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# OCTOBER 2014 A GIE MEDIA PUBLICATION VOLUME 35, NUMBER 10



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## Stepping up to the plate

Richard Restuccia took his passion for smart irrigation and used it to change the water game.

## It runs in the family

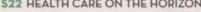
An honest man, Michael Kravitsky credits his company mantra to his upbringing, and the people who've all played a role in the 50-year-old family business.



## FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS

## Inside my client's mind

Customer surveys reveal important insights that can help a company shape better service.



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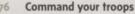
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Check out what's new online from LAWN & LANDSCAPE.

# Igniting a new era

How Eagle Creek Nursery operates as a family-owned business.

By Kristen Hampshire

t's the cycle of life. The loss of two uncles, owners in the family business, resulted in the end of an era for Eagle Creek Nursery in Indianapolis.

It was the beginning of a new age for the company, which was founded four generations ago in 1916. One uncle had been overseeing operations for the last four decades; the other was mostly



retired. The family had not anticipated the loss - the uncles died within a month of each other.

"We reached a fork in the road at that point," says Mark Esterline, who had been in charge of landscape maintenance and worked in the family business since the early 1990s. He is now president. "Being a family business, everyone had ideas about what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go. and here was an opportunity to make some changes.

"We had lots of ideas, but no real plan in place on how to execute them," Esterline says.

Esterline's uncle had been managing plant procurement for the nursery, along with daily banking and insurance. Esterline immediately began taking over these duties. "We had a void there and everyone was so busy in their own part of the business, someone had to step up and start doing more." he says.

The company continued to move forward, not slowing its pace. But the fact was, Eagle Creek Nursery had been riding steady for some time, Esterline says. "Under the past management, we had gotten lethargic and were not growing anymore," he says. "When you have someone who has been in charge of the business for 40 years, change is tough."

Visit bit.ly/llignite for the rest of the article.

## **CLASS** is in session

Dean Murphy shares his insight on how he and his team have grown Terracare Associates. It's an exclusive opportunity for L&L readers to look behind

the scenes at how one of the largest companies in the landscape and lawn care industry runs. Visit bit.ly/deanmurphy to take the virtual tour.



# 'DIGITAL' chamber of commerce

Gain new customers using social media.

By Jason Scott

s many of you know, local Chambers Of Commerce, Business Network International Groups (BNIs) and other networking associations are great places to find new customers and leads for many business owners over the years. In fact, many longtime Chamber Of Commerce members rely solely on the referral network for new business.

Their involvement with these associations has created some longlasting relationships and referrals. With more people online, we have a huge opportunity to apply the same traditional networking concepts in a "digital way." I have had great success with having new customers fall into my lap due to the commitment I have made online.

The key is spending time online where your buyers are having conversations. It is similar to how you would network at a Chamber event, but you engage with them in a digital way.

• STEP 1: Identify the influencers in your service area (for example: local journalists, politicians, real estate agents, property managers, town administrators, business owners, attorneys, etc.). These are people you would have been getting in front of at local networking events. And these are people with whom you'd like to share your message.

• STEP 2: Now that you have identified them, follow them. Follow them on Twitter and re-tweet their tweets. Connect with them on LinkedIn and comment on their posts. "Like" their business page on Facebook and be sure to give them a review, or comment on a post. Subscribe to their blogs and comment on their articles.

Visit bit.ly/digcham to read the full article.

The author is president of Distinctive Landscaping in Attleboro Falls, Mass.



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## EDITOR'S INSIGHT

What do you think? Email me at cbowen@gie.net.

# Let the turkeys out

friend of mine, Dan, works as a hired hand at a farm out east of Cleveland. He mends fences and mows and does other odd jobs all around the property as the owners - both of whom work full time in other professions - prepare for the county fair. Dan's a great guy, and a lot like me in that he can get overwhelmed when he has a lot of different projects in front of him.

The other day he was driving up to the farm and got a text from the owners: "Open the gate and let the turkeys out." And that text, while maybe strange to folks who aren't charged with the daily care and feeding of poultry, suddenly made him feel much better. Despite a chore list as long as his arm, he knew that as long as he let those birds out, the day would be a success.

As I drove to work, I thought more about Dan and the farm, and the idea of letting my own turkeys out. Mark Twain is credited with the advice that if you eat one frog when you start your day, everything else you do after that will be comparatively more palatable. But I thought the idea also made sense for anyone in fall planning mode.

One of the best things to do this time of year is to take a long look at your operation

and your team and decide what's working and what's not.

Iim Huston wrote a column in our August issue about firing a long-time problem emplovee with an anger management problem. and how that decision made the rest of the company more productive and a more pleasant place to work.

As a busy owner, it's easy to develop a blind spot when it comes to certain problems. Just like that foreman who does great work but is a jerk, or the earnest tech who's always coming in late, or the longtime customer who always finds a reason to complain.

So many landscapers have trouble finding and retaining good employees. It's a struggle every contractor, no matter the segment or geography, is going through. And because it's so hard to find good employees, it can be tempting to keep some of the mediocre or even poor performers around. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, right?

But take some time in the next few weeks to look around - at your company, your team and yourself - to see where your turkeys are. They do nothing to help you and everything to hurt you. It's time to open the gate and let them out. - Chuck Bowen



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Eli Kean, marketing manager for Dixie Chopper, mowed approximately 106 acres in an attempt to set a World Record for most acres mowed in 24 hours.

# The Le Mans of lawn mowing

A Dixie Chopper employee attempted to set a mowing world record. By Chuck Bowen

LONDON, Ohio – If you think spending eight hours on a zero-turn is rough, try riding one for 24 hours straight.

That's what Eli Kean did last month in an attempt to set the world record for most acres mowed in 24 hours. Kean, marketing manager for Dixie Chopper, mowed approximately 106 acres of rough ground in an endurance test reminiscent of the famous 24 Hours of Le Mans road race.

But instead of French cobblestone, Kean's track was a collection of rough, uneven grassy fields that serve as a parking lot for the Molly Caren Agriculture Center west of Columbus, Ohio.

"It just beat you up the whole time," Kean said of the grounds.



Kean drove Dixie's forthcoming 2015
74-inch Xcaliber zero-turn, powered by
a 35-hp, 999-cc Kawasaki engine. The
mower was completely stock – even the
seat – save for a couple of sets of LED
lights and two GoPro cameras to record
the event.

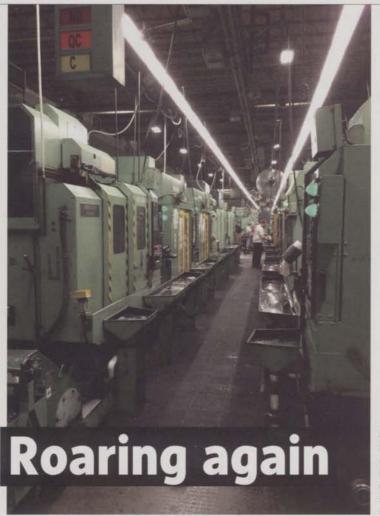
Dixie Chopper is no stranger to endurance challenges. In 2007, one of its sales managers drove a propane-powered mower across the country. And for the company's 25th anniversary, it commissioned the team at Orange County Chopper to build a show motorcycle using parts from one of its Zs.

Guinness World Records is still processing all that footage, and the company was still awaiting confirmation of its world record at press time. But no current record for most acres mowed stands. The only turf-related records Guinness maintains are longest journey on a lawnmower (14,594.5 miles on a stock Kubota BX2200-60) and fastest speed set on a lawnmower (116 mph on a highly modified Honda HF2620).

In all, Kean used 65 gallons of fuel and was on the mower for about 23 hours total – he spent a few 15-minute breaks eating some cold pizza, apples and granola.

Before leaving for the Tuesday record attempt, Kean said, he mowed his lawn at home – an acre in Indiana that he maintains with a 60-inch Magnum – and kissed his wife and two kids, aged 6 weeks and 18 months, goodbye.

"Monday night was the best sleep I'd had in a couple weeks," he said.



Kawasaki's Maryville engine facility has seen a come back since the recession.

# A tour of Kawasaki's Maryville, Mo., engine facility illustrates the industry's rebound. By Guy Cipriano

MARYVILLE, Mo. – The tour guide opened a door and his group gathered on a small concrete square providing a dry barrier between a busy factory and muddy turf.

"We're supposed to show everybody this," said Greg Branner, who works in the engineering department of the Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing engine plant in northwest Missouri. Branner gazed at a grass plot surrounded on two sides by manufacturing structures. "This is a place where we can expand the plant," he said.

One sign of the lawn industry's recovery can be found in this city's signature manufacturing facility. Before, during and after the 25th anniversary celebration of Kawasaki's Maryville plant on Aug. 22, company executives and employees openly discussed expansion, a seemingly unlikely vision shortly after the plant last expanded in 2008.

The recession slowed activity in the 796,699-square foot plant that had been expanded 11 times since opening in 1989. Steve Bratt, vice president and plant manager, says work weeks were reduced to four days in 2008-09, with many employees using vacation and personal time to fill personal financial voids.

And now? The plant hummed with activity as industry guests toured the facility on a

typical workday as part of the anniversary celebration. Kawasaki employs 810 workers in Maryville, making it the city's second-largest employer behind Northwest Missouri State University. Eighteen different engine models ranging from 12 to 37 horsepower for lawn and garden equipment are produced there.

Ten assembly lines have the capacity to assemble 450 units per day and more than 18,500 active parts are stored in the warehouse. The die casting operation uses 1.4 million pounds of aluminum per month.

The plant is operating at full capacity with employees being offered overtime, according to Bratt. "The industry is booming, at least in the lawn and garden side of it," he said. Fumihiro "Clint" Ohno, senior vice president of the United States engine division, called reaching full capacity "a good headache to have." The plant reached another milestone last March when the 8 millionth completed unit left the line.

Bratt judges the industry's current condition based on activity inside the plant. Tim Malinowski offered a different perspective. He's the senior sales-manager-OEM sales and relies on data and industry buzz when determining Kawasaki's place in the lawn market.

"It's been another busy year," he said. "Growth was substantial, kind of following OPEI numbers. We are supporting that the best we can and next year is going to be a similar year with maybe not as strong growth. Technology is key. Going forward people are being much more, I guess, critical of innovation, features, benefits, fuel economy and those types of things. That's something we are working on."

The anniversary celebration included a kampai toast, a Japanese goodwill gesture, and ended with the starting of the first engine produced in the plant, a FC150V model.

"I personally still have one of the mowers," Bratt said. "It's 25 years old and still going strong."

The author is assistant editor of Lawn & Landscape's sister publication, Golf Course Industry.





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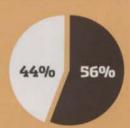
L&L recently surveyed 100 contractors about their fuel-buying habits and how they are saving at the pump. We found that the majority of respondents haven't made a drastic move like changing a fleet, and they also haven't made smaller-scale changes and invested in routing/tracking software. Yet, that doesn't mean they aren't looking into alternative fuels. For more from the survey, read the Smart Fuel package in our September issue. For more on alternative fuels, turn to page 104.

Have you changed your fleet vehicles in the last five years to save fuel?

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Source: Lawn & Landscape research



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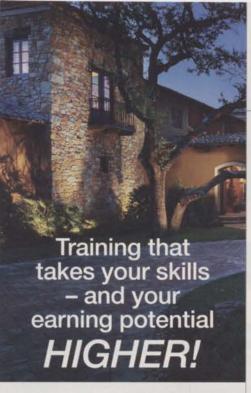
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# The training game

Bill Arman of the consulting group the Harvest Group answers some of the most-asked questions about preparing employees.

# Q: How do you measure the effectiveness of training?

A: There are basically six areas that should be measured and tracked to verify the effectiveness of your training program. These areas are pretty critical and come into play with most every position in the organization.

# 1. Quantity of workload or capacity to take on more responsibility

The more training employees get, the more we would like them to take on, as in more jobs, more complex duties and responsibilities, more people under their jurisdiction, or more customers without being overwhelmed or stressed out.

How to measure: Give people more work and see if they consistently deliver on the other items listed below.

# 2. Quality of work as perceived by the customer

Employees should deliver consistently on your customers' needs and requests. This would include some customer relations training with operational delivery that is recognized and meets and exceeds your customers' expectations.

How to measure: Use customer surveys, customer retention tracking, accounts



receivables, referrals for other work and enhancement sales.

## 3. Quality of work as measured by internal standards

Each company should have an internal method for measuring the quality of its work. This measuring tool should be used frequently and objectively. This is usually referred to as quality assurance.

How to measure: Build a score sheet that covers key areas that can be measured and progress tracked at least each quarter.

## 4. Efficiency and productivity

Measure efficiency and productivity by measuring actual hours used versus hours budgeted to do the work. Don't forget that the quality needs to be there as well. It's a balance between the two.

How to measure: The gross margin on a job or by a service area, like maintenance, installation or snow removal is usually a great way to measure efficiency.

## 5. Safety

Each company needs to have safety as a major focus and training needs to be in place here.

How to measure: Keep track of the number of accidents and incidents, along with the frequency and severity of accidents. A low Workers Comp MOD rate is a good indicator of having a well-trained staff.

## 6. Transfer of knowledge to others

The people who do all of the above and also help with the training of others are golden.

How to measure: People or trainees are successfully accomplishing all of the top five items on time and consistently.

# Q: How do you know that information transfer actually took place?

A: The best way to verify that the training has indeed taken place is a process called 'certification." Certification is an independent process from the actual training that allows the trainees to demonstrate, on their own, the task, skill or behavior that has been taught to them. It's similar to when you take your driver's license test. There's a written portion and a field verification completed by

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## Q: How do you hold employees accountable for the time/effort spent on training?

A: Measure the expected outcomes of their training and track their results and behaviors. Conduct regular performance appraisals and define what skills need tuning up. Reward the performers and help build their skills. If they do not respond or improve their skills, results or behaviors after reasonable effort, then, perhaps, it's time for them to be successful elsewhere.

# Q: What is the customer impact of a trained versus non-trained employee?

A: Well-trained employees will be effective, productive, safe, positive and content with their career paths. This will translate into happy content customers. The impact is powerful. As a result, your customers will stay with you for a long time, tell others about your company, pay their bills on time, and they will want to add more work and extras with you. Without a great training program, all of the above will definitely be harder if not impossible to accomplish. Remember to have a purpose in mind when you start a training program. Know the desired measurable outcomes before you launch.

## HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE EXPERTS? >> Send it to llexperts@gie.net



Dan Carrothers created a franchise, Weed Man Houston, and purchased 22 territories, the largest Weed Man franchise to date.

# Weed Man ready for big year

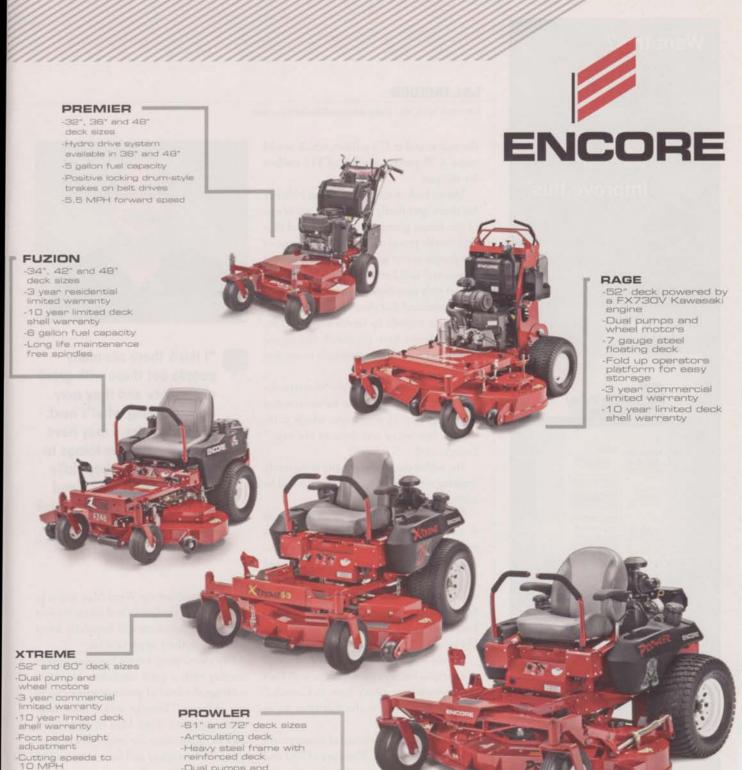
The company had one of its best years in 2013, and expects better in 2014. By Katie Tuttle

n what the company is calling a "phenomenal year," Weed Man USA is on track to have one of its best years with both revenue and opening franchises.

"And the good news is the year's not over yet and we're coming into our busiest selling season for franchises," said Jennifer Lemcke, chief operating officer for Weed Man. "So we're really, really excited about where we're at and where we're going."

For 2013, the company grew 19 percent. For 2014, the company is projecting





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the year to end at \$75 million, which would mean a 19 percent growth of \$12 million for the year.

"As we look at some of what our industry has done, specifically in lawn care, we're one of the fastest growing companies, and that we're really proud of. I know it's because of the people we've gotten involved with the company," said Lemcke.

Not only growing in revenue, Weed Man also announced that the company has grown in size in regards to franchises. To date, 11 franchisees have expanded and signed additional franchise agreements to acquire 35 territories.

"We had budgeted to have 56 territories and we're at 77 already, so we've exceeded our budget by 21 territories, which is really the best we've ever done in one year," Lemcke said.

She added that the company is currently working on a few verbal deals which will be announced at a later date.

Weed Man also announced a new venture it was taking. Dan Carrothers, who was marketing manager at BASF, created a franchise, Weed Man Houston, and purchased 22 territories, the largest Weed Man franchise to date. In addition to being a Weed Man franchisee, Carrothers is also part of a brand new joint venture, Turf Operations Houston.

"Based on all of this, we actually decided as a company to do a joint venture with Dan in our corporate entity here in Canada," Lemcke said. "This is the first time we've done this.

The new company's board of directors will consist of Carrothers, Weed man CEO and founder Roger Mongeon and a few other key employees, including Lemcke.

"I am extremely excited about joining Weed Man," Carrothers said. "After many years in the industry, primarily on the chemical side as a basic manufacturer, I'm now going to be on the other side of the fence where on a day-to-day basis we're interacting with customers, with an organization that is clearly customer-centric."

Lemcke said partnerships and investments



"I think there are many people out there with great experience and they may be wondering what's next. If nothing else, I may have given them some things to think about and hopefully one of them is that Weed Man is a great place to think about being with."

- Dan Carrothers

like this is something Weed Man hopes to see more of in the future, and taking the first step with Carrothers will hopefully bring attention to these opportunities.

"By developing strong business opportunities with a great candidate like Dan, it brings the level of professionalism up in our industry," Lemcke said. "These large owner-operated Weed Man franchises give a lot of opportunity for employees to grow within the company and see a future career within our industry."

"I think me joining Weed Man will simply open up doors for people who are thinking about something beyond what they are currently doing," Carrothers said. "I think there are many people out there with great experience and they may be wondering what's next. If nothing else, I may have given them some things to think about and hopefully one of them is that Weed Man is a great place to think about being with." L&L



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



# Lessons from the end

like to tell my team at Grunder Landscaping and my coaching and consulting clients to work like a defensive end does in the NFL. A good defensive end never settles. What is their job? To get to the quarterback, right? To make a tackle behind the line of scrimmage, right? To do whatever they have to do to limit the forward progress of the offense. I think there are a lot of great parallels between a great NFL defensive end and a great landscaper. Here are three of my favorites:

1. THEY DON'T MAKE EXCUSES. What happens to the teammate on an NFL team who makes excuses or blames others for their performance? They don't stay employed on a team for long. Great landscapers don't make excuses either. Owners don't want to hear their team talk about them not wanting to chip in and cut grass for the day. Owners and managers don't want to hear their team say, "You know, I just don't feel like working today because it's too cold."

And owners, your team doesn't want to hear about how bad you've got it. Or how horrible Mrs. Smith is to work with. Or how unlucky you are. They don't want to hear why you're having trouble making payroll or why you didn't get

them the materials they needed for the job. Your team expects you to do what you said you would do and never throw them under the bus.

They are watching how you behave and looking to you for leadership – not for excuses. I like what former football coach and current ESPN analyst Lou Holtz said: "Don't tell me how rocky the sea is. Just bring the dam ship in."

Amen, Lou.

Great owners take the blame when things go wrong and put the praise on others when things go well. They realize they are part of a team and they have to chip in, too. It's pretty hard for you to get upset at your team making excuses for poor performance if you make excuses, too.

Just state the facts, learn from your mistakes, be grateful you have a team and show them that by your actions – not just by your words. If things are not going well, ask for help, lead the way and get better.

2. THEY DON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER. No matter what these elite athletes are doing, they don't take no for an answer. Sure, it's nauseating sometimes to see their confidence and cockiness. However, if you just look at it for what it is, it's really pretty admirable. What if all of us owners ran our businesses with the bravado that an NFL defensive lineman did? I think we'd be better off. If we all approached our work with a can-do mindset and took on whatever was across the line from us, we'd find success more times than failure.

Today, at Grunder Landscaping Co., we had a slight mix up. We sent a whole crew to a job site with plants and guys to do a job. When we got there, the client came out and said, "Whoa, you can't do this today; we're going to be gone and we won't be home to water." Most landscapers would say, "Oh, okay, we're sorry; we'll come back when you get back into town."

The landscapers at GLC – the ones that have this defensive end mentality – said, "That's OK, we'll water for you when you're gone and just plant it now." We won't charge them to water. It will be cheaper to do it for them than going back later to install the plants. Problem solved, job done, moving on, right?

How many times do you just lie down and accept it when you are told no? Probably too often. Owners and team members would all do better if they didn't take no for an answer. Try to find a way around. Be a defensive end and shove aside the obstacles in your way, or at least try to. Many times things will work out really well for you.

3. THEY TAKE BREAKS. If you think about the performance of an NFL defensive end, they work really, really hard for about 20 seconds every three minutes or so. There's no way they can give it their all for hours and hours at a time.

I think many landscapers, me included, don't even remotely grasp this concept. Great ideas don't come to you when you are fully exerting yourself. They come to you when you are relaxed.

Sometimes the best thing I can do is take a 10-minute break and recharge my batteries. Sometimes, rather than working till 8 p.m., I go home early and then go in early the next day.

Short breaks, vacations and things other than work are where we find our zest for work. It's when we're not working that we see what could improve and how we could do better. If an NFL defensive lineman can figure this out, we land-scapers should be able to figure it out, too. L&L





JIM HUSTON runs J.R. Huston Consulting, a green industry consulting firm.



# Time to huddle up

ollege athletics is as competitive an arena as any today. Coaches who produce winning teams usually become millionaires, campus heroes, professional coaches and sports icons. Coaches who don't produce winning teams often end up selling insurance.

It's all about the numbers and winning.

Yet, it amazes me how some college athletes and teams are willing to die for their coach, their team and each other. This, in spite of the fact that if you, as an athlete, cannot perform a functional role on the team and be used to win, you're replaced. It's a totally utilitarian environment.

Good coaches focus on quantifiable Xs and Os. Great coaches do so as well, but they master the intangible – the unseen. Like a band of brothers fighting for a great cause, great coaches not only master the tactical, they meld the minutia of the job at hand into the strategic – the big picture. And what is the big picture? It's the caring for one another at a deep level that's somewhat spiritual.

Players performing for great coaches know that they're not just a number. They know that the coach cares for and believes in them, probably more than they do themselves. Great coaches care deeply for their players' character development, education, futures and families.

Mediocre coaches are myopic in their perspective. Their worldview is incomplete. They focus on themselves, their record, their career, their problems. Players (people) are simply a means to an end, the purpose of which is to glorify themselves. And you can bet that players know this. They, like most of us, know when they are being used.

Great coaches like John Wooden, Lou Holtz and Tom Landry see themselves as servants whose primary objective it is to enhance others, rather than themselves. They can't help but help others develop all of their potential, all of the time, and in all circumstances. It's been cultivated into their DNA over many challenging years. It's this DNA which transcends mere winning, championships and sports glory that they pass onto their players. They truly do create a band of brothers (or sisters) – an arena of sorts where brothers and sisters not only achieve technical, but also relational, excellence.

Great leaders are, first and foremost, great coaches. To be a great leader, you have to master technical challenges and love people. You cannot merely focus on technical excellence while remaining inept at relationships. You must master both.

