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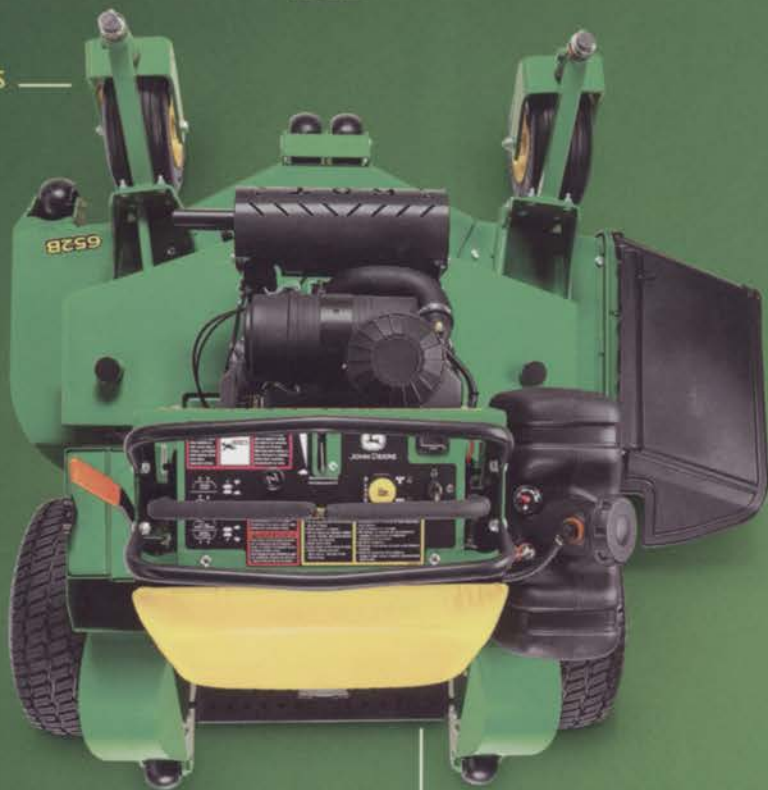
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We asked commercial property managers why they hire
and fire landscapers. Their answers will surprise you.

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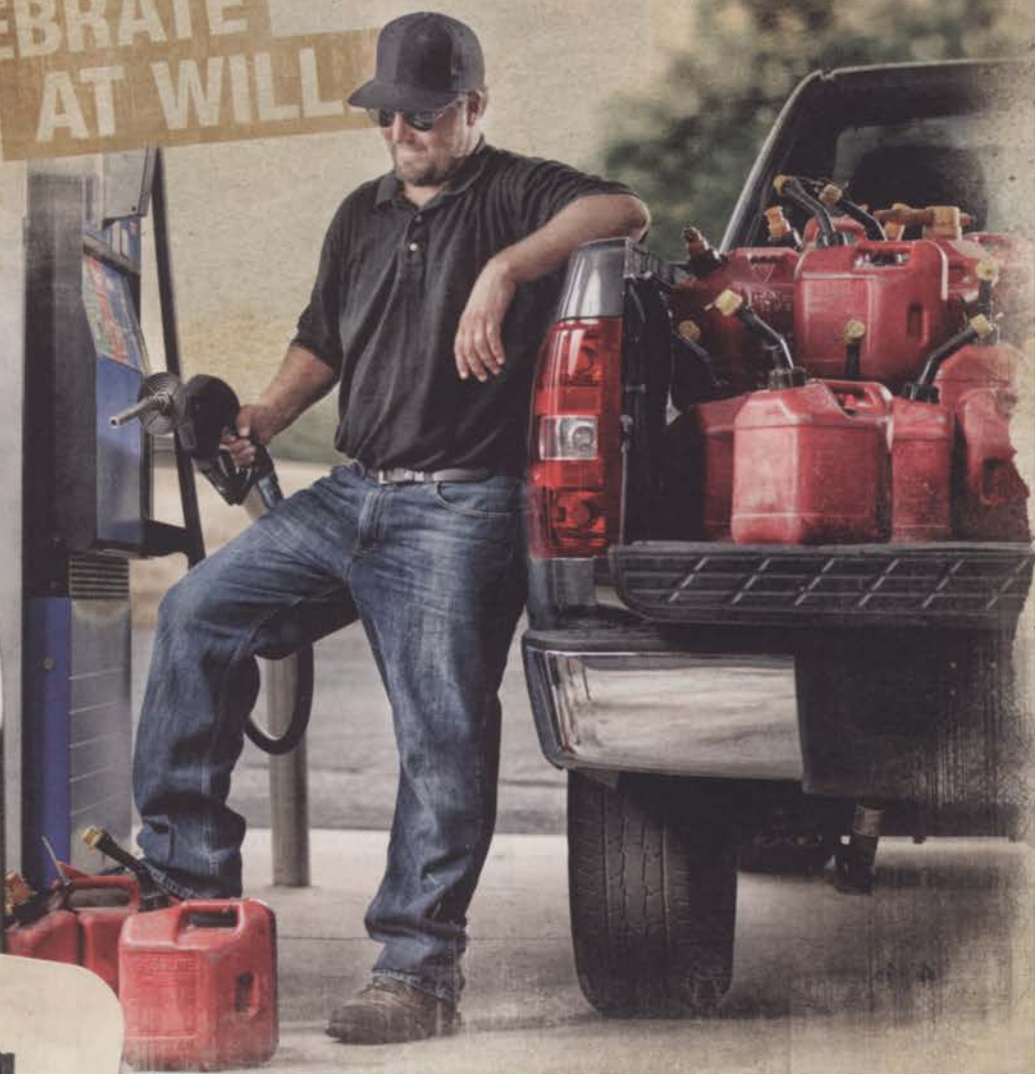
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ONLINE CONTENTS

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

Underdog leadership

Make your employees feel like the odds are stacked against them.

By Dan Coughlin

Successful underdogs don't focus on what they don't have. They also don't give in to the temptation to say they don't have a chance against overwhelming odds. Instead they look for a tiny bit of leverage they can turn to their advantage.

Apple couldn't beat out IBM in the 1970s, until it did.

IBM, the fallen king of hardware, could never become a dominant global services company, until it did.

Wal-Mart couldn't replace the successful retailers of the 1960s so it just kept trying harder and harder at adding value to the people who were attracted to them.

Bill Marriott couldn't take his company from root beer stands to a successful hotel business, until he did.

Successful underdogs focus on their current reality and they leverage what they can leverage to improve a little bit at a time.

And that is part of their key to success. Individuals and organizations who hang on to the underdog mindset keep on keeping on. They never feel like they've arrived or completed their journey.

Visit bit.ly/llunderdog for the complete article, and learn how you can lead like an underdog.



YOUR FAVORITE HASHTAG

WE (@LAWNLANDSCAPE) now host #landscapechat the first Wednesday of each month on Twitter with Corona Tools (@CoronaTools).

All you have to do is search #landscape chat at 2 p.m. EST on the first Wednesday of every month and you'll be able to join the conversation.

We will be questioning experts in the green industry on different topics every month. Last month, we interviewed McKay Lighting (@McKayLighting) about landscape lighting.

Below are some of the takeaways from the conversation.

- More and more people are expanding their indoor living spaces outside like outdoor kitchens, fire features, dining and living areas. They want those spaces well lit for nighttime enjoyment.

- McKay has seen a stronger focus on security lighting in the last ten years.

- Solar has not been developed enough on the low-voltage market to be a great option for systems.

- You can have system turn lights on/off to control specific types of lights to different areas in the landscape. You can go as far as controlling your lights to different audio for different areas of the yard.

So, if you're looking for advice and insight from different aspects of the green industry, join us at the next #landscapechat.

Take it to the bank, web rankings and keys to growth

If you've missed any of our recent podcasts from our Lawn Care Radio Network, then you've missed a lot. Check out a few of them below. You can find more podcasts on our website at bit.ly/medialawn, or by subscribing for free on iTunes at bit.ly/lawnandlandscapeapp.



LAWN CARE
RADIO NETWORK

Skeletons in the closet: blunders and banks

Industry consultant Jason Cupp talks with Editor and Associate Publisher Chuck Bowen on a regular basis about the challenges Cupp hears from his clients, and how he helps them move past those obstacles.

In this podcast, Cupp goes in depth about how his client's bank made a major mistake, how the contractor responded and what everyone learned in the process. bit.ly/cuppbank

How to improve your local search rankings

The local search landscape is always changing. Those who are able to keep up and adapt to the changes put themselves in a highly visible position, ready to be found by consumers searching for their services.

In this special webinar, Chris Heiler covers the most tactics you need to know to ensure your business appears higher in local search rankings.

bit.ly/llsearch

3 keys to grow your business in 2014

L&L columnist Marty Grunder is an award-winning landscaper who runs one of the Midwest's most successful landscaping companies.

He has also helped hundreds of other landscapers grow their own businesses as a consultant and adviser. Grunder hosted a free webinar with L&L that revealed three key things any landscaper can do to grow and beat their competition in 2014.

bit.ly/grundergrow

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How you grow it

Part of my job involves speaking gigs around the country, usually getting up in front of a few dozen landscapers at a regional or state meeting.

I give them my take on the state of the industry and what trends I see coming down the pike that are going to have the most impact on them in the coming year.

It gives me a chance to get out and talk with contractors, association folks and suppliers that I might not otherwise get to see.

Earlier this winter, I was at a conference in Columbus, where I'd coordinated some education sessions for the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation.

One of the speakers I asked to come up was Larry Smith. He runs Greentech in Troy, near Cincinnati. He shared a few to-do items that made for great advice for owners just starting out and who have been in the business for a while.

My favorite thing he said during his short presentation was this: "Start succession planning today. If you started your business yesterday, start succession planning today. If you started your business 10 years ago, start succession planning today."

With the sale of Brickman last year to KKR for \$1.6 billion, and its subsequent purchase of Metheny Commercial Lawn Maintenance, one of the largest contractors in Texas, a lot of owners are thinking that it might be time to cash in.

But many of them aren't ready — financially or emotionally — for that to happen.

You could do almost anything with your company. You could sell it to a national company, or you could sell it to a regional player. You could liquidate and just close the doors. You could transfer it to your son or daughter or employees.

Whatever you decide to do with it when you've finished your run, you have to decide what it is. Because the decisions you make today and this spring and next year to grow your company will be predicated on what you want to do with it when you're ready to sell it.

Maybe your kids aren't interested in taking over the family business. Maybe you don't want to sell to the guys in the two-tone trucks from Maryland. That's fine.

But, whatever you want to do when you're ready to retire or step back, you have to start thinking about it now and do what you need now to build your company accordingly.

Our 2014 Mergers and Acquisitions Guide starts on page 76 and is designed to help you get ready, to ask yourself those big questions to see what you want and how to get there. The time to start thinking about the future is today. — *Chuck Bowen*



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L&L INSIDER

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A bird's-eye view of Daytona International Speedway.



Extreme landscaping at the speedway

Artistic turf design and a slew of maintenance challenges make caring for the grounds at Daytona International Speedway an ultimate experience. By Kristen Hampshire

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — The checkered flag turf pattern at Daytona International Speedway looks like an artist took to the land with a stencil and paint. The rich, green perennial and lighter annual ryegrass flag design with five stars shooting from its center create an artistic backdrop to the track. "It gives the look of thunderbirds flying over the stadium," says Sam Newpher, grounds supervisor.

Newpher, a 40-year industry veteran, has been caring for the turf at the speedway for the last two decades. "If you ever think you know it all, it's time to go home," Newpher says of the challenges of maintaining a high-visibility property riddled with challenges. "This gives me a chance to try something new and expand my skills."

For starters, there's the meticulous fertilization program for all of this "turf detail," which is centered at the grandstand finish line. And, there is limited time to accomplish

the goal because the track is "extremely active," with 300 days of activity each year.

Meanwhile, another 5.2-acre of Floratam St. Augustine, a variety somewhat resistant to chinch bug damage, sits on a steep grade up to 45 degrees. Mowing requires special attention and remote-control technology.

SHOWSTOPPER TURF. The Daytona International Speedway is dubbed the World Center of Racing because of its diverse racing schedule. Aside from eight, intense weeks of racing activity, from a 24-hour race to the NASCAR Sprint Cup, the grounds are used for production vehicle testing, police motorcycle training, car shows and social events. All of this leaves limited time to care for the turf's very specific needs, let alone repair damage. (Newpher sometimes works a night shift.)

Meanwhile, the care of this property is

crucial because so many people see it. "It's the most highly visible area in all of sports year in and year out," says Gary Morgan, territorial manager for Direct Solutions.

"It's not like the Super Bowl or World Series where they change venues. It's home of the Daytona 500 and the 24-hour race."

The trial area, with its pristine turf pattern, is dubbed "the football field" because, back in the day, Morgan says, there were two goal posts on that greenspace where pigskin games were actually played.

Staging a pattern in this space required some testing. "The first time we wanted to see how the design would look before we put a big pattern in, so we did 10-foot wide strips of alternative perennial and annual ryegrass," Newpher says. The test strips were 1,500 long.

The planting produced the desired painted-on effect. From there, Newpher and team began changing the pattern on the 4-acre area each year. Missouri Turf Paint comes up with the design, and Newpher and crew execute the planting and care — no small feat.

The property is prone to disease because of the climate, which often is about 85 percent



TIME FOR CHANGE

After more than two decades, Club Car rolled out updated versions of its Carryall cart.

By Brian Horn

ORLANDO, Fla. — For more than 20 years, Club Car has hesitated making any major changes to its Carryall line. But that changed recently as the company,

in January, rolled out new models with improvements to fuel efficiency, horsepower and other modifications.

The company invited media members and dealers to Disney's Fort Wilderness Lodge in Orlando, Fla. to get an up-close look at the new vehicles and to test drive them.

Disney has almost 3,500 Club Car vehicles on its properties and has a 20-plus year relationship with Club Car. What Club Car has learned through its relationship with Disney (Club Car actually developed a custom solutions department because of Disney) were implemented into the updated Carryall vehicles.

In addition to lessons from Disney, Club Car sent 12 employees across the U.S. and Europe, visiting 46 locations that use Club Car or competitor vehicles to gather information.

What they heard from that research was that customers wanted a more powerful engine, more comfort in the vehicle and a fit-to-task-bed box.

Kurt Meyer, commercial/industrial marketing manager, said landscapers specifically asked for a better bed, and they wanted a pick-up truck-like tailgate that is easy to open. The new vehicle now has a single-handed latch and release tailgate, and a protected aluminum bed that will protect the inside from corrosion from any spillage.

Landscaper feedback also led to the implementation of movable bed dividers and cargo tie-down loops to prevent tools and other cargo from shifting.

"You are protecting your assets," Meyer said

watch a mowing day at the big track where a 60-foot tall, steep angled slope is maintained using a radio-controlled Spider slope mower. It's not unusual to have a small crowd watch this process.

The space is mowed up and down, left and right. "We can put the same pattern on the hill that you see at the base," Newpher says of the 27-acre total area. The mower operator, working from a tractor at the top of the slope, controls the remote mower, which is attached to the tractor with a winch. "That braces the mower so it doesn't slip when he wants to cut at a 45-degree angle," Newpher says.

The winch is attached to a 15-foot bar on rollers. "That way, when the operator is up high, he can do seven to nine rows before he has to move the tractor," Newpher says.

Then, there's fertilizing this steep slope. "You can literally see the color green sliding down the hill," Newpher says of when nitrogen is applied. He must apply products in ¼- to ½-pound rates to avoid "the slide."

You can calibrate anything, he adds. Of course, there's plenty of math involved in getting the application down pat. "We have a physical measurement of how big the hill is and how many thousand square feet we are doing, so we tested calibration by running different speeds until we got it to where one load covered exactly half of the hill," he says of the 900-gallon hydroseeder.

You get attached to a turf space you work so hard to maintain, he says.

"I feel honored," Morgan says. "If a car spins off the track, you're thinking, 'Stop spinning!' because you don't want the turf to get torn up."

For video of the grounds, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and search "Daytona video."

humidity during the day. Meanwhile, they battle poor soil quality because of the abundance of lime rock base under the asphalt track. "If you have high calcium, it ties up everything in the soil," says Morgan, relating that the speedway uses an acid spray that breaks down calcium in the soil without hurting the turf. That brings the soil into a better balance so there is improved fertilizer uptake.

Meanwhile, the water quality is sub-par because of the calcium levels, as well — and because irrigation reserves are typical Florida groundwater that is high in bicarbonates. "Heat radiates out of Lake Lloyd, a 40-acre lake on the back stretch of the race track, and it is high in calcium, as well," Morgan says.

Still, there are unexpected "guests" at the track — like pythium, a potentially fatal turf root disease that can take out overseeded grasses overnight. Newpher took a positive sample for pythium, but caught it immediately.

The next morning, Morgan drove to the site and made recommendations to get the disease in check fast.

MAINTENANCE, AGAINST ALL ODDS. If you want a lesson in extreme landscaping, then

of the upgrades to the truck-bed's storage capabilities. The company also wanted a more truck-like look to the interior, and a truck-like feel to the seating area.

"We tried to decrease the gap between getting out of the truck and transitioning into this vehicle," said Billy Dakuras, director of sales and business development for the Americas.

Mike Cotter, commercial/industrial and consumer marketing director, said the company expects to see a sales increase of 24 percent in the commercial utility vehicle market.

Cotter said UTVs can be a less expensive alternative to pick-up trucks and vans when moving people or tools around a facility on a limited budget.

"As budgets and teams shrink, they (facility managers) are always trying to do more with less," Cotter said.

Other features of the vehicle include:

- Key switch, shifter and gauges on the dash, right next to the ergonomically engineered soft-grip steering wheel. To deter unauthorized use, the company has upgraded from a common fleet key to an uncommon automotive-style key switch.
- The solid-state, global charger is 92-95 percent efficient, a 10 percent increase compared to the old charger.
- The new engines boost horsepower by 30 percent and fuel efficiency by as much as 50 percent over previous Carryall utility vehicle engines.
- The aluminum bed box features a floor protected with Rhino Lining, the same material used in the beds of many pickups.
- Newly designed rustproof aluminum side panels feature a configurable track-based attachment system for carrying shovels, rakes and other equipment for specific jobs. Just remove the accessories when you don't need it.
- Movable bed dividers and cargo tie-down loops stabilize cargo and prevent shifting. The system also accommodates optional cooler holders, trash can holders and other accessories.
- Contoured seating and more space between the seat back and the steering wheel were designed to keep drivers comfortable. There is also no wheel well intrusion.



Brian Hornung, a contractor at William Quinn and Sons gave the students of the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences feedback on the plans they designed for Nufarm's North American headquarters.

A fresh set of eyes

When Nufarm needed a landscape plan designed for its new headquarters, the company looked to the youth of the industry to help. *By Brian Horn*

CHICAGO — Instead of using a local landscape architect to design the plans for the landscape used for its North American headquarters, Nufarm did something a little different.

The company called upon a few of high school students from the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences to design the project. The school was founded in 1985 with the mission to prepare urban students for careers in agriculture.

"The last couple of years we've been working pretty closely with them to expose the students to the agriculture and green industries and create some opportunities for them to learn what career opportunities are out there for them," said Brian Rund, director, branding and marketing services at Nufarm. "It's really a fantastic place."

Nufarm worked with Andrea Briney, the school's horticulture career pathway instructor, and three of her students during the project that took about seven months to complete.

"When students work alongside a professional they gain a deeper connection to the material they are learning at desks back at school," Briney said. "During my school years, I always questioned 'when am I ever going to need to know this?' Projects like these take the lessons out of the classroom and make them real."

Briney said the students were genuinely interested in working on something other than small design projects around the school campus or exhibit gardens.

"I think they saw the opportunity behind this particular project and really jumped at it," she said. "However, I don't think they realized the gravity of their decision until their first site walk and meeting with their clients at Nufarm. At that point, this project was no longer





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Andrea Briney, far left, helped the students with their design plans for the project.

another assignment given by their teacher, but a real world project with real clients and real deadlines.

"I've known these students for over four years and I've never seen them as serious about a presentation as I did when they needed to present their ideas to their clients."

After the students presented the plans to Nufarm last spring, the company took it to Brian Hornung, a contractor at William Quinn and Sons to get feedback on the plan.

"When I received the details of what the project actually involved – working with students from the agricultural school to implement a complete renovation of the property – the answer was a very obvious 'yes.'"

"It's not every day you are able to introduce our industry to a group of high school students," said Hornung, who was already doing general maintenance on the site. "The work we do is not as glamorous or glorified as a high tech job in Silicon Valley, but I believe it's equally important."

Rund said the experience was great, but he advised that another company thinking of taking the same process should expect it to take more time than if you were working with a professional designer. "The kids have to fit this stuff in with everything else," Rund

said. "High school kids are busy. It's amazing to see the workload these kids have."

Even with the delay, Rund said the experience was well worth it.

"You are giving those kids an opportunity they wouldn't have otherwise," he said. "That's what will inspire the passion in these kids and lead them into our industry. And we need people."

"We need the understating of what it takes and more than just the shallow, 'Well there's grass and there's flowers.'"

"It's good for the industry, even if they don't go into the business, it's good to have kids coming out of school who otherwise wouldn't know what it takes – why it's important to have green space and good landscaping and some of the benefits that occur from that."

The project was also an eye-opener for Briney. Prior to her teaching career she was an associate landscape architect and admits she didn't understand how important an opportunity like this was to students.

"These opportunities are invaluable to a young person trying to carve out their niche in the world," she said. "Wouldn't it be nice to know you and your company helped with that?" **L&L**

Advice on the move

Editor and Associate Publisher Chuck Bowen recently moderated a webinar with columnist Marty Grunder, and we wanted to share some of the feedback we received.

Hi Chuck,

Loved the webinar last week. Some really great advice. Hey, is there any way you could email me the video and/or audio of the webinar as an mp3/ mp4 download, so I can download it and play it in my truck as I drive. Thanks!

Anthony

Peek Landscaping LLC

Thank you for sending out the link. Is there any way to burn that webinar, or others from your site, to a flash drive for the purpose of being able to listen to them in my truck?

Vince

Del Vacchio Landscape & Garden Center

Editor's note: You can download it via our Lawn Care Radio Network at bit.ly/lawnandlandscapeapp or you can stream it by visiting bit.ly/grundergrow.



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Great webinar!! Awesome way to start the New Year!! I love the magazine and all the great information it provides. Keep up the good work!

Have an awesome day!

Scott

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ASK THE EXPERTS

CUSTOMER RETENTION AND D/B BUDGETS

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.

HOW TO KEEP THE CUSTOMER!



Q. What kind of customer retention should I be getting, and if I'm getting below that, what should that tell me?

A. Customer retention is a big issue in the landscape industry. You can spend your hard earned dollars obtaining new customers. However, it's just as important to keep existing customers. A dissatisfied customer can cost more than his or her billing amount. Customers don't just decide to leave a company without reasons and the biggest reason for customer defec-

tion is unsatisfactory performance results. Sure, you may lose a few customers because of their budget issues or, in the case of residential customers, a lost job or illness. However, the No. 1 reason customers leave is because they're not happy with your work.

When a customer leaves you, ask them for a reason, and take it as a learning experience so it doesn't happen again. In some cases, the customer is in a budget crisis and you could suggest reducing services to fit their smaller budget. Generally speaking, in our industry a 90–92 percent customer retention rate is typical. You'll never retain

100 percent, but the higher the better, and benchmark 90-plus percent as your goal.

