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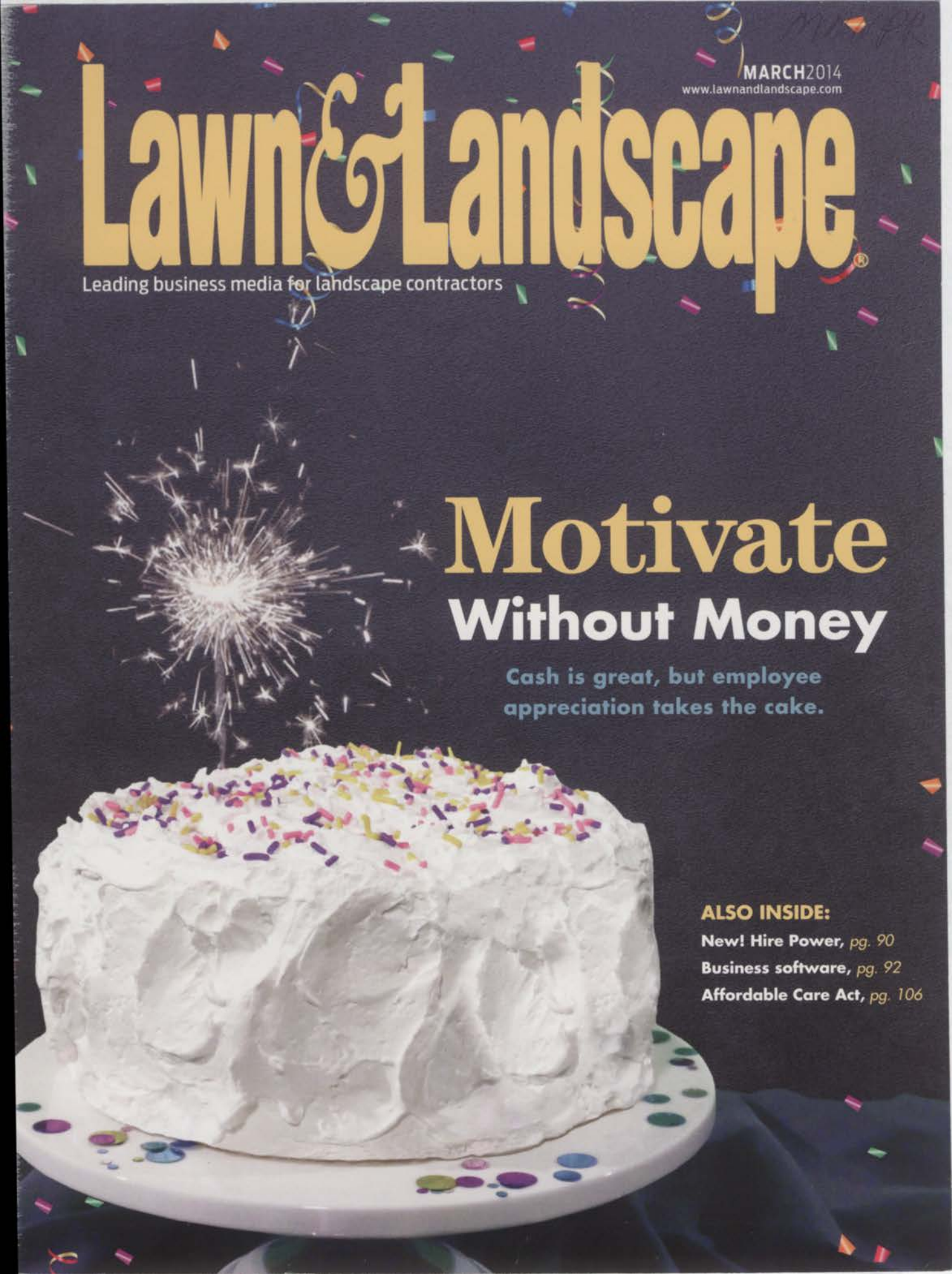

Motivate Without Money

Cash is great, but employee appreciation takes the cake.

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Business software, *pg. 92*
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CHEVROLET

ONLINE CONTENTS

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

Still cleaning up

More than a year later, contractors are still dealing with the damage from Hurricane Sandy.

Christopher Hunt, vice president of Tamke Tree Experts based in Liberty, N.J., the northern New Jersey area, says his company was inundated with post-Hurricane Sandy work for about four to five months after the disaster.

The company's first step was to triage the emergency situations (e.g., a tree in a bedroom) versus a downed tree in a yard that wasn't blocking anything.

"This is not our first rodeo in dealing with storm damage and acts of God of this proportion," Hunt says.

"In the year before was the 'Snowtober' storm, with broken limbs and downed wires."

The work stemming from Sandy carried Hunt's company for a long time, creating a backlog of work, though he found that his customers were willing to wait, particularly for non-emergency situations.

Keeping customers informed and at ease was Hunt's priority, as well as his biggest challenge. As Sandy caused loss of power in a widespread area, maintaining communication with both employees and customers was not easy. Within a day or so, however, they quickly were up and running. Even so, "...getting access to some properties and customers was difficult," he says.

Perhaps Joe Holland's, owner of Majestic Lawn and Landscape in Rockland County, N.Y., most considerable challenge emanating from Hurricane Sandy was processing all the wood left over from the storm.

"We had mountains and mountains of logs in our facility that had to be cut up and split into firewood; we only finished last September," he says.

Read the whole story at lawnandlandscape.com and search "Still cleaning up."

KISS, a new president and tips for trade shows

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/lcrnitunes**.

Rock 'n' roll lessons
Author and speaker Steve Jones talks about how business owners can learn how to be different from KISS and what to learn from U2 about sticking to your core values as a company.
bit.ly/rnrlessons

Numbers and the future
New president of the Grounds Guys, Chris Elmore, gave some insight on why small business owners need to better understand their finances, and what he thinks about the future of the industry.
bit.ly/lawnelmore

Trade show guide
Marketing expert Tim Asimos talks about how to get the results you want at a show. He gives advice on what to do at your booth, and how to promote your presence at a show.
bit.ly/lltradetips

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Below are some articles we posted to our social media sites that gained plenty of clicks.

Landscaper injured
A Cincinnati company's worker was hurt after being caught in a mulch grinder on the job.
bit.ly/mulchgrinder

LCO threatened with gun
A lawn care operator going door-to-door promoting his lawn care company was greeted by an armed man.
bit.ly/lcogun

Pregnant woman killed by snowplow
Mia Lin and her husband, Jin Feng Lin, were putting groceries into their trunk when she was struck in Brooklyn, New York.
bit.ly/womansnowplow

Landscaping for a star
Elizabeth River Landscape Management had the chance to do some work for country music singer Luke Bryan.
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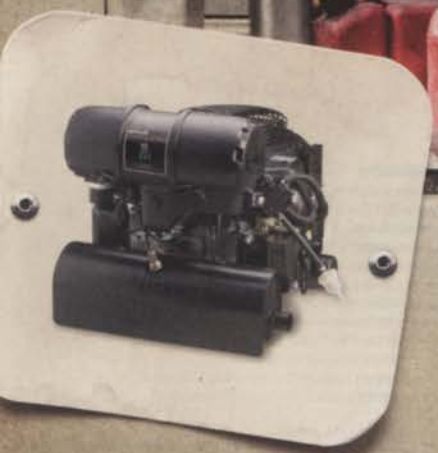

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Hire power

A quick question as you get settled in for the start of what I hope is a very successful 2014 season: How's your bench looking right now?

I don't mean how shiny are your new mowers, or how organized is your shop or what does your backlog look like. I mean: How are the people who run those mowers and sell that work doing? Do you have enough of them to do the work this year? Do you have *any*? Are they as excited to get back to work as you are? Are they as excited to do the same thing come the sweltering heat of August?

This issue focuses on how to keep your employees motivated without just handing them more cash. Turns out, that's not always the most profitable or practical solution. To help explain the wheres and whys, we've got a great piece from trainer and HR pro Ellen Ely.

And as a companion to Ellen's cover story, we're launching a new column I'm calling Hire Power. It's a practical and tactical piece we'll run each month that outlines tangible things you can do to improve your own recruiting – and retention – of good employees.

When we asked for contractors' top problems in our annual state of the industry poll, finding qualified candidates for open positions was the top answer. Anecdotally, good employees are the diamond in the rough for almost every landscaper I talk to. Our new column is just one small way to help you figure it out.

Later this month, PLANET puts on one of the best events aimed at recruiting in the industry. Student Career Days is a clearinghouse for up-and-coming college students to showcase their talents and meet with prospective employers. And while it's a fine event, it's not enough, and it's not taken advantage of by enough companies.

At the end of the day, a couple of college students or a few interns aren't going to solve your problems. Just like anything, you're going to have to try a bunch of stuff and look in a lot of places to find the right employees.

That's the true focus of Hire Power – how to find good people and keep the good ones you have. Just like a sales pipeline that's never truly full, your recruiting and retention work pipeline is never complete. You always have to be filling it with prospects. No company is ever finished – not one that's growing, anyway. Without fresh blood and new perspectives, your company will become stagnant and stale.

There's no silver bullet to recruiting, but there are a lot of ways to improve what you're doing. And the best time to start is right now. – *Chuck Bowen*

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A snow storm that slammed some parts of the country didn't stop landscape contractors from attending Marty Grunder's GROW! 2014 in Atlanta (which avoided the snow and ice this time around, but got it again a week later).

Approximately 175 contractors joined Grunder and his host of speakers to learn better ways to do business, while also being able to share ideas with companies across the country. Here's our coverage from the event, which included a half-day spent at HighGrove Partners.

L&L ON THE ROAD

Up close and personal

Contractors at GROW! 2014 saw what it's like to be a $16 million company. By Brian Horn

It was an early wake-up call for *L&L* and the GROW! attendees, but rising and shining at 4:30 a.m. was worth it to get a peek at how HighGrove Partners does business. As part of Marty Grunder's GROW! 2014 in Atlanta, the 175 attendees of the event spent half the day at the company's headquarters.

During the visit, contractors witnessed owner Jim McCutcheon's team roll-out in the morning, and then were able to meet in small groups with different members of the HighGrove team, including McCutcheon. The company employs 200 workers and has grown 10-20 percent during the past seven years. While many landscaping companies won't hit $16 million, Grunder was quick to remind everyone that there are always ideas that smaller companies can use from larger companies.

L&L tagged along and pulled these tips from the half-day spent at HighGrove.

CIRCLE MARKS THE SPOT. If it's difficult getting your team to gather around before heading to job sites, then just paint a circle on the floor. At HighGrove, one of the operations managers yelled "stretch" and workers from all directions worked their way through the attendees to stand on the circle. From there, the operations manager stood in the middle of the circle and led the meeting.

The group does a safety chant and the results of a random three-truck check from the night before are read. Supervisors check to make sure the truck is in order, and if it checks out perfectly, the group applauds. If not, the announcement is met with a dull boo. Once the trucks leave the garage, the trucks are inspected by managers to double check the trucks meet requirements to go to jobsites.

DO NOT ENTER. Mechanic Greg Nelson doesn't want any loitering in his wing of the building. If you need something fixed, or are picking up something, then you are more than welcomed into his area. "It's a friendly environment, if you've got a problem," he says.

Just one person from a crew is allowed to pick up a piece of equipment because he doesn't want the whole crew in the area just hanging out. Equipment has to be signed out by a manager, "so we have a record of it going out the door."

Other tips from Nelson: He and his team start servicing seasonal equipment five weeks before the season starts. And when it comes to oil, they change the oil in mowers once every three months. The oil tank must always be full because Nelson says that is the key to a longer change period. If he sees a mower consistently at the quarter tank level, he'll talk to a manager.

COLOR CODED. When field workers start at HighGrove, they have to wear an orange vest for the first 30 days, while everyone else wears yellow. If they commit a safety violation, they have to wear it longer than 30 days. The idea behind the orange vest is so other workers know who the new guy is, but it's also serves as motivation. "They want

GROW! 2014 attendees saw how HighGrove gathers employees in the morning for a team meeting (below) and toured the company's design area (above).

PHOTOS BY BRIAN HORN

For more photos inside HighGrove, download our app at **bit.ly/lawnandlandscapeapp**

out of the orange vest so fast, they can't stand it," says Gary Tomlinson, vice president of operations. Color also comes into play when it comes to equipment. All spare equipment is painted hot pink. So if someone had to use spare equipment because they lost or damaged their crews', they have to take the pink-painted equipment on the job and use it. "No one wants to walk around with hot pink on their equipment," Tomlinson says.

COME PREPARED. Crews are not permitted to stop on the way to a job site or on the way back to the office without a manager's permission. Crews also have to bring their own food to a job because they are not allowed to go to a restaurant for lunch. If a field employee is caught out to lunch during work hours, he can be fired.

PAY NOW. Sales people are paid their commission up front, says Mark Knaggs, vice president of sales and client services. If the contract cancels, the remaining amount of the cancelled sale is taken out of the next check. "Their responsibility is to take care of that client," Knaggs says. "They're disappointed, but they work hard to keep that account."

PLANT KNOWLEDGE NOT NEEDED. HighGrove employs client relationship managers (CRM) who make sales and serve as a liaison between the client and the employees doing the work.

Knaggs says when hiring CRMs, horticultural experience isn't necessarily needed. They want someone who relates to people and who can sell. "We have plenty of people here with a horticultural background to answer those questions," he says.

The importance of the finer points

Scott Fay ignored a couple of small details before a flight and was left in an awkward position in front of a plane full of people.

By Brian Horn

Scott Fay was that guy. He got so wrapped up on a phone call that he missed numerous calls for him to board a plane. Finally realizing he had completely zoned out, Fay, who told this story at GROW! 2014, made a mad rush down the bridge to the plane, only to be greeted by a full house of unhappy passengers glaring at him.

Read more about Fay, second from the left, by visiting lawnandlandscape.com and searching "Fay."

Furiously sweating, he made his way to his seat, and began to load his luggage in the overhead compartment like he had done a hundred times before. But this time it wasn't fitting.

As he continued to shove the bag in he realized why it didn't fit. He bought a gift for his daughter that was causing his luggage to bulge just enough where it didn't fit.

"It's just a detail that really, really matters," says Fay, explaining that a small gift was now escalating his problem.

While he was trying to squeeze the luggage in, he realized he overlooked another detail before leaving the house.

He forgot his belt. As he continued to struggle with getting his bag loaded, his pants slipped, and slipped and slipped some more leaving him with his pants around his ankles.

Eventually, he got his bag loaded, pulled his pants up and was greeted with applause by the passengers. He learned ignoring the small details can leave you looking like a fool.

"I sit down in 2B and the guy in 2A doesn't say a word to me the whole time," he said. "That's never happened before and will never happen again."

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS FROM GROW! Fay spoke about how business owners can grow their business by knowing their purpose. He gave these tips on being able to better decipher your purpose.

- Make a list of your success. And also make a list of worse failures. Then study those lists and look for the commonality in your successes and failures. "I promise you will begin to unpack this thing called purpose," he says.
- Ask people you know what their first impression was of you.
- How do people who really know you describe you?
- Passions – what would you sacrifice to do? What do you love to hate? What are you willing to pay, what are you willing to do to keep it?

"Purpose is a DNA kind of thing," he says. "Landscaping isn't your purpose, it's what you do."

DANGER ZONE. Matt Caruso, owner of Decra-Scape in Sterling Heights Mich., talked about avoiding the "danger zone," which is an area where your expenses exceed your revenue. Caruso said entrepreneurs have to let go of some responsibilities in order to focus on the mission, vision and core values of the company. That focus will help them run a profitable business.

Caruso said the owner of the company has to truly believe in the vision of the company because if things go wrong, "entrepreneurs will get left holding the bag" so it's important you're handling situations the way you see fit. Core values are also important to a company, and, "the moves you make are driven by your core values."

Other important points from Caruso:

- If you don't begin to develop team leaders, you will be stuck doing work you should trust your employees to do. While completing these tasks will satisfy you now, your company will suffer in the future. "We need to stop looking at things in the short term and look at them in the long term," he said.
- When you have a vision, mission and core values that employees genuinely understand and use as a guide when on the job, then "You're going to be able to focus on things to get you to the next level," he said.

GETTING BETTER. Grunder shared his five steps to improving as a leader.

- Lead by example. It's fine to talk about your core values, but you better model your behavior after them if you want employee buy-in, Grunder said. "People see better than they hear," he said.
- Integrity. You have to tell the truth. Otherwise no one will believe you have the integrity needed to lead.
- Be enthusiastic. You don't need to come in to work every day and do a dance, but you have to show you have a genuine interest in helping others. "Enthusiasm is about how we work, and about how fast you get back to a client or employee," he said.
- Communicate. Grunder has signs posted at his company that say "no surprises." "That's our mantra for good communication," he said.
- Do a little bit more. You are at the top of your company, so when employees see you doing more, they will follow your example. "Engagement comes from the top, not from the bottom," he said.

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Shiny and new

John Deere showed off its newest tractors at a dealer event in Orlando. By Katie Tuttle

Dealers took a chance to escape reality with a trip down to Orlando to test out new products and models John Deere has been working on.

John Deere's 2014 Ride and Drive event is a two and a half day event that gives dealers a chance to test out the equipment and speak face-to-face with the Marketing and Training teams at John Deere.

The main announcement at this year's event was the release of six new compact utility tractors: the 4044M, 4052M, 4066M, 4044R, 4052R and 4066R. These tractors were built after six years of customer research on what operators liked and didn't like of both John Deere and competitors' tractors.

Dealers and media members had an up-close look at six new John Deere tractors.

At the event, dealers were also able to hop up on these tractors and test them out against competitors' models on obstacle courses, and doing normal tasks such as lifting logs and moving dirt. Tuesday morning, attendees tried out John Deere's newest feature – the Hitch Assist, which comes standard on the 4R Series.

The Hitch Assist allows operators to control the tractor from the ground as they go through the process of hooking up an attachment.

It's designed to cut down on the time required by eliminating the need for operators to go back and forth to line up the tractor to the attachment.

As an optional kit, customers can also get the Hitch Downforce on the 4R, which provides additional downward force to the 3-point hitch and rear elements.

For more coverage from the event, visit lawnandlandscape.com and search "John Deere's Ride & Drive."

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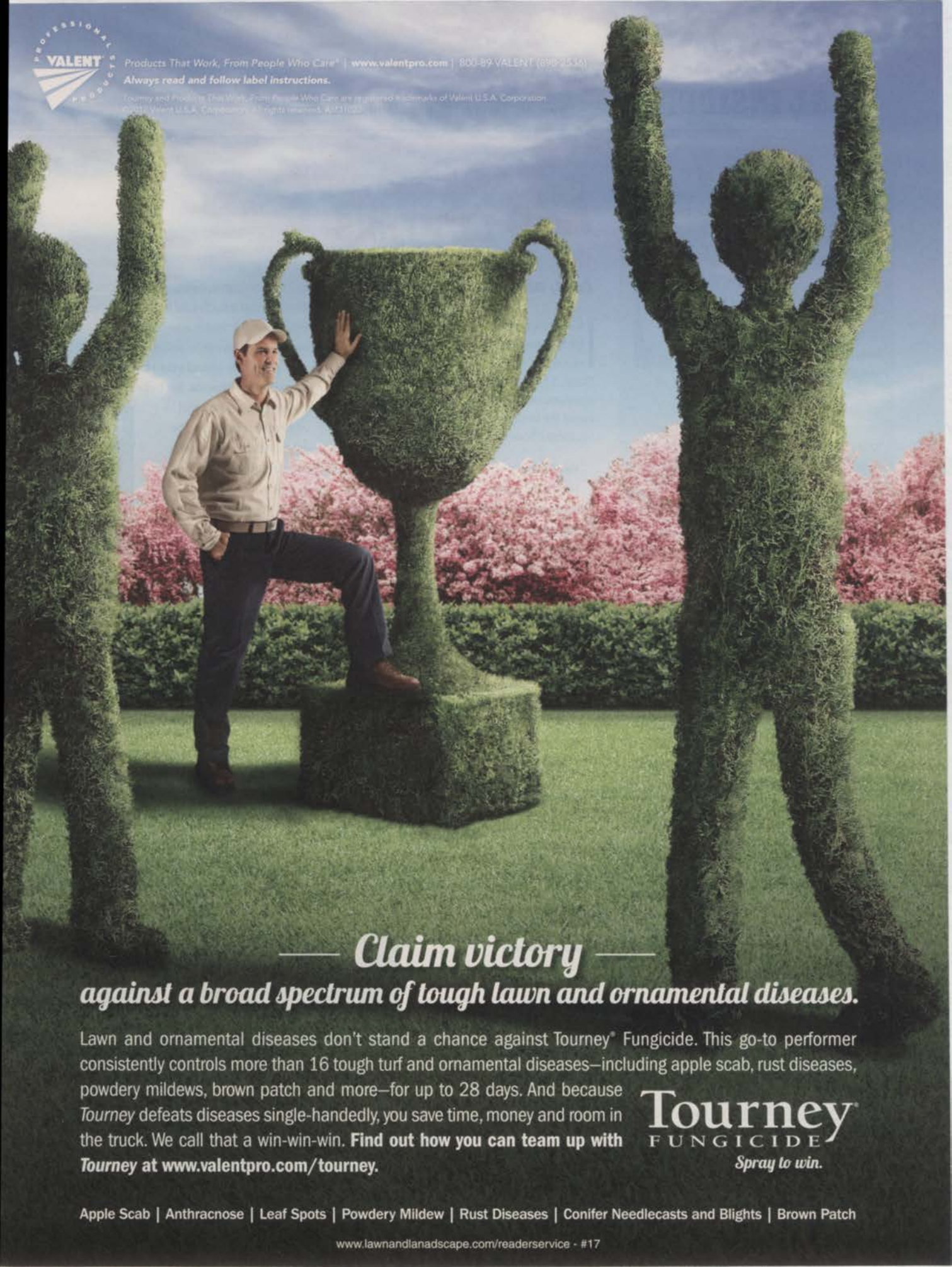
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CORRECTION

Rocked by snow

In our September America in Bloom supplement, we incorrectly labeled one of the projects as being from Castle Rock, Ore., (where the classic film "Stand By Me" takes place) when it actually was from Castle Rock Wash. As punishment, the L&L offices in Cleveland have been hit with never ending snow and freezing temperatures. We promise, we'll never make that mistake again.

LETTERS

Ask, and you shall receive

In his January column, which you can read at **bit.ly/bowenadvice**, Editor Chuck Bowen requested your advice to pass on to Dylan Stapp, a high school student/landscaping company owner who wanted to know more about the business. Below are a couple of responses from readers.

Hey Chuck,

Here's my advice:

1. **Read *Lawn & Landscape* every month to get a broad view of what's going on in the industry.** But don't stop there. Study the area you live in and the companies operating in that market. Identify what a successful landscape looks like and who did it. Watch a landscape installation or maintenance service in action.

2. **Definitely attend your state's annual trade show/turf conference.** But better yet, join the state trade association of whichever segment of the green industry you want to pursue. Join a similar local or regional organization as well (if you have one) and volunteer.

3. **The biggest benefit**

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Steve Skyer
ISA Certified Arborist

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of joining an association is the opportunity to network through personal relationships. Again, get to know other contractors through the local, regional and state associations. People that join associations are much more likely to mentor someone who is enthusiastic and involved. Cold calling for advice probably won't get you very far.

4. **"Just get started" is poor advice.** Basic skills and knowledge are absolutely needed. If you don't want to get a formal education at a two-year community college or a four-year degree, the next best thing is going to work for a reputable company. Find out who the best company in your area is and try to get a position with them. Be humble and be clear about your goals and make a commitment to work for at least two years. Work on a crew, learn through experience.

5. **Don't ever work cheap.** Everything you do defines who you are and what you do. Set the bar high and reach for success through experience and hard work not by "practicing" on friends and neighbors.

6. **Definitely focus on learning the business end.** This is where some night classes might prove invaluable.