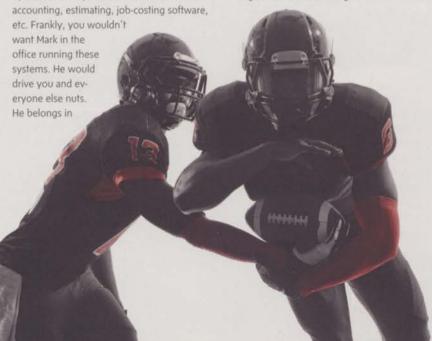
HOW IT WORKS. Mark Pendergast, president of Salmon Falls Landscaping in Berwick, Maine, is gruff, somewhat unrefined and driven. He wears his emotions on his sleeve. If he feels it, you get to feel it. Mark's a field guy. He doesn't like office work. However, he knows and understands commercial landscape installation field operations as well as anyone in the country. Mark does not know how to operate all the systems in the office such as accounting, estimating, job-costing software, etc. Frankly, you wouldn't

the field. On the other hand, Mark knows how to assemble an excellent office team, and he knows the right questions to ask them.

No one works harder than Mark. He's up earlier, works harder and stays longer than anyone in the company (or outside the company). He truly leads from the front. His passion for his work and his people is obvious, but that doesn't mean that he's easy to work for. Many have not lasted at Salmon Falls Landscaping – some for good reasons and some for not-so-good reasons.

Mark has recruited, trained and maintained a great team. This is primarily because he sets the example for others to emulate. You can recruit the best and train the best, but if you, personally, are not the best, it may all be for naught. You have to set the example. This is your No. 1 job as an entrepreneur – one that you cannot delegate.

CONCLUSION. It's simple but true. If you want your team to sweat, you have to bleed. If you want your team to bleed, you have to hemorrhage. Leaders hemorrhage. L&L





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## BY MARGIE HOLLY

HIRE POWER is 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. Email Chuck Bowen at cbowen@gie.net with topic ideas.

# 5 cheap ways to train

n challenging financial times, the training budget is often one of the first things cut.

But that doesn't mean your employees should do without. Here are some suggestions for inexpensive but effective methods to achieve your employee development goals.

- 1. Take advantage of networking groups. Many industry associations offer education for members at monthly meetings, at annual conferences and online, and some offer the added credentialing of professional industry certification. Beyond landscape associations, get involved with the associations of your customers. It helps you network and keep up with trends in your customers' industry and may even open doors to a wider range of training opportunities for your employees.
- 2. Foster peer-to-peer learning. Having your employees teach each other is a great way to share best practices, teach new employees old subject matter and maybe even teach some of your old dogs new tricks.

Cross training: Cross train jobs shouldn't only cover someone going on extended leave. Treated as a regular part of training, with a predictable schedule of job rotation, you can not only ensure that your employees are flexible, but you will create an engaged work force that understands the big picture and is stimulated by the challenge of continuous learning.

Lunch-and-learns: Modify the traditional office-based format to benefit your field-based employees. Send a production expert to have lunch with the crew and solicit their ideas to improve efficiency. One afternoon a month, bring your crews back to the yard early for a "lunch-truck-and-learn" where team members can highlight their successes and share production tips and techniques.

And don't underestimate the value of a "breakfast with the brass" where your top executives host various functional groups for breakfast, listening to their feedback and showing them how they fit into the success of the overall business. Weekly book club; Choose a business book and have team members read a chapter per week. At the end of every week have a team member lead a lunch meeting where everyone discusses what they learned and brainstorms how to apply those lessons to your business.

3. Partner with who you know. Ask your vendors what's new. Check with government agencies or university extension programs for free resources. Is there a community center you can use for training space in exchange for volunteer services? Can your customers provide a venue or education on topics that are important to their business?

Here's a real life example: When budget cuts

Having your employees teach each other is a great way to share best practices, teach new employees old subject matter, and maybe even teach some of your old dogs new tricks.

threatened one company's training calendar, it partnered with a customer, local government and three long-time vendors to create a day-long program that offered hands-on workshops in horticulture, irrigation and equipment maintenance. The company held the program at a nearby botanical garden, which allowed in-house experts to lead a plant identification tour in the afternoon.

A representative from city government gave a presentation and answered questions about new water regulations. Lunch was provided by another vendor, who was given time during the meal to present a few new products. The entire day cost only a few hundred dollars, but employees left feeling energized with tools and information they could apply immediately to better serve their customers.

- 4. Train the trainer. There are some skills only a professional can teach, so you will likely have to rely on some formalized training programs. If you are training multiple people, you can save time and money by bringing a trainer on site. If your budget won't support that, then identify someone within the company who has strong communication skills along with the patience to help others learn. Send them to the classes and have them come back prepared to share what they've learned.
- Encourage self-study. Develop a supplementary course of study that will help employees achieve their own career goals by customizing the learning.

Online training: Online courses are a great way for employees to learn at their own pace with a course of study tailored to their career goals. Check with your local Small Business Development Center (SBA.gov) for free or low-cost options. Other resources include: Dale Carnegie, BizLibrary, Learning Tree and the Business Training Institute.

Book lists: Customize lists of business books by topics relevant to a specific career track. For example, a field employee who wants to get into management can enhance his competency with books on leadership, management skills, communication and budgeting. Someone on a sales track may benefit from topics such as customer service, effective listening and project management. And leaders at every level should never stop learning about new ways to motivate, communicate and strategize.

Community resources: Toastmasters International is a non-profit group with chapters all over the country that will help an individual improve communication, public speaking and leadership skills. Community colleges and adult education programs, often based in public high schools and tech schools, offer low-cost courses on a variety of topics from computer software to business to English as a second language. If you have enough employees interested, some schools may even send instructors on site. L&L



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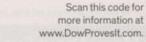
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## OPS PROFILE

From left to right: Aaron Katerberg, his grandfather Ev Katerberg, who founded Grapids Irrigation in 1957, and Will Katerberg, Aaron's father.

# ABOVE WATER

How an irrigation-only firm has persevered through the auto-industry crash and economic fallout. By Kristen Hampshire

here are clear business advantages to running a niche operation. You hone a client base that demands, and will pay for, your services. You focus skill building on an area of expertise and become a subject-matter expert. You target marketing and focus on getting the business you want.

But there are also pitfalls when the going gets tough and customers stop spending on irrigation systems. Many companies diversify to extend or deepen their reach in the market. They run with the idea that comprehensive coverage will prevent customers from leaving their firm to find services elsewhere.

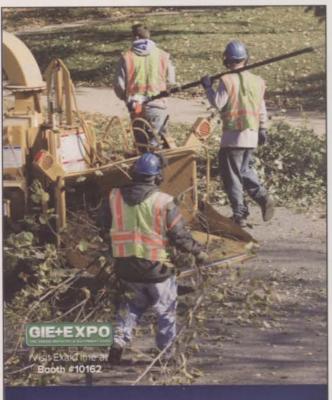
There's truth to that.

But Aaron Katerberg never considered branching out beyond his company's longtime core business: irrigation, and irrigation only. That said, Grapids Irrigation, located in Grand Rapids, Mich., has overhauled its business model, pumped up cash flow with smart payment systems, expanded into drainage tiles and formed a peer group to keep the profitable ideas flowing.

Some things stay the same – an irrigation focus – but the daily operations of the business have changed significantly to secure the sustainability of the 50-year-old firm. "One of my grandfather's advertisements was, 'irrigation is not a sideline,'" Katerberg says. With modern business model changes, that saying is still very much the case at Grapids.

**SWITCHING THE MIX.** To stay alive and busy the last 10 years, Grapids Irrigation completely flip-flopped its installation and service mix. Historically, the firm had been mostly installation. Today, the split is 25 percent installation and 75 percent service.

The problem with installation is that commercial work goes to the lowest bidder, Katerberg says. He saw more opportunity in service, because of its recurring revenue – and also, there is a "keeping up" factor that will drive even clients who feel financially crunched to take care of their irrigation systems.



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## **OPS PROFILE**

"My grandpa would always say that people with money will always still need you," Katerberg says. "There will always still be work from the top end of your clientele, and even if those higher end customers do not have the money, they don't want to be embarrassed in their neighborhoods with a brown lawn."

So Katerberg began building the service division of the business—a wise decision, he said, considering the financial storm going on in their immediate area, and the country. "With the economic dump in Michigan on the auto industry in 2003, and the economic dump of the whole country in 2008, we have had to reform our business model almost from scratch," he says simply. The commercial installation business simply wasn't going to be there like it was.

This service shift was a big move for the Katerberg family. Katerberg began the efforts in earnest when he took over as service manager eight years ago. Today, he serves as president and is buying out the now third-generation business from his father, Will. Katerberg's grandfather, Ev, a plumber by trade, founded the company in 1957.

In spite of the economic climate, the family still wanted the business to continue with its irrigation-only service model – that is their passion– but increasing service business would improve cash flow, which quite frankly, stopped flowing during the company's five-month off-season.

But in order to boost service, Grapids needed to build internal resources, including bringing on (and training) employees to do the work; and developing systems to maintain a high level of customer service. "We are roughly triple the size we were 10 years ago, and our marketing efforts and the employees we hire for service are very different, as well," Katerberg says.

As for employees, irrigation construction takes "a bull" of a worker who can focus on production; while the service side calls for a self-starter who excels at relationship building, Katerberg says.

"Service is very detail-oriented, and you are dealing with customers very intently," he says. "Sometimes you need to hold that older customer's hand as you adjust the (irrigation) head just the way she wants it – and you need to juggle paperwork," he says, noting that the typical service technician does 20 times the paperwork of an installation foreman.

"A foreman interacts with potentially one customer in two or three days or longer on a commercial job," Katerberg says. "A service technicians is often interacting with somewhere between 15 to 20 customers per day."

Most employees do not jump back and forth between departments. In fact, only two employees have done that in Katerberg's 20-some years in the business. Recruiting for service is focused on finding individuals who can work independently on the road, manage customer relationships and handle administrative duties, such as billing and payment (Grapids recently implemented COD).

As for systems, Katerberg says the company has always focused on fast response to customer calls. This is integral to secure new and repeat service business. "We make sure that we follow up with our

## **OPS PROFILE**

customers, and from my experience, it can be hard to get a hold of (other companies) on the phone," he says.

**CUING UP CASH FLOW.** Switching to service was one gradual decade-long process, but implementing systems to improve cash flow was critical to Grapids' continued growth during the recession.

"Cash flow kills more businesses than P&Ls do," Katerberg says.

Trying to spread out the money during the off-season was stressing the firm – it's a challenge for any seasonal business. Grapids stoked its cash flow, and ironed out its frantic early-spring scheduling rush, by offering a 10-percent discount to clients who prepay for service. Today, about 70 percent of startup service customers sign a prepay contract.



Aaron's grandfather at a homeshow in the late 1950s.



## **OPS PROFILE**

Katerberg introduces the program to clients each year by mailing them a formal letter the first of February. A commitment to prepay is due by March 1. The selling point for customers is the discount, plus the convenience of knowing their irrigation service needs are handled for the rest of the year. For Grapids, the business flow improves because Katerberg can plan routes well in advance.

Another move to "significantly" help cash flow, Katerberg says, has been implementing cash-on-delivery (COD). Grapids began offering the system in early 2014. Technicians are responsible for completing the COD transaction.

"Technicians can take checks or credit cards in the field," he says. "They are doing their own pricing, so they quote the customer like a mechanic would, and by the end of the job, they take that money and it goes directly into our account instead of us waiting for the collection period, which is 40 days on average."

Some technicians are better at securing COD than others; it's a system that Katerberg and managers will continue to emphasize to field personnel because it drastically reduces receivables.

These steps to improve cash flow have allowed Grapids to use winter months to sharpen the business and conduct training. "We'd rather spend the off season making our service better instead of trying to pick up a few bucks here and there plowing, which is a very competitive business in our market," Katerberg says.

With a move toward more service, and by putting systems in place to support the company's financials, Grapids has maintained growth during the recession. The company posted about \$1.7 million in revenues last year.

What Katerberg is most excited about is continuing on this growth mode, and continuing to explore opportunities that align with the company's irrigation mission. One such service is installing drain tiles. Grapids can use its existing equipment for the work.

"The beneficial thing is when it rains, no one cares about the sprinkler company, but everyone cares about the drainage company," he says. "The service has been a good balance for us." The company has gained drainage tile business from existing customers and expanded its client base, too.

"We have made significant leaps and bounds as far as financials, but that's not what is most exciting," Katerberg says of growing a talented team. "Seeing our people become successful excites me far more." L&L

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Upon reviewing this valuable information, you'll find the outlook for the lawn and landscape services industry is promising for the foreseeable future. Nearly half of the contractors surveyed have more work backlog than they did a year ago and over 90 percent of the respondents reported that they will generate a profit this year.

Other leading indicators such as weather, housing starts, home values and employment figures support the positive trends you'll see in this issue. Industry revenues are projected to grow by 7.4 percent for 2014 and 8.5 percent for 2015. And while quality available labor continues to be a limiting factor in the industry's growth, there is a positive trend in employment opportunities of 2.5 percent and 2.2 percent over the next two years. This is good news in such a labor-dependent industry.

I have learned over the years that there is tremendous benefit in listening and learning from those who have experience and insight within our industry. As the major sponsor of the Green Industry Conference, as well as various industry events throughout the year, we continue to gain greater knowledge into the opportunities and challenges that you, our customers, face.

As you read through this issue and start planning for next year, I would encourage you to get involved in the communities you serve to promote the benefits of well-managed green spaces and your profession in creating and maintaining the quality of life in the communities you serve. Be an active member in your state or national trade associations.

To take full advantage of the projected continued growth in the industry, you will need to implement new and innovative approaches to business. John Deere is dedicated to providing you with the products, dealer support, financing and other integrated solutions to help you grow and prosper.

Sustainable growth is important for all of us. There has never been a better time to clearly define your brand, your niche, strengthen your business and better serve your communities and customers.

We wish you a safe and prosperous year!



KEN TAYLOR, CLP
General Manager
John Deere Corporate Business Division

# DATA DRIVEN

Exclusive L&L research on the state of the landscape market and what's coming in 2015.

t's a good time to be a landscaper. Revenue and profits are on the rise and the long-dormant construction market is starting to come back to life. Homeowners and property managers are once again investing in their properties. More contractors say they'll turn a profit this year, and the national average net profit is up a point to 11 percent. The average owner's salary is up 11 percent from last year to a national average of \$68,414.

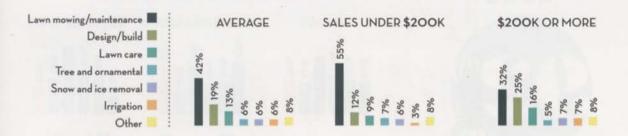
According to our research, in 2014 the average landscaper employs 15 people year-round and does just more than \$1 million in annual revenue, of which he sees a net profit of 11 percent.

But, not all bodes well. Landscapers across the country complain of a lack of qualified employees – both for crews and management positions. Persistent drought in the west and south has put pressure on the entire green industry to get smarter about how it manages water. And the specter of the Affordable Healthcare Act still looms over many contractors. Read on to see how contractors across the country are dealing with these and other problems.

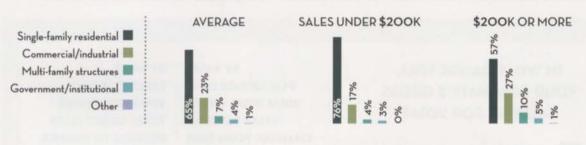
But before we begin, some housekeeping: For the data in the pages that follow, we report the national average for landscapers, then drill down and split responses between firms doing more or less than \$200,000 a year in revenue. Maintenance means mowing, trimming, etc. Design/build is hardscaping and installation work, and lawn care is chemical application. — *Chuck Bowen* 

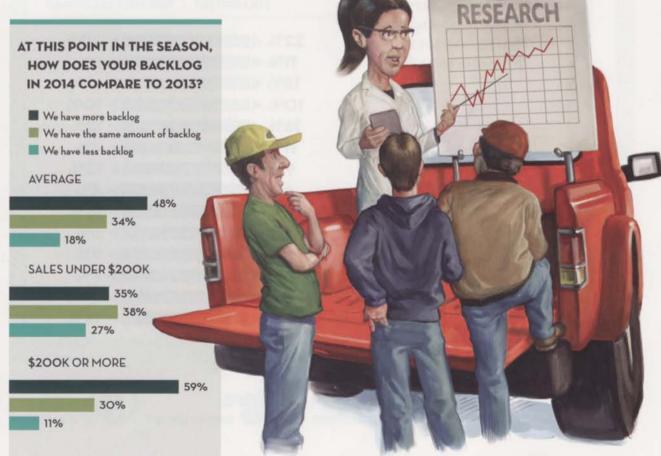
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#### WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR ANNUAL SALES COMES FROM THE FOLLOWING SERVICES?

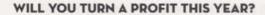


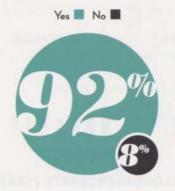
#### WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR SALES COMES FROM THE FOLLOWING PROPERTY TYPES?



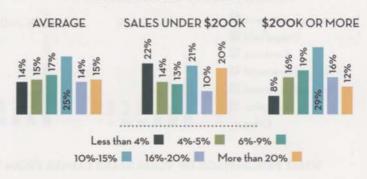


#### 2014 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT | RESEARCH

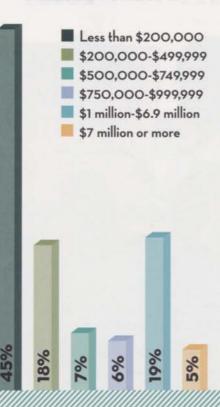




#### WHAT DO YOU PROJECT YOUR 2014 NET PROFIT WILL BE?

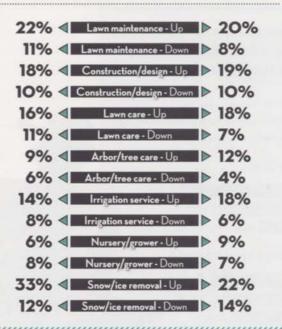


#### IN WHAT RANGE WILL YOUR COMPANY'S GROSS SALES BE FOR 2014?



BY WHAT
PERCENTAGE HAVE
YOUR TOTAL GROSS
SALES REVENUE
CHANGED FROM 2013
TO 2014 FOR THE
FOLLOWING?

BY WHAT
PERCENTAGE DO
YOU EXPECT YOUR
TOTAL GROSS SALES
REVENUE TO CHANGE
FROM 2014 TO 2015
FOR THE FOLLOWING?



HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU THAT THE LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY WILL GROW IN 2015?

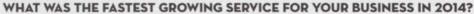


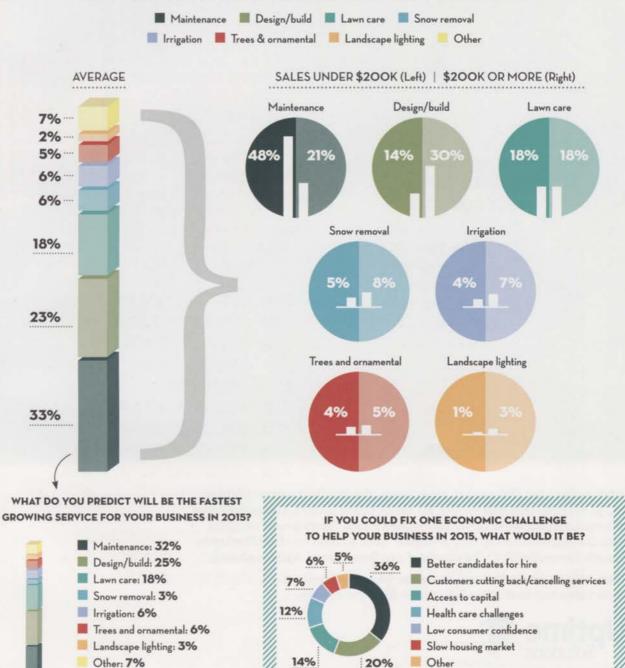




#### SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Lawn & Landscape partnered with ABR Research, a nationwide independent research company, to conduct our 2014 State of the Industry Report survey. An internet-based survey was sent to a random sample of L&L subscribers. The responses were gathered during July and August. In all, a total of 6O2 surveys were completed. The margin of error is calculated to be no greater than +/- 4 percentage points at a confidence level of 95 percent.





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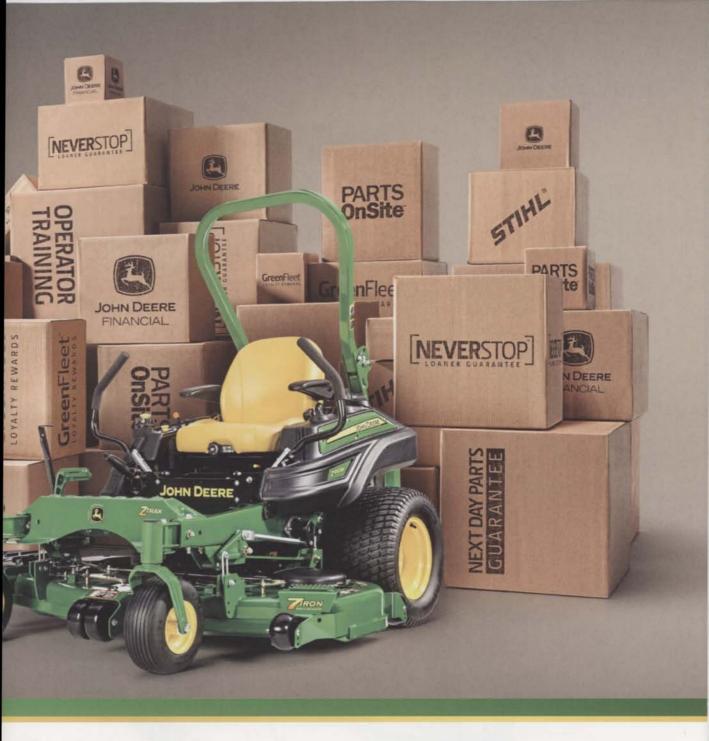
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# DESIGN/BUILD IS BACK

The sector gets a shot in the arm from new home construction breaking ground and homeowners' loosened purse strings. BY KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE

omeowners who have been dreaming of a better backyard - one enhanced with hardscape, water and fire features and fullblown outdoor kitchens - are tired of holding back and are making a move on those projects now.

That's the report from design/build contractors around the country who are seeing an increase in more "luxury" design and installation work, and a resurgence of new construction, triggering a demand for design/build projects.

Scott Cohen's design/build business is up about 50 percent this year compared to 2013. "A key indication of how the economy is looking right now is whether people are buying 'extras' or keeping projects bare bones," says the president of The Green Scene in Chatsworth, Calif.

In his area, clients are buying the original design he presents - and then adding on sophisticated color-changing lighting, outdoor speakers, misting systems to cool down areas and more. These are items clients might have omitted when Cohen proposed them, even as late as last year.

"I think people have been sitting on the sidelines for the last five to seven years, and they are chomping at the bit of the opportunity to get their yards fixed," Cohen says.

Meanwhile, median home values have increased in California by about almost 13 percent during the last 12 months, according to Zillow, compared to 6.5 percent nationwide. "So people are feeling like they can invest in their properties," Cohen says. "They feel like their investments won't be lost and they will get their money's worth."

Pete Bryant, president, Southern Exposure Landscape Management, Summerfield, N.C., says his firm never suffered a decline in business in 2008 and 2009. "We did see a slump in growth during that time," he says, "But the last two years have been excellent for our company, not only maintaining our current customers but also seeing substantial growth with new customers looking to finally do that backyard project they've been dreaming of."

But is this upswing here to stay? According to Lawn & Landscape's research, the answer is yes. Design/build was the second most popular answer when contractors were asked what their fastest

There is more opportunity (in design/build) as outdoor living is getting more elaborate and sophisticated. IT'S HARDER FOR HOMEOWNERS TO FIND QUALIFIED CONTRACTORS WHO CAN REALLY HANDLE **ALL ASPECTS** OF A PROJECT." - Reed Dillon, president,

Reed Dillon & Associates

growing service was in 2014. The optimism was the same from contractors with design/build landing as the second most popular answer when asked about which service would grow the fastest in 2015.