Rick Cuddihe, president, LaFayette Property Maintenance

Q. Design/build ... it has to do with financial budgets. If you had a large sell last year, would you budget that into the next year or not? Also, how do you figure gross profit on products? What should be your overall gross profit for that department?

A. We were in exactly the same situation last year. We had one design/build job that reached the \$1 million mark in 2012 and made it easy to reach an otherwise challenging sales goal.

In budgeting for 2013, we decided to keep the same sales goal that we had in 2012 for that division. As a result, we will be falling short of our goal this year. It is extremely hard to capture a large sum of dollars like this through smaller jobs. My recommendation is to set your budget to match your average number of projects times your average project value. Data should be based on the last two years of sales history (include the one large job you had at a discounted rate that is equal to your typical highest value project – do not include it at its actual dollar amount, as it will skew your numbers).

Remember, if you exceed your sales goal, the extra dollars drop to the bottom line; if you miss your

sales goal, then you may not have a bottom line.

I'm not sure that I clearly understand your question regarding gross profit, but I'll give it a shot.

Gross profit (also called gross margin) is calculated by subtracting your direct expenses for a job (labor, materials, rentals, subcontractors, dump fees) from the income received for that job, and it is tracked as a percentage of income.

Our firm has a budgeted (target) gross profit of 62 percent for our self-performed design/build work and 48 percent for our subcontracted plus self-performed design/build work combined.

Fifty percent is a common rule of thumb for gross profit because

it means that you spent 50 percent of the revenue received on "doing" the project and you have 50 percent remaining to be split among

indirect expenses (roughly 20 percent), overhead/admin. expenses (roughly 15 percent) and net profit (roughly 15 percent). Every company's costs and pricing structure is unique, and P&L sheets are frequently set up differently from company to company, so don't take this as gospel. It is just a basic example to help you understand how gross profit plays into financials. **L&L**

Burt DeMarche, president, The LaurelRock Company

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



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MARTY!

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

Blame yourself



Frequently I hear leaders saying things like, "My employees never do what I want them to," "I have to do everything myself if I want it done right," or my personal favorite, "I don't know what else I need to do to get my team to understand what we need to be doing around here."

Do you know who we can blame for these situations? **It's the person reading this column, that's who! Yes, you. That's the answer the first time something like this happens.**

There are three reasons that our people don't do what we want and need them to do. 1. They were not properly trained, educated or equipped to do the job. 2. They don't have the capacity to do the job you need them to do. 3. They have a bad attitude. These three reasons are a funnel in which you should run every situation through

that doesn't go well at your company.

If you don't like the results you got from a member of your team, the first thing you have to ask yourself is, "Did I properly train them to do that? Did they receive the education they needed from us to do what we needed them to do? Were they properly equipped to do the job?"

If in any way, shape, or form, you have to answer NO to these questions, then you have to take the blame for what happened. Why is that?

How can you expect to ever make improvements if you are looking for someone else to blame and how will you ever improve if you keep throwing people out there doing things they haven't been properly educated, trained for, and equipped to perform?

If someone didn't do what you wanted and needed them to do

and you can't honestly say part of the reason for them not performing well isn't lack of training, then go give them the proper training and tell them what you expect the next time. Have them learn from the mistake.

Sometimes the best teacher of all is committing a mistake. If you did properly train, educate, and equip them to perform and you don't like the results, the next thing you have to look at is: do they have the capacity to do what you want and need them to do?

I see lots of landscapers who put people in positions they can't handle. I see it often in sales. We make our top sales professional our sales manager and wonder why they can't do that job well.

Just because someone can sell doesn't mean they can teach and manage others to do the same. Just because someone was a good team leader doesn't mean they can be the production manager and, my personal favorite, just because someone has the same last name as yours doesn't mean they deserve to be promoted.

I'm an old baseball player. Many times I saw our coach put a right fielder at shortstop and rarely did that go well.

Why? Because the skills it takes to succeed in right field don't always translate to shortstop. Business is the same way. So, if you don't like the results you are getting and it's not because they can't do the job (they do it right once in a while), then we go on to the last point to look at in your funnel and that's attitude.

The most dangerous and toxic

people in our small businesses are smart people with a bad attitude. Why? Your team respects someone who knows how to run the excavator well. Your team respects someone who has a degree in horticulture from Auburn University.

Your team respects someone who is an Ohio Certified Nursery Technician. That respect means your team will listen and might follow these types. For example, if you allow one of these smart types with a bad attitude to consistently be late for work, what are you telling everyone else they can do?

As hard as it is, if someone isn't doing what you want and need them to do and you're training them well and they are capable of doing the work but they have a bad attitude, they need to go. You will never grow nor reach your potential by having people with bad attitudes on your team.

Bad attitudes are contagious; they affect your entire team. A team full of people with good attitudes has a positive culture. And if you have a positive, good, healthy culture, a lot of the right things will be achieved naturally.

I have seen this time and time again, as my friend Joe Calloway says, "Culture drives results." It sure does and you'll never have a good culture until you get the bad attitudes out of your operation.

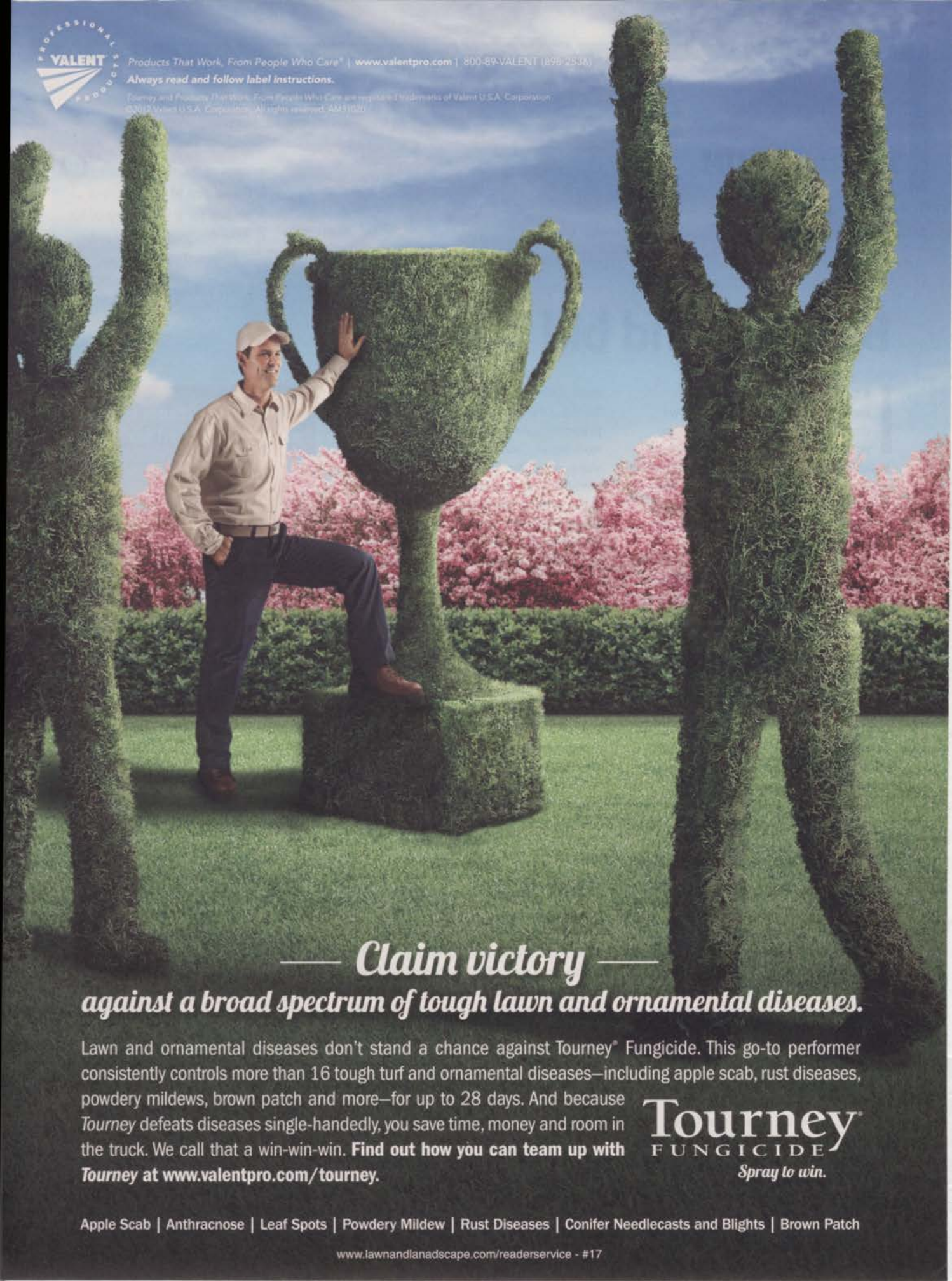
Next time you have someone go sideways in your company, use my funnel. It has helped me take emotion out of the problem and show me what I need to do to fix the problem. Talk to you next month. **L&L**



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Travels with JIM



JIM HUSTON runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm. www.jrhuston.biz; jhuston@giemedia.com

Email Jim at the address above for a free copy of his 2014 MS Excel bid board.

Backlog and bid boards

In the November *Lawn & Landscape* Benchmarking Your Business issue, we discussed the importance of monitoring your backlog at the beginning of the year. However, to make this exercise meaningful, there first has to be an annual sales budget to track against and compare to.

Once the budget is in place, you then have a meaningful target to shoot for.

I like to establish a preliminary budget for my clients in July or August for the upcoming year. This budget should be finalized in late December or early January.

I have developed a bid board in MS Excel that my clients use to track key data to help them monitor their business throughout the year in relation to their budget. You can use the bid board concept to track almost any type of work

Benchmarks. Here are some benchmarks for some of the categories listed in the box to the right that you might find useful.

Commercial installation companies/divisions* should start monitoring their backlog in August or September for the upcoming year. They should strive to have sold one 1/4 to 1/2 of their annual budget by January 1. Bids won usually range from 10 percent to 20 percent of work bid. Sales per hour usually run \$85 per man-hour (+/- \$10) depending on the material intensity of the work bid.

The GPM** in a normal economy for such work ranges from 20 percent to 30 percent. You should bid negotiated work high – in the mid to high 20 percent range – and negotiate down. Low-bid-take-all work should be bid in the low 20 percent range.

Residential installation companies/divisions*** should start monitoring their backlog in November or December for the upcoming year. They should strive to have sold as much work as possible by January 1. However, due to the nature of residential work, most

residential installers have a minimal backlog on the first of the year. Bids won usually range from 30 percent to 60 percent of work bid. Often it is much higher. Sales per hour usually run \$75 per man-hour (+/- \$10) depending on the material intensity of the work bid.

The GPM in a normal economy for such work ranges from 30 percent to 40 percent. Smaller jobs under \$10,000 to \$20,000 should be priced with a GPM near 40 percent, while larger jobs – ones more than \$20,000 – should be priced a little more aggressively near 35 percent.

Maintenance companies/divisions should start monitoring their backlog in the fall for the upcoming year. Non-seasonal companies / divisions should strive to be 80 percent to 90 percent sold by January 1.

Seasonal companies/divisions should strive to be at this level by mid-February or March. Bids won usually range from 10 percent to 20 percent of work bid for commercial work and 30 percent to 60 percent for residential work. Like bids won, sales per hour varies dramatically depending upon the geographical location of the company.

Non-seasonal companies usually see sales per hour near \$25, while seasonal companies usually see it at \$35 to \$55. The GPM for both commercial and residential maintenance work is normally at 35 percent.

Another benchmark to track is enhancement work. This is the work generated from maintenance contracts. Many companies target billing 25 percent above the amount of the contract for such work. You should monitor this figure for your company and set revenue goals for it.

How it works. I've been working with and monitoring Salmon Falls Landscaping in Berwick, Maine for more than 25 years.

The staff there has been using the bid board concept for about the same amount of time. Mark Pendergast, president of SFL, is the one who

Some of the items tracked on the bid board for each division are:

- Annual sales goal
- Annual billable field-labor hours goal
- Total work bid
- Bids sold
- Bids pending (not yet sold or lost)
- Bids lost
- Backlog
- Sales per hour (SPH) per bid and average SPH for the year
- Gross profit margin (GPM) per bid and average GPM for the year
- Work billed

got me to focus on keeping things simple and measurable.

I remember him telling me, "I focus on backlog and production. Are the crews working efficiently and do we have plenty of work in the pipeline?" From that evolved my three-fold mantra: Price it right. Produce it right. And produce enough of it.

John Sheldon, chief estimator at SFL, at any time of year can tell you exactly what the backlog is, what bids are pending and what he needs to sell to meet budget. He also knows where his GPM needs to be to win work. John is so good at bidding that I jokingly say that he can sneeze and produce a \$250,000 bid. **L&L**

Notes:

* Commercial work is done for a general contractor, builder, homeowners' association.

** GPM is calculated by adding general and administrative (G&A) cost in a bid to the net profit margin (NPM). GPM does not include field equipment and trucks (usually 10 – 14 percent).

*** Residential work is done for a homeowner.

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HR House Call

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

Begin alignment now



February is a uniquely strategic month for landscapers. It has long been my belief that February provides fundamental alignment between last year's performance results for the company and its employees, as well as this year's performance goals for the company and its employees.

Year-end results. Astute companies conduct a "soft" year-end close-out in early December, leaving only minor modifications to be completed in January.

This early review enables executives to evaluate annual business results against the previous year's data and track variances to current year projections, before much of the competition has even started their Christmas shopping. Additionally, knowledge of year-to-year results and itemized variances contribute significantly to the strategic planning process for the next calendar year.

With that pace in mind, by the time January 1 arrives, these companies have already judged the relative performance of their organization across multiple indicators (e.g., revenue, safety, customer retention, gross margin) and established the key goals, objectives and metrics for the upcoming year.

This efficient time planning accelerates the pace for bringing the organization together in the form of an annual company kickoff

meeting conducted in mid-January. During this meeting, with timely data in hand, executives can document historical strengths and weaknesses, share forecasted annual goals, and commemorate employee recognition in front of the entire company.

Performance evaluations. With the annual business review essentially finalized, strategic planning done and the annual kickoff meeting completed, it is now time to align those historical results and anticipated expectations, down to the individual employee level.

Due extensively to complacency, tradition or naiveté, most landscape companies conduct performance evaluations on the annual anniversary of each employee's start date. That common practice is bureaucratic, inefficient and counterproductive, all of which reinforce a vertical disconnect throughout the whole company.

For example, in this scenario, the company has its goals on January 1, though one employee may not get his individual performance review and goals until his anniversary date on May 4, while another employee may not receive her performance evaluation and goals until her anniversary date of September 9.

That fragmented, disjointed and asynchronous process severely undermines organizational synergy because the entire company is never on the same page at the same time.

The previous year's results represent the context for evaluating each employee's performance during that same timeframe. With rare exception, if the company's performance objectives (e.g., revenue, customer, safety, gross margin) for the previous year did not meet expectations, it lends credible documentation that many employees, especially management, should not receive a performance evaluation of "average" let alone "above average." This same premise of alignment extends to pay raises as well.

The rationale is simple – organizational results are due in large part to employees' actions. Accordingly, individual performance reviews should generally reflect organizational results. By reviewing employees' performance in February with the previous year's overall metrics available, accountability can be definitively aligned.

Keep in mind that every employee should be evaluated on two key criteria: job performance and job potential. Their job performance rating is based on how well they did their job during the past year.

Their job potential rating is based on the likelihood that they will be promoted during the next 18-24 months with job potential based significantly on their ability to help the company reach its future goals.

Goal setting. Beyond reviewing employees' performance for the past year within the scope of the company's overall performance, the same rationale applies for the current year's goals, at the individual and organizational levels.

During February, with the current company goals already established and recently shared at a macro level during the January kickoff meeting, supervisors can now specify the individual goals of each employee and pinpoint how those goals are inextricably aligned with the company's performance goals.

By understanding the overlap between the company's annual goals and their individual goals, each employee feels more functionally connected, emotionally engaged and personally involved. This unmistakable alignment shifts the employee's self-perspective from simply being a "worker" to becoming a "stakeholder." **L&L**



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Searching for an SEO Provider

If an SEO company comes knocking, be skeptical. That's what James Tolentino advises.

"Legitimate companies don't come knocking, and if they promise to put you on Google within a certain amount of days or give you a guarantee, that's a red flag," he says.

"Companies that have a great deal of success in SEO will not give you any guarantees, although they have great track records," he says.

Here are some other pointers Tolentino offers when choosing an SEO firm to enhance your visibility on the web.

Interview prospects. Tolentino searched for SEO firms and spent time vetting them over the phone by asking about their process, experience and successes.

Check the reviews. Tolentino compared the information those SEO firms gave him over the phone with the reviews he read online. While these reviews are not 100 percent accurate, a slew of dissatisfied customer reviews was a red flag.

Beware of guarantees. Getting his website to the "top page" took a good four months after Tolentino engaged an SEO firm to redesign his site. Go in with realistic expectations, and be wary of firms that make promises for overnight success.



James Tolentino, right, officially started his landscape company in 2008.

SEO success

Imperial Landscaping made the "front page" of landscape online search results in its area, thus driving lots of new business.

It all started one weekend when James Tolentino bought an aerator to unplug his lawn before fall. His neighbors watched, and they wanted a hand at aerating their properties, too. They began to notice Tolentino's perfect cut, clean edges, his immaculate yard. "As a result of how beautiful I had got my yard up, my neighbors would ask me to do their yards, and then I began doing lawns in other neighborhoods," says the owner of Imperial Landscaping, which serves the greater Winston-Salem, N.C., area.

Tolentino eventually left his full-time job delivering propane in 2008 to ramp up his lawn business. "I bought a trailer, I bought zero-turns and from that, everything just evolved," he says.

Well, his growth from a few neighbors' lawns to the 200-plus customers he serves today didn't happen without a great deal of work – and dedication to marketing by delivering quality and earning referrals, and by focusing on search-engine opti-

mization and getting found on the Internet. "When I started getting ranked on top with search engines, that started driving customers," Tolentino says.

When the phone rings – and it hasn't stopped ringing for as long as Tolentino can remember – the first thing he asks is how the caller found Imperial Landscaping. "I cannot discount word of mouth, but the vast majority of people tell me they found me on Google, Yahoo, MSN or other search engines," he says.

SETTING A PRECEDENT FOR QUALITY. Tolentino believes in good, old-fashioned referrals from neighbors, friends and people you trust. That is, after all, how his business turned from a hobby of keeping his yard perfect into a career of caring for clients' properties. Imperial Landscaping's service menu covers the gamut, from mowing to lawn care to installing plantings and designing patio spaces or more.

As clients asked for more services, Tolentino



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Tolentino makes sure to tell his clients it takes time to perfect their lawn.

worked to expand his business so that he could cater to the demand. For example, the company added lawn care services

when Tolentino was hearing from customers who were dissatisfied with their providers. "They felt the larger provid-

ers were too big and would just come on their properties and spray a little here and there, and they'd be off to the next customer," he says.

What differentiates Tolentino in a hot market packed with landscape companies and the full spread of national players is his down-home honesty and commitment to quality.

At first, Tolentino was doing everything himself, but several years ago he hired his first employee – and now there are four. He spends the majority of his time focused on client service and sales/estimating while his key folks perform the work on

jobsites. Because he grew his team, Tolentino was able to provide services his customers demanded: lawn care, landscaping.

Tolentino earned his lawn care applicators license and trained his staff; though they had experience from previous jobs, he says.

Another key team member has design experience. Because Tolentino hires the best he can find, he makes sure to pay them a premium wage.

"I give them the top pay in the industry and I keep them happy – and that keeps customers happy," he says.

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paying a top wage wasn't easy, he says. "I was pretty much giving away my profit. I just hung in there."

"I had a full-time job so I was able to maintain my employees' good salaries and concentrate on impeccable service."

WINNING REVIEWS. The economy tanked just as Tolentino was starting his landscape business.

"Basically, the lawn care person was the first person to go," he acknowledges, adding that he was not making money for a short while. "But I had determination," he says.

"So, I started diverting my

attention to SEO and getting ranked among the top," Tolentino says. "Being on that first page of search results is priceless because it lends some credibility to your outfit," he says.

After a company is found on the "front page," the next stop for many online consumers is reviews sites. What are others saying about the service?

"Once they read the positive reviews about our company, they are calling or filling out the web form on our site," Tolentino says.

He has solicited reviews from clients, but getting people to carve time out to write a ditty

about their positive experience is a challenge.

Few will offer to sacrifice a moment or two. If they're happy with your service, they just continue buying from you and don't complain.

Tolentino did capture a couple of positive reviews. His company won a local customer satisfaction award, which helped. Every bit of positive feedback helps.

What also helps is hiring an SEO firm to focus on improving the search engine ranking of your website. Tolentino did some shopping around and eventually hired a firm to redesign his site

and propel his rankings to the front page.

The investment was modest compared to the return. "They got my phone ringing," Tolentino says.

Now it's his job to make sure the service that is delivered meets expectations.

Ultimately, Tolentino's goal is to give clients the assurance that the lawn care chores are checked off the to-do list.

"That is why they call in the first place, because they don't want to manage their lawns because they don't have time. The last thing I want is for them to manage me." **L&L**



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Stand YOUR GROUND



Landscape professionals weigh the pros and cons of stand-on mowers. By Jason Stahl

Roughly five years ago, Victor Parrales, vice president of production with Professional Grounds in Lorton, Va., had his crews try out a stand-on mower to see if it would make a valuable addition to their equipment arsenal. But what he found was that they posed a safety hazard for the operator, especially given the number of accounts his company maintains that have steep slopes.

"We found that when we were working with it on hillsides,

it had a tendency to tilt, which can be very dangerous to the operator," Parrales says.

"Second, if the grass was so high that it hid a stump and you hit that stump, the operator could potentially fly over the machine, kind of like a motorcyclist might if he hit something."

The other issue Parrales received feedback from his crews on was turf damage. When you have to make a sharp turn

Riding/stand-on mower expenditures

ANNUAL CONTRACTOR SPEND NATIONWIDE IN 2014.....	\$10,427
2014 ESTIMATED MARKET SPEND	\$220,426,780



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Stand-ons don't take up much room on trailers, leaving space for other tools.

while on a stand-on, the tendency, he says, is to go faster when you're turning. This can cause turf damage.

"Getting off the machine and working behind it to reduce the weight isn't an option," Parrales says.

This is why Parrales prefers walk-behinds with velkies. They take more time to make a turn, but consequently, they're easier on the grass. But velkies aren't perfect solutions, either.

"When you're working in wet areas, you can get mud between the wheel (of the velky) and wheel cover," Parrales says. "The machine continues mowing, but the wheels stop turning, and that can create big damage to turf. But still, they're safer than stand-ons."

Parrales points out that even on hillsides, you can get off the velky and walk behind the mower with no issues.

With a business mix of 60 percent HOA accounts and 40 percent commercial, Parrales determines the mowing equipment he will need for each property based on how difficult the terrain is. Obviously, a riding mower is best suited for a flat property with few obstacles, whereas a walk-behind is ideal for a property with many obstacles and tight spaces.

While Parrales has determined stand-ons are not for his company, Joe Markell, president and CEO of Sunrise Landscape and Design in Sterling, Va., swears by them. In fact, his whole fleet is comprised almost totally of them (18 to 20), with a few walk-behinds as well.

"Standers are pretty versatile and very efficient, so that's why we like them," Markell says.

"They don't take up much room on the truck, and the guys seem to like them once they get the hang of them. They're also a lot more comfortable than walk-behinds. They feature a cushioned, spring-loaded platform. Plus, they have good maneuverability and speed of cut."

