and other reputable companies you’ve done business with. Then, ask them to link back to your website. This establishes relevance and trust with search engines.

**2. Register with local directories.** When someone searches for “lawn care services,” under the paid ads, search engine results show local results by recognizing your computer’s IP address (where you are physically located). To be in those local results, submit your website to Google Places, Yahoo Local and Bing Local. Also submit your website to social networks for local businesses: Merchant Circle, Patch, Yellow Pages, CitySearch, Local.com, Yelp.com. On these websites, you can create a profile page of your company and include logo and website and why customers should use your services. Your business can appear high in search results with the profile page you create because these websites already have lots of web traffic and an established web presence.

**3. Start a Google Analytics account.** This is a free tool to know who clicks on your website, who your customers are, where they are located and what areas you need to concentrate on to reach more customers. You can also see how your website performs online and how much traffic you get from search engines.

**1. Get social.** Many times when you search something you see first the Facebook page of a business instead of that business’s website. That’s because Facebook and other social networks have web presence. So use Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, Google+ and other social networks on a regular basis.

**2. Set up a blog (and use it).**

A blog does no good if your last post was from six months ago. Post regularly and offer to write guest posts on other blogs in the industry. Most important, connect your website to your blog and to all the social network pages you create.

**3. Get your homepage in order.** Your homepage should have a clear and brief call to action telling the visitors what you can offer. This page needs to have a headline, a call to action, contact information and a logo. You have about 7 seconds to grab the viewer’s attention and convince them to keep clicking.

**4. Update other pages on your site.** Search engines love new, relevant content. Educate visitors on your main site about your business and services, your role in the community or any current promotions. Don’t forget to include pictures.

**THIS MONTH**





**1. Optimize your pages with keywords.** Pick a keyword or two for each webpage and include those keywords within that page. A page talking about landscape design should have "landscape design" in the URL (e.g.: [www.yourcompanyname.com/landscape-design](http://www.yourcompanyname.com/landscape-design)). Use this formula: headline, sub-headline, body text.

**2. Review your metatags.** A metatag is a line of code in the background of a webpage. Search engines look at the metatags to learn about the webpage and provide users with a specific search experience. They're used in the description you see on the results page after you do a search. It's important to have accurate metatags because they're the keys to get a high position in search results. **L&L**

Turn to page 44 for case studies of three landscapers who have found success with solid SEO.



The author is an SEO associate for Lawn & Landscape.

## THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

We got the head of home services at Google to reveal how the search giant works with contractors. Here's his advice for landscapers looking to rank high. By Drew Mitchell



The way consumers shop for home services – not just what they search – presents an opportunity for landscape professionals in the years ahead.

Here are five ways Just like in other industries, Google has a team dedicated to helping landscape operators make the web work for them. From ads to mobile, it is increasingly important for service providers to utilize the web to win moments that matter by connecting with homeowners online. With the busy lawn and landscape season underway, we thought it would be helpful to share five tips to help you win customers and grow your business online.

**Be found.** When it comes to understanding what your customers are doing online, lawn care operators can do themselves a favor by putting their business in the direct line of a customer's vision. That means "being there" and visible on the web.

Consumer numbers support a multi-pronged approach. Since 2007, there has been a 180% increase in the number of gardening and landscape related searches on Google with homeowners looking to buy services earlier every year. With this year's early spring, consumers went online as early as January to research lawn and landscape solutions. That's why it's important to have an "always on" search presence, even during your perceived "off" season.

**Be mobile.** It is increasingly clear that the home services business is quickly becoming a mobile-first industry – simply because the nature of the business is conducive for people searching on the go. In the past four months, almost 40% of all landscape-related searches on Google came from a mobile device versus half of that (21%) during the same

period last year. At some point, we'll see more searches on mobile than other platforms.

**Be local.** The growth of mobile means that consumers are looking for local solutions. One in three searches on Google from mobile devices are of local intent and 51% have called a business after searching on a smartphone<sup>1</sup>. That makes local ad tools even more critical as operators can target nearby customers more carefully. All season long, operators can target their marketing by location – where the customers are located – and hone in on a particular ZIP code, community or even neighborhood. When homeowners search for "spring clean up," landscape professionals can engage with a specific set of customers in a particular area with a customized offer or ad.

**Be social.** While getting involved with social media is not a new tip for landscapers, our team at Google continues to stress that it's crucial in today's marketplace – and something that needs to evolve over time. The most effective social activities aren't ones that simply announce deals or offerings, but engage with customers.

While social media may be daunting to independent operators, landscape firms should start with what they know, and then work toward other platforms. Running cable TV spots? Then video is a natural transition. Homeowners are also watching videos to understand their lawn and landscape issues. The number of landscape-related searches on YouTube have increased 66% since 2009. Plus, YouTube is a wealth of "how to" info with 1 out of every 5 videos on YouTube being "how to" related.<sup>2</sup> We are seeing consumers not only watching "how to" videos, but also sharing them through Twitter and Facebook.

1 Our Mobile Planet: <http://bit.ly/LLlocal>

2 Source: YouTube Report 2010 Edition

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# Moving On Up

Appeal to search engines to improve your ranking so customers can find you online.

**H**ave you Googled your company lately? Go ahead, type in the name of your business in a search engine – Google, Yahoo, Bing, Ask, AOL, pick one. Now, start counting the results until you find your own. How many pages have you scrolled down already? If you were a customer, would you spend time sifting through the “about 36,800,000” results that Google found with the search “landscape company?”

In today’s world, where the Internet seems to have all the answers, your prospects are pulling up a web browser to shop for services. Where your name falls on the list impacts their buying decisions. A 2011 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 47 percent of adult Internet users go online to research local businesses and services other than restaurants and eateries. Of these users, 36 percent rely on search engines to find the services they need.

What are you doing to make sure your business gets found online?

This month, *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with three firms that are focusing on search engine optimization (SEO) to improve their Internet search rankings.

## Raising the ranks

### RYCO Landscaping

Colin Taheny, vice president of sales **LOCATION** Lake in The Hills, Ill. **ESTABLISHED** 1996 **EMPLOYEES** about 100 **2011 REVENUES** less than \$10 million **CUSTOMERS** 50% residential; 50% commercial **SERVICES** landscape maintenance, design/build, irrigation and snow services

**T**here’s no exact formula for SEO – no recipe, no steps 1-20 to get your site pushed to the top of search engine results. There’s no boilerplate keyword list for landscapers, though most can guess what potential customer will type into the Google search bar.

Colin Taheny sees SEO as a sort of buffet of online media. Every bit of content matters: blogs, social media, press releases, online reviews. And all of the information is intertwined, delivering a common message about RYCO’s mission and services.

“It’s not like you can spend \$10,000

on a website and you’re done,” Taheny says. “It’s a chess game.” SEO requires many moves, and Taheny recognizes that incorporating keywords into company website text is one strategy. “From a business perspective, it’s all about exposing yourself,” he says, adding that tweeting, blogging and posting Facebook updates work together to build brand awareness.

Then, when a prospect Googles a landscaper, RYCO’s name is top of mind – at



Taheny

least, that’s the plan. “A lot of times, people find us on search engines by typing in RYCO,” Taheny says. So many people are more specific in their searches than merely typing in “landscaper” or “cutting grass.” A lot more people, in fact. Taheny says that 80 percent of his sales at RYCO are based on someone typing the company name into a search engine.

The key to triggering a name search rather than a keyword search is consistent company promotion, Taheny says. And so some of the team at RYCO helps with updating social media sites and blogging. An outside expert assists with the company’s Twitter site and regularly tweets, and provides direction on SEO across the board.

The quest for SEO can seem like reaching into a bottomless pit budget-wise. So RYCO controls the cost by



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dedicating modest funds on a consistent basis.

"Spending little chunks of money consistently seems to be the name of the game versus spending a lot of money at one time and then letting (your activity) drop off," Taheny says.

The real take-away from RYCO in the since the company has focused on SEO, is that you can't rely on a website alone, and you've got to do *something* to up your search engine rankings. "The biggest mistake companies make is doing nothing at all," Taheny says.

### QUICK TIPS

**Be consistent.** "You have to make the commitment to SEO then stick with it," Taheny says, noting that it's important to delegate web posting responsibilities so team members understand who's responsible for what. It's a complete company-wide effort.

**Cultivate key words.** As you consider key words to build into Web content, put yourself in the place of the customer. How would you spell your company name (include frequent misspellings and nicknames). What words would you type in to find services like yours?

**Diversify your presence.** Beyond your website, what content is being generated about your business? Online reviews can win top search engine rankings. (What are people saying about your business?) Sites like LinkedIn and Twitter also rank high. "You want take part in multiple online activities," Taheny says. SEO isn't a one-shot deal.

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## Better positioning, guaranteed

### Wabeke Lawn Service and Snow Plowing

Michael Hoeksema, owner **LOCATION** Hudsonville, Mich. **ESTABLISHED** 1968 **EMPLOYEES** less than 30 **2011 CUSTOMERS** 70% residential; 30% commercial **SERVICES** landscape maintenance, design/build, snow services

About five years ago, Michael Hoeksema noticed a downturn in his returns on print marketing efforts. What worked before, including Yellow Pages and ads, was no longer bringing in the sales leads he expected for his investment.