"Unless we have another free fall in the stock market, yes, I think this (business) is here to stay," says Reed Dillon, president, Reed Dillon & Associates, Lawrence, Kan.

JUST ADD LUXURY. That free fall in the stock market - and the years of recession after - forced many landscapers out of the market or into different services. Those contractors with established companies who were left standing have an opportunity to take on the more complicated projects customers are now asking for. And Dillon says 2014 is just the beginning.

"There is opportunity (in design/build) as outdoor living is getting more elaborate and sophisticated," Dillon says. "It's harder for homeowners to find qualified contractors who can really handle all aspects of a project."

Because his company got involved with a referral network including builders and architects, new work has been coming in the doors and filling up



the schedule. The referral network has turned the firm on to high-end projects at custom-built homes, Dillon says.

For example, one project the firm is completing in exclusive Mission Hills includes a terraced property, pool, cabana house, outdoor fireplace and extensive plantings and outdoor lighting. "There is a lot of demand for outdoor living, and if you are in the right market, there is an expectation of what the outside environment will be like in terms of materials and degree of sophistication," Dillon says.

In other words, the outdoor living space is a given rather than an option in the custom home world.

Back in North Carolina, Bryant says the abundance of work means his firm doesn't have to jump at every job.

"We can be more selective and focus on the services we thrive at (landscaping and deck and patio lighting), and subcontract the tangent services that we don't do as often," he says. "When a company spreads itself too thin and tries to take on everything within the landscape field, something will lack excellence."

Bryant's focus on higher-end construction helps separate him from the competition. He says the company's specialization in more projects in the \$300,000 range has given the company an edge because there are fewer qualified firms that can even bid these jobs.

**PUSHING UP PRICES.** There's more work in the design/build sector today – but how profitable is it? The landscape design and installation firms we spoke with said they're minding their margins to stay competitive. And while profit margins are healthy, increasing material and labor expenses mean they aren't blowing anyone out of the water.

"We have kept the profit margins tight because we want to be busy," Cohen says, adding that the firm will increase prices moving into 2015 to defray increasing labor and materials costs.

Labor expenses, in particular, are a growing burden in Cohen's California market because of the minimum wage increase and the "trickle up" effect that has on other employees' wages, he says. "Our staff has responded to the increase in minimum wage by saying, 'Hey, if everyone is getting \$1.50 per hour more, I want that, too,'" he says. "The minimum wage increase we saw here is affecting our whole staff."

Bryant says in his North Carolina market, he expects prices to continue a slow increase, indicating stability (as opposed to spikes that show market turbulence). "I don't think the current economy has bounced back enough to sustain a rapid price jump," he says.

Meanwhile, Bryant says his firm tends to be more expensive than others in the region, but potential clients are willing to spend the extra money if they know they'll get quality work. "Mainly, we quote a job accurately so clients don't have lots of surprise expenses throughout the project," he says.

Dillon says his firm has tweaked pricing slightly to see what the market will bear. "But we have not really done too much with that," he says of pricing. "We are doing higher volume now than before, so we are making more profit."

But the cost of materials continues to creep, Dillon says. "I'm actually kind of amazed with some of these hardscape projects and where the bids are coming in," he says. "If it's shocking to me, I can't imagine what it is to the client."

But those clients seem willing to pay the price today compared to prior years. And, Dillon says, because his clients want to do business with him. he is rarely bidding against another company. He is sometimes altering the bid to accommodate clients' budgets, but clients have expressed that they feel they're getting value.

Besides, Dillon says his firm is "very lean" now after trimming back significantly in 2008. "We had to do some fairly significant layoffs, which was tough on people who had worked with me for 20 years," he says. "But through that process, I found out that we could maintain a much leaner operation."

Cohen did not eliminate staff during the downturn. "We kept everyone, and that is allowing us to respond and rebound quickly," he says. "Really, the only thing slowing us down is our subcontracted teams because there are not as many guys out there ready to rock and roll as we need."

Shoring up a larger, qualified network of subcontractors will be critical for taking full

advantage of the market growth, Cohen says. His in-house staff of 45 is supported by professionals such as plumbers and other tradespeople. "Whereas we used to work with one plumber, now we work with three," Cohen points out. (For more on labor issues in the industry, turn to page 14.)

Another holdup for getting jobs started, Cohen says, is the number of building permits waiting for approval. "The city and county planning offices that issue permits have not staffed back up to be able to accommodate the higher volumes of permits, so we have projects on standby waiting for permit approval for months on end," he says. "It has been really frustrating for our clients and us as we wait."

#### BUILDING IN 2014 AND BEYOND.

"If you are going to make money in 2015, you need to be staffed and ready to go," Cohen says, adding that if California sees rain, business will be even better. "There is a lot of potential business out there where homeowners are not pulling the trigger because they are concerned about whether they'll be able to water (their landscapes).

Cohen thinks that design/build business could easily multiply four-fold if the drought concern dissipates.

Continued construction will sustain the influx of work in the high-end design/ build sector, Dillon says. "There are areas of town where builders are doing a lot of tear-down and building new, bigger houses," he says. "As long as that trend continues, and it shows no sign of abating, the market should remain good here."

Also, the fact that homeowners are choosing the extras for their projects indicates not only comfort in moving forward with a project, but an ability to splurge on luxury - always a good sign for design/build.

"We've seen an increase in clients wanting to invest in their properties and do projects that are not only remedies to issues," Bryant says, "but additions that would be considered luxury for entertainment and enjoyment." 181



# 2014 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT | LABOR



# HELP WANTED

Landscapers across the country continue to struggle to find qualified employees.

#### BY STACIE ZINN ROBERTS

t's not breaking news, and, in fact, the complaints have been coming in for awhile – it's hard to find good help these days. But the answers to the problem have been few and far between.

"I think as an industry we need to get together and rally around who we are and what we do," says Jerry Schill, president of Schill Grounds Management. Schill's company has four locations in Ohio, employs 106 people, and has been in business for 21 years.

One way Schill Grounds Management publicly supports growing the workforce in the landscape industry is by its support of the PLANET Academic Excellence Foundation. Schill's goal is to work together with other industry leaders through PLANET in order to recruit more workers into the landscape industry before they get swallowed up by some other field.

Some companies conduct outreach to young people through industry job fairs, recruiting through Future Farmers of America programs, or by going into the high schools for career days and other work related events.

For Schill, the issue is in hiring qualified managers. In July, Schill was quoted in a Wall Street Journal article on the challenges faced by small business owners looking to hire skilled employees. A month after the story ran, Schill had received 194 inquiries from folks around the country looking to fill the five managerial positions the company has had available for about a year. The company has

#### 2014 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT | LABOR

made several hires after the article came out, but still struggle to find qualified and experienced horticultural professionals at the managerial level.

"We are not seeing enough people energized by our industry. There's not a lot of folks getting ready to graduate from high school or going to trade schools ... we just don't see the interest from kids anymore to enter those programs. That's really it in a nutshell," Schill says. "The middle management positions, Schill says, are the most difficult to fill. These jobs pay from \$35,00 up to \$75,000.

The lack of vocational and technical schools and reduced agricultural training programs, Schill says, have reduced a once-robust stream of applicants interested in the landscape industry. It's unfortunate, he says, considering that at 22-year-old right out of one of these schools could start his first job as a landscape manager making \$40,000 a year.

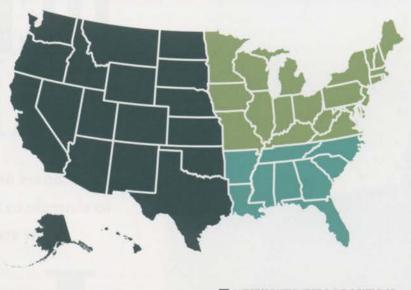
"A manager's job is not a bad job," Schill says. "That's a great stepping stone. But they don't realize that, they don't understand it. And our industry as a whole is at fault for it."

**ON THE GROUND.** In other areas of the country, landscape business owners we talked to say middle management is easier to come by. It's the unskilled labor force, hiring enough workers to mow grass during the busy summer season, that is the real challenge.

Ivan Giraldo is president of Clean Scapes, LP, a landscape company with offices in Dallas, Austin and San Antonio. Giraldo says the industry struggles from a lack of understanding of the value of physical work, and how an entry level position can lead to bigger opportunities.

"It's becoming difficult to fill entry positions. It appears that many view physically challenging manual labor as something that may be beneath them. Many of our young people haven't engaged in really challenging manual labor and find it easy to quit when it turns out

#### LABOR NUMBERS HOW MANY OPEN POSITIONS DO YOU HAVE?



NATIONWIDE: 1.3 POSITIONS

WEST/SOUTHWEST: 1.8 POSITIONS

EAST/MIDWEST: 1.1 POSITIONS

SOUTH/SOUTHEAST: 1 POSITION

to be more initially challenging than they expected," Giraldo says.

"I believe that people don't see manual labor as the first step for something big anymore. They don't see it as a career path. They want to step into the middle of the ladder to start with, they don't see as the 'jumping board' to something bigger."

In the resort area of the Delmarva Peninsula, in coastal Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore, Tony Sposato, president of Sposato Landscape Co., has a similar experience. Sposato says not only is he competing with other landscape companies to find temporary workers, but also the hotels, amusement parks and restaurants in the resort towns that need to hire folks to clean rooms, operate rides and wash dishes during the busy summer season.

"Mainly we are having trouble with mowing labor, guys who can mow grass. It pays anywhere from \$9.50 to \$13.50 an hour, depending on skill level. Those are the jobs that are hard to fill. We could pay \$15 to \$20 an hour and we'd still have people not show up on Monday. It's not the pay. It's a nine to 10-hour day. It's hard work," Sposato says. "Monday morning we had 11 guys not show up so we had three trucks that sat in the yard. It backed the whole week up so we had to go into Saturday to finish our schedule."

And that wasn't the first time.

"We just keep doing what we're doing. Hiring and hiring and hiring, and having a revolving door. That's all we can do." Sposato says. "Plus, we might have to scale back and turn work away. If it really got bad, we'd have to shut trucks down and lose contracts, and that could happen easily if we don't get the personnel to do the work."

One way companies are filling the unskilled labor gap is by employing temporary immigrant workers through the U.S. government's H-2B program. Employees hired under the program must be retained only for a temporary or seasonal need and be paid at least minimum wage. Workers are pre-screened in their native country and federally tracked for compliance. Most of the workers employed in the landscape sector come from Mexico.

In Texas, Giraldo says, H-2B "has become a big part of our business. The big majority of our H-2B visa employees are employees that return year after year. This helps us reduce accidents and keep our productivity high."

Schill is a huge proponent of the H-2B program. He says a full 22 percent of his workforce is H-2B, which fills the seasonal void during the heavy summer mowing season. He's traveled several times from his offices in Ohio to Washington, D.C., to lobby in favor of the program.

"For every one H-2B worker, we can hire and retain three domestic workers. They fill the seasonal void. We've built an organizational model to spread out the type of work we're doing over time. Nobody wants to take a well-paying job and find out they're not going to work for three months a year (during the winter off-season)," Schill says.

"Because we are in Cleveland, Ohio, we have a seasonal market. We are shoveling snow November through March. So we bring in H-2B guys, some of them for 10 years. The same guys keep qualifying to come back. We know their families, they understand our systems, they are a part of our culture. They get it."

Using the H-2B workers in the summer, Schill says, allows him to utilize his year-round talent in other ways. "We are able to spread out some of our work now on an annual basis. Our full-time staff, every one of our guys, are involved in snow operations. When we get the spike in spring, our H-2B guys arrive. We integrate them into our domestic workforce."

Schill says he's come to rely on the H-2B workers, so much so, that they're now critical to his company's success. "When the H-2B guys don't show up it puts us in a world of trouble," he says.

NOT A PERFECT FIX. But a heavy reliance on H-2B is what worries Sposato.

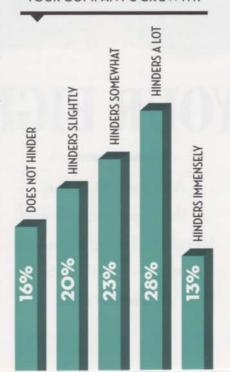
"I don't want to get too dependent on it because the program is a little unstable right now," he says. "The cap, the cost to bring in labor, the wage rule, and they could just cancel the program. Those things are making it hard to use the program. So, I don't want to rely on it."

Will hiring practices get easier as time goes on? But with a concerted effort by the industry to recruit more workers, and a little help from the government to understand the need for seasonal laborers, things could get better. After all, things do change, right?

"Five years ago, we were in a recession and had people knocking at the door," Sposato says. "The last couple of years, it's been getting more and more challenging." L&L

Stacie Zinn Roberts is a freelance writer based in Mount Vernon, Wash.

HOW MUCH DOES A LACK OF **QUALITY EMPLOYEES HINDER** YOUR COMPANY'S GROWTH?



"A manager's job is not a bad job. That's a great stepping stone. But they don't realize that, they don't understand it. AND OUR

INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE IS AT FAULT FOR IT.

- Jerry Schill, president. Schill Grounds Management



### SHAKE YOUR EIGHT BALL

We look at seven of the top concerns and trends facing landscapers as they face 2015.

BY LINDSEY GETZ

hile it would certainly be handy to have a crystal ball from time to time, many lawn care owners and operators have gotten used to dealing with the uncertainties that come with this industry. After all, the unpredictability of climate and weather patterns is something landscapers face every day – and that can make or break a season. But our research revealed that other concerns top the list, including: fuel prices, stress, consumer confidence, low-ball competitors, lower margins, water and private equity investment.

In talking with contractors, we also found that possible minimum wage hikes and immigration reform are also big concerns, along with the looming but still uncertain mandates from the Affordable Care Act (both of which we've addressed in this issue as well).

Though none of us has that crystal ball, giving these issues some forethought, and planning for the challenges they pose just may be all it takes to get them off the front burner.

#### 1. FUEL PRICES

Grappling with rising fuel costs is nothing new to the industry but it remains a top concern for many business owners. For most, it's a major expense that is not always easy to thoroughly budget for. According to a recent Lawn & Landscape survey about fuel buying habits, 38 percent of contractors said up to 10 percent of their budgets went to fuel costs. Another 38 percent said between 11-20 percent of their budgets went to fuel costs.

"It seems that no matter how much more we budget for fuel, we always spend a lot more than we planned," says Mark Fockele, owner of The Fockele Garden Co., in Gainesville, Ga. "We do not have a great solution to this, but as we buy new trucks and replace old ones, we are slowly converting our fleet from diesel to gasoline, which saves money not only on fuel costs but on repair costs as well."

Some states are certainly worse than others. In California, where the fuel price is consistently higher than the national average, Stay Green, a Santa Clarita-based company is always looking for ways to save at the pump. According to Triple A, the national average for gas prices in August was \$3.48 for regular and \$3.83 for diesel. The average for regular in California was \$3.91 and \$4.10 for diesel.

"We recycle older vehicles for new ones that have better gas mileage," says Rich Angelo, company founder. "We also look for ways to move people around that don't necessarily need a truck, such as an account manager or a production manager. Someone who is supervising field people all day doesn't necessarily need to be driving a big truck around."

Angelo says the company also uses gas cards that give a kickback if used at certain gas stations. And for equipment, the company switched from gas to propane. That had the added bonus of decreasing lost revenue from theft.

"Stolen gas is definitely an issue for us but propane is a different story," Angelo says. "People typically don't use propane so it doesn't just disappear on us. It also burns clean and can be highlighted as part of a green initiative."

#### 2. STRESS

Stress is often an unescapable part of being a business owner and landscape business owners certainly have their share of it to deal with. It's a labor-intensive field and it's not always that easy to find laborers willing to do it. Most contractors say that qualified labor is their biggest stressor, but there are a number of other issues constantly putting pressure on owners, including some of the very topics our research has explored. Learning how to deal with stress is the critical piece.

"I've been in this business for 23 years and it's typically the same stressors just coming back around again and again," says Bill Bumgardner, co-owner of Bumgardeners Landscape in Central Point, Ore. "The difference is that you learn how to handle them better. You strategize better. And you also don't let the stress get to you as much."

Bumgardner says that a big part of knowing how to handle stress is being willing to get away from it. He admits that's hard to do as a business owner. "You have to force yourself to take some time off," he says. "Do things with your family. Hit the gym a few days a week. If you don't force yourself to make that time, you will burn out."

#### 3. CONSUMER CONFIDENCE

Although it took a while for consumer spending to bounce back following the recession, many contractors saw a big improvement in 2014 and expect consumer

# **N STRESS**

#### "I'VE BEEN IN THIS BUSINESS FOR 23 YEARS.

and it's typically the same stressors just coming back around again and again," — Bill Bumgardner, co-owner of Bumgardeners

Landscape in Central Point, Ore. "The difference is that you learn how to handle them better. You strategize better. And you also don't let the stress get to you as much."

#### 2014 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT I FORECAST

confidence to continue to rise in 2015.

"We're finally seeing people going back to add-ons like patios or hardscaping, which were some of the first things to go away when people stopped spending," says Tim Meehan, owner of Meehan's Lawn Service, based in Brook Park, Ohio, "Now they have more disposable income available and aren't as reluctant to spend some of it."

Meehan says some of the reluctance to spend came from the sense of uncertainty that loomed over everyone following the recession.

"I can relate to that," he adds. "Even as a businessman. I wasn't looking to grow my business in a time that we didn't know what was going to happen next. I wasn't looking to pursue new customers when I felt like I couldn't predict the end result. I definitely understood the uncertainty my customers had."

#### 4. LOW-BALL COMPETITORS

Mow-blow-and-go landscapers are nothing new to the industry. While they aren't any major threat to take over, they can still drive margins down. "They're not competing on the same level as us but they still take a bite out of the market," Meehan says. "Our customers will ask us to bid a property for 10 percent less because of low ball competitors. That can be frustrating."

Meehan dealt with that issue by getting out of commercial work and that's where he sees himself continuing, "I moved more into the residential market and that's where I'm able to keep a good flow," Meehan says. "Homeowners tend to be less driven by bottom line and a little more driven by quality."

Angelo also says low ballers can be a nuisance to battle. They don't bring the same quality to the table, and have a negative impact on margins. "If a company can find someone to do their maintenance for \$5,000 a month as opposed to \$10,000 a month, they're likely to be more forgiving of things done below par because they're saving so much money," says Angelo, whose company is 100 percent commercial. "What they don't realize is that they usually end up going back and spending more money

ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10, with 1 being low concern and 10 being high concern, please rate your concern about each issue and their aspect on your business.

(Answers ranked from highest to lowest concern)



on deferred maintenance that the low-priced service provider wasn't offering. They're just taking money out of one pocket and putting it in another."

At times, it can be disheartening, Angelo says, to lose jobs that his company has had for many years simply because it's undercut. But Angelo says that competition - even low-ball competitors - ultimately helps strengthen his business by forcing it to compete at a higher level.

#### 5. LOWER MARGINS ON WORK

Lower margins are often the result of lowball competitors and though the recession made many consumers hold tighter onto their purse strings, contractors have found there are ways to maintain a higher yield.

"Low ballers that are driving down our margins are just the nature of the beast," Bumgardner says. "It's nothing new. But to combat it you must know your true costs. If you don't, it's very easy to lose money to the low ballers. You must work on making your bids and proposals as competitive as possible so that you can make some money."

It's especially difficult to compete with low-ball mowing, says Chris Elmore, president of The Grounds Guys. "There is just such a low barrier to entry for mowing," he says. "Mow-blow-and-go has become commoditized and one guy cutting grass in a pick-up really isn't that different from the guy cutting grass from the big company."

That's why diversification is the answer. "You don't see big landscape companies just doing mowing and blowing anymore," Elmore says. "They're all diversifying and getting into areas that require knowledge and specialization beyond just experience. Knowing how to do a chemical application or knowing what plant works best based on the conditions of the soil are specialty skills and the way that you keep those margins higher."

#### 6. WATER

Water – specifically the conservation of water through more efficient irrigation systems – continues to be a hot industry topic. But the urgency is definitely regional. Areas dealing with severe, persistent drought are already on board with seeking new solutions while those that aren't paying high water costs or dealing with restrictions could fall behind the curve.

Still, landscapers report that the general public is becoming more aware of the need for conservation.

"Ultimately, what drives work for landscapers is the consumer and right now the consumer is becoming very aware of the need to conserve more water," says Mike Garcia, owner of Enviroscape in Redondo Beach, Calif. "I've never gotten as many calls for drip irrigation as I have this year. It's to the point where we are shifting our business from a traditional landscape business model to a water conservation model."

Marty DeNinno, co-owner of Pinnacle Irrigation & Nightlighting in Haddon-field, N.J., has also found success with an increased focus on water conservation efforts. Though not faced with drought conditions, his clients are still interested in evapotranspiration (ET) based controllers for both ease of use and cost savings.

In fact, a customer pushed him into

"WE'RE FINALLY SEEING PEOPLE GOING BACK TO ADD-ONS LIKE PATIOS OR

HARDSCAPING, which were some of the first things to go away when people stopped spending,"

 Tim Meehan owner of Meehan's Lawn Service, based out of Brook Park, Ohio near Cleveland.

the business of selling smart controllers.

"He came to me and wanted it installed," DeNinno says. "Technology like that can be intimidating at first and I do think our industry needs more education on it. Three years later that same customer called me and told me he has never touched the controller and it routinely saves him 20 percent on his water bill. He also said he has the greenest grass around. That's the future. I think the industry is lagging when it comes to technology but there's great room for growth."

#### 7. PRIVATE EQUITY INVESTMENT

Private equity has been present in the landscape industry in one form or another for many years. But a series of high-profile investments by KKR in the past year to purchase a controlling interest in the Brickman Group and ValleyCrest Cos, has increased interest from many other areas.

Tom Fochtman, CEO of Ceibass Venture Partners, a green industry mergers and acquisitions consulting company based in Arvada, Colo., says the green industry has no doubt been "discovered" by the private equity world. He says investors appreciate the predictability of the landscape management related revenue business model and the ability to lever the whole business model with people.

Ronald Edmonds of The Principium Group, an advisory firm serving the green industry on mergers, acquisitions and more, based in Cordova, Tenn., says ever since KKR began fueling the trend, other private equity firms have also been investigating the industry.

"We see a number of smaller private equity firms, including family offices, examining the industry as well as several so-called 'search firms' that are looking for a single company to acquire and manage," Edmonds says. "At the same time, private equity firms holding some existing investments in the industry will likely be seeking exits as Brickman's prior owner Leonard Green did last year and MSD Capital did in the merger of ValleyCrest with Brickman this year."

Edmonds sees this as a continuing trend that will create the prospect of improved exit opportunities for certain types of companies in the industry which are solid and large enough to be platform investments, as well as others which may be attractive as add-on investments.

"Creating additional opportunities for business owners in the industry to monetize their investment when the time is right is a good thing," Edmonds says.

Fochtman says there's room for positive impact as well. As the Brickman/ValleyCrest transition occurs, there will be overlapping people that are let go or choose to leave.

"There is unique opportunity right now to bolster your team and grab some accounts as this transition occurs." he says. L&L

#### **WEATHERING REFORM**

While the uncertainty about the Affordable Care Act remains, many businesses are learning to deal with it. BY LINDSEY GETZ

n February, the government responded to pressure from various business groups by delaying the Affordable Care Act's mandate for companies to offer their employees insurance or face penalties for not complying. That latest delay gives businesses that have between 50 and 99 employees until January 2016 to begin offering insurance or to pay the penalties. Some businesses have simply begun making cuts to get under that 50-employee mark to be excused from these mandates. For larger companies that's not an option. Beginning in 2015, employers with 100 or more full-time employees who do not offer affordable health insurance may be required to pay an assessment.

"We currently employ about 300 people so the Affordable Care Act will potentially have a huge impact on us," says Chris Lee, president of EarthWorks in Lillian, Texas. "But the most frustrating thing for us is that we can't get a straight answer from anyone about how it will work or what it will cost. We have estimates ranging from \$150,000 to \$500,000. At this point our insurance agent is feeling fairly optimistic that we can be compliant for closer to \$150,000 but it's not firm. That makes planning and budgeting very difficult."