Mark Peters, president, Piedmont Carolina Nursery and Landscaping Colfax, North Carolina

Hi Chuck,

I have some advice for the young man that is 17 and is getting started. I would suggest him calling or emailing a company that is in a different state that is close by and maybe going to visit that facility. Another thing that's really important is the right equipment. I feel it's best to purchase what you need and purchase something that's newer and not beat up.

Maybe take a friend that's handy with mechanics if you go purchase something used, remember the time you spend working on someone else's issue is the time you could spend making yourself more money. I would also suggest come out swinging. Be aggressive, professional and sincere.

I would suggest dividing his company into four different areas – sales: 35 percent; operations: 35 percent; administration: 35 percent and organization: 5 percent.

I have found organization to be extremely helpful and very tactical when it comes to facing the local hitters and the other major companies that control our industry. As you grow, try and set goals and small figures that you would like to accomplish over the short and long term.

Frankie Valentin, president, Final Cut Landscaping, Middle River, Md.

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ASK THE EXPERTS

CEMETERIES, CUSTOMER RETENTION AND MORE

ASK THE EXPERTS is presented in partnership with PLANET's Trailblazers On Call program. Trailblazers are industry leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to give back to the industry.

Q. Although we have been providing mowing services for commercial properties for many years, we have never worked in a cemetery before. We have the opportunity to bid on four locations ranging from 35 to 70 acres per area. All the cemeteries are old with many monuments, markers, etc. Does anyone have experience with this that could provide some guidance with production rates?

They are currently being maintained in house. The current procedure is to mow between the rows of grave markers keeping a one foot distance away from all monuments and markers. Line trimming finishes up the missed areas and around the markers themselves and finish with blowing off any grass or debris from the stones/markers. The mowing is fairly straightforward; however, the line trimming is a huge variable. We estimate there are as many as 1,000 markers per acre in the older areas of each site. There are very few areas with less than 500 markers per acre. Only 22 cuts per season which is about six less than we normally provide.

- **Are 75-100 markers-per-hour line trimming reasonable or possible working carefully around the gravestones and flowers?**
- **Any idea of a combined mow/trim/blow rate per acre? Would it be five, six, seven hours per acre combined?**
- **Any advice on crew size or configurations?**

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A. In working on cemetery properties, you must be mindful of the extra production time required to string trim and small mow a lot of area. As landscapers, we get used to using larger, more efficient equipment and although there are some areas in a cemetery where this works, most of the work is tedious and time consuming.

When bidding on this type of project, figure one half acre per man-hour to know how long your crew will take to complete the mowing each week.

It is also necessary to figure in some minor repair or replacement work as humans make mistakes. Doing maintenance at gravesites is somewhat risky.

Imagine what you would think if, for example, a dear relative's headstone got chipped by someone hitting it with a zero-turn rider and you will get the picture.

That being said, there is some upside to this type of work. You would be pleasantly surprised to know how much extra money you can make by doing annual flower planting, cleanup and mulching and trimming the one or two bushes around each headstone.

Rich Arlington, consultant, Rich Arlington & Associates

Q. What kind of customer retention should I be getting?

A. Retention rates vary depending on the life cycle of your business. In the early stages, when the owner is very technically involved in the applications and has daily contact with the customer, retention is very high at 85-90 percent.

As the business grows and matures, and the owner begins to transition from the field to the office and starts relying on field technicians, renewals drop to 75-80 percent.

Q. What add-ons are easy to add?

A. The three main add-on services would be grub control, aeration and PH control. These are all value-added services that traditionally fall outside the scope of basic lawn service.

Q. Should I use a payroll service?

A. A few factors should be considered when deciding on a payroll service. First, determine if you have the necessary accounting skills. If a mistake is made or a poor pay structure is being used, it could be costly. Another consideration would be the time needed to apply payroll to each pay period. If you are in the field, it is tough to stay on top of everything.

The last consideration is the complexity of your pay structure. If you have different pay structures or levels based on service or seniority, it may be easier to bring this service in-house than to work outside. **L&L**

Jon Cundiff, president, Weed Man - Kansas City

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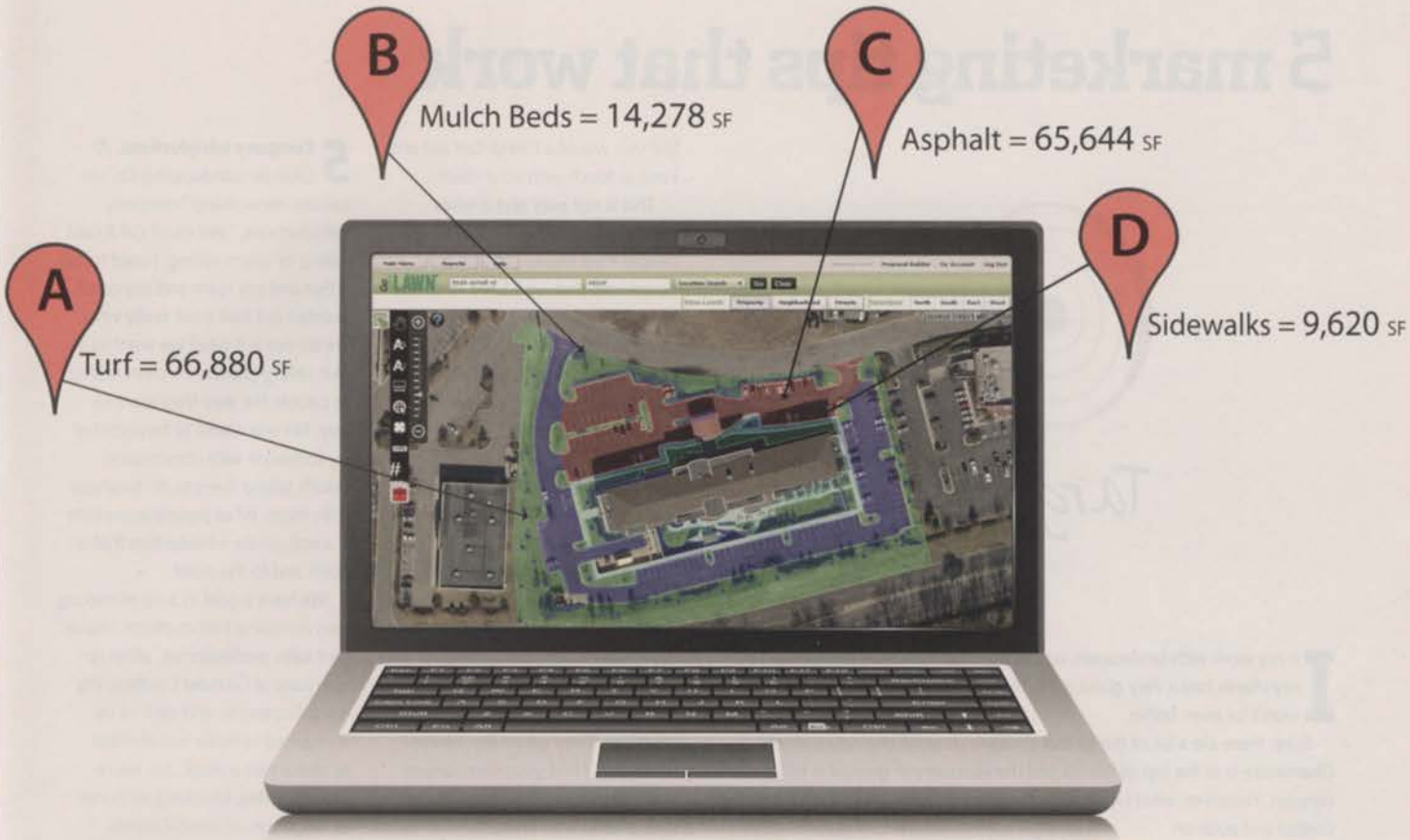

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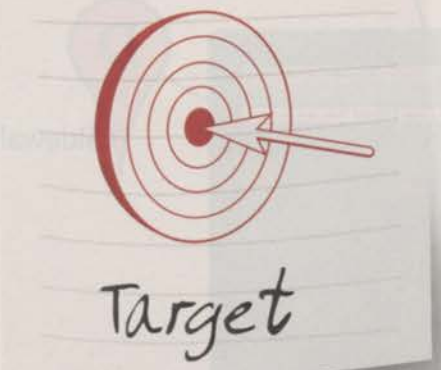
5 marketing tips that work



In my work with landscapers across the country, I have found most of my clients had a very good 2013. There is no reason to believe that 2014 won't be even better.

Sure, there are a lot of things that concern us small business owners. Obamacare is at the top of the list and the economy in general is still a concern. However, what I have found works is to worry about what you can control and push on.

My experience, and the success of my clients I coach, points to the fact that if you watch your expenses and control your debt, do good work and take care of your team and your clients, you have a very good chance of being successful. Oh sure, there's a lot more to a successful business than just that; however, the aforementioned works well.

My clients also know their costs. They know their numbers and they are empowered to make great decisions as a result. Since they know their numbers, they know what clients are good and which ones are not. And that leads me to the marketing tips I want to share with you in this month's column. Here are my top 5:

1 Know who your ideal client is. Your ideal client is the one who helps you make money, the one you enjoy working with and the one that sends you more business. Too many green industry professionals never identify their ideal client and end up targeting all sorts of people who aren't going to be long-term clients. Take the time to define your ideal client. For more help, visit my website and download my client experience funnel and the instructions associated with it.

2 Practice relationship marketing. Relationship marketing is the things you do to keep in touch with a client. It's calling a client to see if they need anything. It's visiting a client's property to walk around. It's sending them a birthday card. It's simply keeping in touch with them, like you would a friend. Get out and keep in touch with your clients.

This is not easy and it takes time. People do business with people they know, like and trust. To achieve that, you have to spend time with your clients. So, spend twice as much time on that as you do on lead generation. My last three tips are all lead generation marketing functions.

3 Fully maximize your SEO. If I do an Internet search with the name of the town you service, your company's name and the word "landscaping," and you aren't one of the top three that comes up, you have work to do.

Hire an expert to achieve that. Consumers don't use phone books anymore. They go on the Internet. If they can't find your company or aren't impressed by your website, your phone won't ring.

And, if you have your website set up correctly, it allows your clients and prospects to inquire about your services 24/7 by submitting an email from the site.

4 Mail postcards. Yep, those simple cards that have been around for years. They still work. The key is to mail them to homes and businesses where you already have a presence. Blanket mailing to neighborhoods where no one knows who you are normally does not work well. If you have trucks in a particular neighborhood or office park, your postcards will create more awareness and will help you get more leads. Before you try to branch out, get density in areas. This has worked for my company and for the countless ones I've implemented this idea for as well.

5 Company introductions. At Grunder Landscaping Co. we call our networking "company introductions." We don't call it cold calling or warm calling. I used to call it that and my team and my coach pointed out that's not really what we do nor is it what we want to do. Our selling process involves selling to people the way they want to buy. No one wants to be accosted by someone with commission breath telling them to do business with them. What people appreciate is a soft, polite introduction that is quick and to the point.

We have a goal in 2014 of making 400 company introductions. I have four sales professionals, although everyone at Grunder Landscaping is a salesperson, and each of us is required to make 100 of these, or about two a week. So, we're mailing notes, knocking on doors of neighbors of current clients, sending e-mails, and even making phone calls. Our message is simple, and it is the same whether we are writing, calling or emailing. We have all of these laid out on a one sheet for you that can be downloaded at www.martygrunder.com/vt.

Focus on what you can control, know who your ideal client is, develop relationships, make sure to maximized your SEO, mail postcards and work on introducing your company to as many people as you can. I know you will make more sales if you buy into what we shared. 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

At the mercy of data

Early this year I presented a seminar at the Real Green Systems Marketing Symposium in Orlando, Fla. The topic covered benchmarks and critical numbers for the lawn care industry.

Benchmarks are universal units that are used for comparison purposes. For instance, the universal unit for comparing the human body temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. However, not all benchmarks are created equal. Critical numbers are benchmarks that are especially prescient or foretelling. Such critical numbers for the human body (body temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate) when combined are referred to as "vital signs." They are especially predictive regarding ones health. Critical numbers, in the context of a business, when understood and used properly can prognosticate its health both short term and long term.

Who in a company should use them? Just about everyone can make use of benchmarks and critical numbers if they know how to apply them. Here are a few examples.

Operations managers using production benchmarks can see which routes and technicians are the most efficient and/or most profitable. Human resource and safety managers can combine hiring, training, production and accident data into metrics that measure the effectiveness of training and safety programs. In particular, individual technicians can compare their daily production results to those of other technicians both within and without the company.

Common benchmarks and critical numbers. Benchmarks and critical numbers should be tied to risk in order to help measure and control it. The greatest risk in an installation or service company is labor. That is why we measure most items in relation to billable man-hours.

There are also relative and absolute benchmarks. A material to labor ratio can vary dramatically and still be within acceptable parameters. However, net profit per man-hour is an absolute metric. The higher the better, the lower the worse it is. A net profit per man-hour of $15 is always better than a net profit of $5 per man-hour. All benchmarks evolve over time but relative ones tend to do so more often. Here are common benchmarks you might find useful. L&L

REVENUE BENCHMARKS

1. Sales per man-hour (SPH): Revenue ÷ man-hours
   $1,000 per man-day ÷ 8.0 man-hours = $125 SPH
2. Sales per man-year: Total company revenue per year ÷ # of full-time field staff
   $1,050,000 per year ÷ 7.0 full-time field staff = $150,000
3. Sales per man-day: Revenue per man-year ÷ # of days per year
   $150,000 ÷ 150 days per year = $1,000 per man-day

MARGIN (MAN-HOUR) BENCHMARKS

1. Net profit margin per man-hour (NPMPH): Net profit margin ÷ Man-hours
   $1,000 per man-day x 20 percent NPM = $200
   $200 ÷ 8 man-hours per day = $25
2. General and administrative (G&A) overhead per man-hour (OPH):
   G&A overhead for a lawn care company is usually 25 to 30 percent of sales
   $1,050,000 x .3 = $315,000
   Total billable field man-hours per year = 7 people x 7 months x 173 man-hours per mo. = 7 x 7 x 173 = 8,477
   G&A overhead per man-hour = $315,000 ÷ 8,477 = $37.16
3. Gross profit margin per man-hour (GPMPH)
   Net profit margin per man-hour + Gross profit margin per man-hour = GPMPH
   $25 + 37.16 = $62.15 GPMPH

PROFIT & LOSS (P&L) BENCHMARKS (AS A PERCENT OF SALES):

Direct costs

Materials	20 percent (+/- 5 percent)
Field labor	25 percent (+/- 5 percent)
Labor burden	30 percent (+/- 5 percent) (as a percent of labor)
Labor burden	5 percent (+/- 2 percent) (as a percent of sales)
Equipment & trucks	10 percent (+/- 2 percent)
Subcontractors	0 - 2 percent
Commissions	4 – 8 percent

General & Administrative Overhead - Indirect costs (as a percent of sales):

Total	25 – 30 percent
Marketing	3 percent (+/- 2 percent)
Office salaries	6 percent (+/- 2 percent)
Officer salaries (FMV)	6 percent (+/- 2 percent) (a fair market value salary minus dividends)
Total office and officer salaries	12 percent (+/- 2 percent)
Rent	3 percent (+/- 1 percent)

MARKETING BENCHMARKS

Percentages:

Closing percent	20 percent (+/- 10 percent)
Retention percent	80 percent (+/- 10 percent)
Cancellations percent	10 percent (+/- 10 percent)
New sales percent	20 percent (+/- 10 percent)
Net annual growth percent	10 percent (+/- 5 percent)
Marketing as a percent of sales	3 percent (+/- 2 percent)

Dollars:

Cost per new customer	$100 (+/- $25)
Cost per customer (all)	$15 (+/- $5)
Revenue per customer	$400 (+/- $50)
Net + gross profit per customer	$80 (+/- $20)
Annual revenue per truck / tech.	$150K (+/-$20K)
Annual "up" sales per truck / tech.	$10K (+/-$5K)

General:

Customers per truck	375 (+/- 50)
Customers per $100,000 revenue	250 (+/- 25)
Customers per $1 million revenue	2,500 (+/- 250)

Conclusion. Benchmarks and critical numbers are a "work-in-process." They are constantly evolving. I've found that the benchmarks and critical numbers I've shared with you are fairly consistent throughout North America. They will vary primarily due to the customer density of individual service routes.

I'd recommend you calculate these benchmarks for your company. Then, compare your results to my benchmarks. Share them with your staff to set goals throughout your organization. Send me an email and tell me what you found and if your figures are close to mine. If they aren't close, maybe mine need to evolve a little more.

It isn't how many people you employ. It's the equipment you deploy.

Chris Shipp, *Owner*

Shipp Shape Lawn Service | Sylvester, Ga.

If you want to increase your profitability, you've basically got two choices: cut costs or increase the productivity of the people you've got. For my company, choosing the right equipment made it possible to do both. Which is why I rely on my fleet of eight Grasshopper diesel mowers. Where we used to need more machines to keep up, we're actually running fewer now and doing the same amount of work because of the extra power diesel provides. And that extra power delivers a better quality cut, which keeps our customers happy. Of course, the fuel savings with diesel don't hurt, either. We're saving more than $13,000 a year compared to gas. And when you combine that with less maintenance and less downtime, it means you can do a lot more profitable work and keep overhead to a minimum. Thanks to our Grasshoppers, we're doing and earning more than ever.

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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; scesare@giemedia.com

Fundamentals for improving the selection interview

The selection interview is one of the most time-consuming, costly and critical HR functions. While determining talent quality entering the organization, it also conveys vital information about the company's image. With this in mind, it is important to note that simply because someone has conducted a lot of interviews, does not necessarily mean that person is a good interviewer. This article outlines key features to improve interview quality.

Content. To improve interview quality, legality and ensure consistency from one interview to the next, an interview protocol should be developed for each position. All interview questions within this protocol must be categorized based on information from the job description.

For example, a maintenance foreman interview protocol should have questions on: safety, supervision, job quality, equipment operation, chemicals, customer service, field operations and interpersonal skills. Ideally, many, if not all, of the interview questions should be phrased within a situational context closely resembling the position's actual job responsibilities.

Preparation. The importance of the interview dictates it be treated seriously, and involves suitable preparation. Candidates can tell if the interviewer is prepared or if he is "winging it." Accordingly, interviewers should review the candidate's application or resume, as well as the position's job description and performance appraisal form two days before the scheduled interview.

Logistical preparation also requires the interview be scheduled to minimize job conflict. Given today's litigious society, it is strongly recommended no candidate ever be interviewed in a one-on-one setting. Panel interviewers are invaluable witnesses against spurious claims made by a candidate.

Interviewer biases. The selection interview is rife with potential bias that may lead to a bad hire or potential lawsuit. Here are the most common biases interviewers must consider before evaluating a candidate.

- Primacy: Rather than evaluating the candidate's entire interview performance, some interviewers make an immediate judgment, favorable or unfavorable, based on a first impression of the candidate.
- Recency: Rather than evaluating the candidate's entire interview performance, some interviewers make a definitive judgment, favorable or unfavorable, based on the last impression of the candidate.
- Similar to me: Some interviewers tend to give higher ratings to those candidates that share common qualities with them.
- Contrast effect: Instead of evaluating a candidate against a common standard, some interviewers simply judge a candidate against previously-interviewed candidates. For example, an average candidate will appear far better if he follows a bad candidate; similarly, that same average candidate will appear far worse if he follows an outstanding candidate.
- Idealized candidate: Many interviewers believe they must only hire the perfect candidate, and therefore must reject any imperfect candidate because they have "very high standards."
- Negative information: Research shows that once a candidate offers a bad response, many interviewers erroneously assign disproportionate weight to that answer and therefore falsely believe the candidate is unqualified.
- Halo: Many interviewers have a favorite topic that overshadows other rating categories. For example, if an interviewer has a preference for customer service, that interviewer is likely to give a higher overall rating to a candidate who answered the customer service questions very well even though he did not answer other interview questions to the same standard.
- Leniency: For various reasons, some interviewers routinely give higher ratings to candidates who may not deserve them.
- Severity: For various reasons, some interviewers routinely give lower ratings to candidates who may not deserve them.
- Central tendency: Some interviewers give ratings in the middle of the scale as a way to minimize potential explanation or conflict.

Rating process. Interviewers should evaluate the quality of each candidate's response as soon as it is offered. Once the candidate has answered all questions and left the room, the interviewers should discuss the candidate's performance on each of the protocol categories by comparing their individual ratings, and then determine the candidate's overall ability to perform the essential functions listed on the job description.

Summary. The subjective nature of the selection interview coupled with its immense value to the company, suggests landscapers develop interview protocols, minimize biases in interviews and constantly evaluate the interview process to ensure it is legally compliant, procedurally fair and clearly linked to business goals. **L&L**

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{ By Kristen Hampshire }

Brian Dumont took a passion and turned it into a successful company with 300 employees

Professors don't know everything

Even though Brian DuMont was told as a college freshman landscapers won't make any money, he stuck with it and now runs the $17 million Yard-Nique.

When Brian DuMont founded Yard-Nique during his last year in North Carolina State University's landscape horticulture program, he thought if he could grow his company to a team of five, then that would be big. Real big.

This year, Yard-Nique surpassed 300 employees and revenues neared $17 million in 2013. Growth has doubled since 2007 – even during the recession years. In spite of losing builder business, Yard-Nique boomed through the economic bust.

"It's a little different than what I envisioned," DuMont says of the company's evolution from a college startup to a five-location company serving Raleigh, N.C.,'s Research Triangle area and beyond.

"I'll never forget sitting in the classroom my freshman year, and a professor told us, 'If you are in this profession to make money, you might as well walk out of the door right now,'" DuMont says, noting that the average annual salary in 1993 was about $21,000. "I was never in it for that."

Though DuMont's passion for the business was not factored into that salary estimate, in 17 years, he has grown jobs for a few hundred people who share his love for the industry – people on board with Yard-Nique's "full speed ahead" culture.

"I went after amazing people, that was my key to growth," DuMont says. "I attracted key employees, and there were a lot of them out there. That has allowed us to continue to grow."

The fact that a bulk of the company's growth occurred during the recession is due to this hiring strategy – investing in talent when it was available,

A meeting of the minds

Each year, Yard-Nique hosts a management retreat where structured brainstorming and future planning is the agenda.

"We talk about the positives and negatives of the previous year, what we are going to do differently, and what we want to be," says Brian DuMont, president and CEO of the Raleigh, N.C.-based firm.

"We talk about our vision and mission statement – and are we in line with that?"

Fourteen employees attended the 2014 brainstorming meeting, including all department heads, the human resources director, CFO and six employees who are "key assets" to the company. He will also identify a "rising star" or two.

Here's how Yard-Nique pulls of a successful brainstorming event:

- Draft an agenda. While the idea is to hold an open forum for ideas, DuMont makes sure the event stays on track by creating an agenda that is distributed in advance.
- Keep an open mind. Listen. Soak in the feedback from participants. The purpose is to gain many different perspectives.
- Take action. DuMont's managers are responsible for communicating what goals were set at the meeting to their teams. "Once we get back, we make sure that information is translated to all levels," he says.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF YARD-NIQUE

expanding market reach to diversify. "We took a totally different approach in 2008," he says.

BUILDING DIVERSITY. The Raleigh, N.C., area was somewhat buffered during the economic downturn because of the Research Triangle.

When other markets were down and out, DuMont's commercial maintenance clients were not backing off their service. "HOAs and commercial outfits are not going to stop maintaining their facilities," he says.

Meanwhile, the building rush that had fueled Yard-Nique's installation growth for several years prior to 2008 pretty much froze. Then, 35 percent of Yard-Nique's business was new landscape installation for builder clients. "It was like, overnight, someone turned off the switch – they quit building," DuMont says.

Diversification was the strategy. "We had no choice," he says. In 2008, Yard-Nique had its only "flat" year, and even then there was an oh-so-slight revenue uptick. DuMont figured $300,000 profit, about 1 percent growth.