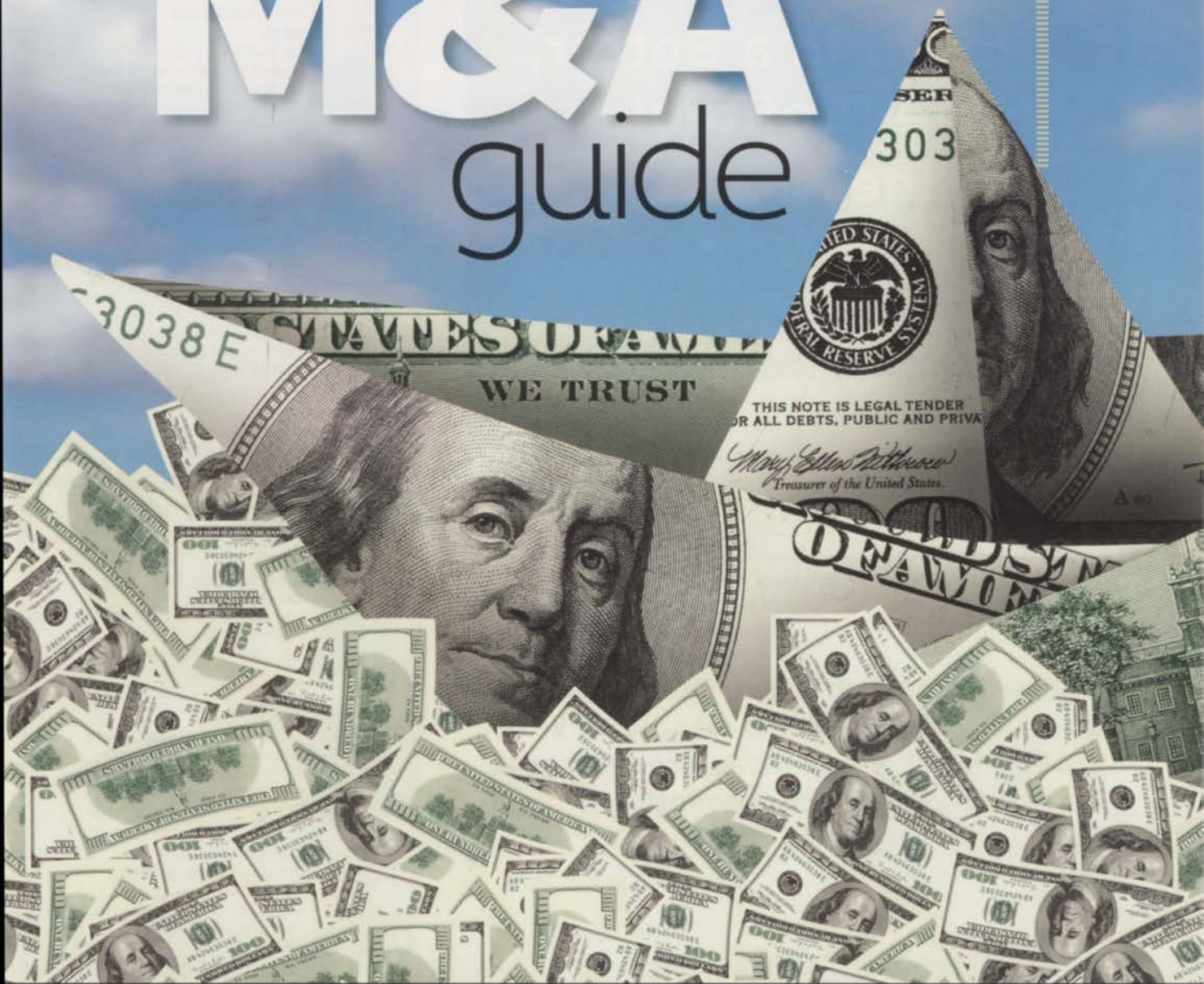
"Today's technology world has shifted, and now positioning on Internet searches is the most critical aspect," says Hoeksema, president of Wabeke Lawn Service and Snow Plowing in Hudsonville, Mich.

So Hoeksema invested in a website redesign and focused on plugging in more keywords to trigger better search

2012

Grow your business (or your bank account) with the latest news and advice on mergers and acquisitions in the landscape industry.

# M&A guide



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# Decisions, decisions

Is 2012 the time for you to make a strategic purchase (or sale)? Read on to find out.

**T**he right acquisition can strengthen your landscape company and help buoy it through a still-stormy economy. And a well-timed sale can position you for future success in another arena. We caught up with owners from around the country who have recently closed successful purchases to ask them how – and why – they did it. Read on to see if a purchase (or sale) is right for you.

**DO I OR DON'T I?** Whatever side of the table you're sitting on, you're likely to have a lot of questions: What are the benefits? How did the transaction process unfold? What all did the participants get out of the deal?

These were just some of the questions Kris Ashby, owner of Elite Landscaping in Pleasant Grove, Utah, began asking himself before his very first transactions in 1999 and 2003.

"I sold my company to a larger one back, then bought back their maintenance division a few years later," he says. "Through the years, I've looked at plenty of options which I thought might help my business grow. But that process really helps you identify what your needs are.

Ashby recently purchased Spectrum Landscaping in the Park City, Utah, area. But it had little to do with the fact that he was good friends with the former owner and more to do with how he felt the company identities were as complimentary as the geographic areas were different.

"I bought at the backside of our mountain range with some thought that (residents there) didn't think folks from the front side of the mountains could service their needs correctly," Ashby says.

Spectrum Landscaping now has 10 full-time employees; Ashby works out of a Park City office two days a week. With an eye on market share, "acquisitions make sense for harder markets to break into," Ashby added. When asked about the economic impact, he adds, "I can tell you it has paid off big time. I'm glad I did it. It has made a big difference in our business."

**"If you've done your homework, you usually find out way before the contract stage if they're a compatible fit or not."**

– Dean Burhoe, *The Yard Group*



**ALL NATURAL.** Dean Burhoe, principal and COO of Connecticut-based Burhoe Landscaping & Yard Service – now part of the Yard Group through a partnership acquisition – agreed that doing all of the legwork to see what a company is buying into can bring growth and stabilization in a difficult economy.

Growth opportunities can be difficult if you're starting from scratch with expanding existing business or growing new offerings on your own, he says. Acquisitions offer a lot in a deal: more customers, new territory, new markets, and reduced competition are often among the benefits.

"Acquisition is great to expand the customer base, fortify your operations and sell your services to a wider range of clients," Burhoe says. "Any com-

**"Your first acquisition is a bit like having kids. After that first one you're going to be so much smarter going into the next one."**

– Jeremy Durgan, Green Earth Landscape Services

pany brings with it a new customer base. Growth and stabilization is not going to come from status quo."

"Growing a business when the good, old-fashioned marketing route isn't working, and there's limited cash flow to aim at your existing customer base – when it may not necessarily spend any more with you than they are already-marketing not working – well, that's a great way to acquire new footholds in the marketplace."

"There are always transition issues," Burhoe says. "Always personality differences, slightly different business

cultures and business philosophies to sync up, but if you've done your homework, you usually find out way before the contract stage if they're a compatible fit or not."

**BEREADY FOR A ROLLERCOASTER.** Jeremy Durgan, co-owner of Green Earth Landscape Services in the Florida panhandle has been a part of a number of acquisitions, recently acquiring the LandOpt license rights for the Santa Rosa market.

Broadening the customer base was the goal, but the assimilation of cultures helped with ease of operations at other Green Earth locations because their processes and systems were identical.

"What I've gotten out of (acquisitions) is experienced knowledge," he says. "It really is priceless information and there's really no book you can buy to do this sort of thing."

To a first-time buyer or seller, the amount of information can be "over-



whelming" according to Durgan.

"And it's overwhelming because of the number of ways it can be done – the codes, tax laws and rules are endless but so are the possibilities," he says. "And the ways it can be done are, too."

Durgan says that he and Green Earth worked through a \$2.5 million transaction and "quickly realized that for what needs to be done, it is sometimes more complicated to get one of those deals done than a \$100 million deal."

Durgan advises other potential buyers and sellers to wear a seatbelt and safety harness when they're ready to negotiate.

"It can be a real rollercoaster ride from

day one to the end, with plenty of ups and downs unless you have *every last dime of cash* ready to pay out," he says.

"Financing makes it more difficult, as do tax laws – there is a lot of tax law to know – but it is definitely worthwhile. ... My advice is to make sure you have a very smart accountant and a great business attorney to help you through the process and make it work so you don't get killed financially. Your first acquisition is a bit like having kids," Durgan says. "After that first one you're going to be so much smarter going into the next one."

**ONE-ON-ONE CONNECTION.** Ashby says the key for successful purchases has been a consistent team, and clear communication with the seller. "With each one of the purchases I've done, I've used same attorney for the transaction so he understands me, my history and that level of comfort between us is there. It might cost a little more that way, but it's so worth it."

"With the last purchase, it took us about six months to get it all together. That first two months was just really feeling the owner out about why he was selling," Ashby says.

"I wanted to know how it would affect the price, the future of the organization... talking every day for two months leading into the purchase helped immensely with putting the deal and contract together. You want to make sure someone is selling for the right reasons and that there's not trouble brewing behind it – financial difficulties and so on."

Ashby says it's just as important to get familiar with the company history as that "informal personal connection" is when you're buying.

"It takes a little while before people start opening up to you when you're buying," he says. "And they're not going to come out and tell you they're in trouble (financially), so building trust is essential."

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

# Cash and carry

We shed some light on the inner workings of private equity investment. It's not just for the big guys anymore. By Chuck Bowen

As banks are still reining in their credit for small businesses, many landscapers are left out in the cold when it comes to finding a source for investment capital. An area that should appeal to contractors is private equity. PE investment, no longer the provenance of the largest companies in the industry, has become a growing source of cash for firms looking to take advantage of their market conditions and expand. To help contractors learn more about how this segment works – and what they could expect – Lawn & Landscape caught up with three firms that are (or were) invested in the green industry. Read on to find out what they look for in an investment, how the process works and what you stand to gain.



**Thomas Horner, partner**  
Brighton Partners  
HEADQUARTERS: Atlanta  
CURRENT GREEN  
INDUSTRY INVESTMENT:  
\$1.5 million in Lawn Dawg  
INVESTED SINCE: 2009

**What attracted you to this industry?** To date, our focus has been primarily on lawn care. Unlike a maintenance business where service is scheduled every 7 to 14 days, lawn care applications are made every 30 to 40 days. The extended amount of time between scheduled customer applications allows lawn care businesses to be more efficient with respect to its fixed assets and people. Another favorable attribute of lawn care is that most of the revenue is recurring in nature. We see opportunity in market fragmentation.

**Describe the process of investing in a landscape company. How does it work?** We look closely at revenue trends,

revenue type, revenue categories, gross margin, revenue per customer, sales and marketing expense per customer and EBITDA margin. Even if the numbers are “all there,” we won’t move forward on an opportunity unless we believe we’ll be able to work with the seller and/or management team going forward. Chemistry is just so important when you are talking about a partnership between a private equity firm and an owner/operator. A lot of the financial analysis can be done remotely, but you need face-to-face time with your prospective partner, discussing things like strategy, growth opportunities, past successes and failures, etc., to ultimately know whether it makes sense to move forward.

**What does a typical investment look like?**  
**What are the metrics you look for?** We make control equity investments and prefer to purchase assets as opposed to stock. We look closely at all financial and operating metrics, but don’t have

any hard-and-fast benchmarks in place. Sometimes it can be hard to compare one company to the next on metrics alone. Differences in programs and services offered to customers, geography, revenue type (residential versus commercial), etc. can all skew metrics. You have to look at the “whole picture.”

**What can a landscaper do to court private equity?** Make sure you have good information, particularly financial information. So many smaller companies we see don’t have audited or reviewed financial statements. It’s hard to get many private equity buyers to spend time evaluating a business without high quality historical financials. If you know you might explore a sale of your business in the next few years, we’d recommend going out and getting a review (or at least a compilation) sooner rather than later. Even two years of historical financials will lend a level of credibility to your business that will positively impact any process.



**Steve Sanglias, partner**  
**Progress Equity Partners**  
**HEADQUARTERS: Dallas**  
**CURRENT GREEN INDUSTRY**  
**INVESTMENT: \$3 million in**  
**Terracare Associates**  
**INVESTED SINCE: 2009**

**What attracted you to this industry?** We were attracted to it from the diversified maintenance aspect – the steady revenue every month. In 2009, many industries were falling even harder than those maintenance-related business. In 2011, we started to look a little more aggressively at making some tuck in acquisitions and purchased Cimmaron.

At Terracare, we do a lot of municipal work, and we're seeing that trend continue – municipalities are under financial strain and having to do more with less.

