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NOVEMBER 2012
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TruGreen president resigns, pg. 14

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New truck trends, pg. 80

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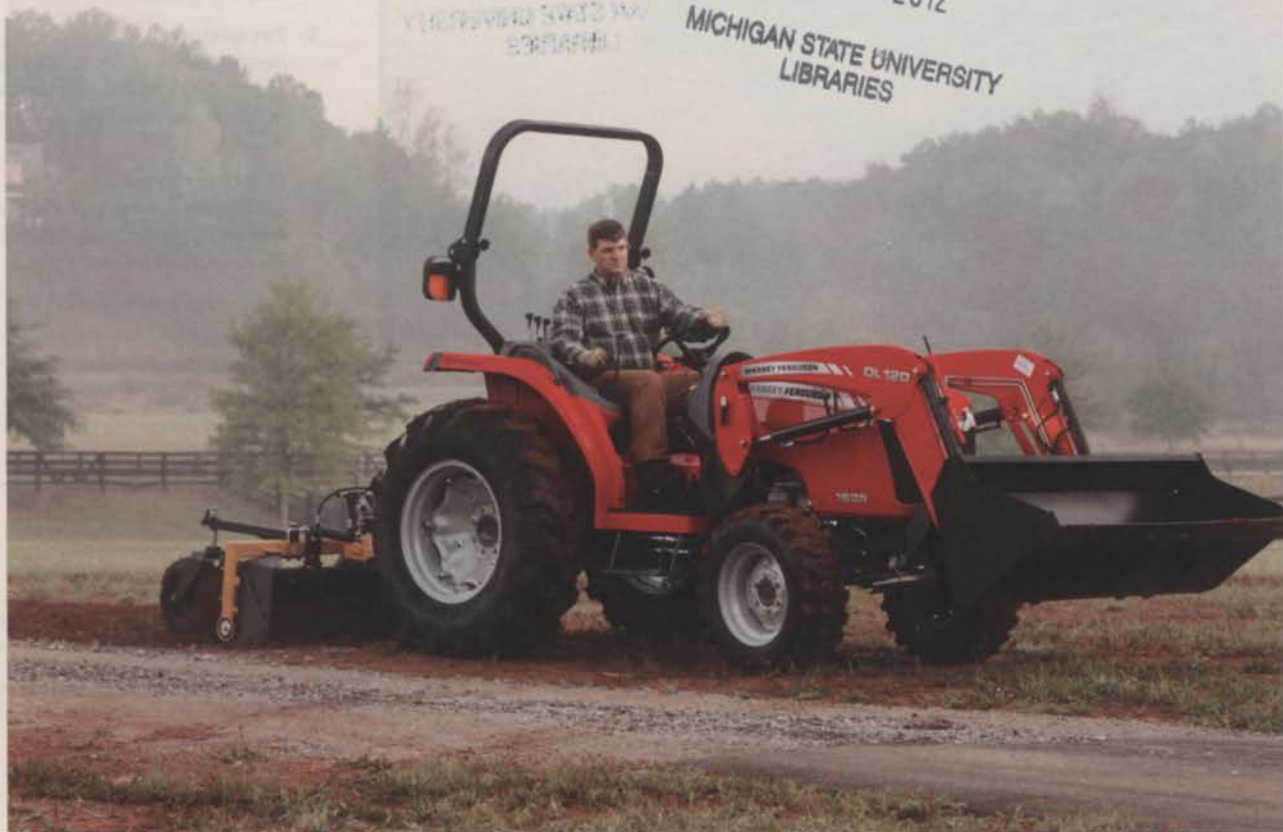
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ONLINE CONTENTS

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

Trade show season

Attending a trade show is a great idea to help your business. You find products, information and connections all in one place, which can be an effective way to help your company.

But it's not as easy as just showing up. In fact, a trade show can be a bad experience if you don't know what to expect. "It's such a sensory environment," says Susan Friedmann, The Trade Show Coach. "Between all the sounds and visuals, you are just overwhelmed with messages coming at you ever which way." If you don't have a plan for a tradeshow, you can be easily distracted.

"That's why the more focused you are in this environment, the less easily you are going to be distracted from what your real mission is because it's really easy to go off course," she says. For trade show tips, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "Friedmann."



For more tips on handling trade shows, turn to **Formulas for Success** on **pg. 54** >>

POPULAR POSTS

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

Caterpillar group presidents retire

Rich Lavin and Gerard Vittecoq step down after a combined 65 years at Caterpillar. bit.ly/catpresretire

Small businesses hiring and spending less but expecting more

Don't look to small businesses for a vote of confidence in the economy. bit.ly/SBhiring

Judge overturns Douglas County Commissioners' approval of Sterling Ranch water appeal

The plan had been approved based on years of hearings and testimony of county and other water engineers. bit.ly/LLsterling

Should Utahns alert neighbors to pesticide use?

Family sounds alarm after dog dies; official notes notification would be costly. bit.ly/LLpestutah

MIX IT UP

The Grasshopper Co., with the help of *Lawn & Landscape*, has released the first mobile app for tablet technology specifically for landscape maintenance contractors. It's called *MOWmentum* and it provides grounds maintenance professionals valuable information to improve their businesses. New issues, available for free download in Apple and Android app stores, will be released quarterly, with relevant content for the

respective season. The second issue featured seven tips for smarter service diversity. As you enter the back half of the year, think about changing your service mix the right way.

The goal of the app, through stories, videos and photo galleries, aims to provide industry benchmarks and resources to assist contractors in their operations. Download the app for iPad:

bit.ly/mowmentum or the Android: bit.ly/mowmentumdroid.

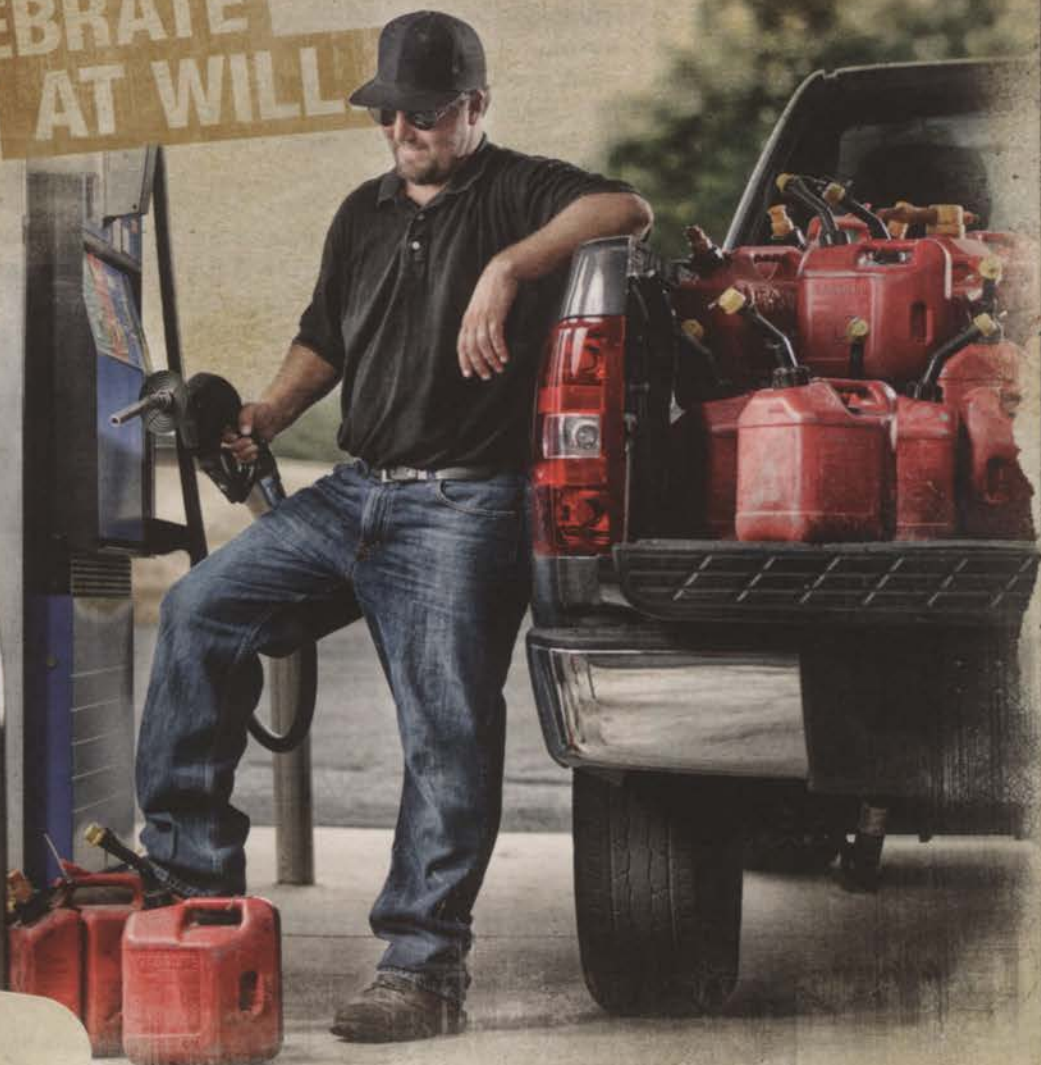


We not only produce a magazine every month. We blog too! And we don't just stick to the green industry – anything is fair game, music, movies, food, we'll write about it, and sometimes even tie it into your world. So if you need a break, just check out our blog, From the Field at www.lawnandlandscape.com/blog. If you don't have time to check it daily, make time to read it on Fridays when we do a weekly round-up.



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To finish, you have to start

Attul Gawande is a general surgeon, MacArthur Fellow, contributing writer at the New Yorker and leads a WHO program. He has more degrees and letters after his name than this poor journalist will ever have.

In his latest book, "The Checklist Manifesto," Gawande talks about how simple checklists have helped doctors in ICUs

across the country reduce infection rates to statistically zero. They make sure doctors remember stuff like *wash your hands before operating* and *cover the patient in sterile cloths before you cut him open*. Not rocket science, but easy enough to overlook in a crowded operating room.

The checklist programs started with nurses, the people doing most of the hands-on work with patients day to day. They really caught on after hospital administrators gave nurses the power to call out doctors when they missed key steps on the list.

Gawande describes three types of problems these lists help solve: simple, complicated and complex. A simple problem is like replacing a light bulb. It has a few steps that anyone could accomplish, and repeat. A complicated problem is one that involves lots of people

and decisions, but can be divided into many simple problems – like launching a rocket.

A complex problem is one that has hundreds or thousands of variables that require many decisions and experiences and specialized knowledge, but that aren't easily predictable or repeatable. Like building a business.

This month, Allan Davis writes for us about the overwhelming mountain of tasks that every landscape contractor faces when he's building his business.

Not what he has to do to *run* the business – schedule crews, buy equipment, pay people, sell – but what he has to do to *build* it. The stuff that's so easy to push into tomorrow or next week, especially when you have all those fires to put out.

The key, as Allan explains, is not to try to do all of it at once. Pick one thing and do it, then do the next one. As long as you can articulate what the most important stuff is, and you work on the most important stuff, the most important stuff will get done.

It's not a perfect system, and you won't get everything accomplished overnight, but the only way to tackle a complex problem is to get started somewhere. – *Chuck Bowen*



They make sure doctors remember stuff like wash your hands before operating and cover the patient in sterile cloths before you cut him open.

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L&L INSIDER

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A children's garden planted with love and friendship

A young girl's Bat Mitzvah project offers a lasting memorial to her friend.



Cassandra Cohen received help from more than 85 volunteers for her Bat Mitzvah project, which honored her friend, Alexa, who lost her battle with cancer.

Cassandra Cohen and Alex Weiner loved to play in the garden.

When 13-year-old Cassandra Cohen led the restoration of a children's garden for her Bat Mitzvah project, she did so not only with aesthetics on her mind, but something deeper.

She wanted to create a lasting memorial for her best friend, Alexa Weiner, who died of brain cancer when she was 10 years old.

The two met at Temple Ahavat Shalom Preschool when they were just three years old.

Days at the Northridge, California preschool often found them playing together in the Temple garden, watering the plants, digging in the soil and getting dirty like kids do. But that garden would eventually become a way to honor Alex after she lost her five year battle with the disease.

When it came time to choose her Bat Mitzvah

project, Cassandra's eyes turned toward the little garden where she had first played with her young friend.

"My goal was to create a Mitzvah project that the kids at the temple would enjoy just like I did when I was at the preschool," Cohen said. "I wanted to create something beautiful to keep my best friend's memory alive."

After raising more than \$7,500, Cassandra and her crew of eager volunteers turned what had become little more than a 20 x 100-ft. stretch of dirt, weeds and broken planting beds into Alexa's Kinder Garden, a rich, interactive "five senses garden." Cassandra designed the space with the help of her father, Scott Cohen, owner of Green Scene Landscaping and Pools.

Scott said the project took weeks to coordinate and five 4-man crew days for in-house teams to pre-



pare so the volunteers could complete the installation in just a weekend.

"I felt a tremendous sense of pride to be working side by side with my youngest daughter to design and install this memorial garden," Scott said. "She did a super job raising money for materials and rallying volunteers to join up in the cause.

"When she was alive, her best friend Alexa was so much a part of our family that I always thought of her as another daughter of my own.

"Losing her was extremely difficult for everyone. Somehow, in a small way, this garden installed in her honor helped ease the pain a bit. I like knowing that she will be remembered."



Cassandra Cohen stands with a memorial honoring her friend Alexa.

The Green Scene donated the labor to do the demolition, grading, hardscape, sprinklers, and assist with lawn and planting installation. Here are the vendors that either helped sponsor the project, and/or sold the company product at half price.

- Yosef Irrigation Supply
- Designcraft Pottery
- Foorhill Soils
- Angeles Block
- Bamboo Pipeline
- Southland Sod Farm
- Concrete Network
- Baskin Robbins - Northridge provided treats for the volunteers both days.
- Brent's Deli provided lunch the days for the volunteers.

ACROSS THE INDUSTRY

BASF goes biological

FLORHAM PARK, N.J. — In a billion-dollar deal, BASF acquired horticulture technology company Becker Underwood.

With the purchase, which is expected to close by the end of the year, the German manufacturer would gain access to a wide range of coatings and biological technology to complement its already strong foundation of insecticides, herbicides and fungicides.



McDougall

The deal continues BASF's move from a focus purely on plant protection to one on plant health.

We caught up with Nevin McDougall, senior vice president of BASF's Crop Protection Group in North America to learn more about what this acquisition means for the company and the green industry at large.

You can read the full interview at www.lawnandlandscape.com by searching "McDougall."

Lawn & Landscape:

What motivated this purchase?

Nevin McDougall: I think the top line of the story here is addressing the changing needs of our customers and broadening our portfolio to have broader range of solutions to address the changing needs of the marketplace. Whether that's the row crop market, the

turf industry, landscaping, ornamentals – clearly our customers have a lot of changing needs.

Not only traditional pest management, but also nitrogen management, water management.

We felt the acquisition of Becker Underwood made a very nice complement for our existing activities.

L&L: Can you tell me why BASF is taking a stronger focus on plant health, and what that means for you guys in the current market?

NM: From past years of experience we've had in plant health, we see a growing opportunity to provide additional productivity or efficiency for our customers through products that provide

more than traditional disease or insect control. With the acquisition of Becker Underwood, that allows us to tap into other technologies such as biologicals that may have other plant health effects that we can then commercialize and bring to a global market. We see that plant health as a fundamental growth driver in the future.

L&L: Are we likely to see a move toward adjuvants being co-packaged with fungicides?

NM: That's hard to say. It's really dependent on the formulation tech, the active ingredient and the stability of the formulation development. In some cases that is happening, in other cases it's not, so I can't say it's a general trend by any means. – *Chuck Bowen*

Brackett resigns as TruGreen president

Hank Mullany takes over as interim head of the lawn care giant.

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Less than a year after being named to the post, Tom Brackett (above) has resigned as president of TruGreen LawnCare.

The news was announced in an Oct. 12 SEC filing by TruGreen's parent company ServiceMaster.

Brackett resigned effective Oct. 9, according to the filing, and will be replaced on an interim basis by ServiceMaster CEO Hank Mullany.

"Tom informed us last week of his decision to resign from the company," said TruGreen



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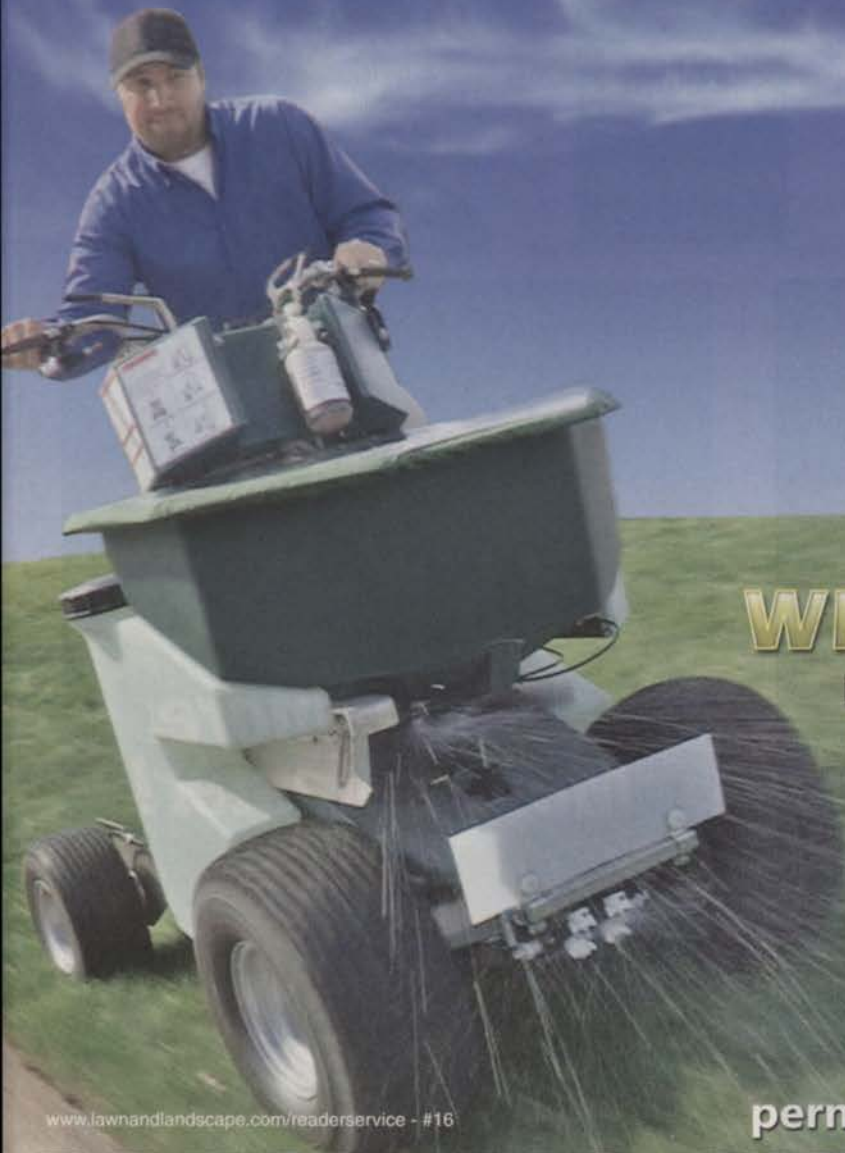
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spokesperson, Alison Boyle. "We've immediately started the process to search for a new president of TruGreen. We will look at all candidates and most likely hire externally."

Brackett moved to TruGreen from Terminix when Stephen Donly resigned as president in May 2011. For seven months, he oversaw the lawn care company while continuing his role as president and CEO of Terminix. Brackett was named president in December 2011.

During his 20-year career at Terminix, Brackett helped the business grow to become the first

TRUGREEN pest control company to surpass \$1 billion in revenues.

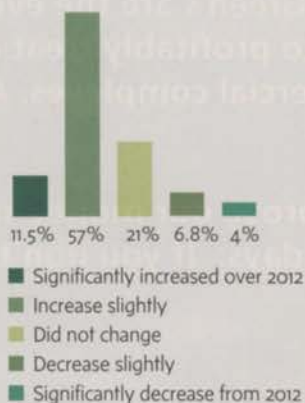
He joined Terminix in 1992 as a branch manager in Miami, and was promoted to division vice president in 1997 and eventually, president and COO in 2006.

R RESEARCH

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What do companies whose gross sales are less than \$200,000 predict will be the fastest growing service for your business in 2013?

Mowing maintenance
31%

- 26% Design/build
- 17% Lawn care
- 7% Irrigation
- 4% Trees/ornamentals

What marketing methods do you use to obtain new business?

98%
Customer referrals

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- 56% Company website/email marketing
- 30% Yard signs
- 24% Yellow page ads



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CLIMBING THE LADDER

Hires, promotions and career advancements

Ruppert Landscape has added **John Baker** as network administrator at the company's corporate headquarters in Laytonsville, Md.



Baker

Baker, a resident of Frederick, Md., brings more than five years of industry experience and has held positions as an IT help desk manager, project manager and network engineer prior to starting with Ruppert. He holds a bachelor's degree from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. In his role as network

administrator, he will be responsible for all internal computer, server and network operations at Ruppert Landscape's headquarters as well as the company's 15 branches.

Kim Lewey, co-owner of Lewey Landscaping & LawnCare, a Raleigh N.C.-based, full-service landscaping and lawn care company, has been named president-elect of the 2012-2013 board of directors for the National



Lewey

Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) Greater Raleigh chapter.

Lewey has served on the local board of directors for four of the last five years in various positions including director of corporate relations and director of community relations.

In her new role, she will be responsible for leading organizational and various community outreach initiatives.

NAWBO Greater Raleigh equips Triangle area women entrepreneurs with the support, resources and opportunities necessary to grow their businesses and sphere of influence as community thought leaders.

James Whitaker was promoted to district manager of Heron Pest Control.

Whitaker began his career in the industry more than 24 years ago and has held many leadership roles such as sales manager, VP of operations, state certified operator in charge of lawn, GHP and termite, and then owning his own company, which he sold in 2009.

Whitaker joined the Heron Pest Control team in September of 2009 as a branch manager at its headquarters in Apopka, Fla., and was recognized as Heron Employee of the Year in 2011.



Whitaker

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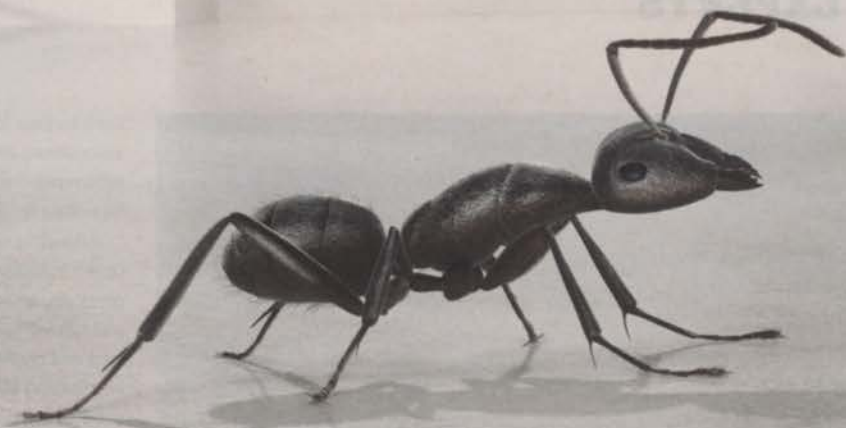
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ASK THE EXPERTS



SUNSHINE AND MENTORS

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 exploring the option of moving to Florida and would like to find a way to keep our operation running in Maryland as well as starting up a company in Florida. Have any Trailblazers done this or explored this option, and could they give me some advice?

A: I originally worked in Wisconsin and then moved to Naples, Fla. Having come from Wisconsin, I assumed the off-season in Wisconsin would coincide nicely with the busy season in Florida.

However, I soon found that there was quite a bit of overlap in seasonality. Knowing what I do about the Maryland market, there would be even more overlap in seasons since your downtime in Maryland is far shorter than it is in Wisconsin.

In order to keep the business

functioning in Maryland while you start a business in Florida, you would have to have a very strong person who could run your Maryland operations in your absence. You would have to be able to rely on this person to manage all of the day-to-day operations. This person would have to be trusted to make many financial decisions for you.

They would basically have to act as an "owner" while you are in Florida. People like that are difficult to find since, if they have those traits, they most likely would want to own their own company.

One last note: I found the competition in Florida to be brutal

and the pricing very low compared to pricing in Wisconsin. I would imagine the pricing would be low compared to the Maryland market as well.

Judson Griggs,
Landscape Industry Certified
Manager

Q.: How do I go about finding a mentor to help me increase my knowledge of managing a successful and profitable business?

A.: Finding a mentor is a great idea and can produce positive results for all involved. For the mentor, it is a great way to give back to the landscape community and for the mentee it provides assistance that can be invaluable as he or she grows and builds a business.

One way to find a mentor is to ask the people you know who they would recommend as a good mentor or if they would be willing to mentor you. This industry is very close-knit and rarely have I ever seen an industry member not be willing to help a newcomer.

Look to your local or national associations and see if they can recommend someone who would be willing to mentor you.

Attending events like PLANET's Green Industry Conference (GIC) gives you an opportunity to meet and talk with some of the industry's best and brightest members. Networking at events like this is another good way to find someone who would be willing to work with you.

PLANET members have access to its Trailblazers program, a personalized networking and mentoring program for emerging and established companies to gain insight and advice on developing and growing their businesses. It's free to PLANET members and over the years has helped create many long-lasting friendships.

There are individuals with landscape contracting experience – business consultants and business coaches – who would also be great mentors, but they offer their services for a fee. As with any service, you need to select someone you are comfortable with and who has the experiences that would help you grow your business.

Another opportunity to increase your business knowledge is through peer groups, where a number of contractors come together to discuss issues they are facing in their businesses. These groups are often led by a consultant or coach who acts as the facilitator, asking questions and keeping the conversation moving in a positive direction.