"We were happy with that," he says. "I was happy to walk away after that year and say, 'We're still around.' That was a win."

But it wasn't good enough. DuMont and managers hunkered down. The plan: Go after more market share – go after more builders.

"In 2006, you couldn't landscape (new builds) fast enough," he says. "They were building homes so fast, it was crazy. We couldn't take on more than four or five builders because they were throwing us so much work."

But when the economy slowed and building "paused," Yard-Nique could expand its portfolio of builder clients. "We could reach out to more of them because most had cut their production by a half, if not three-quarters," DuMont says.

So rather than about five builder clients, Yard-Nique today works with 30 to 40 different firms of various sizes. Some are small custom outfits, others are national names.

Now, after five years of plugging away at project diversification, Yard-Nique's maintenance/install mix is back to where it was before 2008: 53 percent design/build and 47 percent maintenance.

Residential maintenance just doesn't fit Yard-Nique's business model or company size these

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days, DuMont says. Meanwhile, commercial maintenance (that includes HOAs) continues to stay strong. "That is what got us through the slow time. It was always a good sector for us, and we have continued to grow that."

Meanwhile, residential design/build is back in YardNique's repertoire since two years ago, when the company brought on a residential sales specialist. She joined full-time in 2013 and her focus is solely design/build for homeowners.

After a seven-year hiatus from this service, the niche needed a personnel lift to get it rolling. "I said, 'If we are going to do residential design/build, we are going to do it right,' so that is why we brought on a professional to really revitalize that piece of the business," DuMont says.

WINS IN RETENTION. With consistent annual growth, even during recession years, and a fast-expanding staff, DuMont recognized that customer retention can suffer unless quality is carefully managed.

Last year, DuMont realized that his maintenance account managers were maxed out. "At times, as we continued to grow, we got more properties and put more work on those account managers," he says. There's a fine line between "more work" and stretched too thin.

"It took us about six months to dissect the problem," DuMont says. The company analyzed its customer retention rate. DuMont aims for 5 percent – the industry standard, he says, is roughly 10 percent.

"For me, when I see 10 percent attrition, it's like, 'Time out: What's going on here?' Is the problem isolated to one manager? Is it isolated to one division, one branch?'"

Last year, DuMont decided that while the company's customer retention was not suffering per se, quality could erode if something wasn't done to address account manager workload. So, the company invested in hiring two more account managers.

Then, DuMont divided the book of work evenly among the new team, freeing up the managers to spend more time with their clients.

"The expectation is that we'll have better customer service and an improved customer retention rate," he says.

"It will be a win-win, and that is what we are driving for in 2014. So far, the plan is going well for us." L&L

We've rounded up some walk-behind mowers to help you start thinking about the upcoming season.

Get to steppin'

Exmark Turf Tracer X- and S-Series

Exmark has expanded its line to include new EFI-propane versions of its Turf Tracer X- and S-Series hydro-drive wide area walk-behind models.

The new models use EFI-propane Kohler V-twin powerplants to reduce fuel consumption by up to 40 percent.

The automotive-style closed-loop EFI system adjusts fuel/air mixture in real time are designed to deliver improved running and performance.

- Both models are equipped with Exmark's Enhanced Control System (ECS), which offers increased operator comfort and control with improved ergonomics.
- The Turf Tracer X-Series is available with a choice of 52- or 60-inch UltraCut Series four cutting decks.
- The Turf Tracer S-Series is available with a 48-inch UltraCut Series 3 cutting deck.

For more information: www.exmark.com

Gravely Commercial 21

Available in zone start or BBC configurations, the Gravely Commercial 21 has a die cast aluminum deck and side edge guards.

- The deep tunnel design of the deck maximizes air flow and suction.
- Comes with a Kawasaki FJ180V KAI engine and 3-speed shift-on-the-fly transmission,
- Additional features include seven height-of-cut adjustments, a 2.5 bushel bag capacity and an adjustable handlebar for operator comfort.

For more information: www.gravely.com

Honda Commercial Mowers

The Honda HRC Commercial Series offers two models – the self-propelled, hydrostatic drive HRC216K3HXA and push-type HRC216K3PDA. Both offer a combination of features and durability for the professional landscaper.

- Dome-shaped deck design facilitates both bagging and mulching.
- Offset twin blade MicroCut System.
- Front bumper provides deck and engine protection.

For more information: powerequipment.honda.com

John Deere WHP61A and WH61A

John Deere has two new commercial 61-inch hydraulic walk-behind mowers, the WHP61A and WH61A, for landscape contractors who need larger width units.

- Both are available with 23.5-hp engines, and have a 5.8-gallon duel tank, standard electric start and standard electric PTO.
- The WHP61A features pistol grip controls that allow for adjustable tracking.
- The WH61A features twin loop controls and a 7-gauge fabricated floating steel deck.

For more information: www.JohnDeere.com/MowPro

Wright Manufacturing Velke

Wright Manufacturing's Velke pistol grip hydro mowers can be operated as a walk behind or can be paired with Wright's Velke foldaway sulky as a ride-behind

- The mower has deck widths of 32-, 36-, 48- and 52-inch.
- The mower has an integrated latch system for deployment and stowage of the sulky.
- Comes with a 15 hp engine and a six-gallon tank.

For more information: www.wrightmfg.com.

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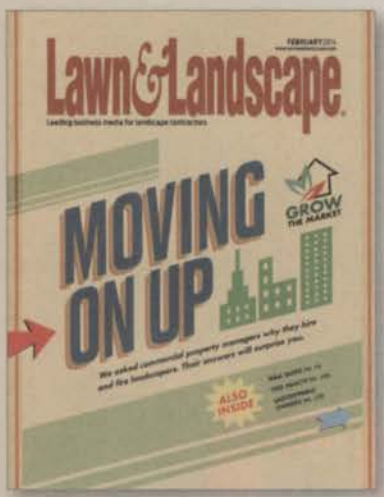

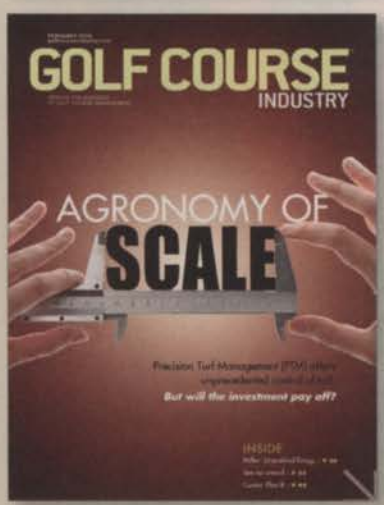

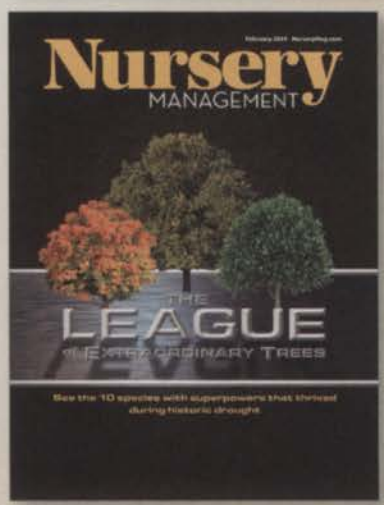

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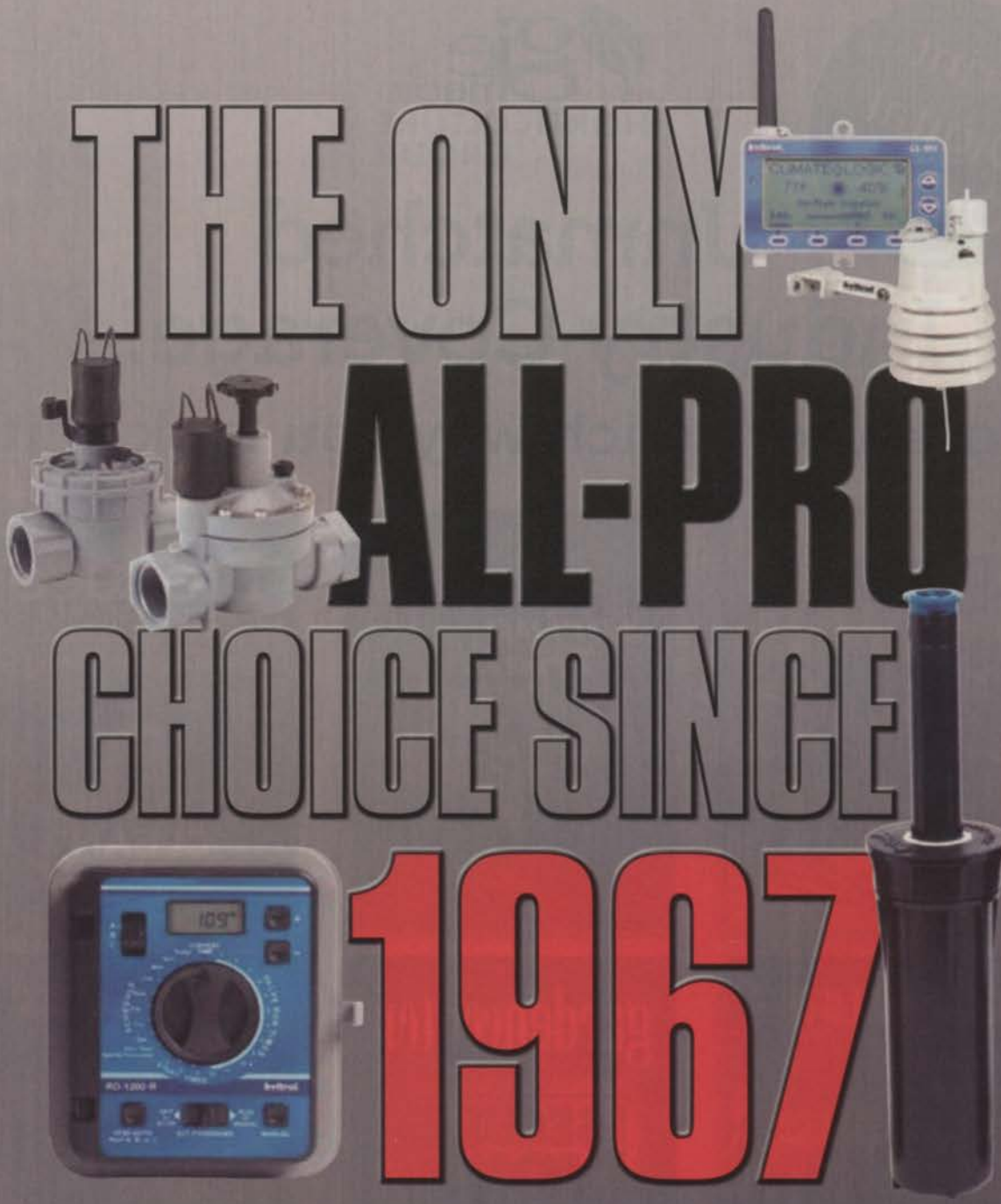

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{ By Lindsey Getz }

The waiting game

Customers want instant savings from water conservation, and the team at Gachina Landscape Management knows how to handle that impatience.

Recently celebrating its 25th anniversary, Gachina Landscape Management in Menlo Park, Calif., was founded by John Gachina, a California native who got his start as a groundskeeper for a golf course and then worked his way into the landscape industry.

Today the company has more than 250 employees and does approximately $18 million annually in both maintenance and construction work for commercial clients. Those clients include corporate campuses, HOAs, shopping centers, property management firms and a lot of city work. Over the years, the company's focus and commitment to water conservation has become a primary goal.

These days, water conservation is a major concern for many clients – particularly in states like California where water restrictions and rising water bills are becoming commonplace. "Water districts are imposing huge fines for going over water budgets so this is a really important topic," says Stacie Callaghan, director of business development for the company. "We utilize a variety of efforts to save water including the use of smart controllers and much more. But of course you have to get the buy-in from the customer."

Clifton Randolph, South Bay Branch manager (the company has four key branches) for the irrigation division says even though water restrictions are tight, clients still want to see the numbers add up.

"Water conservation is definitely an easy thing to talk to customers about, but when it comes to actually getting it done, that's a different story," Randolph says. "There is definitely an upfront cost to make the changes needed to begin saving water and some clients aren't so eager to pay it – espe-

Certification assist

More and more companies are showing interest in becoming LEED certified in order to showcase themselves.

Landscaping and irrigation certainly play a vital role in that certification process and smart companies are helping clients achieve or maintain their LEED Certification.

Gachina Landscape Management assists NetApp, (a data storage solution company), in its LEED Certification Process through a series of monthly reports and green landscaping techniques.

Clifton Randolph, South Bay Branch manager for Gachina's irrigation division, says there are specific requirements for LEED Certification. "For instance, on really hot days we don't use the equipment so we will rake instead of blowing," he says.

"To help our clients maintain their LEED Certification, we've also made sure our equipment is properly maintained, reduced the amount of turf that we have on a site and switched over to drought-tolerant plants.

LEED Certification also requires a lot of paperwork. That's another area where landscape and irrigation companies can assist.

"We walk the site each week and take notes," Randolph says. "They have to have notes on what was done for LEED."

Randolph says the cost involved has probably kept some away.

"But those that are doing it can definitely use our help in maintaining a certain standard and keeping up with reports."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GACHINA

cially if they're not going to see immediate savings. In many circumstances it can take several years to recoup that money."

"If we can show potential clients real-life examples of how we've saved other clients money, that often makes it easier for the new clients to invest," Randolph says.

The company has gone a step further from talking about these examples to formulating "Customer Spotlights" in 2007. "We use them as marketing sheets at tradeshows, we include them in proposals and we share them with potential customers looking for company information," Callaghan says. "We also have them as links on our website as well as included in our e-newsletters to both existing and potential customers. We have received great response from these spotlights. They are a great way to get a lot of information out."

In addition to customer spotlights, Gachina also utilizes newsletters and social media to reach potential clients and stay connected with existing ones. Callaghan says the company also works with local water districts to help customers obtain rebates.

And the company obtains water usage history from clients and compares with previous years to be able to show actual savings. All of these efforts have proven to be strategic marketing efforts and have played a role in securing new clients.

WATER CONSERVATION EFFORTS. One of the ways Gachina aims to reduce water bills is by using recycled or reclaimed water in landscaped areas. This was the case with a large commercial client Gachina has worked with since 2004. The client's landscape includes 12 buildings across a 42 acre site. Through the utilization of grey water for all landscaped areas, Gachina has been able to significantly reduce maintenance costs for this client.

Of course using recycled water on such a large property is no small feat. According to Randolph, the company has gone through a certification process in order to implement the use of reclaimed water. Gachina meets the unique challenges of using recycled water by constantly monitoring the performance of all the plant species on the property and taking proactive steps to ensure plants thrive within the reclaimed watering environment.

"You have to be careful when using reclaimed water because some plant material will not tolerate it well," Randolph says. "You also have to be careful that reclaimed water is not spraying on to nearby cars or asphalt. It can be very hard to get those water spots off because of the high salt content."

In addition to utilizing reclaimed water,

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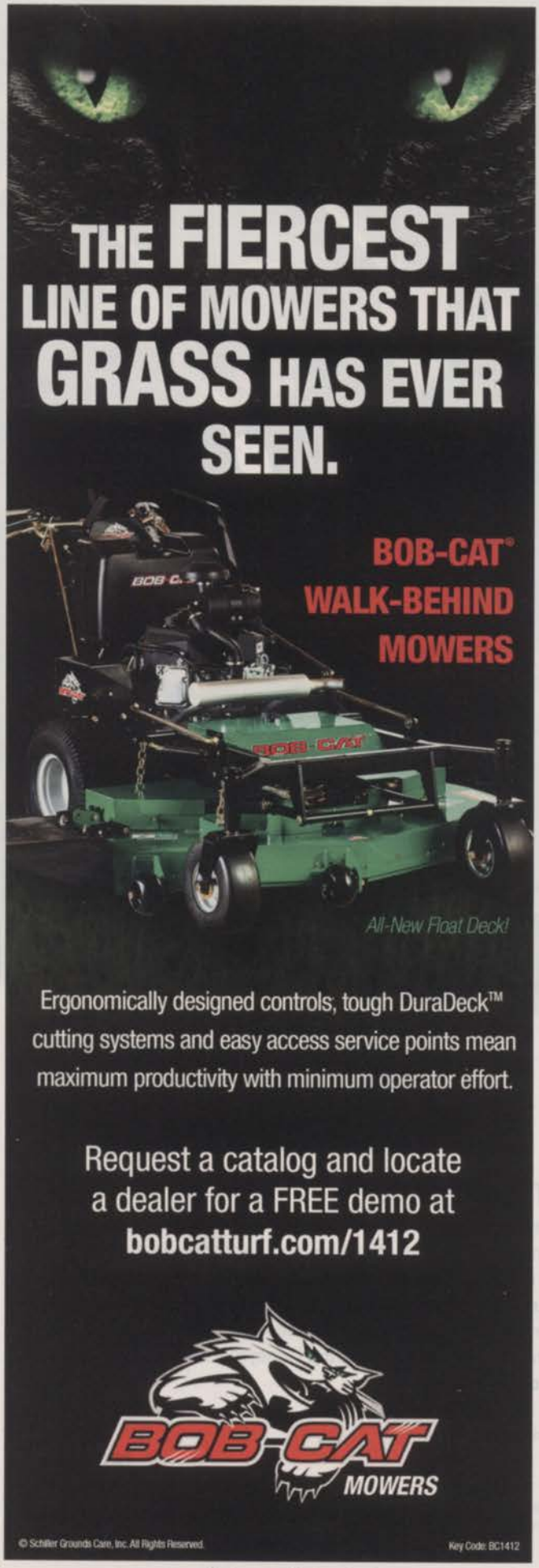

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Employees at Gachina Landscape Management received certificates for completeing irrigation classes.

Gachina also employed a number of other efforts at the corporate campus. This included the installation of drought tolerant plants and retrofitting of the existing irrigation system. Retrofits are a large part of Gachina's business. This includes the installation of smart controllers, the conversion of spray nozzles to drip irrigation and the replacement of older spray heads with more efficient MP rotator heads.

WATER AUDITS. With corporations both large and small, property managers and HOAs paying much closer attention to their bottom line these days, water budgets are a big deal. Gachina offers an Irrigation Water Audit service that existing customers are taking advantage of.

The staff at Gachina participates in the Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor program. Landscape irrigation auditors perform regular audits to define, measure and quantify water use across the landscapes. Audits enable more efficient control over programmed irrigation controllers and pinpoint system deficiencies, enabling reductions in metered water usage of 30 percent to 60 percent.

"With our audits, we work with several water consultants and if a site wants to have a water audit we will have a consultant come out with us and walk the property," Randolph says.

"From that data, plus the square footage, we can figure out what the water budget for the site will be. We also take a look at the past records from the clients and we tell them what they need to use per year and what they're using now."

LOOKING AHEAD. Like many landscape and irrigation companies that are looking to stay atop of current trends, Gachina Landscape plans to keep its focus on water conservation efforts as it moves forward.

"We will also continue to encourage our customers to reduce their water-loving lawns and plant more drought-tolerant shrubs," Callaghan says. "We'll also continue to convert to drip wherever we can. Water conservation is such a huge issue and it's not going away. Getting customers on board has a lot to do with education and we will continue to keep our clients informed about overwatering as well as the newest technology that can help them make important changes." L&L

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Keep it flowing

Overlooking maintenance on valves can leave contractors struggling in the deep end. By Jason Stahl

Things unseen often go ignored. You know, like that furnace tucked away in the bowels of the basement that doesn't get attention until it breaks. Or the mice behind the walls … until they make your kitchen their playground.

Irrigation valves are somewhat similar to those. Because they're buried, we often forget about them. But this is a dangerous way to live. Just ask Patrick Crais, founder of Blue Watchdog Conservation, an irrigation service provider in San Diego. He has found that taking a few extra steps during installation can save a lot of headaches when and if a problem surfaces down the road.

With valves, it's important to make sure they're clear of any debris. While some contractors wait for something to break to address it, Crais and his crew are proactive in cleaning the valves, even washing them down with water.

"It seems corny to do this," Crais says. "Why would we clean a valve that's underground in this plastic box? The idea is that if you can't see the valve and it's covered in dirt or dirty, you can't actually detect if there is a leak. We look at every valve as a risk, so we baby them differently. Making sure they're clear of debris may not be very technical, but it's probably the most effective way to keep them functioning."

So, with valves prone to leaking, a great investment would be a $40 acoustic device much like a stethoscope, Crais says. Once they determine there might be a leak, they

The art of the upsell

Sometimes it's all in the language, right? Patrick Crais, founder of Blue Watchdog Conservation, and his crews don't tell his clients they're cleaning their valves but doing a "leak detection inspection."

"That's really the purpose of it," he says. "We're preventing you from losing water and destroying your property. We don't even use the term 'water meter' or 'submeter' – we call it a leak detector."

Typically it's a separate line item in their bids, usually one of the cheaper items if you figure a day's labor to go through 35 valves ($500).

Crais also upsells the installation of waterproof wire nuts, a cheap solution to making sure the wiring doesn't get screwed up.

"Each one costs $0.89, and putting them in doesn't take long. But if you know how to do it and put them in correctly, that's work to be done."

Husney Landscape and Irrigation's sprinkler installations include a warranty and the first winter shutdown service. At the end of January, the company sends out service proposals for spring startup and fall shutdown service (winterization).

Any repairs needed are over and above this service.

"The majority of our clients have us do both spring startup and fall shutdown," says Project Manager Dan Husney. "Some clients who are mechanically inclined choose to do their own and call us if they have problems."

Once the service contract is signed, Husney sends out a reminder and then works on coordinating a convenient date and time when they can come out and perform the service.

Husney Landscape and Irrigation often does both spring startup and fall shutdown.

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check all the valves because there are a lot of valves that are leaking that a contractor never knows about because they can't hear the leak.

"We recommend this as low-hanging fruit, or an easy return on investment," Crais says. "Otherwise, you spend a lot of time looking for weeks and don't know which

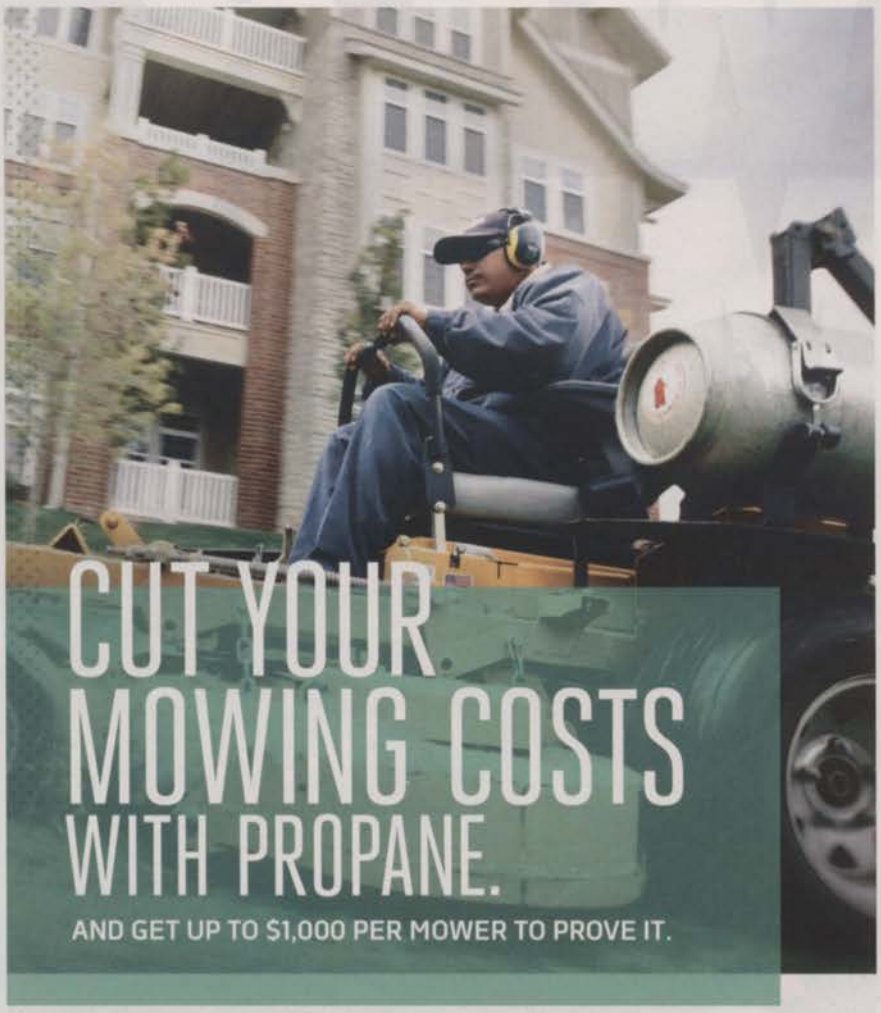
You can solve electrical problems by replacing the solenoid valve.

valve it is and start guessing and digging." Crais suggests a good maintenance program might involve changing out diaphragms every three to five years. In cases where a property might have valves that have been in the ground for 10 years, Crais recommends to the owner to change out all diaphragms to have a fresh start versus waiting for every valve to leak.