**Describe the process of investing in a landscape company. How does it work?** It's typical of any investment we'd make in any industry. We're investing only majority control. We'll get contacted by that source typically, and they'll have a package prepared that describes the business. That will lead to a group of players, one of which is us. That leads to further discussion and further meetings, then a letter of intent by both parties. That process takes 90 to 120 days.

**What does a typical investment look like? What are the metrics you look for?** The key for your readers is how prepared they are. If you have audited finances and really good records, the process goes smoothly. If everything's in a shoebox, it takes longer. The process is dictated by how well the company is prepared. The private equity groups can move as quickly as the owner wants to.

All the numbers matter, but most particularly for us is what the company does in operating profit. Also our proxy for cash flows, and that's what matters to lenders and our ROI. Then, what's the state of equipment, and what's the level of investment required to keep that EBITDA going.

That's what we call free cash flow, and that's the basis for all our investment decisions.

**What can a landscaper do to court private equity?** You can contact us directly, but I think there's a lot of value added to the process to hire some intermediary to help you orchestrate that process. It's a special process and they're at it. And have your administrative house in order, and have prior year audits. That's the biggest help.

**What attracted you to this industry?** Our interest was based on a few key factors. One is the strength of management. The depth and breadth of management's experience is critical. If you look at the different concepts the Dwyer Group has, these are things the homeowner wants to get repaired. The yard is going to grow and need maintenance, as opposed to closet customization. When you have people over to your house, they notice the landscaping. People know when they come to your house if they can't flush the toilet or the yard is overgrown. The franchise model in general is very scalable and helps entrepreneurs as well.



**Jeremy Holland,**  
**regional**  
**director of**  
**origination**

**Riverside**  
**HEADQUARTERS:**  
**Cleveland and New York**  
**CURRENT GREEN INDUSTRY**  
**INVESTMENT: none; previously**  
**invested an undisclosed amount**  
**in the Dwyer Group, parent**  
**company of the Grounds Guys**  
**from 2003 to 2010**

**What does a typical investment look like? What are the metrics you look for – revenue, retention rate, customer base, etc.?** We look at it in terms of profitability. In franchising world, we would start to look at concepts north of \$1 million of profitability. You could have a million of profitability and not have much scale, with the dynamic of franchising, to reach \$1 million in profitability you have a few hundred units. We also look at

if the concept or brand has traveled from one market to another. Some entrepreneurs are very successful in their home market ... but it's another thing to move into another market and be successful.

**Describe the process of investing in a landscape company. How does it work?** Our parameters are growth rate, profitability, brand assessment, number of employees, a lot of different financial parameters, as well as a market assessment – looking at how competitive that market is. Is there a concept or proprietary edge a company has? One could argue the ValleyCrest brand has an edge because it's recognized. People rely on the brand as a proxy for quality, so they would rely on that brand rather than try to assess the market for landscape services.

**What can a landscaper do to court private equity?** Typically the top few things we're going to look at is depth of management team, quality of systems – customer relationship management software, is it an organized, scalable business. Some of it will be brand, their receptivity to assistance, their size and if they're in multiple markets. Riverside has a strong preference to franchise concepts as opposed to 100 percent company owned. Typically, we're most known for control investments, and that's more about what we've promised our investors.

I would stress that they should check many reference prior to partnering. The best investors are proud of their track record and body of work and their references. Entrepreneurs have every right and a duty to check just as many references – if not more – as us.

# On the **block**

By Peter Chakerian

**Veterans and pros offer their advice for selling your company.**

**S**o you want to sell your business. Exit. Cash in.

It's a hard decision to make, but once you're ready, take a look at these tips from veteran landscapers who have been there and done that. They don't have all the answers, but their counsel can take a load off your worried mind.

"I think that far and away the biggest thing to remember, is that the person who is buying the company is trying to do so based on futures," says Kris Ashby,

owner of Elite Landscaping in Pleasant Grove, Utah. "Any seller is trying to sell based on its past, at the end of the day. When you *understand* the motives behind the reason for the sale, it helps in that critical negotiation process and in the pricing as well. Any entrepreneur worth their weight in salt is looking at *potential* – that is the biggest thing in pricing."

Ashby says he sold his first company in 1999 and "didn't even know" the



**"Any entrepreneur worth their weight in salt is looking at potential – that is the biggest thing in pricing."**

– Kris Ashby, Elite Landscaping



buyer prior to the deal.

"They (cold called) and asked if they could buy my company because they were expanding into maintenance," Ashby says. "We had many meetings over the course of this (courtship) and after listening to his story over one month period – probably four-to-six meetings – it seemed like there was enough stability there for me to seriously consider it."

In the end, Ashby sold. Stability was his biggest concern because of his existing customer base. "You never want to leave the people who trust you in the hands of someone you're not comfortable with because the odds are good you'll work in that market again."

When Ashby decided they were stable and not just out

for an old-fashioned "killing of the competition," he contacted his attorney and started negotiations in earnest. Contracts, after all, come second only to an initial comfort level with the buying and selling parties.

"What we look for when we're looking at acquisition opportunities of companies, there's a lot of that similar philosophy of business," says Dean Burhoe, principal and COO of Connecticut-based Burhoe Landscaping & Yard Service – now part of the Yard Group.

"What it comes down to is that business and service quality, along with comparative geographic pricing structures that are in line with continuity," Burhoe says. "People who are dedicated to work, and have a 'no

problem' attitude can offer any customer base a good flow and transition.

"Naturally, you want an attorney involved to walk you through all the ins and outs of any contract that is proposed, but before you even get there, there has to be management integrity, an ideally solid track record and brand name recognition.

"There are a lot of fly-by-night contractors who have a truck with a sticker on the side that calls him a landscaper," Burhoe laughs. "It takes a higher caliber person to hand your business off to – or expects someone to do likewise – where there's so much at stake. In that sense, it's all about people." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

engine results. Then, he started paying attention to the regular solicitations he was receiving from search engine placement firms, which charge a monthly fee for a guarantee that your company will make the top of search engine lists.

Hoeksema decided to take a chance. The first firm he hired was a flop – he didn't get the results he expected. So he tried again, researching the firm and calling references. "The account manager was quite knowledgeable," he says, noting that he took the time to vet search engine placement firms before deciding on Prospect Genius.

For a monthly fee – Hoeksema says most of the firms he checked out charged in the \$130 range – the placement firm he hired created a twin website that mimics Hoeksema's domain because the SEO software wasn't compatible with his original site.



"The content is largely the same between the two websites, but they play around with the wording more and have control over revisions on that second site."

So Hoeksema has two websites, but customers would never notice this. One is the original, the other is managed by the search engine placement firm. This way, he can take a hands-off approach to constantly updating his site with SEO

## QUICK TIPS

**Climb to the top.** "In today's world, where technology is right at our fingertips, the customer simply will not wait and they are not going to put a half hour of their time into going through four pages of Google listings to select a landscaper," Hoeksema says, explaining why he chose a search engine placement firm. "The first few who come up on the page are going to be contacted first."

**Search for options.** Hoeksema explored various SEO-focused firms, and rather than a consultant, he chose a search engine placement firm that charges a monthly fee for guaranteed "top page" results.

**Research firms.** Before hiring a search engine placement firm, or an SEO consultant for that matter, be sure to ask for referrals and find out what their clients say about results. Take the time to do due diligence. "It took a fair amount of hours to select the firm and go through the steps of getting the process activated and going," Hoeksema says. But now, it's hands-off for Hoeksema.

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keywords. "Search engines constantly update their keywords, so it's hard to keep your presence to the top," he says. But now, that's not his job. The responsibility falls on his SEO firm.

Hoeksema explored SEO consultants as an option, but his budget wasn't there. Plus, he was concerned about keeping fresh content live. He needed an ongoing SEO provider, not a one-shot deal; and he needed a relationship he could afford. "I could foresee how the lack of fresh content would result in a decrease in success down the road," he says, fully aware of the commitment SEO requires.

With the search engine placement firm, Hoeksema gets the top placement he hoped for, plus call tracking and monitoring tools. He can log on to his account and pull up a report that identifies who called or emailed because of the website. When a call comes in, he receives an email containing the customers' call number.

"There are definitely results coming out of all this," Hoeksema says. "We have to rely on those who are professionals in their industries. There is no way I could devote the time or resources, and I'm simply not tech savvy enough to do their job."

## SEO is part of the plan

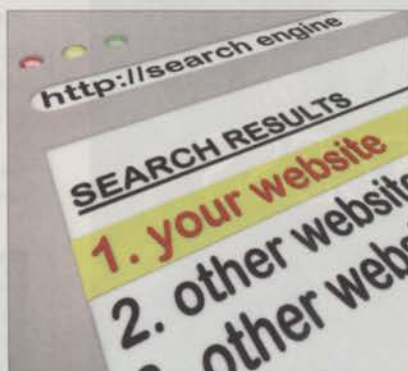
### Neave Landscaping

Scott Neave, president **LOCATION:** Wappingers Falls, N.Y. **ESTABLISHED:** 1973  
**EMPLOYEES:** 50 **2011 REVENUES:** \$5.3 million **CUSTOMERS:** 50% residential; 50% commercial **SERVICES:** landscape management, design/build, irrigation and tree services

There's more online competition today because most businesses in the industry recognize they need a web presence. customers aren't using the Yellow Pages (unless it's the dot.com version), says Scott Neave, president, Neave Landscaping, which services West Chester County, N.Y., Fairfield County, Conn., and Palm Beach, Broward and Dade Counties in southeast Florida.

But it's not enough to just slap up a website. A "presence" will only take you so far. Neave has always focused on providing an online home that gives potential and existing clients a real understanding of the firm and its values. "We thought it was important to have a web presence 12 to 13 years ago," he says, noting that was before the time when every company had a URL. "What I didn't understand was how our name came up in searches. We tried some (SEO), and we were successful in some of our efforts, and in some we weren't."

Neave ramped up his efforts a few



years ago, deciding to focus on SEO and pushing his company to the top of search results on a consistent basis. Every word makes a difference in SEO, content volume is critical (that is, content containing the right key words), and regular posting and updating is crucial. All this takes time, resources and expertise. That's why Neave brought on a consultant who specializes in SEO.

"It's a whole other world," Neave says of SEO and other web specialties, such as site design and social media. "It's like a landscaper trying to do the

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job of a lawyer. I know some things about law, but it's not what I do."

Neave says there are a lot of "moving parts" to the company's website – and he promotes that in all of the firm's marketing: business cards, job signs, brochures. What he learned about SEO is that content is king – the right content. "We try to generate a lot of content, pictures and blogs and constant additions to our site," he says. "Basically, you have to keep changing it, that's what I think is really the key. And that's difficult. A stagnant site is not going to get traffic."

Content generation at Neave Landscaping happens in and out of house. An outsourced public relations expert helps create some content for the site, while certain employees contribute blogs, posts and other updates. "The staff has to be committed to it, and we are still in the process of learning here," Neave says.

The key to content is the key words imbedded in the text. Personally, Neave struggles with striking a balance between SEO language and quality writing. Content loaded with key words can be bland, but it helps raise your company to the top of the search results lists.