This method allows group members to share experiences, learn from each other, and hold each other accountable. **L&L**

Rich Wilbert, Landscape Industry Certified Manager, SiteSource Business Coaching

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One Tough Animal



MARTY !

MARTY GRUNDER is a speaker, consultant and author; he owns Grunder Landscaping Co. www.martygrunder.com; mgrunder@giemedia.com



Living in the present

Well, fall is here and winter is right around the corner, so I thought it would be helpful if I shared with you what my team and I are working on right now and what the landscapers I coach are doing as well.

Smart landscapers take some time to review the year gone by and plan for the upcoming year.

So, this month, take some time to think. Take some time to dream. And take some time to plan. I find most landscapers need help in the following areas, so to help jump start your planning process, give thought to the following:

How is your hiring? Do you have several key people? Do your key people have their successors in place? Give some thought to the "who, what, where, how and when" of your hiring. When you

look at each and every member of your team, you need to ask yourself one of my favorite questions: Given what you know about this person now, if you had a chance to rehire them, would you? If the answer is maybe or no, then you have your course of action clearly laid out. Train them and make them better or do both you and them a favor and terminate their relationship with you.

What are your sales goals for next year? Given those goals, how many people do you need to achieve those levels?

What does your organizational chart look like? Do you have the right people in the right places?

At Grunder Landscaping Co., we talk a lot about hiring the *right* people, not just people. We have found that our culture drives everything. My friend and

bestselling author Joe Calloway says "culture drives results." That is so true. When you get the right people on your team, they will naturally do the right things.

And when people do the right things without your asking them to do that, you have the right culture and momentum is in your favor.

How are sales? How can you generate more sales? Are you happy with your sales levels? Do you have sales goals? If you have a sales force, do you have weekly sales meetings? What are they like? Do you do them every week? If your answers aren't what you would like for them to be to these questions, then you know what you need to do.

For starters, the best landscaping companies enlist all their people to help with sales. The question

becomes how you do that. A simple meeting with your best people discussing how they feel you could make more sales will often lead to some awesome ideas.

It's then up to you as a leader to take those suggestions and implement what you can and then communicate clearly what and why you cannot implement the others.

I see landscaping companies realizing gains in sales just by doing a lot of small things like placing door hangers at the properties that are next door to the ones you are working on, asking clients for referrals and giving your crews a small commission for the leads they get you that materialize.

Little things can make a big difference in sales, so start looking.

What about your work orders? Are your work orders written on the back of the paper placemats you used from breakfast at your favorite morning stop? (Mine used to be like this.)

Or do you not even use work orders and simply tell your teams what to do every morning in what some refer to as the "morning circus?" I could go on for days about the power of work orders done well. Let me just say this.

Do your work orders under the impression that you will not be available when the work is to be done. Put together everything you can to make the job clear, especially how many hours you have budgeted for the job. If you just do this, you will become more efficient.

I hope I have motivated you to have a conversation with your team and ask them how you can find more of the "right" people, make more sales and be more efficient.

Remember, as my mentor and friend Dave Sullivan says, "all planning is good." So, if you believe that, what are you waiting for? **L&L**

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Wide awake

Zech Strauser showed up late to an estimating class I was teaching in January of 2003 at the Cook College Campus, part of Rutgers University in New Jersey. Zech was late because his office was 90 minutes from campus, and he was pretty spent from plowing snow all night after a big storm. But to his credit, he made it – physically. Mentally was another story as I had to help keep Zech (and many of the other students) awake during the day.

Zech, an admitted workaholic, founded Strauser Nature's Helpers in 1998 at the age of 20. As a kid growing up in northeastern Pennsylvania, he was home-schooled and loved being outdoors. He played in the woods and helped his parents in the garden. He started landscaping in 1991 at the age 13 mowing fairways and greens at a local golf course. His working in the landscape industry was a natural extension of his love for the things green and natural. He says, "I started this company with a \$25 push mower. I learned that if you get help from the correct people, good things can happen."

The company. After taking my class at Cook College and sleeping through much of the second day, Zech thought it a good idea for the two of us to meet one-on-one. A couple of days before our meeting, Zech called me to tell me that his entire field crew – all three guys – had abandoned him. In Zech's customary entrepreneurial style, he

decided that we needed to meet and plan a new future for him and his company – a resurrection of sorts. We met, created a strategic plan and a detailed budget for the upcoming year, calculated all of his pricing and thought through some of the key hurdles that Zech was facing. At this point, the only person in the company was Zech. To his credit, Zech saw what most would see as a serious setback as an opportunity to reshuffle the deck and start over.

And it worked. He hired new employees, rebuilt his team and pressed ahead. By the end of the year, he was well on his way. A solid foundation was in place upon which to plan for future growth.

Today, just nine years later, Strauser Nature's Helper, is the dominant full-service landscape company in its market. Strauser Nature's Helper has a staff of 20-22 at the season's peek and five full-timers.

As for product/service mix: 60 percent of revenue comes from commercial maintenance and snow, 15 percent from residential maintenance and snow, 22 percent from commercial and residential installation and 3 percent from Christmas decorations.

Robin Petras is a landscape designer and in charge of horticulture services and sales. Duane Walck is the maintenance services supervisor and account manager. Stephanie Stashluk is in the office manager and in charge of accounting and human resources.

What makes Strauser Nature's



Zech Strauser has more than 20 employees and continues to grow.

Helper unique? Per Zech, "In our market, we are the largest and most service-focused company. We can meet the needs of any kind of client for all phases of landscape and snow work."

Why should you do business with Strauser Nature's Helper? Zech adds, "We offer a full service option for clients and are great at meeting client's goals. We offer more services ... than other companies while being price-point competitive."

The future. The future looks bright at Strauser Nature's Helper. This is, in no small part, due to Zech getting married in September 2011 to his longtime sweetheart, Mary. He's still a workaholic but is exercising more, working on his diet and generally working smarter. The two biggest challenges for SNH are operating efficiently and profitably in a more competitive market, and finding

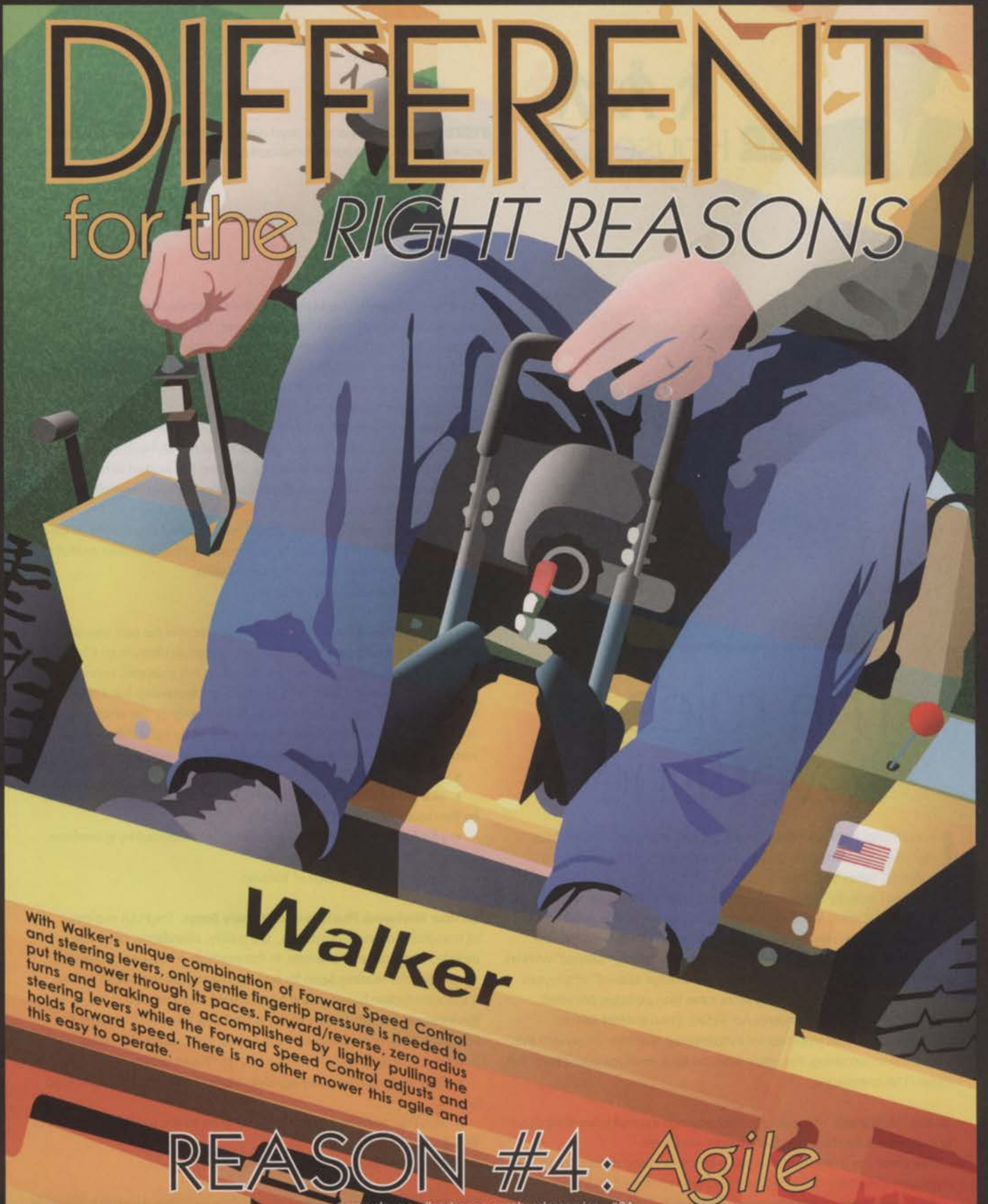
and training future field staff. The biggest opportunity for SNH is to continue growing by maintaining its 90 percent renewal rate. If they keep their renewal rate high, growth is inevitable.

The main goals for the next five years are: to grow sales by taking advantage of their reputation and broad product/service mix, and to improve the bottom line through training current staff to work more efficiently and take advantage of technology.

Zech is committed to improving his technological base. Strauser Nature's Helper is currently implementing a new computer system that totally integrates accounting, estimating, work orders, scheduling, job costing, etc. Full implementation will take some time but the new system should provide many of the tools necessary for Strauser Nature's Helper to grow more quickly and profitably. **L&L**

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STEVE CESARE is an industrial psychologist with the Harvest Group, a landscape consulting group. www.harvestlandscapeconsulting.com; sc Cesare@giemedia.com



The rules of overtime

In an attempt to simplify their payroll process, many landscapers have made several positions (e.g., foremen, estimators, office managers) "salaried" rather than "hourly."

While I ardently disagree with those decisions, the fundamental problem is that some landscapers mistakenly believe that "salaried" employees do not have to be paid overtime wages. That is not the case.

"Exempt" employees do not have to be paid overtime; "salaried" workers are not always "exempt." Accordingly, "non-exempt salaried" employees must be paid overtime when they work more than 40 hours per week.

Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), a non-exempt salaried employee can sue an employer for miscalculated overtime. To prevent this problem from occurring, this article provides basic overtime calculations that foster FLSA compliance.

40 Hour Workweek. This example involves a non-exempt salaried employee who receives \$400 for a standard 40 hour workweek.

The employee's regular rate of pay is \$10/hour (\$400 divided by 40). The employee's overtime rate is \$15/hour (\$10/hour multiplied by 1.5).

If this employee works 55 hours in a workweek, the employee must receive the following:

- the stated salary (\$400),
- plus \$225 (\$15/hour multiplied by 15 overtime hours),
- for a total weekly wage of \$625.

50 Hour Workweek. This example involves a non-exempt salaried employee who receives \$400 for a 50 hour workweek. The employee's regular rate of pay is \$8/hour (\$400 divided by 50). The employee's overtime rate is \$12/hour (\$8/hour multiplied by 1.5). If this employee works 55 hours in a workweek, the employee must receive:

- the stated salary (\$400),
- plus \$40 representing the difference (\$4/hour) between the regular rate of pay he already received as part of his salary (\$8/hour) and the overtime rate (\$12/hour), multiplied by all hours (10) worked between 40 and the 50 hour salaried workweek (\$12/hour minus \$8/hour) multiplied by (50 hours minus 40 hours)),
- plus \$60 in overtime wages for all hours worked beyond the 50-hour workweek (5) for which he did not receive salaried pay (\$12/hour multiplied by (55 hours worked minus 50 hour workweek)),
- for a total weekly wage of \$500.

37.5 Hour Workweek. Due to cost cutting efforts over the past several years, many landscapers have reduced their employees' workday from 8 hours to 7.5 hours, resulting in a 37.5 hour workweek. In this example, a non-exempt salaried employee who receives \$400 for a 37.5 workweek has a regular rate of pay equal to \$10.67/hour (\$400 divided by 37.5). The employee's overtime rate is \$16/hour (\$10.67/hour multiplied by 1.5). If this employee works 55 hours in a workweek, the employee must receive:

- the stated salary (\$400),
- plus \$26.68 for all hours worked (2.5) between 37.5 and 40 multiplied by the regular rate of pay (2.5 times \$10.67),
- plus \$240 for all overtime hours (\$16/hour multiplied by 15 overtime hours),
- for a total weekly wage of \$666.68.

40 Hour Workweek Plus Non-discretionary Bonus. The FLSA requires all non-discretionary bonuses (e.g., job quality, attendance, safety) be included in overtime calculations. In this example, a non-exempt salaried employee who receives \$400 for a 40 workweek (\$10/hour) also earned a \$200 production bonus during a week in which he worked 55 hours. In this example, the regular rate of pay is \$13.64 (55 hours multiplied by \$10/hour plus \$200 bonus) divided by 55 hours). The overtime premium is \$6.82 (regular rate of pay (\$13.64) multiplied by .5). This employee must receive:

- \$750 in straight time pay (55 hours multiplied by \$10/hour) plus \$200 bonus),
- plus \$102.30 (15 overtime hours multiplied by the overtime premium of \$6.82),
- for a total weekly wage of \$852.30.

Summary. These examples illustrate overtime incidents. They do not include shift differential pay, fluctuating workweek or double-time pay scenarios, which are more complex. To remain legally compliant, you should periodically audit their overtime procedures, and ensure all calculations are made within the context of the FLSA and relevant wage and hour laws. **L&L**

Implement those ideas

The follow up to trade shows is as important as going to them.

Conferences, trade shows and small-group meetings with industry peers can become a huge brain dump. You'll take notes on more ideas than you can count. With your motivation and mojo for the business completely stoked, you head back to the office to deal with the daily fires, and all of those great ideas are filed away for "later." John Rennels, president, A Plus Lawn and Landscaping, knows the feeling.

Here are some tips on how he deals with the problem.

Prioritize the ideas. Go through your notes and decide which ideas could be implemented in the short-term, and which are more visionary, long-term concepts. From there, choose a few ideas you'd like to implement right away.

Ask for feedback. Consult with trusted advisers, whether industry peers or an informal board. Gather their input on the priorities you selected. Can they be implemented? What must be done to take action?

Set some deadlines. By sharing your ideas with others, you create a system of accountability. Ask those individuals to hold you to your promise to implement the ideas, and set a timeline. "Perhaps you meet with them regularly in person or over the phone to discuss your progress," he says.



Gaining an edge

Joining a peer mentor group has changed John Rennels' outlook on business and helped him create pathways for success so key employees can excel.

In July 2008, John Rennels almost missed payroll. He had just paid off his \$37,000 long-term debt, and was still running his growing business on a cash basis despite its size. "I didn't have a handle on my expenses," admits the owner of A Plus Lawn and Landscape in Lawrenceburg, Ky. When he came scathingly close to not being able to pay his team, "I realized there was a big problem," he says. "I had to figure out what I was doing or not doing and get it fixed."

Rennels says the incident was "self-inflicted" because he had not mapped out expenses and was making decisions on whether or not there was money in the bank. "I was still working in the field at that time, putting in 80-plus hours a week, and I think a lot of business owners find themselves in that role – no time to take a look

at what is going on," he says. "Then you end up making snap decisions."

Fortunately, some accounts rolled in just in time for Rennels to cut paychecks – but that close call was out of his comfort zone. "It was enough to scare me to pay attention and learn," he says.

That's when Rennels joined a peer group called The Leaders Edge, led by consultant Jeffrey Scott. Rennels had been in business since 2003, grown the organization from maintenance to include lawn care and design/build services, and hired several employees. And he had taken a green industry accounting class a few years prior – when he realized he was actually paying 40 percent of his clients to maintain their properties. (Switching them to monthly flat-fee payments fixed the problem, and no one got upset.)



they meet target goals throughout the year. Jeffrey Scott is facilitator.

By taking turns meeting at different companies' facilities, members gain an intimate understanding of each operation. Those meetings generally last several days, with one full day dedicated to the host company, and the other days split among the group as members review progress, discuss business issues and set goals.

Right away, Rennels and his peers assembled standardized financials so they could easily compare numbers. "If I see that one company is paying 8 percent less for insurance than we are, I can investigate...are we getting a bad deal?" Rennels says. This is an example of how standardized reporting illuminates numbers for the entire group.

"Getting our financials straightened out and into a format where I can get feedback has been huge," Rennels says. "It's a situation where you get totally naked with these people – not literally, but figuratively. Everyone's information is totally exposed."

DEVELOPING THE TEAM. After the meeting, Rennels instituted rapid improvement plans, where key employees who want more responsibility in the company set one-, three- and five-year goals.

"A lot of times, employees just sit back and expect things to happen instead of taking an active part in making them happen," Rennels says.

He adds that as an owner, he was not doing anything to show them a path. And that has changed dramatically. "You have to train employees so they understand, 'For you to grow, the company has to grow,'" he says. "We have to actively create opportunities for people – it doesn't just happen by accident."

Rennels adds that in this economy, everyone must be a salesperson every day. "I'm trying to teach that ownership thinking of if you want extra you have to do extra," he says.

Mainly, three key employees are involved in the rapid improvement plans. These are workers not currently in management who would like to be in leadership roles.

Based on those goals, Rennels is reviewing the company's numbers and what it will take to push those employees into manager roles.

Ultimately, the business will need to do more volume. So, if a lawn care client's average annual contract is \$400, how many clients must be added net year to achieve a goal? And if 250 lawns must be added, how will this happen?

"We are rolling back those numbers and figuring out what we need to do to get where they want to go, and coming up with an advertising and marketing plan, looking at internal practices and seeing if there is anything we can do different," Rennels says. **L&L**



down upon, as in, what do I have to offer?" he says. He quickly found out this was not the case. A Plus Lawn and Landscaping was ahead of the game in the marketing and advertising department, but the company financials were straggling behind. This

didn't surprise Rennels.

Rennels' Leaders Edge group includes about 10 companies that take turns meeting at each others' businesses twice a year, and they gather via phone conference two times each year. There are a number of mentor groups in The Leaders Edge program. In between, "team" meetings with a few companies are held via phone to work out problems one member company may be experiencing. And the group members are constantly checking in with each other as

Over the years, he had been working to fine-tune his business practices, but work in the field continued to draw him away from number crunching. But 2008 was a wake-up call for Rennels, he says. And joining The Leaders Edge has made all the difference for his business. "We have been very blessed to grow every year since we have been in business," he says. "But now, it's more on purpose than an accident, I guess."

TOTAL EXPOSURE. Rennels was a bit apprehensive when he attended his first meeting of The Leaders Edge. He was one of the smallest companies in the group in terms of revenue. "I was worried that I might be looked

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Infected impatiens

Seasonal color installations are under threat from a disease spreading across the country.

By Chuck Bowen

Millions of flowers are prime targets this season for downy mildew, a cousin of pythium that's ravaging landscapes across the country.

Colleen Warfield, corporate plant pathologist for Ball Horticulture, is one of the leading researchers focused on downy mildew. She says the disease, while devastating in the areas it impacts, can be managed by sharp-eyed contractors.

WHAT IT IS. Downy mildew is a fungus-like organism or water mold, Warfield says, related to pythium and phytophthora that attacks *Impatiens walleriana* and interspecific hybrids with an *I. walleriana* parent as well as a few types of wild impatiens.

The disease has been identified in 32 states as of press time. Most are clustered on the eastern seaboard, from Maine to Florida. In the late summer and early fall, outbreaks occurred throughout the Midwest and in Oregon and Washington.

When impatiens started dying late last year, many contractors thought it was just frost damage, or a fluke. "Everyone knew there was a problem but no one thought this was a disease," Warfield says. "Now we've got it in all these states."

WHAT IT DOES. Infected plants can look healthy – it takes up to 14 days for the velvety-white spores to grow big enough on the undersides of leaves to be seen with the naked eye, Warfield says. But by then, it's

● As of Oct. 17, impatiens downy mildew has been identified in the landscape in 32 states.



Above: a bed of impatiens after downy mildew hit. Right: the tell-tale white spores on the underside of foliage.



Solve Tough Challenges the

First Time

While fluctuating weather conditions can present a different set of challenges each season, one thing remains constant:

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While pests such as grubs, weeds and crabgrass can be found on turf across the country, it's also important to stay on top of more regionalized problems, such as *Poa annua* and a long list of other weeds, including kikuyu and ryegrass. These challenges often require re-treatments.



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Solve Tough Challenges the

too late. Once it arrives, it hits hard, turning once-lush mounds of pink and white flowers into a tangled mess of gnarled stems.

"Anyplace it's been introduced," Warfield

says, "the picture I just sent you, that's the end result."

The downy mildew pathogen has been in the United States since the mid-1800s,

but scientists don't know where this latest outbreak started, or what's causing it to spread so quickly. Warfield says fungicides with the active ingredient fluopicolide have been effective in treating the disease, and that she hasn't seen it build a resistance. But, she cautions landscapers to always rotate their products as often as possible.

Researchers don't know if spores can live in landscape beds that were infected. To be safe, Warfield recommends not replanting with susceptible plants and instead rotating in alternatives like New Guinea impatiens, which have shown high levels of resistance, or other appropriate varieties.

WHEN IT HAPPENS. The pathogen seems to tolerate warm days, but when evening temperatures drop into the upper 50s or lower 60s, that's an ideal time for the disease to develop, Warfield says. Combine that with "free moisture" – a rainstorm, or a few overcast days of drizzle or just a good layer of fog – and you'll see the disease develop. All it takes is four hours of leaf wetness for the spores to infect the plant.

"You will never know when spores have landed on the plant," Warfield says. Studies on similar spores have shown that they can travel hundreds of miles through the air. "There's no reason to think downy mildew can't" do the same, she says.

And two plantings on one property could be affected differently. A tight grouping of impatiens in the shade, with little air movement, could be devastated, while the same variety planted 20 yards away in the sun perform as advertised.



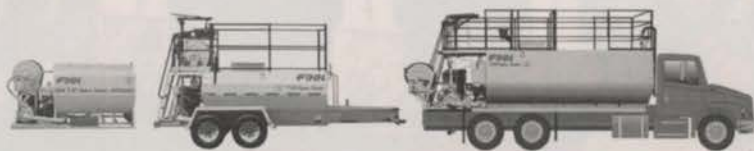
Damaged beds should be replanted with new varieties to avoid recontamination.

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JUST THE FACTS

IF YOU INSTALL

Or maintain a property with bedding impatiens, here's what you need to know and do to prevent downy mildew from devastating your accounts.

Work with your grower to make sure she's using preventative fungicides on her crops. That can keep the disease from ever making it out of the gate.

Rotate the beds you plant with impatiens, or mix up massive plantings with other varieties. Monoculture can be dangerous.

Consider alternative shade annuals like hypoestes, sedum or other species of impatiens, like New Guinea, which have shown high levels of resistance to downy mildew.

Use preventative applications of fungicides. They're more effective than treatment after the disease is identified.

Tear out and burn or bury any infected plant material.

WHAT NOW? If you have infected impatiens on their hands, remove the offending plant material as soon as possible, then bury or burn it. Don't replant the same species, and start thinking about alternative plantings.

"Don't leave it in the bed longer than absolutely necessary," Warfield says.

Also, be sure to verify your plants are preventively treated at the greenhouse. Warfield stresses that fungicides applied at the greenhouse won't give season-long control of infected plants.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS. Warfield says that, while impatiens downy mildew is bad news for many landscapers and growers, it's not the end of the world. A similar pathogen – coleus downy mildew – hit in 2005 "and didn't kill the industry," she says. Careful planning and aggressive treatment can prevent widespread damage.

Researchers continue to study the disease, and its effects on the landscape. Warfield says

it can be managed, but contractors have to remain vigilant; there is little margin of error.

"It is a sporadic thing, it's really hard to predict," Warfield says. "If they're located in

a region of the country where it's been seen, it's a big threat." **L&L**

The author is editor and associate publisher of Lawn & Landscape. Email him at cbowen@gie.net.

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Case Skid-Steer Chipper Attachment

The pitch: Case offers tree trimming and land clearing clean-up with a skid-steer chipper attachment.



- The Case chipper has two mounts, so it can be set to feed in front or to the curb side.
- A four-position manual valve controls the hydraulic feed roller with variable feed roll speed.
- A built-in hydraulic jack makes feed roller maintenance quick and easy.

For more information:
www.casece.com

ECHO Bear Cat Wood Chipper

The pitch: The ECHO Bear Cat 4-in. CH4400 Wood Chipper is replacing two



- 4.5-in. chippers, the CH45342 and CH45390.
- The new model provides improved productivity with a double-banded belt drive to guarantee an equal transfer of power from engine to chipping blade
- This machine has a 404cc Overhead Cam Subaru Engine.
- This chipper is equipped with two reversible, heat treated 1/2-in. threaded chipping blades.

For more information:
www.bearcatproducts.com

EDGE Mulcher

The pitch: CE Attachments' new standard-flow EDGE Mulcher attachment is designed for efficient mulching of brush and small trees.



- Equipped with a safety pusher bar to force brush or small trees down and allow the mulcher teeth to contact the lower part of the brush.
- The rest of the plant is mulched as the machine moves through the working area up to 1 in. below grade.
- Features include 104 carbide-tipped teeth for long tooth life, smooth operation and fine mulch.