Sunrise's business mix is 50 percent commercial and 50 percent residential. Two-man crews maintain properties from $\frac{1}{8}$ of an acre up to several acres.



Their box trucks typically have two or three stand-ons or walk-behinds on them. Although there are some situations more suitable for a walk-behind, Markell says his stand-ons can pretty much handle anything.

"With walk-behinds, we only use small ones to fit in certain areas and use them on very steep hills, ditches or swales," he says. "The standers are even pretty good on hills and swales, so our walk-behinds don't get a lot of use, but there are certain times when it makes sense."

Markell's walk-behinds are 36 inches, making them sometimes the only option for going through a small gate. His stand-

can simply jump off it if it loses control or slides down a hill.

"There have been instances where riders have rolled over and trapped the guy underneath it," he says. "With a stander, you're not strapped to the machine."

The turf damage can be the result of a wheel dragging due to a tight the turn, but Markell says a little training goes a long way.

"Usually, you can train guys out of that," he says. "These stand-ons can be turned without tearing up the turf. You could have the same issue on a rider if you turn that tightly and quickly."

"The stander does require a different mode of coordination, though. You have to be aware that if you go under trees and obstacles, you have to duck or be aware if you can fit under a branch."

Markell has been considering riding mowers for some of his bigger properties, but a discussion with a manufacturer at a trade show convinced him to purchase a larger model of stand-on with more horsepower and speed to make up for the size difference.

"They turn probably about the same because they're zero-turn just like a rider, but they take up less space on the truck," Markell says. "The unit is probably not much different cost-wise, either, but we like to stick to the same manufacturer for parts and other reasons."

"Maybe if you're cutting big acres, a rider might be more appropriate. But we're doing a mixed bag as far as the terrain we care for, so standers are efficient and safe and do a good job of cutting." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

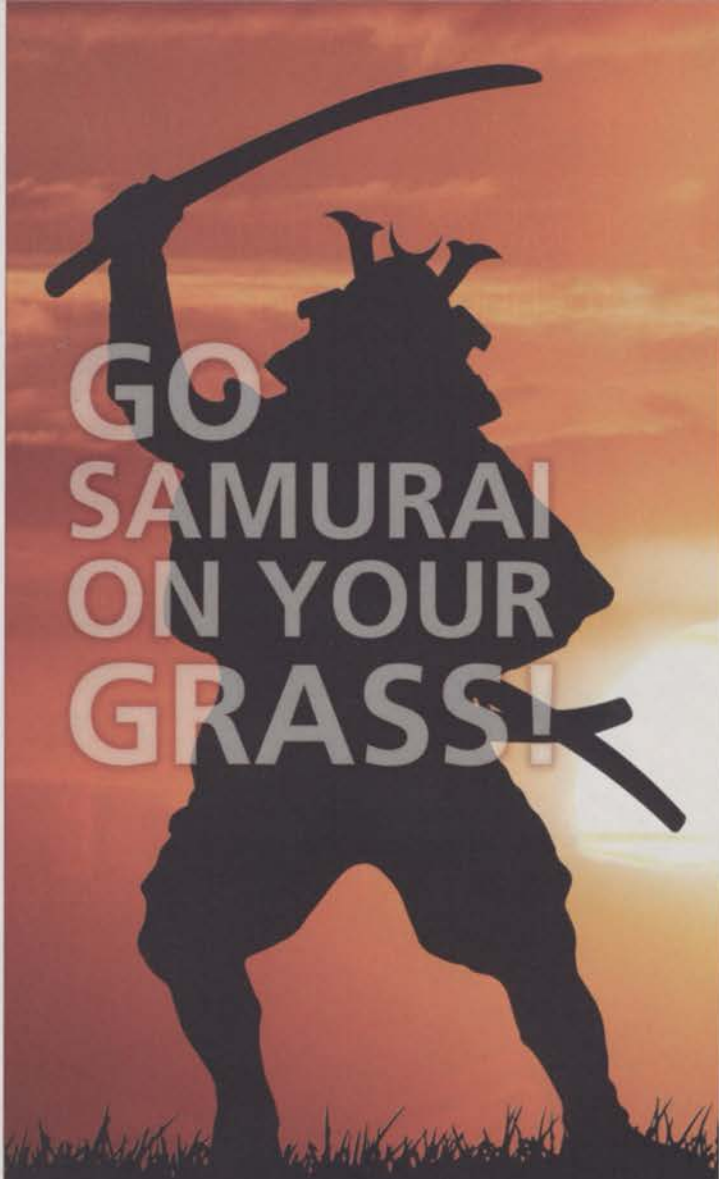
"You have to be aware that if you go under trees and obstacles, you have to duck or be aware if you can fit under a branch."

— Joe Markell

ons are 48-, 52- and 61-inch versions Crews will typically use the 61-inch for a more wide-open property, versus a 48- or 52-inch if there are more hills and turns to make. Markell said he has no safety concerns with stand-ons.

"Sometimes they're too heavy or a swale is too steep and you could tear up the turf if you're not careful. But I haven't found tilting to be a problem. Our guys know their limitations, and our stand-ons are well-balanced and don't lose traction as quickly as others."

The benefit of a stand-on, Markell says, is that the operator



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Forming a team

Ryan Jardine, president and founder of Quality Irrigation, believes in team work. In fact he believes in it so strongly, he doesn't like the term "employee" – he prefers "volunteer" – and he constantly attributes his company's success to the entire team. He recently shared some of his best tips for putting together a great team.

Be slow to hire. When recruiting, Jardine says the current team is the best tool. "(If) someone comes in and talks to our people they see how happy they are."

He also takes the hiring process seriously. "I'm always amazed that people get hired after a one hour interview. That's a one hour investment of your time compared to a minimum of 2,080 hours they'll be putting in while working for you."

Be quick to fire. Jardine says a good way to know whether someone isn't a good fit for the company is to ask yourself honestly if you'd rehire them again. "If the answer is no, you should free up their future to do something else instead of just hanging on to them."

Create camaraderie. Part of the reason Jardine is constantly using the terminology "Q team" is to remind everyone he views them as a team. He's also adamant about using the word "our." "I never say 'that's my truck' or 'those are mine.' It's always 'ours.' I do understand why people are apt to say 'mine' when they built the company from the ground up, like I did. But I also recognize that I wouldn't have gotten to where I am without my team and I want everyone to know that."



A dream come true

Ryan Jardine got the irrigation bug at an early age, and has made a successful career in the industry.

Ryan Jardine began working in the irrigation business while he was only 16 and still in high school. He says the grocery bagger jobs he'd previously had just weren't for him and with irrigation he really felt he'd landed a kid's dream job. "You get to play in the mud and run through the sprinklers," Jardine says. "I'd see the little kids staring at me in awe because I was playing in the mud and nobody was yelling at me."

Following high school, Jardine continued working in the industry as a college student while also studying business management. His passion for the outdoors coupled with an entrepreneurial spirit led Jardine to start his own irrigation business upon graduation and in 2003 he launched Quality Irrigation, one of Omaha's few irrigation-specific companies. The fact that the company focuses solely on irrigation has been a differentiator and helped the business grow. But it's also been Jardine's hard work and his focus on a team effort that has made the business a success as it celebrates more than 10 years in business.

Jardine says he strongly believes in team spirit – something he attributes partly to playing a lot of sports. He knows that success is achieved much easier when everyone works together. Therefore, he has taken that team approach to heart as a boss. "I've had jobs where all the boss does is yell at you," Jardine says. "I believe that people don't leave jobs, they leave bosses, so I keep that



Jardine landed his dream job.



in mind when running my business. I'm a big believer in treating our employees like volunteers. I don't like hearing someone say 'he works for me.'"

FACING CHALLENGES. While the company has grown steadily every year, like everyone else, they were challenged by the downturn in the economy when new construction in the

area came to a halt. Still, they managed to grow a bit that year, just not as much as in previous seasons. With the recession also came the new challenge of increased competition. Many jumped



Jardine

into the irrigation field – including landscapers and lawn care companies – in order to seek new lines of revenue for the deficits caused by the economy. But Jardine says the company's specialization in irrigation is what has continued to differentiate them.

"It's not a side line for us and we know what we're doing," he says.

Jardine says the company was able to hold prices firm and push quality as the reason customers should consider paying more for its services.

"We only do one thing and that's irrigation – so we do it quite well," Jardine says. "We're not trying to be a jack of all trades and I think the customer recognizes that."

Another key challenge for the business has been in keeping up with the latest technology and ever-changing communications. Jardine says the company is always learning new billing or scheduling programs and has had to adapt to all different ways of reaching and communicating with customers.

"It's been beneficial, however, because almost all of the changes have allowed us to provide better service to our customers and to build even stronger relationships with them," Jardine says.

"There are tremendous competitive advantages to technology and if you're not learning, you're dying. It's so important to keep up. If you're still doing your estimates on carbon copy, I'm going to look a lot more impressive when I show up with my iPad. Regardless of what age you are, I think all customers expect today's businesses to be on top of the latest technology."

Although the Midwest states have not been as engulfed in the water conservation issue as other parts of the country, that has not stopped Quality Irrigation from push-


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ing smart technology. Jardine says that the company installs systems only using water-efficient sprinkler components. If customers need parts replaced, those parts are always upgraded to smarter technologies.

"We've really pushed and promoted rain sensors and smart controllers, offering them at discounts or even giving them away for free," Jardine says.

OPPORTUNITIES IN MAINTENANCE. When Jardine first began the business, his focus was on new installations. But today that has shifted and the company is very focused on service work. In fact, the company is comprised of one install crew and five service guys because Jardine says he'd rather do five times as much service as install.

"Frankly, we enjoy it and it's our strength," he says. "There are a lot of companies – and even independent one-man bands – who can slam in a cookie cutter system. But then they disappear and the customer is left hanging. We're not like that."

A lot of businesses say they'd prefer to get more install work but Jardine sees maintenance is his bread and butter. It's steady and ongoing, plus it requires less manpower. Instead of sending a whole crew to an install job, it can be tackled by one technician. Plus it doesn't require all the heavy equipment. "It's easier to be nimble when you stay small," Jardine says.

Of course since the downturn in the economy, many irrigation companies have had to get more involved with maintenance purely out of necessity. There isn't much new construction going on and it's easier to find repair or retrofit jobs than new work. But there are also brand new competitors jumping into the maintenance sector. Jardine says the fact that the barrier to entry is low – there's not a lot of investment in big equipment or manpower – has also meant that more one-man-and-a-truck operations are springing up.

"It's not just the guy that has been mowing and says 'I can fix a sprinkler' but even people who have lost corporate jobs and are looking for a way to make money," Jardine

says. "One of our biggest frustrations is when there is work being done out there without a license and there's no repercussion. There is nobody patrolling it and if we saw some-

one clearly operating without a license and called the city they wouldn't even know who should handle it. Licensing is a hot topic here because it's not enforced."

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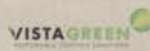


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Fortunately Jardine says that even though more competition in maintenance exists, Quality Irrigation has been able to hold its own. "There are a lot of people who have had a bad experience in something because they tried to save a little money and go with the lower cost provider," Jardine says. "Not just in irrigation but in anything – roofing, electronics, you name it. So we find that most people are willing to spend a little more if they believe they're getting value out of that extra expense. The most valuable thing you can do for anyone is save them time and if they believe you'll get the



Quality Irrigation recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

job done faster and also correct the first time, they're willing to pay more for that. We're more organized and more efficient and customers recognize that."

BUILDING SUCCESS. As Quality Irrigation celebrated its 10th year, Jardine says he can't reiterate enough how much of that can be attributed to team work.

"I learned a long time ago that if you hire talented, enthusiastic people that everything else becomes much easier," he says.

"Every job is valuable. From that first point of contact with your business – the friendly and helpful person you hear when you call to schedule service – to the knowledgeable and friendly service techs that come to your home, every team member plays a critical role. I have a team that works with me – not for me."

Jardine says that because the team members are so committed to providing their customers with outstanding service, it has been easy for Quality Irrigation to back up its work with a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee.

"That isn't just hype," Jardine says. "We live by it. That's why we all work really hard to get things right the first time for our customers and why so many of our customers are so willing to refer us to friends and family. They know they can trust us and they know that we do all of our work to the very best of our abilities." **L&L**



Become an award-winning company

Quality Irrigation in Omaha is an award-winning company. In fact, the business has won quite an impressive number of awards.

While it's always a nice honor to win things, company founder and President Ryan Jardine says there have been other benefits as well. For one, the name recognition that it's helped produce gets the business recognized within the community.

It also gives customers an automatic sense of trust. And it never hurts to get free PR since many of the rewards get reported by local news.

Jardine, himself, was named a "40 Under 40" award winner by the *Midlands Business Journal*, an award that recognizes entrepreneurs, executives and professionals in Omaha who

are under the age of 40, and the business has been recognized for everything from an Angie's List Super Service Award to Small Business of the Year by the local Chamber of Commerce, among many other honors. Jardine says the service awards give him the most pride and satisfaction.

"This means we're meeting or exceeding our customers' expectations," he says. "The Chambers' Small Business of the Year award is personally prized due to the recognition from the business community."

It's also an honor that Jardine says they don't solicit the awards but that in most cases they have been nominated by customers or won recognition for excellence in customer service.



The one exception is the "Best of Omaha Award," which Jardine knows gets a lot of recognition from residents and would be a great business builder. He says the company did ask customers to vote for them. When it comes to awards like that, it can help to remind customers to consider taking a moment to vote.

Oftentimes without a reminder they just might not realize or remember to do so.

Winning awards has helped Quality Irrigation stand out in a crowded marketplace and has definitely helped build their reputation.

Jardine adds: "I think it helps show that we are a quality company with a great team and will do everything we can to make our customers happy."

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DRIP TIPS

This increasingly popular way of irrigation has its fair share of rules. By Lindsey Getz

Rising water costs and changing regulations are driving the popularity of drip irrigation in some parts of the country. However, those that don't have to comply with regulation or deal with an increase in the cost of water aren't necessarily opting for it.

In North Texas, Chris Lee says that he's been selling a lot more drip irrigation these days. "There are a lot of reasons it's a better system," says the president of EarthWorks. "There's much less run-off and it's horticulturally the better option for the plants. But it's the drought and water restrictions that have driven its popularity here."

Lee says that rapid population growth, which is outpacing the region's reservoir development, has led to a need for efficient water usage. For EarthWorks, that's meant more xeriscaping and more drip installation, even in retrofits.

Wayne Nolan, president of Nolan Plumbing and Irrigation in Jacksonville, Fla., says he's seeing an increased interest in drip as well. But he also says it's being driven by necessity. Changing codes are "forcing many to accept it," Nolan says.

And where codes haven't changed and the cost of water is still low, drip isn't getting the



Though some may think otherwise, drip can be an effective way to water seasonal color installations.

same interest. Paul E. Morgan, principal, The Rain Harvest Co., in Snellville, Ga., says he hasn't seen any major increased interest in drip installations. "The only significant increase in drip installation requests would be for the commercial market where it is required by municipal code or performance requirements as dictated by LEED, Green Globe or Earthcraft," Morgan says. "Here

in the southeastern U.S., the cost of water is still quite low and plentiful due to recent abundant rainfall."

Though clients' interests in water conservation is typically driven more by their budget than their concerns with saving water, many companies like Morgan's have still gone the route of only installing drip. "It's the only type of irrigation we install because

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our company is driven by the promotion of water stewardship," Morgan says. "Drip surface, and especially subsurface, are the only options."

THE DOES & DON'TS OF DRIP. Though drip hasn't taken a stronghold in all parts of the country, some say it's trending toward increased interest as the cost of water inevitably rises in more regions and codes continue to evolve. As that happens, it will become necessary for more irrigation contractors to get comfortable with drip installation. Those that are already familiar with the process say there are some key "does and don'ts."

Before even starting the process, Nolan says it's a big "do" to get a soil test done. It's a step that many skip but Nolan says that this "often overlooked test" can make a big



Get a soil test before installing drip materials.

difference in the success of your installation. "You need to know what type of soil you're watering," Nolan says. "The more clay you have, the less water you put out and the further apart you space things. The soil dictates everything."

The first few installations can be daunting and Morgan admits that a drip system design is more complicated than a conventional one. "The errors in the design of a conventional system are much more forgiving in regards to providing adequate irrigation to all the plants," Morgan says. "However, if any zone or section of a zone of drip is improperly designed or fails, then you can have dead plant material rather quickly."

Morgan says that knowing the product you install is also a major "do." "Know what the pressure ratings for valves and filters are and what the flow rate for the drip line or tape is," he says. "And use soil moisture sensors. Drip must operate much longer than conventional rotors or sprayers. We find using soil moisture sensors – one per zone – will determine exactly how long the

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run time should be." In terms of "don'ts," Nolan says the biggest lesson learned was to be more diligent about burying and securing the system. "The biggest complaint we've had was when they can see it sticking up," he says. "If not buried or stapled to the ground it can be unsightly. Drip should be out of sight, out of mind."

However, when it comes to beds that have a lot of change-out for seasonal color, Lee says he's learned it takes a little extra planning and finesse. "We'll use an above-ground drip so that we can unpin it in that area, lay the grid back and then do the soil prep," Lee says.

"Then it must be completely re-pinned in place. We've heard people say they can't plant seasonal color with drip irrigation because of the drip line in the way. That's not true. You just need to be more careful. We

get a lot of compliments about the beautiful seasonal color you're able to get from drip when it's installed properly."

EDUCATE FOR SUCCESS. Morgan says "don't neglect to educate the consumer." The client's understanding will play a significant role in the overall success of the installation. "Drip normally requires less maintenance than conventional irrigation but requires more operation time," Morgan says. "Remember when you are using drip, GPH – gallons per hour – is the language rather than GPM – gallons per minute. Many of our clients that transitioned from rotors and sprayers to drip don't immediately understand why the system will be operating for 90 minutes per zone rather than 20 minutes."


Lee agrees and says one of the biggest

challenges in their experience with drip installation has been related to consumer understanding. "People are confused by the fact that they don't see water percolating above the ground," Lee says. "They see the soil is a little dry. So we're constantly running into the issue of people adding water. They keep turning it up until they see the water bogging out and at that point they've flooded it."

"The key has been educating people that the ground is going to have some cracks and look dry but that there is plenty of water underneath. If they dug into the soil a little, they'd see."

It comes down to frequent and repetitive education. "We're constantly pushing the education factor when it comes to drip," Lee says. "I think the more we all learn about it, the more successful it can be." **L&L**

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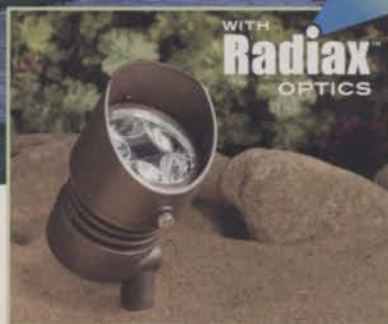
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Client stewardship wins repeat contracts. That's especially true today because of society's thirst for instant response to a problem or a question.

And technology helps Brian-Kyles Landscapes of Distinction deliver real-time "status updates" on properties.

Crews are equipped with tablet computers and systems that allow the company office to track their progress on an entire route from start to finish in real-time.

"We know as soon as they fill out a completed work log – I can go online and see where a truck is at any time of day," says Kyle Maurer, commercial account manager at Brian-Kyles, located in Lorain, Ohio.

Kyle and his brother Brian are also the namesakes of their father's landscape and construction company.

"Technology gives us a better opportunity to drive production and also to better serve our clients because we know when we are on site and we can see what is happening on the grounds so we always know what is going on," Maurer says.

Plus, the tablets help Brian-Kyles maintain momentum during the sales process.

"We can meet with a client, take measurements, review the property and make calculations, and if we need to create a proposal right on the spot we can," Maurer says.

The client can print, sign and seal the deal right on the spot.

There's no need for Brian-Kyles to take extra days or make repeat visits to finalize the deal.

"We are excited about how technology is keeping our business forward-thinking and progressive," Maurer says.



A distinct evolution

Brian-Kyles Landscapes of Distinction transitions into the next generation of ownership while holding on to the core principles that have helped grow the firm for 25-plus years.

When Douglas Maurer named his landscape and construction business after his two sons, at the time he really wasn't sure if Brian or Kyle would take over operations one day. But more than 15 years later, both sons are at the helm of Brian-Kyles Landscapes of Distinction in Avon, Ohio.

The firm morphed from Maurer's original construction homebuilding company and separate landscaping outfit into a complete design, build and maintenance entity in 1988. The oldest son, Brian, came on board after earning a degree in agricultural sciences and has driven the landscape installation division for the last decade. The youngest, Kyle, entered the business officially as director of commercial maintenance this year, leaving a career in the insurance and financial industries to pursue his passion in the family-owned business.

Both remember working with their father as soon as they could handle a shovel. "Growing up, we were working outside and helping dad," says Kyle Maurer, relating the work ethic that was instilled early on. "Those are the core values we still carry with us today and have been able to maintain as we have grown."

The company has posted double-digit growth since 2010, "and that's rather significant considering the sluggish economy," Maurer says. The company also ranked 8th on the 2013 Weatherhead 100 Upstart category recognizing northeast Ohio's fastest growing companies.

A focus on commercial landscape maintenance is partly responsible for the company's success



"We focus on creativity and quality." – Kyle Maurer

during tough times. Also, the Maurers decided to shift from a "family business" run from a kitchen table conference room

to a "family owned" business with senior management (not family) and a senior leadership team (including the Maurers)

with a combined 100 years of experience.

Brian-Kyles Landscapes of Distinction is officially in its second generation, and the structure has evolved into a more sophisticated business model with the same grass roots focus on commitment, execution, creativity, excellence and quality.

Meanwhile, the firm is moving forward by implementing technology to drive efficiency, forging relationships to grow its commercial maintenance division, and continuing to seek out installation opportunities where the firm can shine.

"We focus on creativity and

quality – our designs are authentic," Maurer says, pointing to the Japanese tea house (pictured at the beginning of this article) as an example. "And we know we can build a project from start to finish because of our construction roots."

IN SYNCH. What differentiates Brian-Kyles in a competitive market is that authenticity – a keen design eye, ability to execute complex projects without calling in the subs, and the work ethic to deliver results that keep the referrals rolling in.

Maurer points to the company's core values on its website,





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remarking that "these things can seem cliché," but the leadership and staff of about 15 really live out the company's mottos. It all starts with a commitment to the community. Brian-Kyles has operated out of Lorain County, Ohio, for nearly 30 years.

"We are heavily involved with community organizations like Rotary and Kiwanis, and we do charity work with the Friendship Animal Protection League and Avon Youth Baseball," Maurer says.

"We have been raised in this area and always operated a business in Lorain County, so we feel like giving back to our commu-

nity is the best way to conduct business."

But the foundation of the firm's success is based on its execution. And how jobs are executed is an evolving process, despite a steadfast focus on quality and excellence.

When Douglas Maurer founded the original company in 1983, called Brian Builders, the firm constructed custom homes. He added a landscape company to his repertoire soon after, naming it Kyle's Landscaping. In 1987, Brian-Kyles Construction was incorporated.

"My dad's true passion was landscaping, and the decision

to merge those firms and focus on landscape construction was driven by the economics of the 1980s and how that affected the building business," Kyle Maurer says.

Since 1988, the firm has expanded its landscape construction offerings to lawn fertilization, lawn enhancement, irrigation, seasonal lighting, landscape lighting, commercial maintenance and more.