And that's the ultimate goal. **L&L**

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

## QUICK TIPS

**Draft a team.** SEO is successful when employees are involved in helping create content. Neave Landscaping has a group of people who help write blogs, post pictures and keep content fresh. "Throwing money at SEO is not going to do it alone, your staff has to be committed," Neave says.

**Tracking the moving parts.** SEO is one portion of Neave Landscaping's overall marketing strategy, and each piece (web, referrals, etc.) works together. Neave serves as the coordinator of the plan, but he relies on experts in their fields to help execute. "It's somewhat of a complicated loop we are trying to create," Neave relates.

**Creating quality content.** Neave won't settle for just SEO-speak on his site. He could load up pages with key words, but would the babble make sense? "It's a tough balance between writing good ad copy and having good SEO," he says. He works with an outside SEO expert to achieve his goal.



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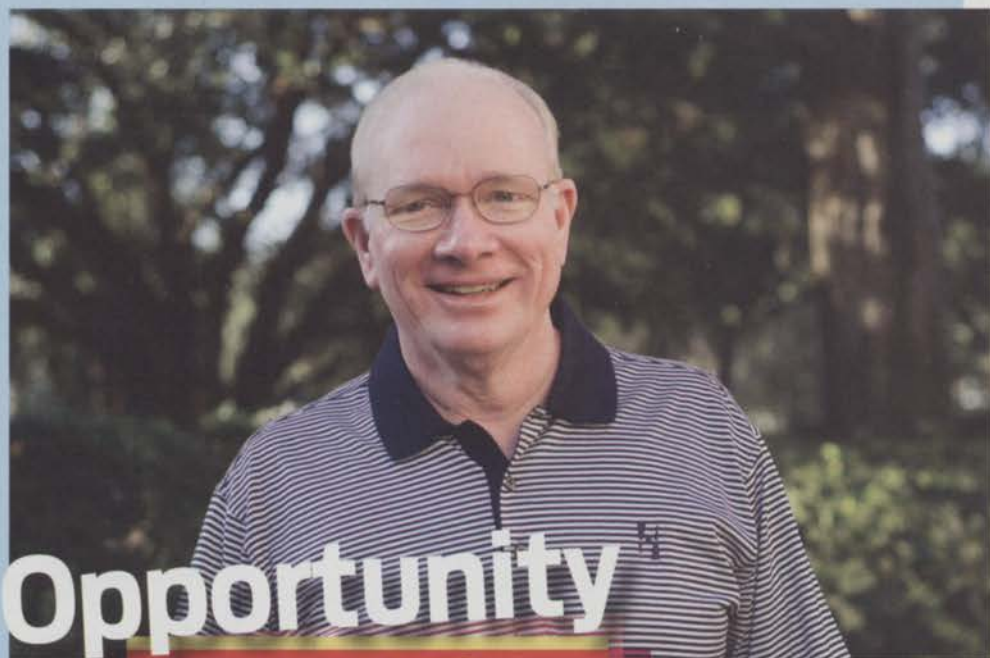
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# Opportunity knocks

By Pat Jones

Harrell's CEO Jack Harrell Jr. finds the right moment to open up a brand-new market for growth.

**H**arrell's surprised many recently when they jumped into the LCO market ... predictably, with both feet. Building on its foundation of turf and ornamental products in Indiana and Florida, Harrell's added coverage of the southeastern U.S. in its expansion of the turf and landscape division.

The company placed territory managers in six states: Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas and parts of the Gulf Coast, and appointed a dedicated technical adviser for that division.

We caught up with Jack Harrell for his first major interview to talk about the

company's growth, his management philosophy and how he's become the king of Facebook among turf distributors.

**Give me the "elevator version" of your company today.** We're a family company that sells directly to the golf course, ornamental/nursery and landscape markets. We manufacture our own fertilizer and represent major pesticide manufacturers. If you draw a line from Texas north to Canada, we cover everything to the right of that in some fashion in those three main markets. The vast majority of that is covered by our reps and our trucks. We have two fertilizer plants –

one in Lakeland, Fla., and one Sylacauga, Ala. We also formulate Polyon.

**That was a damned good elevator speech! Now tell us the 30-second version of your history.** We were a Florida-based small golf distributor and we also covered

“The days of multiple applications are coming to an end.”

Sea Island, Biloxi and a few other places. We first started doing business with the Pur-sells in the mid 1980s, working with Jim, David and Tim Orton. We worked with them

in '90-'91 to bring Polyon to the golf market. We got into the nursery/ornamentals business with Polyon in the mid '90s. In 2000 we made the decision to, in our vernacular, go north. We broke ground on the Sylacauga (plant) site. At the end of 2001, we bought Willbrough. We ended up owning three plants for a while. When Simplot decided to retrench and move back west, we saw that as a big opportunity. Obviously we've done a couple of other acquisitions since then and expanded territories a little, too.

**How big is the company now?** We don't normally give out dollars and cents figures. We have about 275 employees now and we produce 60,000 tons of fertilizer annually. That's not huge in some markets, but it is in our world.

**You seemed to come out of the recession stronger, which is remarkable considering how hard it hit both the golf and ornamentals market.** We dipped about 15 percent in 08-09 against a market drop of 40-50 percent. Our people really are our greatest asset. As a whole we have the best team in our industry. They worked together. At the beginning of the year, I laughingly told them that in 2009 I had one goal: to be in business at the end of the next year. Everyone really got into it and it was actually kind of fun. Guys pulled together and it was a great team effort.

We'd spent 10 years buying companies and growing and



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## INTERVIEW

working like crazy and it took that same effort to 'save our way to prosperity' in one year. We laid a few people off, but it also came down to blocking and tackling. We reduced inventories dramatically and stopped doing things we didn't need to do. The sky wasn't falling and we had great relationships between our guys and the end users. We actually did come out of it stronger because of the intense effort.

**Why did you decide that now was the right time to move into the landscape side?** I don't know that we've ever done a bunch of marketing analysis and made decisions based on how the market was doing. We had played with it in the past but decided to get serious about it, particularly since our bread-and-butter (golf) isn't likely to grow anytime soon. That's when I sat down with Matt and we decided to do it. It's another opportunistic move, not some big master plan.

This is a marathon – not a sprint. It was all about getting the right people and looking at this as a long-term play. In 10 to 15 years from now it ought to be at the same level as the rest of our business. Polyon, long term, will be good in that market, too. The days of multiple applications are coming to an end.

And candidly, we didn't see anybody else that was being all that successful. Lesco was king of the hill in that market but still losing money thanks to their infrastructure. That's not a shot at them ... I didn't know how to attack it (the LCO market) either. They had all those service centers and that didn't seem to help, so I got to watch and learn from them. We figure that we have infrastructure, too – warehouses, trucks, etc. – but we just need to go do it the Harrell's way.

**What are the LCOs saying so far?** The early results are that customers like it and we have a team of quality people with good relationships. At the end of the day, if we don't make our customer successful we've screwed up. In that market, it's about their ability to keep customers. All three sectors have different dynamics. Golf courses need to look good, ornamental growers need to get the most for their crops and, in lawn care, it's all about retention – eliminating churn.

**You've launched your own products in a couple of key segments like wetting agents. How do you balance an opportunistic approach to that "own brand" philosophy with supplier relationships?** We have great relationships with Bayer, Syngenta, Dow, PBI/Gordon, BASF and a bunch of others. In that world, we are 95 percent branded. I don't see us changing that. That's not on our horizon.

We are a branded company. We had the opportunity to do our own branding in a segment that was pretty splintered, so we don't look at it that same way.

We're probably the only company in the east – when you look at Harrell's, JDL, Agrium Direct and Helena – we're pretty much the only company that leads with brands. That's one of the big things that has grown our business in spite of everything.

**Okay, you're all about opportunity ... how about the opportunity to go national?** I don't know. Last year was our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in business and I'm the third generation of my family running it. So I gave

a talk at our national meeting in December about what we'd do in the next 70 years. Going west – or going national – was one of the things on that list. That said, there's absolutely no timetable to do it. It would be like everything else we've done: opportunistic. There's nothing specific driving that, but most of the golf courses are in our current territory. I'm not saying that if somebody called me today and there was an opportunity in California, I wouldn't listen. I wouldn't be surprised if we were there in 10 years but we have to do it our way.

**What's the secret to the growth?** We're still family-owned and pretty nimble. We can jump on opportunities pretty quickly. The second thing is that if you don't grow, you plateau. I'm always looking for ways to grow our company, but do it on the top line, the bottom line ... the whole nine yards. But we don't want to get too far afield of what we do best. Boring is beautiful.

Our philosophy is, 'Be nimble and find ways to grow the business.' That's what drove the decision to get into the landscape and lawn care business more heavily. We'd always treated it as an appendage to golf, but as we were looking at ways to grow, it seemed logical.

Matt Shook and Greg Nichols were managing our business in a north and south geographic territory set up. So, we quit being geography-specific and got market-specific.

So now, Greg has golf and Matt has a full-fledged turf and landscape business. Matt is very well thought of inside and outside our company. It speaks volumes about how important this is to us that we put Matt in charge of it.

**How does it feel to be the king of social media in turf distribution?** (Laughs) I am truly inept at all things technological, but I have a great team. Alex Barcia has been our IT lead for years. Back in about 2003, I told him I just don't understand all this tech stuff. I just want to make sure we're the most tech-savvy company in the industry. His new title is chief innovations officer and I give him pretty free rein ... including to make me look like I know what I'm doing on Facebook. L&L

The author is publisher and editorial director of *Golf Course Industry*.

“ This is a marathon – not a sprint. It was all about getting the right people and looking at this as a long-term play.