For more information:
www.ceattachments.com

Loftness TimberAx Skid-Steer Attachment

The pitch: Loftness TimberAx uses an exclusive knife system to cut grass, vines, brush or trees up



- to 6 in. in diameter, or intermittently cut material up to a foot in diameter.
- The 17-inch rotor of the TimberAx features a reverse-rotation design to lift material off the ground.
- The knives are constructed of durable, low-maintenance alloy and can be sharpened directly on the machine.
- The TimberAx is available in 53-, 63-, 73- and 83-in. cutting widths and comes with a universal mount for attaching to all major makes and models of skid-steers.

For more information: www.vm-logix.com

Patriot Products Wood Chippers

The pitch: Patriot Products has manufactured two wood chipper models, one gas and one electric.



- The CSV-2515 features a 14-amp motor and a chipping capacity of 2-1/2 in. (diam.).
- Weighs 96 lbs.
- The CSV-2540B features two 12-in. wheels and a built-in handle for easier maneuvering, the ability to shred leaves and chip branches up to 2-1/2 in. (diam.) into coin-size chips.

For more information:
www.patriot-products-inc.com

Vermeer Brush Chipper



- The pitch:** The Vermeer BC900XL has the ability to chip heavily branched material up to 9 in. (23 cm) in diameter.
- The BC900XL features a large 9-in. x 14-in. (23 cm x 35.6 cm) feed opening.
- A 33-in.-diameter (83.8 cm) disc rotates at 1,400 rpm and features two steel chipper knives with two usable cutting edges.
- Two shear bars also have two usable edges to help extend wear life.

For more information: www.vermeer.com

Mainscape offer landscape maintenance and water management in eight states.



Rapid response

Mainscape monitors irrigation systems through a central control system, allowing it to immediately catch problems.

Two brothers started Mainscape as a college project in Indiana. Today it's a \$40 million company.

There's an equation that's helped it expand to eight states and nearly 600 employees on the rolls.

"We've always taken a very science-based approach to our landscape maintenance and water management programs," says Jeff Snyder, director of the company's irrigation and water management division.

"Along with that, we also rely on the latest technology to help enforce that approach."

The Fishers, Ind.-headquartered company specializes in agronomy, horticulture and irrigation management. And the latter, especially, has continued to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of the industry.

With the addition of a central control monitoring service to the company's water management offering, Mainscape is poised for even more growth.

ADDING CENTRAL CONTROL. When Mainscape added central control monitoring to its water management offerings in the fall of 2011, the company had already become quite familiar with the technology, says Snyder, who is based in Florida. "We've had clients that we've been working with for a while that were already either having somebody else do the central monitoring or we were doing it by



Mainscape relies on the latest technology to control and manage water.

subbing it out," he says. "It got to the point where it just made sense to bring it in house."

The primary benefit of making central control monitoring an internal process was the opportunities it afforded the company. "Mainly it was our ability to respond more rapidly to issues that were coming up," Snyder says. "We have a central control manager who now reviews each site on a daily basis and reports what is happening. It gives us the ability to not only respond more quickly but to provide a higher level of service. We are able to view all activities of the irrigation system from online."

With just the push of a button, Mainscape can now be notified of broken heads or zones that didn't run as scheduled. That allows a technician to be dispatched for a repair before the next regularly scheduled irrigation event. "We no longer have to wait for the client to tell us there's something wrong," Snyder says. "We know immediately and can take care of it much faster."

Clients are much happier as a result. With problems fixed quickly and systems running optimally, the performance of the landscapes Mainscape maintains has improved dramatically. "Having the system not only set up correctly but functioning at its best is



SELLING UPGRADES

Educating the client can close the deal when it comes to renovating irrigation systems.

Renovations and upgrades are a key part to a thriving irrigation business, yet they're not always the easiest sell – especially if a customer is satisfied with their system. Making successful upgrade sales relies on a few key factors, says Jeff Snyder, director of irrigation & water management at Mainscape. But in the end it all comes back to education.

Knowledge is power. Information really is critical in driving sales. "Mainscape's owner, Dave Mazanowski, has a philosophy that knowledge is power," Snyder says. "Our job as landscape maintenance partners with our clients is to give them information and educate them so that they can make the best decisions for their property. Once they understand, they often see the value behind an upgrade."

Water savings. Obviously one of the key benefits – and reasons – for a renovation or upgrade is improved water management. "We take a science-based irrigation maintenance approach so we have a strong focus on local water management," Snyder says. "So much water is wasted by a poorly maintained irrigation system. It comes back to educating the customer on why this is happening and how it can be modified."

Take it by zone. Snyder says that doing a zone-by-zone process that breaks everything down. All of that information is communicated to the customer with a huge spreadsheet. "We use that spreadsheet, and in some cases the customer is delighted and buys the whole project because of the cost benefit analysis," Snyder says.



really important," Snyder says. "We've seen the positive impact it makes on a landscape." The water management aspect is also quite important as this precious resource becomes scarcer, Snyder says.

"Most central control systems have on-site weather stations or are linked to weather stations that will make automatic adjustments to zone run times and perhaps run days," he says. "These adjustments are calculated based on default information loaded into the system such as soil type and its ability to receive and hold water. Precipitation rates, plant types, slope and even shade percentage can be entered into most systems to dial in the irrigation demand and allow the system to match that need. It's very science-based. This high level of water management can save a huge amount of water and money for a client."

It also simplifies the process. "Where central control makes most sense is larger properties with multiple controllers throughout the property,"

For more Water Works: www.lawnandlandscape.com/newsletters



Snyder says. "When you have a site with dozens of these controllers and attempt to make setting changes such as seasonal adjustments, it can become quite cumbersome. With a central control environment it's just one click that applies to everything."

Snyder says that the data central control produces has had the added benefit of helping the horticultural side of the business as well. "We can pull data up after a rain event and see just how much rainfall we had," he says. "A lot of our work is in Florida, and you can have rainfall that is two inches on one side of town and only a quarter inch on the other side. But instead of relying on the weather report, we can get that exact data from the system. Then we can make a decision whether we might want to hold our mowers off a day or two since the ground will be saturated." With all of these benefits, selling the use of this system hasn't been a huge challenge. Mainscape works with quite a few large communities that are developer-driven and



Snyder

Snyder says that it's been a fantastic upsell for that base.

"If a new home comes online, we are now able to make changes to the system from central control instead of sending a tech out every time," Snyder says. "The homeowner can get on the phone with our central control manager and we can operate the system remotely while we talk to them. It gives homeowners peace of mind that it's being dealt with right away. The developers we've worked with have found that to be worth the cost. They're used to dealing with large numbers, but when it comes to adding central control to their irrigation package, it's not an enormous investment for what you get in return. We're able to offer service at the highest level and have found developers are very pleased with those results. It allows for a much smoother turnover when the developer eventually turns things over to the homeowners association and that makes everyone happy." **L&L**

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7 reasons why people hate irrigation systems ...

And 7 ways to calm that anger.

By Alan Harris

Finally, fall has firmly settled in. The days are shorter, temperatures are lower and plant growth has slowed. In other words, the evapotranspiration rate is lower with each passing day, which means each day the amount of water required by the landscape is less and less. And yet, I still see irrigation systems watering the same amount this week as last week. I hate that.

And I'm not the only one. Here are seven reasons people hate irrigation systems.

1. OLD CONTROLLERS. Do you still have a rotary phone in your house? Does your cell phone still flip? Do you still listen to 8-track tapes? Controllers older than 5 years are not using the latest technology and are not watering the landscape in the most efficient manner.

2. RUN OFF. Once water starts to freely flow from the landscape onto drives and sidewalks, the soil has reached the saturation point and can not absorb any more water. The amount of time this takes to occur varies based on head type, soil type, compaction and slope.

3. MISTING. During a wet check watch the fixed spray heads to see if there is a misting effect. Misting is a result of high pressure and as much as 50 percent of the water is evaporating into the atmosphere before it can get to the landscape.

4. IRRIGATING WHEN RAINING. If it is raining for more than 5 minutes the irrigation system should be like your flip phone on a Delta flight: turned off.

5. BROKEN HEADS. At a minimum, a broken nozzle will emit 4 gallons a minute. If the zone is on for 10 minutes, 40 gallons of water were wasted. If the zone runs three times a week, 120 gallons were wasted. That's about how much water a person uses in a day.

6. SHRUBS BLOCKING SPRAY PATTERNS. When the irrigation system was first installed the landscape was young, so a 12-inch pop up head was tall enough. However, a mature plant often will block the spray pattern. A shrub (or sign) blocking the spray pattern means a higher concentration of water in one area and a "rain shadow" where no irrigation is reaching the plants or turf.

7. LEAKING VALVES. Sand, rocks and other small debris in the water system can keep a valve from fully closing. These are "invisible" leaks where just enough water gets through the valve to the lowest head and oozes out at a half gallon per minute, 30 gallons per hour, 720 gallons per day, 5,040 gallons per week. A small wet area in the gutter that never dries out and may have a slimy green, gray or brown coat is evidence of these silent water wasters.

If you have an irrigation system with any of these symptoms continue reading for the best cure.



Harris

1. Upgrade controllers to smart technology to accurately determine how much water a landscape needs.

2. Use a cycle-and-soak feature on the new controller so zones run for a shorter amount of time, but may run more than once per watering cycle.

3. Install a pressure reducer on the mainline to control the pressure. If installing new heads or upgrading a system use pressure regulating heads for even better control of pressure resulting from grade change. (Water pressure at the bottom of the hill is higher than the top of the hill.)

4. Install a rain sensor or an in-ground soil moisture sensor.

5. Install a flow meter along with the smart controller. If you have the right technology, the system will bypass the zone with the broken head and send a message to your smart phone to let you know there is a problem.

6. If the head is next to the building it may be able to be changed to a fixed riser. A conversion to drip may also be possible or, if the plant material is well established and is in an area with ample rainfall, a well-established shrub bed may be able to be weaned off of irrigation.

7. The valve has to be taken apart and the debris removed by a service professional.

To the irrigation professional some or all of these may be obvious. My question is, "If they are so obvious, why then do I continue to see a plethora of these problems?" Tweet your response to @h2oBloggers with #L&L or leave a message on Facebook at Water Bloggers.



Find a firm that fits

While vetting a consultant, consider these points.

There's no such thing as a one-size-fits all marketing plan. The answer to your advertising problems is not to just build a new website or to begin Tweeting every hour, on the hour. Before revving up to blast out e-newsletters, a consulting firm should take the time to understand what makes your business tick.

Marketing is personal, after all.

But with the unlimited webinars and seminars designed to steer you into social media, or pay-per-click advertising or the marketing buzz of the minute, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

"Businesses today are inundated with new opportunities," says Christian Klein, president of Company 119, an Internet marketing strategy firm in Cleveland, Ohio. But what you really want to know is how many customers will call you if you add X, Y or Z to your marketing plan.

"Businesses throw money at a new website and then the phone doesn't ring and they don't understand why," Klein says.

The marketing plan should be aligned with a company's sales goals. And a consulting firm should understand exactly what those goals are before making any recommendations.

Klein offers these pointers for vetting a consulting firm so you can be sure you're partnering



Great ex-scape

A robust marketing strategy is driving business forward for this Ohio design/build firm.

The way Bill Dysert describes his website is like this: "We had a nice, clean 2009 Chevy Malibu with 30-40 percent tire life left on it," he says, referring to a major overhaul that will result in a brand-new site launch in March 2012. "It was clean, presentable. But not cutting edge – not that Ferrari we wanted."

Faster, smarter, more attractive – Dysert wants the best for his Chardon, Ohio-based company, Exscape Designs. What owner of a small business doesn't strive to present that image of class and luxury, especially in

a business dedicated to creating outdoor spaces that deliver that vacation-at-home feel?

"Part of my character is that I always want to work with the best and have the best technology," Dysert says, relating how his high standards and limited bank account to spend on website and Internet marketing momentarily red-lighted his plans when he initially chose a firm that catered to companies with that Ferrari budget.

He just couldn't foot the bill. But more importantly, he recognized that he needed to

partner with a marketing expert that could relate to his small business and deliver a practical, workable strategy.

Ultimately, Dysert needed to reset his search for a marketing consultant and focus on finding a firm that matched his business size and scope. "The (other firm) was very talented, but I felt like there was no way I could financially make it work," Dysert says.

Test-driving an alternative resulted in a happy union, a robust marketing strategy, an e-newsletter that reels in business and a website that has double



with a pro that is focused on your best interests.

Talk numbers. What new sales do you want to achieve, and what are your current sales? Ask the firm how they can help you accomplish that number, because ultimately a marketing program should drive business.



The team at Exscape Designs

Introduce clients. Who are your customers? Be sure the firm fully understands your target market.

Share the past. What marketing efforts worked before? What failed? How much website traffic do you draw? "Talk to the firm about what your online brand is now," Klein says.

Trust your gut. Bill Dysert, president of design/build company Exscape Designs, felt confident that Company 119 was on board with his goals after the firm performed a thorough analysis of Exscape's existing marketing tools. "They came back with ideas to improve (our strategy) and let us make the decision based on what fit our budget," Dysert says.

the traffic it did before. Now, Exscape Designs is poised for future growth and preparing to use its website as a real business driver and lead generator.

"The need to make a good first impression online is critical because 65 percent of individuals under the age of 35 will search on Google and look for a com-

pany's brand long before they pick up the phone or go into a storefront," says Christian Klein, president of Company 119, the firm Dysert partnered with to refresh and reinvent Exscape Designs' marketing strategy.

A MARKETING MATCH. Dysert went into his search for a marketing firm with the notion that he needed a brand-new website to boost traffic and get the results he was seeking. He figured his current site just wasn't cutting it.

But that's not the feedback he got from Klein, who took a careful inventory of Exscape Designs' existing marketing efforts and resources and analyzed how each component was working to drive traffic and, ultimately, convert those hits into customers.

"We evaluated the site and we thought it wasn't embarrassing the brand, and it was helping him out," Klein says. Company 119 recommended that Dysert wait a year before investing dollars in a total site rebuild. Instead, Klein suggested that Dysert invest in photography so the existing website could be spruced up with compelling images of completed projects.

"We took a different approach than what (other marketing firms) were telling him at the time," Klein says, noting that a good firm will focus on matching a business's budget and sales goals with a program rather than pushing a company into expensive marketing projects, such as building a new site, that might not deliver the type of return on investment the company needs to see.

So Dysert's website got a refresh, and an e-newsletter was launched with great success. Company 119 holds a conference call with Dysert monthly to discuss the newsletter content so the firm can produce the editorial. Exscape Designs maintains the email list – specifically, the office manager is responsible for logging new customers and prospects, people Dysert meets at networking events, into the computer system.

The e-newsletter paid off on the first round. Within one hour

of sending it out, someone from the local chamber of commerce Exscape Designs is involved with called for information. "That resulted in a nice backyard patio project," Dysert says.

Aside from the newsletter, Exscape Designs invested in pay-per-click advertising to draw people to the site. "It's hard to tell how much traffic we got because (customers) forget how they found you exactly," Dysert says. But all of these marketing efforts work together.

And some efforts don't work so well anymore, such as direct mail. In the past, Exscape Designs sent postcards to a list of potential clients. "The last few years, the results we were driving from were very poor," Dysert says.

"We got very small projects, a very small return on investment. We were lucky to cover our cost with the amount of work we sold."

On the other hand, the work his e-newsletter is raking in will justify the expense of the new websites. "Quite a bit of work was generated right off the bat from email marketing," Klein says.

Klein also emphasizes the importance of a 360-degree program that includes traditional media like print advertising, an area where Exscape Designs readily spends each year.

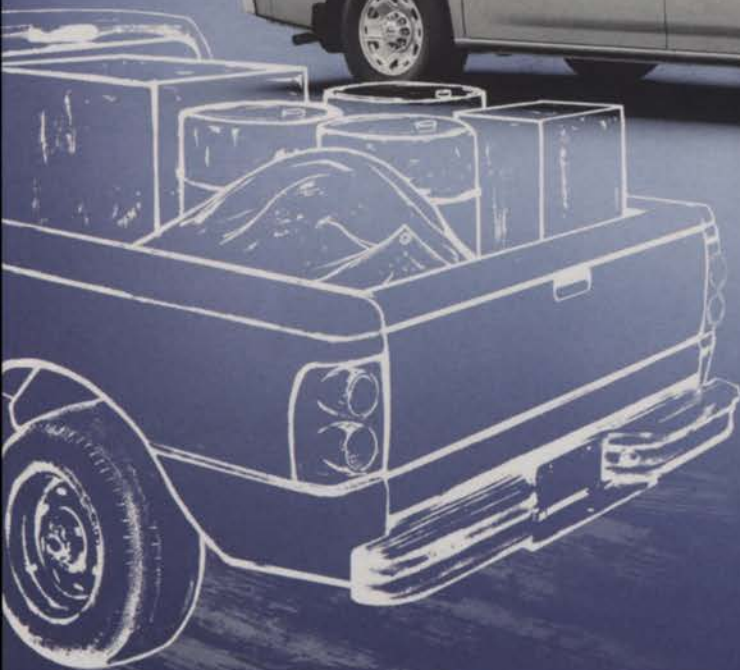
That can also mean that some "cutting edge" methods are not a fit, such as social media. "It's not for everyone," Klein says. **L&L**



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Shore up your bottom line

By Neil Moran

The increasing popularity of natural shoreline landscapes has some landscapers bathing in new revenue.

Landscapers who don't mind getting their feet wet may want to consider getting in on the ground floor of a potential revenue stream: installing natural shoreline landscapes. As concern for the aquatic environment grows, homeowners on inland lakes in the Upper Midwest are considering alternatives to costly and ecologically defunct breakwall construction.

"There is increasing interest in natural shoreline landscapes," says Ron Niewoonder, owner of Niewoonder & Sons, a landscape firm out of Kalamazoo that has installed several of these landscapes recently.

Niewoonder and other landscapers across Michigan are

taking advantage of this new revenue stream by becoming certified to install natural shoreline landscapes via the Michigan Natural Shoreline Partnership (MNSP). This program is a collaboration between Michigan State University (MSU), the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and other partners.

Certification will continue into 2013 in Michigan for landscapers and marine contractors who want to test the waters of this new market. The Michigan Natural Shoreline Partnership is providing the training to interested companies and has already certified 131 individuals. Participants must pass a

certification course that consists of three days of classroom training followed by installing a demonstration landscape along a shoreline property.

Bruce Snyder of Gull Lake Landscape Co. out of Richland. Snyder says he often taps into his existing customers who own lake front property as their primary residence or as a vacation home.

As for the tools of the trade, other than a good pair of hip boots, Snyder and Niewoonder say most of the tools and equipment needed is already in a landscaper's arsenal — shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows and a track loader. Another piece of equipment Snyder has found to be a labor saver is a backhoe with

the thumb attachment. This can be handy on properties with steep, sloping banks. The thumb attachment allows workers to move equipment and materials up and down the bank.

The real tool of this trade, however, is knowledge, according to both landscapers.

"It's all about learning the plant material, because the success of the landscape is based on the plants establishing themselves," Niewoonder says. Because of the omnipresent action of waves and ice along the shore it is imperative that the plant material be installed correctly.

Plants for these projects consist of deep-rooted native plants that can secure a shoreline

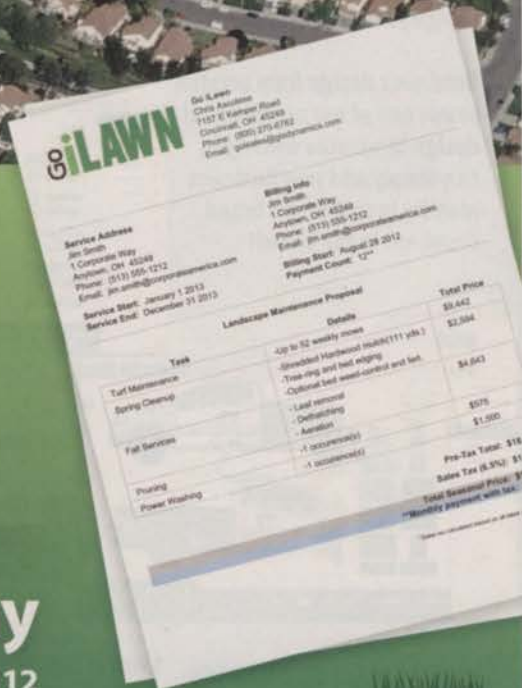
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against erosion, which is a constant threat to along shorelines.

Native plants specific to these installations can either be purchased locally or grown by

landscapers. Snyder is currently realizing an additional profit by growing his own native plants.

The profit margin for natural shoreline



Shoreline remediation makes sense for many landscape contractors.

landscapes is higher than traditional landscaping because the work is more challenging and it's a niche service.

"There's a 20-25 percent profit margin in this work," says Snyder, who is certified by the MNSP, but got into installing natural shoreline landscapes before certification was even available and is now reaping the benefits. He gets three to four calls per month to install one.

Follow-up maintenance is required mostly for weeding, a low profit margin service Snyder begrudgingly offers to satisfy customers and to ensure these landscapes are successful.

"You can't have the kid down the street do the weeding," he says, adding that it takes an educated eye to know the difference between a native plant and a weed.

MAKING THE SALE. A natural shoreline landscape isn't an easy sell to a homeowner. Snyder says he gets on his soapbox as often as he can to expound the virtues of aquatic landscapes, which he tells clients help improve the ecology of a lake and is at the same time aesthetically pleasing.

However, he says homeowners don't always take the word of a contractor like himself who will be doing the work. He said what really convinces folks to make the switch from unnatural breakwalls and riprap is to see other people around them take the plunge. It is then that they start to realize they're making the right choice for the health of the lake.

"There is the satisfaction and comforting thought that they're doing the right thing for the body of water they live on," says Snyder. "They also like the 'up north' cottage type look of a shoreline landscape."

In addition, some lakefront property associations, townships and counties are now requiring a riparian buffer of native plants



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Projects make sense for customers with vacation homes on the water.

back from the water's edge to prevent chemical discharge into critical waterways.

While curbing erosion is necessary for a natural shoreline landscape, there are more reasons to have one installed.

These landscapes act as a buffer against runoff and, unlike traditional breakwalls, a natural shoreline landscape, with its deep-rooted shoreline plants, provides habitat for aquatic life. The tall plants that replace close-crop mowing along the water's edge also discourage nuisance geese who are leery of what might be hiding in the tall vegetation. "Native plants provide a lot of amenities to the shoreline that were there before," says Jane Herbert, a senior water resource educator with the Greening Michigan Institute of MSU Extension.

PERMITTING. One potential roadblock is the permitting process, which Snyder admits can be a downright pain and has discouraged some landscapers from taking advantage of this potential revenue stream. Snyder says landscapers should allow for a 90-day lead time for a permit to be

processed. If there is going to be a delay in processing the permit it will probably be attributed to an incomplete application. The best thing Snyder has found to expedite the process is to set up an appointment to see a MDEQ permitting agent and discuss exactly what they want from you so that the permit won't get kicked back or end up in a slush pile.

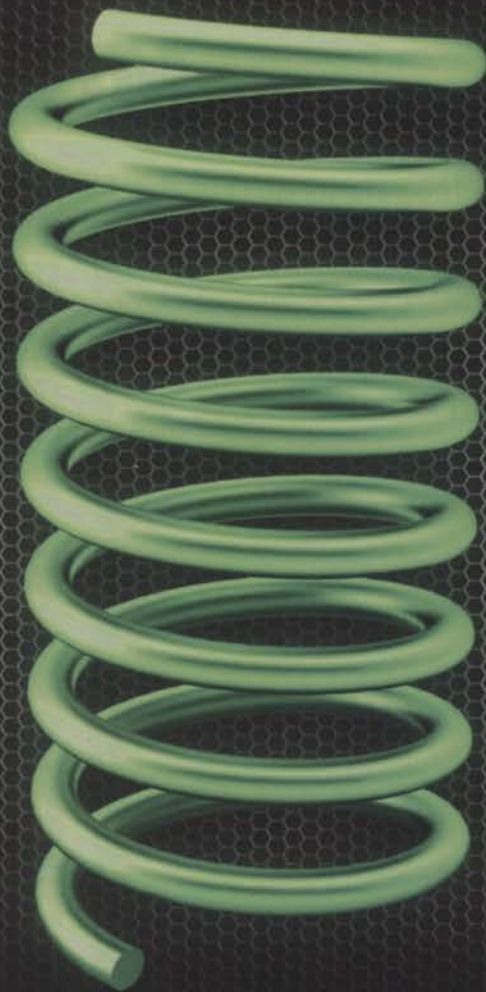
Natural shoreline landscapes are not only good for the environment, but also allow accessibility to the water for recreational purposes and can increase property values, according to John Skubinna, of the MDEQ and facilitator for the MNSP. This niche service gives landscapers an opportunity to diversify their business in this changing economic climate. **L&L**

Neil Moran is a horticulturist and freelance writer based in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.



MNSP has a website that includes future dates for certification training, current certified contractors, recommended native plants and a library of educational materials. Learn more at: www.mishorelinepartnership.org.

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A

B

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Club Car's Carryall 242

The pitch: The Club Car Carryall 242 is the most compact, economical utility vehicle in the company's history.



- Replaces the Carryall 232 and includes more leg room and increased comfort thanks to a shorter, more ergonomically designed dash and a spacious bench seat
- Offers speeds of 17-19 mph.
- Its tilting bed box carries 800-pounds, and fits into the back of a pickup truck.

For more information: www.clubcar.com

Cushman LSV 800 Street-Legal Utility Vehicle

The pitch: The Cushman LSV 800 is a street-legal utility vehicle to be used for management of large grounds.



- Has a maximum speed of 25 mph.
- With four 12-volt deep-cycle batteries, the LSV 800's 48-volt AC electric drivetrain can provide up to 25 miles of travel.
- It can also be equipped with Exceed Hybrid Technology, extending range to up to 150 miles between charges.