TACKLING THE UNCERTAINTY. There has been a lot of uncertainty when it comes to the exact mandates of the ACA, as well as the potential costs associated with it. For a long time, that uncertainty had led to unrest. But these days many landscape business owners say they've stopped wasting so much energy worrying about it. After all, says Mark W. Forsythe, president and

COO of Mainscape, in Fishers, Ind., everyone in the industry is in the same boat. "This isn't just an issue we're dealing with – it's an industry-wide issue," he says. "From that viewpoint, we've decided to take a wait-and-see attitude. It appears that rules are still being confirmed and delayed. While we're continually doing research and trying to understand the latest news, we aren't taking any specific action or spending a lot of time worrying about it until it's more concrete."

As businesses try to understand what may be required of them, many are falling on the cost-sharing provision possibility currently written into the law.

"We will offer and provide coverage for our employees but plan to execute the personal ownership that employees have in partially helping fund that coverage," says Chris Angelo, president and CEO of Stay Green, a 300-employee commercial company in Santa Clarita, Calif. "We do believe that most will opt out, take the personal risk, and pay the \$99 personal penalty for doing so. We estimate that more than 80 percent of our population will opt out because of the economic impact."

Like many other bigger companies, Angelo says he relies heavily on a team of health care brokers that keep him abreast of the changes – or proposed changes – so that he can continue to plan accordingly.

Many commercial landscapers recognize that their clients also stand to be affected by the ACA.

But Angelo says that because Stay Green generally services larger companies with higher wage earners, most clients were already offering their total benefit packages and may not see the same changes that industries like the green

# THE LATEST DELAY TO THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

gives businesses
with between 50
and 99 employees
until January
2016 to begin
offering insurance
or to pay the
penalties. Some
businesses have
begun making
cuts to get under
that 50-employee
mark to be
excused from
these mandates.



industry could face. The one exception is retail shopping centers, Angelo says.

Forsythe says that many of the commercial companies Mainscape services, and the vendors they work with, have expressed they're in the same wait-and-see mode that Forsythe finds himself in. "They know they might have to do things differently with their business but they're not really sure what," he says. "Honestly, we've found that even the insurance companies don't appear to be 100 percent certain of what changes are ahead."

**ALL IN IT TOGETHER.** Because it often seems like these changes are being made since businesses were unwilling or refused to pay for employees health coverage, many business owners make the point

that they want to help their employees as best they can. Chris Elmore, president of The Grounds Guys, says that small business owners are often vilified in the media for not wanting to comply with proposed changes.

"I have yet to talk to a franchisee who says they never want to offer health care," Elmore says. "They always say that they would offer health care if it wasn't so expensive. We often coach them in that area and help them research the benefits packages out there.

"We often say that even if they're not providing coverage, it's very helpful for them to still assist employees in finding a package that is right for them. One benefit of the ACA is that the health care exchange will provide another resource and possibly make it easier for people to shop different plans."

Like others, Lee says he will wait and see what ultimately becomes the law of the land. Angelo believes that after a couple years of problems, there will likely be additional reform to the ACA. And Forsythe adds that taking it off the "major stressors list" is his objective – at least until more information is available.

Forsythe says one silver lining is that the entire landscape industry will have to deal with the health care question. "The business owners, the employees – the green industry in general – we're all in the same boat. Collectively when the time comes, hopefully we'll figure out what works best for us," he says. "But for now, I will not waste a lot of my time worrying about it." LEL



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#### **OPS PROFILE**

### Strength In Numbers: Forming a Peer Group

By forming a peer group that includes non-competitive irrigation companies, Aaron Katerberg has developed a sounding board, a forum for ideas, a benchmarking group – an assembly of professionals with similar goals for growth and success.

The peer group has been instrumental in Grapids Irrigation's growth in the last few years, since Katerberg began holding the bi-annual meetings. The group started with three owners, who Katerberg initially met at various networking events and conferences. It has grown, organically, to eight participants.

From the regular meetings, Katerberg has gained the knowledge and insight to make "tons of little tweaks" including using different materials for irrigation parts, and re-organizing the way tools are organized in trucks. The group has also guided Katerberg through some big decisions, such as adding the drainage tile service. "One of the contractors has been instrumental in helping us build that and learn how to market it," he shares.

The shelf life of peer groups tends to be rather short, Katerberg says. "They typically fall apart after a while because there is no direction or purpose," he says. Here's how Katerberg helps ensure that the partnerships formed will be sustainable.

**SET AN AGENDA.** The bi-annual meetings always have a purpose. For instance, when the group meets in August, they will focus on benchmarking their financials. "You have to have a reason you're putting together the meeting, and you can't take on too much at once," Katerberg says.

**ENLIST IN A FACILITATOR.** "Being owners, we are chickens with our heads cut off sometimes," Katerberg relates. Having a facilitator on board during meetings allows the owners involved to brainstorm with a purpose. "The facilitator gives us focus and a plan that we follow – and then we can let the chickens run around the yard a little bit."

**RECRUIT OUTSIDE OF YOUR MARKET.** The owners involved in Katerberg's peer group have businesses in different regions. "We are not in competition with one another," he says. "So, our financials don't need to be a secret and we are able to open our books and compare notes."

**GET PERSONAL.** The members of the peer group have developed personal connections that transcend their business relationships. When they meet at conferences, they take time to attend a sporting event together, go out for a meal or take excursions, such as a boat trip. "It's important to have people in the peer group with similar values and personalities that work together," Katerberg says, adding, "There needs to be more than a business connection for the group to last."

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# Inside your client's mind

Customer surveys reveal important insights that can help a company shape better service.

By Kristen Hampshire

hen's the last time you asked customers the simple question: How are we doing? And, more importantly, what did you do with the feedback you gathered? Putting survey data into action can improve retention and inspire positive operational changes.

This month, Lawn & Landscape spoke with three firms that take distinctly different approaches to surveying their customers. Here's what they had to say about their info-gathering techniques.

# The lukewarm customer

#### **Arbor-Nomics Turf**

Richard (Dick) Bare, president Location: Norcross, Ga. Established: 1980 Employees: 70 2013 Revenues: \$7 million

Customers: 90% residential, 10% commercial Services: lawn care, tree and shrub care

simple call to ask, "How are we doing?" impressed customers of Arbor-Nomics Turf in Norcross, Ga. Several years ago, the company enlisted in a telemarketing firm, Spectrum Services, which called a group of the lawn care company's customers each month. For \$500 a month, the telemarketers called as many clients as possible.

Arbor-Nomics tried the surveying technique for three years. Nearly 90 percent of the clients who picked up the phone gave the company an overall "very good" or "excellent" rating. But more valuable were the few who said, "I'm glad you called, I was thinking about cancelling."

"We have to know who these people are, and we were able to call them back and see what the deal was, why they were unhappy," says Dick Bare, president.

Customer surveys "save" clients who could be lukewarm about the services but not proactive enough to pick up the phone or email a complaint. That certainly was not the majority of responses from Arbor-Nomics Turf's surveys – Bare can count two clients who said they were thinking of leaving. But by finding out what's wrong and making it right, the company preserves its reputation and improves retention.

And in the lawn care business, Bare says, retention and referrals are what building a business is all about. Overall, clients who received the survey phone calls were just glad Arbor-Nomics cared enough to ask about the





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service. They didn't mind receiving the phone calls, either, Bare says. But Arbor-Nomics realized that its customer database contained some duplicate entries; some clients received duplicate phone calls and were sore about that.

"Overall, people were impressed that we were calling, and some said, 'I have had five different lawn care companies, but no one has ever called to see how happy I am,'" Bare says. "The effort got a good response."

The survey was brief, including a handful of questions such as: 1) Would you recommend our company to family, friends and neighbors? 2) Will you use our company again in the future? 3) How happy are you with the technician who performs the service? 4) What was your experience like calling the office?

A bonus question about whether clients



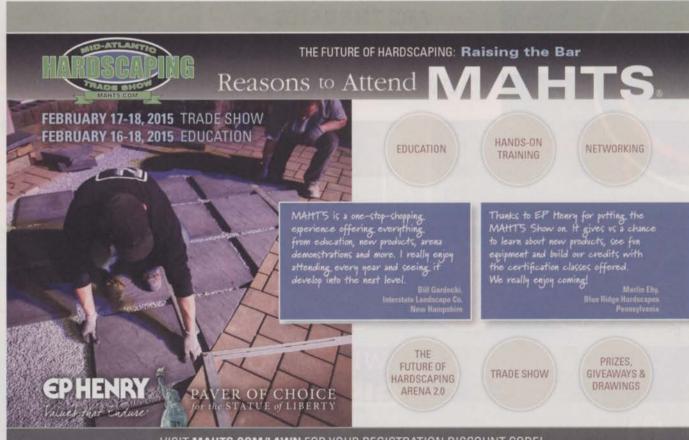
"We have to know who these people are, and we were able to call them back and see what the deal was, why they were unhappy." – Dick Bare, president, Arbor-Nomics Turf

thought Arbor-Nomics Turf should get into other services – mowing, for example – helped confirm the company's mission to continue with its lawn care focus. "Overwhelmingly, 85 to 90 percent of people said, 'No.' They felt we should stick to our niche," Bare says.

Beyond the telephone survey, Arbor-Nomics likes to find out how it's doing all the time by posting a place for comments on the back of customer invoices. Whenever there's a comment, the information is forwarded to the appropriate technician. "If someone makes the comment, 'I never see the technician,' then we will make sure the technician knocks on the door and gets to know the customer," Bare says.

In another case, a customer reported he couldn't find the company's phone number on the invoice. The contact was there – but in fine print. "So we made the phone number larger on the invoice," Bare says, relating that feedback on even the little things is treated seriously and often acted upon. Of course, Bare has to determine whether the company's 18,000-customer universe will benefit from changes. "We look at the economics, too," he adds.

One thing Arbor-Nomics has learned





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Enlist in a pro. Rather than taking on the telemarketing duties, Arbor-Nomics outsourced the job to an experienced firm that does this type of work for a range of industries (namely automotive). His office staff provided the customer names/contacts on a monthly basis, and the telemarketing agency executed the survey calls.

Provide direction. If you choose to hire an outside firm to conduct anonymous surveys, be sure to provide detailed instructions on how associates should respond if a client provides negative feedback. Mainly, be sure you can gather the names of unhappy customers so you can follow up.

Take action. If a client takes the time to fill out an invoice comment box with a suggestion or complaint, personally acknowledge it by phone or in person and discuss next steps.

from the invoice comment box is that the sales and marketing language advertising visits every four to eight weeks must be changed. "Because of our growth, we had a problem where we would get behind in the round-three application," Bare says. "Round three is a killer – it's in May/June, and that's when people are also calling for fungicide treatments and other things."

Arbor-Nomics geared up with more trucks and people this year. But getting to every account within eight weeks time during high season is still a challenge – and it's not entirely necessary, Bare says.

"I had a customer who called me and said, 'It has been 11 weeks since you have been here,' and I said, 'Well, how does your lawn look?'" Bare says. "He said, 'The lawn looks great,' and I told him he was due for service in about a week, and that would be 12 weeks since the last visit. He said, 'I want it done tomorrow,' and I said, 'OK.'

"So, we will take that out of the sale pieces because customers tend to lose sight of the lawn and what it looks like and they focus in on the weeks between visits," Bare says.

Without customer feedback flowing in from invoice comments and phone surveys, Arbor-Nomics might not have recognized that some customers were hung up on the "when" of the service rather than the end results. "That comment section has been very important," Bare says.

Applying the information gathered from surveys to business practices is the key – otherwise you've got data and feedback, and perhaps angry customers who want to know why they took the time to express their opinions if no one's doing anything about it.

Caring about the little-big things earns repeat business.

And Bare knows his technicians do care about clients and go the extra mile from the feedback he receives. When two Arbor-Nomics technicians noticed a woman's car broken down on the side of the road, they pushed the car to safety at a nearby parking lot. The Arbor-Nomics customer watched the act of kindness and called the company. "She said she was impressed that our guys would stop and help," Bare says. "It's all about caring for people."

#### Net promoter surveys

#### Lawn America

Brad Johnson, president Location: Tulsa, Okla. Established: 1999 Employees: 49 2013 Revenues: \$5.2 million Customers: 90% residential, 10% commercial Services: lawn care, tree and shrub care, snow removal, holiday lighting

hat Lawn America really wants to know from customers is, on a scale of 0 to 10, "How likely are you to refer or recommend us to your friends, family and colleagues?"

This is the ultimate survey question: an inquiry that aligns with Lawn America's mission statement to please clients to the point that they'll tell other people. Brad Johnson, president of the Tulsa, Okla.-based firm, began structuring company surveys around this single question after learning about the Net Promoter Score (NPS), a concept introduced in "The Ultimate Question" by Fred Reichheld and Rob Markey.

NPS is based on the fundamental principle that every company's customer base can be divided among promoters, who rate the company a 9 to 10, passives who give a 7 to 8 rating, and detractors who offer up a paltry 0 to 6. Lawn America applies NPS to its survey process, but it's more than a way to gauge how happy customers are with your service, Johnson says. "It's also a management tool. It allows us to get feedback and act on that feedback."

Johnson is talking about the

"action" part of NPS, where Lawn America takes survey data and uses that information to pay employees' bonuses and to address operational concerns. For example, the company has learned that customer education via e-newsletters and other communications is absolutely critical to improving client satisfaction (and, as a result, the NPS score).

Lawn America works harder to help clients understand what the company's services can (and cannot) control. "We send customers an email reminder telling them what services we performed, and we'll also include a ditty in there as far as customer education on mowing, watering, weed expectations and disease issues that may be a problem at the time," Johnson says.

"We have always known that customer education is important, but through Net Promoter feedback, it has shown us more about how we have to be on top of education by using technology to do that – email, e-newsletters, tools like that," Johnson says.

As for how Lawn America facilitates its NPS-based survey, the strategy is multi-faceted. First, every invoice customers receive asks the Net Promoter question on the back, where it is visible next to the return mailing address. That means every month clients can rate the company on a scale of 0 to 10 concerning whether they'd recommend the service. A few lines below this question, there is space to write comments.

Then, mid-season, after spring applications, Lawn America sends business reply card surveys to its



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13,000 accounts. The brief survey includes the NPS question and Lawn America pays \$1 for every returned survey. The response rate is 1 to 2 percent, giving the company a

nice sampling of about 1,000 surveys. Johnson is pleased with this level of feedback.

Finally, in the fall, a year-end survey is included in each invoice packet. Every year,

#### AKE-AWAY TIPS

Roll out several surveys. With an opportunity to answer the NPS question on every invoice, and at least two distinct survey cards distributed annually. Lawn America gives customers many chances to rate the company. This improves its data sample and provides a steady stream of feedback during the season.

Post positives. Lawn America separates "detractor" replies that rate the company at a 6 or below so it can follow up with customers and find out what's wrong. But it also sets aside the 9s and 10s and posts those for employees to see. Employees appreciate the recognition.

Give it time. A system like NPS isn't an overnight survey success because it's more than a survey. It's about changing the culture by asking for feedback, and reacting.

customers get at least two opportunities to fill out the reply card and they can respond to the NPS question on their invoice replies every month if they want.

The feedback rolls in all season long, which gives Lawn America a clear indication of when customers need additional education. For example, Johnson says NPS tends to be higher later in the summer than in early spring, when the company is fighting weeds.

It's how Lawn America uses this data that separates the company from competitors, Johnson says. For one, the NPS determines pay incentives. The company sets a goal based on "promoters" and "detractors." A score exceeding 50 percent is considered really good," Johnson says. "The highest we'll ever see, I think, is 80 to 83," he says, adding that it's impossible to reach 100.

Lawn America is shooting for 74 this year, and route managers that reach that goal are paid out bonuses throughout the year. Paying out bonuses several times, rather than in one lump sum, keeps employees motivated and gives those who missed the target early

(continued on page 192)

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# From the bottom, UP

he minimum wage is going up. It's no longer a question of if, but a question of when.

President Barack Obama has been pushing a hike in the federal minimum wage from the current \$7.25 per hour, up to \$10.10. In a deeply divided political climate, the proposal has found support. Seventy-one percent of Americans support a hike in the federal minimum wage according to a 2014 poll by CNN.

Across the country, major green industry states like Michigan, New York and California have raised their individual minimum wages, as have Vermont, Minnesota, Delaware, Hawaii and West Virginia.

Most landscape workers already make more than the federal minimum wage. But new rates - or even

the discussion of new rates - put upward pressure on what landscapers have to pay their employees.

By Jake Zuckerman

Landscapers already pay their employees more than the federal minimum - the average hourly wage for entry-level crew members is \$10.60, according to Lawn & Landscape research. But owners say that any discussion of a boost in the minimum wage outside the industry puts pressure on them to increase hourly pay for their own employees.

PROFIT PINCH. Dan Gandee is the director of design and marketing for Aesthetic Gardens in San Jose, Calif., one of a growing number of cities that have raised their minimum wage to \$10,10 per hour in advance of any federal changes.

minimum wage higher than the Federal rate

States use the Federal minimum wage States have no minimum wage law

States have a minimum wage lower than the Federal rate



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#### MINIMUM WAGE

The new wage rate in the area, coupled with California's high cost of living make San Jose a natural economic experiment. "You start to see two things happen (following the hikes)," Gandee says. "Budgets get tighter when you estimate bids, and you get an influx of employees asking for raises."

Gandee says he pays his employees between \$14 and \$16 an hour on average, but he has been approached by them to raise it to \$18 to \$20. "Of my employees, about 80 percent of them get raises, and about 20 percent of them either quit or drift out slowly," he says. "Of that 20 percent, about 70 percent leave the market."

According to Gandee, it's a combination of both depending on the job. "For bigger, commercial projects, you eat the difference yourself," he says. "With smaller jobs, you have to increase your prices or you won't

Entry-Level Position	Average Hourly Wage
MOWER OPERATOR	\$9.60
LAWN TECHNICIAN	\$11.20
CONSTRUCTION WO	RKER \$10.60
IRRIGATION TECHN	ICIAN \$11.00

survive." However, Gandee is not bitter about having to shell out the extra money or losing a few employees along the way. "The cost of living does not match the minimum wage," he says. "You can't have a labor pool that's worrying day to day if they're going to make it."

But Christy Webber, owner of Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago, where the minimum wage is \$8.25 per hour, says any increases in the minimum wage won't have much of an effect on her business. From her perspective, much of the effect of any hike will be watered down by the high number of undocumented workers in the industry who are unlikely to have their wages boosted following a hike. "Because they're undocumented, they're voiceless," Webber says. "More than raising the minimum wage, we need to look at immigration reform."

In the meantime, Webber's major worry is how, with her stringent adherence to hiring only documented workers, she can compete with companies hiring undocumented workers and paying them wages far below legal and market rates.

DEALING WITH THE CHANGE. Landscapers already paying more than today's minimum wage may have to either raise their wages or risk losing workers to another market, according to legal and industry



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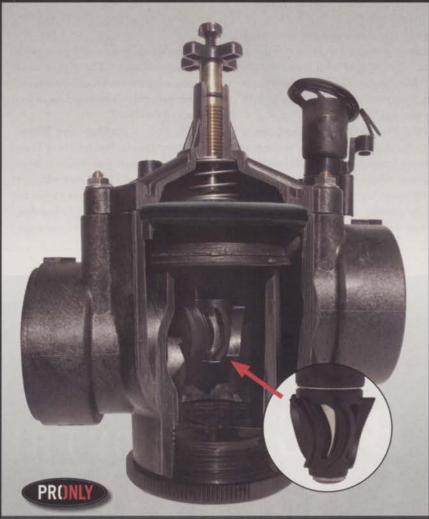
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#### MINIMUM WAGE

experts we spoke with.

Patrick McGuiness, an attorney at Zlimen & McGuiness in St. Paul, Minn., specializing in the green industry points out that consumer buying power under the current minimum wage isn't what it used to be.

"What you can buy with a 40-hour work week at today's minimum wage is significantly less than what it was historically," McGuiness says. "The main focus is giving more purchasing power to people of lower incomes."

McGuiness says that if businesses won't raise their wages relative to the new minimum wages, then they will lose their employees to other higher-paying landscaping businesses. Ultimately, the higher costs must be covered by either the business owner or the customer.



"You start to see two things happen (following the hikes). Budgets get tighter when you estimate bids, and you get an influx of employees asking for raises."

- Dan Gandee, Aesthetic Gardens, San Jose, Calif.

"If wages go up, costs could go up with it," McGuiness says. "The higher costs could cross a price point which would lower consumer demand, which could mean less of a demand for labor."

Charlie Hall, a professor and Ellison Chair of international floriculture at Texas A&M University, says that certain companies who pay around \$10.10 now will have to cut into their profit margins to handle the ripple effects from the raise, or lose their workers to an easier job of the same wage.

"As labor costs increase, particularly for our market our prices must increase," Hall says. "Any time we've seen higher wages in another industry, we've lost workers."

Hall says that there will be only one saving grace for companies who must raise prices to cover higher wages: "Successful differentiation is the only way consumers will eat prices," he says. L&L

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The author is a contributing editor with Lawn & Landscape Magazine.



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### COMMAND TROWORS

When it comes to subcontracting, controlling the process can prevent an unwelcome customer defeat.

By Kristen Hampshire



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om Trench has operated on both sides of the contract, as the business owner and the sub. He enlists subcontractors to complete projects for his Denver, Colo.-based firm, Landscape Systems and Designs. And he has served as the specialist, working as the landscape designer/sales arm at Cooperative Design Resource.

"It's a partnership, no matter what side you are on," Trench says of the sub-owner relationship. "Because, if either party does not perform the way they are expected to, you'll get a bad reputation."

Virtually every problem related to subcontracting out work – payment, scheduling, quality – can be traced back to one culprit: communication.

"I'd love to tell you there are 10 secrets to working with subs effectively, but there are no secrets. It's all about communication," Trench says. "You have to be honest and upfront, and make sure that everyone is on the same page."

And when that happens, subcontracting can result in business expansion and more. For that reason, Trench says he loves working on both sides of the arrangement.

"I love it because I just make sure everyone knows what's going on," he says, adding that subcontracting gives business owners the flexibility to expand their scope of work, respond faster to clients' deadline demands and, of course, bring in more revenue.

Subbing can even jumpstart a business. At Reliable Property Services in Minneapolis, Minn., winter work defined the company's services until six years ago when the firm expanded into commercial maintenance, thanks to subcontracted mowing crews. "Subcontracting mowing has allowed us to take on locations that are out of our working area," says Tom Hougnon, COO.

A lot of Reliable Property's key winter accounts involve large parking lots – not necessarily a "prime summer stage" but clients still want the same company servicing their site year-round, Hougnon says. "We can build a route with all of those small sites, and our contractor partners can take that mowing off of our hands," he says.

Houghon provides contractor partners that perform mowing with a route – four days worth of work. Sites are inspected Monday through Thursday. Many of these subs work with the company during winter, so there's already a strong relationship.

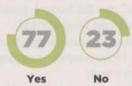
Hougnon adds that the work goes both



#### **SUB STATS**

awn & Landscape surveyed 100 contractors about their approach to subcontracting. Findings (at right, in percentages) showed that most of you use subcontractors, and tree care is the area where you need the most outside help. And while almost half of respondents needed help with irrigation, not a lot of contractors looked for lawn care subcontractors, preferring to keep that in house or just not offer it at all. Those who have subs working for them weren't concerned about branding as almost 80 percent said they never have subs show up to jobs in the main contractor's uniforms.

#### Do you use subcontractors?



How do your subs show up to jobs?



Never with our uniforms on



Always with our uniforms on



Sometimes with our uniforms on

#### What services do you use subs for? (choose all that apply)



Tree care (pruning, chemical applications, etc.)



Irrigation



Hardscapes/ construction



Home services (structural pest control, decks, fences, etc.)



Snow and ice management



Maintenance (mowing, trimming, edging, etc.)



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ways. "This provides opportunities for our winter contractor partners – if we get a call from a customer that wants concrete work done, we can pass that work on to them. We try to partner with them on both sides: they work for us, but we pass work to them."

Whether you're currently using subcontractors, working as one or considering adding this type of labor to enhance your crews, here are some keys to managing and growing a mutually beneficial subcontractor relationship.

come clean with clients. Tell customers up front who will be working on various aspects of their project. If you'll enlist in a sub to lay a flagstone patio or install a pool, be clear about the relationship between your company and the contracted labor.

"We tell clients that we have a lot of

resources we pull together to make sure the job is completed on time and up to their expectations," says Bill Banford, president, Sharper Cut, Upper Marlboro, Md.