"Pretty rarely do you have to replace the entire valve," Crais says. "Sometimes a contractor will say, 'Oh, the valve isn't working,' and then replace the whole thing. Well, now you have to cut the whole thing out and you just added three more hours of labor to it and the client won't understand why it will cost $200 to change out a valve. All they had to do was ID the valve and purchase a diaphragm – as long as they determined that was a failure."

Crais performs a quarterly inspection of the entire irrigation system. He generally works with older properties, and will get the client on a program and keep with it. Anything pressurized they want at least inspected. And they install a water meter to tell them what's going on with their valves.

"Valves may fail but often the manufacturers don't have a submeter or water meter in place that would tell them if they have a leak. They often look at the water meter up at the street and often don't know where it is," Crais says.



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Using a union or threaded fitting can go a long way toward saving a lot of work when it comes to removing valves, Crais says. He makes it standard practice to put a union or threaded fitting downstream of his valves, which gives him the ability to spin off the valve rather than cutting the entire thing out.

"We put it downstream because that's not the pressurized side of the valve," Crais says. "To purchase a $4 union downstream of the valve makes it easier to work with that valve if there's a break."

Dan Husney, project manager for Husney Landscape and Irrigation in Cleveland says valve problems he runs into typically are mechanical issues or diaphragms sticking open due to dirt or debris under the diaphragm preventing it from closing. If it's an electrical problem, replacing the solenoid usually is the fix.

Addressing the diaphragm or solenoid is always preferred over replacing the valve entirely.

"There are some manufacturers of valves with chronic problems where, if we run into those, we are better off changing out the valves," Husney says. "But I've seen others last 10 to 20 years, so you can't benchmark the years they will last. It can be tedious and labor intensive to replace them depending how they're manifolded together." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

It's important to make sure valves are clear of any debris.

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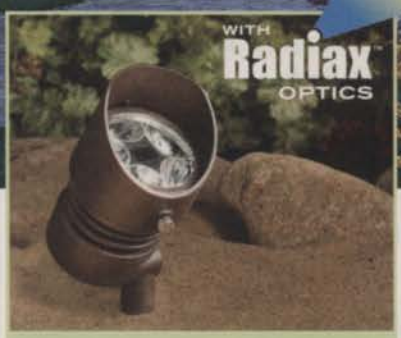

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[By Kristen Hampshire]

A creative drive

Joe Pavlovicz wants to do more than just install plants for customers.

His truck is a think tank. The time spent stalled at a red light is sometimes used to scrawl down a note or two. Great designs happen on the move. Joe Pavlovicz, owner of JTS Landscaping in Seville, Ohio, says, "I'm thinking of ideas all day long – and I feel like 90 percent of my ideas come when I'm driving around in my truck."

Or lying in bed. Or walking the properties while his installation crews are practicing their craft, laying intricate outdoor living spaces using interlocking paver systems or creating organic-feeling gardens the freestyle way, using natural stone.

For the love of design, Pavlovicz began this business as a high-school graduate living in his parents' house, and he has grown it in 25 years into a firm with 15 employees, and a portfolio of work that speaks to this flair for creativity.

Craftsmanship and client service separate JTS Landscaping from the pack. "A lot of people can put plants down," says Pavlovicz, who was working in a garden center after school, long before he had a driver's license.

He has grown a team of experts who have helped cultivate JTS Landscaping into a strong and growing business.

"I've always looked at the business this way. If our employees are happy and continue to do good work, our customers are happy, our guys get more work, we get different opportunities and everyone is happy – it keeps going 'round and 'round."

Put your stamp on it

When you win a client's trust, you can earn the freedom to express creativity in a landscape design. Such was the case at a property where Joe Pavlovicz had been working since he was a teenager. In the last 25 years, he has helped the homeowner completely revamp the property three times.

Joe Pavlovicz likes when his customers let him get creative on a project.

So when the client called and said he had found a bronze fountain and needed Pavlovicz to "figure out how we are going to put this somewhere," Pavlovicz knew he would have some artist's license to create a proper space for the outdoor artwork.

In this case, Pavlovicz removed some problem-area turf and tied the fountain into the rest of the gardens with walkways and hedges.

Pavlovicz loves a design challenge like this, where a client basically turns over the keys to his or her property and says: Do your thing. Part of earning those jobs requires building strong relationships with clients and proving yourself by performing on projects they request.

That's why the client jokingly refers to his own landscape as "JTS's place."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JTS LANDSCAPING

GROWING HIS OWN. "You're not going to work for me the rest of your life – what are you going to do?" That's what the owner of the garden center where Pavlovicz had worked since grade school asked him one day. Pavlovicz replied, "Well, I don't know." His mentor planted the seed: Why don't you do your own thing?

"He gave me a tip to start my own business," says Pavlovicz, who was 18 when this conversation happened.

"He bought a truck and said I could use it and just make the payments on it. Within three months, I bought the truck off of him." Pavlovicz started working for this owner when he was eight years old, essentially working as a farm hand before the guy ever opened a garden center.

JTS Landscsaping has been in business for 25 years.

The little outfit raised produce and perennials, so young Pavlovicz picked veggies and did whatever else was necessary to keep the plants growing.

When the owner opened a garden center, Pavlovicz carried potted plants out to customers' cars, and eventually he worked in the nursery selling plant material.

"I can remember having a Dirr's book, and people would come to the garden center and ask what a plant does, and I'd read the book to them," he says. "That is how I learned about plants – by selling them."

Pavlovicz continued to work at the garden center through high school before starting his own company out of his parent's house with three guys and two trucks.

He took classes at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio, during winters for the first couple of seasons he was in business.

But the housing boom in Medina, Ohio soon sucked up all Pavlovicz's extra time – in a good way. It was the mid-1990s and Medina was rapidly developing county. "There was more work around here to do than you could really perform,"

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Pavlovicz says. JTS Landscaping embraced the boom.

And at the same time, Pavlovicz and the firm sought out opportunities to make a mark in the industry.

"Our business was evolving at the same time that interlocking concrete pavers were coming out," he says.

The company is known for its hardscape designs, Pavlovicz says. "There are two parts to a hardscape.

"There is the precision aspect where a patio might be 16 by 16 feet with (interlocking paver) design work."

And there is a side of this type of work that involves using natural stone and designing as you go.

Pavlovicz has grown JTS Landscaping into a firm with 15 employees.

JTS is equipped with two craftsmen who are accomplished at each technique. "One is like a carpenter and the other is more of an artist – he doesn't know what (the job) will look like until it's done," Pavlovicz says.

"A lot of times, a job begins with a pile of dirt and rocks – the (competitor) may have the same pile, but will he be able to do the same craftsmanship? It's all about what you do with the materials and how you put it all together in a landscape."

CULTIVATING A TEAM. "The green industry is still green, in my opinion," Pavlovicz says.

He's talking about business acumen and the constant need to learn new skills to keep up with product introductions and emerging trends.

"We have all seen landscaping evolve from a couple of shrubs to all of this hardscape and structures and pergolas and low-

(continued on page 114)

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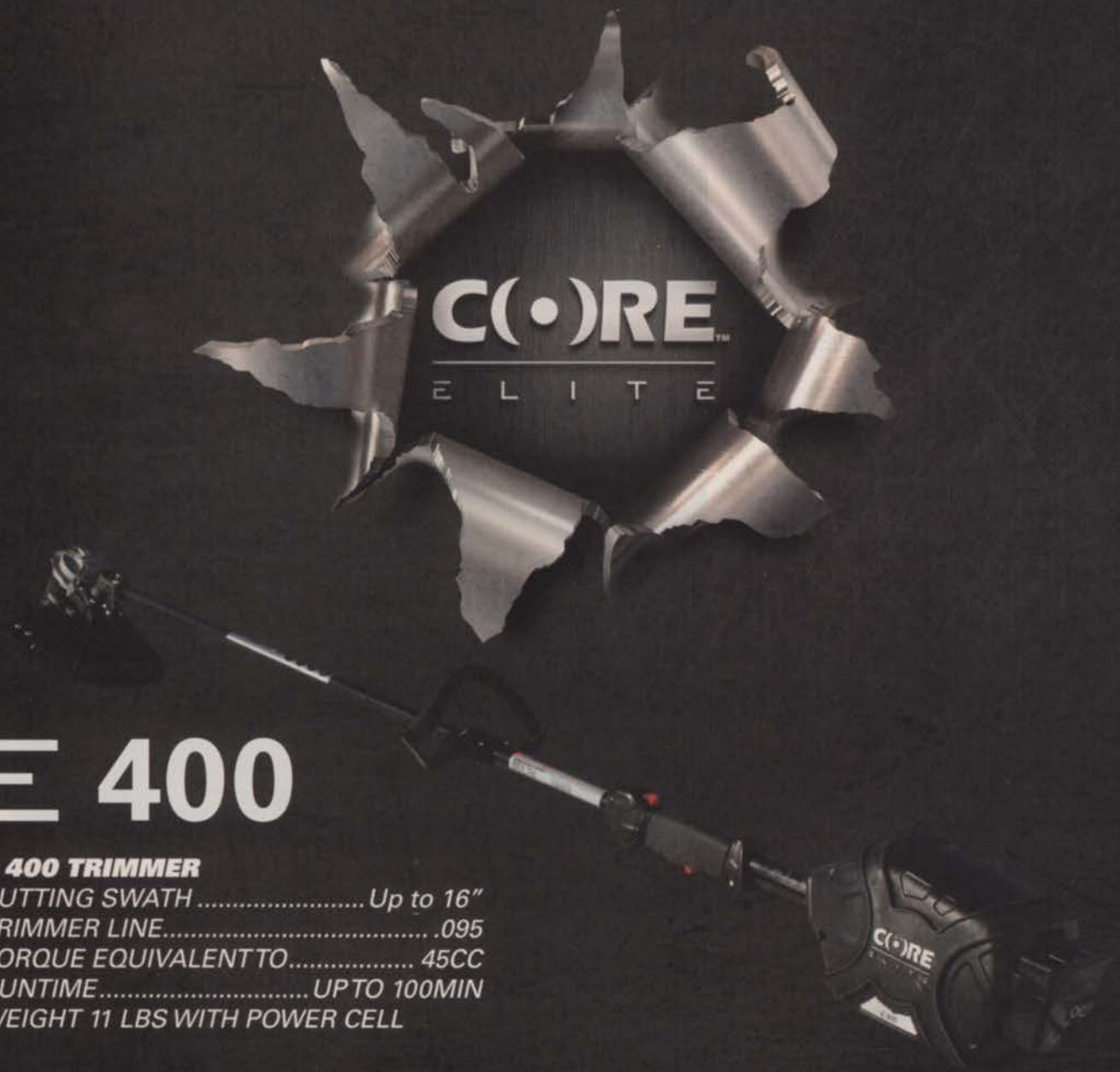

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The rules of BUILDING RET

Retaining walls can be a profitable addition to your landscape service profile, but there are some important considerations to keep in mind.

By Lindsey Getz

There's a lot that goes into building a successful retaining wall, and those who underestimate the required steps and skills are putting themselves at risk. A faulty retaining wall is not only a risk to reputation, but a significant liability. Understanding the engineering principles of segmental block wall installation is critical to the wall's integrity, says Keith Frederick, president of Environmental Landscape Associates based in Doylestown, Pa. Those who are successful building retaining walls understand a number of elements and how they work together for construction.

"Proper base materials and compaction, proper backfill materials and ratios and correct drainage are all key elements," Frederick says. "The biggest mistake new installers make is thinking a wall is simply a matter of putting in the base course and stacking it up without understanding the hydrology or soils of a site."

AT THE BASE. When it comes to something as important as a retaining wall, you should never cut corners, says Scott Shorrow, president of Landscape Concepts in Frederick, Md. For instance, geogrid is used for reinforcement but because it's expensive to buy in a large roll, Shorrow says some contractors might be tempted to skimp. Shorrow says that's a big mistake. "If the retaining wall calls for six-feet of geogrid, we'd be more likely to cut that at 6.5 than to short it," he says. "I'd rather put some extra in than cut it too short. I call geogrid 'cheap insurance' and we put a layer or two of it into every wall."

It can definitely be argued that the most important part of a retaining wall is its base. Les Cline, co-owner of Teacher's Landscaping & Irrigation in Olathe, Kan., says that the most common source of wall failure he's seen has been due to inadequate foundation. "Designing and installing a proper base is essential for the long-term viability of your project – and your reputation," Cline says.

Failing to install a proper base is a common but detrimental mistake made by first-timers. "Any of the major manufacturers' wall systems will produce a nice looking finished product but unless the base prep is done correctly, it is both a waste of time and money for the contractor and the client," says Ed Swietanski of Gill's Landscaping in

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TEACHER'S LANDSCAPING & IRRIGATION

ENTION

GET CREATIVE

There are times that erosion and land grading may force the need for a retaining wall. While the addition of a wall might be an unwanted necessity, there are some ways to make the wall more appealing. Contractors who are willing to get a little creative may have even more success within this service offering.

Smart design has a lot to do with how the retaining wall will look within the rest of the landscape. Strategic plantings can play a part in dressing up – or even distracting from – a retaining wall, though soil compaction and root zone issues need to be taken into account. "Some plants with light root structures could be planted at the top of the wall and allowed to grow over the fronts to soften the overall impact," says Keith Frederick, president of Environmental Landscape Associates based in Doylestown, Pa.

Contractors who have gotten creative are also making use of the green, plantable walls now available, says Scott Shorrow, president of Landscape Concepts in Frederick, Md. "These walls have plant pockets that allow plants to actually grow within the wall," he says. "The plants usually have to be lower maintenance – high heat tolerant and drought resistant – though some more complex systems can actually have the irrigation system tied into the wall."

Sometimes just the shape of the wall can up the creativity ante. "Even with more commercial walls, you can still get creative with some curve instead of going totally linear," Shorrow says. "A curved wall offers some interesting appeal."

Proper base materials and compaction, proper backfill materials and ratios and correct drainage are all key elements of installing retaining walls.

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SAFETY

Taking the proper safety precautions is important, but a step that is sometimes underestimated by landscape contractors who are new to working in the hardscape world.

"Respiratory health is a big health and safety issue that continues to be on the forefront of paver and wall installation safety," says Frederick.

"When cutting pavers or blocks, always wear an approved respirator. The potential for lung damage is very high risk." Beyond that, Frederick says the standard construction safety advice should always apply.

"Wear work boots, preferably with steel toes," he says.

"Wear gloves, heavy duty long pants, and no loose fitting clothing. Helmets are always a good idea on a construction site, but especially when heavy equipment is moving materials around."

"A lot of the common mistakes boil down to cutting corners and that's true of safety precautions as well," Shorrow says.

"Never cut corners on the proper safety equipment. It can result in injured employees and workers' comp issues. For instance, a contractor should not be wearing sneakers to lift block. A dropped block could easily break a foot."

Mullica Hill, N.J. "Underestimating both the cost of labor and materials to do a proper base install is also a common mistake. Think about accessibility to the site, soil conditions and other obstacles such as tree roots and irrigation systems that will add time to your project."

Swietanski says that cutting corners on the base puts the company's reputation at stake. "The base is the part of the project that no one sees and rarely gives it a second thought – until it fails and the whole wall has to be rebuilt," he says. "You have one shot to do it right. The second time is twice as hard and much more costly."

ALL ABOUT EDUCATION. Getting the proper training is a key to success and an important step to take before tackling a build. "Get training and get certified by a reputable organization like the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA) or the Interlocking Pavement Institute (ICPI)," Cline says. "Segmental retaining wall manufacturers also have training classes offered through their vendors. Ask to be notified when these classes are offered."

Shorrow says he places a lot of emphasis on internal education, as well. "We are constantly training our people," he says. "We spend a lot of time on safety training and making sure everyone knows the right way to lift a block. Safety training helps prevent accidents. It's also important to make sure workers are proficient and good equipment operators before sending them out to build walls."

Often the biggest lessons do come with that first build. If you're just starting out, Cline suggests taking a "manageable project" for the first job. That would be one that isn't too large or has too many variables. "There are things you can learn from building your first wall that you cannot learn anywhere else," he says. "You just need to get some experience under your belt."

Of course, education isn't just for the newcomers. Cline says that even veteran wall builders should consider classes and ongoing education.

"It never hurts to keep your training up to date," he says. "Things change and a professional should be on the top of his game at all times."

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The project included a circular design with curved hardscaped areas defining the series of terraces.

A hardscape dream come true

John Fields took a simple project and turned it into an award-winner. By David Aquilina

In October 2011, when the owners of an elegant brick home in Clyde, N.C. contacted John Fields, president of Haywood Landscapes, they had a modest project in mind. They wanted a small, manageable area to start a vegetable garden. When Fields stepped outside through the French doors from the home's great room, he surveyed an inspiring vista of rolling hills with the Smoky Mountains in the distance. He envisioned greater potential.

"I saw an opportunity to extend the features of the home out into the landscape with a series of terraces connecting upper and lower levels to create a pleasant flow of beautiful outdoor living spaces interspersed with garden areas," he said.

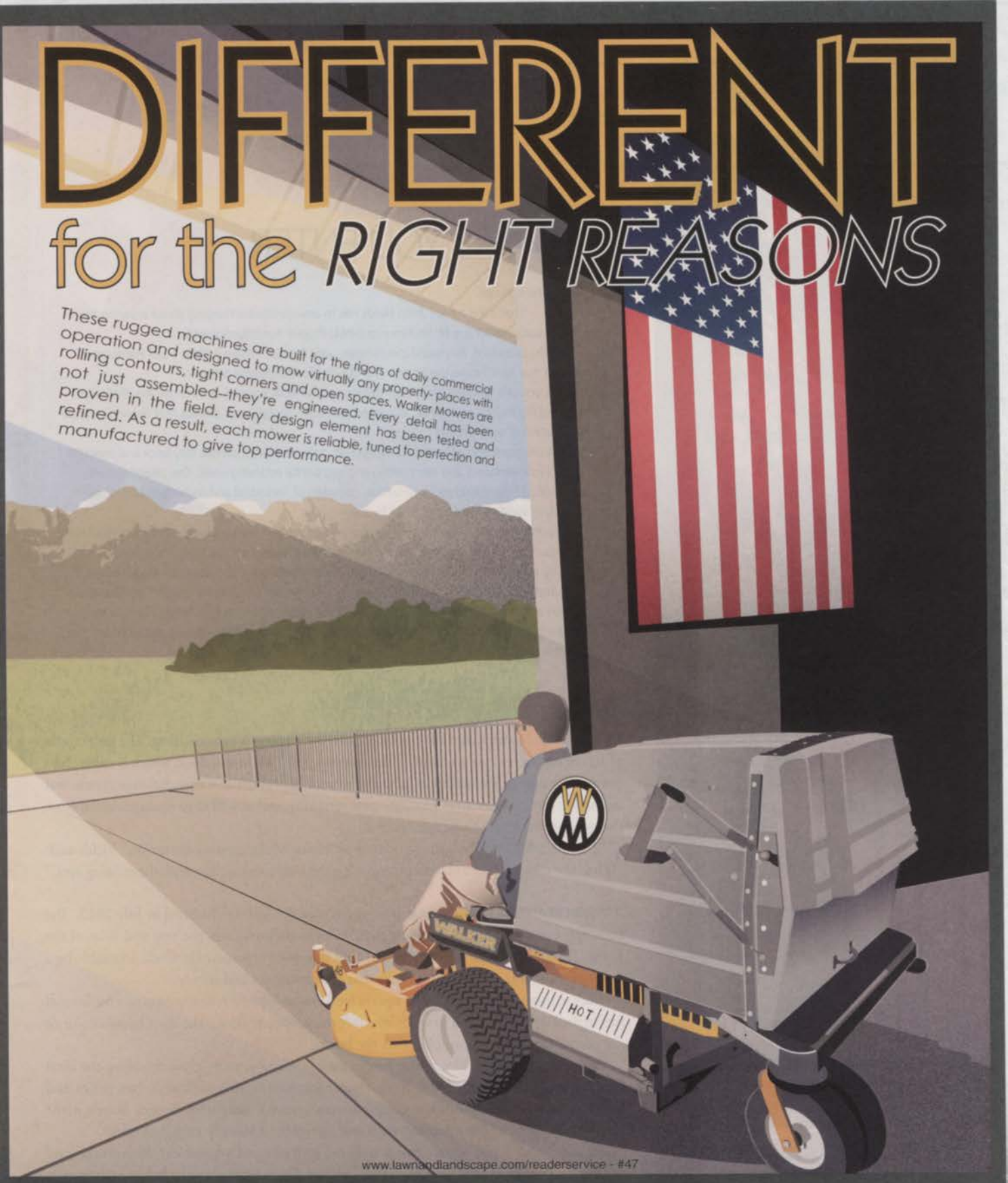
Fields' vision captivated the homeowners. They gave him the green light to develop a plan to realize his concept. In November 2011, Fields brought in colleagues from Broadbooks Associates, P.A., a landscape architecture firm. Together they came up with two alternatives. The homeowners selected a circular design with curved hardscaped areas defining the series of terraces.

CHALLENGES EMERGE. The project got underway in January 2012. A significant problem was quickly revealed.

"An existing patio area surrounded the great room on three sides. When we cut back the overgrown shrubbery around it, we found troublesome cracks in the retaining wall attached to the house," Fields said.

Several areas of the wall were failing, allowing water to seep into the home. Moreover, the

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PINE HALL BRICK



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Think ahead.

That's the advice John Fields has to any contractor thinking about entering the 2014 Hardscape North America (HNA) Project Awards competition.

Fields, president, Haywood Landscapes, won for his "Where Edibles Meet Hardscapes" project that took home the prize in the Clay Brick - Residential category.

"As you are working on it, start thinking about how you will summarize the challenges and highlights," he says. "You also need excellent, professional photos that show the scope and details of your project."

The program encompasses 22 categories, organized by material: clay brick and concrete pavers (conventional and permeable) and segmental retaining walls. The categories are subdivided by project type (residential, commercial, industrial and municipal) with some including additional subcategories by size.

The institute will issue the 2014 call for entries in May. Jessica Chase, director of marketing and membership for the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute says contractors should start by assembling information and high-quality photos that showcase their best projects.

Submissions require a 250-word summary. Summaries that define project goals, explain design and installation challenges and highlight solutions and results help judges as they review project photos. "Even as the project was underway, I knew it was special and deserving of national recognition for my team," Fields says.

footer was undersized, and the deck tied into the patio was deteriorating. The best course of action was to remove and replace the retaining wall, patio and deck, which is engineered the area for new construction to solve the structural problems. A new drainage system was devised to direct water away from the new retaining wall as well as to manage runoff from the new hard surfaces to be constructed.

"The revised plan solved the structural problems of the existing footprint," Fields said. "It had the added benefit of better integrating the new construction with the existing area."