For more information: www.cushman.com

Husqvarna Utility Vehicle

The pitch: The Husqvarna utility vehicle HUV4421DXP is a multi-purpose machine that satisfies the requirements in forests, municipalities, industries and major gardens.



- Powered by 20-hp Kubota diesel engine
- All-wheel drive with automatic front and rear locking differential
- Vehicle load capacity is 1,200 lbs. with an 800-lbs. bed capacity
- Carries a two-year warranty

For more information: www.husqvarna.com

John Deere Gator Crossover Utility Vehicles

The pitch: The new John Deere Gator Mid-Duty XUV 550 and 550 S4 crossover utility vehicles have the ability to transport up to four people across landscapes.



- Provides 9 in. of wheel travel, and up to 10.5 in. of ground clearance to smooth out the ride.
- For the 550, you can choose from either standard high back bucket seats or bench seats. The 550 S4 comes standard with two rows of bench seats.
- Both vehicles have a top speed of 28 mph, and 4-wheel drive to quickly traverse all types of terrain.

For more information: www.deere.com

Polaris GEM 2013 Models

The pitch: The Polaris GEM 2013 Models are equipped with new standard features and customization options.



- New standard features on all 2013 GEM e2, e4, e, eS, eL and eL XD models include high-low beam headlamps for improved visibility while driving, and a day-night mirror that offers the ability to reduce reflective glare.
- Also included are improved front brakes, suspension technology borrowed from Polaris' powersports products, improved steering components for greater control and enhanced foot pedals.
- GEM cars reach a top speed of 25 mph

For more information: GEMcar.com.

Terex Hydrostatic Site Dumpers

The pitch: Designed with narrower dimensions and a tighter turning radius, the new Terex TA2H, TA2SH, TA3H and TA3SH site dumpers have enhanced maneuverability to work efficiently in tight places.



- Terex site dumpers are perfectly matched to the bucket capacity of a mini excavator and are ideally suited for congested job sites and the rental market.
- The new hydrostatic transmissions on these Terex dumpers drive through a new drop box and axles, providing smooth, clutch-less operation.
- Operators can now select the dumpers' directional drive through the steering column-mounted lever for ease of use.

For more information: www.terex.com



Knowing the limits

In a region where two young girls were killed by lawn chemicals, Kris Ashby wants his employees to be cautious with their treatments.

However counterintuitive it might sound, Kris Ashby, owner of Elite Grounds and Spectrum Landscaping in Pleasant Grove, Utah, applies chemicals precisely so that he can avoid using them at all.

"We spend a lot of time trying to prevent issues," says Ashby, whose nine-year-old lawn and landscape company handles mostly commercial maintenance and installation. With 60 employees, it is one of the largest landscape firms in Utah. "We're pretty aggressive, but because we're consistent, we don't use a lot of chemicals. For instance, we have a big push in the spring to make sure we get our pre-emergents down at the right time."

Elite Grounds, which Ashby founded in 2003 with business partner Mark Minson after working for three decades in the field, has always had a scientifically-driven focus on results. Yet for many landscape professionals

in Utah, a defining moment came two years ago when a tragic accident galvanized the industry to new safety standards.

In 2010, a pesticide worker treating voles applied large amounts of chemicals too close to a home, killing two young sisters in the Salt Lake City suburb of Layton three days later. The company was ultimately cited for more than 3,500 recordkeeping violations, and the worker responsible faced two counts of negligent homicide.

The untimely tragedy became a rallying cry for improving Utah's pesticide regulatory system; today, landscape companies are required to become licensed applicators. Previously, the system only required individual workers to become licensed.

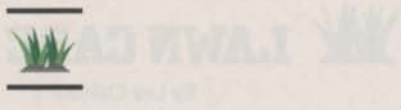
"A lot of companies dump chemicals because they let things get away from them, and they're trying to get things in line," Ashby

says. "We're very selective about chemicals. We believe in the integrated pest management approach of identifying the plant first, and then choosing the right chemical that is specific to taking care of the problem."

Although chemical applications are hardly the sole focus of Elite Grounds' work – the



Kris Ashby owns Elite Grounds in Utah.



firm maintains large commercial properties for cities and companies, has assisted Utah's professional soccer team with turf management and completes large landscape installations – it provides an apt metaphor for the firm's approach to business.

"I started Elite because I wanted to create a problem-solving company that has the experience and resources to give people real solutions," Ashby says. "We're very strong in chemical knowledge, and we've become a real partner with large campuses such as Novelle, which is an international software company here. We take care of their campus, and they like us because we have all the professionals to do it."

THE RIGHT WAY. The key to using chemicals properly, Ashby says, is to train your workers properly, invest in further education and take licensing and continuing education seriously.

"One of the differences between my company and a lot of others in Utah is that I built my company around the green industries – I have 17 licensed chemical applicators, a staff person with a bachelor's in soil science, three arborists and a licensed backflow technician," says Ashby, who got started in the industry in 1976 when he went into business with his father. "We cover the large needs of professional industries."

In addition to maintaining corporate campuses, Elite Grounds also works with a lot of smaller cities that don't have their own arborists or landscape professionals on staff. "There's a niche. If they need arborists, in a single call, they can have us do it."

The company even has a licensed right-of-way applicator and vertebrate animal pest management applicator. The former takes care of median strips in major roadways around Salt Lake City, while the latter is trained to safely treat animals like voles.

BEING GREEN. Some might find it ironic that Elite Grounds' strong chemical knowledge has actually led the firm to become an industry leader in the rapidly growing field of organic lawn care. Yet Ashby is not surprised and says it is a natural outgrowth of chemical know-how.

"We have a lot of lush gardens here, and

our lawns are a beautiful bluegrass and rye mix. Yet as water has become more and more of an issue, we've spent a lot of time developing water-efficient landscapes," he says. "With fertilizer costs going up and concerns about chemicals, we have also added organic programs to the company."

The results are impressive, Ashby says. "I've done organics on my home for 12 years now," he says. "For years, organics were a little pricey. Yet regular fertilizers are petroleum based, so they've skyrocketed in price in the last few years. Meanwhile, biological treatments have gone down in price and become more competitive."

EFFICIENT EQUIPMENT. Another major emphasis of Elite Grounds is on the productivity and efficiency of its equipment. It uses two-man mowing crews and has an in-house mechanic division. Because of its emphasis on efficiency, quality equipment and regular upkeep, the company is able to operate a robust fleet of 34 trucks with only 60 employees.

"We keep our equipment really efficient, and we're constantly buying new equipment that will keep us efficient," Ashby says. "Although it's leveled off recently, fuel prices have been going up almost a penny a day, so we're very conscious of fuel use too." **L&L**

You can read more Growing Green newsletters at www.lawnandlandscape.com/newletters.



More than words

Kris Ashby doesn't just preach safety; he wants it spread throughout his culture.

Last year, Elite Landscaping and Spectrum Landscaping had no reported accidents. Owner Kris Ashby says that this feat was accomplished by deliberately placing a high emphasis on safety making it part of Elite's employee culture.

"We do a lot of work to make that happen," he says. "Every week, we spend 15-20 minutes in our managers' meeting discussing safety. They discuss these items with employees as part of a tailgate safety meeting. It goes from the top all the way down."

Ashby says there are three basic ways that the

firm creates a safety-conscious culture. Taking proactive steps is key to ensuring your workers are safe, he says.

First, Elite Landscaping has policies in place to check that equipment is working properly. Elite Repairs is an in-house management company that continuously evaluates equipment, making sure safety features are turned on and working.

Second, the company has regular trainings for employees in Spanish and English. Every manager that has Spanish-speaking employees speaks Spanish as well as English. Printed safety materials and a policy manual are given to every

worker. Employees know that they are not to tamper with equipment that isn't working.

Finally, Elite managers place an emphasis on making sure that employees wear professional, safe attire and that they know that safety is a foremost concern. Employees always wear safety glasses and ear protection when necessary.

Additionally, they are required to wear hard hats during construction jobs.

In the end, the results are not only quite impressive, but also entice clients. "Having a good safety record is something that's really attractive to bigger projects," Ashby says.



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Renovation NATION

Lawns across the country are in need of some TLC.
Here's a 12-month plan to turn brown back to green.

By Carolyn LaWell

It's tough out there for turf. A punishing drought and glut of foreclosures have plagued the country. Both have led to neglected lawns and extensive damage. How to turn brown back to green? The solutions, while simple, can be complicated by time, technology and geography.

So when customers call asking for turf repair, the first question should be, "Why?"

That one word is the first that pops in the mind of Chuck Bettencourt, general manager of Nutri-Lawn in Chico, Calif., followed quickly by a series of follow-up questions: "What happened here? Is it a shade issue? Is it a pet issue? Is it an irrigation problem?" I go through that analysis to see if we go in and reseed, is this going to be successful or are we going to have a black eye?"

Laying down seed is probably a waste of your time, and your client's money, if a massive tree has cast a shadow on the backyard and left the grass all but dormant.



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"You have to really lay it out and say, 'This is what you can expect,'" Bettencourt says.

If the problem really is the turf, though – if it's been overrun by weeds and insects or just parched from lack of water during the summer – there are time-sensitive steps to rejuvenate your customer's lawn. Here's a seasonal guide on how to get grass to grow again.

FALL. Fall is the best time to analyze your customer's options. The weather is cooler and more rain falls, which means grass may show signs of growth and survival – and survival can mean the difference between laying seed or sod, and in how big of an area.



"If the lawn is completely dead, then we will tell people the best option is to start over," says Chris Lemcke, national technical director, Weed Man USA. "If it's a smaller lawn, sodding might be the best option as opposed to seeding it. If you want your lawn back quickly, then the best option might be sod. Though more expensive, in the end, it's quicker and you don't have as many weeds."

Laying sod costs about 10 times more than reseeded, Lemcke says, so if the grass shows signs of life it might not be the best option, especially in the fall, prime seeding time.

"The best time to seed is in the fall because the soil temperatures stay fairly warm and there's typically decent rainfall," Lemcke says. "The success of trying to repair a lawn is hinged on watering the seed afterwards."

If your customer has opted to reseed, there are a few questions to ask before taking action.

First, is there a sound irrigation system? How will the homeowner ensure the seeds get the water they need to germinate?

Second, what type of seed will you lay, and what are the parameters? Seeds require different irrigation and soil temperatures to germinate. A bluegrass will need to be watered for at least three weeks, whereas, a perennial ryegrass will need about five days, Lemcke says. Consider whether leaves will fall and hinder the seed growth, and whether a fall frost might snuff out the plan entirely. If the seed hasn't fully germinated, the frost will kill it and erase your work.

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Once you know the irrigation is in place and the temperature is right, you can move to the yard.

"We always recommend aeration with the seeding program," Lemcke says. "The aeration will help bring up the cores, allow the seed to get into the cores and typically germinate because it stays moist there. You need soil contact for the seed to grow."

This next step, top dressing, is where Bettencourt says he sees the most mistakes. "If you put more than 1/16th of an inch or so, the seed is not going to lift it off," he says. "The lawn tries to lift it up and can't break through. It almost acts like a barrier on top of it."

If you make the seed germinate more quickly, it helps the grass fill in sooner, and require less water. Weeds will be less likely to sprout. Soaking the seeds in a bucket of water works. Soaking them in beer works, too, Lemcke says. "I always recommend a beer for the seed and a couple for yourself," he says. A good IPA, maybe even a pilsner. Give your seeds an overnight swig in the fridge, then mix them with the soil.

WINTER. Want to reseed in the winter? There are a handful of options, all affected by temperature and irrigation.



You can try dormant seeding, which occurs when the temperature has cooled and the ground has endured some frost. "The seed won't germinate," Lemcke says, "but it will germinate in the spring time."

You need to consider whether the temperature will rise again and allow the seed to partially germinate. If that happens, the seed will die once the temperature drops.

Replacing small patches of lawn with sod is also an option during the colder months, says Bettencourt, who is located in the transition zone out in northern California. "You can do sod in the winter. If you can get it, that's perfect."

SPRING. If you can't seed during the fall, spring is the next-best time to repair turf. Again, so much



of the potential success depends on temperature and irrigation. Lemcke and Bettencourt still prefer September and October because the window of working time is open longer and the success rate is higher.

"If you're putting pre-emergent down to prevent crabgrass from coming in, then you can't put seed down," Lemcke says. "The other thing is soil temperatures. Two years ago we had really cool soil temperatures and a lot of people tried seeding their lawns and it just didn't germinate."

For situations like thickening a lawn hindered by shade, spring might be optimal to reseed. You don't normally worry about weeds then, Bettencourt says. "You have to really put yourself in the predicament where you go, 'Is this going to work or not?'" he says.

SUMMER. For reasons that should be obvious by now, summer is not an ideal time for repairing lawns – though it is an important time to prevent damage.



During summer droughts, you can educate your clients on how long their turf can last without significant rainfall before damage sets in. Also, make sure your customers have the right fertilizer programs in place. Lemcke recommends four applications for bluegrass, five for tall fescue and six or seven for southern turf like Bermuda and St. Augustine grasses.

"We really believe in slow release," he says. "That way, there's no loss of nutrients."

No matter what time of year your customer requests service, Bettencourt says to document the situation. Note the problems, your recommended actions and the client's final decision – preferably all on paper or computer documents.

"You have to weigh all of the options," he says. "If we come in and overseed, do this great job, and in three to six months it looks exactly the way it did, I don't want a client going, 'Why did I spend all that money?'" **L&L**

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



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Real conference take-aways

Conferences are information overload. How do you tease out workable ideas and put them into action? By Kristen Hampshire

READ ME!

In a word, conferences are overwhelming. It's like going to camp with hundreds of peers who love the same things you love, who understand the struggles, the climb to success, and the sweet stuff, too. They really get you. Industry main events like the Green Industry Conference (GIC) and

DON'T FORGET ME!

GIE+EXPO are where perfect strangers meet and find they have more in common with each other than they might with their own family members. (Though don't tell this to the loved ones taking care of business at home while you're gone.)

The thrill is there – and then

REMEMBER ME!

it's gone. Once you're back to the grind, your good intentions and those pages of notes and lists of ideas get benched until later." Whenever that is.

This month, *Lawn & Landscape* talks to three industry players on how they put ideas on that gruesome post-conference to-do list into action.

LandCare Inc.

Joy Diaz, executive vice president and CMO
Location: Las Vegas
Established: 1996
Employees: 60 in season
2011 Revenues: \$1.5 million
Customers: 80% commercial; 20% residential
Services: design, installation, maintenance, irrigation, arbor care

Igniting efficiencies

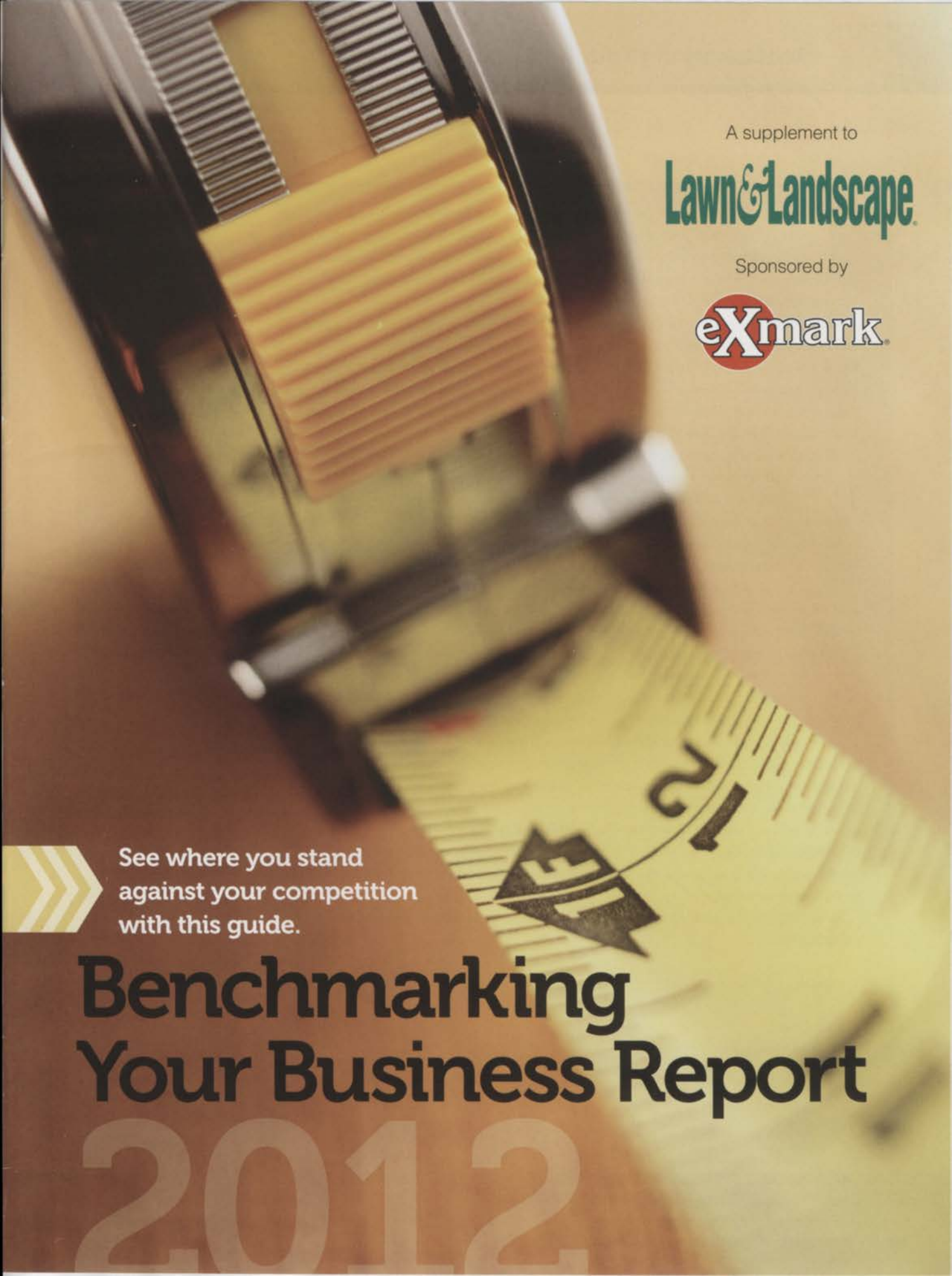
"Ware the original green, you know," says Joy Diaz of the landscape industry. But the daily grind of business and pressure to compete and succeed in a tough economy can tear even the most passionate owner away from the roots of this business. When Joy and her husband Rob Diaz, president and CEO of LandCare in Las Vegas, went to last year's GIE+EXPO, the impressive showing of new equipment geared to run clean caused them to reignite their internal sustainability efforts.

"We were impressed with all of the efforts our vendor partners were making to move toward more environmentally friendly, sustainable-type machinery – like trucks that get more miles per gallon and lighter-weight hand-held equipment," Diaz says. "That had a real impact on us and it was something we needed to revisit here at home."



Diaz

Diaz says her list of to-dos after the GIC was "horrendous." It was just overwhelming.




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Benchmarking Your Business Report

2012

The experience we have gained over the last 30 years gives us confidence that our industry stands stronger today than ever before. In fact, our extensive field work during the past 12 months reveals consistent customer feedback that landscape contractors see a slightly more stable business climate in 2012 than the previous several years.

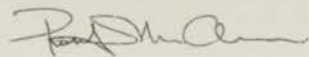
The current environment does not come without inherent challenges, which include pressure related to rising fuel prices, low consumer confidence, regulatory changes and low competitive pricing. To help offset these challenges, individuals have been forced to work harder and do more with less. Their efforts have not been in vain. A high percentage of companies believe that the recent turmoil has forced them to become better business practitioners than in the past.

We see the same improvements within Exmark. Much like the successful customers we serve, a bright future for Exmark will be fueled by our cornerstone values, which include meaningful customer interaction, collaboration and understanding. Exmark holds close the belief that hard work and ingenuity are prerequisites for business growth.

In the report that follows, you will gain even greater insight into the current state of our industry, including key data related to contractor spending, profit analysis and budget management. This includes tear-out budget charts for core service segments such as irrigation, maintenance, lawn care and design/build. In addition, you will learn about the importance of technology and its impact on your business, as well as the benefits of setting up a peer group to share best practices and benchmarking metrics.

Exmark is dedicated to providing our customers with the most durable, innovative and reliable equipment possible, through a dealer network committed to servicing the most important businesses within our national economy: the professional landscape contractor. Collectively, we will continue to find opportunities to help our customers become more efficient, productive and profitable in all aspects of their business, and to earn their trust daily.

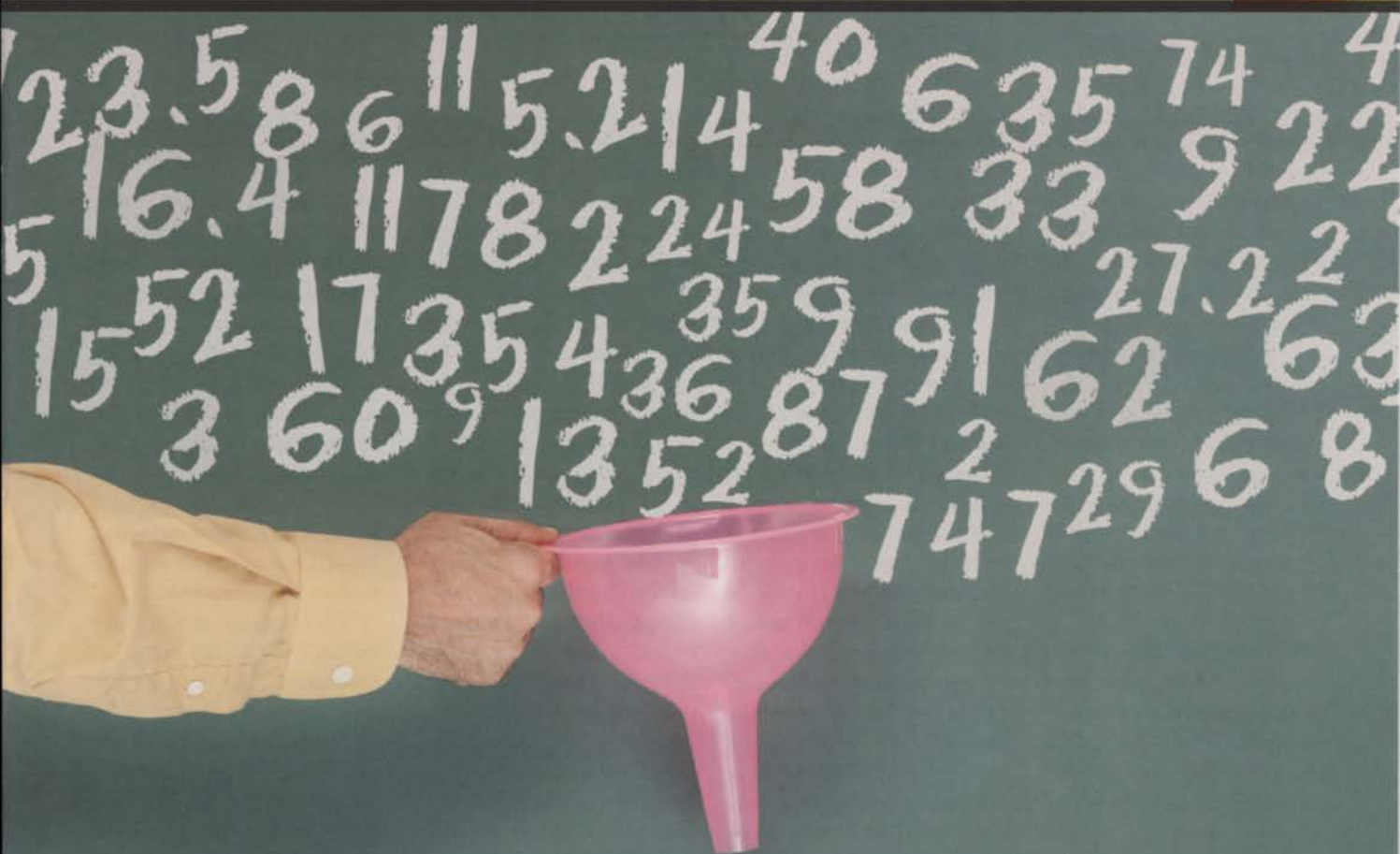
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Rick Olson
General Manager
Exmark



Rick Olson



Strength in numbers

Benchmarking groups give contractors a safe outlet to share data, gauge their performance and become a whole lot stronger.

In 2009 when the recession was full-blown, 40-year-old Eichenlaub landscaping took a 25-percent revenue hit. But owner Dan Eichenlaub kept his team intact and reverted to a carefully laid plan that had been reviewed by his benchmarking group.

"We knew what to do when we realized the leads weren't coming in," he says. "We began to make changes before we spent a lot of money – as soon as we knew we weren't going to sell the volume, we said, 'How do we control overhead and bring money to the bottom line so we can stay alive?'"

The next year, Eichenlaub recovered and the company began rebuilding its business. In 2011, the firm set a record, exceeding its highest revenues by 10 percent. "We'll do that

again this year," Eichenlaub reports. Eichenlaub says today, "Having a plan allowed us to weather the storm – that was a hurricane. It's knowing what to do and when, and that's why benchmarking is so important."

Any company that wants to go from good to great needs a solid plan, a timely and accurate set of numbers and a basis for comparison. "If you don't have a bar set, you can't raise the bar," says Chris Angelo, president, Stay Green, Santa Clarita, Calif.

SET THE BAR. "That's our baseline and we push ourselves to exceed those while maintaining our core values and the integrity of our operating systems and processes," Angelo says.

Stay Green participates in a peer group called Next Level Network, and Angelo has been

active in similar groups. "Over the last half decade, we have gone through some pretty challenging times and the industry, in general, has had to get leaner and create more value for clients," Angelo says.

"The landscape peer group has been particularly valuable during this downturn."