Banford also lets clients know there is a mark-up fee for his company managing the subcontractor's work.

"Our clients get it and they are happy with it," he says, relating that the markup is generally 10 percent using an overhead recovery system.

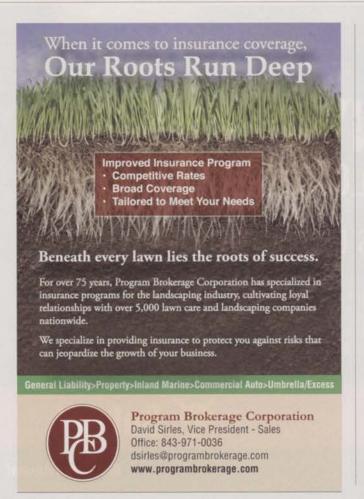
"If it's a job that we 100-percent sub out and we buy the materials, we might add more profit to make sure our gross margins are where we want them to be," he says.

**SET EXPECTATIONS.** Everyone talks about "managing expectations" but what does it mean? The reality is, the sub you're hiring is not ingrained in your company culture – he

or she is an independent. This professional brings to the table a quality your company needs to complete its work – skills in masonry, electrical, carpentry, plumbing and beyond. And, if you needed this skill on every single job, you'd probably hire someone full time.

You have set expectations for your employees and your standards should hold true for subs. But remember, subs are generally not attending your tailgate meetings and starting their mornings at your shop. So communicating a project's timeline, fees, materials requirements and quality demands upfront is critical.

Banford carefully reviews the project specs with subs. "We don't send the subs out and let them wing it," he says. "We have a project manager that makes sure that it is done per spec."





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Trench encourages owners to ask these questions of subs: 1) When can you start the job, and how long will it take you to complete it? 2) What would prevent you from meeting the project timeline? 3) What payment terms do you expect? 4) Do you understand the specifications (after they are reviewed)?

"Having an open discussion so you are on the same page is important," he says.

The timeline factor can cause real problems if not ironed out before a contract or verbal agreement is determined. Trench recommends putting everything in writing, but says he has a 25-year relationship with an electrician, and a phone call and hand shake, followed by immediate payment, work for both parties.

Trench recalls one project where a company assumed that the subcontracted mason it always worked with would show up on a job per an email request to "start on Tuesday." The mason never confirmed - and never showed up. "The result was an extremely unhappy client," he says. "In this case, they only emailed and presumed the mason would be there."

Another mason was brought on the scene for a premium price - 30 percent more than budgeted, which the company ate.

**OUTLINE PAYMENT TERMS.** Speaking of rates, settle the payment terms before the sub starts. Hougnon says once subs come on board at Reliable Property Services, they tend to stay. "We pay quick," he says of the net 30- to 60-day terms. "When the work is done, we pay them as soon as their hours are in and we are invoiced. That helps keep relationships strong."

Banford pays subs when his company gets paid, and he is upfront about this term. For smaller jobs, such as concrete work requiring "a few hours here or there," he settles up immediately after that work is completed. "For larger jobs, like decks, we offer progressive payments." Installments are paid out upon Sharper Cut getting paid.

Trench reminds that the contracting company is responsible for collections - not the sub. So slow-paying clients are not the subs problem, and holding up payment on sub invoices as a result can scar a relationship.

"The sub is not working for the owner; he is working for the contractor, so he needs to know that the contractor will pay him in a timely manner," he says. L&L



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#### Time to cash out

#### If you've been thinking about selling your company, now is the time to act.

he question "when is the right time to sell your company?" is certainly an important one. In most instances, selling your company will be the most important financial and personal decision that you make in your life. If you are like most business owners, the majority of your personal wealth resides in your company and selling is usually how an owner becomes financially fit for life.

FEEL THE BOOM. There is a very interesting dynamic present in the green industry today. There is a very high percentage of Baby Boomer owners who are pondering selling their companies. If you look at Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list of contractors, the companies that participate are mostly owned by folks falling into the Baby Boomer category. Simply put, there are quite a few owners of landscape companies in their mid to late 50s and older, and they are contemplating retirement. If it's not in the forefront of their minds, it is certainly on their mental horizon.

ECONOMIC ADVANTAGE. Another interesting dynamic at work today is our current economy. While you read about "cautious optimism" in the media, the bottom line is we are in a very serious economic run. It's happening right now and it's very important that all of us, and certainly business owners, focus on how to capitalize on it. You can read a plethora of economic forecasts and two

things are pretty clear about this economy: We are in a very positive, growing economy, and it will not last forever.

Most economists agree that the next recession will arrive somewhere around 2018; the latest I've read is 2020 and as business owners it's best to be conservative and plan for sooner than later. (One economist I pay keen attention to is Brian Beaulieu of ITR Economics. His accuracy of economic predicting is quite high and is an Economist I would recommend you follow.) All economies are cyclical and the US economy historically has been on a seven-year cycle, giving some credence to the thought that a 2018 recession has some historical relevance.

As business owners, it's critical that you realize that right now is a serious make-money time period. You need to be 100-percent focused on restoring your wealth while also planning for the next downturn. I would have a three- to four-year horizon of capitalizing on this economic upswing but also have a plan for remaining lean, managing your debt and getting ready for our next downturn. Get after it now and have a plan in place to hunker down a bit in approximately four years, as I'm pretty confident history will be repeating itself.

**MONEY ON YOUR MIND.** There is another reality around all of this thinking that needs to be considered. The right time is when you are mentally and financially ready to retire, spend more

time with family and life passions, and when the sale of your company will result in the proper financial windfall. But the right time is also when the economy is conducive to selling and that is happening right now, before our eyes.

The next three years will be very conducive to selling, if you are ready. For Baby Boomer owners, if you own your companies after 2018, you should plan to own your companies a minimum of six to eight years longer and enjoy being an owner in your early to mid-60s. What? Some of you are reading this thinking there is no way I want to own my company that long, right? Well, if the current thinking about the next recession is accurate, that will be the case. It will take two to three years to ride it out and another two to three years to bring your companies back to par. It is imperative you factor this thinking into your exit planning.

#### WORK ON YOUR EXIT STRATEGY NOW.

Develop and implement a strategy that capitalizes on today's economy and incorporates planning for tomorrow. Grab topline revenue while continuing to measure everything and find ways to improve your bottom line results. Create an Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) calculation at the bottom of your P&L and start living EBITDA. Know what it is and drive results that increase it. Driving topline growth will require investing in your management team. Greatt Assuming your hire properly, that only makes you more valuable and the added talent will produce better bottom line results along the way.

If you are one of the estimated 80 million Baby Boomers approaching retirement age and are the owner of a landscape business, it's imperative you start positioning yourself for the end game – the next chapter.

Engage the right team of professionals to work in partnership with you so you exit in the proper fashion. L&L



**EXIT STRATEGIES** 



#### Your tax return

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### Tax considerations IN THE M&A GAME

Expert advice on the tax impact of buying or selling a company.

By Daniel S. Gordon

hinking of buying or selling a business? Make sure you consider the tax issues. Prior to looking at buying or selling a business, land care professionals should consult with a competent mergers and acquisitions attorney and/or a CPA who is well-versed in the tax aspects of business purchase and sales.

COMPLIANCE ISSUES. With respect to compliance, many states require compliance with bulk sale rules. Bulk sale rules are intended to protect creditors of the seller as well as state departments of taxation by giving them notice of a bulk sale. The object of the bulk sale rules is to make sure the seller doesn't sell the business and disappear with the proceeds without paying creditors or any unpaid taxes due. By having the purchaser report the bulk sale, the state has the ability to set up an escrow out of proceeds of the transaction to cover any liabilities.

Non-compliance with bulk sales filings by the purchaser can result in the purchaser becoming responsible for such liabilities if they exist. Most states have exemptions to sales tax on assets purchased pursuant to a bulk sale. However, there are a number of states that require sales tax to be paid on motor vehicles purchased pursuant to a bulk sale. You need to check with your state to make sure you are in compliance and/or pay the sales tax if any is due. When structuring a deal as an asset purchase (see below as most in our industry are structured this way), IRS Form 8594 must be completed and attached to the tax return of both the buyer and seller.

This form provides the IRS with details of how assets were divided among different classes for purposes of depreciation and amortization, as well as ordinary versus capital gain treatment. In order for the IRS to verify that the purchase price allocation was made consistently for both buyer and seller, the form is to be filed by both and they should reflect the same allocations.

**TAX MINIMIZATION.** The overarching theme when it comes to minimizing taxes relates to capital gains versus ordinary income. Capital gains are taxed at a lower rate (minimum 0 percent,



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#### **EXIT STRATEGIES**

maximum 20 percent, plus net investment income tax of 3.8 percent). Capital gains apply to sales of capital assets that are held longer than one year.

Ordinary income can be taxed as high as 39.6 percent. While it's easy to see why a seller would want a capital gain, a buyer would want deductions related to the sale at ordinary rates to reduce as much ordinary income for monies expended as part and parcel of the purchase. This is where proper planning and negotiation between buyer and seller become important in reducing the tax burden of the seller while giving the buyer the maximum amount of tax benefit.

**ASSET SALE VERSUS STOCK SALE.** In purchases and sales of companies, there are two main methods of structuring a deal. Depending on the objectives of the buyer and seller, and

after considering tax and legal alternatives, the parties will agree to either an asset deal or a stock deal. In our industry, most deals are asset deals as they reduce legal liability to the purchaser and allow tax benefits to be shared by both buyer and seller.

In an asset sale, the assets of the company are sold to the buyer (as opposed to the stock of ownership). Included in the typical assets purchased category are trucks, cars, equipment, inventory, supplies, computers, furniture, fixtures, customer lists, Internet domain names, as well as phone and fax numbers. While all these items get sold to the buyer, the seller is left with the corporation or LLC, which she can either continue to operate or dissolve once the deal is completed.

In a stock deal, the seller sells the stock or ownership in the corporation or LLC and passes the entire entity to the buyer. TAX BENEFITS IN AN ASSET DEAL. The tax benefits in an asset deal can be split between buyer and seller as agreed, as the seller is interested in all gains being long-term capital gains and the buyer is interested in deducting as much of the purchase price as quick as possible at ordinary rates.

This can be done by allocating a large portion of the purchase price to assets that can be depreciated quickly as well as creating employment or consulting agreements with the seller that result in ordinary deductions to the buyer.

**TAX BENEFITS IN A STOCK DEAL.** The tax benefits in a stock deal are mainly for the seller as the seller receives capital gains treatment as if he sold his stock in the stock market. The buyer must capitalize the purchase price as part of his cost basis for the shares acquired



#### **EXIT STRATEGIES**

and can be used to reduce the gain when he resells the shares. Because there is very little tax benefit the buyer can derive from this type of sale, it usually takes more cash outlay for the buyer to do this type of transaction.

**INSTALLMENT SALES.** For those deals that include a payout over time, the buyer can deduct interest payments on any notes payable to the seller over the payout period and the seller can recognize capital gain over the payout period instead of recognizing the whole gain the date the deal is signed.

This provides benefit to both buyer and seller when a cash deal isn't feasible or desired. In addition, the seller defers his gain by recognizing a small portion of gain during each year of the payout. There is a good possibility that the seller will be in a lower tax bracket in those subsequent years. He

likely will only recognize a small portion of the gain in those years, instead of recognizing the entire gain all in one year and driving up his income into the highest tax bracket in the year of sale.

**S CORP VERSUS C CORP.** As a seller, it's important to understand the corporate structure of your entity. If you are a C corp, you are at a distinct disadvantage to that of an S corp or LLC taxed as a partnership when doing an asset deal. This is because you may be subject to double taxation on the sale of the assets: once at the corporate level and once as you liquidate the corporation.

With an S corporation you are taxed only once as the tax on the gains hold their character (capital or ordinary) and are only paid at the individual shareholder level. There are ways to mitigate this by having your C Corp make an S election and waiting several years so that the built-in gains rules don't bite. Another way to mitigate is by selling personal goodwill. Both of these are advanced topics and you should speak to a qualified CPA or tax attorney in order to consider your options.

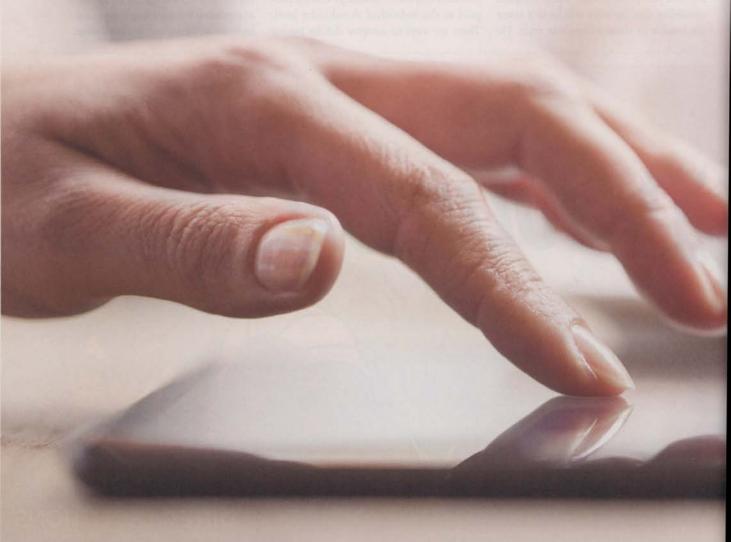
CONCLUSION. When looking to buy or sell a business, it's really not the price you receive as the seller or the price you pay as the purchaser that is as important as the amount you keep or the amount you pay after tax benefits. If you are in the M&A game and you have identified a potential deal, it is always advisable to consult with your tax advisers early. L&L

The author is a CPA in New Jersey and owns an accounting firm that caters to landscape professionals throughout the United States.



### always ON MY MIND

E-newsletters keep your services front of mind with customers. By Joe Shooner



magine for a moment, your business without email.

Some readers will recall a time before electronic communication, and certainly some of you choose to limit your use of email where possible. The impact of email to our communication landscape is profound, and its effect on marketing communications is as important as radio and television were in previous generations. Like many technologies, email can be a powerful tool for your business when used appropriately.

E-newsletters, e-blasts, email promotions – whatever you may call them – provide a tremendous opportunity to communicate with your clients and prospects. Relative to many marketing methods, e-newsletters are inexpensive. And, since most companies' email lists are comprised of clients and prospects who have contacted them in the past, e-newsletters are highly targeted.

BE A PROBLEM SOLVER. All service companies are hired to solve problems. Be it a weedy lawn, a lack of useful outdoor space or lack of time with family because of yard work – in essence you are all in the business of solving problems for your clients and e-newsletters allow you to communicate your problem-solving ability to your audience.

In some cases, the client knows they have a problem, but they need to be told that you offer a specific service that can address the issue. A client may hire you for a specific service such as weekly maintenance, but remain unaware that you offer additional services like lawn applications or aeration. If you've ever had a client hire another company because they did not know you offered the same service, you know that it's maddening. In this scenario, the client had a problem they needed solved, but their contractor did not do an adequate job of informing them about their range of services.

A regular e-newsletter serves as a simple and friendly reminder to your clients about the services you offer, which increases your upsell opportunities, raising your revenue per client. As consumers, we look for the easy solution, and as you solve more and more problems for a client, they will be less inclined to seek assistance elsewhere. Your goal with an e-newsletter should be to make sure all of your clients know about all of the services you offer.

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#### **EMAIL MARKETING**

In other cases, the client doesn't realize they have a problem that needs solving. Services like aeration, dormant oil applications and pruning are all important and useful, but not often top-of-mind concerns for a client. An e-newsletter is an efficient medium for alerting your audience that now is the proper time to schedule a service. Doing so provides a long-term benefit by positioning you as an expert in their eyes, while providing short term benefits by encouraging the client to buy additional services from you.

The easiest way to develop a newsletter schedule is to picture yourself talking to your best customer. Imagine they ask you, "What should I be doing with my property this month?" Most of us would have no problem answering that question, and picking a topic for a newsletter shouldn't be any more complicated.

Be a company you'd want to do business with. There's a sales adage that states, "All things being equal, people prefer to buy from friends, and all things NOT being equal, people STILL prefer to buy from their friends." Psychologically, we are predisposed to avoid cognitive dissonance, and this means that as buyers, we prefer sellers who make us feel good about our purchases. Have you ever thought, "I like this product but I can't stand my sales rep." If so, you probably don't maintain that business relationship, or you certainly don't put any effort into giving them any more business than needed. Conversely, think about the companies you love doing business with. Most likely it's not just the product or the service, but something less tangible that makes you think, "I'm really glad I found these guys," and makes you happy to continue spending your money with them.

Our clients want to feel good about their buying decisions, too. In an ideal world, we would have the time and manpower to develop person-to-person relationships with each of our clients, but realistically this is difficult to achieve. Newsletters — both printed and electronic — give your company a forum for communicating the tangible and intangible things that set you apart from your competition. Think of these intangibles as your

"brand" - the thing that will make a client happy they are working with you.

Thanks to their low cost, e-newsletters are well suited for this effort. The most difficult part is determining what sets you apart. What are you trying to portray? Professionalism? Experience? Superior service? Certainly. But be aware that most consumers take marketing-speak self-promotion with a grain of salt. Do you have friends who always tell you how great they are? It's annoying. We are impressed by displays of humanness more than we are claims of superiority. Again, think of your friends; it's always more endearing to hear a friend tell a funny story about a recent mistake they made than to hear about their latest victory because it's humanizing to hear that we all have similar struggles.

We want a human element — so how do you incorporate that into your newsletters? The most important step is to be honest. You may want to be the biggest landscaper in your market, but if you're a small family-run operation then be honest about it. Talk about the good and the bad of this business, talk about a new baby, talk about it when you lose a great employee, talk about the things that will make a reader feel they know you better as a person. Above all else, be true to who you are.

PRACTICALLY SPEAKING. With easy-to-use online services such as Constant Contact, e-newsletters can easily be created on a DIY basis. But, just as I could put down my own lawn applications, opportunity and completion are two different things. The two most common issues landscape contractors run into are collecting email addresses and staying consistent with their e-newsletter efforts.

**DEVELOPING AN EMAIL LIST.** As common as email addresses are, many of us are hesitant to ask our clients for them. It's a lot like asking for the sale; too frequently we think it will be an imposition. It's not. These people are clients or prospects; they have an interest in your business. Ask them as early as you can in your discussions, and whenever possible give them a logical reason they need to give you their email address, such as receiving an

Get it as close as you can, then send it.



emailed estimate or an emailed invoice/statement. In my business, we have to email PDF proofs to our clients, and I've never had a client balk when I asked for their email address. One of my clients instituted a simple but effective approach: he paid his employees several dollars for any new email address they acquired from a client. Get comfortable asking for email addresses and make sure any website form has "email" as a required field.

BEING CONSISTENT. A common situation with landscape contractors is that they start strong with a nicely personalized newsletter in the early spring, and then they get busy and don't think about it again until fall. If you decide to implement a monthly e-newsletter program, you need to be realistic about who is going to actually put them together. It's not terribly difficult, but then again neither is putting down fertilizer, and I still don't do that on schedule. Decide who is in charge and make them accountable. If you determine that it's not likely to get accomplished internally, consider hiring someone to help with the process.

NOW IS BETTER THAN PERFECT. It's easy to get hung up on perfection, but don't sweat it. Remember that your newsletter is unlikely to get more than a few minutes of attention and that "now" is better than "perfect." Get it as close as you can, then send it. The consistency will benefit you, even if it didn't have that one perfect photo you were hoping to include. Since it's so easy to get off track with your schedule, don't nitpick your newsletter if there's any chance it will delay the distribution.

On the other hand, I often get asked if once a month is too frequent to send e-newsletters, because you don't want to annoy their clients. My response is that I get DAILY emails from Amazon.com. They aren't stupid when it comes to marketing, and I keep shopping there. If a client decides to unsubscribe from your list, it will probably not be because you're emailing them too often, and it's also simply unlikely that you will have the time to send too many e-newsletters. Realize that some people will unsubscribe, and you can't really worry about them. Write for the people who do read your newsletter and commit to a regular, consistent approach.

E-newsletters are one of the most flexible, targeted, and cost effective ways you can communicate with clients and prospects. Consistent and informative e ones will position you as an expert problem solver and help you sell more work. L&L

The author is vice president of sales at Focal Point Communications.

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#### **EMAIL MARKETING**

# MAKE YOUR EMAILS WORK FOR YOU

Four ways to increase your reach via email marketing.

By Maria Semple

mail marketing can be a great tool in your marketing toolkit. Your email list is a valuable asset for your business, and your tips, offers and news about your company should be providing good value every step of the way. Your emails should be cultivating high engagement. Otherwise, it's the dreaded "opt-out."

If you're already marketing through email, are you taking advantage of all the bells and whistles available through your email service provider? As an Authorized Local Expert & Platinum Solution Provider with Constant Contact, I'm always asked what else marketers should be doing once they've hit the send button on their email campaign. Here are my top four tips:

1. Share your email campaigns on social media. Every email you send creates its own unique shareable URL. Take that URL and share it on every social media platform your business is on. You can also customize the introductory message that precedes each post to take advantage of the tone of each platform and the ability to insert a photo. (You ARE taking pictures of each landscaping project ... right?) A side-by-side before and after photo



of your recent project will demonstrate your expertise and talents far better than any article alone can do. You can also use Hootsuite as a social media dashboard incorporating not only your e-news, but other postings to your social channels as well.

2. Insert a social media share bar at the top of every email that you send out, whether or not your own business is on social media. You can bet your customers are using social media and this share bar will enable them to share your e-news on the platforms that matter to them. For example, let's say you send me a coupon in mid-summer that is good for 20 percent off fall plantings. You tell me that this coupon is good for a friends and family discount, too, and you encourage me to forward the email AND share it on Facebook. If I think you're doing a great job with my landscape, don't you think I'll gladly post this on your behalf? And, in doing so, I've just become part of your marketing team ... a real-life marketing ambassador for you. While you don't have direct access to my Facebook friends, you can still have a direct impact on their buying decisions. The email you've created with your branding now has far greater impact because it's being seen by people who aren't even on your email list. This is a huge opportunity for your business.

3. Since your emails are being forwarded and shared, it's important to add the "Sign up for our e-news" button somewhere on your email. It may seem counterintuitive, but you want to make it as easy as possible for people to opt in to your list. While you're at it, don't forget to add a link to your website and social media.

4. Your email service provider gives you great stats for you to determine whether your emails are getting opened, shared and clicked. Don't be romanced by high open rates alone. You are looking for a physical and measurable response: Did someone call and book a new landscaping project? Did they click through to an article you shared? Did they share your e-news on social media? Know the goal of each email marketing campaign you send out and have one measurable goal in mind when you hit the send button. Closely track your results so you'll know what to change going forward. It could be something as simple as placing the call to action "above the scroll line."

Keep your emails short and remember that just over 50 percent of people are now reading their emails on mobile devices, which means you'll need to use templates that are mobilefriendly and your readers will not tolerate lengthy emails on their mobile devices. A recent study from Blue Hornet found that 80 percent of email recipients delete mobile email that don't look good and 30 percent unsubscribe from the email list. Put that all together and what you have is a compelling argument for considering mobile as you build your emails and communications. (And, once they read your mobile-friendly newsletter, are they clicking through to a mobile responsive website? If not, time to upgrade that, too.)

Your next big landscape project is likely to come from your existing customers or someone who is a friend of your existing customers. Your business flourishes on word-of-mouth and never before have small businesses had so many engagement tools at their disposal. Learn how to leverage the online tools available to engage new prospects and watch your business grow. Lal

The author is founder and CEO of The Prospect Finder, consults with growing businesses and nonprofits on email marketing, social media and prospecting strategies, and is an authorized local expert with Constant Contact.

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OFFICE ORG.

#### PAPERLESS

Upstream Waters Landscape finds a way to cut paper out of its business.

By Jake Zuckerman

B ob Dylan once sang, "Then you'd better start swimming, or you'll sink like a stone. For the times they are a changin."

For the average office manager on the verge of drowning in a sea of paperwork, there is a way to swim.

Amid the stresses and spurs of busy season in the landscaping industry, Beth Blaylock, office manager of Upstream Waters Landscape in Niles, Mich., found a way to clean up the clutter, and get work orders out in a more timely and accurate fashion.

Her solution: go paperless.