A VISION REALIZED. Construction took seven months and was finished in July 2012. The completed project has five levels extending out and down from the rear and sides of the home. It provides space for edibles, installed alongside ornamentals, made accessible by a series of walkways and retaining walls that are functional and stately.

The existing upper patio (1,275 square feet) was redone with new pavers in a traditional herringbone pattern and a new 20-by-10-foot composite deck. The dark brown color of the composite material complements the bricks.

The project added 1,325 square feet of new hardscape, more than doubling the total hardscaped area. The new lower levels feature interconnecting walkways, two patios and four retaining walls. Multiple paving patterns create a delightful design. Subtle night backlighting accents the retaining walls and pavers for a visually engaging effect.

An additional 1,300 square feet is devoted to fruits and vegetables. With multi-level gardening, the plants can be easily accessed and tended to from above or below each terrace.

What was Haywood Landscapes' biggest accomplishment? After 26 years of never having even owned patio furniture, the homeowners are now avid backyard entertainers. L&L

The author is a freelance writer in Minneapolis.

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By Brooke N. Bates

More than pretty lawns

Greenscape connects with a green industry movement to define its mission, attract employees who believe it and clients who can benefit from it.

For 35 years, Greenscape has focused on delivering "outstanding results through great service," as its mission states. But only recently did the landscape design, build, management firm in Holly Springs, N.C., begin to articulate why it's committed to giving clients green spaces.

With a slow-and-steady approach to sustainable growth, President Daniel Currin leads the company his father, Michael, founded in 1979, in addition to three Weed Man franchises that deliver lawn care services. Collectively, the companies have added 30 employees in the past couple years, now totaling more than 160 at peak. Greenscape has always been committed to recruiting and reinvesting in the right employees to manifest the company mission.

But recently, Greenscape learned three little words to define its mission, helping attract teammates – and customers – who share it.

"The thing that we've recently connected with, both internally and with our clients, has been the whole Come Alive Outside movement," Currin says. "We're connecting with that as why we come to work every day. It's a way to communicate our 'why' and identify other people's 'why,' which is our goal at the end of the day: to do business with people that believe what we believe."

The movement quickly became a passion of employees, guiding community outreach and non-profit volunteer work for charities.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREENSCAPE

BUSINESS BENEFITS. Established in 2010, the Come Alive Outside movement rose in response to the country's decrease in health and increase in obesity due to sedentary, indoor lifestyles. Citing the health and social benefits of spending time in nature, communities and corporations are taking strides to activate people outside.

The concept clicked for Cur-

Unified brands under one vision

The thought of running three Weed Man lawn care franchises in addition to a 35-year-old design/build and landscape management company might overwhelm some people.

But for Greenscape President Daniel Currin, it's simple. To successfully manage two separate brands that sell different – but complementary – services, he keeps them clearly defined externally, but unified internally.

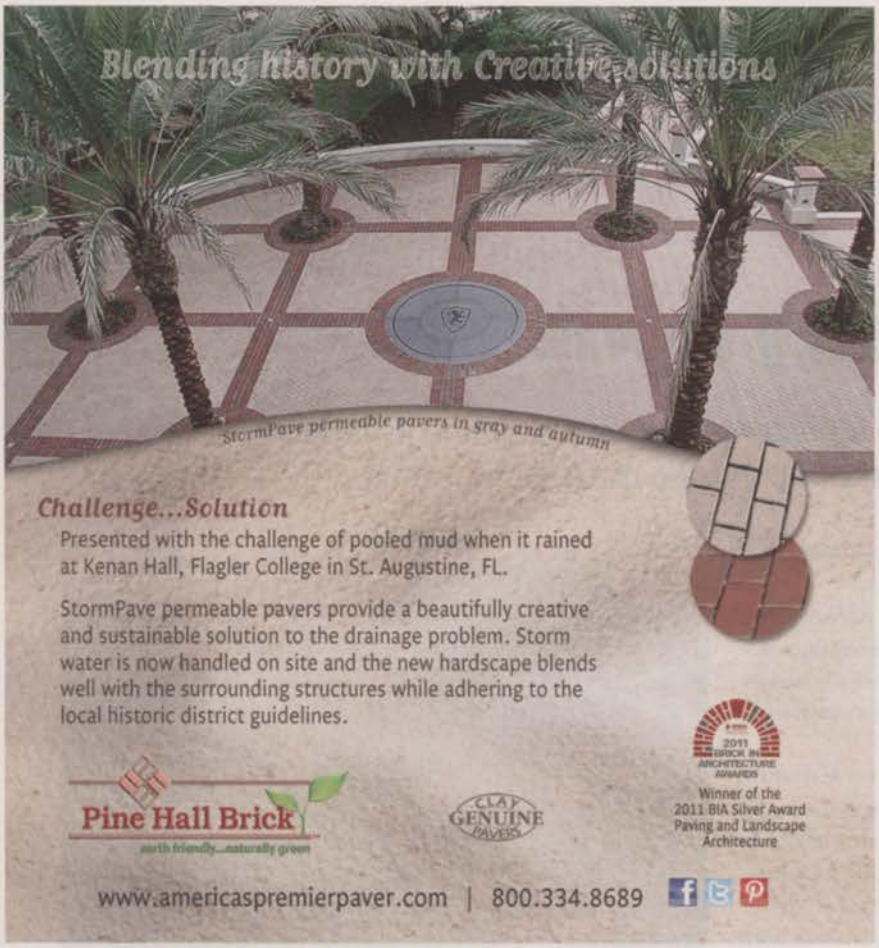
"We take advantage of economies of scale when it comes to behind-the-scenes, back-of-the-house (functions like) finance and HR," Currin says. "But on the front lines, people are usually working for one brand." That means each business has its own crews in its own trucks providing its own services. However, there's often crossover – as the Weed Man lawn care program is included under the basic Greenscape maintenance package – so it's crucial to maintain unity between teams.

Internally, Currin wants everyone to feel like part of one big, happy family that shares a common goal. So collectively, everyone bonds together as "The Green Team."

"We don't use it too much externally because we don't want to create more confusion for the customer," Currin says. "So you might represent one brand or the other to the customer, but internally, we're all part of the Green Team with our Green Team mission, vision, principles and values."

By aligning the lawn care and landscaping teams with a common focus, Currin builds a cohesive team that works together under a unified mission to maximize results and achieve growth.

"We might have different business strategies and sales goals, but ultimately, our principles and values, our mission and vision are the same," Currin says. "That's how we're able to run both companies at one time."



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rin and his team by articulating the concepts they were already discussing with customers. In fact, it was Greenscapes' commercial clients who first envisioned Come Alive Outside projects – just not in those words.

"You see corporations seeing that there is true value in keeping their employees' health and wellness up, so they've been investing in nature trails and engaging outdoor spaces for employees to use," Currin says.

"You see homeowners associations and apartment complexes updating their outdoor spaces to pull residents outside and reconnect socially with people in the neighborhood. What's interesting is they're very much for-profit and they say, 'This is worth spending big money on to separate ourselves when we're competing for tenants, because tenants find real value in outdoor living space.'"

Though Come Alive Outside focuses on the health and social benefits of outdoor activity, Greenscape's customers have also recognized business benefits. As companies realize the value of functional outdoor spaces, they're investing more – often, using budgets not typically spent on landscaping.

"It's generating new revenue because some of these projects are being funded outside of traditional landscape maintenance budgets," Currin says. "They're being funded out of employee benefit budgets or HR budgets or even wellness budgets. In the past, companies weren't spending this money with our industry, because we weren't providing the solutions they were looking for. So, we reshaped the conversation."

By switching perspectives, Currin made business about much more than pretty lawns. The enhanced value proposition helped him tap into new opportunities.

"In the past, when you go in and talk to people about landscaping or mowing their grass, it's a short conversation," he says. "But when we talk about Come Alive Outside and the impact on the community, it's led to some fascinating conversations, minimally, and some great opportunities. We've been able to connect with people at a different level because it's a higher value proposition when you're talking about health and wellness and social connection and the environment."

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The charity landscaping work helps drive home the company's belief that communities should enjoy outdoor space.

SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN. While Come Alive Outside has amplified Greenscape's sales pitch, it's not just a pitch. The company has an authentic connection with the concept – which is why it works.

The movement quickly became a passion of employees, guiding community outreach and non-profit volunteer work for charities like the Boys & Girls Club. The shared philosophy unifies them under the mission. "It's not just, 'I'm coming here to mow grass,'" Currin says, "'but I come here to have an impact on the people I serve.'"

As Come Alive Outside aligns the organization, it leads Greenscape toward clients and projects that fit the vision. Currin says: "We've been going after clients who look at landscaping as an investment, who want to get a return by attracting more people to their shops, or getting employees to engage more, or creating more value for neighborhoods. It's helped us better define what our ideal customer looks like."

Greenscape's ideal clients aren't just commercial and high-end residential buyers of landscaping services. Through Weed Man franchises, the company also serves basic lawn care needs at lower price points – and much higher volume. Currin says these services will be crucial to the vision. "If you look at turfgrass as being one of the most common green spaces we have," he says, "then it's a huge part of creating engaging green spaces for people to use and enjoy."

As Greenscape dives into a Come Alive Outside mentality, the company's programs and products shift into alignment. Just look at the basic Weed Man lawn care package. In the past, the minimal program only covered the front yard, because a nice lawn required neighbors' envy.

"But most people don't use their front yards to 'Come Alive Outside,'" Currin says. "They use their backyards. So our flip in philosophy is: If you buy our program, minimally, we've got to do your backyard. Don't worry about the front yard, because it's not about what the neighbors think anymore. So as we get the 'why' lined up, the 'how' and 'what' we do is going to fall in line."

Now, with the why in place, Greenscape is positioned to grow beyond projected 2014 revenue of more than $13 million – and keep delivering results that transcend beyond pretty lawns.

"Obviously we're in the green industry, but our value creation has more to do with our ability to create engaging green spaces for people to 'Come Alive Outside' in," Currin says.

"If we can enhance outdoor environments and create engaging spaces to pull people outside, then we can start to improve overall health and wellness." L&L

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Southern Botanical sprays backyards with predominantly liquid applications throughout the year.

Analyzing and fertilizing

What the shrinking gap of differences between liquid and granular options mean for LCOs.

By Brooke N. Bates

In the backyard brawl of liquid versus granular fertilizers, neutral ground may be the greenest. With so many variables affecting each formula's effectiveness, and innovation closing the gap between the two, the unbiased approach works best.

Though 90 percent of fertilizer applications are granular at Tomlinson Bomberger Lawn Care, Landscape, and Pest Control in Lancaster, Pa., Ryan Mason says he sees equal pros and cons for each.

"I'm an advocate of both because I'm an advocate of what works," says the lawn care and plant health application services manager. "We want to make sure we're doing not only what's best for the environment, but what's the best value for clients. Cost is a small part of it, but it's about great results."

Both liquid and granular fertilizers deliver results – in certain situations. For every LCO that values the instant-greening power of quick-release liquids, another swears by slow-release granulars.

REMEMBER THE HOMEOWNER. Southern Botanical in Dallas sprays predominantly liquid applications throughout the year, finishing with a granular round in the fall to release nutrients slowly through the winter.

"The attractiveness of liquid fertilizer is that plants utilize that much sooner than

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a granular," says Jason New, vice president of garden management. "There's more of an instant impact. So if you're having issues and you need quick results, a liquid application is what you need."

Though quicker green-up is appealing to customers, liquid's strength can also backfire.

"Being that liquid fertilizers are available to the plant more quickly, they cause a surge growth because they're immediately absorbed," Mason says, which can cause customers to mow too much, too soon. "If it's a really quick-release liquid, this thins out the cell walls, which causes the plant to become weaker and more vulnerable to disease outbreaks. Liquid can have a volatile effect on a lawn if not applied properly at the proper time."

That's why cultural practices surrounding applications are just as important as the fertilizer itself – which makes customer education key. Mason emphasizes the timing of irrigation and appropriate mowing heights, as well as recycling grass clippings, to maximize results.

90 percent of fertilizations at Tomlinson Bomberger Lawn Care, Landscape, and Pest Control in Lancaster, Pa., are granular.

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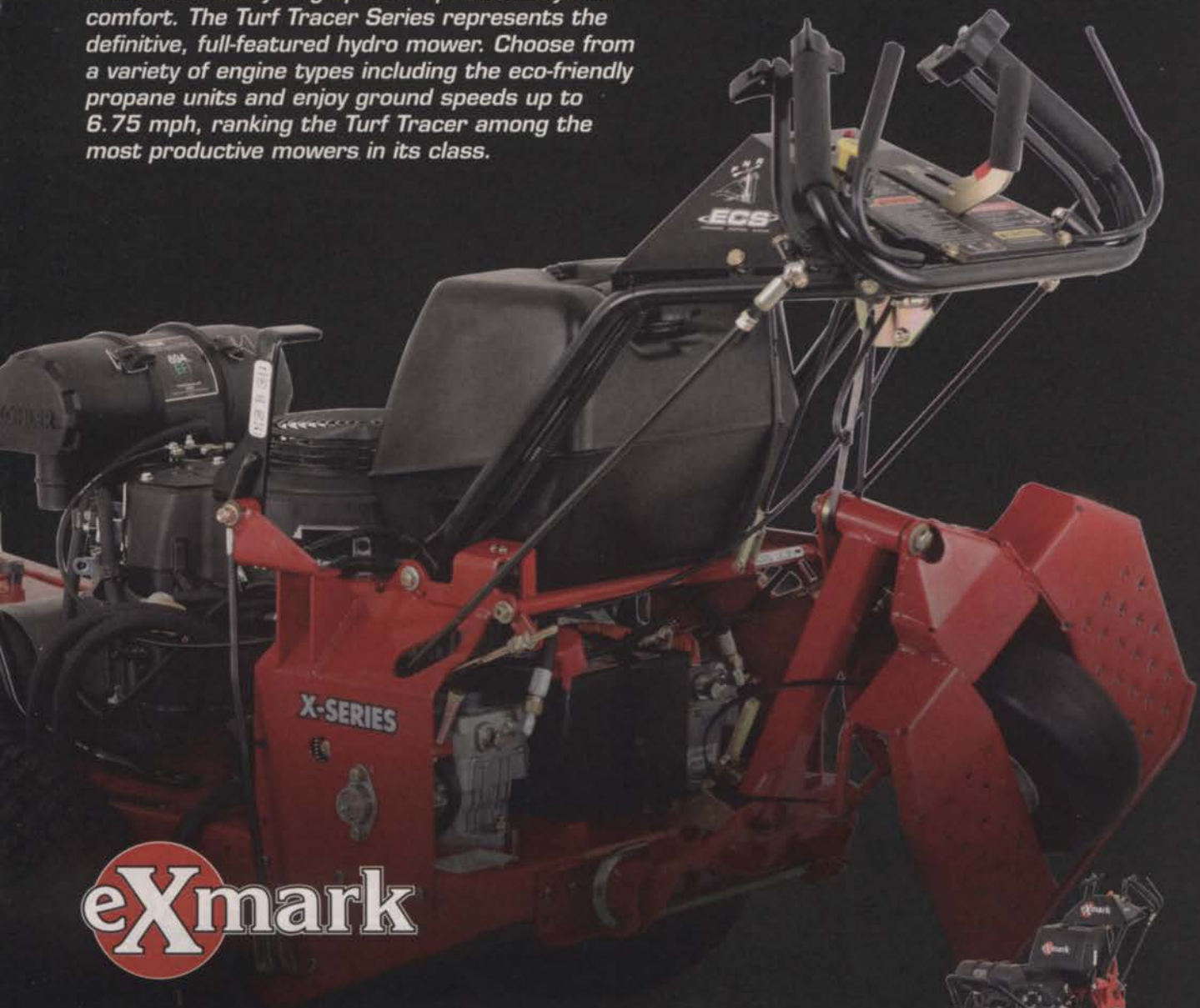

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Mason

CHECK THE TEMPERATURE. Weather can botch fertilizer functions, too. Humidity can clump granulars, causing spotty application. Liquids are typically easier to control, but wind can blow droplets off-target and evaporate liquid quickly. New recommends granular in those cases. But when rainstorms loom, he opts for liquids, which won't be carried away.

If granular stays put long enough, though, it can be just as effective as liquids over longer periods.

"What we like about (granular) is lawns can be fed with less frequency," Mason says. "It does take more time – which is beneficial when you're dealing with hot, dry periods where you don't want to risk burning the lawn. With slow release, the customer's getting a strong, healthy feeding that's going to promote a stronger root system over time."

BLURRED LINES. Of course, the biggest misconception is that all liquids are quick-release and all granulars are gradual. That's no longer the case, says Paul Gebinine, plant health care manager at Terracare Associates in Littleton, Colo.

"There used to be either a yearlong or an eight-week granular product, and now you can pretty much get any release time you want," says Gebinine, citing 8, 12, 36, 46 and 60-week options. "Your granular's going to have a mix of some quick-release and some slow-release in it, so it really doesn't take long for it to pop."

The drawback is the mess displaced granules make when they "pop."

"With granulars, it's hard to get all that blown off the sidewalks and driveways," Gebinine says. "Usually, iron is a darker particle that's mixed in with a fertilizer blend. It's harder to see when you're blowing it off – until it rains, and then there's a rust stain on the customer's driveway."

Aside from cleanup, New says granular labor is less complicated,

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while Mason says liquid is easier to apply evenly. Gebinine sees equal room for application error on either side. "You still have to calibrate everything, either way," Gebinine says.

MONEY MATTERS. Cost can be another factor. Spreaders can run a few hundred dollars, as opposed to several thousand for a spray rig. But consider the overall cost per application.

"The labor and equipment costs can be higher for liquid application, but the material cost is actually much less expensive," New says. "At first, my big misconception was that liquid applications were more expensive and didn't last as long, and that granular was less expensive and lasted longer. The reality is: If you have the right people and the right equipment, it costs you less to do liquid applications, and both last equally as long."

Mason finds liquids cost about 10 to 25 percent less than comparable granular fertilizers – a difference of several dollars per thousand square feet. But the gap is shrinking.

"Granular isn't that much more expensive anymore," Mason says. "When I do cost comparisons for the same amount of nitrogen on a lawn with liquid

Cultural practices surrounding applications are just as important as the fertilizer itself, so customer education is key.

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against granular, I'm really not seeing a huge difference anymore. The misconception is that granular is too expensive, but things are changing."

With costs increasingly comparable, the clincher for Mason and Gebinine becomes volume.

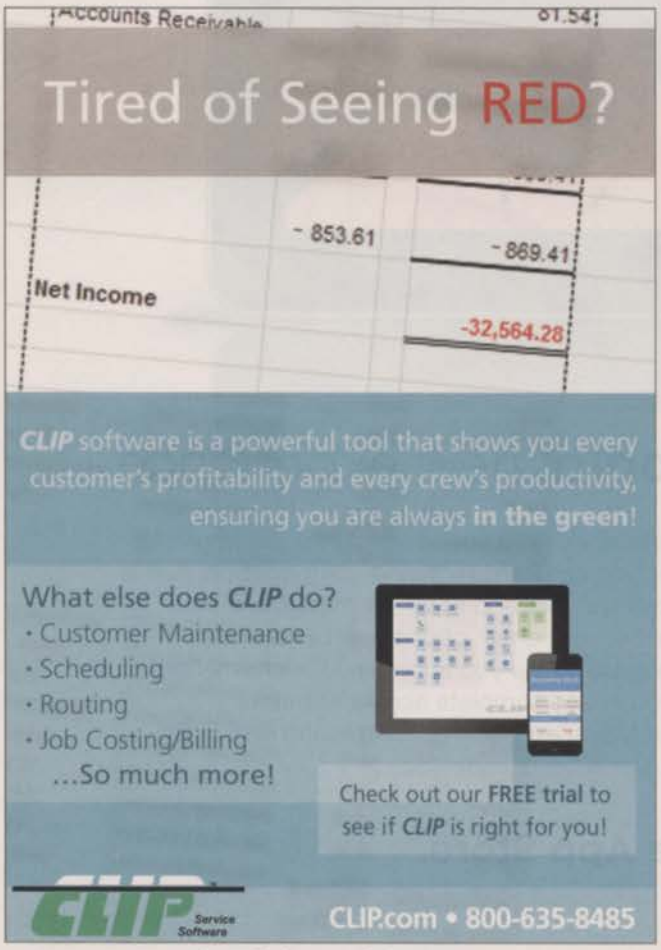
"When you're doing a lot of square footage with a liquid, you have to have a gigantic truck," Gebinine says. "You're going to be filling it constantly, so you have to carry that liquid fertilizer with you in the truck to fill the tank. You can get a lot further with a truckload of granular fertilizer."

As the differences between liquid and granular fertilizers grow more congruous, it forces LCOs to carefully test the options to understand what works best for local conditions.

"There's not a perfect recipe for one or the other," New says. "Sometimes, it's a perfect recipe for the landscape that you're working on. It's very climate-specific, so really it's knowing your soils and getting a customized program for your area. It doesn't matter which one you use, as long as you've got the right nutrients inside of it." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

You should test both granular and liquid fertilizers to understand which will work better for your local conditions.



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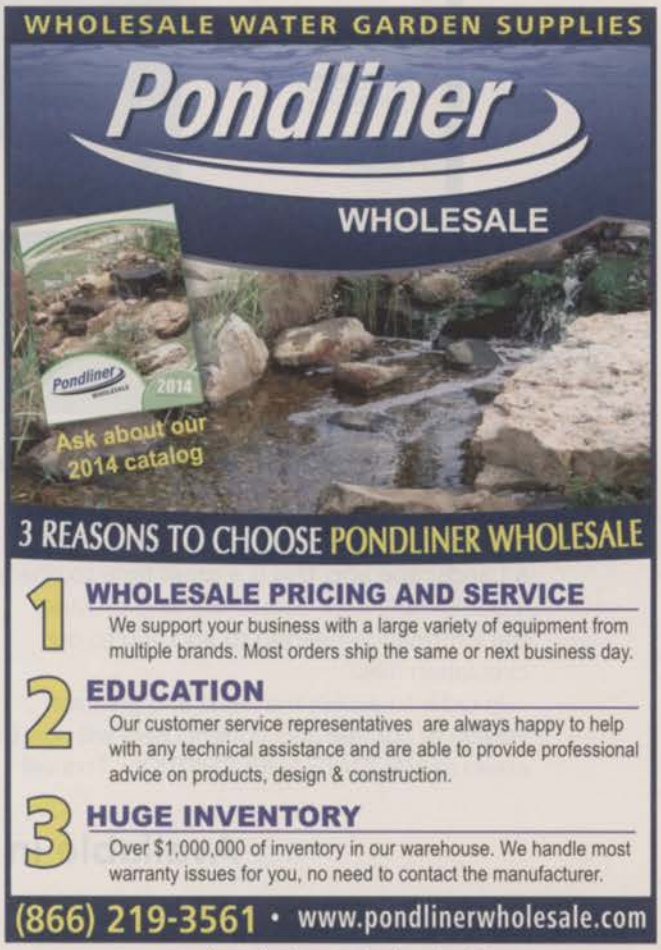

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Just add WATER

Before you dive into the pool business, take some notes from these professionals who know what it takes to design and install the ultimate water feature.

By Kristen Hampshire

Pools are a natural fit for a landscape design/build firm that wants to add a dynamic dimension to projects. But it's not a service to plunge into without careful study of the education and licensing required to execute pool projects. *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with three pool professionals about how they do it successfully.

Build by the book

Water adds another "sense" to the landscape, and the intimate outdoor spaces Scott Cohen designs for clients gain more texture, tranquility and recreational appeal when a pool is involved.

"It's not just how pools look – but how they sound, and the environments we create by combining water with fire effects, with the reflection of trees and plantings and texture," says Cohen, owner of The Green Scene in Chatsworth, Calif., and author of nine books, including *PoolScapes* and *The Candid Contractor*.

Pools set the mood in an outdoor living space. So incorporating this feature into a landscape is only natural for high-end designers like Cohen.

Cohen is a licensed landscape contractor, a general contractor and pool contractor in the state of California.