"We have been able to carve out a niche for ourselves by not specializing," Maurer says. "We can essentially build any project from start to finish – we don't have to use third-party con-

tractors. By being a jack-of-all landscape trades, the firm can be sure that its clients' needs are met without sending them to a competitor.

Creativity keeps the business fresh, and quality wins the firm accolades in regional and national competitions.

"We tend to screen our prospects to really qualify them so the work fits with our core values and strengths as a firm," Maurer says.

"We are not in it just acquiring a mass of jobs – we are into the jobs where we can really display our creativity and our commitment to excellence." L&L

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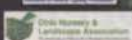
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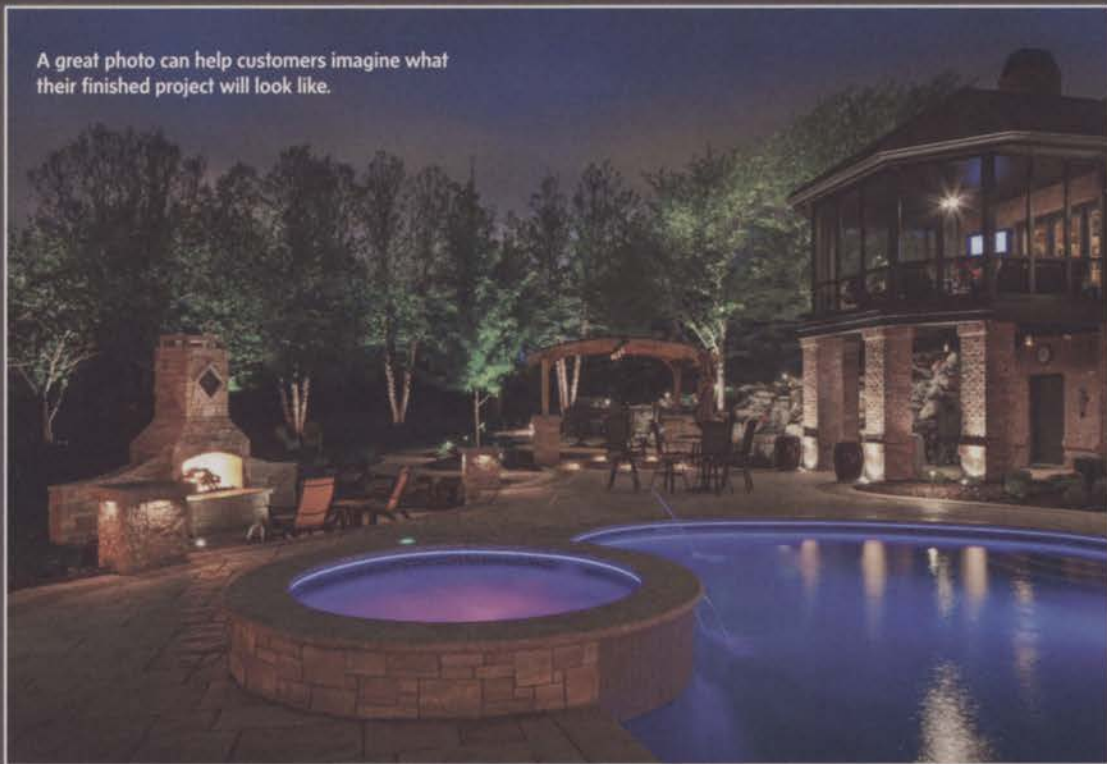
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A great photo can help customers imagine what their finished project will look like.



NOT TAKEN LIGHTLY

By Brooke N. Bates

Landscape contractors should be serious about lighting if they are adding it as a service.

Lighting is the icing on the cake of landscape and hardscape designs, if you ask Jerry McKay. His company, McKay Landscape Lighting in Omaha, Neb., has lit up yards for thousands of clients across the country since 1992.

Often, lighting is a finishing touch, as about 80 percent of calls come into McKay after a project — such as a patio, pergola or fire pit — is completed. Lighting professionals can work around structures to insert wires and fixtures. But it may take a little longer, involve a few more subcontractors, and, therefore, cost a little extra than incorporating lighting into initial design plans.

“Unfortunately, a lot of times, it’s like an

afterthought,” McKay says. “It’s just that a lot of people don’t think of it in the beginning stages. It’s not front-of-mind when they’re thinking of the fire pit.”

McKay is noticing a trend in the opposite direction, though, as landscape contractors recognize landscape lighting as a specialized niche that should be subbed out, instead of tacked onto a list of services.

“It’s the same reason we don’t do landscaping,” says McKay, who started a lawn care company in 1987 that evolved into, and officially relaunched as, an outdoor lighting company within five years. “We think if we just specialize in lighting, we’ll do it right. So we’ll find the landscaper that says, ‘The

best part of my business is hardscapes; lighting just gets in the way,’ then we collaborate with them.”

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS. That’s also why Southern Exposure Landscape Management, Pete Bryant’s company in Greensboro, N.C., separated its landscape lighting services into a division called Southern Lights about five years ago.

“Most contractors incorporate lighting as an add-on, which is great — but leaves so much on the table when they’re content to only light the obvious,” Bryant says. “Landscape contractors have a bad rap when it comes to lighting because it is ‘only an



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add-on.' They haven't devoted enough resources, time, or training to develop the skill it takes to perform at a high level."

With certifications ranging from the Association of Outdoor Lighting Professionals (AOLP) to Certified Low Voltage Lighting Technician (CLVLT) to Certified Outdoor Lighting Designer (COLD), Bryant takes lighting seriously. As such, the gap he sees between add-on lighting and specialized services can be gaping, as cheap or misplaced fixtures plague mediocre lighting jobs.

"Cheap fixtures or lamps, in the long run, are no deal at all," Bryant says. "If you can't offer a lifetime warranty on the fixtures you install, don't use them. You will be making so many maintenance visits that your clients will lose faith in your ability as an installer."

In fact, about a third of McKay's projects are upgrading or replacing lighting systems that other contractors installed insufficiently. The biggest misconception contractors have with lighting, McKay says, is thinking it's easy enough to do themselves. But even a few simple path lights can be botched by amateurs, leaving landscapes with unilluminated potential.

"Somebody that doesn't do it every day would put all the lights along one side to avoid going under the sidewalk," he says. "Or we'll see all these little path lights next to a path — except there are a couple of large trees where you could put lights downlighting the sidewalk to create a nice moonlight effect without any path lights."

WORTH A 1,000 WORDS. Those mistakes can be opportunities for lighting specialists to improve landscapes, but it's a challenge to re-educate customers about proper lighting. Both McKay and Bryant rely on perfectly-timed photography to illustrate the effect. "You can talk about lighting all you want," says McKay, who uses a professional ar-



Think about lighting early in the design process for best results.

chitectural photographer. "But it's such an emotional, visual effect that you really need to see it to understand it."

For example, 60 fixtures sounds like Christmas to most clients, so Bryant uses photography — and even walks through night-time demos — to illustrate the design in context.

"Trying to explain to a client what you mean by grazing a wall or silhouetting a plant may be extremely foreign," Bryant says. "Unless you can visually showcase what an additional 40 fixtures will do for the homeowner, they'll stay content with the 20 it will take to light the house and few trees — and forget about all the moonlighting, cross-lighting, and backlighting techniques you've discussed but haven't adequately portrayed."

PARTNERING WITH PROS. Subpar lighting systems can be business opportunities for lighting professionals — and not just via new customers. McKay sees those as partnership opportunities, offering to collaborate with contractors that do lighting but aren't devoted to it. His company subcontracts lighting for half a dozen local landscapers, including one of the largest nurseries in the state.

"Of course, that makes for the easiest, best projects when we can lay things out on the plan," McKay says. "We'll tell the landscape contractor, 'Let's get a sleeve under this hardscape. Let's pre-wire this. Give us a call when you're building your seat wall around the fire pit, and we'll get our wires in there.' When we're a subcontractor to a landscaper,



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those jobs go extremely smooth." The key is coordinating lighting into design and construction, rather than retrofitting afterward.

"If the plan has any constructed features such as a fireplace, seat wall, pergola, outdoor kitchen, deck or structures, lighting fixtures need to be installed – or at the very least, prepped for – at the time of construction," Bryant says. "It creates a more seamless installation without pricier retrofitting."

THINK AHEAD. Because Bryant owns both a landscaping and a lighting company, he can incorporate lighting into construction projects concurrently. He opts for lighting plans that can be scaled for future upgrades by pre-installing sleeves under patios and using larger wire gauges and transformers than required.

"Not planning for future additions is a

mistake," he says. "You may get a 300-watt transformer and only utilize 150 watts of it. The difference between the 300- and 150-watt transformer might be 75 bucks, but if you had to buy a whole separate transformer, you may be spending \$300 more down the road. The material cost savings is minimal, but the labor saved down the road can sure add up."


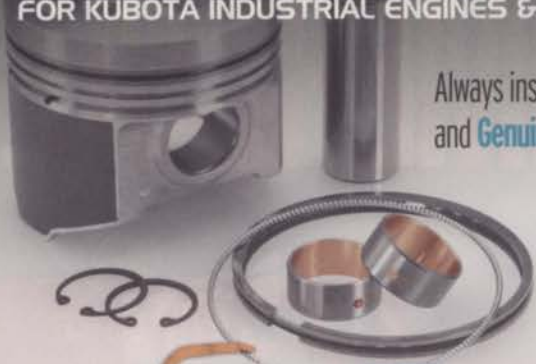
Likewise, if a lighting specialist has to go underneath or inside existing structures to lay wire, the retrofit can be lengthy, costly and involved.

"Adding landscape lighting during later phases is definitely a possibility, but it always saves time and money to know where the fixtures and wires will be placed prior to breaking ground," Bryant says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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Branded by a smile

How Your Green Team grew 200 percent by winning over your neighbors.

Some lawn care companies spend a lot of time conducting thorough evaluations that result in detailed estimates for new customers. The potential customer is left overwhelmed with information, yet can't even recall the name of the company.

Then, someone from Your Green Team comes to the door. He doesn't look like a salesman; dressed casually in "halfway-decent khaki shorts," sneakers, maybe a ball cap, and a company shirt emblazoned with a smiley face. But that smiley face triggers something. Prospective customers have seen it before, even if they've never heard of the company.

"Our sales guys will say, 'You've seen our signs in the neighbor's lawn,'" says Shane Karlson, who owns Your Green

Team with Kevin Igoe. "You know how that lawn looks. If you want your lawn to look like that, we'll do it.' They give them a business card with the price per application on the back, sell it in five minutes, and they're onto the next one."

MAKE IT LOOK GOOD. Since founding the company in Plant City, Fla., near Tampa, in 2008, Karlson and Igoe have realized that customers don't care how many details or promises contractors deliver upfront; they just want their yards to look better.

Of course, Your Green Team makes a huge effort to communicate with customers, and the owners even follow up directly to assure it. But since the company figured out how to let the results speak for themselves, the monthly completed service vol-



Your Green Team chooses a "Lawn of the Month" as a way of advertising.

ume has rocketed 200 percent in two years, from just more than \$50,000 to nearly \$150,000 per month.

"We sell off of what we've done, not what we'll do," Karlson says. "(Fertilization) is not something where people can immediately see the results, so

you've got to get people to buy in by seeing the results with their neighbors."

The growth plan was, quite literally, to sell around — and across and next door to — existing customers. Instead of leaving a yard sign in serviced lawns, Your Green Team leaves two: one on

Back into maintenance

Five years after selling their last lawn maintenance company, Shane Karlson and Kevin Igoe re-entered the maintenance business in November, making Your Green Team a one-stop shop offering mowing, irrigation and design/build services in addition to fertilization and pest control. Using the same neighbor-concentrated plan of attack that grew the company, they expect a similar growth spurt in the new business by depending on neighbor referrals with the promise of a discount for mowing both properties.

"If you sign up for our lawn maintenance

program, we're going to mow your lawn weekly in the summer and come out every other week in the wintertime," Karlson says.

The company may offer to maintain the lawn for \$120 a month. If that's not a good enough deal, the company will ask the customer if any neighbors need maintenance services. If so, the price can be discounted to \$95.

Of course, the full-service aspect of lawn care is appealing to customers who struggle to keep the names of their service providers straight. The convenience of paying once online to cover all lawn maintenance is a selling point.

The neighbors' discount, paired with Your Green Team's relentless branding, launched the service with a bang. Less than two weeks into the new business, without really pushing the maintenance service, the company already sold about 30 accounts that way.

Basically, as the promotional material puts it, they're paying customers to let them keep their truck parked, and service three yards in a row instead of just one.

"Now, when we get a sale, we're not just signing up one customer," Igoe says. "We're signing up two or three."



each property line. But you wouldn't know the signs came from a lawn care company called Your Green Team.

"People don't remember names in this industry; they don't even know who they have for a service provider," Karlson says. "We took a totally different approach when we branded a symbol and, with that symbol, created an emotion. When you see this sign with a crazy-looking smiley guy, you can't help but think, 'Well, that's just goofy.' People remember emotion."

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Your Green Team's signs, fliers, shirts and trucks all bear this icon – a toothy-grinned smiley face sporting shades. By repeating the image on recurring touch-points in concentrated neighborhoods, the company branded the



The company focuses on a memorable logo.

silly smiley into familiarity.

"Our sales team is pushed into compacted neighborhoods where the yards are so small you can almost touch your neighbor's house," Igoe says.

"And, every three months, they hit the same houses. We put thousands and thou-

sands of fliers out and kept doing it again, and then people started remembering the fliers when we knocked on the door. The second their lawn company messed up, they thought of that smiley because it had been branded with repetition."

So, while some companies chase growth by seeking large, luxurious lawns while ignoring small, compact ones, Your Green Team grew by focusing on small jobs in close proximity and high volume. The crews service about 35 lawns a day because they're practically next door to one another.

The concentrated growth makes the company more efficient – not just in marketing, but in service. With triple the volume, the co-owners say it's actually easier to service more customers more promptly now.

"I would attribute a lot of our



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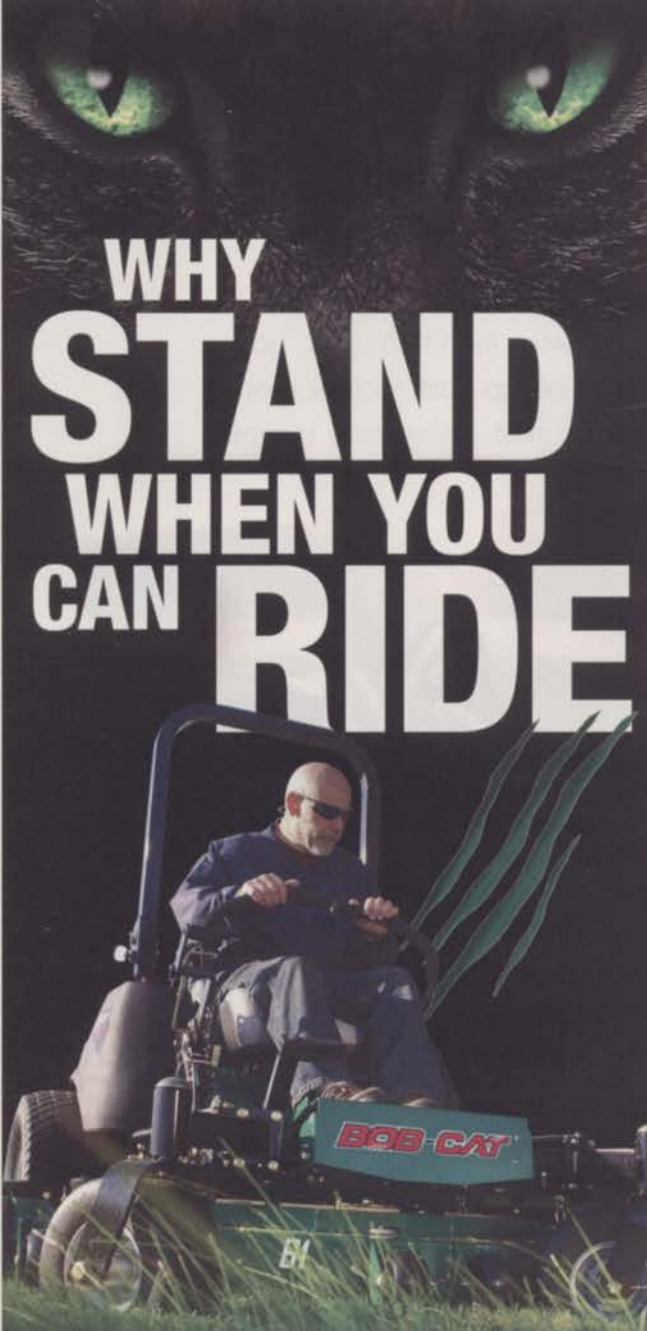
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We took a totally different approach when we branded a symbol and, with that symbol, created an emotion. When you see this sign with a crazy-looking smiley guy, you can't help but think, 'Well, that's just goofy.' People remember emotion; they don't remember names." – *Shane Karlson*

growth to the technology aspect of it, and allowing the technology – built correctly – to do the work for us," Karlson says. "All of our sales people have tablets. All of our trucks have truck-mounted computers, and we're signed into our desktops all the time. Whenever a call comes into the office, we route it to a call log portal, which comes in as a sales lead that you can map."

With Your Green Team's customer base concentrated in certain neighborhoods, each truck covers a small area. So if a crew needs to squeeze in an estimate or another service issue, they'll be there soon.

"Because we attacked growth with complete route density, as we get bigger, it's getting easier to respond to customers promptly because we have trucks constantly in the neighborhood," Igoe says.

SIZE MATTERS. The idea is that neighbors see trucks constantly in the neighborhood, along with signs and fliers – all bearing the bright yellow smiley. But to specifically drive in customer referrals, the company created a much larger sign that only graces one lawn, per neighborhood, per month: "The Lawn of the Month."

"Customers really feel good when we pick our nicest looking yard in each neighborhood,"

Igoe says. "We call them and say, 'We've elected you out of all our customers in the neighborhood,' and people take pride in it."

Proudly, customers display the "Lawn of the Month" sign in their yard, which encourages neighbors to take a pamphlet for a free application. To claim it, neighbors simply go online and enter a code that identifies the "Lawn of the Month" customer – who receives \$40 for the new sign-up.

The program, executed through Real Green Service Assistant, costs Your Green Team \$60-80 per referral – but it pays off in neighborly word-of-mouth, as several hundred customers have signed up this way.

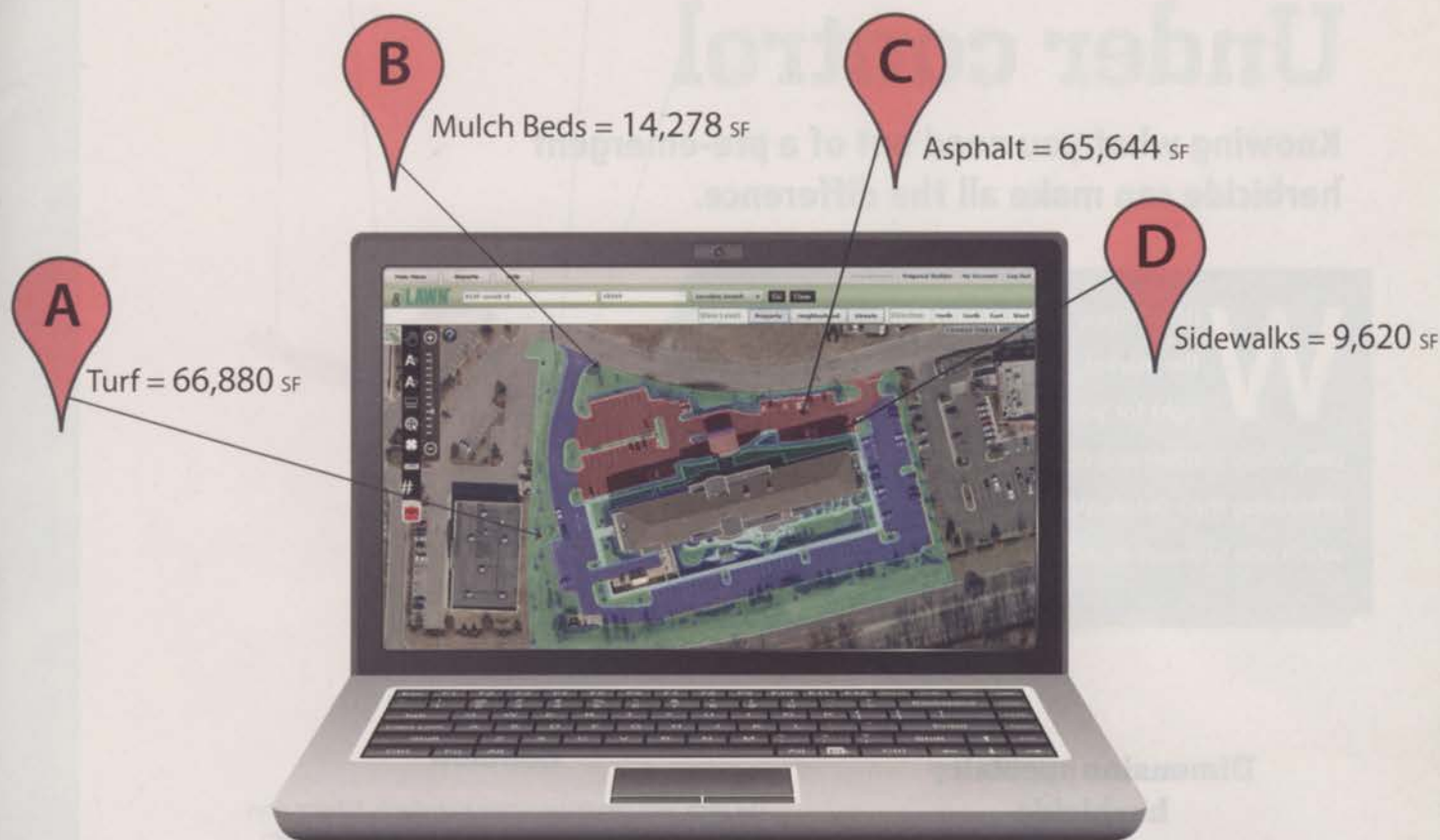
Still, the bulk of Your Green Team's growth – from 1,000 to 3,000 customers in two years – comes through door-to-door sales. Often, that's just the final touch-point after continuous smiley-faced branding that showcases green lawns throughout the neighborhood.

"Our sales team isn't just a guy knocking on a door," Karlson says. "These guys have a lot of resources behind them."