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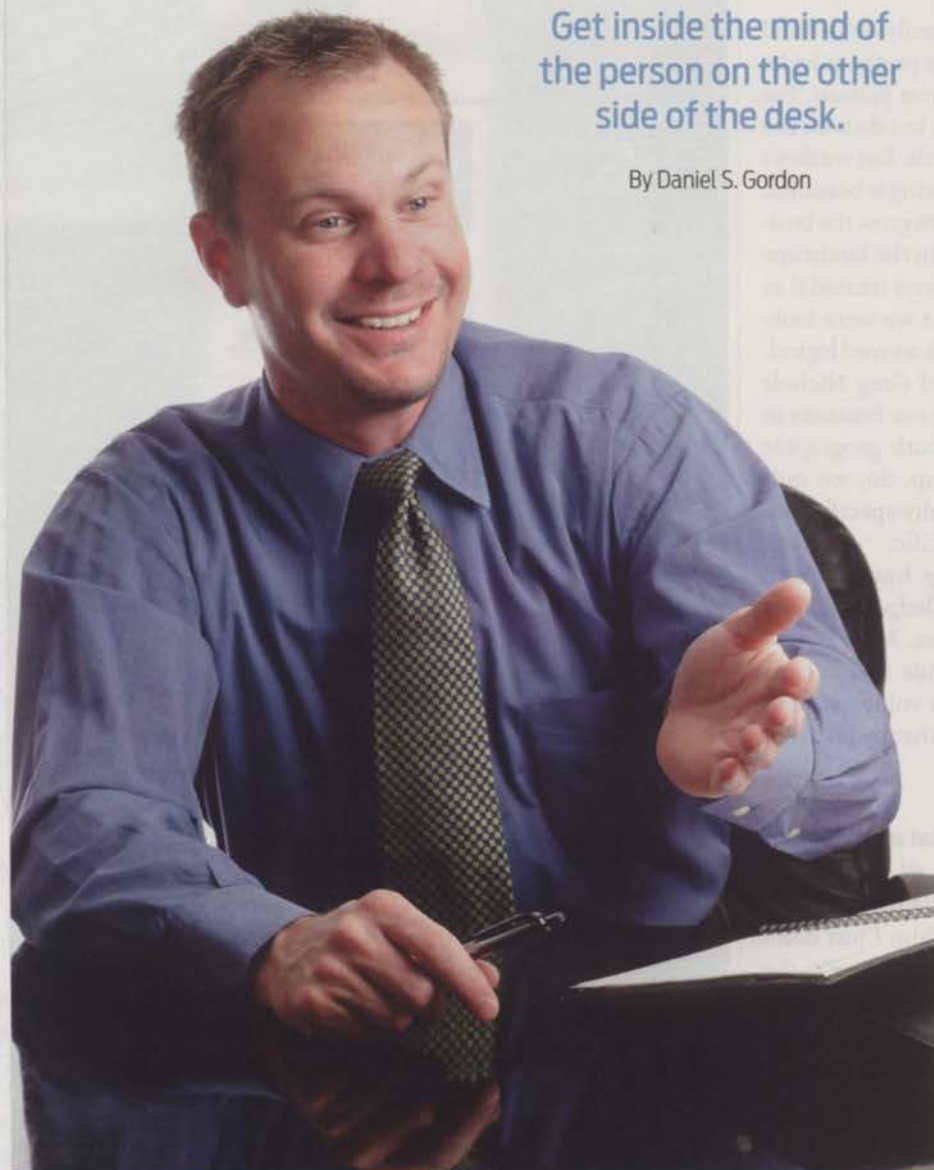
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# What a BANKER wants

Get inside the mind of  
the person on the other  
side of the desk.

By Daniel S. Gordon



Careful consideration should be given to choosing a local bank as most landscape businesses are local and a local bank usually makes an extra effort to deal with local businesses. Many times when dealing with a local bank you will deal with senior management who will listen to your needs and fight to get the services you need. This is not to say that large banks cannot meet your needs, rather it is to say that it will be difficult for a small customer to deal with the real decision makers.

This article will focus on those who are looking for credit. More specifically, as your landscape company grows you will be looking for money to expand your business as well as purchase vehicles, equipment and perhaps inventory.

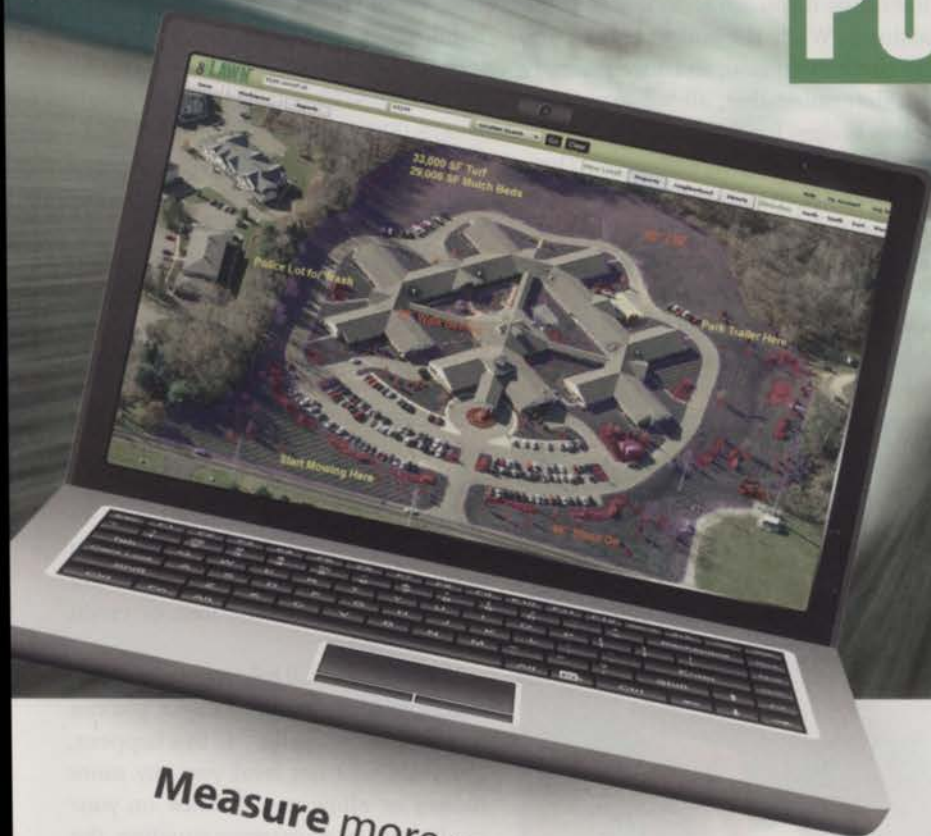
Applying for such credit can be frustrating. Remember, bankers are conservative by nature and their first priority is to protect their loan portfolio as well as earning a competitive return on their loans. As a borrower, you need to give the banker as many reasons as you can to make him feel comfortable with you. Here are some tips you should keep in mind when shopping for a bank.

**WHAT IF MY CREDIT RATING IS LOW?** As the quality of your credit record and personal history declines, so do your chances of getting a loan – especially if you do not have good collateral. It is important to clear up your credit history and any other outstanding legal issues to the extent that you can. With a shaky history, you may have more success borrowing from individuals than from banks.

**OTHER OPTIONS.** If you cannot get a loan because of a low credit rating, you still have options. You can sell your accounts receivable to a bank or a credit collection agency for cash, or pledge firm assets for a loan from a bank. You can also pledge the personal assets of the owners of the business for a loan from a bank, or put a squeeze your accounts receivable to get more cash on hand.



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**BUILD A BANKING RELATIONSHIP.** If you have good credit and you want to proceed with establishing a banking relationship, it all starts with the loan application.

Although business loan applications vary from bank to bank, they all have some basic information in common. Here are some universal questions:

- Why are you applying for capital?
- Who will be managing the business?
- What will you use the funds for?
- What assets will you purchase?
- Do you have a list of suppliers?
- What is your personal background?

Lenders will want to know your previous address and whether you have a criminal record.

**LOAN PACKAGES.** Once you submit the application the bank will ask for a loan package. The loan package usually consists of an application detailing your company's history as well as future plans. The following items are usually required in the loan package:

- *Personal net worth statement of the owner* – The bank will usually give you a template that they use to present the information. It may be a good idea to have your CPA complete this form as he/she usually knows what the bank is looking for and he/she will be able to provide complete information.

- *Three years prior personal and business tax returns* – Most businesses are taxed as either partnerships (including LLCs) or corporations (S Corp or C Corps) and have tax returns that are separate and distinct from the personal tax returns of their owners. The bank will require a signed copy of each year. In a few cases, a business may be taxed as a sole proprietorship or a single member LLC. In this case, the personal tax return contains the profit and loss statement of the business on Schedule C. The bank will require signed copies of these returns as well.

- *Most recent profit/loss and balance sheet* – If you are using QuickBooks or Peach Tree, these reports are extremely easy to produce. It would be highly advis-

able to have a CPA look at the interim reports prior to submission if he/she is not already preparing them on a monthly basis.

- *Three-year budget* – The main purpose for a budget is for the banker to determine if you are serious about your business. While the budget may or may not come to fruition, and only hindsight can determine this, all well run businesses budget for the future.

- *Current A/R aging, A/P aging* – These accounts receivable reports will come from your dispatch program and should be aged at 30, 60 and 90 days. The accounts payable reports will come from your QuickBooks or Peach Tree general ledger program and should be aged along the same lines.

### A full service bank will provide:

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- Investment Services
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- SBA Loans



The banker will use these documents to assess risk. One of the first things he will do is perform a ratio analysis. Some of the more important ratios include Interest coverage, profitability, return on investment. In this analysis he is determining if you are credit worthy, how much debt you can afford and what collateral is available to secure the credit. The most important concepts here would be:

- *EBITDA* – Most banks will require your earnings before interest, taxes, de-

preciation and amortization to be at least 1.25 times debt service (all payments for all debt) and will provide financing up to a monthly payment that will coincide with this payment amount.

- *Equity* – Equity on your balance sheet would include all assets minus all liabilities. You can think of it as if you purchased your home for \$200,000 and mortgaged \$125,000. Your equity would be \$75,000. Equity should be positive. In most instances, since assets are recorded at purchased value rather than fair market value, an appraisal can be done on existing assets and if market value of assets minus liabilities is positive your company may in fact be healthier than what your balance sheet may depict.

**BEST PRACTICES.** For business owners who are uninformed or unorganized, banking relationships can be tricky to manage. The bank will require you to submit periodic financial information verifying that your business ratios are within the terms of the loan or credit line agreement.

If your scores fall below the covenants described in the loan document, you can be put on a "watch list." If this happens, the bank will not lend you any more money or allow you to draw on your credit line. In an extreme situation, the bank can – or at least has the prerogative to – call in the loan.

**CONCLUSION.** A strong banking relationship is extremely important in growing a landscape business. However, proper planning and financial management is the key to a healthy relationship. In business you are judged on your word and your ability to execute on what you say you are going to do or what you are required to do. So in order to start and maintain a strong banking relationship, make sure you can meet the terms of the agreement and treat the relationship as one of the most important factors in your success as a growing business. **L&L**

Daniel S. Gordon is a CPA in New Jersey and owns an accounting firm that caters to landscape professionals throughout the U.S.

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## High risk, **high expectations**

HighGrove doubles down on the Atlanta construction sector with its land services program. By Matt McClellan

**F**or many landscape companies, construction and development were two of the first business segments to disappear when the economy tanked.

But one Atlanta company set out to buck the trend, offering a full range of land services along with the more typical landscape maintenance and water management services.

The focus on a new segment has buoyed the company through a rocky economy, and now makes up about

one-third of its \$15 million annual revenue.

**A NEW PERSPECTIVE.** Craig Morris started working for HighGrove in 1997, worked his way up to vice president before leaving in 2003 to become a developer. Today, he's back as the director of HighGrove's Land Services program. Erik Jarkins started in 2002 after a long career with an Atlanta-based design-only firm. He is now HighGrove's director of design and landscape architecture.

"I felt my career would benefit from understanding the build side and budgeting aspects of design from a construction side, to help me better situate myself with developers and owners," Jarkins said.

One of the first things Morris noticed as he developed mixed-use and residential projects was the disjointed involvement for landscapers on a typical construction project.

HighGrove had always been involved with the early stages of a project, offering

input on master plans. But then the landowner would take those concepts and hire a civil engineer to design them, set up the infrastructure and go through the process of acquiring permits.