"We can design everything for homeowners, so they only have to manage one contract and one company rather than coordinating multiple contractors," he says.

There is a huge learning curve in building pools. Common "rookie mistakes" can cost thousands in fines and repairs. Cohen inspects defects in the field for the Contractors State License Board and construction defect attorneys.

Soil is the culprit for two key problems that Cohen spots in pool designs installed by inexperienced contractors.

While landscapers are accustomed to testing soil for acidity or alkalinity, or its composition, the expansive nature of soil is often overlooked.

"We have to know what kind of soil we are dealing with because the pool shell needs to be designed to accommodate that," he says, explaining why a soil test is always recommended before breaking ground.

The Green Scene

Scott Cohen, supervising landscape and pool designer **Location:** Chatsworth, Calif. **Established:** 1969 **Employees:** 25 **2013 Revenues:** $4 million **Customers:** 100% residential **Services:** pool design/installation and landscape design/build

Then, there's the issue of differential settlement. The deep end of the pool might dig down into native soil, while the shallow end exposes "fill" soil used to grade properties.

Soils settle differently over time, which is why a crack may form in the middle of the pool shell, where it ramps up from the deep end to the shallow area. Cohen says involving a structural engineer can mitigate such issues.

Then there are pool renovations – a common scenario because homeowners want to revamp this space so it blends with a new landscape design.

People want that outdated "sidewalk" border torn up so that the lawn can be brought

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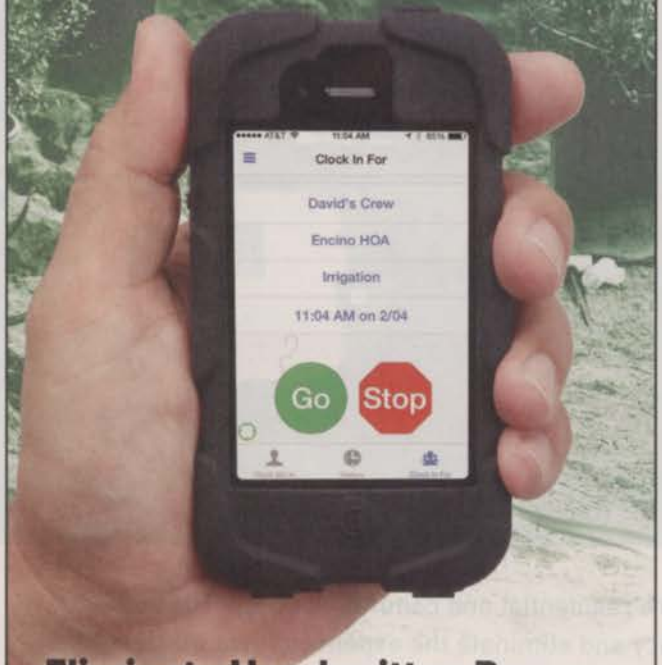

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right up to the edge, called a "zero deck detail." "The concrete pool shell has to be designed to handle that installation," Cohen says. When concrete decking is removed and the pool's bond beam was not designed to be a zero deck detail, cracking can occur. "We see that a lot," Cohen says.

Pools are a natural fit for Cohen's business – and for his clients' landscapes. "I couldn't imagine designing these back yards without doing the pool," Cohen says.

"It would be like creating a painting but missing three colors."

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

Diagnose the dirt. To avoid problems later on, always do a soil test before breaking ground on a pool project.

Focus on strengths. Cohen knows where his crew is strong. "I use my in-house staff for the things we are really good at and that we do all the time," he says.

Do it all. Cohen can design everything for homeowners, which benefits the customer because they only have to manage one company.

Tapping the pool potential

Swimming pool remodeling projects kept Signature Pools & Landscapes running during the recession, says President Eric Watanabe, a 28-year industry veteran who launched this start-up business a couple years ago.

"People had problems with their old pools, and they were not moving – they had equity in their homes and said, 'We are going to remodel our pool,'" he says.

Not just any contractor is capable or licensed to do such work. But Watanabe is, and over the years, he has invested time and resources in education and certification courses so he can preserve outdated pools, design and build new ones and maintain control of the pool aspect of his landscape projects.

Signature Pools & Landscapes

Eric Watanabe, president **Location:** Granada Hills, Calif. **Established:** 2011 **Employees:** 4 **2013 Revenues:** just less than $1 million **Customers:** 95% residential, 5% commercial **Services:** pool design, installation and remodeling; landscape and irrigation; hardscapes; and landscape maintenance evaluations

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"When I first started in the business, I thought of a pool as … a pool," Watanabe says. "But you realize the water is an art in the landscape, and it is a feature that can be enjoyed every day – you don't have to be in the pool to enjoy it."

Treating a pool's aesthetic quality is a completely different approach to pool design than merely planting a pool into the landscape, Watanabe says. And that's precisely why he sought out certification to design and install pools – so he could take the approach *he* wanted vs. depending on another contractor to execute this vision.

Earlier in Watanabe's career, if a client wanted a pool worked into the landscape design, he had to involve a pool contractor with a separate contract. At the time, a landscape contractor in California could not subcontract with a licensed pool contractor.

"What happened was, you would not have complete control over the project," Watanabe says. "If some of the elevations weren't what you expected, you would have to piece together the rest of the landscape design. Or, you might get conflicts on finishes and tile. Design-wise, you want to have control over the pool and landscape."

Carrying out pool design and installation requires licensing – but it also calls for experience that can only be learned from industry courses and others in the field who share their lessons learned. "It's a landscape contractor's responsibility, if they are putting in a pool, to learn themselves what it takes to build that pool," he says.

Watanabe subcontracts out certain pool tasks, including plumbing because of the advanced hydraulics knowledge required, and structural steel, because it's a trade that

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

Get certified. Know what your state requires in terms of licensing and certification for pool work. Without proper licensure, you could be subject to fines.

Exceed the standards. Building a pool to pass code isn't good enough for Watanabe. "The minimum standard is not the best solution," he says.

Hire strong subs. "If you have a bad heart, that limits what you can do in life – and the same goes for a swimming pool," he says. "You have to have good plumbing, good structural steel – all of your subs have to be strong."

involves a great deal of expertise. It's all about achieving efficiency on the job with specialized, experienced subs.

By partnering with pool industry specialists who manage specific tasks on the job, Watanabe can generally wrap up a pool project in a couple of weeks. "The longer you keep the pool shell exposed, the more chance of having problems," he says of the importance of keeping the job moving along.

On hiring subcontractors and training his own people to do pool work, Watanabe reminds: "Your pool is only as good as the weakest link."

Position pool services

A pool project begins with design – and ideally, it continues with ongoing pool maintenance services that Neave Landscaping in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., provides in effort to gain clients for life.

"We are a one-stop shop for the entire pool project," says Kris Schmitt, landscape designer and an Association of Pool & Spa Professionals (APSP) certified building professional.

Neave Landscaping has been in the pool business for about 15 years of the firm's 40-year history. In the past few years, the company has focused more intently on building its pool business, which is marketed as a distinct division of the business with a dedicated crew of four to six professionals who install pools, and up to three specialists who service them.

Neave Landscaping hired in experts to build this division, and taps into the Northeast Spa & Pool Association (NSPA) and APSP for education.

Neave Landscaping

Kris Schmitt, landscape designer **Location:** Wappingers Falls, N.Y. **Established:** 1973 **Employees:** 55-65 in peak season **2013 Revenues:** $7.5 million **Customers:** 85% residential, 15% commercial **Services:** pool design, installation and service; landscape design/build and maintenance; holiday décor; sports landscapes

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"The education is an investment for the company, but it's necessary – and we see the payoff in terms of client satisfaction and the integrity of the project," Schmitt says.

Neave Pools, which earns a 7-10 percent profit margin on projects, mostly focuses on specialty pool work including grottos, sun shelves and other features.

Of course, implementing a luxury pool design requires deep knowledge and ongoing training, Schmitt says. That includes understanding building techniques and codes.

"That is where contractors can get into trouble," Schmitt says, adding, "The problem with pools is, once they're in, it's not like a plant you can move or switch out easily."

Once the design is agreed upon, the company ushers clients through the entire process, including permitting, which can take up to six to eight months in some counties. The company performs much of the pool work in-house, though the firm subcontracts certain aspects, such as installing the shotcrete.

Meanwhile, once the project is complete, all clients are "introduced" to their pool with an educational session and walk-through to cover safety and pool supervision. From there, Neave often takes over seasonal pool open/close along with weekly service.

Neave also offers pool inspections where they'll ensure pools meet the latest codes and are operating properly. This is an attractive option to new homeowners who purchase a property with a pool. Schmitt says that pools are "not something you want to just jump into" as a landscape firm. But the service is profitable, he says. And, it adds an element of creativity to the business mix. L&L

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

Service smarts. Offering pool services ensures the integrity and safety of the pool over time. Plus, offering service and pool inspections generates leads for pool renovation jobs and other design work.

Pools 101. Neave Landscaping educates clients and prospects about proper pool care and the responsibility associated with owning a pool.

Sharpen your skills. The Neave Pools team regularly attends industry conferences to stay up to date on the latest building technologies and codes.

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BY *Ellen Ely*

Motivate Without Money

Cash is great, but employee appreciation takes the cake. Here are the *five ways* to show them some love.

Imagine the owner of your company came to you and said: "You've been doing an excellent job. All your sites look great. Take these tickets and show your family a good time." When you looked in the envelope, there were four tickets to the opera! How would you feel?

The opera may be the perfect reward for some people, but not all. How could this attempt to acknowledge your good work be more effective? By personalizing the reward. They could have found out your favorite sports team or restaurant, and surprised you with a reward you'd really enjoy.

1. Practice the platinum rule.

Most of us grew up understanding the "Golden Rule;" treat others the way you want to be treated. As knowledge of human motivation evolved, we now suggest practicing the "Platinum Rule," treat others the way they want to be treated.

Consider the "reward" of asking an employee to give a presentation in front of a large audience. You might love the opportunity, but others could literally become physically sick with worry.

There are people who strive to be put in leadership positions and others who reject promotional opportunities year after year. We need all types of people in our industry; the highly ambitions and the quietly content.

By getting to know peoples' preferences, you avoid embarrassing mistakes (that cause the employee to feel disrespected) such as:

- Inviting a vegetarian out for a steak dinner.
- Offering to buy a drink for someone who is an alcoholic.
- Sending flowers to someone with allergies to flowers.

You may ask, "How am I supposed to know those kinds of things about people?

Ask. Simply, ask.

Personalization also motivates people to want to change. By acknowledging each individual's strengths and weaknesses, employees know their performance is recognized. The more people feel noticed, the more willing they are to accept corrective feedback.

2. Separate feedback.

Of all motivational techniques, I consider separation of feedback the most essential. Many years ago "sandwiched feedback" was popular. The intention was that corrective feedback should be given between two praises. This technique was designed to be used in marriage counseling, to keep married couples from killing each other. Some management gurus ran with the idea, and we have had confusion in the workplace ever since.

Here is an example of "sandwiched" feedback. Suppose one of your customers said, "The colors look great this year. But the shrubs and trees are very raggedy. You guys are way behind on pruning. But we have had a lot of compliments on the flower bed at the entrance." What would you focus on? Would you carry back the compliments to the account manager, or inquire about the pruning?

What if the same feedback were separated? You could share the praise, and at a later time, preferably the next time they are going to the site, you would make sure to share the complaints. You would give the corrective feedback as instructions – it would be perceived as a delegation. If the feedback is mixed, the recipient usually only focuses on the negative, and feels dejected.

If you separate the praise from the complaints, a person feels motivated by the praise. Then you give them a delegation (not a criticism), to fix the problems, and you can praise them again. Obviously, it is better to give praise, a delegation and then more praise versus mixing feedback perceived as just criticism.

It takes control and concentration to separate feedback. For best results, give corrective feedback BEFORE the employee can accomplish the task, and praise AFTER the task is completed. Ultimately, if the task is not done correctly, you give Work Improvement Discussions (WID), then ultimately warnings that could lead to termination. It's far better to keep employees motivated than to have to go to disciplinary measures.

In the case of a performance review it is necessary to mix feedback. In day-to-day management, separating feedback will be much more effective.

3. Hone your listening skills.

To personalize motivation we need to "listen between the lines." The best way to do this is through open-ended questions.

Try to practice the open ended questions, who, what, when, where and how (WWWWH). People are most motivated when they are totally clear on what is expected of them. By asking these questions, you can "test for understanding" AND hear the individual's concerns and preferences.

The WWWWH is essential to effective delegation. For example, when asking an account manager or crew leader about a new landscape installation, ask questions such as:

- Who did you speak to about the installation?
- What does the customer want done first?
- When does the job need to be completed?
- Where can you fit it on the schedule?
- How much plant material will this job require?

Put post-it notes in your truck, on your desk and clipboard with WWWWH. If you use these questions, your employees will be clearer and therefore more motivated.

In addition, you will get to know your people much better.

4. Acknowledge diversity.

Many of us work side-by-side with individuals from other groups, whether they are cross-generational or cross-cultural. The same issues that separate us (age, race, nationality, religion) can make the workplace more interesting and stimulating.

In the landscape industry, we enjoy working with a large Hispanic population. One company wanted to recognize the crew's good work so they asked their team what they would like to do to celebrate. The crew members wanted to put on a pig roast, cook all the food and bring the music. Even though it was a lot of work, they were thrilled to share a bit of their culture. The bonding that takes place in culture sharing is a tremendous resource to promote loyalty. A pig roast or traditional Latino foods can be much more beneficial to your team than a pizza party or hot dogs and chips.

Other groups that require a thoughtful approach are employees of various generations. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) may have a different sense of urgency and loyalty than Generation X (1965-1080) or Generation Y (1980-1995).

For example, the orientations to work assignments vary widely. They might ask:

Baby Boomers: "Tell me what needs to be done."

Generation X: "Show me how to do what needs to be done."

Generation Y: "Why do I need to do this?"

To personalize your motivational approach for each generation, consider:

Baby Boomers: Meet with them in person. Focus on one thing at a time. Tread lightly on technological demands.

Generation X: Avoid small talk. Be direct. Use email. Don't micro-manage. Acknowledge their hunger for change.

Generation Y: Ask their opinions. Expect resistance to "boxes" (chain of command, job descriptions). Provide frequent feedback. Use technology whenever possible.

When working with these different groups, meet them where they are. Remember, everyone tunes into WIIFM – What's In It For Me.

5. Unload dead wood.

Nothing can bring down the morale of an organization as quickly as an unreasonable or negative, cranky boss. There is a saying in the human resource field that "people quit managers, not companies." Everyone wants to be treated with dignity and respect. If you tolerate just one hotheaded jerk manager, you can loose an entire branch of excellent employees, even if you have a wonderful company.

As a manager or owner, it is essential that you are really aware of your team's morale. It's not just money that motivates; it's personal pride from doing a good job and receiving recognition. L&L

The author is president of Landscape Training Solutions and chair of the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance Education Committee. She can be reached at ellen@wheresellen.com.

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EXTENDED Stay

It can be hard to keep staff around for the long run, unless you're ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance and Design.

By Katie Tuttle

When it comes to hiring and retaining your staff, the team over at ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance and Design may have discovered the answer.

Located in Venice, Fla., the company started in 1990 with a four-man crew. Over the years it's grown, and today it boasts approximately 200 employees. Of those 200, 17 have been with the company for more than 10 years.

According to Debra Morrow, vice president of marketing, a big reason for the employee retention is the company's culture.

"There's face-to-face contact, as opposed to other companies where you don't see the founders any given day," she says. "It's very inspirational. It's just a family environment. You feel appreciated here and I know for a fact that's why people stay."

CARE PACKAGES. For any company wondering how to have the success at keeping employees, Morrow says it takes showing your employees that you care.

"(Show) that you care about their safety, you care about them being happy and productive in their position," she says. "You're there for them whenever they have questions. You make sure the equipment is maintained for their safety and welfare."

Top: CEO Joe Gonzalez, left, and president Frank Fistner use cookouts as one way of developing a family environment.

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She also says it's important for you to care in a non-work-related way as well.

"Do things to surprise them," she says. "On any given week throughout the particularly hot summer months, an account executive will go out and pick up some food for the crews and treat them to lunch.

A hat and pin are rewards for safety.

"They're not just people who punch clocks. It's important to show respect for each other … to really treat them as a family."

BUILD THE RIGHT WAY. Along with making sure the environment is one that employees want to stay in, Morrow says it's important to make sure you make the correct hires. Otherwise, that employee won't be a good fit and they're more likely to leave. That's why ArtisTree tries to weed those hires out during the interviews.

"Someone can come in and meet all the black-and-white criteria and have all the licensing and years of experience needed, but if they're a jerk, if they've got some type of attitude or baggage with them, we won't hire them, because we want to have fun, we want to do quality work and we want to make money together," she says.

It's hard to spot the jerks, especially when they're on their best behavior in the interview.

"We try to have just a nice conversation in the beginning, to get to know about them as a person before we actually start going through the job criteria," Morrow says. "When we do go through the job criteria, if we sense any hesitation or look of concern, then we know that person probably isn't the candidate for us.

"Occasionally we do lose someone, and we almost always hear back that they wished they hadn't left. We have had a couple people leave and come back. As long as they've left on good terms, they're right back in the saddle again and we're glad to see them. I don't know all the reasons why they leave, but for whatever reason, they come back for the family feel and they know we take good care of them." L&L

"Someone can come in and meet all the black-and-white criteria and have all the licensing and years of experience needed, but if they're a jerk … we won't hire them."

– Debra Morrow, V.P. of marketing, ArtisTree

Celebrate SAFETY

ArtisTree's 10th annual training day was a little different from previous years. This year the company decided to do something special and highlight the company's focus on safety.

"We said 'Everybody, we have a special announcement. When we call your name, we want you to stand up and go up to the front,'" Morrow says.

Twenty-seven employees were called up, and then it was announced that they had all been accident-free for five years.

"That's pretty impressive in our industry," Morrow says. She adds they have approximately 40 additional employees who have been at the company more than four years with no accidents.

The 27 employees were each given a certificate and a new hat with a special pin attached, recognizing their achievement. Then, the accident-free employees were also each surprised with an iPod.

The acknowledgments were just one part of the event, which included recognizing employees who had been with the company for 10 years or more.

"A couple of the crew members applied to both," Morrow says. "One of the guys not only won the iPod and the 5-year pin, he was also recognized with a $250 check for being here for 16 years."

Morrow says the training day is another big factor in employees staying with the company.

"It's not just a one-day ceremony," she says. "It's education, and that's important to our crews. That continued education is another important thing that I think other landscape employers would want to consider."

The meeting kicks- off with task-specific training – classes taught by the company's account executives or by vendors who come in and demonstrate the newest techniques and trends.

At noon, the account executives and vendors serve food to the crews, with the day turning into an employee barbecue. As the crew members eat their meals, trivia questions are asked, and whoever gets the answer correct first wins either a gift card or a cash gift.

"We have servant leadership in our company," Morrow says. "We're here to serve the crews … and they're the heroes of the day."

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Hire **Power**

Editor's note: This is the first edition of Hire Power, a monthly column designed to help you recruit, hire and retain the best talent for your company. We've got a rotating panel of columnists ready to give you practical, tactical advice on solving your labor problems. Let's get to it.

Everyone's a recruiter

By Amy Snyder

When it comes to attracting talent to your ranks, there are a number of effective ways to go about it from online recruiting and job fairs to college recruiting and good old networking. And while every approach offers its own set of advantages, one method that offers consistently good outcomes is using sphere of influence (SOI).

Sphere of influence refers to those with whom a person has personal contact, and can range from those you know well and see regularly to those you may not know as well and see only sporadically. People in your SOI are family, friends and co-workers, but also extend to the people you know from church, the parents of your kids' playmates or those you meet at trade association meetings (just to name a few).

When using SOI as a recruiting tool, the process involves having an ongoing conversation with those in your sphere. Sometimes that conversation is about a specific position you may need to fill and what job skills would be needed to fill that position. If there are certain non-negotiable skills that go with the position, like the person would need to have a commercial driver's license or be a certified public accountant, then it's always a good idea to be specific in those situations. But by describing characteristics, you might be able to cast a wider net and it may enable the person you're speaking with to better imagine who they know (including themselves) and might be a good fit.

Don't ask someone in your sphere this question: Do you know anyone who's looking for a job in landscaping for a field manager position I have open? Keep it broader with this question: Do you know anyone who has real leadership qualities, is anxious to take on responsibility and is a strong communicator? The person you're speaking with might be able to see those qualities that closely describe, for example, her nephew, who might be a good fit for your organization and the position you're trying to fill.

There are certain situations where specific skills are needed, but by describing qualities like a "sense of urgency" and a "willingness to go the extra mile," or even talking about your organization's values and that your company is strong and growing, you may better your chances of attracting a good fit and if needed, you can fill in the gaps with specific industry knowledge they may be lacking.

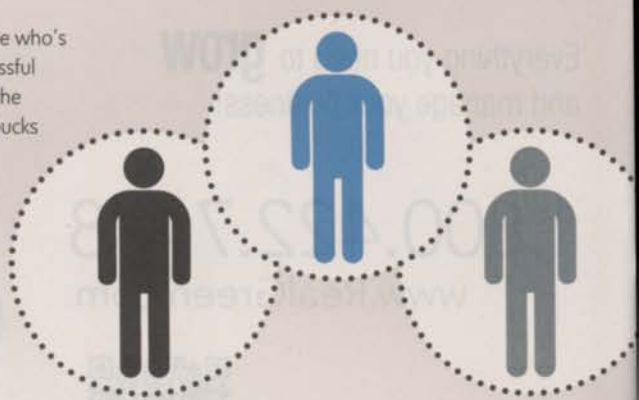
The idea that everyone is a recruiter is another important aspect of SOI recruiting. We don't have a central human resources department in our organization, so every employee is encouraged to bring good people into the fold. When done well, each one of your team members is actively recruiting from their sphere of influence with an eye to improving the collective team.

Often the ideal candidate is someone who's not even looking for work and is successful where they are right now. It might be the barista who makes your coffee at Starbucks every day and has a consistently positive outlook and great customer service skills, or the Jiffy Lube technician who seems to be very knowledgeable about your car's oil leak and goes that extra mile to explain it to you.

Another important aspect of SOI recruiting is that by having a mutual connection between your organization and the potential candidate, it's like having a built-in reference. If you know someone, even peripherally, but will have continued contact with them, they are far less likely to recommend someone that might not work out because it may reflect poorly on them and can create awkwardness the next time you see them. Generally, if you know and trust a person and they know and trust you, you increase the likelihood that the candidate they offer you comes along with their endorsement.

The old adage "birds of a feather flock together" is the underlying principle of how sphere of influence really works. Generally in our spheres, we know people with the same characteristics we possess. By making it a practice to continuously reach out to those in our spheres of influence, we better our chances that we will connect with the right individual to fit with our team. L&L

The author is director of public relations at Ruppert Landscape in Laytonsville, Md.