"There's a lot of preloading because of the energy that our branding has created in these neighborhoods." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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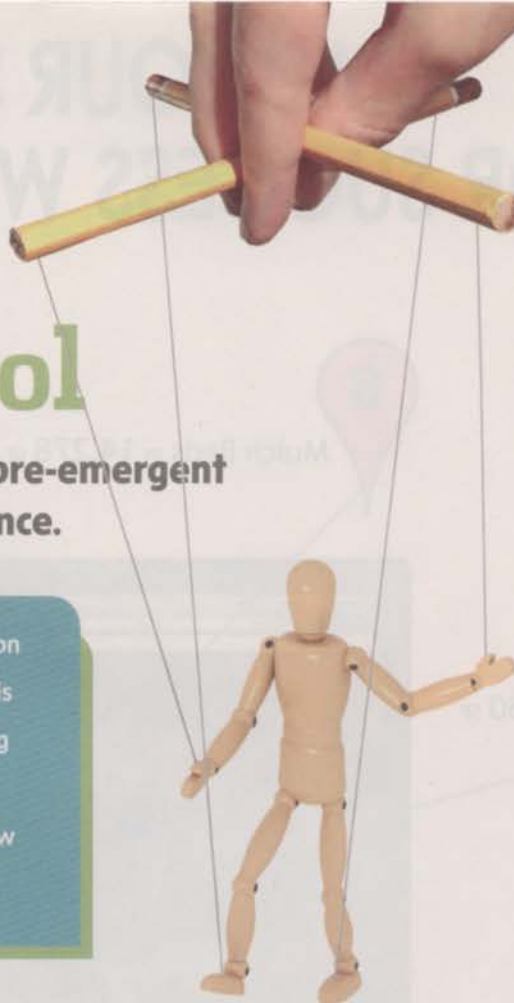
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No time for downtime

It's still cold out (maybe). You're plowing snow (perhaps). Maybe you're still on vacation (good for you). No matter what, now is prime time to secure sales to prepare for a record 2014 season. What are you waiting for? **By Kristen Hampshire**

Depending on where you live – and whether the groundhog opts to hang out in his den or pop up for an appearance – spring might be around the corner or miles down the road. Regardless, now is the time for clinching contract renewals, selling colder-weather services (mulch, pine straw), marketing in new neighborhoods and taking the temperature of existing clients to be sure they're happy and on board for the

upcoming spring. Forget the concept of "off season." If you're planning on a strong 2014, you've been on the phone and in the field since the holidays, and you're spending those really ugly days analyzing the books.

Lawn & Landscape spoke with three companies that maximize the early months of the year for building a strong sales backlog and setting the tone for a full schedule of accounts.

Keep in touch

This year, Weisburg Landscape Management reached a tipping point in how the firm must manage its sales. Coming off of a 36-percent growth year – the company upped its revenues from \$1.8 to \$2.4 million last year – Vice President Eric Moroski recognized that supporting this larger business infrastructure will take a proactive approach to getting contracts signed.

"Before, property managers were feeding us work, and we spit out proposals and they approved those and we got the work done," Moroski says. "This year, we have reached

the point where we better start being stronger in our sales."

Indeed, sales have been record-setting strong at the company. But, Moroski says, those sales have been reactive, a response to a customers' requests. "People would ask us for things rather than us finding service opportunities and writing proposals," he says.

Now, early in the year, Moroski is hunkered down in the office with the company's software program sending an automatic email to customers upon job completion. Tasks like sending emails help further sup-

Weisburg Landscape Management

Eric Moroski, vice president **Location:** Colorado Springs, Colo. **Established:** 1999 **Employees:** 43 (during summer) **2013 Revenues:** \$2.4 million **Customers:** 95% commercial, 5% residential **Services:** maintenance, snow, enhancements, irrigation

port the strong relationship the firm enjoys with its long-time clients, and they help grow rapport with newer customers.

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ware) to give the customer a better experience with us," Moroski says, relating that customer experience is the key to securing sales before the maintenance season begins in April.

In fact, customer experience is how Weisburg Landscape Management has built a strong business fast, even during a recession. "You get a trusted relationship with property managers, and it all makes sense," Moroski says. "The way to do that is to bid correctly – and bid what it is." Specifically, Moroski is referring to companies that use landscape maintenance as a loss leader and inflate the price of "extras," meaning enhancements of all sorts. "It's a pet peeve of ours," he says.

"We are pretty tight on bidding the maintenance contracts as what they are, so if a customer doesn't want to spend one more penny with us on extra work, we are still making money."

Of course, when customers are happy and rely on you for regular service, the extras are a given. That's why the firm has not worked all that hard to really upsell at all.

But meaningful sales, calculated before the start of the season, could really pay off. That's why, now, Moroski is running account reports so the company can identify the work completed last year and pinpoint opportunities to deepen the service relationship. For example, if a site has a declining irrigation system (noted in a report), Moroski can begin writing up a proposal to fix certain watering zones. That way, the proposal will be prepared in advance for the HOA board to review and hopefully approve. "Then property managers have some idea how their money can be spent in the best possible way," he says.

Another key is to understand how an HOA's budget is set up. "They may have improvement budgets and irrigation line items," Moroski says. "We are getting more in tune with those numbers and asking, 'How can we find out those numbers?' so we can provide the most ROI for customers."

Timing is everything

When you're always climbing, and always slightly uncomfortable, you're always selling – and selling hard. "At the end of the day, you have to feel like you really have something that drives you," says Derek Gracely, co-founder of Capstone Landscape Management in Taylors, S.C.

"What we have always done is put ourselves in some sort of financial bind that we have to get out of – and I don't mean stupid debt, but I mean quitting a full-time job so we have to recover that revenue, buying a truck we have to pay off, purchasing a building and now we are outgrowing that building and buying a new one."

Staying busy all year requires building a backlog, Gracely says. And that requires what he calls "strate-



TAKE-AWAY TIPS

Think pre-approval. HOA boards could meet infrequently – every month, bi-monthly. That's why getting proposals out well in advance is critical, otherwise lose out on opportunities to sell.

Focus on relationships. Happy customers renew their contracts. "We are visible on their properties, taking care of them," Moroski says.

Stay in touch in the off-season. Winter means snow business for Weisburg. Fulfilling these contracts, and ensuring that clients are satisfied, is critical to getting contract renewals and new business in spring.

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Capstone Landscape Management

Derek and Heather Gracely, founders **Location:** Taylors, S.C.
Established: 2007 **Employees:** 24
2013 Revenues: \$1 million **Customers:** 60% residential, 40% commercial
Services: landscape management, installation, tree and shrub care

gic sales." That's what to sell, and when. For Capstone, building a design/build backlog of more than about one month does not result in the type of customer satisfaction the company strives for.

The biggest sales backlog challenges is helping clients understand that landscaping involves a process. Ideally, Gracely and team sells design/build jobs about three or four weeks out. Any longer and he notices clients are fidgety.

Maintenance is a different story. Those contracts are ideally signed by March, and Gracely's team carefully reviews customer accounts so dialogue can focus on what's going on the lawn now, and what could make the property look better. The high-end residential clients Capstone serves are receptive to suggestions. It doesn't feel like selling at all, Gracely says.

Meanwhile, budgets are carefully analyzed so the sales team understands their target numbers. Rather than taking the prior year's sales and setting monthly sales goals based on an average, Gracely looks at the past three years' sales, month by month. You can't expect to sell in January what you can in July, when the company enjoys a surge of jobs, some of which are clients who are leaving a maintenance company mid-season to try Capstone instead.



TAKE-AWAY TIPS

Sell through the seasons. "When you do need to build that backlog in a slow month, customers will come through for you because you have been coming through for them the whole year," Gracely says.

Hit the happy medium. Gracely wants to be sure his company hits sales goals, and the winter months are prime time for clinching maintenance contracts. But selling sod or a design project that won't break ground until July doesn't make sense for his clientele.

Get out. The Capstone team doesn't hibernate in the off-season. All year, team members are out in the community, sharing their knowledge. "We do classes on irrigation, or classes on planting gardens," Gracely says of events hosted by HOAs. "People see us as professionals who are involved with them in the community."

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Chris Casselberry, from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, always knew that "You can't put value on working with family." So when he started Green Seasons in 2000 he was determined to have the right tools in place to make the company able to support himself, four of his children, and even two of his grandkids! CLIP Software has been one of his greatest tools to achieving his dream from day one – helping with scheduling, project management, customer management and efficiency ratings. CLIP ensures that Chris gets the profit he needs on each of his jobs, keeps his customer routes tight, and watches his costs on every landscaping project. Chris says, "I especially love using the new CLIP2Go because it allows us to know where our crews are at all times and has completely eliminated our paper route sheets!"

To help Green Seasons reach the next level, Chris attended the annual CLIP Conference a few years later and he has never regretted it. "At the first conference we went to they talked about the H2B program so we went home and started using it ourselves – since then we have learned something new at every conference we go to!" By using the tools and ideas of the CLIP Conferences, Green Seasons has been able to reap profits from the H2B

program, piecemeal system, innovative marketing ideas, and so much more. Ever since CLIP started their own lawn care company (CLIP Lawn Care), Chris has been given even more great business ideas to implement into Green Seasons.

Today, Green Seasons is looking forward to growing their company to almost 200 employees in 2014, and offers a

"I especially love using the new CLIP2Go because it allows us to know where our crews are at all times and has completely eliminated our paper route sheets!"

variety of services such as lawn maintenance, Christmas decorations, irrigation, tree work, landscaping, and window

cleaning, all powered through CLIP! Chris' key to success? "Treat your customers like they are supposed to be treated and you'll create a life-long relationship with them."

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But March is go-time for getting those residential maintenance contracts confirmed. And before and during this time, the company is focused on selling work it can deliver immediately – to appeal to the client that wants it now. That includes mulch, pine straw and lighting.

"You get the longevity out of mulch in January and February, and it's a great time to do that work because our maintenance staff is already on slack hours so we don't have to staff up," Gracely says.

Most of all, Gracely emphasizes that sales is a year-round effort. "If we can keep a property at a grade-A level, and keep that customer well taken care of, then when that client is looking for landscaping at the end of February or early March, that's when we'll really start pushing our maintenance."

Staying on the radar

Custom Landscaping and Lawn Care

Frank Leloia, Jr. **Location:** East Brunswick, N.J. **Established:** 1982 **Employees:** 35 **2013 Revenue:** not disclosed **Customers:** 90% residential, 10% commercial **Services:** maintenance, landscape design and install, snow

Which routes are thin and could use a sales boost and a slew of accounts to maximize a crew's schedule? What marketing pieces really hit home with residents? What collateral needs updating to reflect new service offerings?

These are the issues Custom Landscaping and Lawn Care reviews early in the year. While snow operations are humming along, the office is just as busy planning

for sales and marketing so come spring – whether that's early March or later in the New Jersey market the firm services – the company is prepared with a full load of accounts to meet budget goals.

"Our planning for new sales begins toward the end of the year and goes into early winter," says Frank Leloia Jr., president of the East Brunswick, N.J. firm. "We like to be early, so planning is absolutely critical."

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TAKE-AWAY TIPS

Forget the off season. "If you really want to grow your business and work hard at it, there is not really a 'time off,'" Leloia says. "There is no better time than now to re-evaluate how the past year went, find out where you made mistakes and get yourself prepared for the upcoming spring."

Check their temperature. Rather than focusing on sales when calling on existing customers, account managers at Custom simply ask how the service went last year and what the client would like to see for the following year. Keeping a conversational tone and pointing out ways to enhance the property make the call more of a dialogue than a sales effort.

Think location. New sales efforts are focused on geography: Which routes need to be rounded out? This ensures greater efficiency once the busy season starts.

Specifically, Custom Landscaping and Lawn Care targets neighborhoods where it wants to increase sales. Leloia reviews areas where he feels the company could excel. And because he reviews year-end numbers by geography, he knows which areas are thin on business. "Say we want to fill up this city with these couple of neighborhoods – we'll need to make 100 new sales, so we target the area heavier with our marketing because we want the crews to fill up on some more accounts," he says.

As for selling to existing customers, account managers dedicate time to reviewing each client's record. What services did they purchase last season? Were any enhancements added? How about service calls – and was the estimate accurate?

"Not only do we evaluate what our current clients do not have at that time, while we have the customer screen (on our software) up, it's a great opportunity to evaluate those sales to make sure they are priced accurately and that all measurements are correct. During the busy time when we

are doing 20 estimates each day, it's easy to make mistakes."

Any pricing margins can be corrected with the new contract – you can't up a price in the middle of the season if you made a mistake on the estimate.

Of course, the most important part of those customer calls is gauging clients' satisfaction. Simply asking, "How is everything going?" can make the difference between a renewal and a client that shops around. This is also the time when salespeople can, in a genuine manner, suggest additional services that might enhance clients' properties. "We might say, 'I noticed you are not signed up for lime with us this year. Do you have any interest?' We don't even like to call it sales," Leloia says.

Meanwhile, the marketing engine revs up early in the year – though Custom Landscaping and Lawn Care waits to release the direct mail floodgates until the start of spring. "As soon as the weather turns, everyone knows spring is here when we put down about 70 percent of our advertising," Leloia says. **L&L**

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Questions to ask yourself

Keep these queries in mind when you consider your M&A options. **By Ron Edmonds**

Once again, there is a high level of interest in mergers & acquisitions (M&A) within the lawn and landscape industry.

There are a variety of factors causing that high level of interest. There have been some high profile transactions announced, including the acquisition of Brickman by KKR and the acquisition of a controlling interest in John Deere Landscapes by Clayton, Dubilier & Rice (CD&R). In addition, CD&R has been reconfiguring its investment in ServiceMaster by spinning off TruGreen as a separate company, all in anticipation of some sort of "liquidity event."

These events have focused investors on the green industry, which seems poised to receive more investment capital in anticipation of growing opportunities as the economy strengthens and construction rebounds.

While these transactions involve some of the largest companies in the industry and are not at all representative of what smaller business owners can expect, the increased interest in the industry is likely to have a very positive effect on M&A in the industry overall. The ripple effect will likely include some

large companies more aggressively looking for add-on acquisitions and other private equity investments in smaller companies in the industry, while some regional companies use acquisitions to build their footprints.

One thing is clear, M&A activity is cyclical and hard to predict. These cycles reflect external factors such as the economy and interest rates, the health of the industry and reactions to past M&A activity. Even today, while landscape services companies are becoming popular for acquisitions, the market for lawn care companies is weaker with TruGreen on the sidelines.

Right now, we have some additional factors coming into play that business owners would be well-advised to consider. Because the level of M&A activity in the industry has been relatively limited for the past few years, there are likely to be many business owners who would like to be able to transition their businesses who have not yet done so.

In addition, the aging of the baby boomer generation is expected to increase the number of potential sellers significantly over the next few years. Other business owners may consider exiting their businesses over such politi-

cal issues as Obamacare, immigration reform and an increase in the minimum wage.

Since M&A activity is cyclical and we cannot predict the future, business owners must consider their future plans and take steps to position themselves and their businesses for the best possible outcome.

If a sale is ultimately in your plans, it is wise to be able to make a move when an opportunity arises. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself as you consider your options.

ARE YOU READY TO SELL YOUR BUSINESS?

This is a much more complicated question than it sounds. It takes some soul searching and, often, reflection, analysis and planning to answer it.

I like to break this down further into two sub-questions, addressing two different facets of readiness: mental readiness and financial readiness. We will address them individually.



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2014 M&A GUIDE

ARE YOU MENTALLY READY TO SELL? Almost everyone who contacts us about the possible sale of their business tells us they are ready for that step.

Business owners who are not mentally ready to sell their businesses may encounter a number of roadblocks along the way. Here are some questions you may ask yourself to help determine if you are mentally ready to sell your business.

- Can you imagine your business (the one that you started with one truck and grew to a significant size) being run by someone else?
- Do you believe that your business cannot thrive without your involvement in day-to-day operations?
- Does your entire life revolve around your business?
- Have you cultivated outside interests?

• Do you know what you want to do next?

Although you may intellectually know it is the right time or a good time to consider selling your business, if you are not mentally ready to pursue a sale, the chances for a good result are diminished.

As you set your goals this year, consider these questions and what steps you can take to increase your mental readiness to consider a sale.

ARE YOU FINANCIALLY READY TO SELL? This question requires some homework and, possibly, a session with a financial planner. The basic process works like this:

- Determine your plans for the future.
- Determine what it will cost to execute your plans.

• Determine the financial resources you will have available from existing assets and future income (retirement income, future earned income or other sources).

• Estimate the market value of your business, and what it could be sold for under current market conditions. You will probably need some professional help with this, since this estimate of value is critical to the evaluation of your financial readiness. It is not safe to rely on simplistic rules of thumb or rumors of other transactions which may not be valid in your situation.

• Compare your existing financial resources together with the estimated market value to your estimate of what it will cost to execute your plans.

If the result is positive, you may be financially ready to pursue a sale. I say may be

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because there are still many variables and the analysis you have completed is based on estimates, which may or may not be accurate.

What if the analysis suggests you may not be financially ready to pursue a sale?

Your choices include reducing the costs associated with your future plans, taking steps to increase the market value of your business or delaying or abandoning your future plans.

IS YOUR BUSINESS READY TO BE SOLD? Here are some questions to ask yourself regarding your business that will give you some insight into whether your company is ready to be sold for a good price.

- Does your business have a history of growth and profitability and quality records and systems that support it?
- Does your business have significant growth potential through scaling the existing business, adding new service or product lines or expanding the company's geographical territory?
- Is your business dependent on one or a small number of customers, employees or suppliers for its continued success?

• Does your business have positive cash flow and not require significant investment of working capital to finance operations?

• Does your business have a significant component of recurring revenue?

• Does your business have any significant competitive advantages that keep other businesses from competing against it successfully?

• Does your business have a large number of satisfied, repeat customers?

• Can your business operate without you as the owner being involved in both daily and major decisions?

The answers to these questions will, in large part, determine whether a business can be sold and at what price or multiple.

In reviewing these questions, it may be wise to bring in an outsider, perhaps one of your existing advisors, to help make sure you are making an objective assessment. Every business should set goals based on these questions as a part of their planning process, whether or not a sale is potentially in the works.

Of course, the good news is that addressing these same issues will make your business

a stronger, more profitable business, regardless of your personal plans.

Some businesses will always be easier to sell than others, especially if a strategic buyer is active in your industry sector. Strategic buyers pursue acquisitions based on the synergies they believe may exist between their existing business and an acquisition.

The other type of buyer is a financial buyer. Financial buyers usually look at a potential acquisition's growth, profitability and prospects on a stand-alone basis.

As we have all learned, acquisition opportunities are not always out there. Many factors beyond the facts of your particular business will affect the availability of an acquisition opportunity and what value your business may bring.

Asking yourself these questions and taking action where it is possible will help put you in the best possible position to take advantage of opportunities as they do arise and make an exit opportunity on your own timetable more feasible. **L&L**

The author is president of the M&A firm The Principium Group.



From **awesome** to **awful**

Some of the best and worst acquisition and merger stories in my more than two decades in the business. **By Jim Huston**

During the past 25 years, I've probably helped more than 100 companies merge with, acquire or divest a division or company. Most of these transactions have gone reasonably well. I've also had the opportunity to witness from afar similar transactions that did not go so well. Upon analysis of these failed transactions, it wasn't difficult to see why they didn't have legs and why they did not last over the long haul.

THE GOOD. A highly profitable maintenance company (net profit margin more than 20 percent for many years) with annual revenues exceeding \$7 million, calculated a value for his business of about \$2.45 million using the gross profit margin evaluation model. I recommended that he and his CPA use the EBIDTA method. Using it, the value calculated to be roughly \$5 million, double the GPM amount. In the final analysis, he used the EBIDTA model and sold his business for more than \$5 million.

THE ALMOST BAD. A number of years ago, a \$1 million commercial lawn maintenance contractor called me. He was interested in possibly selling his business. His net profit margin after all bills and a reasonable salary to him were paid was 10 percent. I gave him a ballpark value of around \$0.75 per revenue dollar – \$750,000. This figure included his inventory at fair market value and equipment, but no real estate. He then told me that his CPA, using various evaluation mod-

els, told him he should get around \$2 million for his business. I told him that he had better get all of his money, the entire \$2 million, up front. Otherwise, he'd never see it.

Think about this deal. Even if a buyer pays \$1 million as a down payment, and the seller finances the remaining \$1 million for 10 years at 10 percent interest, the interest payment wipes out the entire net profit margin for ten years. There's nothing left to pay off the principal. This deal simply will not work.



THE REALLY BAD. In the early 1990s, two large multi-million dollar landscape companies in the upper midwest merged – for all the wrong reasons. One company focused on installation while the other was primarily a maintenance business. The new entity endured for about five years and grew to more than \$35 million in annual sales. Then it blew up.

I talked with some of the non-owner survivors who went on to form new companies that ended up doing quite well. Their stories were amazing. For years, after the two companies merged, there were no centralized systems for accounting, estimating, job costing, sales, etc. Worse yet, a year after the merger, many of them did not even know to whom they were to report to.

In the final analysis, motivation to merge the two entities was primarily driven due to financial mismanagement and cash flow needs – the two *needed* each other for all of the wrong reasons.

THE DOWN-RIGHT UGLY. In the late 1990s, public and private money was raised to fuel the creation of large landscape entities primarily focused on commercial lawn maintenance services. Soon a number of companies doing hundreds of millions of revenue dollars emerged.

Many of my clients sold their companies to these large consolidators. Almost none of the sellers lasted more than 2-3 years with their new bosses. Here are a few reasons why: 1. Layers of bureaucracy and outdated procedures killed any entrepreneurial zeal that the entrepreneurs might have. 2. Their recommendations to improve operations mostly were ignored. 3. Quality was ignored and corners cut in order to meet financial goals set by bureaucrats who were totally separated from daily operations.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. You may think that the big consolidators have really got it figured out. Don't be fooled.

Due to the lack of a true entrepreneurial environment at the branch level, most of the large consolidators only produce a "C" or "C+" quality of service.

Perhaps the best lessons to learn from these stories is first, you have to do your homework on the front end and second, you have to maintain the zeal of a true entrepreneur on the back end. **L&L**



The author runs J.R. Huston Consulting and is a columnist for *Lawn & Landscape*. He can be reached at jhuston@giemedia.com.

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The purchase and sale process

You'll have a different perspective depending on what side of the table you are on for an M&A deal.

By Daniel S. Gordon and John P. Corrigan

As a growing land care professional, sometimes we run into situations where there seems to be a good deal on the horizon and the idea of purchasing a competitor is appealing. Depending on what stage you are in life, selling your firm might also be appealing. But how is it done? As in any large decision, no matter who you ask, they'll have an opinion.

Problem: If those opinions don't come from qualified professionals, they

can be drastically wrong and end up costing you a lot of money in terms of purchase price, payouts and or taxes. **Solution:** You need to consult a good lawyer or CPA who specializes in merger and acquisition structuring. These professionals can be expensive, so we recommend you familiarize yourself with the process so you can communicate your vision before you seek out this advice.

Let's do a run-down of how the process works:

BUYER'S PERSPECTIVE

Confidentiality agreement/info request

- Avoid risk of competitors trying to steal the deal or driving up the price if it became known the seller was selling the business.
- Need to know more information about seller's business strengths & weaknesses, (e.g., personnel, customers, equipment).

Letter of intent / due diligence (D/D)

- Agree on major deal points such as price and structure of proposed deal (stock or asset purchase transaction).
- Verify accuracy of seller's financial and non-financial information about the business.
- Timing, access to records, cost and proper talent to conduct D/D.

Financing the deal

- Small down payment as possible to reduce risk of loss.
- Pay balance over long period at low interest rate.
- Use bank and/or investor money.
- Use future earnings of seller's business to pay balance due seller.

Purchase and sale contract

- Want as many representations and warranties as to all aspects of the business being purchased.
- Want seller to retain all liabilities prior to closing the deal.
- Want to eliminate any chance of risk for items not discovered during D/D.
- Want to withhold 10-20 percent of the purchase price in escrow for the first one to two years after closing.

Other considerations

- Any employees not being retained.
- Is the seller's office lease being assumed?

Closing the deal

- Ensure any open issues are satisfied and free/clear title to business is conveyed.

SELLER'S PERSPECTIVE

Confidentiality agreement/info request

- Ensure trade secrets and customer lists are protected and not stolen by buyer.
- Give as little information as possible other than positive aspects of business.
- Keep lawyers and accountants fees in check given deal may not proceed.