Then, the owner would hire a general contractor and start pricing site work. That project would then enter the construction phase. HighGrove and most typical landscape companies would not be brought back until the end of the job, when the site is ready to be landscaped.

After he became a developer, Morris figured that with his design and landscape architecture background, he could eliminate those gaps by controlling the entire process from start to finish.

"I understood the initial vision and concept," Morris said. "I was partly involved with creating it. Typically, if you hire an engineer, they like to do straight lines with roads or utility lines. That may be the first step of pulling away from the original design concepts. By being able to control that, I oversaw the engineers, I hired the grading contractors. If issues came up in permitting and zoning, I was involved."

He found that when one person or group knew everything about that project, the project itself ran smoother and the same concept was carried from planning stages to the end of the project.

**COST MANAGEMENT.** Typically, when a landscape design goes over the amount budgeted for it, large components are stripped out of the project. Jarkins saw a better way.

"What I felt would be a better, seamless process for my design abilities was to understand the real world costs of materials, and design better toward budgets and expectations," he said.

With the downturn in the



HighGrove aims to be a one-stop shop for clients.

economy in 2008, a lot of landscape companies let their development teams go. They no longer had the capacity to manage and oversee projects. Morris and Jarkins saw an opportunity and presented it to HighGrove's CEO, Jim McCutcheon.

"Most developers are more financial guys," Morris said.

"They don't know field work; they don't understand it. So it was our idea to act as adjunct staff for them, to help evaluate the site. What condition is it currently in? Is it foreclosed on? Is it partially constructed? We can take a step back, look at the zonings, the plans, rework as needed and act as adjunct staff to help carry

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that through the process. And when the economy picks back up, they may wind up hiring their teams back or wind up staying with us.

"We want to be and we are now a true one-stop shop for our clients. They can put their hands up and say, anything outside the building envelope, HighGrove's going to handle," Morris explained. "That has been one of the main reasons that over the last three years as companies are struggling to stay afloat, we have grown significantly."

**A NEW STORY.** But how do you rework your company's 23-year-old brand to include

property development and local high-end landscaping?

"Building confidence with potential clients is the biggest challenge," Jarkins said. "When most people think of HighGrove, they think of a landscape company. We needed to put a new face on what HighGrove is."

So HighGrove redesigned its website and then hit the road, explaining the concept in face-to-face meetings.

"Every time we hit an existing client or potential client, we are going to sell land services and explain what it is, how it can benefit them," Morris said. **L&L**

The author is managing editor for *Nursery Management* magazine.

## Through their eyes

Get inside the mind of a property manager.

**L**awn & Landscape asked Jarkins and Morris what developers look for in a landscaper, and how landscapers can become indispensable to their clients. Here are their top three tips.

**Be on time.** The key to building a solid relationship with a developer is timing. They are looking for landscape companies with the ability to react quickly, turn jobs around quickly, and understand budgets and costs.

**Be on budget.** Developers want to do business with someone with the design background and vision to make decisions that can improve the design without increasing cost. "There are a lot of landscape companies out there that can wow you with fantastic designs, but if they don't have the understanding of actually building it within a budget with certain constraints, it's a waste of time," Morris said.

**Be proactive.** Developers and property managers appreciate landscapers who take a proactive approach to dealing with their problems. "We don't wait for them to ask us for a proposal," Jarkins said. "We're not afraid to say 'your water is dirty. Your pond is shallow. Do you need services? Here is the pricing; can you fit it into this year's capital expenditures?'"

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# Under control

How smart controllers can save you time and your customers money. By Richard Restuccia

New irrigation technology and innovative products impact our customers in a positive way. The product making the biggest water savings impact in the shortest period of time is smart controllers. When it comes to controllers, there are many options with many features and benefits. Here's how we integrate controllers into our projects.

**FIRST STEP.** We talk to the customer to determine goals first, and when appropriate, integrate smart irrigation controllers into the overall landscape plan. The major-

ity of companies I work with haven't integrated smart controllers, so it is a perfect time to talk about developing a water management plan for their facility. It's our goal to provide the proper solutions for their water management objectives.

Many customers simply don't know where to start because there are numerous parts to an average irrigation system. That's where an experienced landscape maintenance contractor becomes a valuable partner. We have 64 irrigation technicians across the country who are licensed by the Irrigation Association.



The smartest part of any irrigation system is still the installer running it.

## Smart controllers need smart contractors

10 years ago, when you looked at irrigation controllers, the notion of a smart controller was pretty much unheard of. Fast forward and all the major manufacturers now have smart controller products. Back then, technology wasn't as big of an emphasis.

Adjusting for weather was done on large commercial sites or golf courses that had their own weather station. The introduction of smart controllers has allowed that technology to be brought down to the consumer level. And from a price point and a feature standpoint, there's been more of an emphasis on water rebate programs across the country.

It's still very much heavily focused on the West Coast, but that's changing. They're talking about smart controllers in the Midwest and central states and southeast. Whatever you want to believe about climate change and weather patterns, drought conditions get people to focus on water efficiency.

Remember, a smart controller takes a smart irrigation professional to install it. You need proper training. Especially during fall when people don't turn their systems down - that's where you see the biggest savings potential because the controller will start dialing down the rate of water due to lower temperatures or less moisture in the ground.

The biggest thing to look at is how old the system you're working with is. If you're working with a controller that isn't as advanced as some of the new technologies, this is an opportunity to upgrade that controller. Anything 20 years old, even within 10 years isn't a bad idea. - Warren Gorowitz, vice president of sustainability and conservation, Ewing

We're seeing more contractors across the industry taking our classes and attending conferences where we teach water management practices. Contractors expecting to be successful in the future must make water management a primary focus and educate and train accordingly.

**HOW THEY WORK.** Several things make a controller smart. Instead of turning valves on and off at the programmed time, a smart controller calculates weather conditions and adjusts to optimize water usage. Scheduling capabilities, and the ability to manage your controllers anywhere you can get an internet connection are optional features. The ability to measure flow and shut off water when there is a break in a line and then alert an irrigation technician or manager there is a problem is one of the most practical advanced features. The water

(and time) savings from this can be enormous.

Smart controllers can provide a quick return for your green investment. As the price of technology decreases and water becomes more expensive it's now more critical than ever to evaluate if smart controllers are right for your client's property.

**RISING RATES.** Clearly, there's increased customer demand for water management expertise. Increasing water rates are one of the key drivers. Water rates are increasing across the country so companies now pay closer attention to their water bills. This increase often leads to requests for us to do water audits and water assessments to determine how to manage water more efficiently. Owners and managers look to us to advise them about water management as part of an overall landscape program. Some are integrating water



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## CONTROLLERS



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We examine and analyze historical evapotranspiration (or ET) information for customers, and then determine the plant water requirements for a specific period of time and measure the water requirement against the actual water usage. This gives us an idea of how much water we could save by installing smart controllers. We use this to

create a return on investment calculation, and by sharing the potential return on investment we help customers make better educated decisions. Many times we can recommend a smart controller with an ROI of 24 months or less.

**HOW TO USE THEM.** Smart controller systems require a strategic approach. They are not a set-it-and-forget-it solution, and training and field experience play big roles in the long-term success of an installation. The Irrigation Association conducts independent testing of controllers to help you determine which fits the needs of your project. The testing also provides multiple product options and offers a measure of quality control for the industry. Incorporating a

For a round-up of the latest controllers and moisture sensors available to irrigation contractors, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and search "controllers."



## More functionality, better service

We're seeing smart controllers and ET systems installed across the country for different reasons. In some circumstances, particularly with estate- or large-scale residential, or high-end commercial properties, contractors love the service element associated with the two-way communication. It's not unusual for them to get an emergency service call, and they want to respond immediately. When you're dealing with one-, two- or three-acre estates, that counts for a lot.

We're also seeing a lot of influence from the Irvine Ranch Water District to get property owners to manage their water to a budget. They're very active in holding a landscape company to a budget. Here, people use flow, or measuring the water used per week, and configure the water used to the billing cycle. There are some progressive landscape companies selling their water savings - Bemus Landscaping in southern California and Southern Botanicals in Dallas.

We're working to put more functionality into our smartphone application to give contractors broader management ability. People want full access, whether you're on your laptop or your cell phone. - Pat McIntyre, CEO, ET Water Systems



New technology makes systems more efficient.

smart controller system starts with landscape contractors deciding to be proactive.

Customers are hungry to implement smart water management plans at their properties. Every week, I am asked to advise customers from property management companies or corporate facili-

ties how systems work, what the process is and how it can save them money.

Once they see the scientific process they get comfortable and are willing to sit down and target the biggest water users so we can work out a plan together.

Commercial managers understand the value to the owner or investor. Community managers recognize justifying the investment to their board is easier when they can show the ROI calculation, and the board can evaluate the investment using the data. **L&L**

The author is director of water management solutions for ValleyCrest Landscape Cos., Calabasas, Calif.

## More modular control

There has been a huge effort by manufacturers over the past several years to develop controllers that can automatically adjust watering schedules for daily changes in weather. It is common for the controller to stay programmed for peak summer watering throughout the year rather than be adjusted to accommodate changes in seasonality.

The contractor is much more tech-savvy than even just a few years ago. Customers continue to put pressure on manufacturers to provide them with more advanced features and capabilities, such as weather-based control, two-wire control and central control. So controller products are continually evolving to meet customer demands. Electronics manufacturers are improving the components that go into our controllers, which lets us improve performance and lower the overall cost.

Depending upon the situation, it can be a relatively easy task to upgrade an existing irrigation system. For most applications it is as easy as removing the old controller and attaching a newer, more advanced controller in its place. Adding weather sensors to controllers to make them 'smart' is also easy to do. The customer today is getting much more value for his or her money than they were with irrigation controllers made 10 years ago. — *Jeffery J. Kremicki, senior product development manager, Hunter Industries*



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Contractors report a growing interest in outdoor entertaining spaces in 2012.



# The **OUTSIDE** experience

Outdoor living spaces are becoming more popular, which means more jobs for you. By Brian Horn

It's music to contractors' ears. That frozen, depressed residential design/build market that killed, or at least wounded, a lot of companies is thawing, opening up new opportunities.

"I think that the economy is picking up slowly, and I think there's the possibility that some companies that weren't top quality fell by wayside and couldn't make it through the downtime," says Shannon Hathaway, president of Green Heron Landscaping in Cary, N.C.

Recent surveys point to an increased focus from homeowners on outdoor living spaces. (See "Survey says" on page 78.)

Maverick Pickering, owner of Maverick Landscaping in Kansas City, Kan., has seen the same thing in his

area — companies that didn't position themselves in the downturn are now out of business, leaving more work for the owners that had their acts together. Pickering is on pace this year to reach more than \$600,000 in revenue, numbers he hasn't seen since 2008. On top of that, he's increased his profitability by taking on bigger, more expensive projects.

"The number of projects we are doing is way down but the cost per project is way up, like astronomically up," he says.

**WHAT THEY'RE BUYING.** Hathaway says her company has experienced its best first quarter in its 11-year history with revenue up about 30 percent from last year and 15 percent more from the

company's previous best first quarter. Hathaway has recently hired two employees, bringing the total to six, and she will buy a new truck this year, as well.