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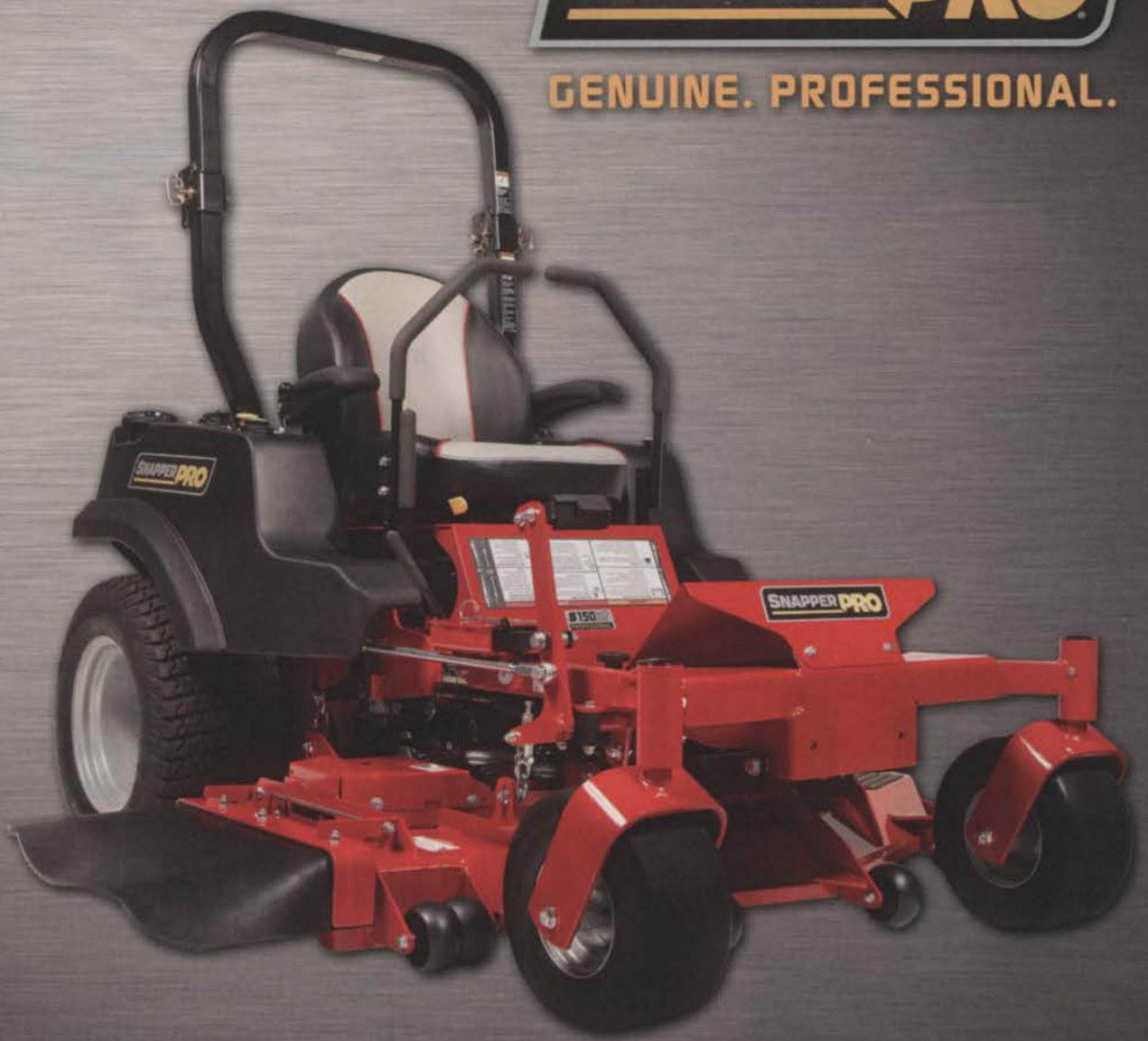

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BY Kristen Hampshire

All parties connected

Business software helps your employees get on the same page.

The 60 trucks at Clean Scapes are virtual reporters – data collection centers on wheels, really. Since the Austin, Texas, firm replaced its under-the-hood GPS systems with sophisticated tracking software, the company knows exactly when a truck pulls onto a property and how long it spends there. The program produces travel reports, and timesheet projections that managers can compare to actuals. Plus, information can be instantly imported into accounting and payroll systems.

Sure, the trucks carry equipment and crews. But the information those vehicles gather on the road is critical for

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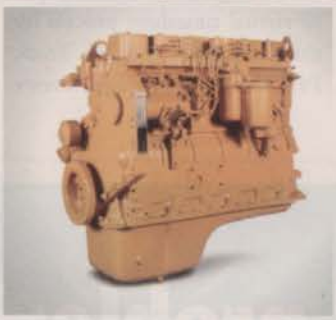

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"Managers can open up an Excel report, refresh the GPS log, pick the truck and day, refresh the report and show the work they did."

Travis Dyer, IT and special projects manager for Clean Scapes

managing efficiency and streamlining the payroll process, says Travis Dyer, IT and special projects manager for Clean Scapes. "We save tons of time on labor because we aren't constantly filling out timesheets, rounding (the numbers) up and down," he says. "It saves managers time in the trucks and in the office."

Time is the one aspect of business you can't adjust – you only get so much of it to do the work. So software that helps companies understand how they use time, and to manage those hours and minutes more productively, is a real asset.

Besides, once a business reaches a certain size, the basic business software that suited the startup and small-scale operation no longer fits the bill. "We basically overloaded our QuickBooks and it crashed on us," says Mark Paine of Sposato Landscape Co. in Milton, Del. Now, the company is embarking on a major transition to a landscape software program that will accommodate the $15 million-plus firm.

At Integrated Landscape Management (ILM), with offices in Arizona and Nevada, choosing software that integrated the disparate account managers' spreadsheets to improve job costing is revealing any inconsistencies in pricing or performance. "We can see how jobs are performing at any time," says Robert Clinkenbeard, co-owner.

DATA-FOCUSED TRACKING. Clean Scapes went from a paper to virtual timesheet process by using IQgistics and MS Track Pro. A few years ago, crews

filled out paper time sheets that managers reviewed and signed off on before batching to payroll, which inputted the numbers. Today, time sheets are electronic. "Managers can open up an Excel report, refresh the GPS log, pick the truck and day, refresh the report and show the work they did," Dyer says. The report is then saved so payroll can open up the report, as well. "Now, it takes about 10 seconds to import a time sheet, where before it would take five minutes or longer to key it in."

Meanwhile, Dyer wrote an Excel program that extracts information read from tracking software. The program automatically fills out the time sheets based on data collected. Rigging the system first required "geo-fixing" properties the company services so that trucks entering a marked region would essentially clock in. "We time-stamped crews' days as soon as they left the yard, from the first job and during their travels all day," Dyer says.

Geo-fixing is basically like staking out a property, except it's virtual connect-the-dots. Dyer geo-fixed accounts using a Google Satellite image. Each property was outlined so GPS-equipped trucks entering the boundaries get time-stamped. Travel information (time in and out of property, time on the road) is collected and then flowed into those synched Excel timesheets.

Now, the company can intelligently tweak routes to improve efficiency.

"We can see the percentage of travel each day for every truck, and we can look at the route and see if we have a travel pattern that is too high, we can streamline that," Dyer says.

Managers can also produce projective schedules for crews, including how long it should take to travel to a job and the time a crew should spend working there. "Then, we can run a variance report on what the manager projects vs. what actually happens," Dyer says. "We can look at that information gathered from the GPS and see how crews are actually doing versus how we think they are doing."

Clean Scapes implemented the system in baby steps. Dyer geo-fixed routes for three trucks, watched the progress and tested to ensure data collected was accurate. Within two months, all 60 trucks at Clean Scapes were on the new GPS system. "Doing it on a small scale first gave

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Breaking in

CONSIDERING NEW software, or want to make the most of what you've got? Here are some take-away tips to get you started.

- **Ask around.** During the software vetting process, ask the company to provide references. Call and/or visit companies that use the software so you can learn how the programs actually work.
- **Appoint a guru.** This person doesn't have to have an IT title, but an interest in learning and ability to communicate across departments is key. This person (or people – a good idea to have a backup) will learn the ins and outs of the software and can help train others.
- **Allow for mistakes.** No software is absolutely seamless to install – you can depend on some human error. Plan on a bit of a learning curve and the fact that you will have to make adjustments to the system. Talk to the software provider about the support you will receive during implementation.

us time to trouble shoot and fix any problems before we did a large-scale roll-out," Dyer says.

Gathering route information is incredibly valuable – but transmitting that data into timesheets and reducing accounting/payroll labor sweetens the deal.

MERGING INFORMATION. ILM is a growing company with 320 employees and a team of account managers among its three locations in Phoenix and Tempe, Ariz., and Las Vegas.

About four years ago, Clinkenbeard recognized that the company's legacy software wasn't going to cut it.

"We felt disjointed," he says of the various account managers work documents, job costing and tracking. "We needed a tool to pull together all of that information."

Job costing is a key benefit of the Boss LM software ILM chose, he says. The company can track how jobs are performing on a daily, weekly and monthly basis and keep tabs on gross margins for landscape maintenance contracts. "That really helps us adjust our labor," he says.

Come annual contract time, a review of individual jobs reveals which ones were profitable and which contracts need retooling.

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Once a business reaches a certain size, the basic business software that suited the startup no longer fits the bill.

Also, the software essentially standardizes pricing so account managers' estimates and contracts stay in line.

"If you are a large company, you are somewhat relying on your key account managers to price accurately, so if they are off doing their own thing. …" Clinkenbeard says. "With a pricing framework in place, we have more control over job costing and there is less liability, so no one can underprice a contract just to get (the job and) commission."

When ILM implemented the software, the company had an employee that acted as a "guru," learning the program's ins and outs.

This person became the in-house pro who could help others trouble-shoot and ease managers through the transition. The problem is, that guru left the business.

"We had no backup, so from that experience, we have changed that to having two key people who are gurus," Clinkenbeard says.

GROWING DEMANDS. The QuickBooks crash was a sign. Sposato Landscape Co. had been considering new software for some time, but the information overload initiated an assertive effort to find another way.

"When you have been in business for 20 years and you are up to $15 million, that is a lot of information for QuickBooks, and while we are still using it, it's difficult now," Paine says.

Sposato decided on Asset (he's using Quickbooks until Asset is implemented) by Include after visiting Mariani Landscape in Chicago, Ill.

"They introduced us to several of their admins and account managers, and each discussed how a piece of the software works, from accounts receivables to payroll and job costing," Paine says.

Seeing it at work, in person, helped Sposato Landscape make a decision. The company also talked with a similar-sized firm in the Washington, D.C., area that uses pieces of the program.

Meanwhile, Sposato invested in hiring an IT specialist who will eventually manage some of the tasks currently outsourced, along with driving the transition to this new software. It's a major under-taking for a business.

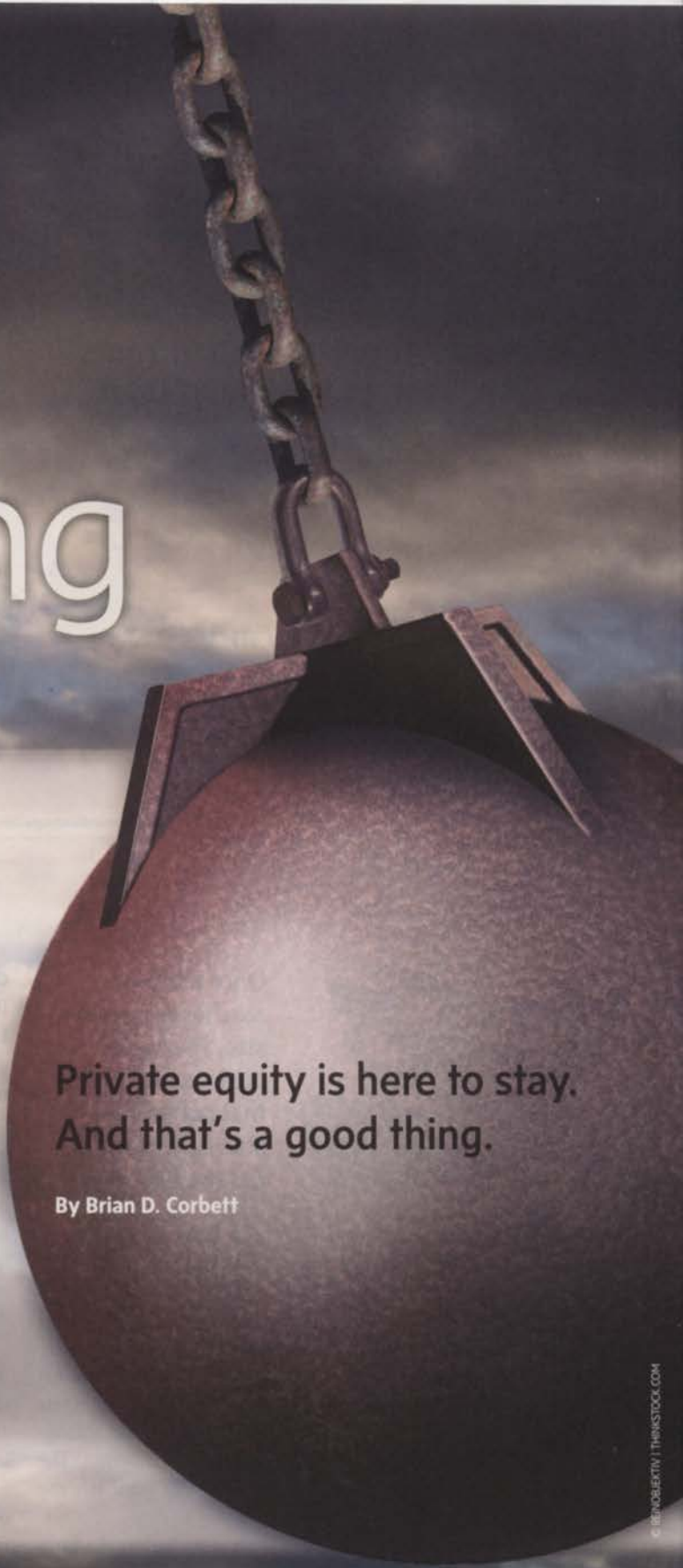
"We want to be a more paperless type of operation, and we have been using quite a few Excel spreadsheets for job costing, tracking and whatnot," Paine says.

"We won't need those anymore, and our people will have more access to customer information." L&L

Wrecking stereotypes

Private equity is here to stay. And that's a good thing.

By Brian D. Corbett



Private equity has played a large part in the green industry for many years and recent activity suggests that it will play a larger role going forward. Investor dollars are pouring in to the green industry, lured by the excellent opportunity for growth in landscape services as the economy continues to improve and large customers seek to consolidate their supply chain.

All too often, private equity gets a bad rap as just "a bunch of suits buying and flipping companies."

In this article, I hope to get beyond stereotypes and dispel negativity surrounding private equity by shining a light on the positive growth opportunity it presents for the industry and for your green industry company in particular.

WHAT IS PRIVATE EQUITY? A private equity recapitalization is a liquidity strategy in which an institutional investor or private equity group (PEG) acquires significant interest in a company in exchange for cash. The largest companies in the green industry have relied on this process to achieve certain goals of their ownership groups.

Brickman first partnered with private equity decades ago when CIVC of Chicago and others contributed capital to facilitate a generational transition. In 2006, ValleyCrest took on a major investment from MSD Capital, Michael Dell's private equity firm, to create liquidity and provide a stable source of

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growth capital. Also in 2006, Brickman doubled down with private equity – teaming up with Leonard Green this time around.

In 2007, Clayton Dubilier and Rice (CDR) took the ServiceMaster Companies private, making TruGreen LandCare a private equity-owned entity. By 2011, Aurora Resurgence acquired TruGreen LandCare from CDR in a spinout transaction. Most recently, Leonard Green sold their interest in Brickman to KKR, one of the largest PEGs in the world.

Other notable companies teaming up with PEGs are Yellowstone Landscape Group (Gridiron Capital), Terracare (Progress Equity), Merit Services (L2 Capital) and Landscape Workshop (McKinney Capital).

MSD Capital, Leonard Green, CDR, Aurora Resurgence, KKR, Gridiron Capital, Progress Equity, L2 ad McKinney Capital are all PEGs of varying size and structure. Sometimes called a financial sponsor, a PEG is most often a partnership that raises capital from investors for the specific purpose of buying and investing in companies.

These funds are then typically invested in a recapitalization of a company where the owners receive substantial personal liquidity and diversification for the interest sold. Although a PEG typically requires a controlling interest, this strategy allows you to remain a significant shareholder and continue to be the driving force behind your company.

This structure creates liquidity at today's value and involves a financial sponsor to help fund and grow the future value of your business by partnering with you and your team. These companies can access a tremendous amount of capital that is unavailable to smaller closely-held companies, creating a competitive advantage in financing growth.

Unlike strategic buyers, PEG buyers often look to maintain the brands they acquire, realizing the value in brand recognition and loyalty of the management, employees and clients. Therefore, post-transaction, your company will likely continue to operate under the same brand name and you won't be faced with the often-unsavory prospect of selling to a competitor. Once a PEG has acquired a platform company in an industry, they become strategic buyers, like other large companies in the industry.

The PEG's goal will be to partner with you to grow the company over a period of four to seven years, on average, and then sell it to generate a return to their investors. Most equity groups have a well-defined strategy as

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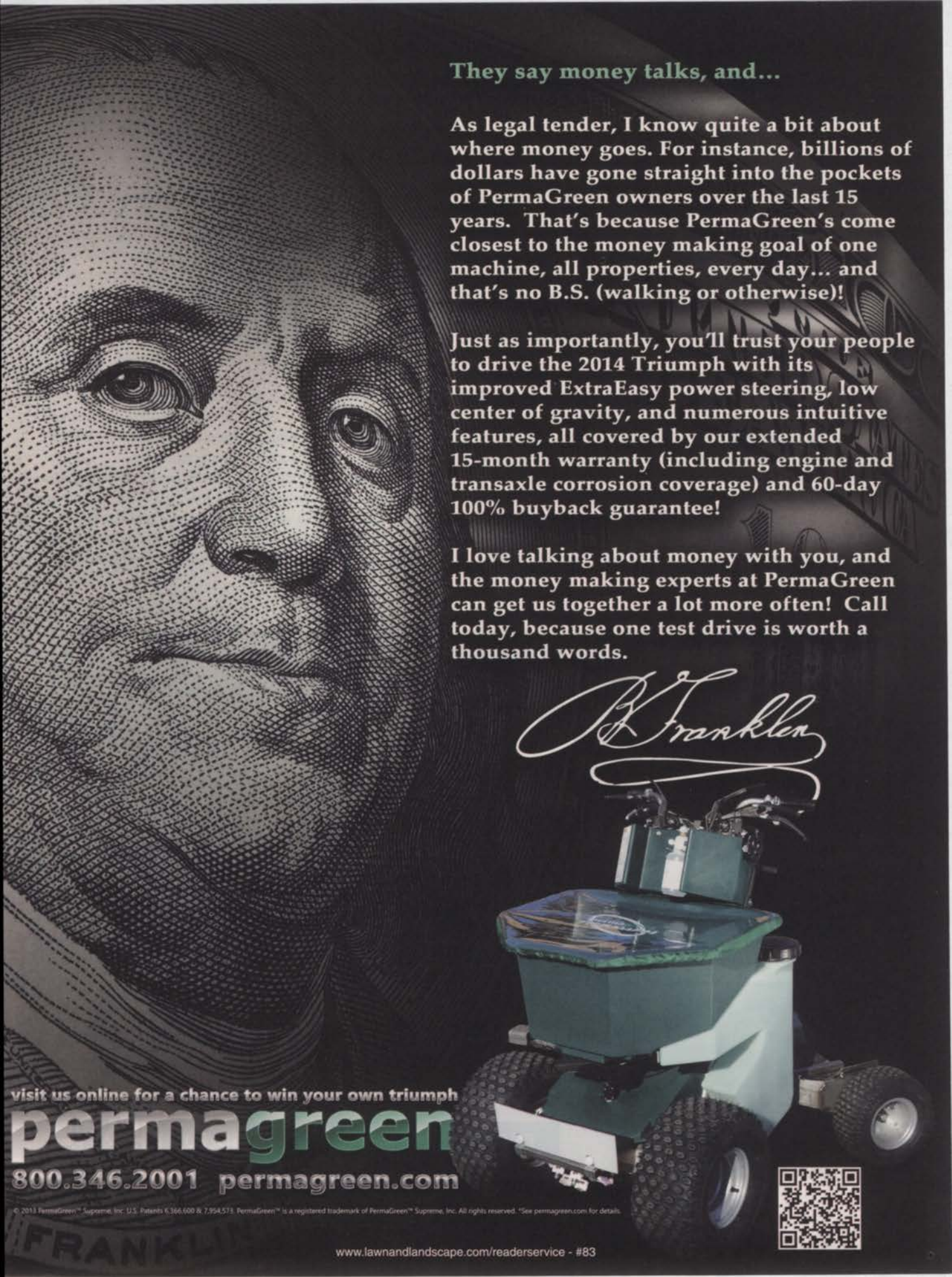

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to the type and size of companies in which they invest, how they structure their deals and their investment time horizons.

The PEG strategy of buying an interest in a company and then holding and building both top and bottom lines over a period of years certainly should not be considered "flipping" a company for a short term gain.

WHY IS THE GREEN INDUSTRY APPEALING TO PRIVATE EQUITY?

PEGs are primarily focused on growing their companies and landscape service companies present a significant growth opportunity. For example, when Leonard Green invested in Brickman in 2006, Brickman was valued at $847 million. When Leonard Green exited some seven years later in late 2013, Brickman was valued at $1.6 billion.

Over their seven year ownership period, a private equity group helped to grow Brickman's value to roughly double through both organic and acquisition growth initiatives.

Several factors inherent to the industry contribute to the appeal of landscape services. The recurring revenue model of landscape maintenance is particularly attractive to PEGs. An assured revenue stream to improve upon year after year reduces the risk of their investment and increases the opportunity for steady, bankable growth.

Corbett

The "business to business" nature of commercial landscape services draws substantial activity and interest from PEGs. Continued consolidation among property owners and managers drives them to seek large, professionally-run suppliers, fueling more growth and consolidation of companies who supply landscape maintenance services.

While there has been significant acquisition activity in the industry over the past two decades, the green industry remains highly fragmented. The top three companies account for less than five percent of overall market revenue and the top 150 account for less than twenty percent.

Most landscape companies are privately held businesses with annual revenues less than $5 million. Larger commercial maintenance businesses are the

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perfect target for PEGs, and there are still a good number to choose from.

WHY SHOULD THE GREEN INDUSTRY PAY ATTENTION TO PRIVATE EQUITY? When private equity invests in an industry, they are focused on growth, both organic and through acquisition. This means that if a PEG partners with one of your competitors, they will often seek to acquire competitors or smaller companies in the same or adjacent territories.

Private equity investment signals the availability of a pool of funds for acquisition. If you're thinking about your own strategic growth, shareholder liquidity or exit plan, then private equity might be one of your most attractive alternatives.

Liquidity in your industry creates exit alternatives that might not have been previously available and private equity can open a window of opportunity for owners looking to transition.

Further, private equity involvement can foster a competitive bidding process for companies pursuing liquidity options, boosting the maximum value you might receive for the company you've worked so hard to build.

Private equity investors are experts at maximizing growth, streamlining operations, augmenting management and key employees, tackling new geographies or service offerings and implementing new systems and technologies.

Private equity investors often bring seasoned business professionals from similar industries so they can bring fresh ideas and methods of operation to a company.

The capital to fund expansion and acquisition can make a PEG-backed company a formidable force in the industry.

Finally, larger independent players in the green industry might be able to find a private equity partner to team up with directly in achieving liquidity or securing growth capital. If your landscape company has grown to be one of the largest in your region, it might be appealing as a platform investment for a PEG.

When the time is right for you to pursue your exit and liquidity options, it's important to take a look at private equity in addition to your other options to ensure that you maximize value for your company. L&L

The author is managing partner, CCG Advisors, a business advisory firm.

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Obamacare

– how will it change the way we do business?

Whether you agree or disagree with it, the Patient Protection and Affordable Healthcare Act is law.

By Daniel S. Gordon

The passage and implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Healthcare Act, otherwise known as Obamacare, is one of the most politically charged issues that has divided the country in generations. Its proponents say it's good for the country providing all citizens of the United States health insurance. However, its opponents say it will bankrupt the federal government leaving a legacy of unmanageable government debt for generations. So how did we get here? And as business people how do we comply with the law?