Numbers talk. Stay Green has continued double-digit topline growth annually, increasing its bottom-line profitability by 100 percent year after year. Sales went up 10 percent in 2012, with 26 percent overall growth and an 89-percent increase in profits.

At ArborLawn in Lansing, Mich., Jerry Grossi shares how participating in structured and informal benchmarking groups over the years has done more than help him keep numbers on track. He has tried new products suggested by peers, and more signifi-

cantly, transitioned the sales process from mainly direct telephone to Internet. "We are improving the efficiency of bidding work," Grossi says.

The sharing is reciprocal. "We can move quicker by sharing information with others," Grossi adds.

Benchmarking groups are helping businesses grow in the toughest economic times because they provide a network of professionals with similar goals and business structures. By comparing numbers, operational processes, marketing efforts, sales models and other business drivers, the groups' participants drink from a rich brew of ideas. They learn what works and what doesn't – they share lessons and avoid mistakes. Most of all, they hold themselves accountable to working their own business plans and reaching financial targets. "None of us is making

a plan in a vacuum," Eichenlaub says.

BUILDING A GROUP. Constructive feedback and focused business discussions keep Eichenlaub on track when he creates his annual budget and engages in short- and long-term planning for his company. He knows he's not alone in the process. "I can compare my plan to others," he says. "Are my numbers in the right place? Was I dreaming when I said I was going to sell \$10 million worth of work?"

"Plus, we talk about issues that will impact the plan," he continues. "What if we fall into another recession? How will fuel costs in 2013 impact the business. And it's (about) trends – what's happening out there. Is the housing market really recovering?"

This dialogue with peers has been especially beneficial

How we did it

Earlier this year, *Lawn & Landscape* editors – with the help of independent firm ABR Research – surveyed more than 600 of our readers and conducted dozens more personal interviews to pull together the 2011 Benchmarking Your Business Report. Read on to learn more about what companies across the country pay their employees, spend on equipment and how they're budgeting for 2012.

INDUSTRY OVERVIEW

2012 GROSS SALES	% of Industry	SALES FROM						SALES FROM	
		Maintenance	Lawn care	Design/build	Irrigation	Trees Ornamental	Snow & Ice	Single Family	Multi-Family
Less than \$50,000	18.2	57.8	9.3	10.6	4.8	5.4	4.1	76.1	5.0
\$50,000 - \$99,999	14.3	58.4	9.4	10.8	6.4	6.7	4.4	72.8	4.0
\$100,000 - \$199,999	15.0	44.2	13.1	17.5	5.7	5.6	8.0	66.1	4.0
\$200,000 - \$499,999	20.1	39.9	13.9	21.9	8.9	5.1	5.7	64.2	7.2
\$500,000 - \$999,999	15.0	32.1	14.3	27.2	7.7	3.8	7.4	59.4	5.8
\$1 Million or more	17.3	34.2	13.1	28.6	6.9	4.3	5.3	43.0	13.5
		44%	12%	19%	7%	5%	6%	63%	7%

ABR Research, Inc. (October 2012)



– and that brings to light the importance of who those peers are in the group. Eichenlaub belongs to LandOpt, a group of regionally-based landscape firms with revenues of at least \$1 million and a keen interest in improving all business practices. The total network is diverse in terms of commercial vs. residential clientele, service offering, etc. But Eichenlaub says the different groups within the network assure that participants are in like groups. For Eichenlaub, this means primarily residential, landscape management and renovation. “There are enough businesses that look like mine, so it works,” he says.

Grossi began benchmarking about four years ago when another landscape professional asked him if he was interested in sharing numbers. For some time, it was just the two of them and their key managers

trading numbers and sharing ideas. Then, they invited others to join. Today, Grossi and six other firms meet several times a year and their sessions are guided by a facilitator. The geographic diversity of the companies involved assures no competition among members.

The same is true in the group Angelo belongs to, called Next Level Network. This select group of regional landscape firms is focused on innovation and high performance. Angelo says it’s a strategic alliance among six of the best privately owned businesses in the industry.

“Being geographically diverse allows us to feel less threatened,” Angelo says, adding that the group swears confidentiality. “We are not crossing boundaries or finding ourselves bidding against one another. We are not recruiting each others’ team members.

So, that has allowed us to ‘get naked’ and be completely transparent – to put it all out there so we can be pushed, challenged and receive some proper feedback so we can grow as leaders and grow our businesses.”

Indeed, confidentiality is a key success factor for these peer/benchmarking groups. And so is company involvement. Peer learning is most effective when key managers are involved, too. Bringing in critical team members – sales, production, etc. – gets everyone on the same page. Angelo shares how Next Level Network holds its third annual Next Level University in early November. This year, 120 attendees from the six firms – from account managers to CFOs and managers on down the line – will come together for three days of workshops and peer training. “That is

truly taking it to the next level because all of us as owners and CEOs of our organizations are believers, and now we are getting our people on board,” Angelo says.

Grossi and Eichenlaub also involve key team members in their peer benchmarking activities. “It’s not just one person at the top who is communicating – the lines are very open so with every role, we can figure out what are the best management and trade practices we should be utilizing to move forward,” Eichenlaub says.

BY THE NUMBERS. You can’t change what you don’t measure. Eichenlaub says this fact is the crux of why benchmarking is so critical for business success. “Benchmarking is a tool – it’s a way for me to grow and compare my business and see where we’re at and how we

■ West/Southwest ■ East/Midwest ■ South/Southeast



		REGION			# OF EMPLOYEES				
Comm/ Industrial	Govt/ Institutional	West/ Southwest	East/ Midwest	South/ Southwest	1 - 2	3 - 4	5 - 9	10 - 24	25 or more
13.7	4.2	19.6	16.5	20.0	46.8	16.5	7.3	5.6	0.0
21.8	1.3	10.1	13.3	20.7	29.1	15.1	12.8	3.5	0.0
25.8	3.8	13.0	15.9	14.7	15.6	21.1	25.6	8.9	1.1
26.1	2.5	19.6	20.4	20.0	3.7	9.9	42.0	24.8	1.0
27.8	4.6	18.1	15.9	10.7	1.1	1.1	17.8	53.3	11.1
35.3	7.1	19.6	18.1	14.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	12.5	68.3
25%	4%	23%	52%	25%	21%	14%	24%	23%	18%
		\$897,464*	\$856,230*	\$623,500*	\$77,345*	\$130,159*	\$306,591*	\$619,676*	\$3,315,060*

*denotes average revenue for each category



"We are not recruiting each others' team members. That has allowed us to 'get naked.'"

— Chris Angelo

should change," he says.

By tracking his numbers carefully and comparing those with peers, he can gauge where he is on the roadmap. Is he headed toward the destination he outlined in his plan? Or, is he stalled at a dingy rest stop?

In order to properly benchmark with others, a standardized method of calculating numbers is absolutely necessary. "Some people put vehicles and equipment below the gross profit line so their gross profit might be 5 percent

vs. someone who puts truck and equipment above the line and reports a gross profit of 40 percent," he says.

In other words, where those numbers fall on the chart of accounts is critical. What line items are included matters. How the balance sheet is generated is a big deal. A standardized method helps groups compare apples to apples. How specific a group gets when sharing depends on its members' preferences.

Grossi's group uses PLAN-

ET's Operating Cost Survey as a benchmarking tool. He says the group doesn't necessarily swap numbers in terms of sharing pricing or dollars and cents on budget line items. They're more concerned about hitting those percentages and margins.

Angelo, on the other hand, says his group really digs deep and gets down to the nitty-gritty of those numbers. They focus on sales, but then break that number down by service line. They aggressively study

their balance sheets and cash flow statements. "I'd say that novices focus on the income statement – how big are your sales and bottom line. We really push ourselves on long-term solvency and reducing risk, so that is managed on the balance sheet."

He focuses on debt-to-equity ratios and fixed assets, working capital.

"We all have very strict accounting rules and systems where we are getting all of our financial data within 10 days of the close of the prior month, or at the end of the prior month, so we are able to respond faster if there are any lagging indicators," Angelo adds. "We keep leading indicators in front of us so there are no surprises at the end of the month when we review financial statements."

Accurate information gathering is the foundation of these peer groups. Without the correct numbers, there's nothing to compare. The numbers are meaningless.

Use the charts on pages 14-15 to measure your company against industry averages.

And having a peer group, or an industry mentor – another firm like yours willing to swap information and share ideas – can go a long way toward keeping your operation running smoothly regardless of the climate Mother Nature or Wall Street brings.

"Anyone who wants to take their company from good to great, or maybe even to just exist, needs to start figuring out their numbers and measuring them," Eichenlaub emphasizes. ■

Getting PAY-BACK

See how your pay rates stack up to industry averages and what perks and performance-drivers keep good people on board.



Location, location ... that's a key driver in pay rates for positions from mower operator to CEO. Cost of living, availability of labor and the skill of those workers, plus local economies all figure into the going rates for workers in the landscape industry.

But there's more to pay than doling out an average (or more) rate and expecting potential employees to clamor for a position at your company. Performance, skills, certification, and benefits weigh into the pay scale.

For one, pay can work as a competitive advantage, at-

tracting workers who might be considering minimum wage jobs in other service industries. "If you are going to have people do physical labor, you have to pay a bit more than the going rate," says Todd Pugh, CEO, Enviroscapes, Louisville, Ohio.

Pugh says his firm attracts

better employees because of workplace policies including pre-employment drug screening and background checks. Plus, the firm maintains a smoke-free environment. "We are looking to work with a little bit of a better person. If we are asking for a better person, we have to pay a better rate," he says.

Also, in Northeast Ohio where Enviroscapes is located, oil and gas companies are paying \$20 or more per hour for truck drivers. "They're guar-

anteeing them benefits and year-round work," Pugh says. "It's important for companies in our market, whether you're a landscaper or anyone who has to hire someone to work outdoors, to continually create better work environments."

That includes challenging workers to give their all and compensating them for their efforts. Pugh believes the greatest opportunity in the future is performance-based pay as a way to keep the most productive workers on board. "Every business has waste," he says, relating that number to about 20-30 percent. And that's a lot of extra fat. "If you take our business at \$9 million, 20 percent of that is almost \$2 million."

Getting top performance, which essentially means realizing the full investment of your labor expenses, means rewarding those who work hard for the business. "We can be hard on people in the field, and those are the guys we should congratulate more than we do because they are the ones out there making us money," Pugh says.

Pugh has come up with some creative ways to stoke performance, involving tracking daily and weekly estimated crew hours on a white board. Each branch sends in a report to home office each week, and these reports are shared with the entire company. The report includes estimated to actual hours, indirect time and enhancement sales. "It gives us a good snapshot of what is

Pay me my money down: What everyone's earning this year

Position	REGION			
	Average hourly rate nationwide	West/Southwest	East/Midwest	South/Southeast
Mower operator, entry level	\$9.40	\$9.40	\$9.60	\$8.80
Mower operator, experienced	\$12.50	\$12.50	\$12.90	\$11.80
Spray technician, entry level	\$11.00	\$11.00	\$11.40	\$10.00
Spray technician, experienced	\$15.00	\$15.30	\$15.80	\$13.00
Construction worker, entry level	\$10.50	\$10.50	\$10.80	\$9.80
Construction worker, experienced	\$15.40	\$15.20	\$16.30	\$13.60
Irrigation technician, entry level	\$11.10	\$11.90	\$10.60	\$10.60
Irrigation technician, experienced	\$16.00	\$17.00	\$15.70	\$14.80

Position	REGION			
	Average salary nationwide	West/Southwest	East/Midwest	South/Southeast
Crew foreman/leader	\$29,684	\$29,498	\$30,353	\$28,431
Designer	\$41,086	\$42,968	\$42,179	\$36,267
Architect	\$55,208	\$60,833	\$53,214	\$58,333
Account manager	\$41,155	\$41,259	\$43,378	\$38,089
Supervisor	\$41,675	\$42,359	\$43,935	\$36,383
Owner/president	\$65,886	\$71,865	\$67,268	\$57,850

■ West/Southwest ■ East/Midwest ■ South/Southeast





happening at each branch,” Pugh says.

“We are constantly sharing best practices among branches,” he continues. “And there is this branch competition by awareness of the numbers.”

So, how does your business stack up in terms of pay rates for employees and the programs you have in place to attract and retain top talent? Here is a roundup of pay rates throughout the country and pay trends on the radar.

STANDARD RATES. Entry-level mower operator pay rates depend on the availability and skill of labor, and what other service companies are offering workers. (Remember, you’re not just competing with other landscape firms here.) Jim Huston, president, J.R. Huston Consulting, says a starting mower operator in the northeast makes \$10-\$12, while the same position in the west/southwest garners about \$8-\$10.

The same goes for the South, while the Midwest matches the northeast’s \$10-\$12 rate. “It’s a matter of supply and demand,” Huston says. “And, it’s more expensive to live in the northeast.”

Major metro areas pay employees more, too. “The closer you get to a city center, the higher the wages go across the board,” Huston says.

A foreman in the northeast, midwest and high-end residential or city centers will make \$15-\$25 dollars an hour. In the South, Southwest and

“If we are asking for a better person, we have to pay a better rate.”

– Todd Pugh

West, \$15 is more average. “If an employee can work with minimal supervision, he or she is worth at least \$16 or in the low \$20 range,” Huston says.

In California, where labor rates are lower for entry-level workers, managerial wages are higher. “Laborers are a dime a dozen,” Huston says of the reason for this gap.

As for office staff, an office manager in the south/southwest might make \$15/hour or about \$30,000 a year. “But I’ve seen office managers earn from \$15-\$20 and upwards of \$40 and higher per hour,” Huston says of the vast range here. Still, in the southern markets, that labor rate tends to be less. “When you’re dealing with labor, you have the influence of supply and demand, and wage rates tend to be lower in the southern states for whatever reason,” Huston says.

Matt Boelman, vice president of Perficut in Des Moines, Iowa, says an entry-level maintenance laborer earns about \$10-\$12 an hour, and foreman range from \$14 to \$16. “An entry-level ac-

count manager could start in the \$40,000 range and advance to \$75,000,” he says. As for administrative staff, the pay rate depends on responsibility. Some staff are paid \$16-\$18 per hour, while others earn a salary that exceeds \$50,000 annually. “We look at experience in the marketplace and the level of certification that someone might have related to their skillset,” Boelman says.

Pugh says his foremen-in-training make \$10-\$13, and crew leaders make up to \$15 per hour. Crew size dictates pay rate. So do certifications. “The biggest factors (affecting pay) are responsibility level and the type of property they work on,” Pugh says.

MOVING ON UP. Pay rates are a starting point, but many employees want to know how they can move up the ladder. Perficut’s tier system is a structure that rewards performance with higher pay. Certain performance targets must be met to move to the next tier. “This system is explained at the start of employment,” Boelman

says. Rather than spending too much time studying competitors’ pay rates, Boelman says the company focuses on its tier system. “We set our pricing matrix and our levels of pay based on where we think they should be if employees can perform the skills based on our standards.” Enviroscapes also strives to create a career path for its people. And, the company offers perks to sweeten the pot.

For salaried positions at Enviroscapes, a “total package” can include a vehicle, retirement savings and health benefits. That’s worth about \$10,000, Pugh says. “All employees are eligible for a 401(k) after working 1,000 hours, and we match up to 3 percent,” he adds.

Employees want to feel that their value to the company is worth more than a dollar sign, Pugh says. “You have to treat your people as an asset and not a liability,” Pugh says. “If your people are an asset, that investment will grow. If you treat them as a liability, that liability will also grow.” ■



Numbers to watch

Know where to focus your attention on that P&L so you can scan financials and make faster, smarter decisions.

by Kristen Hampshire

When the right numbers are at your fingertips, you gain better control over where your business is going. You can gauge whether you're on track to hit the destination you plugged into your budget, or you're veering toward a detour that will stall your performance.

"It's like a dashboard," Steve Pattie says of benchmarks and

key financial reports. "Am I running out of gas here? Do I need oil here?"

Pattie, CEO of The Pattie Group in Novelty, Ohio, says the problem is, many landscape professionals wait until November to analyze their financials for the year. They spend the prior months plugging away, selling and doing, too busy to deal with deskwork. By the time they

realize that the numbers aren't stacking up favorably, it's too late to act.

At The Pattie Group, weekly management meetings take place where this simple question is asked: What is the biggest problem you have in your department? And then, how do we solve it? "That is how you keep from being the Titanic," Pattie says. "You have to move quickly. I don't care

if you are a \$500,000 or \$5 million company, you have to move fast to solve problems."

Understanding your numbers and how they compare to industry benchmarks will help you quickly identify those problems that need attention. And you don't have to hole up in your office for hours every day to figure this out, says Jim Huston, president at J. R. Consulting. "We don't want

to make a bureaucrat out of you," he says. "We want you to know what you are doing and whether you are on track so you can go out in the field and make it happen."

This is possible by zeroing in on key indicators in your financials. Ultimately, Huston says, an owner should be watching whether the company is following this mantra: price it right; produce it right; produce enough of it. That boils down to watching sales (volume), gross margins and overhead.

SELL IT, DO IT. Pattie doesn't need to pull up his financials to figure out if sales are lagging on the design/build side of his business. He listens for the phones. In fact, he analyzes how these calls progress from query to close. In essence, he is monitoring new sales – ensuring that the volume is there to reach the company's budgeted goals. (Huston points out, "If you don't have enough volume, you can't pay your overhead costs and other expenses.")

For example, if Pattie gets 500 calls, those are divided among four salespeople so each gets 125 leads. Of the true leads in that batch, about half are written up into estimates. From those, the company will sell 30 to 35 percent.

Those sales numbers are compared to the company's annual goal, and Pattie works backward, dividing that volume by the number of salespeople, to determine how many jobs each salesperson should close each month.

On the maintenance side

of the business, the key sales indicator is renewal rate, Pattie says. He assumes a 10-15 percent loss each year. So if the company's goal is to go from \$1-1.3 million in sales – figuring in that loss of about 15 percent – the company needs to sell \$450,000 more this year in maintenance jobs.

With these targets in mind, Pattie can look at weekly sales reports and determine whether the company is on track.

The amount of sales volume a company needs depends on a company's overhead structure, Huston explains. He analyzes a firm's history and projects a realistic volume for the year – a reasonable increase in sales given the market, economy and other factors. "I'm going to look at the profit and loss (P&L) statement from last year, all of the expenses and then put together a budget," Huston explains, noting how the budget is essentially a roadmap. "Then, I'm going to ask the owner, 'How much money is each crew generating?'"

A volume benchmark for a two- or three-person design/build crew is \$600,000-900,000 per year. That means each crew member needs to generate about \$300,000 minimum each season (assuming a nine-month working year). Maintenance crewmembers should generate about \$55,000 per person per year for a fulltime employee, Huston says.

STRIKE A BALANCE. You can sell a million jobs, but if you aren't pricing them properly and producing them ef-

Cut overhead fast

Don't delay in trimming areas that can help your bottom line.

THE PHONES AREN'T ringing like you hoped. Sales are behind big-time, and if you don't make some adjustments, your profit will take a serious dive. There's a reason why the balance sheet gets its name. When numbers are out of whack, it's your job to review areas of concern and make changes to reset the equilibrium.

Overhead is a tough area to cut, but it represents about 25 percent of your costs. (The other 65 percent is direct costs, and the remaining 10 percent should be profit.) Of that 25 percent, 12 percent is paid out in office salaries including the owner's take-home pay. The rest includes expenses like your building, advertising phones and other operational expenses. If you need to trim back overhead, here are some ideas.

Pare down part-timers. If sales drop, part-time help in the office could be the first to go, Huston says of making difficult personnel decisions. Or, another option is to reduce full-time office staff to part-time hours.

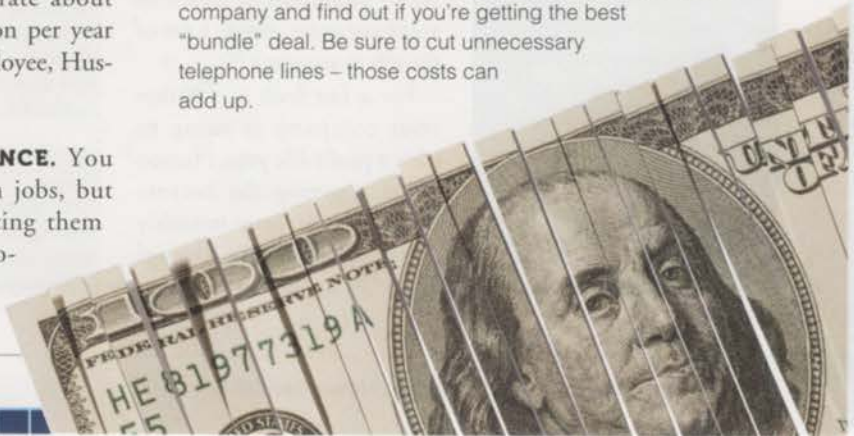
Take a payout. When overhead is too high, the owner takes a pay cut, plain and simple, Huston says.

Weed out weak links. Keep your team sharp and avoid a mass layoff by evaluating the team every year. Steve Pattie, CEO, The Pattie Group, Novelty, Ohio, suggests an exercise introduced by business guru Jack Welch. Say you are allowed to keep one person in your department – who is it? Now, say you can keep one more. Continue this exercise to identify the weakest link in every department. "Every company has dead weight," Pattie says. "Is everyone really looking around them in the department to see where the inefficiencies are?"

The extras. Do you really need a meals and entertainment budget? Steve Rak at Southwest Landscape Management in Columbia Station, Ohio, decided: not really. "When things started getting tight for the maintenance business, I cut the meal budget to save money," he says.

Also, Rak cut employee uniform expenses in half by moving from a uniform company to T-shirts. "We ask employees to purchase their T-shirts, and we still pay for half of the laundering fee for pants," Rak says. The total savings adds up to a couple hundred dollars each month.

Work the phones. Talk to providers such as your phone company and find out if you're getting the best "bundle" deal. Be sure to cut unnecessary telephone lines – those costs can add up.



Get organized

START IMPROVING THE WAY YOU MANAGE AND REVIEW NUMBERS.

1 Update records. Regularly update all expenses and income, and keep those numbers updated so the information you gather is timely. "A lot of times, contractors will work and jobs don't get billed until the end of the month," Huston says. "Not all invoices are put into the accounting system. So, revenues are inaccurate and expenses are inaccurate." Stay on top of bookkeeping, or hire someone to help out.

2 Compare numbers. Review the benchmarks provided in the charts on pages 14 and 15 and see how your numbers compare. Be sure that your chart of accounts is organized in the same manner because where numbers appear (below or above the "top line") will affect outcomes.

3 Start at the bottom. Review the bottom line and look at monthly debt and annual debt. This is a big-picture look at how your business is doing.

efficiently, you're no better off. "If you're having a bad year, it's usually because sales are too low and/or you've had some bad jobs that ran over in hours," Huston says. Then, the ratios get out of whack. Your equipment, labor and other costs are higher than they should be. And the point here or there really adds up.

"Construction labor should run 20 percent plus or minus 2 percent," Huston says. "So if it's 25 percent, something is wrong. The crews in the field aren't producing." Maintenance labor should fall in the 30 to 30 percent range.

All these costs figure into a company's gross margin. This shows how much a company is earning after costs. It's a good indicator of how profitable a company is at a base level.

To understand how the wrong price or poor production can affect gross margins and your financial big picture, consider this: Your direct costs are about 65 percent of sales. Overhead is about 25 percent of sales. That totals 90 percent, leaving a 10 percent profit for you at the end of the day.

"If your equipment costs are a couple percent higher, labor is a little to high, etc., the next thing you know, you don't have a lot left over," Huston says. "This is why benchmarks are so important to review so you have some simple rules of thumb to monitor."

For a fast look at whether your company is going to have a profitable year, Huston suggests eyeing the bottom line. What is your monthly debt? What is the annual debt? "In a seasonal business,

you usually start in the hole in March, April, May and June," he says. "But gradually, you should see that negative number on the bottom get up to zero where you are at your break-even point. After June, in the months of July, August, September and beyond, you should see your net profit on the bottom start to grow."

IN OVER YOUR HEAD? Companies get into trouble and have "a bad year" when overhead and sales volume are not in proportion. It's easy for overhead to get too heavy, es-

pecially when sales aren't rolling in as expected. Sales feed the business. If the business costs you more than you can feed it, then there's a problem.

Ultimately, keeping the business balanced between expenses and income means watching costs, and getting out to sell and do the work.

"If your sales look good and your production looks good and the bottom line is on track month to month, you know your net profit is improving, then it's pedal to the metal to sell more and produce more," Huston says. ■

Buyers' guide: What contractors paid for key equipment and supplies in 2012

Budget item	REGION			
	Average national annual spend	West/Southwest	East/Midwest	South/Southeast
Trucks	\$40,458	\$45,298	\$44,387	\$27,401
Trailers	\$5,847	\$5,501	\$7,313	\$3,243
Skid-steer loaders	\$13,281	\$16,105	\$113,152	\$9,711
Riding mowers	\$12,513	\$17,919	\$12,388	\$9,267
Walk-behind mowers	\$5,066	\$7,321	\$4,481	\$4,153
Trimmers/edgers	\$1,267	\$1,510	\$1,172	\$1,117
Sprayers	\$2,107	\$3,252	\$2,174	\$530
Spreaders	\$1,362	\$1,311	\$1,392	\$882
Paver/patio products	\$20,639	\$31,340	\$18,754	\$15,596
Retaining wall products	\$16,383	\$19,712	\$16,559	\$12,858
Sod	\$12,590	\$12,420	\$13,320	\$11,617
Plants (annuals, perennials and trees)	\$50,660	\$51,165	\$55,887	\$32,369
Biologicals	\$956	\$1,980	\$642	\$411
Fertilizers	\$9,830	\$7,846	\$10,892	\$9,332
Pre-emergent herbicides	\$4,687	\$5,534	\$5,012	\$3,336
Post-emergent herbicides	\$3,924	\$3,901	\$4,572	\$2,709
Subcontracted services	\$30,359	\$35,018	\$27,257	\$32,417
GPS software	\$1,972	\$2,749	\$1,960	\$1,098
Business software	\$2,361	\$3,845	\$2,368	\$933
Mobile phones	\$2,776	\$2,271	\$3,335	\$2,099
Consultants	\$4,696	\$6,400	\$4,936	\$2,176



Budgeting beefs

Contractors share their top money management and P&L problems.