Letter of intent (LOI)/due diligence (D/D)

- Agree on major deal points (same as buyer).
- Posture business for highest valuation.
- Negotiate and minimize volume of business records to provide under D/D.
- Give buyer short window to do D/D.
- Seek break-up fee from buyer if LOI is terminated by buyer after D/D process.

Financing the deal

- Large cash down payment as possible in case business stalls after selling.
- Obtain guarantees and collateral to secure purchase price being paid over time.
- Don't act as a bank for a buyer. If so, then short period and high rate of interest.

Purchase and sale contract

- Give few representations and warranties about the business and make them precise and narrow in scope.
- Make sale of assets on "AS IS" basis.
- Provide as little indemnification as possible on potential contract breaches.
- Reduce or eliminate any proposed escrow holdback from the purchase price.
- Shift as many business liabilities to seller post-closing.

Other considerations

- Negotiate L/T employment agreement.
- Employee liability for any terminated.

Closing the deal

- Ensure buyer cannot terminate deal before closing, get the money.

CONCLUSION. Prior to embarking on a large decision such as this, the land care professional should understand the elements of how a purchase or sale is crafted then consult a qualified CPA and attorney to help guide him through the process. **L&L**

Daniel S. Gordon is a CPA and John P. Corrigan is an Attorney, MBA and CPA who are both directors of Turfbooks, an accounting firm that specializes in accounting, as well as mergers and acquisitions for land care professionals nationwide.



An education in M&A

After meeting with a number of people with knowledge of the mergers and acquisitions world, Marty Grunder came out of those discussions with these tips. Grunder



Mergers and acquisitions. Well, that's not something I really know that much about, to be honest. However, I'm interested in them and since I'm interested in them, I have been seeking out experts, people who have actually experience with them. I've had 10 meetings in the past two years with business people who have done them and I've learned a lot. I thought I'd share what I've found out with you. I also have one point at the end of this column you're going to want to read whether you're interested in a merger or an acquisition or not.

Look for a connection. I spoke with my client, Dan. He's done several acquisitions (no mergers) in the HVAC industry. In fact, one venture he did resulted in the company having combined revenue of \$4 billion – that's billion with a B! He also has done many acquisitions of HVAC companies.

Sure, they aren't landscaping companies, but they are service businesses, so there's a lot in common. I learned from Dan to not have your attorney call a company you are interested in purchasing or merging with.

Dan said, "I would not let your attorney do it. Many attorneys are good for 'papering' deals but typically not 'making' deals. Some attorneys are very commercial minded and work to get deals done – but they are hard to find. At any rate – the size deals you are looking at will be more about the connection you make with the seller and how that individual plays into your go forward plans."

Look closely at what you are buying. After I met with Dan, I had lunch with my pal Michael. Michael is scary smart and he's done a ton of acquisitions, no mergers. He always looks at the numbers.

He wants to know what kind of clients are coming over in the deal and what type of people he is getting to add to his team.

Michael doesn't care about buildings, computers, or trucks and equipment.

"That stuff means nothing to me. I don't want it. And in many ways, I want smaller companies, ones that are owner operated that I can take an owner, remove some of the burdens from him or her, and let them run the business day to day," he says.

And then he advised me to "look at what they're doing. Are they as efficient as they could be? Would your systems help the company you are purchasing be more efficient and hence more profitable? Some more simple brilliance.

Culture and cash flow. Then I listened to a local successful entrepreneur Ed, who owns a very large trucking company. He said, "The two most important things to consider when buying a company are culture and cash flow. Their culture has to fit your culture and the company has to have good cash flow for it to make sense.

The notion that you are going to change a culture and miraculously fix their cash flow is a dangerous proposition." I marveled listening to him talk about a deal he spent a lot of money analyzing and putting through due diligence, only to walk away because he thought their culture would never fit with his was really eye opening.

Why? Because I think as a whole, we entrepreneurs are way too optimistic. We think things will be easier than they end up being.

Smooth sailing without you. Now for the granddaddy lesson of them all that came from my friend and mentor Les. Les was a long-time client that not only did a lot of business with me, but he spent hours with

me through the years, still does actually. He retired a couple years ago and helps family businesses succeed to the next generation. And what he taught me is magical. Les says that whether you are selling your business or buying a business, the goal should be one thing, and that is to have that business set up in such a way, it runs without you.

Why? Les reasons that whether you have the intention of selling your business or growing it, you need to get it running like a well-oiled machine. A business that runs like a well-oiled machine, with the owner present or absent, is far more marketable and valuable than one that relies solely on you. Get the business running well without me, whether I plan on selling it, doing a merger or an acquisition.

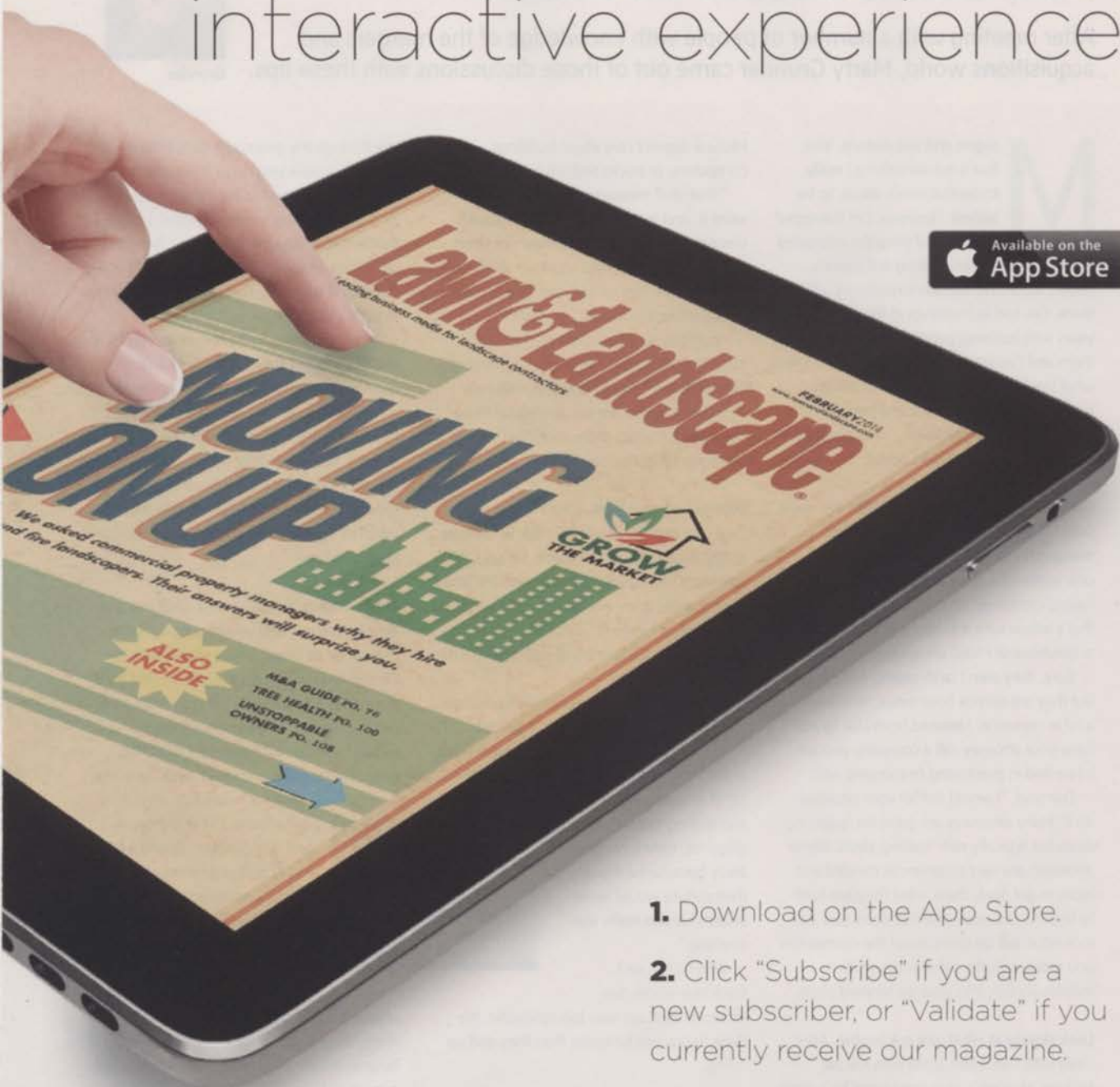
My two cents. Finally, here's what I would do if I were you and you're considering a merger or an acquisition. I would seek out several folks who own businesses that have done them. Ask them what they liked and did not like; talk to them about what they would have done differently. Call PLANET, our national association, and ask them for some names of companies that have done them. Call those owners and go see them. Spend a few hours on the internet and see what information is out there on mergers and acquisitions.

Ask around and find the attorney in your town that has the best reputation for handling mergers and acquisitions and go meet with them. Even if you have to pay them for an hour to talk, it could be the best money you ever spend. And then, finally, read my words above again and make sure you can check off all those items too.

The author is owner of Grunder Landscaping Co. and is a columnist for *Lawn & Landscape*.

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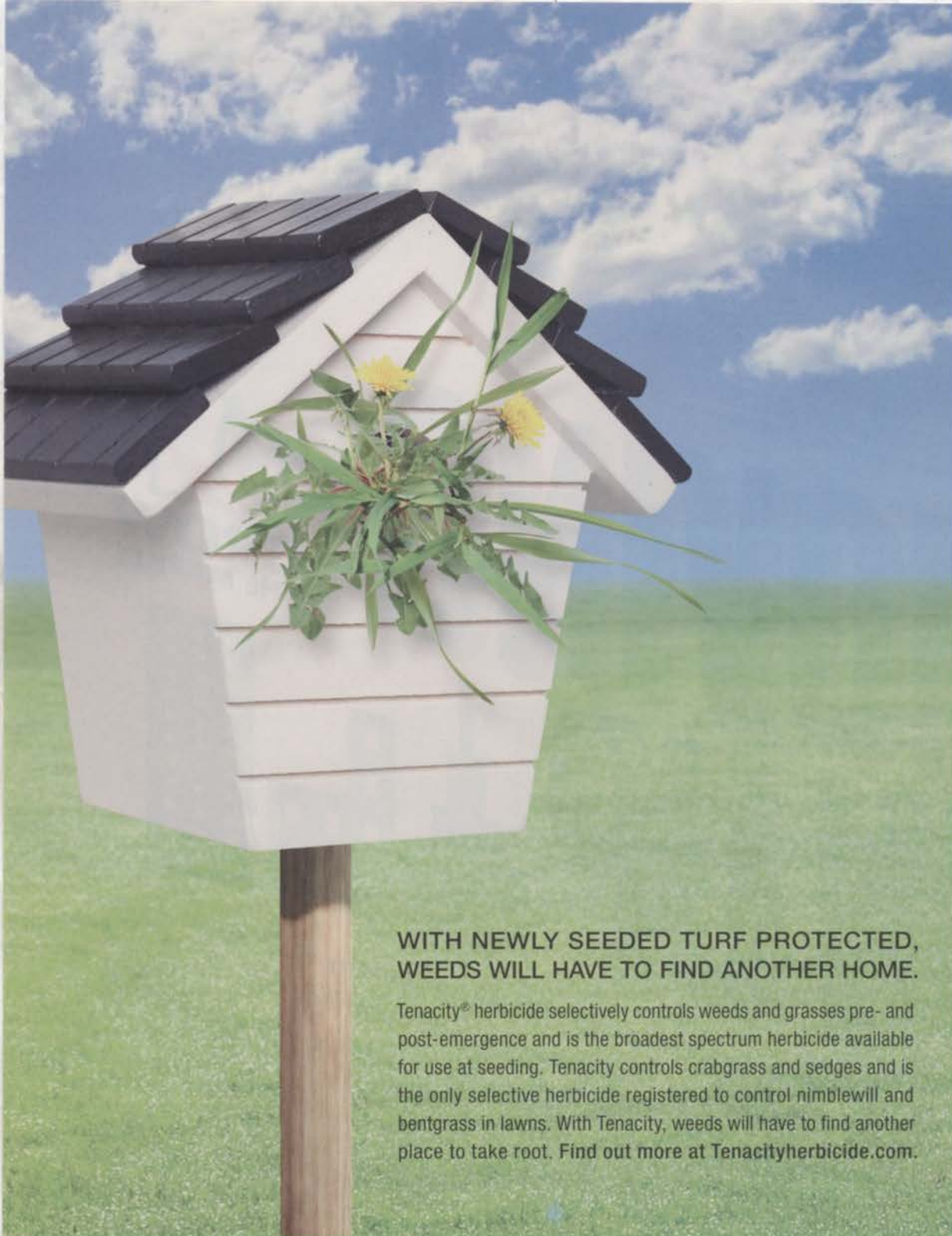


MOVING ON UP

We asked commercial property managers why they hire
and fire landscapers. Their answers will surprise you.

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Commercial properties appreciate quality above all else

A landscape is more than just green grass. Whether it is a recreational park, a home lawn or a commercial renovation project, a well-maintained landscape delivers a sense of community. It greets visitors, provides a play area for children and gives homeowners pride in their outdoor living space. As the economy continues to recover, the lawn and landscape market also continues to grow as commercial properties seek unique landscapes and beautiful spaces with quality turf.

To help you maintain your customer's landscape, Syngenta is proud to partner with *Lawn & Landscape* on this special Grow the Market report. Keeping in mind the value of quality customer service, the findings in this report can help you implement business strategies for the year ahead. The report features feedback from your customers, giving you insight into current market trends such as:

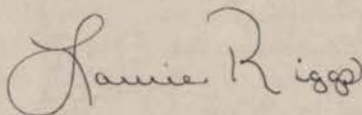
- 89 percent of property managers reported their landscape budgets have remained the same or increased in the past three years. However, of those commercial properties whose budgets increased, 42 percent increased their spending between 10 and 19 percent.
- More than half of property managers consider the quality of completed projects to be the most important hiring factor. In 2013, only 5 percent of decision makers hired a landscaper because the company offered the lowest bid. In the lawn care industry, commercial properties are willing to pay more for high-quality services that meet their needs.

- When there are errors or a lack of efficiency in service delivery, 69 percent of property managers are more likely to end the partnership. The importance of providing efficient service and completing a job in a timely manner ranks high on the list of necessary qualities for a landscaper.

These are just a few of the trends identified in this 2014 Grow the Market report. In this issue, you will find many insights to help you grow your business.

As homeowners and businesses begin to invest more into lawn care, Syngenta is looking forward to providing the tools you need to give them a beautiful outdoor space. With brands like Acelepryn insecticide, Barricade herbicide, Heritage fungicide and new products in development, Syngenta remains dedicated to helping you grow your business with products that perform.

Laurie Riggs



Lawn Care Market Manager





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BRAND NEW MARKET, SAME GREAT APPROACH

BY CHUCK BOWEN



When we launched Grow the Market last February, we sought to conduct the first major post-recession study of homeowners' attitudes about their landscaping and lawn care. We wanted to find out why Mr. and Mrs. Jones hired you, and why they fired you. How much do they spend on your services, and what they were planning to spend in the next few years?

It was a great report, and we ran a year's worth of stories based on the data. I was excited to share it with every reader I talked to. But I was in Atlanta last winter, doing just that – sharing my excitement and geeking out about this data – and the contractor I was talking to looked at the notes, then at me and said, without missing a beat: "This is good. But what about property managers? I don't do residential service."

I left a bit deflated, but with a plan to replicate the same ideas in a different market. And so Grow the Market II was born, in which we sought to answer the same questions about commercial property managers. Here are some of the key points we learned:

- Far and away, having good communication and high levels of good customer service ranked far ahead of pricing or services performed. Those are much more difficult to do, sure, but not impossible.
- Most of our survey respondents – 60 percent – spend more than \$20,000 a year on their entire landscape, and almost half of them say that budget has increased since 2011.
- Just 11 percent of respondents say their budgets have decreased in the last three years, and most of them say that drop has been less than 10 percent. About a third of them say they've

slimmed their landscape budget by between 10 and 19 percent.

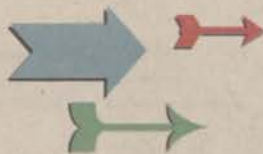
- Seventy-eight percent of respondents to our survey say that a well-maintained landscape at their building helps increase occupancy rates.
- Three-quarters of property managers agree that a well-maintained landscape is good for the environment.
- Two-thirds of survey respondents say that a well-maintained landscape helps save water.
- And, in a nod to how contractors stack up to other professions, only 7 percent of respondents say that they spend more time working through problems with their landscaper than with other service contractors.

Now, residential service still is the bread and butter of the average landscaper, producing two-thirds of sales, according to our 2013 State of the Industry Report. Commercial work makes up just 22 percent of the average top line. For smaller companies, those numbers are thrown into higher relief: Companies earning less than \$200,000 a year earn, on average, 17 percent of their revenue from commercial accounts. For companies earning more than \$200,000 a year, commercial business only accounts for 28 percent of their top line.

To me, that shows commercial landscaping as an untapped market for most of you reading this column right now. The following pages contain a treasure trove of data and analysis that will help you either enter the world of commercial landscaping, or intelligently expand your current commercial division. Our report does exactly what it says on the tin: It helps you grow your market. So read on and take notes. It's time to move on up.

How we did it

In mid-January, the editorial team at Lawn & Landscape teamed up with the fine folks at BOMA International – the nation's leading property manager association – to distribute a web-based survey to their members. We also asked some key commercial landscape contractors to pass along the same link to their customers. Ultimately, we received 248 responses from property managers, building owners and facilities managers in 43 states across the country. The data in our report this month come from these people – all of whom, regardless of their specific title, are responsible for the hiring and firing of the landscapers at their properties.





Doing **BUSINESS** with a **BUSINESS**

Before you decide to try your hand at commercial landscaping, there are a few things you should consider.

BY KATIE TUTTLE

Profitability is the name of the game, and when it comes to landscaping projects it can be the difference between staying in residential and making the giant leap to commercial. The fact of the matter is, any business can be profitable if it's run correctly. When it comes to residential versus commercial services, it's about the bottom line.

If you've been tossing around the idea of getting more into the commercial side of landscape work (in this article commercial is defined as business parks, HOAs and other commercial properties), now may be your time to make that big step.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR. First things first, know what you want. That's the first step in making any type of decision,





and according to Orlando, Fla.-based U.S. Lawns President Ken Hutcheson, it definitely should be considered here.

"Decide where you personally are more comfortable," he says. "Are you most comfortable dealing with professionals, or are you uncomfortable and more comfortable dealing with a residential homeowner?"

Second, evaluate your mindset. What kind of mental situation do you feel most comfortable in?

"(Is) the way you think transactional?" Hutcheson says. "Do you like a beginning and an end to everything you do during the day? Because that's what residential is. You go to a job site, you do your service and you leave."



Hutcheson

The third thing to consider is your management style. There is a large difference between managing a residential crew and managing a commercial crew.

"This is the most important," Hutcheson says. "Are you a micro-manager that likes control, or are you willing to delegate? If you're unwilling to give up control, have at it with residential, because it requires that. As the owner you have to be involved all the time. If you're willing to give up and let your team grow and be successful, you may be willing to jump into commercial."

"Money and profits follow, but if you as a person can't delegate and allow others around you to grow, if you think long term instead of thinking transaction to transaction, if you aren't comfortable talking to professionals, then stay in residential."

Another thing to consider is your equipment, according to Carly Rizor, enhance-



Rizor

ments account manager for Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago. She says you'll need larger equipment to get the job done in the commercial world.

"All these larger commercial sites require a different set of equipment," Rizor says. "So sometimes making that leap from purely residential to commercial spaces, which are just wide open, you'll want to take a closer look at your fleet to make sure it's something that you're capable of and that you're doing it as efficiently as possible."

There's also the topic of certification.

"The guy on the homeowner end, he doesn't care necessarily that you've got a lot of certifications," says Chris Kujawa, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Kujawa Enterprises in Oak Creek, Wis. "He wants to know that you're going to do a good job and he can trust you. The guy on the other end has a boss above him, and they've got corporate policies and so forth, that they want to see people with different certifications and professional degrees and those kinds of things."

"That's an important distinction between the two. That's way more important to a corporate property than a residential property."

BUILD A CUSTOMER PORTFOLIO. If you've thought all of these points through and made the decision to make the jump, your next step is to find customers. But how?

"I've had the most success getting in front of commercial people by joining various real estate organizations where property managers and facility managers are meeting on a regular basis," says Gib Durden, vice president of business development for HighGrove Partners. "Getting to network with those people puts a face to the name."

Christy Webber, president of Christy Webber Landscapes, suggests looking into your current residential clientele and the relationships you've already developed.

"A lot of times when you really get to

know your residential customers ... they own businesses, or work for businesses, so a lot of times you have to leverage what you have," she says. "Find that homeowner that just loves (you). That guy wants to see his landscaper succeed, he wants to be a part of helping."

Unlike residential accounts, where you offer your services and customers either accept or decline, commercial landscaping can be more cutthroat. These businesses are required to get two or three proposals before making a decision, and that's where the danger lies.

According to Tom Houghnion, chief operating officer for Reliable Property Services in St. Paul, Minn., commercial property managers price shop much more than residential clients.

"The relationship is still very important," he says, "but customers are more cost-conscious on the commercial side."

Hutcheson says most of the customers know as much about this industry, or more, than some contractors.

"Pricing must be accurate for you to get work," he says. "I can tell you 100 stories of customers that throw out the high bid and low bid because they are inaccurate."

Note that Hutcheson mentioned both the high and low bid. In this business, it's not best to be the cheapest.

"I think one common mistake people make is they try to enter into a new type of business by being cheap," says Bob Grover, president of Pacific Landscape Management. "People are working off of budgets ... usually it's a fine line in their expense. If you do it really cheap in year one, it's going to be hard to raise that price."

A way to make sure your bid is as accurate as possible is to have a good estimating process.



Webber

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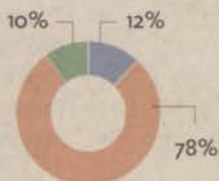
managers still go year-to-year on their contracts with landscapers, and more than three-quarters say their time frame has stayed the same since 2009. Just one in ten respondents say they have changed the lengths of their contracts – longer or shorter – in the same time.



How long is your average contract with a landscape contractor?



How has the length of that contract changed in the last five years?



- Our contracts are longer today than five years ago.
- The length of our contracts has stayed the same.
- Our contracts are shorter today than five years ago.

"There is an art and science to estimating," Hutcheson says. "It can't just be winging it. That process has to be consistent from job to job to job. It's not competitive, it just requires accuracy."

Kujawa says you need to know exactly what everyone wants from the project.

"Write down that they are in fact calling for edging, for mulching, whatever services there are, because your idea of a full-service program and their idea of a full-service program might be different," he says. "You can't include flowers in a program that takes it from \$30,000 to \$40,000 if they didn't want flowers. You won't get that company."



Grover

Kujawa suggests creating a spreadsheet or matrix with one column being what the customer wants, and another column being marked off when you add that to your bid.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS. While it's important to know what the client wants, Houghnion says it's also important to know all your costs, so you can profit from the job.

"You really have to know what you need to be profitable on the site," he says. "They're typically bigger properties and have differ-

ent demands and different ideas. We as an industry do a pretty good job knowing what our direct costs are, but we sometimes forget the other costs associated with doing the property, whether it's insurance to equipment repair ... that kind of gets put by the wayside. You have to make sure you're covering all those costs or it's just going to be a lost leader."