"It was largely a time thing," Blaylock says. "For me, putting in all that information, and for the guys in the field to fill it out, was just too much."

Upstream Waters made the decision to

go paperless in the spring of 2013. They switched out pen and paper for tablets and the accompanying Hindsight app.

Hindsight, developed by a former employee of an irrigation company, can be tailored to its user's company. The app can track materials, make schedules, route employees and add personal notes to any clients' file. It can also link to the Quickbooks app to transfer numbers for invoicing and accounting.

The company planned for a three-month transition period for employees to switch work-order platforms. All the contractors were so enthused with the new medium that they transitioned smoothly in just one month.

"They were really excited to drop the pen and pencil and pick up a device," Blaylock says.

Anthony Lubarsky, a foreman for Up-

"We would do everything online if we could," Blaylock says. "But not all of our customers are there yet."



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#### OFFICE ORG.

stream Waters, says the move has fixed problems he and his crew used to have with losing or damaging important papers.

"It was a complete 180," he says. "It was not a problem at all for me."

Along with work orders, Blaylock says 25 percent of their invoicing is now paperless. That percentage opted into the paperless system voluntarily. As much as they would like to be 100 percent paperless, they still have to cater to their pen and paper clientele.

"We would do everything online if we could," Blaylock says. "But not all of our customers are there yet."

It wasn't just organization, cost efficiency or time efficiency that improved. Blaylock says accuracy of the orders themselves increased dramatically. As opposed to waiting until the end of the day to fill out work orders and rushing through them to get home, all crews have to fill them out immediately after leaving a client. They cannot get the information for their next job until they complete their work order. The fresher memory and more thorough procedure from the app prompted better systems for the company.

The technology does, however, come with its price. According to Lubarsky, problems arise when crews arrive at job sites where they cannot get a good signal.

"We have Verizon, which is pretty good," Lubarsky says. "But there are still times where we might have to leave a site to get a signal and pre-download everything."

Blaylock also warned that a paperless system is not a be-all-end-all magical cure for unorganized managers.

"Overall, if you're going to do it, you really need to know your business," Blaylock says.

"No app is 100 percent. It's not a solution if you're unorganized. You need to tailor the app to fit your business or vice versa."

All in all, the new system has done good things for Upstream Waters Landscape. When the company moved offices, Blaylock says she had more time to help with the move instead of burying herself in paperwork.

Of the new system and transition at large, "overall, it's been a really positive experience," Blaylock says. L&L



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### BULLSEYE

Connect with your commercial customers with the right marketing strategies.

#### By Chris Heiler

he way you provide your lawn and landscaping services to a commercial property is probably a bit different than how you would perform those same services for a residential property. This is one reason many companies focus on one or the other, and are often much more successful (read: profitable) doing so compared to companies who try to serve both audiences.

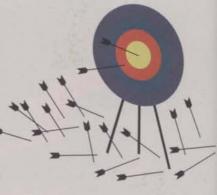
For proof, look to Lawn & Landscape's annual Top 100 List where you'll find the top 20 spots dominated by companies laser-focused on either the residential or commercial market.

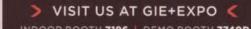
Whether your business is B2B (business to business) or B2C (business to consumer), as it relates to marketing, it is always P2P: person to person.

Because of this there are many similarities in how you would market your services to either the business or homeowner crowd. That said, there are many subtle differences that you should be aware of when developing a marketing strategy.

For one, the sales cycle of a B2B company can be much longer than that of a B2C company. According to Jacqueline Zenn of The Agency Post, this is because "B2C buys tend to satisfy immediate needs, while B2B decisions are meant to complete long-term goals."

There are also more decision-makers involved in the B2B process. Homeowners can conduct research and typically move forward without approval from others, often making decisions based on emotions. In contrast to that, "the B2B purchase process tends to be rationally and logically driven," according to Zenn, and "B2B marketers have a much longer





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#### MARKETING

chain of command to deal with since procurement, accounting and their superiors often need to approve purchases."

To get a better understanding of this topic,

let's dive into the fundamentals of an effective B2B marketing strategy, highlighting three of the best practices that separate B2B from B2C marketing.

**UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE.** If your marketing message is going to hit the mark, it is critical that you understand where you're aiming. In other words, know your audience.

This process begins by developing what are called buyer personas. According to HubSpot, an inbound marketing and sales software company, "A buyer persona is a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers."

Sound complicated? It doesn't need to be. We suggest starting with very basic buyer personas. Here are two examples:

CEO Jim. Jim is the CEO or owner of a \$6 million commercial landscaping company. The company is a leader in its market, innovative and always ahead of its competitors. Jim has an annual marketing budget and also has experience working with outside agencies and consultants.

Overwhelmed Allison. Allison is the marketing director for a \$2 million residential landscape design/build company. She is also involved with sales and has other responsibilities within the company that stretch her thin. She needs more help and support, either in house or from outside the company.

As you see, this is an attempt to clarify and paint a picture of exactly who we are trying to reach.

After you create buyer personas you can develop a strategy to reach each of them. This is where segmentation comes into play. Segmenting your prospects and customers by buyer persona allows you to create content for the right people at the right time, whether that's via email or a blog post.

To illustrate this point, take a look at these two recent blog post topics, the first from Schill Grounds Management in Ohio and the second from HighGrove Partners in Atlanta (disclosure: both are clients of Landscape Leadership):

- Snow Removal Musts for Your North East Ohio Retail Property
- 5 Landscape Enhancements for Atlanta Hospitals and Assisted Living Facilities Each of these blog posts is clearly targeting a very specific audience: retail properties in



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#### CONTENT MARKETING AND LEADERSHIP.

Thought leadership and expertise are more valued in the B2B space. Remember, there are property managers (and others) responsible for making decisions on how to spend other people's money and are being held accountable for this spend.

This is a lot different than a homeowner making a quick, emotional decision. As Zenn explains, "They often want to look like the workplace rock stars or heroes thanks to their excellent decisions."

If you're selling in the B2B space, you have to arm these buyers with in-depth information they need to make informed decisions. This starts with your website.

Build out in-depth "About Us" pages

showcasing your key employees, answer frequently asked questions in greater detail and cover topics on your blog that appeal to your unique buyer personas. Supply your audience with real data and insights on trends. This is the type of content and information they need to make a confident buying decision.

SOCIAL SELLING. Unlike the B2C audience, "The B2B crowd wants the ability to build a close relationship with brands," says Zenn. Social media, especially networks like LinkedIn and Twitter, offer the chance to connect with your B2B audience in a more meaningful way than you could with homeowners.

These social networks are great for prospecting and gathering leads. It's extremely easy to find and engage with influencers and potential customers on these networks.

Marketing and sales is always a P2P endeavor, so there will always be similarities in how we promote our services whether B2B or B2C. For the B2B crowd, focus on more clearly defining your target audience through buyer personas, building your thought leadership through more in-depth, insightful content and using the social platforms available to reach and engage with your B2B audience. 181

The author is the founder of Landscape Leadership, a digital marketing agency for green industry companies. He's a former landscape designer and frequent contributor to Lawn & Landscape.

Check out our February issue for "Moving on Up," a special report on what commercial property managers think about landscapers, and what they want from you.







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#### **ALTERNATIVE FUEL**

But lack of infrastructure and technology is impeding the company's ability to make the switch to alternative fuel sources for other vehicles and equipment.

"If you're into the green movement, have clients who care about the environment or want to diversify your business, switching to alternative fuels can be a benefit," says William Bathon, vice president of Bay Country Landscape. But regardless of your motivations for trying alternative fuels, doing so has to make financial sense.

**INCENTIVES TO SWITCH.** When it comes to diesel, Grover says prices are more variable than unleaded. "And you have to use an additive, which increases cost. But the miles per gallon savings more than cover the added expense," he says.

Grover acknowledges that biodiesel would



Pacific Landscape Management has lowered its costs by converting to propane and diesel

be an even more environmentally friendly option than standard diesel. All diesel in Oregon is 5 percent biodiesel; however, getting a higher percentage requires companies to own their own fuel tanks – a cost Pacific Landscape Management cannot yet justify.

The propane used for mowers also re-

quires more complicated fueling that is best performed with an onsite propane fueling station. That can be pricey. The company is leasing its mowing equipment from John Deere, which proposed the mower conversion and introduced Pacific Landscape Management to propane suppliers and incentives





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JOB DONE

#### ALTERNATIVE FUEL

to offset the costs of an onsite fueling station.

That's why Grover recommends talking to local distributors and attending trade shows to get the scoop on alternative fuel options. "There are a lot of resources out there you won't have access to unless you ask for them," he says.

Right now, the company's entire fleet of about 40 riding mowers is fueled by propane. About a third of Pacific Landscape Management's 50 production trucks are diesel, too. "We keep trucks for 10 years, so it takes a long time to convert," Grover says.

Of course, he acknowledges that at the company's truck conversion rate, a new technology may present itself before they even purchase an all-diesel fleet. "Maybe we'll get to the point where hybrids become an economically viable option," Grover says. "We just keep our ear to the ground and see what's best for now. If best changes, we'll re-aim our ship as new technology comes down."

BUSTING MYTHS. Before Bay Country Landscape took the plunge and purchased nine new propane mowers, the company did a lot of research. "Propane has a lot of myths about it," Bathon says.

After considering the switch for a year, Bay Country Landscape purchased propane mowers for one crew. "We immediately saw the benefit," Bathon says. The propane mowers cost about an additional \$1,500 up front per walk-behind mower and \$2,000 more up front per riding mower. "But we can recoup that initial cost within one year of use."

Bay Country Landscape is working with its propane provider to install a fuel tank on site. Bathon stresses the importance of developing a relationship with a good fuel service provider before making the switch. "You can't just go down the street and fill up your propane tanks," he explains. "It can be very costly, and our propane provider is sharing the costs associated with installing the fuel tank for us."

In the future, Bathon says, Bay Country Landscape may look into alternative fuel options for management vehicles, too, but not in the next two or three years.

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#### **ALTERNATIVE FUEL**

300 employees currently use diesel fuel for service vehicles and equipment. Although the company has looked at natural gas for roadgoing vehicles, as well as propane and electric options for mowers and other equipment, as of now none of those options are quite right for the company.

"Certainly sustainability is a big part of

our mission, so we looked for ways that make economic sense. Our difficulty is we have a unique business model, market and city, and the durability and availability aren't quite there for us yet," says Vice President John Holbert.

DLC Resources focuses specifically on large planned communities on the perimeter of the massive Phoenix metropolitan area. "We have a very limited client base," Holbert says. "By geographic happenstance, they're spread all over. We probably have 100 miles between the westernmost and easternmost properties."

That means electric service vehicles don't have the range DLC Resources needs. In addition, Holbert says lack of infrastructure is a huge barrier to purchasing vehicles that run on natural gas, "We mobilize from two maintenance yards, do all fueling on site, and use the same routes every day. The infrastructure for natural gas is not available on our routes yet."

Holbert says some companies in the Phoenix area, such as UPS, are running natural gas pipelines to their facilities. But DLC Resources doesn't have a large enough fleet for natural gas vendors to justify the expense.

For now, the company is sticking with conventional fuel sources for small equipment, too.

In lieu of using alternative fuels for trucks, Holbert says DLC Resources focuses on a robust maintenance plan to maximize fuel efficiency, with simple steps such as ensuring tires are properly inflated and mobilizing employees from a central yard. The company also purchased some hybrid vehicles for field managers who don't have to haul around equipment and supplies.

With a few technology and infrastructure tweaks, Holbert says his company would certainly consider natural gas and electric options in the future. "There's always a cost-benefit analysis to be done," Holbert says. "But on a speculative basis, of the current alternative fuels available, I would say natural gas is probably the more attractive based on the cost of fuel." L&L

#### **BOLD IDEAS. BIG RESULTS.**









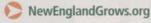


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# CREAT for

## IONS Lawn Care

Take a look at the latest chemical technology to hit the marketplace.

By Lindsey Getz

hese days lawn care operators are under tremendous pressure to get the job done quicker, but still be affordable. As a result, a large focus of product suppliers' latest developments has been on combination formulations that offer more of an "all-inone" product. There are a variety of new products already on the market with more to come in 2015.

The newest products have updates and improvements to existing chemicals that have already been successful in the landscape market. For instance, TZone SE Broadleaf Herbicide for Tough Weeds, manufactured by PBI-Gordon, delivers the same broadleaf weed control in cool-season turf grass as the original TZone product LCOs are already familiar with. But the SE product is a reduced solvent formula that penetrates the cuticle to control weeds like wild violet, ground ivy, black medic, oxalis, clover and lespedeza.

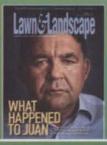
"LCOs hate callbacks," says David Loecke, herbicide product manager for PBI-Gordon. "So TZone SE is formulated for speed. It delivers twice the triclopyr as most combination products so you get visible activity in hours, including leaf and stem curl, yellowing, and brown – and that can mean fewer callbacks."

Following the success of Bayer's pre-emergent herbicide Specticle, the company has now introduced Specticle Total, a new chemical combination labeled for non-selective weed control in hardscapes and mulched areas around ornamental plants. The manufacturer says this non-selective herbicide, launching in 2015, will control existing weeds and grasses plus prevent new weeds for up to six months.

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#### CHEMICAL TECHNOLOGY

"Specticle Total was developed to provide landscape professionals with a non-selective weed control solution with extended residual," says Jeff Michel, herbicides business manager. "This post-emergent control delivers up to six months residual - a key point for LCOs who are concerned with efficiency. Being able to control weeds - whether it be on paved areas, on landscaped beds or around areas where ornamentals might be planted. The idea of not having to come back on a regular basis and retreat is really important to busy LCOs."

Used in combination with last year's new product Specticle G, which allows LCOs to treat weeds prior to coming up, Michel says Bayer is creating a "one-two-punch scenario."

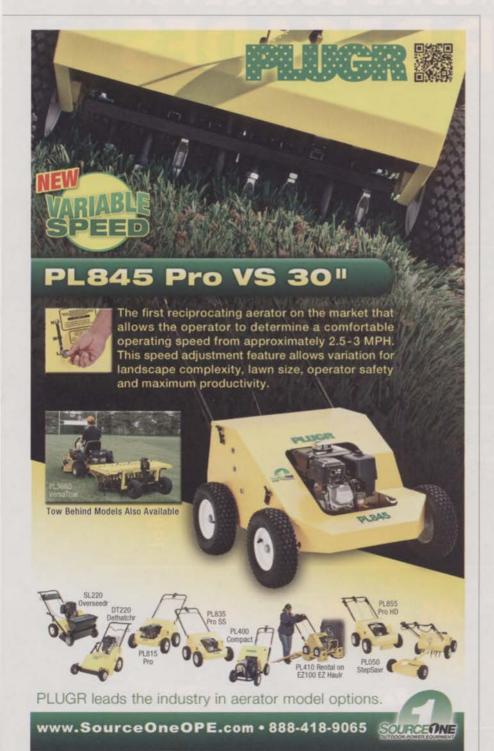
"Use Specticle G to prevent the growth of the majority of weeds and then use Specticle Total to recreate that weed barrier for any that have escaped or broken the barrier," Michel says. "The idea is that most weed issues will be taken care of with just a once- or twice-a-year application when married with a true preventative option like Specticle G. It's a complete solution."

DISEASE AND INSECTS. Tackling turf grass problems is always a hot topic. LCOs want to get fast control over disease and insects before too much damage is done and there are several new products on the market for this purpose. From BASF come two new fungicide products including Lexicon Intrinsic fungicide, a new chemistry combination for control of turfgrass diseases like brown patch, dollar spot, fairy ring, pythium root dysfunction, snow mold and summer patch. Lexicon combines the enhanced systemic properties of Xemium fungicide with Insigna Intrinsic brand fungicide.

Also new from BASF is Xzemplar Fungicide, developed to provide protection against dollar spot as well as other turf grass diseases. The product was made using the latest carboxamide technology and building on the manufacturer's experience with Boscalid, This has allowed BASF to create a new, broader spectrum and more active carboxamide fungicide.

On the insecticide front comes FMC Professional Solutions' Triple Crown T&O Insecticide. With its three-way combination of FMC bifenthrin, FMC zeta-cypermethrin and imidacloprid, this formulation offers multiple modes of action on key pests.

"Triple Crown T&O is a great fit for lawn and landscape professionals because



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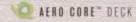
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#### CHEMICAL TECHNOLOGY

it eliminates the need to tank mix multiple products to control pests, saving time, money and shelf space," says Steve Mora, FMC insecticide product manager.

Dow AgroSciences has released XXpire WG Insecticide, which combines two new active ingredients: Isoclast Active (a new class of insecticide chemistry) and spinetoram – to control both chewing and sap-feeding insects commonly found in ornamentals. According to the company, XXpire WG is effective on 39 pests including seven of the 10 most troublesome ornamental insects.

Terminix has also released a new product. The Terminix Mosquito Service, an EPA-exempt formulation, is said to collapse mosquito populations in treated areas by more than 90 percent in two to three weeks.

TOTAL CONTROL. Getting control over the turf

is a top priority for LCOs and adjuvants also help achieve that goal. Winfield has introduced the Gulfstream adjuvant which the company says has the potential to improve spray coverage and penetration in dense canopies while promoting increased absorption of products on a leaf surface. It also includes buffering agents to lower spray solution pH which may reduce hydrolysis and has the potential to improve performance of certain products.

"LCOs are pressed for time more than ever and adjuvants help them to be more efficient by getting the job done right the first time," says Aaron Johnsen, product manager for WinField. "Also, weeds continue to be a persistent threat but adding an adjuvant like Gulfstream has shown to significantly improve overall weed control and efficiency."

Also developed to help improve efficiency and assist LCOs in getting control over the turf is Winfield's Aquicare wetting agent. This soil wetting agent will help improve water retention and reduce watering requirements to maintain turf quality. The formula is designed to help prevent localized dry spot conditions and control water-repellent soils. Because of less evaporation and runoff, Aquicare promotes more efficient use of irrigation water or rainfall.

"On top of recent drought issues, LCOs are under constant pressure to keep their clients happy," Johnsen says. "Aquicare wetting agnet helps LCOs to maintain healthy grounds while doing more with less." L&L

Stay up to date on the latest new products for LCOs. Visit www.lawnandlandscape.com for a complete database of new chemical technology.



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#### EQUIPPED with IDEAS

#### Customer feedback drives changes in wheel and track loaders. By Anne-Marie Hardie

hen it comes time to purchase a new piece of equipment, most contractors are looking for a machine that can handle their load demands, site terrain and efficiency needs. Track loaders and wheel loaders have their own advantages, so contractors should first determine their job needs before deciding on a piece of equipment.

"Compact wheel loaders provide significant advantages in capacity, lifting and dumping height, etc. This gives them an advantage in truck loading applications - and the tire platform is better for use on paved surfaces, as tracks tend to deteriorate at a faster rate on concrete compared to rubber tires," says Warren Anderson, brand marketing manager at Case.

In general, the wheel loader offers a smoother ride, with reduced jerkiness, increased visibility and a greater lifting capacity, says Paul Wade, brand marketing manager at New Holland. Keith Rohrbacker, product manager for Kubota, says the wheel loader perfectly complements the capabilities of smaller compact track loaders.

"The compact track loaders can easily fit into tight places but may not have the same bucket capacity and hinge pin height to gather up and load as efficiently as a wheel loader," he says.

While the long belt of a track loader provides a stable platform that works well when lifting, says Keith Coleman, senior marketing engineer at Caterpillar, one of the main reasons for purchasing a track loader is it can be used in almost every terrain and weather condition.

"It's a much gentler interface with the machine and the ground conditions so you can work in those weathered conditions and can extend your season more fully," he says.

**OPEN TO SUGGESTIONS.** Customer feedback plays an integral role in the future design and platforms of both wheel and track loaders.

It's from this costumer feedback that Doug Laufenberg, product marketing manager for compact wheel loaders at John Deere, learned that the company's wheel loader customers were looking for a simpler design and lower operating height. As a direct response to this, John Deere launched two new compact wheel loaders.

Although a track loader system can be used in almost every terrain and type of weather, they require a bit more maintenance than a wheel loader due to the track system.

"Replacing a set of tracks on a compact track loader would be more expensive, typically, than replacing a set of tires on a loader or six gear," said Gregg Zupancic, product marketing manager, skid-steers and compact track loaders with John Deere Construction and Forestry.

Wade says New Holland has designed its loader equipment for quick and efficient maintenance, grouping all the checkpoints together so operators can complete their service easily. "As long as the daily maintenance is easy to do, then the contractor will be more likely do it," Wade says.

Terex's recent improvements were also based on increasing durability and decreasing

#### COMPACT EQUIPMENT

service time. Some of these improvements include a cylinder seal package with three additional sealing surfaces to eliminate potential leakage, wear bands to reduce side load strain, new high-torque, stainless-steel clamps and upgraded hydraulic couplers.

Case responded to service time concerns by introducing a "maintenance free" solution into both product lines, emphasizing that there are no filters to maintain.

eASE OF USE. Incorporating individual operator codes to simplify driver use and increase productivity has been a feature several manufacturers have added to their track loaders including John Deere's E Series, Case EZ-EH control panel and Caterpillar D series. This feature allows the operator to fine tune the machine exactly to the driver's preference.

"This control panel has a mechanism to adjust your wheel speed independently of your engine RPM," Zupancic says. "If a contractor wants to get the job done quickly, then they can keep their steering very aggressive and for those new to the compact loader there is the option of utility mode where the joysticks will be both less sensitive and less aggressive."

Caterpillar's D series includes 11 different parameters that can be customized for the operator, says Coleman including preference, skill level and even language. Case also introduced its EZ-EH control system in its compact loaders that includes nine different preset speed and control settings, and the ability to quickly change operating patterns.

A COMFORTABLE RIDE. Comfort has been one of the primary areas of improvement in the loader market. Bobcar's newest loaders include conveniences such as cup holders, a storage compartment, tape measure and place for an iPod or phone to plug in.

"Our latest generation of Bobcat machines have improved visibility, better noise (reduction), improved cooling and heating systems so that from an operator standpoint we will meet their needs better," says Mike Fitzgerald, loader product specialist for Bobcat. The machines have different control options for their loader so that they can operate in their most familiar mode. "If they want to operate the controls with their feet, hands or if they want to step up to the joystick with selectable controls," he says.

Jonathon Ferguson, regional sales manager with Terex Construction, says customers have asked Terex to make the cab environment both more comfortable and intuitive for the operator. Features in Terex's new line includes fingertip controls to operate the unit, attachments and pressurized cabs.

Caterpillar's D series was introduced al-

of wheel loaders, says Wade.

He adds that New Holland's track loaders offer a long wheelbase for increased stability and 365 degrees visibility in the company's compact track loaders.

The focus for Case's new line was ease of use and driver comfort. The company's wheel loader has been shortened in both length and height, allowing easier access to small spaces and a shorter turning radius, while the features have been adapted for easier control. Anderson says the line-up is equipped with electronic controls that increase driver precision and reduce fatigue.



Far left: A wheel loader offers a smoother ride, with reduced jerkiness, increased visibility and a greater lifting capacity. Left: Compact track loaders can be used in almost every type of terrain.

most a year ago, and operator comfort wasthe main focus of their design. This includes a fully encapsulated one-piece cab that offers both longevity in the steel and a pressurized cab design. "The sight lines out of that cab are outstanding and then we've enhanced the visibility even further by offering the industry first review camera for our compact track loader," Coleman says.

This new design includes the option of a high back, heated, air suspension seat that offers the driver additional lumbar support. Heated seats are also a feature that are available in New Holland's current line-up of compact track loaders and its new line-up "Operators are in these machines for long days, and constantly manipulating the controls can be tiring," Anderson says. "Case has aimed to make it as simple as possible with these new controls."

"People are looking for comfort. They're looking for safety. It ties back into the visibility and productivity," Coleman says. "And the ability to be productive also ties back into that display and being able to customize that machine to really do either the job you're on or to my skill level." LEL

The author is a freelance writer based in Ontario, Canada.

### SPRAY IT, DON'T SAY IT

Use these rotors to help customers keep their lawns efficiently watered.

t's important to keep your lawn efficiently watered. Instead of letting customers use hoseattached sprinklers that need to be moved every hour, or risk flooding parts of the lawn. suggest installing these rotor products to water the whole lawn in a more effective way.