Both Pickering and Hathaway said they credit some of the increased outdoor living

spending on a trend that has been going on for a couple years — families not traveling, and instead staying home. Hathaway said customers are interested in firepits and modernizing their patios, but also simplifying them at the same time.



Grills rank among the most popular additions to outdoor spaces.

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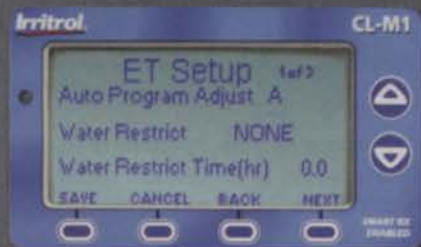
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"It's less about impressing the neighbors and more about enjoying yourself with your friends and family," she says.

Pickering has seen many new homes in his market add beautiful outdoor spaces.

"There's more talk about big projects from all the contractors, even the ones that do the cheaper work," he says. "People want to blow the back out, they're not travelling, they want to reinvest

in the house, and a lot want to entertain outdoors."

But he also warns that a lot of builders who were doing new homes have moved on from that market and have jumped into outdoor living.

"And they are cutting every corner in the whole world and they are ruining the market," he says.

Pickering combats this by educating clients that corners cut on a patio project will save

## Survey says: Consumers still want outdoor spaces

According to a recent survey conducted by the American Society of Landscape Architects, consumer's love affair with the backyard is increasing.

Landscape architects with a specialization in residential design across the country were asked to rate the expected popularity of a variety of residential outdoor design elements. The category of gardens and landscape spaces, with 94.9 percent rating somewhat or very popular, was followed closely by outdoor living spaces at 91.5 percent, which were defined as kitchen and entertainment spaces.

Across all categories, 97.4 percent of respondents rated grills as somewhat or very in-demand for 2012, followed by low-maintenance landscapes (96.6 percent), fireplaces/fire pits (95.8 percent), and dining areas (95.7 percent). Lighting features remained a popular choice from 2011 at 93.1 percent.

Americans also love their pools (79.2 percent), but not quite as much as their spas (80.4 percent) and other decorative water elements (89.9 percent), such as waterfalls or bubblers.



Decorative elements remain very popular with consumers.

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"(Concrete countertops) will do exactly what your sidewalk is doing," he says. "It's going to start chipping, it's going to fade, and it's going to crack."

**THE RIGHT CLIENT.** As the market gets better, you can now be more selective on who you choose as a customer.

Pickering, whose average project costs \$50-75,000, says he'll only do higher-end work, and won't do concrete countertops or fake stone, instead only using natural stone. That limits his jobs, but allows him to focus on big projects like the \$350,000 job

he worked on in the spring.

Pickering now asks more questions on the phone before visiting a client. He wants to make sure they are willing to stick to his more expensive work.

He also charges a consulting fee of \$75 for an hour for anyone he does meet in person. Pickering found he was getting worn out by meeting with potential clients that didn't wind up buying.

"I was constantly disappointed when I left because I had given them great ideas and they hadn't paid for them and I left with nothing," he says. "The premium client fully expects to pay for a consultation. How can you

be professional if you don't charge for your time?"

Hathaway, whose average cost per project is \$9,000 and posted revenue of \$450,000 last year, says she has been booking jobs 8-10 weeks out, which means referring customers who want work done fast to competitors.

"I know that I may lose a client here and there by sending them to a smaller company, but maintaining the highest quality standard is of utmost importance to us," she says.

Hathaway says contractors have to be careful in an improving economy because the new work can be very enticing. Before you know

it, she says, you've hired too many people, and bought too much equipment, and you're stuck because work has stalled again.

Her philosophy is to wait for her foreman to tell her that they need one more guy to do the job on time. The loads of new leads can also tempt contractors to promise customers the world, which will also get them in trouble.

"Don't overcommit yourself," she says. "Be honest with your clients on when you can get to them. Concentrate on quality, not quantity. If you are trying to knock out as many jobs as you possibly can, the quality is going to suffer." **L&L**

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**The pitch:** The SA 2700 BP Backpack blower from efco is a light and powerful backpack blower designed for jobs around residential properties.



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- Equipped with a silenced muffler and max air speed of 145 mph.

**For more information:** [www.efco-power.com](http://www.efco-power.com)

## Grasshopper Turbine Blower

**The pitch:** The blower attaches in place of the out-front mower deck to retain zero-turn maneuvering, and with a nozzle that rotates a full 360 degrees, operators can move the large debris piles.



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- Attaches in place of the mowing deck on Grasshopper 700 and 900 Series True Zero-Turn FrontMount mowers.
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# Spotlight on Success

BY LINDSEY GETZ



## Steven Keys, U.S. LAWNS

**S**teven Keys says that without the backing of a strong franchise model he wouldn't have been able to grow as rapidly as he has. Keys currently operates in eight different territories in two states with six individual offices, and he'll likely be adding a seventh by the end of this year.

All of this has been during a tough economy. Keys says his success can be boiled down to two factors – financial management and cold calling – both of which he says U.S. Lawns' headquarters has supported him in.

"Successful financial management means staying in a good cash position," says Keys, who currently operates in both Georgia and South Carolina. "When the economy goes bad you can't get a loan and this becomes even more important. For many, the work is still there, they just don't have the cash flow available to keep business going. I believe if a business is in a good position going into a bad economy they can continue to sustain it even through difficult times. That's what we've done."

Keys says that the U.S. Lawns franchise model has fully supported him in financial management. He's able to keep track of the financials in the most detailed fashion. "You need to know your

position in terms of the financials at all times," Keys says. "We're looking at the profit and loss statement every other day to see if we're profitable for the month. That's while we still have time to make changes. If you're not dissecting your company until the end of the month, you're already too late. How can you even know if you're making money on a job? You need to track everything from materials to man hours."

Besides full financial support Keys says that learning to make a good cold call has been the other facet that's contributed to his success. In his previous ownership of a residential lawn care business Keys says he picked up work through flyers and word of mouth. But when he learned to make a good cold call with the U.S. Lawns' model, it changed the ballgame.

"When I first started out with U.S. Lawns I was slumping a little so the home office sent a gentleman over who taught me how to properly do a cold call," remembers Keys. "In fact, the first one I did, I sold. So I started to grow my business by cold calling. Then



Keys

we also got referrals coming in. A lot of people don't like to ask for business but that's what works – and I promise it does. Sometimes it comes down to persistence."

Where persistence can really pay off is the commercial market, Keys says. It's very easy to be told the manager is busy and to get turned away. While many companies wouldn't bother trying back again, Keys does, and that makes a difference. "Even if a manager tells me 'No,' I still put a reminder in the system to call back again in six months – maybe the middle of the summer when stuff is really growing," he says. "You'd be amazed how many jobs we get from customers that initially said no."

Keys' success has led him to become the first-ever winner of the U.S. Lawns' President's Award. The company says it's because he goes "above and beyond." Keys enjoys helping his peers and encouraging other U.S. Lawns franchisees as both a mentor and adviser. "We're getting to the point where a lot of the guys I helped out over the years have built up their businesses to the point where they're now helping me," laughs Keys. "They've always known they could come to me for advice and now I can go to them, too."

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- Dave Mlotkiewicz, Franchise Owner, NJ



*"I had a hard time competing against Lawn Doctor, because once a customer started with them, they never left."*

- Bryan Sallmen, Franchise Owner, MI

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franchise owners has been a major support. "We have the ability to share ideas, information and experiences," Smith says. "That support system of people in the industry is invaluable and one of the greatest benefits of being in a franchise system. When we started using a new weed control last year, for example, it might have been new to us but it wasn't new to Nutri-Lawn as a franchise so we could reach out to other franchises for their expertise. That's true of not only a new product or application but even new marketing ideas. You can bounce ideas off of one another and talk about what did and didn't work."

Support is also felt from headquarters. "We have a full-time agronomist on staff and an agronomic manager that supports the franchise from that standpoint," Smith says. "He travels to

our franchise at least once a year to run training sessions with the staff. I can only assume that if we weren't a part of a franchise group that we wouldn't have those things so easily at our disposal. We are often able to get answers immediately."

Diligence is also important, says Tanner, particularly when it comes to following up on estimates. "You can do the estimate but if you don't follow up, a lot of times the customer might see you as not being very interested in the work and they may go with the person that is staying on top of it. Following up is so important," he says.

Both Tanner and Smith also contribute much of the franchise's success to customer service. "You have to care about what you're doing - whatever it is that you do," Tanner says. "When you take pride in what you do, that shows

and customers recognize that. We have great guys that really care about what they do when they're out there. They put a lot of care and pride into their work so I can sell jobs being confident that they're going to follow through with the hard work."

Smith agrees. "This industry always comes back to customer service in the end," he says. "Your competition can buy the same fertilizer, weed control, aerators, and even drive the same truck. But, at the end of the day, it comes down to the level of customer service you're providing so that the customer will continue to do business with you. It's not all about the lawn having zero weeds and being 100 percent perfect. It's about making sure that the customer is happy at the end of the day. That will actually keep the customer coming back more than the perfect lawn." **L&L**

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# Franchise Guide

Thinking about jumping into the franchise world? We gathered some basic information on popular green industry franchises as an easy place to get started. Contact each company directly to learn more about opportunities in your region. Do you have a franchise concept we should know about? Send the information to Editor Chuck Bowen at [cbowen@gie.net](mailto:cbowen@gie.net).

## Clintar Landscape Management

Average Initial Investment: \$270,000-\$382,000  
 U.S. Locations: 2  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 0  
 Hours of Training: Two weeks initially and more ongoing



## The Grounds Guys

Average Initial investment: \$50-100,000  
 U.S. Locations: 68  
 Hours of training: Initially 60, with ongoing after that.  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 0



## Lawn Doctor

Average Initial Investment: \$68,387-\$98,237  
 U.S. Locations: 460  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 40  
 Hours of Training: 2 week program, 70 hours classroom and approx. 20-25 hours for classroom prep, homework, test taking and planned group events.



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## Diversifying Through Lawn Care

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

### Leadership in Action

#### Weed Man franchisees show growth

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



Paul Brooks (left) and Michael Currin

you own a home you are a potential lawn care customer. We drive past a tremendous number of houses on our way to our full-service maintenance or design/build customers. We needed a service to offer these people."

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

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

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

Growth in any business starts with sales and Brooks aggressively hired a full-time sales team to generate leads, close contracts and grow the business to \$1.75 million. In 2011, the group purchased the Wilmington, N.C. franchise and anticipates revenues there of \$750,000.

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

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

"A lawn care business was really a natural fit," Currin said. "Unlike high-end design/build, if

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



The Schlatter family

### Behind Every Great Team is a System

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

Corbin and his wife, Audrey, started with a small operation in Defiance, OH, then expanded to Columbus. "Despite the size difference, we did the same things in both markets. However, we just used smaller crews."