Tom Canete, president and CEO of Canete Landscape & Garden Center in New Jersey, says that because of costs and everything involved, you most likely won't even see a profit until later in the season.

"(The commercial properties) give you a lump sum for a year, and usually break it into eight or nine payments," he says. "So you're very heavy in the spring with what you're laying out. You may not even cover your out-of-pocket expense, so you have to be able to float that money until you start seeing a little bit of a profit after the summer. In the summer you skate by and come fall you start getting out of the red and get into the black."

Sometimes, you are going to have a bid that's too high, and if the property manager isn't willing to negotiate, you may need to accept that and move onto a different job.

"You can't go below what you can't go below," Webber says. "You just have to let it go. It's like buying a car. You love that car,

but if the guy isn't willing to negotiate with you on the car, then screw it whether you love it or not. You've got to let it go. You've got to make money, and many of these companies that went out in the last five years are because they didn't pay attention to that."

"You're going to have to be diligent with it," Durden says. "A typical closing rate for commercial properties is 20 percent, so if you're putting out 100 bids, 80 times you're going to be told no, 20 times you'll be told yes. Don't be discouraged and keep plugging along. Be consistent and don't get frustrated."

So what happens if you've put in your bid and you realize it's not working out?

"Be honest with yourself," Durden says. "You've got to know what kind of product you want in your portfolio. Not every commercial job is perfect for every company. You've got to know what your niche is. Don't be afraid to say no to somebody if you don't feel it's going to be a successful project. We always want to please people. We're always the go-getters, we can do it, no job is too small ... But sometimes a strategic decision to say no can pay better dividends." **L&L**



Durden

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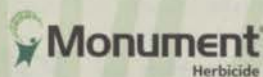
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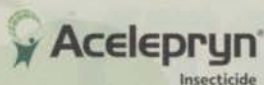
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PROPERTY BY THE NUMBERS

Our exclusive research will help you better understand and sell to commercial property managers.

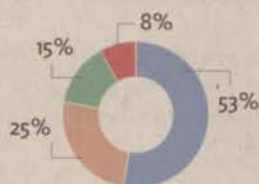
IN OUR LATEST Grow the Market research project, we asked property managers across the country what they thought of landscapers, why they hire you and why they fire you. Turns out communication, quality work and reliable account managers are some of the best defenses against low bids and shorter contracts. Use these data to help you better understand your customers and prepare for the coming season. — Chuck Bowen



WHO WE TALKED TO

WE SURVEYED 248 commercial property managers, building owners and other folks to see what they think of landscapers. Everyone who answered our questions is in charge of hiring the landscaper at their buildings. All told, we received responses from 43 states.

What title best describes your position?



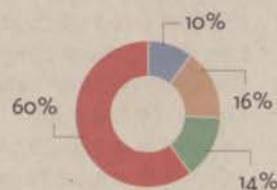
■ Property manager
■ Building owner
■ Facilities manager
■ Developer

How many buildings do you oversee?



■ 1
■ 2-3
■ 4-6
■ 6 or more

How many acres of outdoor landscape/turf do you oversee?



■ Less than 1
■ 1-3
■ 4-6
■ 6 or more

What type of facilities/grounds do you oversee? (Choose all that apply.)



Business park/
multi-building property

44%



Homeowners'
association

13%



Apartments

39%



Strip mall

16%



Standalone
office buildings

44%

WHY THEY HIRE YOU

FAIR AND AWAY, quality of work and staying on budget are the most important things to the average property manager when it comes to hiring a landscaper. For as much talk as we hear about low bids and the cutthroat nature of the commercial world, price comes in tied for fifth on the list of top reasons. This jives with what we've been hearing in the last few years – that many contracts went to low-bid companies during the recession, but property managers got what they paid for when it came to quality of work. After a year or two of shoddy craftsmanship, property managers came back to the more expensive – but more reliable – contractors.

Coming in a distant second, with 19 percent, is a high level of customer service. This suggests that even if you can't come in at or under budget, or the quality of work isn't up to snuff, you can still win the business if you're up front and communicate well about the status of your jobs. Green services and certifications come in dead last, with just 2 percent of property managers choosing those as the top reasons to hire a company.

What's the most important factor when you decide on hiring a landscaper? (Choose only one.)

Quality of work – jobs are completed on time and within budget.....	52%
A high level of customer service	19%
My relationship with the company contact/account manager	8%
The company offers multiple services.....	7%
The company is highly recommended or has great reviews	5%
The company has the lowest bid	5%
The company offers green/sustainable services.....	2%
Insurance and/or professional certifications	2%

AGAIN, WE SEE THAT almost two-thirds of property managers say the most important thing about their landscaping is how it looks. Keeping the landscape a low-cost item on the budget is a distant third place, with just 9 percent of respondents choosing price. About one in five say the most important factor is simply not having to worry about it.

What is most important to you when it comes to the landscaping at your building(s)?



WHY THEY FIRE YOU

ALMOST THREE-QUARTERS of respondents cited problems with services or improperly completed jobs as the most common reason they fired a landscape contractor. In second place was poor customer service or bad treatment by an account manager, which highlights the importance not just of quality work, but of putting the right person in charge of handling each customer. High prices came in near the bottom of the list, with just 4 percent of property managers saying it was why they often changed landscapers.

What is the most common reason you fire a landscape contractor? (Choose only one.)

Problems with services/jobs aren't completed properly..... 69%

Poor customer service/bad treatment by account manager.....	19%
Poor communication	5%
Price is too high.....	4%
I don't trust them.....	3%

WHEN ASKED WHAT a landscaper could do to instill confidence in their company, more than half of respondents said excellent communication. Everything else – multiple service offerings, being local, a long tenure in the market – pales in comparison, with those responses just barely breaking into double-digits.

What one thing could a service provider do to instill confidence in their company?

Have excellent communication.... 53%

Offer multiple services	13%
Be local to my market (not a national company).....	11%
Have a good image	11%
Have been in business for many years.....	6%
Have certifications/professional trade association memberships	5%
Have the lowest bid.....	1%



LET'S TALK ABOUT MONEY

MOST OF OUR SURVEY RESPONDENTS – 60 percent – spend more than \$20,000 a year on their entire landscape, and almost half of them say that budget has increased since 2011. Of those property managers who have increased their landscaping budgets, about half say they've bumped up less than 10 percent. About four in ten say they've increased spending by 10-19 percent.

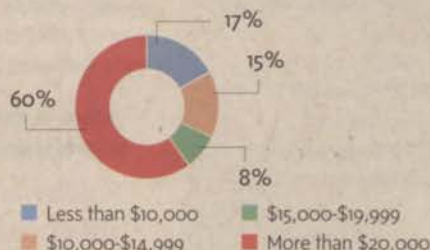
Just 11 percent of respondents say their budgets have decreased in the last three years, and most of them say that drop has been less than 10 percent. About a third of them say they've slimmed their landscape budget by between 10 and 19 percent.



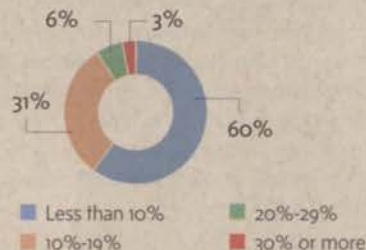
How has your total budget for landscaping (mowing, enhancements, irrigation, lawn care, etc.) changed in the past three years?

- ↑ My total budget has gone up. **47%**
- ↔ My total budget has stayed the same. **42%**
- ↓ My total budget has gone down. **11%**

How much do you spend on landscaping (mowing, enhancements, irrigation, lawn care, etc.) in a year?



As a percentage of your total budget, how much do you spend on landscape enhancements in a year?



WHEN WE ASKED about the next two years, half of the respondents said they plan on increasing their landscape budgets. Another 45 percent said they would keep their spending about the same. Just 7 percent said they would be spending less by 2016.

How do you anticipate your total spending on landscaping changing in the next two years?

- ↑ My spending will go up **48%**
- ↔ My spending will stay the same **45%**
- ↓ My spending will go down **7%**

A SHARPER SALES PITCH

WE ASKED OUR RESPONDENTS to tell us how much they agreed with the following statements as a way to judge what was truly important to them when it comes to their decision of hiring landscapers. These numbers indicate the percentage of property managers who said they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Use these as a way to hone your sales messages.

Curb appeal is important to my tenants

87%



- A well-maintained landscape at my building helps increase occupancy rates **78%**
- A well-maintained landscape is good for the environment. **74%**
- A well-maintained landscape helps save water. **67%**
- It's important to me that my contractor provides all the exterior services. **60%**
- Sustainability is an important factor when considering a contractor. **52%**
- Certifications or memberships in professional trade associations are an important factor in my decision to hire a landscaper. **35%**
- A well-managed landscape is too expensive to maintain. **10%**
- I spend more time working through problems with my landscaper than with other service contractors. **7%**



Service with a *SMILE*

**Commercial clients need a lot of attention.
You need an account manager who can give it.**

BY JIM HUSTON

An experienced commercial maintenance account manager is one of the most important roles at your company. Whether you can develop your existing sales team into this role, or you have to find someone new, it's a position you can't go without.

According to *Lawn & Landscape* research, after quality of work, commercial property managers cite high levels of customer service and their relationship with their account manager as the most important factor in hiring a landscaper.

Here are some qualifications and performance expectations I've found that can help you find the right person.

QUALIFICATIONS

- Minimum of five years of combined commercial landscape maintenance production and sales experience
- An associate degree (preferably in the green industry) and a certified landscape professional certification
- A valid driver's license that is insurable on the company's insurance policy
- Possess excellent written and oral communication skills
- Possesses excellent computer skills
- Able to make effective presentations to clients and sell \$750,000 to \$1 million of commercial maintenance projects annually
- Able to represent the company in a courteous and professional manner

EXPECTATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Oversees \$500,000 to \$1 million of commercial maintenance projects annually
- Ensures vendor pricing is competitive and accurate

- Sells approximately 10 percent to 25 percent of account contract amount in enhancements
- Develops new business and prepares bids for supervisor to review
- Prepares all bids/proposals for enhancement work
- Reviews all bids/proposals with sales manager for accuracy and marketability
- Presents all proposals/documents to client
- Closes sale and coordinates job specifics with accounting personnel
- Coordinates job specifics with production personnel
- Meets with client and ensures that all client concerns are addressed in a timely and professional manner
- Conducts monthly walkthrough with client and identifies and documents any discrepancies
- Provides written monthly report and files in customer file
- Ensures that jobs are kept on schedule, and at or under budget
- Processes all change orders/enhancements and ensures that they are priced and processed correctly
- Interfaces with subcontractors to ensure timely and accurate completion of their work
- Interfaces with suppliers to ensure timely and accurate delivery of job materials
- Interfaces with company production manager to ensure client's expectations are met and that jobs are kept on schedule and on budget
- Ensures that all safety procedures are

- followed and reports any unsafe conditions to supervisors
- Continuing education requirement minimum of 20 hours per year

ONE MORE THING. I'd highly recommend having all of your key staff sign a confidentiality agreement and/or a non-compete agreement. In addition, account managers should use a customer relations management (CRM) software package. It should be mandatory that the account manager schedule all meetings, to-do items, phone calls, proposal due dates, etc., using the CRM software. Brief notes from meetings and client conversations should be entered daily and always be kept current.

If the account manager gets run over by a truck (or quits), the company has a record of what he or she has been doing. I've seen a number of account managers depart a company and take all of the information that they've been collecting with them.

WHERE TO LOOK. There's no silver bullet or hidden secret as to where to find good account manager prospects. Landscape contractors are scouring every possible nook and cranny where they might find good help. You have to be in constant hiring mode.

Many of my clients have found Craigslist or Angie's List a good resource. Others look for people in a service sector outside of the green industry, and who have great attitudes, communicate well, are trainable and are looking for an opportunity. **L&L**

The author runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm, and is a columnist for *Lawn & Landscape*.

Go to our site to download full-length job descriptions for both commercial and residential landscape account managers.





GO ALL IN

Give your clients the full monty and ask to be their one-and-only service provider.

BY KATIE TUTTLE

So you've done it: You've made the leap to commercial landscaping. Congratulations. But what do you do if all your crews are doing is maintenance? How do you take that next step to sell yourself as a full-service company? The commercial property you maintain may hire a different company for irrigation, a different company for snow removal and another one for construction.

How do you become their one-and-only contractor?

Tom Canete, president and CEO of Canete Landscape & Garden Center, Wayne, N.J., says a simple, but important first-step for his company is marketing.

"Let your customer know you do all that stuff," he says, suggesting that you hand out mouse pads and magnets with your provided services and contact information on them. "They pass their file cabinet 10 times a day and your magnet's there. What happens when their other guy doesn't come through? They call you because you're staying in their face. You may not be getting the work, but you're staying in their mind."

Most landscapers we contacted agree that the easiest place to sell yourself as full-service is with your current clients, and not just for added revenue. Another contractor coming onto your client's property for lawn care,

parking lot maintenance or snow removal could put your business at risk. "If they have to go out and hire a different company, I potentially put my relationship at risk because I'm not able to provide all their needs," says Bob Grover, president of Pacific Landscape Management, Hillsboro, Ore.

Tom Houghnon, chief operating officer for Reliable Property Services, St. Paul, Minn., echoes Grover's statements.

"Your margin is definitely a lot stronger if you're a full-service provider," he says. "Mowing and weekly services, while they can be profitable, that's really where you can get upside down quickly. If you can't provide the irrigation service or some of the enhancement services, it's going to be significantly tougher to make a profit and succeed in the commercial market. You're giving up significant revenue potential that can help compensate for the lower margin mowing work that got you the facility in the first place."

Grover also says you shouldn't be worried about a lack of resume or long list of previous work, and you definitely shouldn't let that keep you from offering your services.

"I'm a firm believer in 'act the way you want to be,'" he says. "If you have one reference, you've got a reference. You don't have to have a long history before you can say you do it. Say it confidently or show examples

confidently. You don't say, 'Hey I just started this this year,' you just say, 'We provide this.' You may not have done it last year, but act confident that you know what you're doing."

So what happens if your client already has another company do that service, and you're thinking about offering to do it yourself instead?

"I just say 'I'm not trying to kick anyone out of the box, but I surely would love the opportunity to bid it,'" says Christy Webber, president of Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago. "They can't really deny you that, but at least you get to throw your hat in the ring. Ask for the opportunity to price it at least."

ASK FOR THE WORK. If your client contracts multiple companies for the work on the property, you may stumble across another hurdle in your attempts to be full-service: What if they don't want to consolidate?

"In those markets, there's really only one way to go about attacking that," says Ken Hutcheson, president of Orlando-based U.S. Lawns. "Develop a working relationship with that customer or prospective customer by using one as the entry point. You will not sit in front of a customer that has always kept (services) apart and convince them conversationally that they can bundle all together."





You won't be a trusted counselor unless you have a working relationship with them. Once they trust your counsel, then you can start sharing your reasons why they should bundle and use you."

WHAT MAKES THE RIGHT CHOICE. When it comes down to it, the client will pick which is the right choice for them.

"We put a proposal in for snow plowing," Canete says. "The previous guy had it for 20-plus years and charged per hour. They had a check-in system, then had to check cameras to make sure everything was working or they weren't being mis-billed, and that was their pain."

When Canete Landscape & Garden Center put its bid in, the proposal included a pay-per-event plan.

"If 7 inches fall, we only charge for 7 inches," Canete says. "We had proven ourselves with the landscaping, so they checked our snow references. Now they're one of our top referrals."

When it comes to why the client should chose you over another company, there's more involved than just costs. Something to also consider is relationships.

"To sell yourself," Houghnnon says, "say 'we're on the site and you deal with us in the summer, you can deal with us in the winter.' We know the site intimately in the summer. When it comes to winter, it's the same guys coming so they're going to know that property because they're on it so much in the summer."

It's also about your knowledge and coordination.

"So many things we do are dependent upon the weather or the application timing," Hutcheson says. "When you mow affects when you do a fertilizer application."

It can also benefit the client in a non-typical financial way.

"We can easily reallocate funds in your budget," Hutcheson says, "and do it very affectively from service line to service line. If

DON'T HATE. CONSOLIDATE.

Sometimes your clients hesitate to go all-in with just one service provider. Ken Hutcheson, CEO of U.S. Lawns, has some key points to keep in mind when convincing your customers to consolidate.

ACCOUNTABILITY. "There's a natural relationship among these service lines, they affect each other, and if one doesn't work well, another won't work well," he says. There will be one company to look to if something happens and they're using a single source.

CREW COORDINATION AND TIMING. "So many things we do are dependent upon the weather or the application timing," he says. Using one crew for everything on the site allows them to time for the best results.

UNDERSTANDING THEIR NEEDS "We know what you need and we know access points. There are benefits to us understanding the ins and outs of the property," he says. Because you're on the site in the summer, you know exactly where that pesky section of land that

doesn't drain is located. If you're also doing snow removal in the winter, you'll know to not pile snow there.

YOU OWN THE LANDSCAPE. "It's more intangible, but it resonates with the customer. We own (the landscape) and want to be proud of it. It's hard to be proud when we cut the grass but we don't own any other aspect of it," he says.

FLEXIBILITY WITH MONEY. "We can easily reallocate funds in your budget and do it very effectively from service line to service line," he says. If the weather has been unkind when it comes to the plants lining the walkway and there's no point using the budgeted funds to plant more, it's easy to reallocate that money to irrigation, in order to help the current flowers survive.

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IS TRUST. "They always end up trusting the contractor who's on the site every week," he says. "If they don't, you're not on the site anymore."

the weather means you don't need as much maintenance early in the season as expected, we can reallocate cutting funds to something else, like mulch or flowers. We don't need to cut because it's been dry, so we install flowers instead, or do a mulch application."

Houghnnon says it's not just about the relationships with on-site crews either.

"Something that gets forgotten is the administrative side," he says. "The invoices look the same ... the billing, the invoicing, the proposal sheets ... everything to the certificate of insurance. It's just more consistency and that's the key of the thing. Even the person who answers the phone is the same in the summer and winter. Some of it sounds pretty minor, but it's like anything else. You're comfortable with the people you deal with."

One thing most people don't think about is how can being full-service affect your company negatively? For the most part, it's all win-win, but there is one pretty big way it can have a negative impact on your company.

"If you're making money and you're very successful, but you mess up the snow that one time, you'll never do the landscaping again," Webber says.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to the relationships and trust you have with your clients and vice versa.

"They'll say 'I can get anyone to come out here, but this company also has my best interest in mind,'" says Gib Durden, vice president of business development for HighGrove Partners, Austell, Ga.. "I think it makes you more of a partner with that property manager than just a vendor." **L&L**



RAIN, SNOW OR SHINE

Weather has played a major role in what diseases are hitting trees. By Stacie Zinn Roberts

IT SEEMS WEATHER, MORE THAN ANY other factor, ushers in pests and diseases that leave trees vulnerable to infection.

In Denver, where temperatures may swing by as much as 50 to 70 degrees in one day, tree diseases usually "aren't a huge thing," says Steve Geist, senior consulting

arborist with Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape in Denver. But in 2012, Denver saw an unusually hot spring.

"In 2012, we ran into an uptick of Pine Wilt Disease," Geist says. The disease is caused by the Pine Wood Nematode, a microscopic, wormlike animal. "Pine Wilt

is the only tree disease caused by an animal," he says.

"It's very peculiar and difficult to work with," Geist says. "It's a major pest in the Midwest: Illinois, Missouri, Central and Eastern Nebraska, and Kansas has got quite a bit of it. It gets going a lot faster if you have a hot spring, which we did in 2012. We were running into quite a few deaths of Austrian and Scots pine, exotic pines that aren't native."

To treat it, you inject the trees every other year with a product with the active ingredient abamectin, Geist says.

While the spring of 2012 was hot and dry, the spring of 2013 was cooler in Denver. "In 2013, we didn't see a whole lot of it. It cooled off. It's still here but it takes millions of these things inside a tree to choke it off. If it doesn't get warm in the spring, the reproduction cycles are muted a little bit."

NO SOLUTION. Thousand Cankers disease, which attacks black walnut trees, has also been an issue in parts of Colorado.

"Thousand Cankers has wiped out walnut trees in several communities in the eastern plains of Colorado," Geist says. "You cut the tree down. There is not a great solution for it. Soil drenches with insecticide are thought to slow the progression down."

"We use Merit, or post patent, anything with imidacloprid. It comes from a small tiny bark beetle and tens of thousands of these things attack a tree. They cause a fungus which causes a canker and the cankers coalesce and kill the tree."

"It is awful but we don't have that many



This Austrian pine tree has been infested with Pine Wilt Disease, major problem in the Midwest.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWINGLAW, DR. NED TOSERIAN AND DAWEY TREE



walnuts in Colorado. It keeps popping up in the Midwest and eastern states where the walnut is native. For us, it's just sad. For them, they'll have a huge problem."

Rex Bastian, PhD, is a regional technical advisor for Davey Tree, and he is based in suburban Chicago. He also says that Thousand Cankers is a major threat to the walnut trees in the states where it's native.

"They believe it came out of some of the walnuts that were in southwest U.S., Arizona, New Mexico ... it showed up in Tennessee a year or so later then moved into Virginia, then Pennsylvania, and last year it spread into North Carolina and Ohio. These things, they get a little toehold and begin to spread out from there."

SWIFT DEATH. In the Mid-Atlantic states, Bastian, whose territory stretches from Chicago into New York and Pennsylvania, says Boxwood Blight is also of concern.

"This disease is causing major issues and is likely to get a lot worse in future years,



Rhizosphaera needlecast on a Colorado spruce.

handling it, don't go out and touch another boxwood," Brewer says.

LETHAL NEEDLE. Weather has also contributed to the increase in conifer Needle Cast disease in the Midwest, Bastian says, "because of the rainy springs we've had." The disease, he says, impacts spruce, pine and Douglas fir trees. The disease has become so prevalent, Bastian says, "that landscapers are not planting Colorado spruce anymore in our area" because of its susceptibility to it.

The disease attacks the needles of the plant, causes them to turn brown and drop off, "leaving a bare-looking tree, especially on the inside of the plant ... now that the disease has taken effect, you can't put the needles back. They don't grow back in the same place," Bastian says.

Treatment of the disease is difficult. "The disease is sneaky. Symptoms might not show up for 12 or 14 months and by then you may be a day late and a dollar short," he says. Though treatments may be available, they can be costly, Bastian says, which makes the decision between treating the tree or removing it a cost/benefit analysis for a residential.

MOVING OUT. If there's a trend in tree disease management, these experts say that rather than trying to combat some of these most insidious diseases, they're seeing an increase in removing infested or vulnerable tree varieties and replacing them with newer, more resistant cultivars.

With Boxwood Blight, for example, Bastian says, there are many cultivars of Boxwoods that vary in their susceptibility to Boxwood Blight.

"Probably what we'll see is that the ones that are more resistant, those species will be used more," he says.

"They won't be planting the highly susceptible cultivars, but that takes time for nurseries to be able to gear up." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Mount Vernon, Washington.



Top and bottom: examples of Rhizosphaera needlecast.



Middle: The result of Thousand Cankers disease.



although most of these diseases can ebb and flow with weather conditions," Bastian says.

Some universities, including North Carolina State, are working to identify fungicides to help with Boxwood Blight, Bastian says, but the treatments are preventative, not curative.

John Brewer is an arborist representative for Arborist Enterprises in Lancaster, Pa. In his region, just outside of Philadelphia, boxwood blight "is the newest disease" in the area. "We've been getting alerts from Penn State Extension. It's only been in the area for about three years now, so it's pretty new," Brewer says.