#### MP800SR-90: Short Radius MP Rotator

The pitch: A short radius version of the MP Rotator product family is the MP800SR, extending the product line's ability to reach radius settings as low as 6 ft., while also reaching 12 ft. at the maximum radius setting.

- . The MP800SR has all of the features of the current MP Rotator line, including high distribution uniformity, wind-resistant streams and debris-resistant double-pop.
- This low volume device applies water at approximately 0.8 inches per hour, maintaining this precipitation rate through arc and radius adjustments.
- . The rotator is offered in an adjustable 90°-210° arc model; a 360° model will be available later this year.

For more information: www.hunterindustries.com



#### Rain Bird 5000 Series Rotors

The pitch: Ideal for both residential and light commercial applications. Rain Bird's 5000 Series Rotors distribute water from 25 to 50 feet.

- · Featuring Rain Curtain Nozzle Technology, these rotors deliver a uniform spray pattern.
- · Close-in watering eliminates dry spots around the rotor, prevents seed washout and allows turf to grow healthy with no matting or bending.
- · Optional features include flow shut-off, in-stem pressure regulation and Seal-A-Matic (SAM) check valve.

For more information: www.rainbird.com



#### Toro RapidSet Rotor Feature

The pitch: Toro's T5 Series rotors will now have the option of the new RapidSet feature.

- · RapidSet offers a quick way to adjust rotor arc settings with no tools required. The technology works by simply turning the rotor past its current trip points. Turn the head clockwise to shift the entire arc; turn the head counter-clockwise to increase the arc pattern.
- · A built-in "slip clutch" protects the gears when making these simple adjustments.
- . The T5 rotor has a five inches of popup height that sits in the same footprint as 4-inch models. This makes it easy to retrofit and upgrade existing irrigation systems without having to do extra digging.

For more information: www.toro.com

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#### IRRIGATION SHOW PREVIEW



The Irrigation Association will educate industry workers, as well as showcase new products

#### **Inside irrigation**

Take a look at what to expect from the 2014 Irrigation Show and Education Conference, By Jake Zuckerman

he Irrigation Association's 2014 Irrigation Show and Education Conference is designed to educate industry workers, teach skills, showcase new products and provide networking opportunities. The event takes place Nov. 17-21, 2014 in Phoenix.

KEYNOTE. This year, Lowell Catlett, Ph.D. will be the general session keynote speaker. Catlett is both dean of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at New Mexico State University, as well as a regents professor in agricultural economics and business and extension economics. Catlett will be sharing his outlook on the market and his stance on emerging technologies.

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#### IRRIGATION SHOW PREVIEW

contest will be returning for this year's show. The latest introductions to the market will be showcased on the show floor. A panel of judges will evaluate each product based on innovation, increased water efficiency, ease of use, cost benefits, time savings and design quality. All products will be entered in one of six categories: agriculture, turf/landscape, golf, technology/electronics, rainwater catchment and pond and water-scape. The first and second place winners will be announced Thursday during the general session.

**BRAIN POWER.** The show will also offer multiple educational seminars, sessions and certification opportunities. Admittance to both the irrigation seminars and the technical sessions are included in full registration. However, the education classes and certi-

fication classes require extra registrations and costs.

NETWORKING. Turf Talk contractor roundtables will take place Nov. 19th. Discussion topics will include sales strategies for success, quantifying water savings, innovative irrigation technologies, making sense of social media and marketing, customer service mapping, meeting the needs of young consumers and more.

This year's show will also feature:

- More than 300 exhibitors for irrigation and related products.
- Show pavilions hosted by the International Professional Pond Companies Association and American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association.
- Networking at the opening night party and Blending Borders, an international

- reception open for the first time to fullyregistered attendees.
- Technical sessions on using alternate water sources, conservation programs and landscape water management.
- Seminars on chemigation/fertigation, wiring techniques and new auditing technology.
- Half-day International Agriculture Irrigation Summit on global regulations, practices and sustainability initiatives.
- Classes on landscape irrigation basics and advanced techniques.
- Pond and waterscape seminars from IPPCA INFO TANZA.
- Rainwater harvesting workshops at ARCSA's 2014 Annual Conference.

Registration information is on show's website at bit.ly/2014iashow. The event is located at the Phoenix Convention Center. 181



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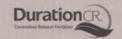


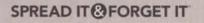


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#### **CHAMPIONS OF INNOVATION**

Champions of Innovation is a quarterly series presented by Lawn & Landscape and sponsored by Hunter Industries. Each story will shine a light on the smartest and most dedicated people in the irrigation industry.

#### **Culture of conservation**

Jodi Johnson has a conservationist's heart, a landscaper's field experience and a team through Denver Water to give contractors tools and knowledge to effectively managing water. By Kristen Hampshire

ater is the next oil," says Jodi Johnson, noting that when she took the position as conservation specialist at Denver Water two years ago, the city's water reserves were nearly half empty.

Denver's average yearly rainfall, 15 inches, is about a quarter of what a tropical city like Miami gets. Severe droughts in the last several years have severely taxed the water supply and forced a coming-to-terms with the reality that water is a limited resource.

Still, landscapers are in the business of keeping grass green, Johnson says. She gets it.

In her role at Denver Water, Johnson helps create innovative programs and tools so green industry professionals can deliver "green" expectations to customers while adhering to watering restrictions and reducing their overall water use.

"Water is a precious resource that we have to protect, and we have to teach people how to do that, not just take it away, but become more efficient - that's what the goal is," Johnson says.

#### CONNECT WITH CONTRACTORS.

Landscapers are, perhaps, a bit taken aback by the water utility showing up on their



properties - to help. Historically, Denver Water has serviced single-family residences and commercial customers. In recent years, the utility has been making a concerted effort to develop programs specifically for landscape contractors to help their businesses succeed as they mind their water use.

"I know their troubles with contracts," Johnson says, understanding how landscape firms are squeezed by clients' tightened budgets. They struggle to find labor hours in the budget to spend on an irrigation technician who can dig deep into the system and seriously audit it for improvements. That's where Denver Water can step in and offer on-site audits and full reports for free, Johnson says.

'We'll go through a landscape's entire irrigation system

zone by zone, identify breaks and leaks, make recommendations for upgrades, share how they can take advantage of our rebate programs and what is best for the site," Johnson says.

"They don't have the money in their contracts to have one of their technicians go through the system - so let us do it. We'll do it for free, and we'll create a useful report for free in the field that they can give to customers."

Use the report to make money, Johnson says. Use the report to show where system upgrades are necessary. Use Denver Water as a contractor, in a sense.

That's how Johnson speaks landscaper language.

"Their job is to keep the grass green," she says. "We are not on their properties to judge. We want to find problems to improve their systems and be

that third-party voice." Denver Water is the voice that says, "Use only what you need." And now, with the Water Budget program designed for large, commercial landscape companies, the utility is saying, "And here is actually how much water you need." Johnson says

Denver Water wants to get away from restricted watering days and give landscapers tools to manage their budgets.

"Every month, we send the landscaper and property manager a letter with a simple graph stating how much water was used, and how much water they should be using," Johnson says.

"It's a great informative tool for landscapers, and it's also a tool for identifying breaks in the system or a spike in consumption."

Meanwhile, Denver Water is making appearances at distributorships during landscaper events and "counter days," popping in with information. Denver Water's team of summer temps drive brightly colored cars and spread the word about savings. They're tough to ignore, and that's the idea.

"The whole goal of our program is to touch our customers," Johnson says, adding that programs are designed to engage customers in the irrigation process. That's why the Water Savers will be working this summer to capture pictures of customers in front of their irrigation controllers.

"We want to help people get to a point where they can look at their water consumption and manage that," Johnson says. L&L



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# MORE THAN JUST MARCHARITATION MARCHA

GPS and routing software let you monitor your fleet and employees from anywhere.

By Stacie Zinn Roberts

t's the middle of the night and the cellphone on your bedside table lights up like a Christmas tree. The GPS system you've recently installed to track your fleet of trucks has just sent you a text message. One of your service vehicles is moving out of the company yard, and it's 3 a.m. You hop out of bed, log onto your computer and confirm that, yup, you've got a truck on the move.

You call the police and give them turn-by-turn directions to locate your vehicle. The boys in blue pull the truck over at a busy intersection and apprehend the thief. You've just recovered a heavy duty Ford pickup truck, trailer, and \$30,000 worth of landscape equipment. And it all happened because your GPS system knows you don't cut grass in the dark.

Sound like science fiction? It's not.

Seven years ago, one of the managers at Acres Group,



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#### TRUCK TRACKING

a landscaping firm based in Wauconda, Ill., got a text message that alerted him to a vehicle theft as it was happening. He called the police and they nabbed the bad guys. Jeff Dumas, vice president of Acres Group, says before installing the system, the company had lost about \$100,000 in vehicles and equipment to theft at its three Chicago-area locations. The thefts prompted them to install a companywide GPS tracking system in the company's more than 300 vehicles. Approximately four months later, the late night text message arrived. After the arrest, "the thefts stopped," Dumas says. "We've had nothing like that since."

RIDING SHOTGUN. Tracking vehicle movements outside of business hours is just one of the many features available on GPS fleet tracking systems. Caretaker Landscape and

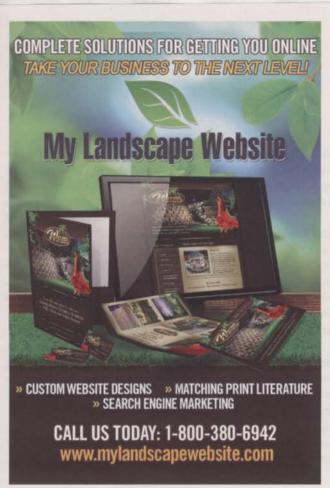
#### What to look for in a GPS system:

- ALERTS: Warnings by email or text that give you real time information about when the system notes vehicles are speeding, idling too long or moving outside of normal business hours.
- DASHBOARDS: Monthly updates called "dashboards" that summarize critical information so you don't have to sift through it.
- WIRED IN SYSTEMS: While iPads and other mobile devices are useful for scheduling and communication with the office, they can also be turned off. Research from the Aberdeen Group suggests in-vehicle devices that are hard wired in offer a more consistent means of tracking.
- TRAINING: On-site or online training to help your staff learn the system.
- CUSTOMER SERVICE: A company that is accessible and easy to work with can make all of the difference when implementing a new software system.
- REFERENCES: Ask other industry members which systems they've used, and which they'd avoid.

Tree Management, based in Gilbert, Ariz., installed GPS tracking in its service vehicles five years ago. Matt White, president and CEO, says his company uses the GPS system

software to track driver habits and vehicle data, from vehicle acceleration to hard braking, vehicle speed, sharp turns, idle time, routes and even vehicle service needs.









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#### TRUCK TRACKING

White says one feature he relies on is the weekly "dashboard" updates the system provides. Instead of having to sift through the vast amount of data collected, the GPS software pulls out the most critical data, providing a snapshot of the company's fleet performance.

Dumas says Acres Group's operations managers use the data collected by the system as tools to help manage their crews. Managers can track when a truck idles too long or wastes fuel, or when a driver exceeds maximum set driving speeds. This information is used to initiate conversations with employees to help them change their behavior. "Out of 120 vehicles, we had eight or 10 that would speed," Dumas says. After managers let the crews know they were being monitored, Dumas says, speeding incidences were reduced to just one a week.

Dumas recommends rolling out functionality of the system slowly so employees are not overwhelmed by too many bells and whistles when they are training to use it.

PHONE-FREE CALL. Neither Acres Group nor Caretaker Landscape uses the software to schedule vehicle routing for regular landscape routes. However, as Acres Group is the eighth largest snow removal company in the United States, Dumas says the routing features become critical during snow removal season.

When a truck breaks down, as is fairly common during snowstorms, Dumas says the driver can call in and the system knows exactly where he is. They can then print out a map or dispatch a map to the GPS on the dash of the repair service vehicle.

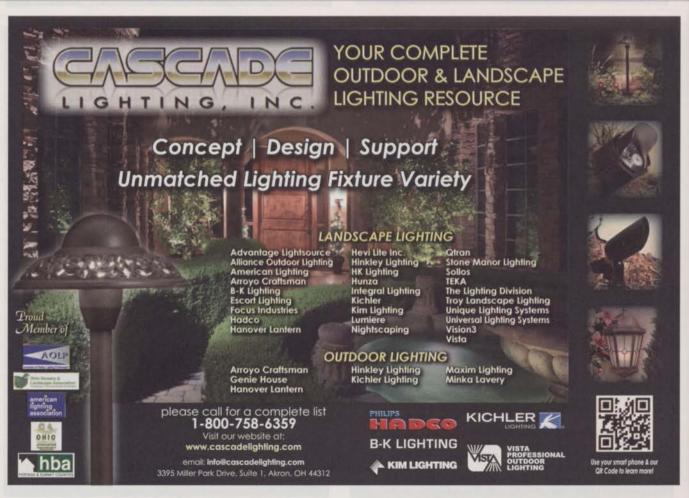
Many of Acres Group's snow removal

customers are the managers of townhome communities and banks that need to have their parking lots cleared before morning so their residents and customers can get in and out. During snowstorms, Dumas says customers anxiously call to know when the snowplows will arrive at their property.

If a customer calls the company, the GPS tracking system allows staffers to locate vehicles and let them know a snowplow driver is on his way.

"We don't want the guys using their cellphones while they're driving," Dumas says. "We can get the information without calling the guy while he's driving, so he doesn't have to find a place to pull over to call us back. Safety wise, it's been great." L&L

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



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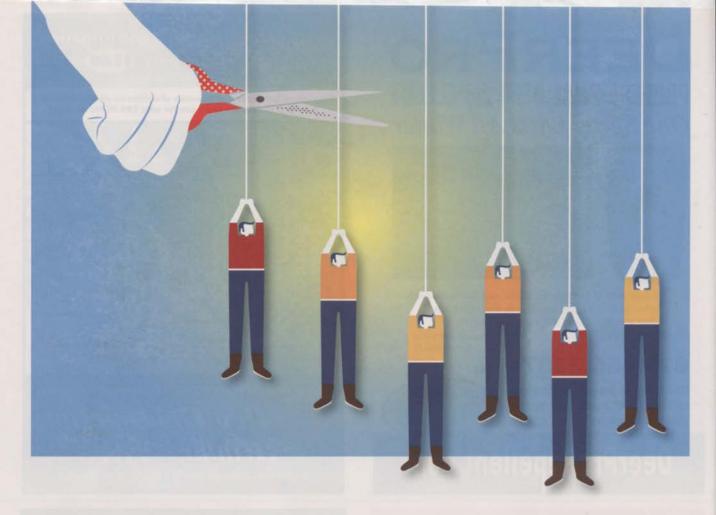


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#### When it's time to cut

How contractors approached firing a family member or friend. By Katie Tuttle

t's hard enough to fire an employee. But what if she was your mother? Rob Garpiel, president of Garpiel

Landscaping Co., had that very experience at his company.

Garpiel's mom worked in the office, doing tasks such as filing paperwork. He hired her because she was at a place in her life where she was stuck in the same routine and needed to try something else, he says.

"Like many entrepreneurs we're the first one to jump on the grenade, so I offered her a position helping out in the office," he says. "It took about two or three months before my office manager had enough nerves to say, "This isn't working, she's not doing what I ask.' It wasn't bad stuff. I just think that's not where she wanted to be in life."

After talking with his mom, they both

realized they weren't happy with the arrangement. "She ended up thanking me," he says. "Personally, I know I helped my mom go to another level in her life where she could transition."

Dynamics like that can make bad situations even worse, but Garpiel says it's important to put the business first. If you can't confidently sign that individual's paycheck, you need to think about what they're really contributing to your company.

LETTING GO. While it can be hard to fire family, it can be equally as hard to fire a longtime employee. But even they can outlast their usefulness in your business.

"A lot of people are limited in their growth," says Michael Thackrey, vice president of Fieldstone Landscape Services.

Someone hired to manage a small group of people might excel, but as the company expands, that person is unable to handle more.

"What happens is we grow and that same individual that was perfect is now wearing pants that are too big for him," he says. "We learned from that experience, because essentially what you're doing, in a positive way, you're setting them up for failure. It's positive because you grew the company, but you failed them. That's the casualty right there."

Fieldstone experienced this recently when the company had to fire a long-term employee who Thackrey and President Chris Eastman felt was holding the company back. The employee did his job well, but they wanted to go to the next level and they knew this employee wouldn't be able to take it there.

"In a nutshell, we hired someone who could fulfill a need, the need grew to a bigger need, and that individual couldn't fulfill," Thackrey says.

He says it's a lot harder to fire someone in this situation.

"They're not breaking rules, they're just not meeting standards," he says. "It's not moral issues or integrity; that's a different Lawn&Landscape.

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#### FIRING

story. In (this) situation, I think you're looking more at a process of trying to help them develop."

KEEPING STANDARDS. Garpiel says it's important to have job descriptions for every position, because that's the best way to evaluate how someone is doing their job.

"If there's a job description, look at the job description you have for that person and measure that person's role," he says. "Don't think about the person or any element other than, 'Are they doing the job the way it needs to be performed?' If someone has an excuse and you accept it, that's on you, not them."

Sometimes you hire employees that you think will be a good fit, but after an amount of time with the company, you realize they're just not living up to your expectations. Sometimes this can be noticed in a few months, or sometimes it can go years.

"Those tough decisions need to be made," Garpiel continues. "If you think you have one person holding you hostage, don't let that person have that much control over your organization. Don't allow them to keep you from growing because they have a bad attitude. Stay focused with what your critical successes are going to be for the company."

Thackrey says there are two kinds of firings: a fire quick and a fire slow. Fire quicks are when someone does something wrong. It should be a no-brainer that that individual needs to be let go from the company. In situations where someone is underperforming, it's important to talk to that person and give them a chance to step up instead of just immediately giving them the boot.

"Every relationship is based on communication," he says. "Good communication equals a good relationship. Nobody should ever be surprised. It should always be communicated along the way that if they're not meeting expectations, here's what to change. I think that's probably the number one failure, people not speaking up along the way."

When it came to firing his long time employee, Thackrey kept to that mantra. His business partner was present as a witness, and Thackrey made sure to keep the dialogue short.

"I let him know that as previously communicated, he was not meeting expectations, and we would be terminating our relationship as of now," Thackrey says. "Typically, and in this instance, too, there is silence, and then the person asks a few ques-



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#### FIRING

tions, even if they are not surprised. Such as, 'Is there anything I can do to change your mind?' etc. Less is more in this situation. In this case the individual shook my hand and moved on."

Thackrey says the only "bad" firing situations he's been in are ones where there is no communication leading up to the firing. Any negative situations involving the employee should be documented and communicated, so the person knows what is wrong, what needs to be improved, how much time has been given for the improvements and what happens if those improvements aren't made. You may need to consultant with an attorney or HR manager to make sure you are following labor laws when it comes to dismissals.

**AFTERMATH.** After the firing conversation is held, it's up to each individual company how

they want to deal with everything that follows. Thackrey says he offers the ex-employee the chance to leave as quietly as possible.

"One thing I'm big on is respect. Integrity is my number one core value," he says. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, we try to say however you'd like to exit this building, we can assist you with that. For instance, if it's embarrassing, I don't want to embarrass them. On that level, we almost always give them an option to exit quietly. We can worry about that tomorrow if you want to just grab a couple things and get out."

When it comes to what happens after they leave the company, that's up to the individual company as well. Thackrey likes to end it with as little communication as possible, in order to give both parties a clean break.

"Although it might not be a complete surprise, it's still an emotional event for everyone," he says. "The least amount of words, crystal clear, to the point, this is what's happening, this is our decision."

And when he says clean break, he means it.

"I'm not confident in writing a recommendation for someone that I let go," he says. "That's tough to do. I'm not saying that doesn't exist in unique situations, and I've had people ask for them, but it's not something I do."

While Thackrey and the company don't speak directly to the long-time employee they fired, they have heard good things he's said about them.

"We've been successful with (how we fire), and I think that has been a big reason that guys such as this guy go to a competitor and we hear good and respectful things," Thackrey says. "They may not like us, but they respect us." L&L



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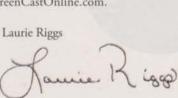
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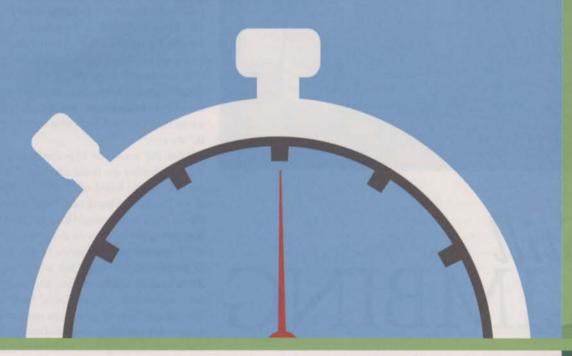
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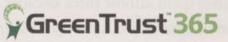
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## Still CLIMBING

Martha Hill has spent almost three decades readying the next generation of contractors (and their parents) for jobs in the industry, and has no intention of slowing down.

By Brian Horn

The best time to

artha Hill isn't angry, just a little annoyed. She recently had two students ready to enter her Landscape Management program at Hinds Community College, but then they changed their minds. She can handle kids having a change of heart, but these particular students were talked out of enrolling in the program by their parents.

"I knew that was out there, but that has hit me in the face twice in one week and I am frustrated," she says of the anti-landscaping sentiment.

The change of heart is something Hill, and the green industry as a whole, has to deal with. Mom and Dad don't see landscaping as a career, but as a part-time job you do while you prepare for your "real job." But after almost 30 years in education, Hill isn't going to let a few misguided parents kill the passion she has for the industry. If she had the chance to speak with the parents, she'd lay out valid reasons why their son or daughter should consider a career in the industry.

"I would tell them that our program doesn't train a student to be a laborer, it trains a student to be a manager, and ultimately an owner of a business if that's what their desire is," she says.

After she made her hypothetical case, along with what she could tell them about her role on the board of PLANET's Academic Excellence Foundation, there's a good chance Hill's passion would have the parents trumpeting the industry on their own.

"Every semester she seems to take one or more students under her wing," says Allen Spence, a small engine and equipment repair instructor at Hinds. "Some of the students have life situations outside of school that can affect their studies. She is always encouraging these students to continue their education. She gives of herself way beyond just being a teacher."

That means assisting students with finding scholarships, helping them find part-time jobs and just being there when they need to talk to someone.

"She sits down with every student to determine what is the best educational plan

#### Leadership

for the student," Spence says. "I can go on and on about the different ways Martha helps and shows compassion, but I think the best thing I can say is she truly cares about each and every student."

THE BEGINNING. Hailing from a "really small town" in southwest Mississippi (Bude, Miss., population 1,037) Hill grew up with a father who had a garden "until the day he died, and my grandmother and my aunt lived together and they always had something blooming in their yard, as my mother did also." Hill would visit her grandmother every weekend, and while her dad was working in different gardens, she would help herself to some of the beautiful plants at the house.

"I would get out of the car, walk around the yard and look to see what was blooming so that I could pick a bouquet at the end of the day and take it home and enjoy it the next week," she says. "That is something that I know influenced me in my career path."

Fast forward a number of years, Hill enrolled in community college at Copiah-Lincoln Junior College. She wanted to major in forestry but was steered away from that because of the lack of jobs in the industry in the late 1970s, especially for women. After speaking with an adviser about the influence her dad and grandmother had on her, she looked at what Mississippi State (where she wanted to attend after community college) had to offer and settled on a landscape architecture major. While at Mississippi State, she co-oped with Brickman Group at the company's Long Grove, Ill., and Philadelphia offices, which she called the best co-oping experience she could have had.

"That pretty much covered every facet of the industry because we had design/build, maintenance, arboriculture," she says. "We had a nursery – and even a full-service vehicular mechanics staff. We were doing large commercial work and high-end residential work."

Part of that experience was figuring out how to get heavy equipment into an area that didn't have an entrance big enough to fit the equipment. That meant the girl from a little town in Mississippi was going to have



"Some of the students have life situations outside of school that can affect their studies. She is always encouraging these students to continue their education. She gives of herself way beyond just being a teacher," says Allen Spence, an instructor at Hinds Community College.

to direct a crane operator located four stories below street level. Skid-steers, soil amendments and trees, were lifted over a wall into a large planter just off Michigan Avenue in the Windy City.