What do you think is the most difficult part about budgeting?

PREDICTING THE WORKLOAD – recovering overhead and deciding how much equipment you need and how much profit you want. We always like to start with the profit first instead of last when figuring out our budget.

Another challenge in our market is the predictability of snow. For example, last year we did \$1.5 million less in snow than the year before. Even though we do not budget for snow, we have to be prepared.

– **Todd Pugh, CEO, Enviroscapes, Louisville, Ohio**

THE MOST CHALLENGING part of budgeting for me is projecting overhead when considering hiring a new key staff member. For example, if I am in need of a commercial landscape salesperson (which I am actually looking for), I will need to put this salary into my overhead. But you really don't know how that individual will perform in that position. So in a sense, you have to look at it as an investment that may or may not pay dividends. This is where it gets tricky because a salesperson will need some time to become established with your company, so at first they may not be able to bring in the sales needed to cover their salary. However, if they are good, after some time they should be able to help your company grow and cover their salary. That is the chance you take when budgeting for a new hire, and that's why it's so important to get the best talent that you can, even if it means making an investment and taking a chance.

– **Steve Rak, Southwest Landscape Management, Columbia Station, Ohio**

OUR CHALLENGE HAS BEEN with the amount of growth we've had over the last couple of years. Setting up a budget is fine, but we seem to exceed our (goals). So our budget needs to be constantly tweaked to keep up with our growth pattern.

– **Matt Boelman, vice president, Perficut, Des Moines, Iowa**

What do you wish you understood better about your numbers?

INDIVIDUAL DEPARTMENT financials and how those relate to our overall company financials. We have divided our company into service segments and we try to run individual financial reports. But it's tough to relate the value of each client through those numbers. For example, if we have a client that we do 5-10 services for, when we look at individual financials, some of those services may not be where we want them to be (with profit margins), but as a whole, the value of the contract may exceed the profitability we want to see. So, being able to evaluate and judge that has been difficult.

– **Matt Boelman, vice president, Perficut, Des Moines, Iowa**

LOOKING AT THE company as separate divisions is still something I struggle with. As we have grown, it has been a lot more difficult to look at the company as a whole from a pure numbers standpoint. Having said that, I still believe in a holistic approach to managing the numbers of an organization. At the end of the day, the company is either profitable or not.

– **Steve Rak, Southwest Landscape Management, Columbia Station, Ohio**

Budget builder

Use these sample P&L pages to create your own 2013 plan.

Maintenance

COST OF GOODS SOLD (Direct Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Materials (with tax)	5-10%	7.5%
Gas & oil	2-4%	3%
Labor (field)	30-40%	35%
Labor burden (field)	20-30%	25% (as a percent of labor)
	8-10%	9% (as a percent of sales)
Subcontractors	0-5%	2.5%
Equipment	9-14%	11.5%
Equipment rentals	1-2%	1.5%
Miscellaneous direct job costs	0-2%	1%
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS	60-70%	65% +/- 5.0%
GROSS PROFIT MARGIN	30-40%	35%
NET PROFIT MARGIN	10-20%	15%

GENERAL and ADMINISTRATIVE (G&A) OVERHEAD (Indirect Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Advertising	0.5-2%	1.25%
Bad debts	0.5-1%	0.75%
Utilities	0.25-0.75%	0.5%
Donations	0.1-0.2%	
Downtime		1%
Downtime with labor burden	1-1.5%	1.25%
Dues and subscriptions	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Medical insurance for office staff	0-2.5%	1.75%
Interest and bank charges	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Licenses and related bonds	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Office equipment, computers, software	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Office supplies	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Professional fees	1-1.5%	1.25%
Cell phones	0.5-1%	0.75%
Rent	2.0-4.0%	3%
Salaries, office staff/officers	10-12%	11%
Salaries labor burden	12-15%	13% (as a percent of labor)
Small tools/supplies	.5-1.0%	.75%
Taxes, business		0.1%
Training and education	0.2-0.3%	0.25%
Travel and entertainment	0.3-0.5%	0.4%
Uniforms and safety equipment	0.2-0.5%	0.4%
Vehicles, overhead	1.5-2.0%	1.75%
Yard expense and lease-hold improvements	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Miscellaneous	0-0.1%	
TOTAL INDIRECT COSTS	25%	+/- 1-2%

Lawn Care

COST OF GOODS SOLD (Direct Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Materials (with tax)	10-15%	12.5%
Gas & oil	2-4%	3%
Labor (field)	20-30%	25%
Labor burden (field)	20-30%	25% (as a percent of labor)
	6.25-10.5%	8.25% (as a percent of sales)
Subcontractors	0-5%	
Equipment	8-12%	10%
Equipment rentals	0-1%	
Miscellaneous direct job costs	0-1%	0.5%
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS	50-60%	+/- 5%
GROSS PROFIT MARGIN	40-50%	45%
NET PROFIT MARGIN	20-35%	27.5%

GENERAL and ADMINISTRATIVE (G&A) OVERHEAD (Indirect Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Advertising	2-6%	4%
Bad debts	0.5-1%	0.75%
Utilities	0.25-0.75%	0.5%
Donations	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Downtime		1%
Downtime with labor burden	1-1.5%	1.25%
Dues and subscriptions	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Medical insurance for office staff	0-2.5%	1.75%
Interest and bank charges	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Licenses and related bonds	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Office equipment, computers, software	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Office supplies	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Professional fees	1-1.5%	1.25%
Cell phones	0.5-1%	0.75%
Rent	2.0-4.0%	3%
Salaries, office staff/officers	10-12%	11%
Salaries labor burden	12-15%	13.5% (as a percent of labor)
Small tools/supplies	1-1.5%	1.25%
Taxes, business		0.1%
Training and education	0.2-0.3%	0.25%
Travel and entertainment	0.3-0.5%	0.4%
Uniforms and safety equipment	0.2-0.5%	0.4%
Vehicles, overhead	1.5-2.0%	1.75%
Yard expense and lease-hold improvements	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Miscellaneous	0-0.1%	
TOTAL INDIRECT COSTS	25%	+/- 1-2%



Design/Build

Irrigation Service

COST OF GOODS SOLD (Direct Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Materials (with tax)	30%	+/- 3%
Gas & oil	1-3%	2%
Labor (field)	18-22%	20%
Labor burden (field)	20-30%	25% (as a percent of labor)
Subcontractors	0-10%	5%
Equipment	8-14%	11%
Equipment rentals	2-3%	2.5%
Miscellaneous direct job costs	0-2%	1%
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS	65% of sales	+/- 5.0%
GROSS PROFIT MARGIN	30-40%	35%
NET PROFIT MARGIN	5-15%	10%

COST OF GOODS SOLD (Direct Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Materials	15-20%	17.5%
Direct labor	22-25%	23.5%
Labor burden	25-35%	30% (as a percent of labor)
Equipment	8-10%	9%
Subcontractors	0%	0%
Miscellaneous	1%	1%
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS	50%	+/-5%
G&A	25%	+/-3%
NET PROFIT MARGIN	15-25%	20%

GENERAL and ADMINISTRATIVE (G&A) OVERHEAD (Indirect Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Advertising	1-2%	1.5%
Bad debts	0.5-1%	0.75%
Utilities	0.25-0.75%	0.5%
Donations	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Downtime		1%
Downtime with labor burden	1-1.5%	1.25%
Dues and subscriptions	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Medical insurance for office staff	0-2.5%	1.75%
Interest and bank charges	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Licenses and related bonds	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Office equipment, computers, software	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Office supplies	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Professional fees	1-1.5%	1.25%
Cell phones	0.5-1%	0.75%
Rent	1-2%	1.5%
Salaries, office staff/officers	10-12%	11%
Salaries, labor burden	12-15%	13.5% (as a percent of labor)
Small tools/supplies	1-1.5%	1.25%
Taxes, business		0.1%
Training and education	0.2-0.3%	0.25%
Travel and entertainment	0.3-0.5%	0.4%
Uniforms and safety equipment	0.2-0.5%	0.4%
Vehicles, overhead	1.5-2.0%	1.75%
Yard expense and lease-hold improvements	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Miscellaneous	0-0.1%	
TOTAL INDIRECT COSTS	25% +/- 1-2%	

GENERAL and ADMINISTRATIVE (G&A) OVERHEAD (Indirect Costs)	RANGE	AVERAGE
Advertising	1-2%	1.5%
Bad debts	0.5-1%	0.75%
Utilities	0.25-0.75%	0.5%
Donations	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Downtime		1%
Downtime with labor burden	1-1.5%	1.25%
Dues and subscriptions	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Medical insurance for office staff	0-2.5%	1.75%
Interest and bank charges	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Licenses and related bonds	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Office equipment, computers, software	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Office supplies	0.2-0.4%	0.3%
Professional fees	1-1.5%	1.25%
Cell phones	0.5-1%	0.75%
Rent	1-2%	1.5%
Salaries, office staff/officers	10-12%	11%
Salaries, labor burden	12-15%	13.5% (as a percent of labor)
Small tools/supplies	1-1.5%	1.25%
Taxes, business		0.1%
Training and education	0.2-0.3%	0.25%
Travel and entertainment	0.3-0.5%	0.4%
Uniforms and safety equipment	0.2-0.5%	0.4%
Vehicles, overhead	1.5-2.0%	1.75%
Yard expense and lease-hold improvements	0.1-0.2%	0.15%
Miscellaneous	0-0.1%	
TOTAL INDIRECT COSTS	25%	+/- 1-2%



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But by honing in on an initiative they could start, and then grow as their budget allowed, LandCare began to move toward the green goals they set.

"In any company, you have to discuss the idea and put a plan in place," Diaz says. "Then, you've got to budget accordingly." LandCare couldn't replace its entire mower fleet and trade in those hand-helds for newer, more efficient models. But the company did commit to replacing equipment that's ready for retirement with leaner-running, cleaner-burning upgrades.

But there's more to the initiative than buying iron. Diaz says LandCare verbally rewards employees who introduce new ideas that are green-minded (and all constructive suggestions, for that matter). The little stuff matters, such as choosing reusable coffee

cups rather than paper, and using throw-away printouts for message paper.

And the big picture is important, too, Diaz says. The company can only buy the new equipment if it gains new business, and that's ultimately up to the staff. "They understand that when they gain a new client it affects the entire team – from the very minute they walk in the door, they are part of a team, and their behaviors will hopefully be positive and allow us to put aside money in the budget for these pieces of equipment."

Visual reminders help instill this attitude. Diaz hangs pictures of the new equipment up on bulletin boards so the team can see what managers are talking about. She and Rob bring back product brochures and industry literature from trade shows to share with the team. When they can see it, they believe it



QUICK TIPS

Start somewhere. You can't rework your business model or implement a new program the day you get back from the conference. But you can get started toward that goal, Diaz says.

Motivate your team. Change, big or small, requires support from within. Involve employees in the process. "We emphasize that this is a culture, not just a company," Diaz says.

Give them a carrot. Visual motivators are helpful for crews at LandCare, so Diaz brings back brochures boasting photos of what the company hopes to obtain: brand-new, efficient equipment.

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can happen with their hard work. "It's really a grassroots infiltration of the whole team pushing forward in the belief, and that has to come from the top," Diaz says.

"We have to think of the motivators for our team." Diaz knows that changing out the company's fleet won't happen overnight. "It's like changing how you eat," she

compares, adding that just starting the initiative is a big step. Over time, LandCare will continue to deepen its sustainability efforts and commitment to running more efficient equipment. "It's all about taking that first step," she says.

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Gearing up for growth

Stephen Mazelis calls the GIC the Super Bowl of the landscape industry. "It's something you don't want to miss," he says – even though he did, in fact, miss this and other conference opportunities for most of his career. Let's face it, the business pulls you in and finding time to leave it, even for a weekend, can seem impossible.



Mazelis

But for Mazelis, the changes he made in his company this year after attending the 2011 GIC are putting him on track to double his revenues in the next three years from \$1-\$2 million.

"I was at a point where I felt like I didn't know where to go – I wanted to take the business to the next level, but I didn't know how," he says. "Meeting other landscapers and networking with peers at the GIC helped guide me in the next direction."

And in order to meet his growth goals, he has to fine-tune production – and produce more. So he started by talking with others at the GIC about running a two-man crew. What were the pros and cons? "I had so many conversations with so many people, whether

Mazelis Landscape Contracting

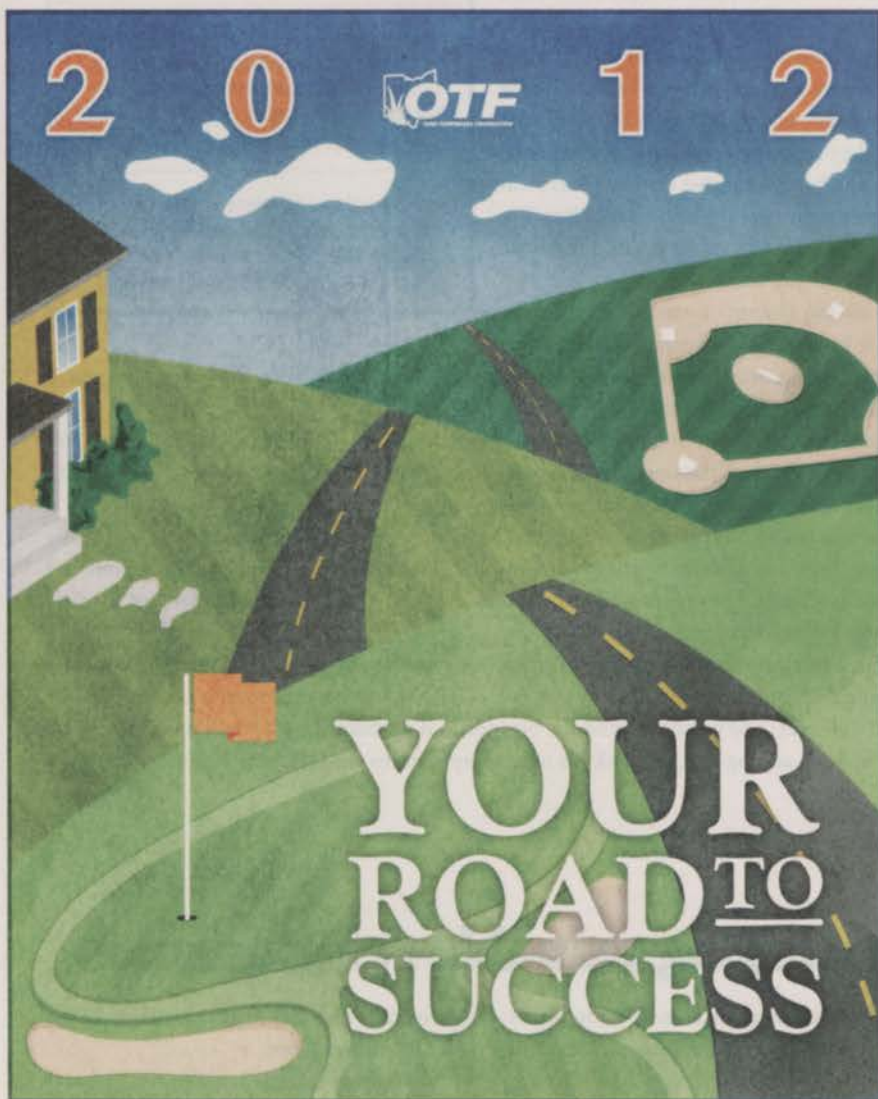
Stephen Mazelis, president and CEO **Location:** Nesconset, N.Y. **Established:** 1992 **Employees:** 12 **2011 Revenues:** \$1 million **Customers:** 60% residential; 40% commercial **Services:** landscape design, construction, maintenance and irrigation.

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at the show or after-hours," he says. When he returned from the show, he changed his crew configuration from three to two laborers.

"You don't have that fifth wheel, which was the third guy, wasting time on people's properties," he says. "There's no waiting time, it's constant work with two crewmembers."

To accommodate the company's workload, Mazelis added a crew, and he was a bit worried about the increased fuel cost.

But his industry colleagues assured him that the numbers would work out because of the improved efficiency from two-men crews. And so far, they have been right. As for the crews, they were a bit disgruntled at first. "There was some mild fight-back," Mazelis says. "But they are more accountable now because there are just two guys per crew."

So this big change, a seed planted at the show, is helping improve production. Next came producing, which means boosting those sales numbers to \$350,000 more per year if Mazelis wants to reach his three-year revenue goal.

It was time for Mazelis to hire his first full-time salesperson. "I had to grow some nerve and confidence to do that," he says. "I did some number-crunching to make sure he'd be able to hold his own with salary plus commission."

Also, Mazelis was forced to implement an estimating system. "Now that I'm not the only salesman, I needed to share a system with another person who can competitively go out and estimate properties," he says of working out standardized square and lineage footage production rates for maintenance.

So far, Mazelis is on track to continue growing, and he wishes he had taken the weekend away to gain inspiration and insight years ago. "If I would have gone to a conference like the GIC 20 years ago when I started the business, I'd probably be a \$5 million company by now," he says, adding that he took his new salesperson to the GIC this year.



QUICK TIPS

Buy recordings. Avoid missing valuable nuggets of information by purchasing recordings of educational sessions. A bonus: tapes are motivators to continue improving your business after the buzz of the conference wears off.

Meet mentors. Take advantage of networking opportunities. "The wow factor for me was the incredible businesspeople that I met and the wealth of information they were willing to share with me," Mazelis says.

Ask, 'How?' Mazelis wanted details on how implementing a two-man crew could work for his company. So he asked his peers about their experiences. He got lots of answers.

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Developing valuable relationships

"The information is in the room, it's at the conference, you just have to put yourself out there," says Mike Rorie, who shares how he grew his former business Groundmasters from a \$5-\$30 million in six years before selling to The Brickman Group in 2006.

Groundmasters was growing at a 20-percent clip annually, opening a new branch per year. In that short, aggressive phase of driv-

ing forward fast, the firm popped up seven branches in five cities.

"We figured out the branding model and that was largely learned through industry consultants who helped critique our plan and direction, and from business owners just sharing answers to some of my concerns," Rorie says. "I learned all of that through PLANET and people at the conference."

Rorie first became involved in the Associated



GIS Dynamics (former owner Groundmasters)

Mike Rorie, CEO, Location: Cincinnati, Ohio
 Established: GIS Dynamics (2010); Groundmasters (1979)
 Employees: n/a 2011 Revenues: n/a
 Customers: n/a Services: software and IT services

"You have to open up your hands so information can flow in and out." – Mike Rorie

Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), now PLANET, back in 1991. He was doing about \$1.5 million then, "and that allowed me to ask a lot of questions," he says, adding that he was "blown away by what people had accomplished."

Rorie, like many landscape contractors, is a visual learner. The shows helped him see the opportunity – and then he took that a step further by making personal visits to companies to learn how they did things. He traveled to other markets, leaving behind any competitive bent.

And when the GIC was stationed in Cincinnati in 1996, Rorie opened the doors of Groundmasters for attendees to tour. "You have to open up your hands so information can flow in and out," he says. "If you stay guarded and keep your hands clenched, not much can come in and out. It's give and take." Rorie gave generously by volunteering from the start, and eventually serving on the

exterior board of ALCA. And while serving on the executive board, he attended annual retreats with other leaders. That is how he first met Scott Brickman, who was just taking over as president of The Brickman Group at the time and would purchase Groundmasters more than a decade later.

"If you want to be progressive and learn, you want to surround yourself with peers who are more successful in the sense of what they have accomplished in their businesses," Rorie says. "You want to be around people who are trying to get better – you want to be around people who love the industry that you love. That is the commonality that bridges perfect strangers at an industry function."

These relationships helped grow Groundmasters over the years, and ultimately led to buying out the company so Rorie could begin a new chapter in his career in the software/IT business. Now, he is owner of GIS Dynamics, producer of GoiLawn.com, GoiPave.com and GoiSnow.com, which are a property measurement and estimating solutions for the lawn, pavement and snow industries.

He's at the shows, still consulting and offering advice (and asking for it), but in a different capacity. "A lot of contractors do what I'm doing – they sell franchise or equipment or they sell something back to the industry because they know it," he says.

"I got into this technology component, and now I'm looking forward to growing it." **L&L**



QUICK TIPS

Go to breakfast. The GIC's Breakfast of Champions was packed with early birds who feasted on knowledge. Sit down with a small, diverse group of peers and drill down on business issues.

Pack your bags. Rorie road-tripped to visit contractors he met at the shows so he could continue to learn by visiting their operations.

Open up. "I gained more than I gave, and I gave as much as I had," Rorie says of sharing openly and receiving invaluable advice and direction over the years.



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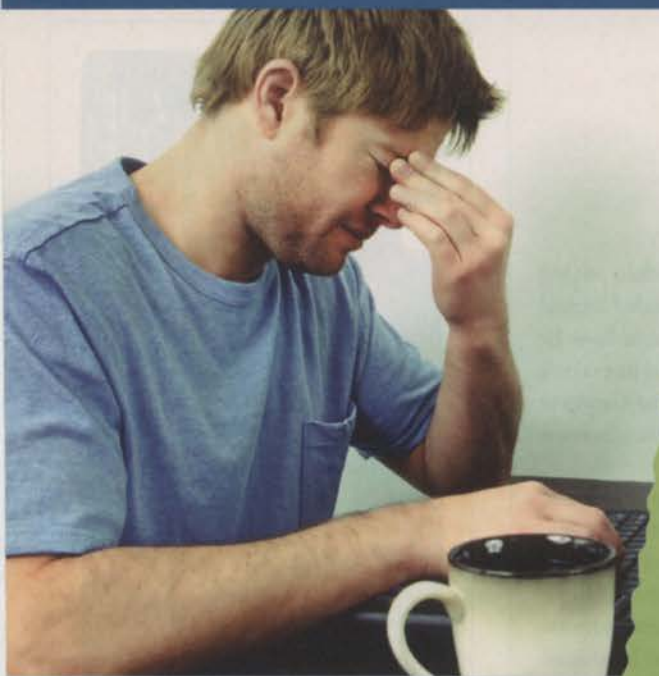
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Just do something

It's easy to get mired in the day-to-day. Here's how to rise above and really work on your business.

By Allan Davis

A friend of mine runs a small landscape business and one day he came to me for help. He is very busy man, beginning his day very early dispatching crews, visiting sites during the day, meeting with potential clients in the early evening, and sitting at his desk for hours at night working on proposals and invoices. It is not a 9 to 5 job, or even a 5 to 9 job. He has lots of trucks and equipment and some really good people. He makes good money and if he doesn't kill himself by the age of 30 he might be able to enjoy some of it one day.

He had a client who decided to bid out their sites. My friend wanted to make sure his renewals were in line and was thinking about adjusting his prices, but he wanted my opinion. I asked him how the jobs were performing. I got a blank stare.

He wasn't sure how to answer. He had no idea how he would go about finding out. I shared with him the importance of a job costing system in making such decisions. Of course, I explained, you must first have an estimating and proposal system to base your pricing on. In fact, you need an entire financial reporting system to be sure that you

He makes good money and if he doesn't kill himself by the age of 30 he might be able to enjoy some of it one day.

are capturing all costs and applying them to each project. This will also allow you to create a budget and plan how you spend your money and manage cash flow.

But, before all of this he would need a proper P&L that would help him gather real-time information and make good decisions. At this point, the blank stare turned to more of an eyes-glazed-over look. I went on to discuss a system for invoicing so he is sure to be getting paid for work. And a job planning-work flow process to schedule work, line up materials and get completed paperwork turned in for billing. And monthly forecasting.

And he should learn Excel. And QuickBooks and find a purchase order system and perform budget review and create a proposal template and find a payroll system and create a mission statement and estimating form and marketing plan with marketing material and create a website and direct mail newsletter and create job packets and policies and procedure and an employee handbook and pay scale and progressive discipline program and performance appraisal system and communications protocol and reporting structure and join PLANET and ... STOP!

The eyes-glazed-over look had suddenly turned to a mouth-wide-open-and-snoring look. Even my head was spinning. At that moment I realized why he doesn't have any of these programs in place. It's just too much. It's just too big of a task and too time consuming. These things must be put off until there is more time. And, if you are

working on these projects, who will do all of the other stuff that needs to be done? How can anyone do all of this and still run a business?

Weeks and months and years pass and nothing improves because there is never enough time to work on the business. The fact is that you can't do it all. Not all at once anyway. The key is to tackle this huge project one bit at a time.

You can start right now.

Begin by making a list of everything you can think of that needs to be done. Don't pull a brain muscle – it doesn't have to be everything that you need. Post the list somewhere and as you read *Lawn & Landscape*, speak to others, attend conferences and trade shows, you will see or hear things you would like to accomplish. Go to the list and write them down.

Set priorities. Commit to doing one thing each week. Promise yourself you will set aside four hours per week (or two, or one, whatever is feasible for you) to work on your list. Break the projects down into multiple tasks and tackle those one at a time.

Don't look for the end, it won't be there. Just stay committed to doing something each week. Over time, things will get accomplished. Systems will begin to fall into place and the job of running your business will become easier. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer with 35 years of experience in the commercial landscape maintenance industry. He can be reached at adavis@giemedia.com.

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Miss the big show?

If you didn't get the chance to make it down to Louisville, Ky., at the end of October for the GIE+EXPO, here's a wrap-up of a couple of the educational sessions. For more coverage of the event, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "GIE+EXPO."

Avoid the social media time-suck

Chris Heiler has practical tips and time-saving efforts for managing your time online more effectively. BY TOM CRAIN

Tweets, texts, emails, posts, blogs, smartphones, teleconferencing. We've never been more connected to people than we are today.