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

After growing the Defiance office in rural NW Ohio to more than \$350,000 and 950 customers, Schlatter sold the office to Tom and Rose Curdes who owned the Toledo Weed Man franchise. "It was a win/win for both of us," Schlatter said. "The sale makes their office stronger and allows us to focus on our business in Columbus."

The Columbus office today touts more than 1,800 customers and \$615,000 in annual revenue. Mid-way through the year, they've already beat their business planning goals for 2012. Schlatter said it's due to the sole focus on the Columbus market rather than splitting his attention. As a result, they've been able to more efficiently operate the franchise systems they have and be more productive with their time.

"We're better able to serve our customers and we have better cash flow," he said. "On a personal level, it allows me to spend more time with my family." As a Weed Man franchisee, Schlatter said he enjoys the tremendous support he gets from his sub-franchisor and franchise group.

"If we work the system right we'll get through difficult economic times with tweaks here and there," he said. "It will work. It's proven. Make adjustments, but stick to the fundamentals."

### Own your future with Weed Man

Weed Man is ranked the #1 franchised lawn care company by *Entrepreneur Magazine*.

For more information on the Weed Man franchise concept, visit [www.weedmanfranchise.com](http://www.weedmanfranchise.com) or call (888) 321-9333.

Weed Man

## Nutri-Lawn

Average Initial Investment: \$90,000  
 U.S. Locations: 3  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 0  
 Hours of Training: 80



## Spring-Green Lawn Care

Average initial investment: \$84,180 - \$95,520  
 U.S. locations: 120  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 10  
 Hours of Training: 115 (classroom and on the job)



## Weed Man

Average Initial Investment: single territory - \$40,000; double territory - \$60,000  
 U.S. Locations: 261 units with 120 License agreements  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 3  
 Hours of Training: 11 days and approx. 90 hours. Ongoing Training is unlimited.



## Scotts LawnService

Average initial investment: \$25,000-\$60,000  
 U.S. locations: 176  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 0  
 Hours of Training: 2 weeks

## U.S. Lawns

Average Initial Investment: \$85,000  
 U.S. Locations: 254  
 Closures in the last three fiscal years: 9  
 Hours of Training: 65 initial and more ongoing



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## Sam Morgan, Weed Man

Interviewed By Brian Horn

Sam Morgan founded his first Weed Man Franchise in Wilmington, North Carolina in 2001. Three years later, he sold that one and created a franchise in Normington, N.C. During the past 11 years, he has enjoyed consistent growth by executing the systems that Weed Man has provided to him. Above all, Morgan believes that door knocking and face-to-face interactions are the best ways to gain new leads, close sales and convert those sales to regular, paying customers.

**1. Why did you get involved in franchising and how long have you been doing it?** At the time, I was working for a full-service landscaping business that did everything from mowing to trimming, planting, hardscapes and lighting. We dabbled in turf care on

our existing mowing accounts, but we really didn't know what we were doing. I had a friend who is now in charge of North Carolina and Georgia for Weed Man. At the time, he was selling turf equipment. I saw how he was able to start a Barefoot Lawns franchise from scratch and grow it to hundreds of customers quickly. I liked it.

**2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of franchising?**

Franchising provides you with marketing systems to help you get leads. A lot has changed in lawn care from 2001 until now. We have a 'Do Not Call' list. We used to buy phone lists, but now many people have cell phones and they have shut off their home phones. There's less accessibility, so going door to door really allows you to get in front of people. You're right there in person, and the closing rates are great. Weed Man provides you with a system, and that includes a database that has



Morgan

everyone in your area that's already in it. It's also already routed, so if we sell 30 accounts in one day, we can print them out in a routed order and get it done the next day as fast as possible.

**3. What advice would you have for someone who is thinking about entering the world of franchising?**

I think the systems are important. You're investing some money to use the Weed Man name and have access to the systems, so don't try to reinvent the wheel. It's all just math and statistics, and it works. If you knock on doors, you get certain number of leads, close a certain percentage, a certain number will cancel, and a certain number will up-sell.

As long as you're following the system it's going to come together in the end.

Even with the economy the way it is, we grew by \$300,000 in 2010 and \$400,000 in 2011. We've just followed the systems. We're aggressive and we do what we're supposed to do. That kind of growth can happen even in a bad economy.

**4. What is one thing you know now that you wish you knew when you started franchising?**

Maybe that cash is a little more king than I thought. It takes money to start a business and get the work done. There were times in the beginning when, if we had a little more cash set aside, we wouldn't have been so stressed out. Earlier on, when we were smaller, cash was very important. We're not independently wealthy, so we just did what we could.

**5. What type of personality is best-suited for being a franchisee?**

You can't be afraid to work. The most successful franchisees are willing to put in the time. You set the pace, speed and hours, so you have to be the last one out. L&L

For the full story, visit [www.lawnandlandscape.com](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com) and search "Morgan."



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To address this issue, Kawasaki Engines has adopted a higher standard: SAE J2723, one of the strictest in the industry, tighter than the widely-used SAE J1940. It ensures at least 98% accuracy in power output. The 20 HP engine you rely on will deliver a minimum of 19.6 horsepower. Their designation for this standard is called Critical Power.

Further, Kawasaki Critical Power engine output is SAE-certified accurate – the only SAE certified turf engines in the world. Kawasaki Engines actual power output has not changed from before. It is just the rating system that has changed.

Visit [lawnandlandscape.com/whitepapers.aspx](http://lawnandlandscape.com/whitepapers.aspx) to download a special report on how landscape contractors across the country approach their engine-purchase decisions. **L&L**

The basic blocking and tackling of your business is what type of equipment you choose. The brand and type of machines you purchase have a tremendous impact on your productivity.

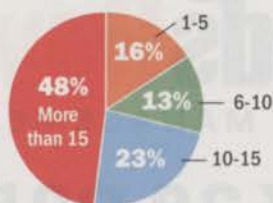
But even more important are engines you choose to power that equipment. Because if the power source for your equipment isn't reliable, neither is your iron and neither is your company.

In a survey of *Lawn & Landscape* readers, 88 percent ranked reliability as the most important feature they consider when it comes to choosing an engine. A far distant second, with 7 percent, was fuel efficiency. Ease of repair came in third, with 3 percent.

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## How many engines for mowers and pieces of hand-held equipment do you currently own?



## Do you do your own maintenance on your engines or send them to a dealer?



## How long do you keep your engines?



Source: Lawn & Landscape research

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- The PRO Landscape Companion for iPad application allows designers to take PRO Landscape out in the field and create, edit and present designs on site.

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## Quick Release Tubing Cutters

**The pitch:** Quick Release Tubing Cutters from Reed Manufacturing Co. provide quick, square cuts on plastic pipe.



- DEB4 and DEB1IPS Deburring Tools create a proper chamfer to manufacturer's specs for even distribution of solvent cement.
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- All tools are contained in a light-weight, hard plastic case.

**For more information:** [www.reedmf-gco.com](http://www.reedmf-gco.com)

## SK170 Mark 9 Excavator

**The pitch:** Kobelco Construction Machinery America has introduced the SK170 full-size



excavator to the Kobelco Mark 9 excavator series. These new Tier IV models include the SK210, SK260, SK295, SK350 and SK485 Mark 9 excavators.

- The SK170 Mark 9 delivers up to a 10 percent improvement in both fuel efficiency and productivity
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## Teco-Edg

**The pitch:** Oly-Ola Edgings introduces Teco-Edg, a 6-inch high L-shaped edge restraint with specially-engineered drainage slots.



- Can be used for green roof systems, permeable pavements, grass pavers, vertical green walls, turf and rubber surfaces, modular planting systems and gravel pathway installations.
- Constructed of heavy-duty 100 percent recycled PVC material.
- Has a 6x6-inch, L-shaped profile of the restraint, designed with multi-purpose stake holes.

**For more information:** [www.olyola.com](http://www.olyola.com)

## Water Box

**The pitch:** The water box by Creative Solutions provides a pop-up water source wherever needed in a commercial or residential landscape.



- Product installs into the ground - when not in use, lid folds down to ground level
- Lid locks firmly into the up position when being used. When finished, lid is then lifted to release and then folds down flush with the ground.
- Underground storage helps protect against freezing temperatures
- Box compartment is heavy duty - can be stood on or mown over without damage to unit.

**For more information:** [www.uhideit.com](http://www.uhideit.com)

## Zylam Liquid

**The pitch:** PBI/Gordon Corp.'s Zylam Liquid is the newest addition to the I Zylam product line, including Zylam 20SG Systemic Turf Insecticide, which was introduced in 2011.



- Is odorless, mixes easily in water and can be applied by multiple application methods.
- ZYLAM Liquid, which contains dinotefuran, is a soluble liquid labeled for insects such as aphids, borers, thrips and lace bugs in trees and shrubs.
- Labeled for drench, bark banding, soil injection and foliar applications.

**For more information:** [www.pbigordon.com/zylam](http://www.pbigordon.com/zylam)

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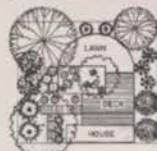
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# Randy Newhard

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**COMPANY:** New Way Landscape & Tree Services

**LOCATION:** San Diego

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**Can you think of any milestones in your company's growth?**

We picked up very large contracts with Lincoln Military Housing. They have a long-term contract with the government to take care of navy and marine homes and they helped us grow quite a bit.

We were around \$4 million then, and helped us grow about 50 percent about eight years ago now. We used to do a lot of municipal work in 1990, about 15 different cities in San Diego County, which helped propel us forward. Now we don't do anything except the Port of Long Beach.

**What has changed most about your company as it has grown? What has stayed the same?**

Our attitude has always been about the customers. It's all about taking care of the customers and finding the right employees who grasp that.

How people view us has changed. We're not a mom-and-pop company anymore. We are competing against the top companies in the country. I think our quality of work has escalated in the last 15 years, and building strong relationships with our clients is the number one driver in the business. It's all about communication and relationships.

We were one of the first landscape companies in town that offered an online tracking system for work orders. People could call, fax, or email it to us and it got uploaded to our website the next day so people could view it and monitor the progress – was the sprinkler fixed? Was the tree stake

straightened? Was the storm debris picked up? Clients could get a monthly report of everything that happened on their site.

We could also send it out to property managers to share to their board members or landscape chairs or higher ups, we give them a password login and look over the work orders and when they got completed.

So I think we were the first to do anything like that. Katherine DeJong, our president, actually wrote the program for that for our company. It saves phone calls.

**What mistake have you learned most from in your career?**

Everyone needs accountability. We don't micro-manage, but over the years we've learned that you can't just leave people alone and assume they are going to do everything 100 percent. It's human nature that if nobody's looking, things fall through the cracks.

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

Define who your client is, who you want to be your client. Then get involved in the organizations that they are involved with. Build a relationship with them.

You can always get jobs by being the lowest price, but once you find out what associations they belong to, get involved in those organizations and that way they can see you care about their organizations and hopefully you can get some business opportunities through them.

I had a chairman that has a house over in Arizona and I found a gardener over there who followed along these same lines. I told him to join these organizations and now he's up to 40 clients and sends me an email about every quarter telling me how well he's doing and thanking me for giving him that information. L&L

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