"At this point, there's no cure. It can kill a plant in about two weeks. Basically, you notify the extension agency and remove the infested material ... We're managing it more at this point. It's an issue with nurseries. If they're growing boxwoods for sale, then they have to wipe out the entire field, or fields, of boxwoods."

Still, even when the disease is found, the removal process is one that must be done with caution so as not to spread the disease to other plants.

"If you're trying to prune it out, you have a 10 percent bleach and water solution to spray on the pruning tools. You put infected cuttings in a landfill or burn them. And, after



TAG-TEAMING TREES

Caring for trees becomes a team effort when pros enlist the help of customers and landscape crews to keep them healthy.

By Julie Collins



Always remind your clients that trees are an asset.

DETERMINING GOALS FOR tree care is key when New Way Tree Services in San Diego, Calif., begins working with a new customer. "Are we making things look like Disneyland or do I just need to get trees out of the parking lot because tenants are complaining?" asks Evan Sims, a certified arborist and tree worker in charge of business development for New Way Tree Services.

For some companies, customer input ends there. Some trees are trimmed, maybe a few are removed and that's about it. But in other cases, the work continues, as the contractor seeks to educate customers about their trees and get them actively involved in the tree care process.

SELECTION. Before putting a tree into the ground, educating customers

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARTLETT TREE EXPERTS

FREE Thrive 2014 Landscaper Plan Ahead Guide

2in1

Color on one side...
Flip it for Perennials & Shrubs!



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2014 TREE CARE GUIDE

about planting trees that are compatible with the hardiness zone they live in is important, says Scott Jamieson, vice president of Bartlett Tree Experts in Grayslake, Ill.

"It's not good to plant a tree from a nursery in Tennessee in the ground in Minnesota," he says. "You want to source your trees as locally as possible for soil and climate reasons."

CALLING ON CUSTOMERS. Enlisting customers to assist with tree care doesn't mean setting them loose to prune on their own. But they can serve as extra sets of eyes on alert for potential tree problems. "I don't expect a client to look for defects and certain things we are trained to see," Sims says. "I tell them, just be aware and, if you see a trend occurring, let us know early on."

In particular, tree pros might rely on customers to assist with:

WATERING. "Watering is the most important factor early in a tree's life. Customers can help make sure the tree has the appropriate moisture in the soil," Jamieson says. Particularly during drought conditions, it's important to give the actual trees – rather than just the turf or perennials around them – plenty of water.

MULCHING. Turf, hardscapes, or other materials surrounding the base of the tree aren't enough, says Jamieson. Mulch is valuable for insulating the soil, retaining water, reducing weed infestations, preventing soil compaction and reducing lawn mower damage. Even if you don't ask customers to mulch the

trees, Jamieson says they can at least maintain mulch as needed between visits.

SPOT PESTS. Because customers see their trees a lot more than contractors do, they are often the first line of defense against pests. That's why Jamieson educates customers about seasonal pests and keeps them updated when an outbreak strikes. "Notification right away is key," he says.

In Portland, Maine, where Lucas Tree Experts is located, hemlock woolly adelgid recently began to devastate hemlocks and spruce trees in the area by sucking their sap. Marty Folsom, consulting arborist for Lucas, asks homeowners to look out for the egg sacs of the pest, which look like small cotton balls on the underside of the branches, so they can notify him immediately if they spot any.



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NOTICE CHANGES. Jamieson encourages customers to let him know right away if their trees are changing color or dropping leaves at times of year they don't normally

do that, which may be a sign of serious damage or problems. Often, such a signal doesn't come until weeks or months after a problem has presented itself, but it's still

important for customers to let Jamieson know so his company can do anything they can to save the tree.

"If clients see any signs that don't look right, I encourage them to contact me early, because there's very little we can do once a tree is in severe decline," Sims adds. "That's often when I get a call, and it's too little too late."

CONSIDER CONSTRUCTION. Folsom says most people think big trees have roots that go way down in the soil, but the roots most important to the sustainability of the tree are located in the top eight to 12 inches of soil.

"They don't realize that equipment, compaction and filling in around them can make a difference in the health of the tree," he says.

Because home contractors may not realize the impact they can have on nearby trees, Folsom reminds homeowners of this fact whenever he can. "Home contractors say, 'Oh yeah, your trees will be fine,' fill in an area and all of a sudden three years down the road people are calling and asking why their trees look terrible," he says.

LANDSCAPER HELP. In many cases, landscape contractors are also enlisted to assist with tree care. Supplemental irrigation or fertilization may be out of the control of tree workers or arborists on the large commercial properties Sims' crews work on. "That can really affect tree health," he says. "So any soil fertilization or water around the trees needs to be closely monitored by the landscape manager."

"When I give presentations to our in-house people or lunch-and-learns for clients, mostly what I encourage is just to have an awareness, to look up every once in a while," Sims says. He jokes that arborists are always looking up and, in doing so, they trip over irrigation and step on plants, whereas landscape people are always looking down.

No matter the audience, education about tree care comes in a variety of forms. Jamieson and Sims often hold workshops for other contractors or for customers. In addition, New Way Tree Services includes an "education" section on its website to provide

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customers with additional seasonal information or advice. Lucas Tree Experts send flyers to all customers three or four times a year notifying them of prevalent disease or insect problems. Some contractors also direct people to quality resources that can supplement the information they provide. For instance, Sims refers customers to the International Society of Arboriculture website as well as local university extension offices or agricultural schools for additional information on topics such as pest problems.

"I try to convey to my clients that their trees are assets," Sims says. "They're valuable. Trees provide a host of benefits monetarily and environmentally. I really try to convey all those benefits and that paying attention to your trees is worth it." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Lincoln, Ill.

More than counting trees

People regularly have management plans for their turf, irrigation systems, or swimming pools. But Scott Jamieson, based in Grayslake, Ill., as vice president of Stamford, Conn.-based Bartlett Tree Experts, argues that more people need to consider the benefits of conducting a tree inventory and management plan, particularly for customers with a large number of trees on their property. "Preventive, proactive management takes out the guesswork. It's the best way to head off any problems," he says.

"The most common question we get is 'Hey, what's wrong with my tree?' But often, by the time we get that call, the damage happened weeks or months ago and may be irreversible," Jamieson says. "Once you know what the potential issues are, you can schedule maintenance based on the trees," he adds.

New Way Trees also offers mapping, using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to note exactly where a tree is located and what its species, size, condition and maintenance requirements are. Such long-term planning is particularly beneficial for New Way's large clients, such as homeowner's associations, which may have limited budgets with which to address ongoing maintenance and long-term planning for their properties.

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BIOCHAR: FROM THE AMAZON BASIN TO BACKYARDS

Carbon-rich charcoal is becoming more popular to help with tree care.

By Kelby Fite

IN THE AMAZON BASIN, where the Amazon River and its tributaries drain into the forests of South America, patches of dark, charcoal-rich soil called terra preta exist. This "black earth" is found where ancient cultures lived, many years before the arrival of Europeans.

Unlike the other red and yellow weathered soils typical of the region, terra preta is highly fertile. Why? Human-made additives were incorporated more than 2,500 years ago to develop land that would otherwise have proved difficult to cultivate. For thousands of years, this soil has retained its fertility and is well-known for its productivity.

Inspired by the legacy left by the earliest residents of the Amazon basin, the idea of adding carbon-rich charcoal to soil is now being applied in urban and suburban tree care in the form of biochar.

CHARCOAL REDISCOVERED. While the concept of using charred matter as a soil amendment is centuries old, the creation and use of biochar as we now know it is a relatively new idea in tree care.

As a soil additive, it has unique characteristics that improve the condition of the soil, creating a better environment for growing trees and shrubs.

Biochar is a carbon-rich material made from waste organic debris. Due to its porous nature and high surface area, the addition of biochar improves the soil's ability to retain water. This reduces the need for watering, helps regulate soil temperature and improves a plant's ability to grow.

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Adding carbon-rich charcoal to soil is becoming more common

Use of biochar also reduces nutrient leaching, the loss of water-soluble nutrients from the soil. Critical macronutrients like nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium and micronutrients remain in the soil for plant use.

Keep in mind that biochar is not a fertilizer. Its addition does

not alter the nutrients in the soil. Rather, it creates more favorable soil conditions so that nutrients remain present and can be used as needed by the plant.

Beneficial microorganisms like *Trichoderma* and mycorrhizal fungi thrive in soil amended with biochar. Mycorrhizal fungi have a symbiotic relationship with plants.

They live on or in the roots of a host plant, promoting efficient root function and offering the plant protection from soil-borne pathogens.

The increase in the presence of these microorganisms resulting from use of biochar means better

growth and improved resistance to insects and disease.

Once added, biochar, and its benefits, persist in the soil for years – similar to the fertile terra preta that remains in the Amazon basin today.

BRING THE HEAT. During pyrolysis, plant waste is heated at high temperatures in the presence of little or no oxygen.

The result is a highly porous charcoal (biochar) that can be tilled into the soil of a tree or shrub's root zone or introduced by liquid injection.

To be clear, biochar is not just any charcoal. Its ingredients and

the way it is produced yield a charcoal specifically suited to soil incorporation. What's more, not all biochar is created equal and landscapers should be aware of the differences.

Biochar can be created from almost any discarded organic waste; however chars made from woody biomass typically yield a superior product for most landscapes.

Knowing and understanding the water content, bulk density, ash percentage and adsorption capacity of the biochar is also key. **L&L**

The author is an arboricultural researcher at Bartlett Tree Experts.

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FEARLESS

Mark Tomko admits he's a risk-taker. But after weathering the storm and surviving a serious revenue hit, Metco Landscape's rebound is more balanced.

By Kristen Hampshire

"To this day, I know nothing about landscaping," says Mark Tomko, CEO of Metco Landscape in Denver, a \$28-million firm that has landscaped 32,000 new homes. The company captures 40 percent of the home-building market in that region, not to mention a thriving \$11 million maintenance and snow division that has quadrupled in growth since the economic downturn in 2006.

But anyway, Tomko knows nothing about landscaping. He left his career as a stockbroker after the 1987 market crash and began mowing lawns.

After 28 years in the business and growing his firm to \$33 million with a staff of 450 at its peak in 2005, has learned everything the hard way.

"My business has always been based on customer service. That's my passion," he says. "I really just knew nothing – I didn't even know what a walk-behind mower was, I only knew what a 21-inch mower was."

Here's what Tomko always did right: He showed up on time, he did what he said he

was going to do, he built trusted relationships with clients, and he recruited a staff of people who are skilled and motivated to grow with the company.

In that time, Metco has escalated from a homegrown business to a market leader, managing some real bumps along the way. The biggest was in 2009 when the firm's revenues plummeted by half, down to \$14 million.

"It was quite a ride," Tomko says. "But we learned a lot of lessons."

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS. Metco was founded in 1997, but Tomko says it "started being a real company" in 2000. That's when he began to focus in on the two hallmarks of what separate his business from the pack: strong numbers and skilled people.

What sparked the more professional business approach? "My son was born in 1998, and I said, 'Gee, you've got to start getting serious now because you've got a family,'" Tomko says. "And, we owed a lot of people a lot of money. We were virtually broke in the year 2000."

Metco had \$300,000 in debt

and \$8,000 in the bank that year. In one year, Metco paid off \$200,000 of that debt, and in 2002 the balance was back to zero. He started watching every dollar that came in and out of the business. "And, we had an extra \$350,000, so that was when the ball started rolling."

In 2001, Metco did \$3.2 million in revenue. The firm closed 2006 with \$33 million because of the housing market boom. Metco became the go-to for the area's key builders, which were planting subdivisions en masse. "We could never keep our systems ahead of our growth," Tomko says of those years.

But what Metco did right was watch the numbers – and an-

ticipate the downturn. Tomko halted equipment purchases in 2006 – a bold move since the firm would buy \$1.5 to \$2 million in equipment each year.

During that time, a number of builder customers went bankrupt. But Metco cut expenditures, trimmed down the staff and kept an eye on payroll and materials expenses

BALANCING THE MIX. Metco Landscape operates four distinct divisions: maintenance and snow, custom (residential design/build), a commercial division and homebuilder department. Before the housing market crashed, that maintenance division was about 25 percent of the overall business.

But establishing more stability during a time when homebuilding contracts were lead was absolutely critical to Metco's survival.

"Our game plan is to be one-third maintenance, one-third commercial and one-third homebuilder work," Tomko says.

Now, Metco is pricing better, too. "We are not afraid to lose work on price anymore," he says. "Back then, we'd take work at any price, and now we said, 'Wait,



Mark Tomko left a career in stocks to grow a \$24 million company.



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GEARING UP AGAIN. Now that Metco is swiftly growing once again, Tomko is gearing up for a \$32 million year in 2014.

This time, Tomko is in the office. He now has four salespeople and two vice presidents on board.

Is he afraid to dive in after falling so hard?

"We can sense when things change," Tomko says of the economy. "It doesn't bother us, and we let that tide take us where it takes us. We are ready to run it again and see how it goes." **L&L**

Eye on the numbers

Mark Tomko is a stickler about watching his numbers. He posts budgets and actuals at Metco Landscape in Denver, so his employees have a clear view of the company's financial state.

"Everyone sees the numbers," says Tomko, CEO. "We post those numbers everywhere and we celebrate all of our wins, and if we lose, we learn."

Here are some strategies Tomko recommends companies use to help them engage their entire team in working toward a common goal of financial success.

Weekly checkup. Every week, department heads report on their revenue and payroll and materials expenses. Then, when budgets are set up at the beginning of each month, Tomko can project

exactly what the company should be spending and earning every day, week and month.

Focus on the variables. "So the variables like payroll and materials are two numbers you can really control," Tomko says. He monitors those weekly, meets with department heads to compare budgets and actuals, and relies on those heads to communicate budget information down the chain.

Meet and review. Every month, project managers and office personnel meet to review the company's numbers and forecast the upcoming month. "Everyone is all about the numbers," Tomko emphasizes, adding, "We also have a lot of fun."

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SNOW AND ICE

You gotta LIVE IT

To become ISO 9001/SN 9001 certified and stay that way, a company has to adopt a permanent culture of process improvement. Case Snow Management did just that and is now reaping the benefits.

By Jason Stahl

Case Snow Management's reason for pursuing ISO 9001/SN 9001 quality management certification was simple – to grow the business. And not only did the company achieve the certification, it became the first company in the snow management business to do so.

"When you're growing your business, you know you need to have processes in place," says Bill Carello, vice president of Case Snow Management. "But when you're small, you don't need all those processes, and they actually get in the way. In order to grow our business, we knew we needed ISO."

When Carello and the other leaders at Case discussed the concept with Kevin Gilbride, executive director of the Accredited Snow Contractors Association (ASCA), consultant John Allin and others a couple years ago, it just made sense to them. And with a background as a CPA, he already had a good understanding of ISO.

"It's a quality management system that's all about customer satisfaction, and that's what we do," Carello says. "We looked at it and said, 'Look, we know we want to grow, and it's a quality management system that's all about safety, training, customer satisfaction, crossing your Ts and dotting your Is

and the whole nine yards.' It was perfect."

Gilbride says there are many benefits to becoming ISO certified, but the initial driver for ASCA creating the SN 9001 quality management system (which works in conjunction with ISO 9001) was risk management.

"The ASCA was looking for ways to reduce risk because of the skyrocketing insurance costs out there," he says. "We wanted to give professional snow and ice management companies the tools to manage risk themselves to reduce that risk for insurance companies."

Gilbride continued, "Of the slip and fall lawsuits that are lost or settled, more than 50 percent of the time, they're lost or settled due to a lack of documentation. ISO 9001 plus SN 9001 ensures that you have that documentation and that it's verified by a third party."

The process for Case Snow Management, while not simple, went very smoothly. ASCA put Case in touch with Smithers Quality As-

sessments, a company that audits and certifies companies for ISO 9001/SN 9001. It turns out one of Case's employees, Gretchen Merriman, was going through the process of becoming accredited herself and needed a company to beta test. Merriman spent a full day at Case doing a pre-assessment and examining its quality manual.

"(Merriman) said, 'I think you already have 75 to 80 percent of the processes in place,'" Carello says. "We already had the training, safety and paperwork, and we were meeting the industry standards anyway, but it just had to be put in ISO language."



Becoming ISO 9001/SN 9001 certified will help protect snow contractors against lawsuits.

SNOW AND ICE

After hiring an outside internal auditor to examine the quality manual, Carello says he set up stage 1 with Smithers where the auditing company looked at Case from top to bottom.

"Basically, we had to summarize our processes and list the process names and associated requirements of each along with that," he says.

After Case fixed a few minor things, Stage Two was scheduled, where the company passed and Meriman was witnessed and accredited.

"Stage 2 was an audit comprised of observations, record reviews and personal interviews to determine the level of implementation and effectiveness of documented procedures," he says.

From start to finish, the process

lasted roughly six months. Carello estimates it cost \$8,000 to \$10,000, including the internal auditor he hired outside of Smithers because he felt he was too close to the process itself and an outside opinion was needed.

"At the end of the day, you will be more efficient, and that will correlate to customer satisfaction. But (employees) have to take the steps in

The grass is greener

To Frank Mariani, being an ISO-certified organization simply means trying to embrace and encourage continual improvement.

His company, Lake Bluff Ill.-based Mariani Landscape, has always tried to do that, especially over the five years since it first achieved the ISO certification.

Mariani was first introduced to the concept by his partner Fred Wacker, who came to the company from the manufacturing business where ISO is more common. He also saw lean principles, one of the components of ISO, in practice during a tour of Ariens Co. and was blown away.

"I said, 'This is spectacular,'" Mariani says. "I was awestruck by it, and I came back and told Fred that I think we could benefit from it."

It took Mariani Landscape nearly two years to achieve the certification, and it's never looked back. He has seen numerous benefits from ISO certification, including

boosting camaraderie among employees and general improvement of the way they do things.

"In the past, when we would have certain incidents come up, we would fix that one problem and wouldn't capture that information but just wait until it happened again," Mariani says.

"Now, when something comes up that we think is important and feel we could benefit from changing the way we go about doing that task, instead of just jumping on the problem right away we try to come up with a policy/procedure to make sure the problem never comes up again.

"Instead of putting a Band-Aid on it, we pull the thorn out of the finger, and that's really beneficial.

"At a company like ours, everyone always has a better way of doing something, and that's fine and dandy – but not if you have 430 people all doing it a different way. Now, we try to encourage people to make recommendations on how we can do something better. But until we officially adopt it, we don't change the way we're doing it."

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SNOW AND ICE

place in order to get to that point," Carello says. "By implementing and living ISO, the product is better at the end and the customer is satisfied."

Carello says Case had no trouble with employee buy-in as they had already been doing a lot of things ISO requires anyway.

"We hold ourselves to a higher standard and employees know that, so they bought in 100 percent," he says. If someone had acted out and said, 'This is ridiculous,' they wouldn't be with us."

What Carello loves most about ISO is that it's auditable and never ending. Every year, the company will be audited to see that it's conforming to the ISO standards.

"Every single year, we could be audited any day, so we have to be 100 percent," he says. "That's what I like about ISO — you



The ISO process cost Case approximately \$10,000 and took six months to complete.

have to keep on top of it. With ISO, it's not just a piece of paper. If you're not living it, you will have nonconformities and you could lose your certification."

Other benefits aside, Gilbride emphasized

that the risk management advantage of ISO 9001/SN 9001 is huge in the snow world.

"Plaintiffs' attorneys are running a business just like everyone else, and they ask three questions when a case comes in — can I win it, how much can I win it for and how quickly can I win it?" Gilbride says. "They're going to find out very quickly when they're filing claims against ISO 9001/SN 9001 companies that they're not going to be able to answer yes to all those questions."

"Therefore, in time, there will be a reduction of lawsuits because ISO 9001 and SN 9001 will be like a neon sign to these guys saying these companies are going to have their documentation and be able to paint a picture from two years ago." L&L

The author is a freelancer based in Cleveland.

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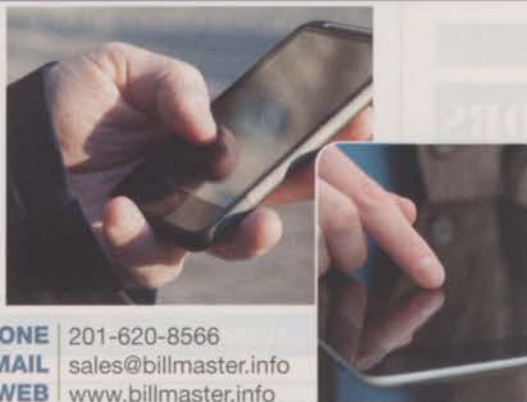
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Company: Senske Lawn and Tree Care **Location:** Kennewick, Wash. **Ranking:** 57 **2012 Revenue:** \$21,600,000



Chris Senske // PRESIDENT

I was graduating from college and my dad had some significant surgery and he needed some help. I was just kind of watching over the couple guys here working for him and making sure things kept going along.

I got thrown into a baptism by fire after college. "Here's what we do and here's the work that we have to do so make sure it gets done. I'm going to the hospital."

Gosh, never really looked back much since then. **It turned out to be a pretty good deal.** I am glad that I did it.

My dad created this formula that worked really well for the rats in Spokane. We would make the formulation of the different kinds of grains and other things. At that point warfarin was the active ingredient that we were using. Then we'd take a tablespoonful and put it in these little bags. As an 8- or 9-year-old kid in the basement of our house, I could do about 1,000 of those an hour.

My major job to start out was just running a lawn care route for the most part. I got guys organized and doing the routing at that time.

Then in about '79 or '78 I took over really the whole operation. **I would have been 25, 26.**

We decided that we needed to start up another branch in a different city because certainly all the people who were going to buy lawn care in Spokane had bought lawn care. **All 300 of them.**

We opened up our first branch in the town of Kennewick. It was a real boom town. That's how I ended up there – that first expansion didn't go so well. So my wife and I moved down there in 1979 and have been there since.

Our average size lawn is somewhere around 5,500 to 6,000 square feet and we have fences around every lawn almost.

The lawn care and pest control are growing and strong businesses. The commercial grounds maintenance we struggle at making money at. We just need to have more sales because we have too much overhead to support it.

Sales, sales, sales. That's really what we're working on. All the systems are in place to

make money – every customer we have falls right to the bottom line at this point.

We're going to be dependent on people feeling comfortable in how much money they're making and that they're going to have incomes and that they're going to be able to pay for services. That's going to be critical and **I'm a little nervous in that there are a lot of people predicting a recession for early next summer, next spring.**

Something that my dad did to me early on was – I want to say did to me, he made me do. He said, "Here, **I want you to forecast sales over a period of time.** I want you to make a plan of what you would like to do over a period of time and where you might like to have businesses at."

I think it was kind of busywork for the winter and **I still hang on to the graph and the charts that I created.**

It doesn't look anything like what I thought because I looked at the map and looked at towns where I thought maybe we could operate in. **I think it was an exercise in learning how to plan.**

My dad always said, "Get it right the first time you don't have to do it again, period." That's the best advice I ever received.

Whether it's doing work the first time or it's buying something or doing a project or hiring people, if you do it with quality in mind, then you don't have to do it again. Buy the right piece of equipment if you need it. **Don't try to go to the cheap model.** You've got to buy right but buy the correct stuff or hire the correct person to do the job.

If people aren't working out you've got to get rid of them fast and that's probably the biggest mistake we make. **My wife's looking at me shaking her finger at me as I say that.** It's one of the biggest mistakes that we make is hanging on too long. We're getting better at it. **L&L**



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