With that in mind, Chris Heiler, founder and president of Landscape Leadership, emphatically preaches to his clients and audiences day in and day out that building a presence online for companies is not only important, but essential. But, he reminds everyone that doing so comes with an enormously overwhelming challenge.

"We can't spend our time everywhere, doing everything," he says. "It's unrealistic to think that your business can have a vibrant Facebook Page, a com-

pellent blog, a popular YouTube channel, etc. You can't be effective with everything."

In addition, Heiler says, most professionals are victims of "social overwhelm." Rapidly evolving technology and the need to participate and engage on a consistent basis—week in, week out is just too much.

Why is it critical to participate in social media? Heiler gives numerous reasons, including generating sales, increasing sales, staying in touch with your customers, expanding your sphere of influence, building your reputation, building brand awareness and just simply keeping up to date and current on issues that affect the green industry.

Heiler offers tips for establishing loyal followers when you have more time to invest in providing content:

Become a trusted source. Heiler estimates that about 30 percent of the content he shares through social media comes from other people. "If your followers find something you posted to be useful, they'll be glad you shared it," Heiler says.

Emphasize the visual. The more pictures and videos you can share, the better. "We work in a unique industry, and people like to see what we do," Heiler says. "We should never run out of cool things to post."

Do one thing really well. He urges people to focus their efforts on the site(s) where their target audience spends the most time.

"Most people try to be everywhere, doing a little bit of everything, to get in front of everyone, but doing too much can spread yourself too thin," Heiler says.

Show up consistently. Part of doing one thing really well means showing up consistently with useful content. "The best way to build your reputation is to establish consistent blogging yourself," he says.

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



ONE STEP AT A TIME



Jerry Gaeta helps landscapers with a one-year business plan.

By Peter Hildebrandt

Most companies have a visual, mental business plan of some kind, according to Jerry Gaeta owner of Gaeta Business Planning. They have an idea of what they want to do, a goal or objective of some kind and a few things they want to accomplish. "But the problem is it's in their mind," Gaeta says.

"I was probably just as guilty with my company; we did more budgeting – which is part of the business plan – more annual meetings and retreats and wrote things down. But we never really wrote the formal plan. We had the same

vision, wrote some of it down but there wasn't some written document or booklet that said 'this is what you do.' Gaeta says that a simple business plan is what you are trying to accomplish.

The first thing that you're going to look at is the basic components of a business plan. You obviously want to tell the basic information about the company. The objective is similar to a mission statement but it is what you want to accomplish in that year summarized in a paragraph.

You also want to look at the challenges that you face in the upcoming year, achievements

you've made from your previous business plan or the year prior. Financial information and goals are just a few of the items.

"The final step is coming up with a contingency plan," Gaeta says.

"This consists of an answer to the question of what if you don't hit your targets. If you don't hit an objective in your budget or in one of the achievements you want to make, you sit back and look at what you want to change – mainly financial – if you are not hitting your goal, your timetable and the basic ideas of what you are going to change.

"If you start with five to seven different little separate categories, that will get the first plan built," he says.

"That's your objective and you want it so your first plan can be implemented." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.



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A recovering market has landscapers looking at new options for more efficient vehicles.

Trucking along

By Carolyn LaWell

When truck and accessory manufacturers gathered with upfitters at NTEA's New Model Truck Product Conference in September, there was a consensus that truck buying and upfitting is back on the road to growth. The landscaping and lawn care industry, though, is subtly adding to the trucks' turnaround.

The commercial truck industry has grown 22 percent in the class 3-5 chassis cab this year, says Len Deluca, Ford's director of commercial truck sales and marketing. The manufacturers that presented at the conference clearly felt the worst of the economy between 2008 and

2010 and forecasted significant growth in the coming years.

The landscaping and lawn care industry has provided a bump for some manufacturers. "It's doing well for us," says Joshua Tregar, manager of marketing and communications for Mitsubishi Fuso. "It seems that some of the service sectors are trending upward, and we've enjoyed a little bit of an uptick in that particular vocation. A lot of people, once the economy went south, said, 'I guess I'll start cutting my own lawn.' I think you're starting to see that swing back up."

That news is contrasted by what upfitters, that also forecast growth, are seeing from the land-

scape and lawn care industry. It isn't much.

The Reading Group, which is based in Reading, Pa., and includes the brands Reading, America's Body Co. (ABC) and Reading Fleet Services, mostly works with landscaping and lawn care clients in the southeast portion of the country. Mike Snyder, director of sales equipment and distribution for the company, says Reading's business from landscapers dropped about 30 percent and he doesn't see that number changing in the near future. Lawn care is different, though. Reading, a primary supplier for TruGreen, has seen requests for spray truck bodies

remain even. Snyder says he expects that trend to continue because homeowners looking to sell want pristine lawns.

"With the economy, we're still doing more of the retrofitting, rejuvenating of existing equipment more than new installs," says Tim Miller, shop manager at Appleton, Wis.-based Casper's Truck Equipment, which works with landscaping, lawn care and snow companies. "Most of the time they have older vehicles, and we're actually putting new bodies on existing trucks or just completely going through to do maintenance that has been overlooked to try to extend the life of their current trucks."

Casper's Truck Equipment hasn't lost any of its landscape and lawn care customers, meaning companies aren't going under, they're just not spending. For the last two years, clients have been trying to stretch the life of their fleet, even if trucks really should be replaced, Miller says.

After two mild winters, a big snow or two could help Miller's clients. "We're looking forward to having a good winter this year," he says.

WHAT THEY'RE BUYING. Even with a sporadic recovery, some companies are updating fleets. Those with the money are making resourceful decisions and customizing their bodies so they can get every penny out of their purchase.

"We actually did more custom work because we had customers that were saying, 'If I'm going to put down this investment, I want it exactly the way I like,'" says Eric Fivecoats, design manager for Pro-Tech Industries, an accessories manufacture and installer based in Vancouver, Wash., and Nashville. "Now business is picking up more to provide more standard product line."

Aluminum siding and tailgates instead of stainless steel continues to be the trend in landscaping because the material isn't heavy, which means less weight on the chassis and easier doors to open and lift. Other recent popular requests have been dump bodies.

Aaron Breitreutz, a design drafter for Truck Bodies Equipment International (TBEI), the parent company for brands Crysteel, Ox Bodies, Rugby, Dura-Class and J-Craft, says landscapers have requested dump bodies

that tilt to the back and to the side and split gates. "In tighter spots they may be able to dump to the side versus to the back," he says.

A split tailgate allows landscapers to haul multiple materials to a job site at once. "You can put a tailgate in the center of the body," he says. "If you want to haul black dirt and mulch, they can put them in separate departments. They can dump the black dirt out at the job site first and keep the mulch in their truck, then raise that up later after their done laying their dirt."

Snyder says beavertail backs remain popular, making it easy for landscapers to lower their gate and drive their mowers onto the truck.

Other customized options include requests for a transverse box that straddles the truck's frames and has doors on either side, Fivecoats says. Sometimes the boxes are used to keep fuel containers and chemicals separate from equipment.

Sometimes the drawers have mesh in the bottom to collect debris and liquid falling off equipment. He has even seen requests for vents that would allow landscapers to place their boots upside down on a pipe to dry them out if they got wet.

Fivecoats doesn't always know what company or industry the custom design is for because he doesn't work directly with the customer. Based on his time in the industry, though, he says Pro-Tech has seen an uptick in requests for options that fit construction, technical services and landscaping companies.

"We've definitely seen an increase in demand," he says.



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TRUCK TRENDS

"We've hired a lot more people to help with that demand."

HOW TO WORK WITH UPFITTERS. To completely understand the time and costs involved, consult with an upfitter before buying a cab chassis. The upfitter probably won't spec the chassis or recommend what manufacturer to buy from, but they can offer advice.

"Since our sales staff works with many customers that have bought different brands of trucks, they may have an idea of what's working better for some companies than others and what kind of features they have," Breitreutz says.

It's important to go in with an idea of what the truck will be used for and what upgrades are necessary. It's also important to keep an open mind and ask questions. "The upfitter may have a lot of different options that a normal customer doesn't know about, but that would work great for them," he says. "Ask a lot of questions." **L&L**

The writer is a freelancer based in Massillon, Ohio.

NEW AND IMPROVED

Here are the 2013 models that drew attention at NTEA's New Model Truck Product Conference.

Alternative fuels and high-tech features were two of the topics major manufacturers spoke about at the NTEA New Model Truck Product Conference held in Michigan in September. Chevrolet, Ford, GMC, Hino, Isuzu, Mitsubishi Fuso, Ram and Toyota were all on hand to talk with upfitters and truck accessory manufacturers about changes in their 2013 models. As consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious and are looking for fuel savings, more trucks are featuring compressed natural gas (CNG), liquefied natural gas (LNG), propane, hybrid and hybrid electric options. The percentage of fuel savings from these options varies widely and while CNG and propane are cheaper than gas or diesel, fueling stations aren't as prevalent.

All of the manufacturers along with more than 550 exhibitors will be at The Work Truck Show in Indianapolis, March 6-8. Until then, find some of the trucks that drew attention at the conference on pg. 83.



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2500HD

Chevrolet offers the 2500HD in 10 different models and eight, single- and dual-rear-wheel 3500HD models.

- A bi-fuel compressed natural gas fuel system and 6.0L V-8 bi-fuel engine is available on the 2500HD extended cab model. A 6.0L gas V-8 engine with 360 hp and 380 lb.-ft. of torque comes standard on HD models.
- The 2500HD models have a maximum payload of 4,212 lbs.
- Technology upgrades include WiFi, Bluetooth connectivity, SiriusXM Satellite Radio.



Ford 2013 Transit Connect

Ford brought its European van line to the U.S. and is phasing out its E-Series. The big brother version of Transit Connect will be released in fall 2013.

- Gets EPA-estimated 21 mpg in the city and 27 mpg on the highway.
- Includes 2.0L Duratec DOHC I-4 engine, 136 hp at 6,300 rpm and 128 lb.-ft. of torque at 4,750 rpm.
- Features cargo length of 81 ft. at the floor, 72.6 ft. at the belt, 48.1 ft. between the wheelhouse and 53.7 ft. maximum height.



GMC 2013 Sierra 2500HD

GMC has introduced 10 Sierra 2500HD models, eight 3500HD models and six Sierra Denali HD models, which include regular cab, extended cab and crew cab bodies.

- Each model is available with standard gas V-8 or Duramax 6.6L turbo diesel and a 6.0L V-8 bi-fuel engine is available on the 2500HD extended cab model.
- Has a maximum payload of 4,212 lb. and 13,000 lb. towing capacity on 2500HD.
- The 6.0L features new powertrain grade braking in normal transmission mode.



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TRUCK TRENDS

Ram 2013 1500

Ram's revamped 1500 offers more horsepower, more torque and better fuel economy.



- The new model offers a 3.6L Pentastar V-6 engine with a standard 305 hp, 269 lb.-ft. of torque or a 5.7L HEMI V-8 that provides 495 hp, 407 lb.-ft. of torque.
- Stop-start function and other fuel improving technologies provide 20 percent better fuel economy.
- Enhanced air suspension improves fuel economy, ride control and features automotive load leveling.

Hino 2013 COE 195

Hino's Class 5 COE model is available in diesel and diesel-electric hybrid (195H), which they're marketing to commercial customers driving mostly city miles.



- Both models feature Hino's 5L Jo5E Series engine that provides 19,500 GVW, 210 hp at 2,500 rpm and 440 lb.-ft. of torque at 1,500 rpm.
- The 195 and 195H frames are 33 in. wide and 56,900 psi.
- Offers a newly designed cab with increased width for drivers.

Isuzu 2013 NPR Gas

Isuzu re-released its gas powered N-Series truck, including a NPR-HD truck, which includes a CNG/LPG alternative fuel option.



- The low-cab forward truck is available with a three person standard cab or seven passenger crew cab.
- Both models include a 6.0 Vortex V8 gasoline engine, 297 hp at 4,300 rpm and 372 lb.-ft. of torque at 4,000 rpm.
- The NPR-HD offers GVW of 14,500 lbs. and body payload allowance of 8,636-9,408 lbs.

Mitsubishi Fuso 2013 Canter FG4X4

The 4-wheel drive Canter FG4X4 is ideal for tough terrain.



- Provides good ground clearance, locking hubs and constant velocity joints for sure-footed tracking and turning.
- Boasts 14,050 GVWR lb. and estimated body payload of 8,065 lb.
- Offers a DOHC 4-cylinder, 4-stroke cycle, water-cooled turbocharged intercooled diesel engine with 161 hp at 3,500 rpm and 295 lb.-ft. of torque at 1,600 rpm.

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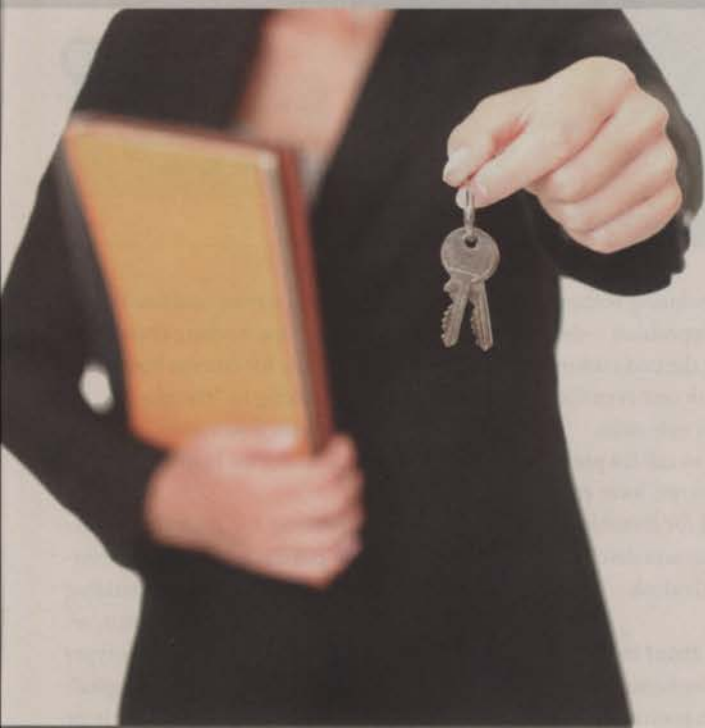


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4 people who will buy your company

This is a conversation I have with a lot of my clients and prospective clients and it's certainly a valid topic. Who will buy my company? I'm always harping on folks to develop an exit strategy and follow it, right up until the day they sell their company. So when that occurs, who will the buyer be?

The good news is our industry has evolved and matured nicely, and there is a much broader range of acquirers today. There are more than the four groups I've outlined here but these four are driving the acquisitions happening today. Part of a sound exit strategy will generally steer you toward a specific type of buyer. Here are description of that range of buyers.

The individual: Individual buyers are usually associated with smaller

transactions. They may not have the financial capacity or desire to purchase a mid- to large-size company. They frequently come from another industry and are making a career change. Or it could be someone from the industry; they have some financial backing and are making the purchase as their entry into the business as an owner.

There is a very well-respected residential design/build company in Denver that was purchased by an individual several years ago. It was a career change for the buyer. He had capital, researched the industry and decided he wanted in. He is very engaged in the business and doing quite well today.

The strategic buyer: This term is a little broad but in most instances it is either a competitor or an industry

player that is looking to enter your market. Typically, this has been the most prevalent buyer of companies in the service sector. The competitor is usually looking to take out another competitor and normally consolidates the operation to reduce overhead. They are buying a book of business – your business. If you have a strong brand that results in you winning more sales opportunities than most will get a competitor's attention.

The strategic buyer entering your market is usually more interested in the quality of your management team and your brand.

They may keep your name or fold you into their company brand but they are much more interested in using your company as a platform for future growth and operations. They will grow the business organically and may do some smaller acquisitions to help fuel growth. And this buyer is usually willing to pay a higher price for your company: They normally want "best-in-class" and the best brand company, and will pay for it.

The diversification buyer: That is not the proper phrase for this buyer but the intent is obvious. It is a company from a different or related industry that is looking to diversify, for whatever reason. They may want a new product or service offering or just like the industry and want to enter. Usually, this is a company already in the service sector but not yet in the landscape industry make an acquisition.

An example would be a janitorial or other building services company deciding to enter the landscape maintenance industry. They can offer another building service to their client base as well as bring another profit center into their company. If the synergies are right, these can be very lucrative

transactions for both parties. They are really interested in the quality of your brand.

Private equity buyer: This is probably one of the more misunderstood entities in business today. Lots of marginal to bad press abounds about PE firms, quite frequently unfounded and usually with a twist of greed involved. This was evident during



"I'm always harping on folks to develop an exit strategy and follow it, right up until the day they sell their company."

this year's election, with media's constant focus on Mitt Romney's involvement with Bain Capital. Generally speaking, private equity firms raise capital from the private sector, specifically to invest in a broad range of industries. Just like all good business people, they are looking to invest in companies that return a handsome profit.

Quite frequently they do have a shorter timeframe in mind and may exit the industry in some fashion five, 10 or 15 years down the road. Or they may become a dominant player in the industry.

The bottom line is they are investing money with a clear expectation of earning a good return on their investment. Well-positioned companies in the landscape management sector will be coveted by this type of buyer. **L&L**

Tom Fochtman is founder of Ceibass Venture Partners, an M&A consulting group. He can be reached at tjfochtman@giemedia.com

FRANCHISE

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Interviewed by Brian Horn

Aaron Samson, Lush Lawn

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How did you know now was the time to try and sell franchises? Notionally, the desire to franchise started when I built and sold my first lawn care business. It ignited a desire in me that I want to teach others how to build their own business. I really was not certain how to articulate that desire into an actionable business plan. Now having gone through building a second, far more successful lawn care business with serious brand potential, I know that showing and supporting others to do the same is an initiative my organization is now prepared to undertake.

We plan on running the Lush Lawn franchise system as an idea culture and while our system serves as a blueprint for new franchisees, our strength will be in our idea sharing and decentralized approach; taking great ideas from the franchisees themselves and implementing them companywide.

What are some obstacles you've faced and how have you overcome them? There have been no real obstacles per se so far. There have been projects within this realm that have required extensive work and will

continue to do so as franchising within any business is an organic proposition – the way you create value for the end customers and the franchise network and even for individual unit's changes over time.

One problem, if you can call it a problem, is the lead response that we have realized outside the area targeted for franchise sales. We are now considering an area development strategy for qualified individuals.

What has been positive about this experience? So far, remembering we are young at this, it has been positive from a self actualization standpoint. Recall from an earlier statement that this dream or vision of helping others do what I have done in this industry started when I sold my first business – I am moving in that direction – that is positive. I also took a thorough review of existing business operations, compiled it, organized it and made improvements on it.

What are you looking for in a franchise owner? In terms of a profile, we are looking for someone that is looking to

start their own lawn service business that is experienced, perhaps working elsewhere now. We are looking for current business owners that are looking to "transform" their existing business into a more successful one, looking for help reaching the next level.

We're also looking for returning or ex-military as they possess a number of developed skills, work ethic and understanding of the sacrifice required for achievement, we consider excellent candidates. Investor types that want to partner with an undercapitalized operator or those looking for a territory development opportunity.

When do you hope to have sold and opened your first franchise? Our goal is to have three units sold by year's end and it would be neat if we had a territory development relationship for a region underway also.

By the end of the year we would like to lay out business plans for those three units and get them started on the way to revenue growth, profitability and increased market share in their market. **L&L**

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Limit your exposure to slip-and-fall liability **PG 105**



Paperwork protection: Write it down to avoid frivolous lawsuits

By Kevin Gilbride

Those involved in the professional snow and ice management industry have often heard that you *really should* make sure to have good documentation records.

I am not sure what those that don't document think, but I have heard a lot of reasons: I don't have the time. My guys won't do it. It really doesn't matter. It does matter, and at ASCA, we hold proper documentation as an

industry standard. But I want to be clear, it is not ASCA that is forcing this documentation; it is our country's legal system. The truth is, 45 percent of professional snow contractors report that they incur at least one slip and fall lawsuit each year. It is not a matter of *if* a professional snow and ice management company gets hit with one of these. It's a matter of *when*.

Now here is the problem

when the inevitable occurs. I recently had a conversation with a snow professional and we were talking about these lawsuits. He told me of a conversation he had with a judge a while ago. The judge told him point blank: "It doesn't matter who is right or wrong, it only matters what you can prove. Unfortunately this is the society we live in today."

This statement reinforces the fact that more than 50

percent of slip and fall lawsuits are lost or settled due to documentation. ASCA supports this industry. Much of what we promote is in an effort to protect this industry and our members from frivolous lawsuits.

As you continue to evaluate your business, look at your risk management practices and how you can help protect yourself. The legal community has forced documentation as a key to success in the industry. **L&L**

The author is executive director of the Accredited Snow Contractors Association. Email him at kgilbride@gsie.net.



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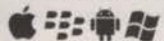
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INSIDER INFORMATION

We find out the secrets from your commercial clients that you've been dying to know.

By Kyle Brown

Snow and ice removal is an unforgiving business, with tough hours, difficult working conditions and tight margins.

Snow professionals are used to having to deal with variables with each snow event and responding to each threat correctly with a focus on getting a clean surface. But even though contractors and commercial clients have the same overall goal, it's tough to tell what exactly a client wants.

But we have the secrets straight from the source, and it didn't take interrogations with bright lamps.

We heard from Jim Mc-

Clarnon, site manager for Glen Oaks Gated Community, as well as other homeowner alliances, in West Des Moines, Iowa; and Krista Hermes, assistant operations manager for Crocker Park, a commercial work-live complex with high-end retail and residential, in Cleveland. Here are their answers on service, straight from our top-secret files.

What's the hiring process like for you?

Jim McClarnon: I am much more relationship-minded and most of my vendor activities are somehow all founded in referrals. It's not very easy for somebody to cold-call me.

If they don't have a referral, I really won't give them the time of day. A contractor has to somehow find a common relationship and work through that door rather than just ringing the front doorbell.

I need to be able to get on a good footing with top management or ownership with the company. I need to be able to go to dinner or socialize with these people. That way I feel comfortable if the vendor feels comfortable with me and feels a desire to get it right because there's more on the line than just a contract.

Krista Hermes: I have so many contractors who work on this site who have a plan

in place based on other shopping centers. Unfortunately, the design of Crocker Park does not function in the same way. We have hundreds of tenants and residents who we have to service, and we've created a zero-tolerance policy which our customers have come to expect. We have to make sure that the property is safe. I've had so many contractors think they're in charge of every aspect, and it just falls apart.

What about planning for events?

KH: (Our contractors) are calling me constantly, always pushing in that direction from bidding to lining up all the equipment, mate-

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“When we first brought our snow contractor on, I wanted to know, where would I be in the pecking order.” — Jim McClarnon

rial and staff. They do pre-walkthroughs with all their subcontractors on site, and do trial runs on site to make sure their entire staff is familiar before snow falls. We don't know exactly how the event is going to go, but they've taken a very proactive approach to handling it. I know who I'm to contact to get started.

They present to me all the subcontractors they're going

to use prior to having them come on site. There's an approval process of subcontractors and machines. We have a noise ordinance here, and they try to be as respectful as possible. We give them a list of the equipment we think is necessary and they give their advice and suggestions.

JM: We do a preseason drive-through, looking for sensitive areas, where to pile

the snow and, more importantly, where not to pile it. We mark the fire hydrant locations. We talk about what constitutes an event and who's going to communicate with whom.

When we first brought our snow contractor on, I wanted to know, where would I be in the pecking order. That was very important to me. We have some 400 residences in the community. I can't show up at 10 a.m. when it snows and have us be the last on the list. It was their commitment to me that they'd be there for me first. When there's a big

storm, we still get serviced immediately.

I don't care about your other accounts. All I care about is serving my customers and all of the members and residents of the community.

What's the optimal way for them to start a response?

KH: Our contractors are required to monitor the site. They have to call me at the beginning of every event to let me know they're on site, and call me after the event before they leave so I can review the work, so they're not halfway back if I have

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a problem with it. But they know what I expect at this point. We always communicate about the event, whether it's a phone call or a text.

JM: It's always been communication before the storm event and during the storm event. When we look at the forecast, we'll say, "Here's what I'm seeing. Are you seeing the same thing?"

You never really know what the weather's going to be like. But I'll make the call, or send a text to two guys, just to make sure one of them gets it. A couple minutes later, I get a "Will do," response. It's

very simple. I never have to chase anybody down.

What about when there's a concern over service?

JM: Errors will be made and equipment will break down. I know that, and I don't expect perfection. But I do expect, when issues arise, management will take them seriously. If there are issues, to me, that's what sets their company really apart from the others.

KH: We use both of our best judgments. But if it's Black Friday or if it's the day before Christmas, regardless of what

they feel is going to happen, I have to overstep and say, "I'm sorry, you're going to have to service this because this is the biggest shopping day of the year." And they'll say, "Can you just wait 20 minutes for the ice melter to start working? We'll stand by and call you back and let you know what we're seeing." I feel comfortable with their decision-making process because I've been working with them long enough.

It's good to have that level of communication and trust that we've instilled in each other's decisions to help us

progress as a team. And they can tell you, I'm pretty tough.

We've definitely crafted that relationship. Sometimes you might not agree with me, and sometimes I might not agree with you. But we've been able to work it out so both of us are typically happy at the end of the day, regardless of how they had to do a little bit of extra work.

I get a little nervous in the evenings, since I can't be there physically to see it coming down, and I'm getting calls from tenants about how it's not clear yet. I can be demanding with the service,

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but we try to work together with some understanding that they're not always going to be happy right away with what I decide.

Sometimes I don't always make decisions the contractors favor, but I'm always trying to have the best intention for the tenant, the property and the contractor.

How about after the event?

KH: We have a standard snow log that's required for them to fill out. It lists every single employee that's there and what piece of equipment they were operating. I can

always refer back to that log when we have slip-and-falls. They're very precise in getting all that information to me. Then I review the log and sign. There's a paper trail for everything.