Problem: 37 Million Americans don't have Health Insurance

Obamacare solution: Require all Americans to be covered. The pros and cons of this law are debatable, but the obvious list includes:

Pros of the law:

- Gives many American access to healthcare that didn't have it prior
- Insurance companies can't exclude people with pre-existing conditions
- Policies will be easier to compare
- Over time, healthcare costs will be reined in (the jury is still out one this one)

Cons of the law:

- Compels people to participate in something they may not want
- Penalizes people for non-compliance
- Requires standard insurance when that may not be necessary for certain people
- Will cause healthcare professionals to decide if they want to participate in Medicare or Medicaid
- Raises taxes
- Will almost assuredly add to the federal debt

How does the law get implemented? And what are the mechanics that individuals and business people should be aware of? It can be broken down into two requirements. The individual mandate and the employer mandate.

- **The individual mandate** requires all Americans to have health insurance. If you don't work for a company that provides the required coverage, you can purchase it from an insurance exchange set up by the government. Individuals with preexisting conditions are not precluded from purchasing insurance and for the most part rates are based strictly on age and tobacco usage or non-usage. Depending on your income level you may be entitled to full coverage paid for by the government through Medicaid or other programs as well as help in the form of tax credits.
- **The employer mandate** requires that beginning in 2015 employers with more than 50 full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) (the calculation of FTEs is not simple) to pay for at least 60 percent of the cost of health insurance for the employee and his or her children.

The employee contribution cannot exceed 9.5 percent of the employee's income. Employers with less than 50 FTEs are not required to provide insurance but may receive tax benefits if they do.

The law uses a carrot-and-stick approach to ensure compliance. There are tax penalties for non-compliance (the stick) and tax credits for compliance (the carrot).

At the heart of the law, all U.S. citizens (with some exemptions) are required to carry health insurance that meets minimum

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The law does not seem to be going away anytime soon.

requirements in terms of coverage or pay a penalty.

Non compliance for individuals - Individuals without coverage will be subject to penalties as follows:

- **2014:** Penalty is $95 per adult and $47.50 per child (up to $285 for a family) or 1.0 percent of family income, whichever is greater.
- **2015:** Penalty is $325 per adult and $162.50 per child (up to $975 for a family) or 2.0 percent of family income, whichever is greater.
- **2016 and beyond:** Penalty is $695 per adult and $347.50 per child (up to $2,085 for a family) or 2.5 percent of family income, whichever is greater.

However, anyone who thought they had insurance lined up in compliance with the law that received a cancellation notice from their carrier late in 2013 may qualify for a hardship exemption from the penalty. This information was included in a letter to several senators from the Secretary of Health and Human Services in late December 2013.

Non compliance for businesses with greater than 50 FTEs:

- If health insurance is not provided, there is a $2,000 penalty for each FTE, with the first 30 FTEs subtracted from the equation.
- If health insurance is provided but it does not meet minimum standards, or less than 60 percent of the cost is paid by the employer or the employee's contribution is greater than 9.5 percent of his income; than the employer is subject to the lessor of $3,000 per employee receiving a tax credit or $2,000 per FTE minus the first 30 FTEs. How will this change the way business's think about adding headcount? For many larger businesses that already provide health coverage, it's just a matter of "tweaking" to make sure the policy and the employee contributions comply.

The problem is with businesses that hire lower-paid labor. The health insurance could act as a significant tax on businesses, in some cases raising the cost of an employee by 50 percent or more of his wage. Employers need to decide if it is more cost effective to pay the penalty or provide the insurance. In addition the law does not require that spouses be covered, so many companies have already made arrangements to cut healthcare for spouses. The carrot (tax credits) is offered to smaller businesses, which while not required to provide health insurance for their employees, in cases when they do, they may receive tax credits. These credits while not refundable

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(if no tax is due, no credit can be taken) can be carried back one year, so if a small business owed taxes in a prior year, an amended return can be filed in order to receive the credit in the form of a refund, or carried forward for 20 years. The credit is available to companies who pay at least 50 percent of their employee's premiums who employ less than 25 FTEs, and whose employees earn on average less than $50,000. Sounds workable right? Well, actually, the credit gets phased out from 10 employees to 25 employees.

So those employers with 10 or less employees get the full advantage of the credit if and only if they have a tax liability to offset it with. IRS form 8941 is used to calculate FTEs as well as the amount of the credit.

Be prepared to spend some time completing this form as there is a lot of information with respect to number of hours employees worked, health premiums, etc. As the era of Obmacare phases in there are several items that we as individuals will be changing as it relates to our personal taxes.

One such deduction is the medical deduction that is available as an itemized deduction which was calculated on medical expenditures in excess of 7.5 percent of adjusted gross income. The law has changed that to 10 percent (for those under 65 years of age). Individual tax increases include:

Hospital Insurance Portion of FICA – Increases by .9 percent (employee only) on those with earnings exceeding:

- Singles – $200,000
- Married filing joint – $250,000
- Married filing single – $125,000

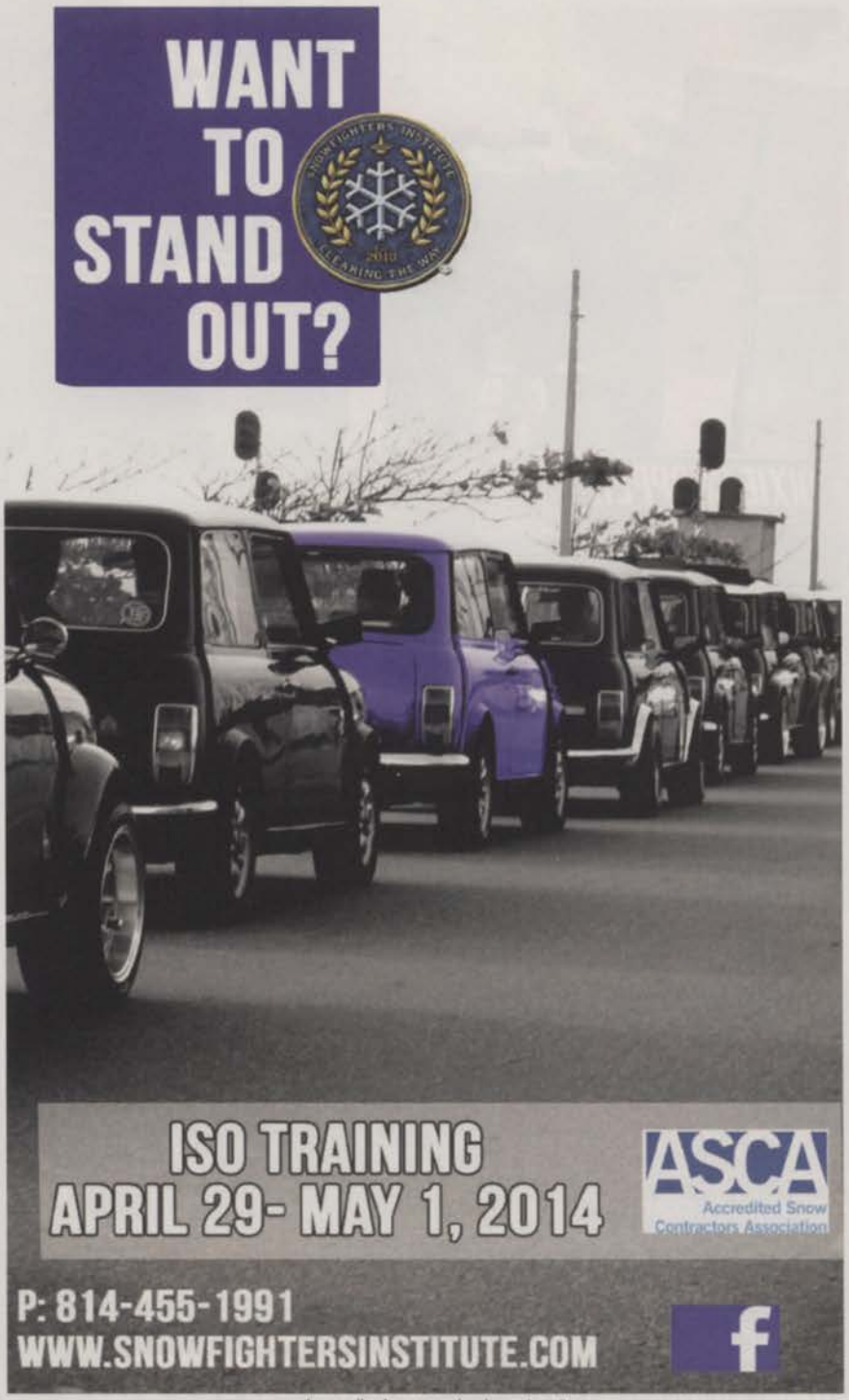
Net Investment Income subject to 3.8 percent surtax (prior only wages subject):

- Singles – $200,000
- Married filing joint – $250,000
- Married filing single – $125,000

Small business owners who are subject to the surtax should speak to their accountant as currently income from an S Corp. owned by shareholders who are actively involved in running the business are not subject to the surtax on those earnings.

BOTTOM LINE. The law does not seem to be going away anytime soon, so the prudent business owner needs to get out in front of it and understand the components of the law and how it affects his or her business. L&L

The author is a New Jersey-based CPA. He runs Turfbooks, an accounting firm that serves landscapers. Email him at dgordon@giemedia.com.



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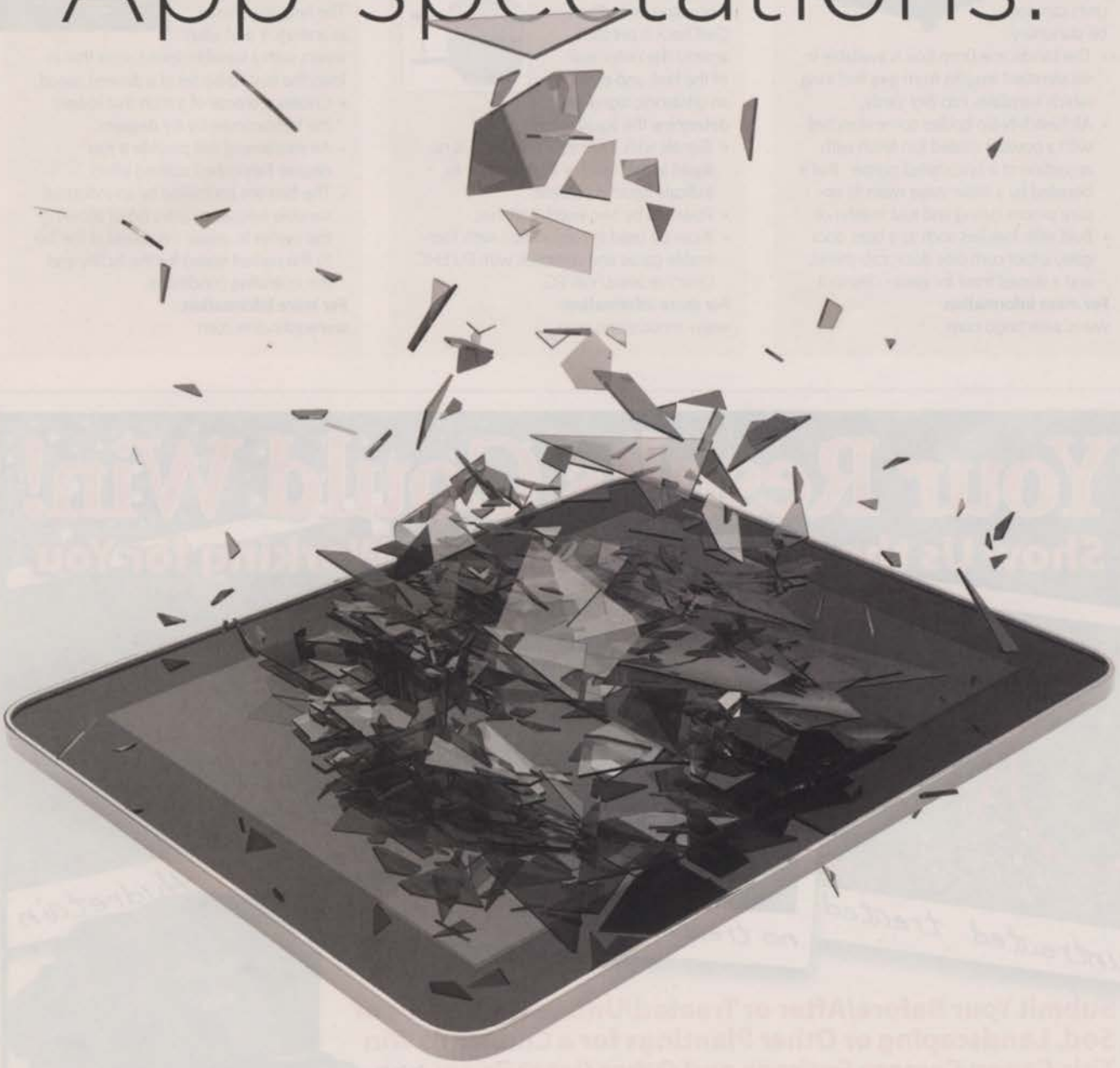

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Switch-N-Go Landscape Drop Box

The pitch: With multiple job sites, your units can now be stationary.

- The Landscape Drop Box is available in six standard lengths from 9-14 feet long, which translates into 8-17 yards.
- All Switch-N-Go bodies come standard with a powder coated top finish with an option of a zinc coated primer, that's boosted by a triple stage wash to ensure proper curing and rust resistance.
- Built with features such as a barn door gate, 4-foot curb side door, cab shield, and a sloped front for easier cleanout.

For more information:
www.switchngo.com

Moscap Engineering GasCheck

The pitch: The GasCheck determines how much gas is in a propane tank. The GasCheck is pressed against the outer wall of the tank and emits an ultrasonic signal to determine the liquid levels.

- Signals with a red light that there is no liquid at that level or a green light to indicate liquid is present.
- Powered by two watch batteries.
- It can be used in conjunction with flammable gases and complies with EU EMC Directive 2004/108/EG.

For more information:
www.moscapeng.com

JohnDow Industries WindStorm Fan Line

The pitch: WindStorm Fans cool the space or make it warmer. The fans are offered in 208-230V and 460V inputs with a variable speed drive that allows the fans to be set at a desired speed.

- Creates a breeze of 3 mph that lowers the temperature by 6-7 degrees.
- Air movement will provide a 7-10 degree Fahrenheit cooling effect.
- The fans are controlled by an industrial variable frequency drive (VFD) allowing the owner to adjust the speed of the fan to the perfect speed for the facility and the operating conditions.

For more information:
www.johndow.com

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Little Giant Disappearing Fountain Kits

The pitch: The new Disappearing Fountains from Little Giant are now being offered in a variety of shapes and colors.

- Designed to look modern and be easy to assemble.
- Sold individually or in a kit.
- Waterproof LED lighting also available to enhance a design.

For more information:
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- Cargo tie downs

For more information: www.clubcar.com

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Design/build *(continued from page 48)*

voltage lighting and artwork – the industry is growing," Pavlovicz says.

Pavlovicz invests in training by sending employees to trade shows and taking advantage of vendor education opportunities. And, there is a big focus on recruiting talent. Three key managers at JTS have been with the firm for the last 10 years. "They are the backbone of the company," Pavlovicz says.

Danny Rutherford came to Pavlovicz after graduating from high school. He told Pavlovicz, "I'm graduating in June, can I come work for you?"

Pavlovicz said, "Sure." Sixteen years later, Rutherford is landscape foreman, but he also assists with design and sales.

"Danny's there with a pile of flagstone and brick and boulders, and there is this pile of rocks that he makes into a patio or a fire ring, a natural walkway or a seating area."

Pavlovicz's first employee, Tommy Baltic, was working for a roofer who passed away. Baltic needed a job, so he came to work for Pavlovicz.

He started planting and eventually moved into hardscaping and is now the firm's lead designer for those projects.

Matt Blynn, project manager, also began working at JTS while in high school. It was a summer job. He attended college, earned a landscape degree and came back to the firm to work.

"We all click," Pavlovicz says. "Everyone has the same priority of getting the job done and getting it done right." Pavlovicz's role is to pair each job with the right person in the firm.

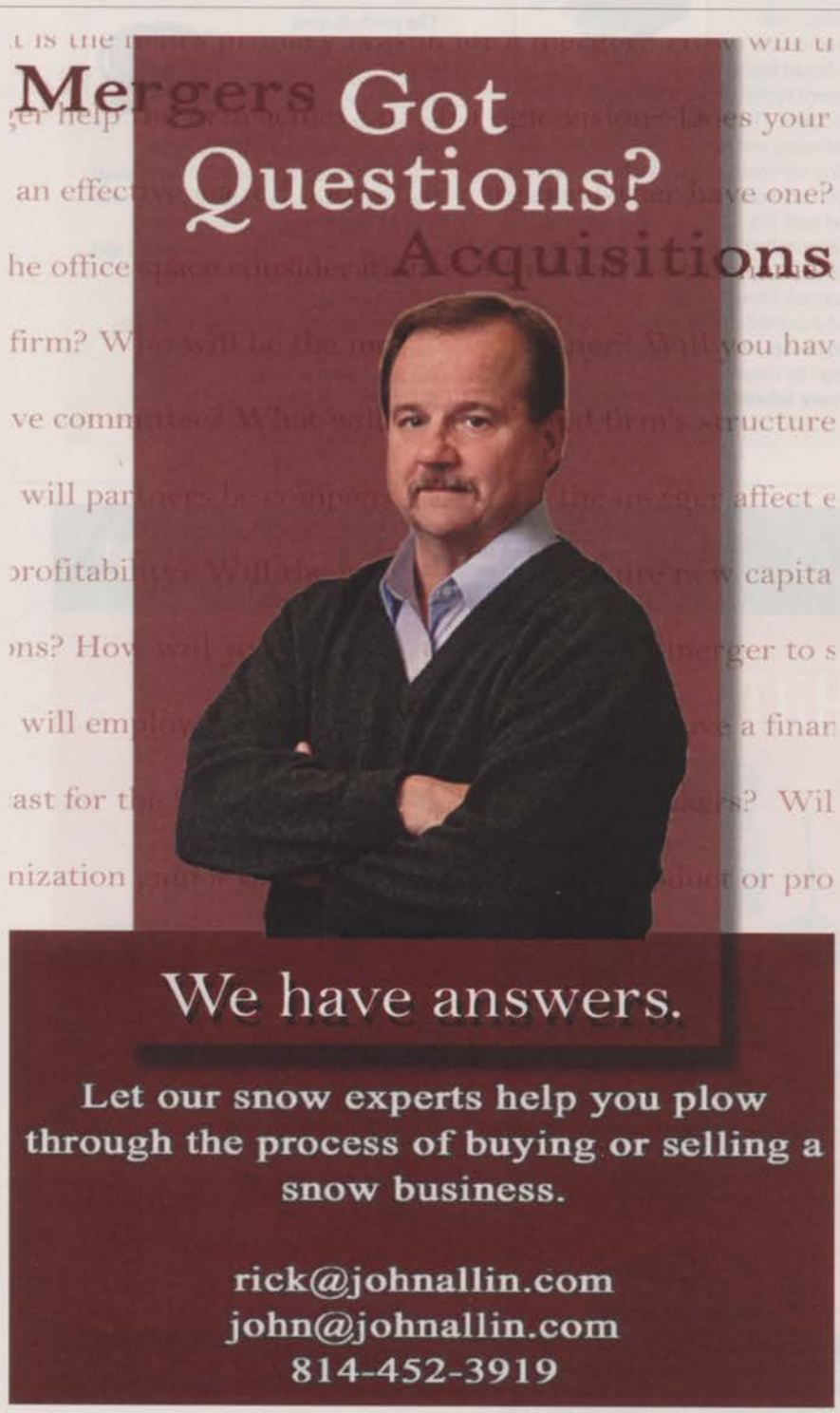
"Projects don't come in the door and we say, 'You're next in line to go do it," Pavlovicz says. "It's about putting the pieces of the puzzle together and putting people on the jobs where they will perform the best."

For Pavlovicz, that means being "on" the job, but not working in it. And this is an adjustment for a hands-on guy.

"I have to rely on the guys to take (the business) to the next level," he says.

He does that by giving them the freedom to make choices.

"Everyone is going to stumble at first, but if you don't let them make their own decisions they will never learn," he says. "They focus on the positives, and we all keep moving forward." L&L



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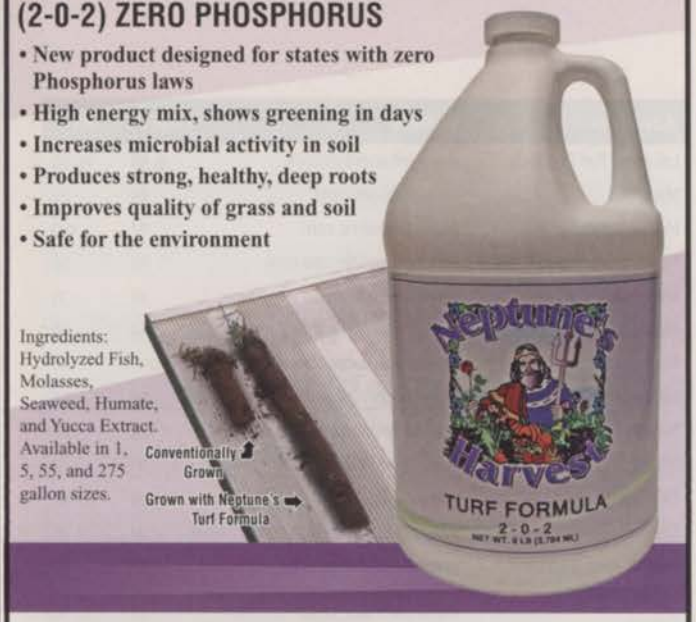

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For five years I was a branch manager at TruGreen LandCare. Before that, I was 20 years in the golf business developing and building golf courses.

Reliable started in 1983 and all they did was snow removal. Part of the reason I came in was to help start up our summer services, and 2008 was the first year we did any landscape work.

It was an interesting run, that's for sure. We're the biggest snow provider in the Twin Cities. We kind of thought, "People like us for snow, why won't they use us for their landscape and stuff?"

That didn't really happen.

At that point, we were a quarter summer services, about $4 million at that time. Now, for 2013, we're at just under $27 million and about $10 million of that is the summer work.

We ended up doing an acquisition and partnership with the Bruce Company out of Madison. That brought in additional snow removal, and also their golf maintenance division.

But the landscaping side of it, there's a lot of similarities to the golf side. Your crew's going to the same ten sites for the week versus your guys on the golf course and fairways every day. The guys really get to know their area, and really take a pride in that.

That mid-level manager, that account manager, it's a tough position. They're dealing with customer budgets, they're dealing with our company budget, they're dealing with hiring, they're dealing with firing, they're dealing with managing people in the field and it's a very tight stressful job.

It's a great job, but we're having a hard time finding those people right now. As I look back on it – I love the golf business, don't get me wrong – but if I was a 22-year-old coming out of college, that is a job that sets you up to do just about anything.

I don't care where you are in the country or what service you're doing, margins aren't getting any bigger. You need that multi-faceted person who can generate revenue for you on the sales side and also do the production.

We're not seeing a lot of increases in pricing. We're not getting more money. We're doing sites for less than maybe we were doing sites four or five years ago, and that trend isn't gonna go away. The customers' expectations are still where they were, but think they're seeing they can get by paying a little bit less.

That's the running battle we've always had: How can you provide both – support your company, support your employees, turn a profit to your investors, but give the customers the experience they want?

You have to make sure you choose customers that best fit your platform. Not every customer is a good fit for us and we're not a good fit for every customer.

Revenue for revenue's sake doesn't do anybody any good.

People look at their own business at the end of the year and they paid themselves this, and they bought two new trucks. OK, it looks pretty good. But you really have to dive into the details of where your profit is. Not only where your profit is, but where you are losing. Where are you bleeding? That's not always easy to see.

I just had lunch today with three of my biggest competitors in the Twin Cities. A friendly lunch – we give each other a little grief here and there, but you learn so much from everybody, and that makes the business better .

I love talking. If anybody wants to talk about this business, you go talk to them. You'll learn something from it. I guarantee it. I guarantee if it's a mowing guy who mows his own stuff with one truck or it's the vice president of whatever it is, everyone's got something in this business you can learn from. L&L

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