JM: I'll take a look and see what I think. Usually after the event is over, we'll talk and they'll try to confirm with me whether I'm satisfied.

Is there anything you prefer when it comes to billing?

KH: They've suggested budgeting for additional dollars. We want to know what we're spending from the get-go and

we don't want it to change. We cannot measure how much money we're going to spend in these five months without knowing from the start what it's going to cost.

JM: To be honest, it's easy to forget about a storm on the second day of the month when you're being billed at the end of the month.

We're getting billed semi-monthly now, making it a little bit easier to go back through the bills and go over the individual storm events.

We have a print out from the weather service showing the precipitation from those

times. You can look at the bill and correlate it to the storm.

What don't contractors realize about your end of the job?

KH: I have so many people that are watching the staff, and nobody understands what's in the contract, what the contractors are there to do. I've got so many people watching out their windows and calling me, seeing the employees. If they have a uniform on, you've got to be presentable and make good decisions. **L&L**

The author is editor of *Green Industry Supply Chain Management*.

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Improve your infrastructure

When it comes to job tracking, you should put down the pen and paper and investigate new software. by Kyle Brown

Building up business in snow usually means the purchase or outfitting of a new truck for the fleet. But it's just as important to upgrade the business's infrastructure, including dealing with job tracking and timesheets. It's easy to pass these over in favor of hardware, but a little attention to streamlining job tracking saves time and money elsewhere.

Pen-and-paper tracking encourages job time estimates and erratic notes on what was done for a client at any given point. Job-tracking software comes in different types and sizes, each to cover the different needs of a growing business and satisfy client questions. Check out these options and see which fits your business best.

The JobClock/PocketClock

From ExakTime, the JobClock is a portable time clock that can be placed at any work site. Employees check in using a green Keytab, and check out with a red Keytab when the job is done. Time records and job codes from the clock, kept at a regular client's location, are collected by a FastTrakker Pro device or a smartphone, with individual job codes for different types of work finished.

Also offered as a part of the ExakTime system is PocketClock/GPS, which transforms a smartphone into a mobile timeclock, recording when an employee checks in. If he's not at the correct job site, he is flagged in the system. "It's not an issue of trust of your workers," says Scott Prewett, vice president



of technical services for ExakTime, "just a memory issue," removing the need for an employee to remember exactly where he was when a client questions the job done. The system lists a PocketClock/GPS license at \$299 per de-

vice, with no GPS fee. There is office time-tracking software, and additional software available. A package can start under \$1,000, says Prewett.

Crew Tracker

When Dan Gilliland started

5 tips to choosing the correct software

Picking the right software is difficult with so many choices and features, the options are confusing. Here are a few guidelines Randy Spivey, chief technology officer at Crew Tracker, says to keep in mind:

1. **Look for a good fit.** Some software might work great in one company but not in another.
2. **Have a plan.** You can't just buy something and expect it to work without you spending time learning it and configuring it to your needs. Our red flag goes up every time we have a customer whose owner isn't involved in the selection process.
3. **Commit with both feet and get into it up to your eyeballs.** If you don't have the commitment to make it a success, then it will fail. Every implementation needs at least two people, one from the customer and one from the software company, whose sole responsibility is to make that implementation a success.
4. **Know all the costs.** It's too easy to get fixated on some really cool part of the implementation and totally miss the small things that drive the cost up.
5. **Don't be misled by thinking some cool new technology will solve all your problems.** A lot of times the new technology just makes a bad process worse.

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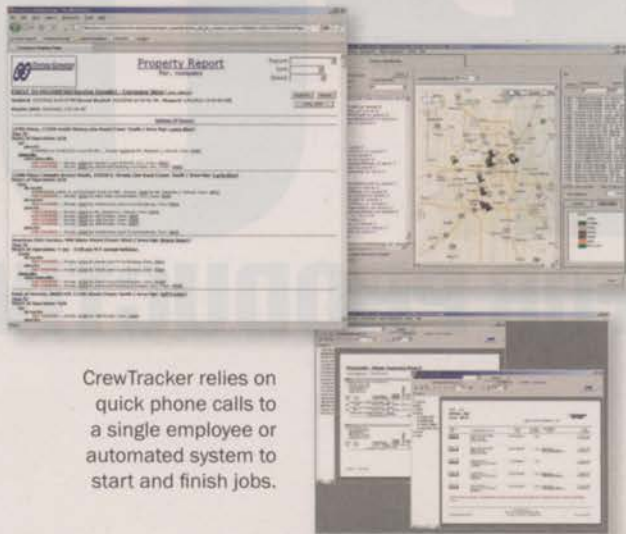
snow management in 1996, he searched for the right tools for the job, including just the right tracking software. Deciding he couldn't find something that fit just what he needed, he began work on building his own with colleague Randy Spivey.

"I needed software that could manage all the crews from the office in real time, and knew where every crew was, what their status was," says Gilliland. From that need, they developed Crew Tracker. Upon arrival at a site, an employee makes a quick phone call to the home

office with the details of the job, which are entered in real time into the database with a few codes by a single employee. When the job is complete, the employee calls back to the home office before heading to a new site. If the company doesn't want to dedicate someone to answering that phone, the job can be done by interactive voice recognition in the computer system with site and job type codes.

The full version of Crew Tracker runs at \$12,000, including annual maintenance fees. A smaller complete ver-

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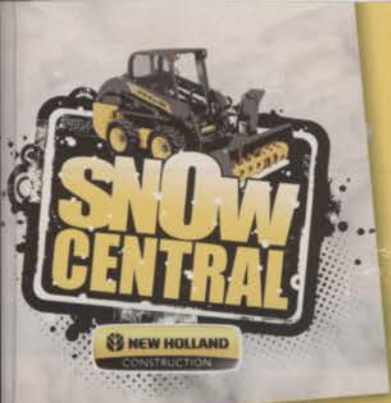
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sion, for businesses with 50 properties or fewer, is priced at \$4,000.

NEDISO

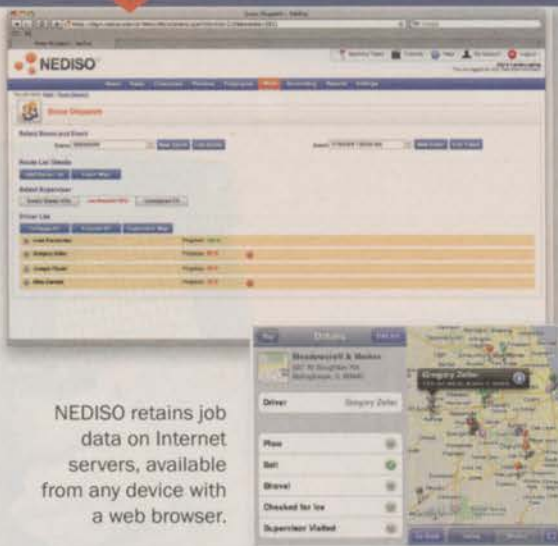
Peter Smolka's NEDISO software branches into a new category of consumer electronics, presented as a Software as a Service. SaaS programs are becoming more and more popular as a way of delocalizing equipment and management of data from a hard copy at the home office for the complete accessibility of the Internet. No software needs to be installed on an office computer or smartphone,

since the whole service is available online. "All our information is backed up on a nightly basis, and you can access it anywhere," says Smolka.

Information is available at any time, even outside business hours, and is professionally hosted. The cost for the service depends on the number of users. At the start, it can range from \$30 to \$70 per user. A version of the service that interacts with QuickBooks can range from \$50 to \$70 per user. **L&L**

Kyle Brown is editor of *Green Industry Supply Chain Management*.

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KNOW YOUR PLOWS

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To snow contractors, a plow is so much more than just a straight or v-blade. It turns out they're pretty particular when it comes to what they like, the technology they prefer, how they purchase and why they make the decisions they make to battle winter's worst.

During the first quarter of 2012, we asked snow contractors across the U.S. and Canada about their plows via SurveyMonkey, an online survey site. Nearly 700 contractors took the time to respond to our poll. We collated and crunched all of that data and found some interesting results. Furthermore, for additional

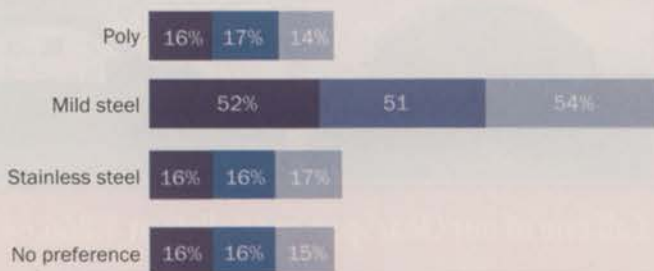
insight into contractors' plow preferences we broke down some of that data between snow fighters doing less than \$500,000 in winter snow removal, and those contractors doing more than \$500,000 in winter snow removal.

Overall, the average contractor has a arsenal composed primarily of straight-blade plows, but it, on some scale, will also include box plows, v-blades and sectional plows. Due to their attractive price tag, the occurrence, on average, of straight-blade plows compared to other types is greatest with smaller-scale contractors (less than \$500,000). Likewise, the

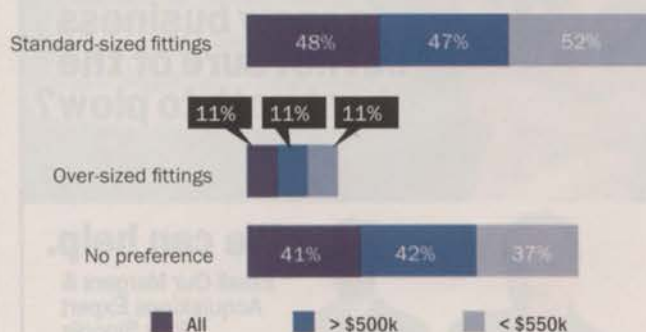
User preferences

Snow contractors outline what they like best in their plows.

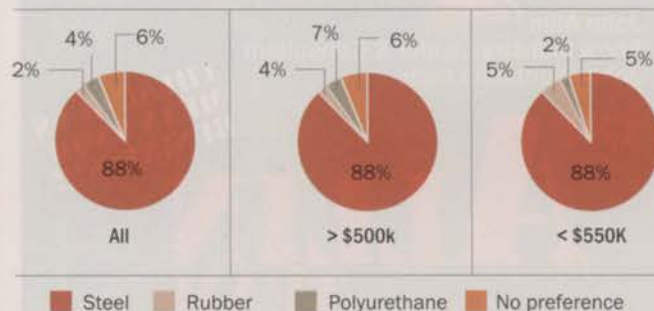
What moldboard material do you prefer on your plows?



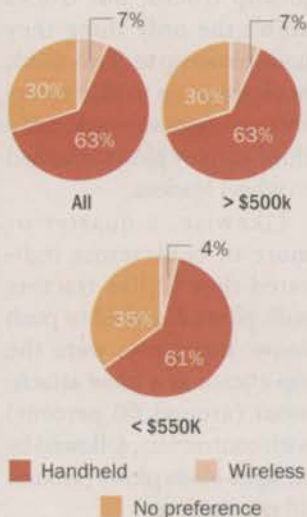
Standard vs. over-sized hydraulic fittings



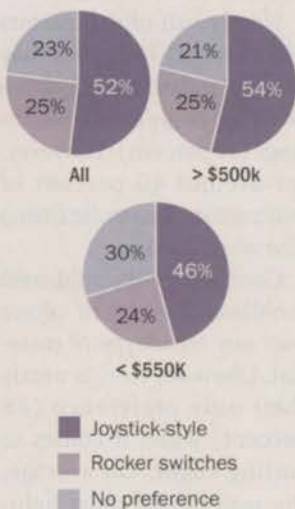
What cutting edge do you prefer?



Wireless vs. handheld plow controls



Joystick-style vs. rocker switches



frequency of box plows and v-blades are greater with larger-sized contractors, reflective of a more operationally aggressive and efficiency-minded operation.

More than three quarters of contractors who use subs for winter snow removal work expect those subs to have their own plows. Overall, less than 10 percent provide their subcontractors with plows

Around a third or more of snow and ice management contractors prefer to buy their plows when they purchase their trucks, as

well as when repairs become too costly, according to the research data. In addition, the majority of snow contractors prefer to purchase "new" plows over used items. However, around 15 percent of contractors state they have "no preference" when it comes to choosing either new or used plows, according to the research.

Interestingly enough, around 13 percent of contractors get every last ounce of work out of their plows, saying they only replace their units when they've rusted away to nothing. Very few



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contractors (1 percent or less), according to the research, purchase plows after the end of a winter plowing season. While only a small fraction, more contractors (around 10 percent) purchase their plows on a 5-year cycle, than on a 3-year cycle.

According to the survey, nearly three quarters of contractors are "loyal" to a particular plow brand or plow manufacturer. So what generates that level of intense loyalty? Contractors' top criteria in a plow is reliability, durability and ease of mounting, with a low em-

phasis on a plow's ancillary bells and whistles, according to the data.

Likewise, when making a plow purchasing decision, contractors are most influenced by their past experiences with a particular brand or model, followed by the recommendations made to them by their industry colleagues and local equipment dealer. So what do contractors like in their plows? On average, more than half of contractors indicated they like their plows to have hand-held, joystick-style controls. Less than a third indicated

they had no preferences when it came to their plow controls and switches.

Nearly half of contractors (48 percent) indicated they prefer standard-sized hydraulic fittings over over-sized fittings (11 percent). However, for around 40 percent of contractors, hydraulic fitting size wasn't an issue.

Contractors like mild-steel moldboards on their plows over any other type of material. Likewise, steel is nearly their only preference (88 percent) when it comes to cutting edges. On average, the majority of snow fight-

ers (64 percent) prefer to hook their plows up to 1-ton pickup trucks. But trucks aren't the only thing they hook plows up to. Two-thirds hook them up to skid-steers for snow removal work, and a third employ plows attached to wheel loaders.

Likewise, a quarter or more of contractors indicated they utilize tractors with plows attached to push snow. Box plows were the top choice as a plow attachment (around 60 percent) with contractors, followed by straight-blade plows (around 40 percent). **L&L**

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Cover your tracks

Ice-watch or ice-monitor?

The question arises when it comes to property managers. Successfully handle this request and limit your exposure to slip-and-fall liability.

by Matthew Peterson

Snow that melts and then refreezes creates a major liability that is leading to the epidemic of slip-and-fall lawsuits. The responsibility of "ice-watch" or ice monitor is one of the greatest exposures to your snow and ice maintenance company.

Everyone has to focus on this service during the winter months. Most often this includes runoff melting during the day and refreezing at night.

The natural accumulation of snow and ice presents a clear liability on the property. Once it's altered by plowing or shoveling, then it is considered to be "unnatural accumulation of snow and ice."

The term "ice watch" or "ice monitoring" takes the center stage of all discussions. This is the term referring to a professional snow removal contractor taking on the responsibility and the liability of preventing any refreezing on the pavement or sidewalk which could form after a contractor performs his

work at the site. The snow fighter is expected to make a reasonable effort to reduce the potential for injury to visitors, customers, guests and patrons while they are on the property in question.

In the contract you sign, whether it's a seasonal contract that is all inclusive or a per-push/per-event contract, pay specific attention to any section that addresses this topic. Both parties should consider the needs based on the current liability crisis.

If a manager needs the services of a snow contractor to monitor the property after an event, then this should be considered in the pricing.

Some snow contractors will spell out the hourly rate for an "ice monitor" plus the cost of material used to treat the property.

The trend of seasonal snow and ice management contracts vs. per-push/per-event contracts is on the rise. The seasonal contract won't have restrictions on the amount of salt you apply to a property

and will not handcuff the contractor into the directional handicap a call-first-for-permission contract has associated with it.

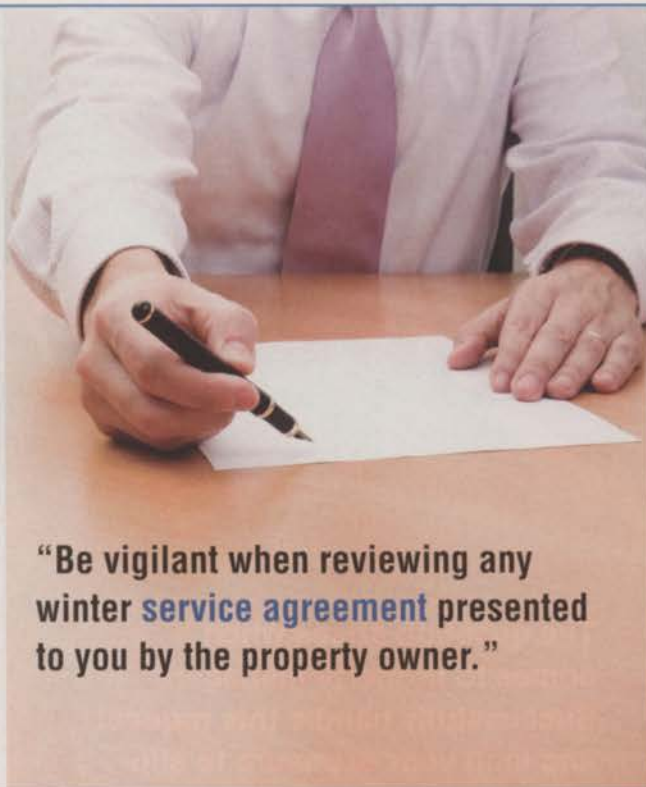
Make no mistake, property managers are under a fair amount of pressure, too. Like professional snow contractors, they have the outstanding snow contracts reviewed by their own insurance carriers and agents before they're signed and finalized.

If the wording of the hold-harmless clause does not favor the property owner, then they will not have insurance available to them or they will

pay the extremely high premiums you are experiencing.

It's not uncommon for insurance carriers to tell property owners to add new hold-harmless language that shifts the liability to the snow contractor making them responsible for all snow and ice related slip-and-fall claims after the contractor services the property and leaves the premises.

Be vigilant when reviewing any winter service agreement presented to you by the property owner. Some of that language may include the following:



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• "Contractor shall monitor the site for thaw-refreeze."

• Making the contractor be responsible and holding the property owner harmless for the presence of snow or ice at the property after the contractor performed services.

• Words like "Any and all claims" are way too broad. Revise the contract to be more specific. Anything too general or ambiguous is bad.

• The PM will ask that the contractor must seek permission to apply anti icing; this is essentially handcuffing

the contractor to take on the liability of the refreeze accidents and dictating how they protect themselves.

• How often is the contractor being asked to visit and treat the property after an event? You want specifics, such as temperature triggers according to an agreed weather service.

• Limit the monitoring after the event to a scenario where the client calls you and the call is documented.

Be careful. They may try to make the snow contractor responsible for the ice formation after they leave

the site, and handcuff them to seek permission to manage the situation. If you can't treat the property unless the property manager approves it, then they are tying your hands and will hold you legally liable.

So a good rule of thumb is to not sign contracts that restrict you from applying salt and deicing material if you are the one on the chopping block to be sued for it. The only true way to mitigate the exposure of the "ice watch" is for a contractor to plant a round-the-clock monitor, or a foreman in his truck,

sitting on the site to inspect for ice and treat the property, its sidewalks and walkways. If you are in a situation like this – and I've seen some snow and ice management contractors face this scenario – then ask to be compensated for time and material. A big help is to establish great communication between the property owner or manager.

Remember, we are a team and the property owners are not the enemy. We are all in this together through the entire winter. **L&L**

Matthew Peterson is the owner of Mills Insurance Group.

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- A large capacity, 3.2 quart fuel tank for extended running time.
- Available with an optional 110-volt electric starter.

For more information:
www.briggsandstratton.com

Buyers Products SnowDogg VMD Series Medium-Duty V-Plow

The pitch: Buyers Products offers the SnowDogg VMD Series medium-duty V-plow specifically designed for half-ton pickups and sport utility vehicles.



- The medium-duty V-plow uses the same hydraulics and hinges of larger VX plow models, designed for 3/4-ton and larger trucks.
- Designed specifically for smaller half-ton vehicles, the medium-duty V-plow features a stainless steel, corrosion-free moldboard.
- The plow's lift arm also provides 35-degree vertical travel.

For more information:
www.buyersproducts.com

Caterpillar D Series Skid-Steer

The pitch: The 272D XHP and 299D XHP, replace the C series and are the largest, most powerful skid-steers Caterpillar has ever built.



- Net horsepower increases for the new D Series models range from 5-18 percent and flywheel torque is increased from 13-27 percent.
- The new engine uses a redesigned air intake path for added efficiency, and a dealer installed pre-cleaner kit is available for dusty, dirty applications.
- Larger lift cylinders on all four new D Series models provide a 19-percent boost in lifting force, compared with C Series models.

For more information: www.cat.com

John Deere 324J Compact Wheel Loader

The pitch: The John Deere 324J is a 74-hp compact wheel loader that combines outstanding maneuverability,



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 - Equipped with an IT4 emission-certified engine, the 324J travels at speeds up to 19 mph.

For more information:
www.deere.com

Snow Edge

The pitch: The Snow Edge is intended for pushing, scraping, scooping, and dumping snow and sleet with your loader bucket on relatively flat surfaces.



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- Top brackets extend down through slots in the main plate where they act as extra support cleats.
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For more information:
www.ratchetrake.com

Sheyenne Tooling and Mfg. 600CT Snowblower

The pitch: Sheyenne Tooling has developed its new 600CT snowblower for compact tractors.



- Features concentric-axis design, meaning the impeller and auger rotate on the same shaft.
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- Has a 74-in. cutting width and a 28-in. cutting height for managing tall drifts and snow piles.
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The pitch: SnowEx presents its new SL-80 and SL-80SS push sprayers for ice management on sidewalks and other small areas.



- Available with a powder-coated steel frame (SL-80) or stainless steel frame (SL-80SS), both sprayers have a 12-gal, corrosion-resistant polyethylene tank.
- Each model includes an adjustable-height boomless nozzle, which sprays most salt brine and liquid ice melters up to 48-in. wide.
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For more information: www.trynexfactory.com

Terex Skid-Steers

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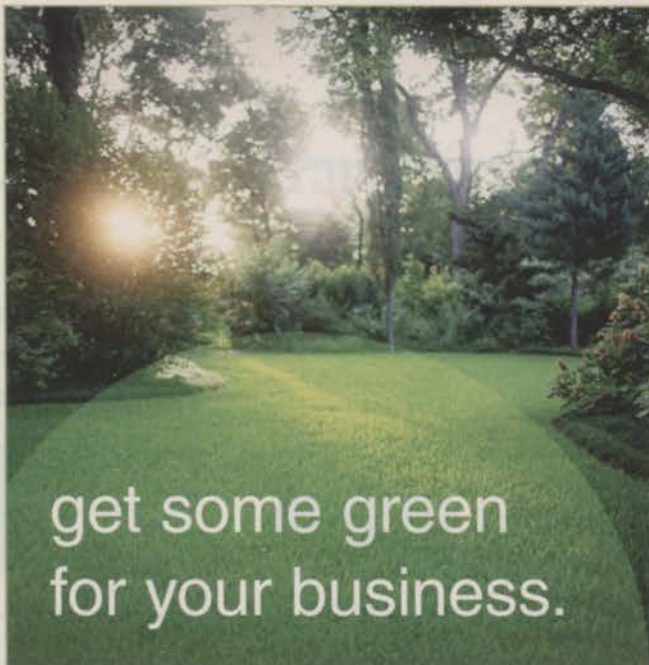
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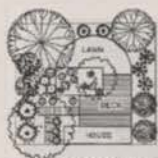
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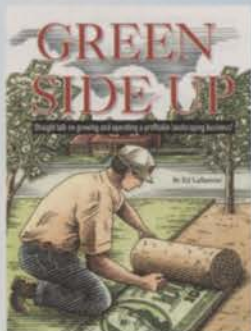
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Company: The Bruce Co. **Location:** Wisconsin **Ranking:** 32 **2011 Revenue:** \$32 million



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Bliss Nicholson, president and CEO of The Bruce Co., discusses how smart growth and an emphasis on quality can elevate a company from even the smallest of beginnings.

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We got started about sixty years ago when a young gentleman named Lee Bruce wanted to go to the Boy Scout Jamboree and didn't have the funds to do it. **So, he borrowed the tractor from his dad and started working in people's gardens and lawns and earned enough money to go to the jamboree.**

The second year, he had all of those people call him back, so he had more work, and by the time he was 15, he was encouraged to apply for a job with the state of Wisconsin. He did it, got it, but the problem was **when he went to sign the contract, he had to go back and get his father because he was only 15.**

From there, we grew from doing landscaping to landscape design, construction, irrigation, etc. This was spread out over a period of 20-plus years of just getting involved with one end to the other. **We started with landscaping, but over time we started a nursery operation to grow our own plants.**

A mistake we made was thinking that we could be everything to everybody and do everything. If you're set to do a certain kind of work, you just can't take on a different kind of job and get the same quality of work on that different kind of job. You're competing in a world of bidding jobs compared to competing in the world of design/build. It's about the relationship with the customer and the quality of the work you're doing.

I think the one thing that we always have to keep in mind is that we can build many customer relationships, but building those lifetime relationships with those customers and **knowing more about the customer and their needs than the customer knows is what makes us successful.** And understanding how important our employees are to the whole process.

We continually tell our supervisors that employees have to see an example from the top down, enforcing that our customers are important to us, and that we expect them to be treated respectfully. So in training, we spend time not only with the people in the field but with the supervisors. We tell them that when you stop at someone's house, take time to introduce yourself and hear what the customer's concerns are and what they have to say. **Be there in a clean truck and a clean uniform** – those outward things that people pay attention to.


I guess I'd certainly look at two things: is it profitable, is it sustainable? If I'm going to grow the company, don't just get into something without having somebody that knows and understands the cost of getting into it and making sure it's something that you should do. **Know the pros and cons; check the facts.**

If you're going to be expanding, my advice is to **make sure you can execute the things you do,** and do what you say you're going to do. **L&L**

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