"That was an experience of a lifetime. It scared me to death, but gave me such confidence in my co-oping experience," she says.

Hill eventually graduated from Mississippi State in 1983 and accepted a position at Richard C. Griffin and Associates, Landscape Architects in Jackson, Miss. But that would be a short stint before her true calling would find her.

CAREER CHANGE. Hill was with Robert C. Griffin for three happy years, but knew there would be no opportunities to move up in the company because there was only two other people ranked higher than her, one of which was the owner. She also had thoughts of starting a company with her husband, Donnie, who is a landscape contractor, but it just never worked out, she says.

It was around that time she was asked to

be on an advisory committee to investigate the need for a two-year program in landscape maintenance at Hinds Community College. Through her time at Mississippi State, she had developed contacts with ALCA (now PLANET) and used the organization's model curriculum as a basis of what Hinds could teach. After a year working on the committee, a friend who was also on the committee told Hill she should apply for the teaching position in the program. She initially shrugged off the suggestion, but then started to warm up to the idea.

"Looking back on it, through my life, I taught Sunday school, I taught Bible school, I taught swimming lessons, I was in the band and I taught band camps," Hill says. "You know how you take those interest inventory tests early in your career? Well, each time I would take one, my results would come back 'teacher.' I just never really took that seriously." She was hired in 1986 to lead the program, which was starting from scratch.

"We started out small, but we had to recruit students, we had to recruit companies

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to hire our students," Hill says. "And I hit the ground running."

She was attending industry meetings and conferences in Baltimore and Alexandria, Va., and the week-long gap between those two stops was filled with visits to landsdcape companies, trying to find prospective employers for her future students

"I visited nine companies in the D.C. area during that time," she says. "I just wanted to start some communication with those folks and ask their advice and what did they want our students to know when they might go to work for their companies. I took my curminutes away was also applying for a landscape management program at the same time as Hinds. The director of that program was Bob Callaway, Hill's advisor at Mississippi State University.

"Bob was an incredible mentor of mine," Hill says. "You don't know how many phone calls I had with him asking 'Do you think I can do this, Bob," before I accepted the job here at Hinds. 'Do you think I could teach this, do you think I could make it?' And the whole time, he was also looking at getting into teaching at the community college level 30 minutes from us.



Hill is a member of PLANET's Academic Excellence Foundation and helped host PLANET's Student Career Days at Hinds Community College 2003. The school is a consistent competitor in the event.

riculum with me and said 'Look over this curriculum; do you think it's viable? Is this what we need to be teaching'? Everybody put their stamp of approval on it. So it was a great way to introduce Hinds to them and get us on the radar, nationally, from the beginning."

Since Hill had no education courses in her college coursework, she had to take summer classes at different universities in Mississippi to receive a teaching certificate.

Plus, another college located about 30

"That was an incredible relationship that Bob and I had." Hill kept in touch with Calloway until his death in 1995, and still takes his advice. "Coaching me along, sharing notes from his classes he had taught at MSU. I have lots of notes that he's written.

"I have every correspondence he and I ever had, I still have that. And every once in a while I'll pick it up and read it and cry a little bit and also get motivated because he was such a motivator and influence on me in education."

TIME TO TEACH. After all the hard work travelling, networking and taking classes, Hill found that recruiting students was the next important step. The first couple of years, the enrollment was low with about five kids taking part, but it gave Hill time to catch her breath. When she did, she was able to help a number of students succeed.

"If it wasn't for me taking Martha's program at Hinds Community College, I would not have been introduced to some industry leaders," says David Pursell, who says Hill's influence lead him to discover U.S. Lawns and buy a franchise. He started with two employees in 1998 and now has more than 30 people working under him. He's also taught with Hill since 1998.

"She and I hosted Student Career Days at Hinds Community College," he says. "This one event impacted at least 700 plus students and no telling how many other people in the green industry business."

Aside from a couple students being lead astray by parents, Hill is optimistic about the future. Hinds is working closely with Mississippi State to make sure students transferring into landscape contracting have a smooth transition into university life. Students graduating from MSU's landscape contracting and management program can take one additional business course and also have a minor in business administration. "That's a great thing for a parent and a student to think about when they get to that point where they're ready to either go to work, or transfer on and continue their education," she says.

With the many graduates from the Hinds Community College Landscape Management Technology program through the years, Hill says landscaping programs and those in the industry need to do a better job of promoting success stories. With more promotion, maybe mom and dad won't fear their kids joining the industry.

"We need those graduates," she says, "and every member of the landscape contracting and management community to tell their story and help educators get the word out that you can have a rewarding, profitable career in the landscape industry."



Gary Mallory, second from the right, opened Heads Up Lawn Sprinkler Company in 1973 with three friends. He's grown the company to employ 300 people and land on L&L's Top 100 list.

#### PAY IT FORWARD

Gary Mallory provides education and growth for his employees and interns to give the green industry a brighter future.

By Kyle Brown

ary Mallory doesn't have a college degree. But that doesn't mean his employees get a free pass to skip out on education.

It also doesn't mean he's at a loss for coming up with ways to motivate his employees and encourage them to grow as green industry professionals. He just picked up some of his strategy while learning the importance of working together while playing and coaching basketball.

Mallory, now CEO of Heads Up Landscaping in Albuquerque, New Mexico, started out with three friends in 1973 when he was one month clear of high school. Then the Heads Up Lawn Sprinkler Company, they spent the season installing sprinklers around town. By the end of the summer, Mallory and one of his partners bought out the other two for a total of \$2,200, and branched into commercial irrigation and landscaping.

Mallory fell easily into the role of the salesman, though

with only two employees, he didn't have much choice. "I was the salesman, accountant, head laborer and trencher operator and warranty person," he says. "I had a partner who was really quite good at all the technical aspects, so he would design everything as the craftsman. I've always gravitated toward customer service."

The hard work paid off: The small business's volume doubled every year for the first five years. Along with partner Greg Bouloy, Mallory hacked at the job throughout the week while he took courses to build toward his business degree. His Greek grandmother worked as their receptionist, answering the phone with a thick accent. The schedule was harrowing, and eventually, he just couldn't keep up.

"I took all my classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays," he says. "I'd go to work in the morning at 6 and get off at 7 at night, and I'd fall asleep in my night classes. I just couldn't swing it anymore."

#### Leadership



Mallory helped start the Next Level Peer Group, seen at right during one of their annual gatherings, a collection of like-minded landscapers focused on helping each other continue to develop and grow their own companies.



With 116 hours of a 128-course-hour degree completed, Mallory called it quits to focus on the company.

"My grandmother, she cried for a week when I dropped out. She's an immigrant, so the whole family was always taught to work hard and go to college and get a degree."

**COURT LESSONS.** But Mallory had bigger plans than just giving up on a degree to cut lawns. As the company grew, he found being a part of a business tough work, but also very rewarding.

And with the addition of more employees, he discovered a knack for motivating his team, crossing over from his history playing basketball in high school.

"I really liked owning a business right off

the bat," Mallory says. "And I think just my passion for coaching and teambuilding and mentoring gets into everything I do. So with my children, my employees – there's something about setting goals as a team and mentoring people and watching their abilities grow. It's the most exciting thing to me."

With more employees joining Heads Up (which got its name from the call upcourt during a fast break in basketball) as it picked up steam, Mallory put programs in place to help build up his staff and support them in growing alongside the company.

The company pushes employees to go to college and work toward a degree, and helps finance the coursework. For Spanishspeaking employees, the company provides English-language courses. A FAMILY MAN. Mallory urges his employees to spend time with their families. He leads by example, reserving Saturdays for coaching soccer and basketball.

"In this industry, it's easy to get wrapped up seasonally and just work," he says. "Your kids only score their first goal once, and if you're not there for that and you're out working, what a tragedy. The family time should be scheduled and protected fiercely."

He speaks from experience, after raising three children who live and work around the world with his wife of 37 years.

"I love my family," he says. "It's way more important to me to be a good husband and a good dad than to win a business award."

Other initiatives are geared toward making Heads Up a rewarding place to work and keeping employees motivated. Once each week, Mallory tries to have lunch with an employee, as well as buy a gift card for the employee to bring his own family back later. When workers have children, he has a card ready for them. Occasionally, he'll pass out movie tickets to the crews.

Once, they held a safety competition in which employees' children made post-

"We spend so much time at work," Mallory says.

"You ought to help people just as much as you can.

And for any employees, I don't want them to feel just like a number. I want them to feel valued and appreciated, so we do all kinds of things to boost people up."

#### Leadership





Mallory would rather promote from within instead of looking outside the company for open positions. To encourage a deep bench, Heads Up runs an internship program to recruit young, college-educated workers.

ers about staying safe on the job – they were supposed to choose one winner, but somehow all the children ended up with gift certificates.

During the holidays, there's a slideshow roast of employees that people actually attempt to get on. And during the season, managers will sometimes hold cookouts, grilling hotdogs and hamburgers to be ready when their teams come back in from the field.

"We spend so much time at work," Mallory says. "You ought to help people just as much as you can. And for any employees, I don't want them to feel just like a number. I want them to feel valued and appreciated, so we do all kinds of things to boost people up."

But building his team isn't just about making the workplace inviting. It's also taking the time to groom employees for promotions, and bringing in new recruits ready to head out into the field, he says.

"We have interns every year that we bring in. For our expansion plans, we need about three to four managers each year coming our of college. So we help pay for their housing and education," he says. "We really like that program. Their energy – it's just so great to work around them. We're always trying to recruit young, college-educated people.

"We are constantly talking about stocking up the bullpen for the future. So in the short term, that costs us, but in the long term, we have a very strong farm team."

Keeping new recruits coming in helps fuel expansion plans for Heads Up, but it also gives employees who have been around for a few jobs a chance to grow as managers. Managers are encouraged to train their replacements, which means employees have the opportunity to look upward for career growth.

"He's not afraid to pay for talent and bringing in the best possible person for the job," says Tom Fochtman, CEO of Ceibass Venture Partners, and former member of Mallory's peer group. "But his preference would be to help his employee team grow. He would prefer that his staff grow into the next position, and the next position. Heads Up has invested in internal training and mentoring to help their people ascend to the top."

Fochtman and that peer group of green industry business leaders are another part of Mallory's plans to build teamwork.

After visiting a roundtable discussion at an industry convention, Mallory was inspired to bring together other leaders to work through issues facing their companies, kicking off the Next Level Peer Group.

"Gary is one of the most genuine business owners I know and is committed to helping others, such as me, a peer group partner," says Bob Grover, president at Pacific Landscape Management. "He has good perspective, cares about what his company does beyond making a profit as is always looking for ways to improve."

Part of pushing for that development is urging those leaders to make progress on what's holding them back without making excuses, says Fochtman.

"He did not settle for average and would not allow you to do either. If you came back to the next meeting with the same issue, he rolled his sleeves up and said, 'Let's figure this out,'" Fochtman says. "If I have an issue, an idea, a problem or concern, Gary is one of the folks I call to vet it out. He's a great sounding board. Once we narrow it down, he's extremely encouraging going forward."





# STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

Richard Restuccia took his passion for smart irrigation and used it to change the water game. By Kate Spirgen

hen Richard Restuccia started talking about water management in the 1980s, people were a lot more interested in pumping costs and power than they were in the actual water. But as drought hits the country and environmentalism gains popularity, the green industry is starting to think about smart water management.

Restuccia has a joke that he uses a lot as a speaker. "I say, 'I've been talking about water management and sustainability for 17 years and I'm no more interesting today than I was 17 years ago.' But people are calling me a lot more and wanting to hear what I have to say and I think it's just because people are waking up to the water situation and the awareness is getting bigger," he says.

Growing up in the desert of Arizona, Restuccia loved heading out to the desert lakes for skiing, swimming and fishing. Now living in the San Diego area, he loves to surf and swim, and spends weekends working with his wife in the garden, so water is a big part of his life, both in and out of the office as ValleyCrest's director of water management solutions.

Restuccia got his start doing irrigation on a cotton farm and saw first-hand just how much water it took. That's when he really started to consider changing the way we use water. "That's when I really started to think about water management and how it affects our lives," he says.

A few years later, he started working at Rain Bird and saw the opportunity to change the way people think about irrigation and how they can use their water in a smarter way. "It wasn't a matter of applying water. It was more important, I thought, to manage it effectively, not only to save water but for plant health as well," he says.

**PUTTING WHY BEFORE HOW.** Restuccia is a communicator at heart and his passion for proper water usage is starting to spread. Water issues are coming to the forefront of the industry. People are ready to listen and he is getting the word out there with digital tools.

"His passion of networking through social media and blog postings is something that is new to our industry," says Eric Santos, ValleyCrest division leader for irrigation and water management. "He really deserves a lot of the credit for the marketing ValleyCrest does specifically to water management. Many people talk about using social media, but he actually gets it done."

Restuccia saw a need to talk about the why of water management to get people interested in the how and so he started blogging at ValleyCrest Takes On. "Most people's water bills aren't very expensive and they think that water is just a public service," he says. "It's just there and I don't think that people really have an awareness. So when we come in and talked about water management – well if there was no awareness, we couldn't be very effective."

The blog has really taken off. It took three years to build 100,000 unique visitors but in the last month alone, they've gotten 10,000, and his Twitter handle, @H2Otrends, has nearly 1,400 followers. "I think (the blog) is the core of what has led to his success because it just continually puts out new messages every week," says Alan Harris, a fellow ValleyCrest Takes On blogger. "It's one of those things that spreads just from people being exposed to it and hearing about it and you don't lose the people that you talk to early on. It just adds up."

Restuccia is now lining up speaking engagements months in advance, but he still wakes up every day with the same goal: to get the word out and save water. It's one of his biggest strengths and he loves to do it. "He loves being up in front of a crowd. It's really in his blood," Santos says.

His hope is that in 10 years, he can look



Richard Restuccia and his wife, Devonna Hall, visit their daughter, Lauren, who was an academic all-American softball player at UMASS.

#### Leading Ladies

here are two women that have been instrumental in Restuccia's successes over the years. They've helped him with his blog, taught him about plants and inspired him to excel. And they aren't even on the payroll.

Restuccia's wife, Devonna Hall, is a master gardener who has taken him to countless gardens and has spent hours teaching him all about plants, soil and water. "She has taught me most of what I know about horticulture and really challenged me to better my knowledge about plants and design so I don't just think the solution to water efficiency is technology in irrigation," he says. "She has been supportive of my work, and more importantly, a source of new ideas and inspiration for many of the articles I have written. I am so lucky to have her in my life because I learn something new from her every day."

His daughter, Lauren Proctor, has helped Restuccia with digital marketing and spreading the word. In fact, information she supplied to Restuccia ultimately became his proposal for the Valley Crest Takes On blog. "She is a wealth of consulting information for any of the digital marketing I do. Lauren provides hours of free and very valuable advice on how to spread the word about how to maximize efficient water management," he says.

#### Leadership

back and be proud of the work the industry has done as a whole: landscape contractors, water agencies, manufacturers and irrigators. He and the ValleyCrest team have had some great successes over the years and he believes that it's the blending of science, technology and design that will get results.

"I really hope that I can look back and say we've been able to really create some synergies that allowed us to have made a big impact on the amount of water people are using in the landscape as a result of that," he says.

BUILDING A TEAM. Restuccia has had his share of mentors when he started out, and he's never done learning. Even after 17 years of talking water, he'll call up Travis Bridges or Dave Palumbo, who trained him at Rain Bird, for product information and troubleshooting. He's got a good team at ValleyCrest as well. He and Harris edit one another's blog posts and every week, he learns something new from Eric Santos.

"I feel very lucky that I have a huge resource of people to call that will help me," Restuccia says.

Restuccia is paying it forward and helping others spread the word about good water management. A few years ago, ValleyCrest created the position of regional irrigation advisor to meet the rising demand, and to educate clients. Santos and Restuccia were getting spread too thin and so ValleyCrest created regional position to coach clients about smart water use. As Harris says, "They're little Richards."

Rather than just focusing on the right technical experience, ValleyCrest puts an emphasis on communication skills that they can bring up to speed on the more technical aspects. They look for "someone who tends to have the traits of someone like an Alan or a Richard," Santos says.

That teamwork is one of Restuccia's favorite parts of the job, and he says the people a big part of the reason he stays in the industry. "We're always looking and willing to share our ideas to be more efficient about the water we use. And I really enjoy that. It really does feel like everyone is pitching in."



Above: Restuccia, center, and the ValleyCrest team accept the 2012 Smart Irrigation Month Smart Marketing Contest award from the Irrigation Association.

Below: Restuccia likes to spend his free time out in the backyard garden.





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# IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

Michael Kravitsky IV credits his success to his upbringing, and the people who've all played a role in the 50-year-old family business. By Katie Tuttle

ichael Kravitsky IV started in sales early. When he was five years old, he used to accompany his father on calls for his lawn care business. His father would head out to a driving range on the corner of Cedar Crest and Tilghman in Allentown, Pa. with a pocket full of change and start calling.

"I'd be hitting golf balls and all of a sudden he'd say 'okay let's go' and we'd drive over to their house to give the estimate," Kravitsky says.

Fast forward a few years and Kravitsky and his brother Shawn co-own Grasshopper Lawns, the landscaping company their father started fifty years ago.

#### Leadership

"It's bittersweet," Kravitsky says, "the reason for that is my dad bled lawn care. He bled this business ... he lived for this business. My biggest regret is he passed away last year and never got to see fifty years."

Grasshopper Lawns was started by Kravitsky's father in 1964 when he bought two franchises called Lawn-A-Mat. At the time, he was running an aluminum awning business and an apartment business.

"It was pretty cool because as kids, in the springtime it would be all about lawn care," Kravitsky says. "We all worked in the business. Summer to fall was the awning business, then in the wintertime we'd refurbish an apartment or two."

As Kravitsky got older, he started joining the crews on the road.

"I loved driving the machines, so the guys would drive me to the jobs," he says. When he was old enough to drive, he started skipping school to do work on the jobsites. Because the school didn't approve, he started working after school instead.

In 1980 Kravitsky joined Grasshopper Lawns full time. At the time, Kravitsky had his hand in a lot of running the business: doing lawn care and maintenance on the equipment. Even Kravitsky's grandfather joined in: After he retired as chief of police of Edwardsville, he worked in sales, and encouraged Kravitsky to do the same.

"My Pop Pop said 'Why don't you learn to do some sales?" he says. He would spend half his day working on a job, the other half of the day selling and would then come home to repair equipment. Then, he's start calling the people he'd given estimates to.

When his dad suggested he start learning how to run the business side of things, Kravitsky decided to let the service part go, as well as sales and service as time went on.

"I probably haven't turned a wrench or been on a sale in at least 10 to 15 years," he says.

Roughly 15 years ago, Kravitsky's father stepped away from the lawn business, and around five years ago the brothers officially bought it from him.

GIVING BACK. Outside of the business itself.

Kravitsky and Grasshopper Lawns are largely involved with organizations and community service. They've been involved with PLANET since it was PLCAA, joining the second year it was formed.

Kravitsky was actually on the board of directors, at his first board meeting when the group made the decision to dismantle PLCAA. Kravitsky relates that decision to when Coke changed their formula.

"Everything works great and you love that soda, then they went ahead and made the decision to change something and change is huge... I was never so devastated than I was at that meeting. I said 'Are you guys crazy? This has been a great organization.' We grew up on it, we were there every year seeing the people. It was something that was very familiar to me, our company and my family, and then it's all going to be taken away, and then the unknown of 'what's going to happen with the new association?' But PLANET has grown from it."

One for being at something when it starts, Kravitsky and his team was also at the first Renewal and Remembrance in Washington D.C., in 1997. The two-day event gives volunteers the opportunity to help beautify the grounds at Arlington Cemetery, then lobby on Capitol Hill in support of different bills relevant to the industry. Kravitsky says he remembers the first year was chilly, but they were eager to give back to the country.

"It just filled you with a patriotism and you wanted to do it," he says. "It didn't matter that it was cold, we wanted to be there for that, and we're just so proud that we're one of the first ones to be able to do that."

Grasshopper Lawns also participates in Day of Service, something they did many years "unofficially" before PLANET started organizing it. The company goes to parks in the community and takes care of them. Another thing they do is work in partnership with local sports parks. If the park puts up a sign advertising Grasshopper Lawns' services, the company will give them a 50 percent discount off all their services.

"We love giving back to the community," Kravitsky says. "We treat all our town's fields for free: town hall, et cetera. We don't charge for any of their services."

A DAY IN THE LIFE. Kravitsky always tries to see his crew members twice a day. In the morning, he wants to check in with them and see what's going on. In the evening, he wants to see how their day went and if there's anything they need. He tries his best to keep his crews well equipped and comfortable so



Above: Kravitsky's father first started off in the aluminum awning and apartment businesses before running two Lawn-A-Mat franchises.

Far left: Kravitsky has been flying planes since 2001.

#### Leadership

they do their job as well as they can.

"They need to do a good job because they pay me," he says, explaining that if his crews didn't do a good job, the company wouldn't make money. "I don't pay them. They pay me and I just handle the transactions for their paychecks every few weeks. That's how I feel, that's how I run this company."

Joe Kucik, president of Real Green Systems, has been a friend of Kravitsky's for roughly 18 to 20 years.

"He's a great friend to have do anything for you," Kucik says. "He's a mentor in the industry and he's willing to help anybody out."

Kucik met Kravitsky at a trade show, running into him a few times before Kravitsky bought the software. Because the training would take place close to Christmas, Kravitsky invited Kucik to the company Christmas party. Unknown to Kucik, a restaurant in Wilksburg would host a joint holiday party, and business owners could reserve tables for their company to spend the evening networking and celebrating with other firms.

"I didn't know anything about (Grasshopper Lawns) and I walk in this door and I was blown away," Kucik says. "I thought it was just his company, so you can imagine it was overwhelming. I'm thinking he has hundreds of employees, and I find Michael and say 'this is an amazing company party' and Michael replies 'Our table is over there.'"

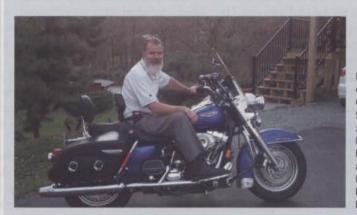
Kucik remembers looking over and seeing a handful of employees, much less than the hundreds he'd originally thought. "We've been good friends ever since," Kucik says.

**AN HONEST MAN.** When it comes to ethics, Kravitsky considers honesty something he wants to instill in all aspects of the company.

"I'm involved with payroll," he says. "If they're owed a penny, they'll get it, and they know it."

Kravitsky says last year one of the company's technicians was getting incorrectly deducted a certain amount from his paycheck and no one noticed.

"I thought to myself, 'how the heck did I miss that for so many months?" Kravitsky says. "So I went to the employee and said



Kravitsky owns a 2008 Can-Am Spyder, a 2007 Harley Davidson Road King and a 2014 Harley Davidson Electra-glide.

#### **Down Time**

When he's not in the office, Kravitsky can be found doing what some would call extreme sports.

"If it's winter time, I'm on a snowmobile," he says. "The rest of the time, you will find me in my airplane. In a plane, snowmobiling, and the third passion is motorcycles."

The snowmobiling started way back, with Kravitsky spending the last 35 years snowmobiling in Quebec. He calls it "some of the happiest times" of his life. Now, he and his son go every year.

His passion for flying started in 2001.

"It was December," he says, "and I remember driving by the airport and I said 'before I turn 40, I need to learn how to fly.' So I turned into the airport,

and the guy took me up within five minutes of being there."

The motorcycle passion came in 2008 when Kravitsky was with friends in Key West. When they met up at a bar one night, they pulled up on mopeds (a typical mode of transportation for the area) and another friend pulled up on a motorcycle.

"I told this guy, 'Never get there the same time we do'," he says. "You're pulling in on a Harley, we're pulling in on mopeds, and it doesn't look too good for us."

Now, Kravitsky owns three bikes and his family takes bike trips together.

"You'll find us anywhere on them, as long as the weather's good," he says.

'look, I found a mistake to your benefit on your payroll. In your next check I'm gonna give it back to you because that's not right, you shouldn't have that taken out.'"

Kravitsky says the employee was surprised and pointed out that Kravitsky could have stayed quiet and gotten away with it, but it's a thought Kravitsky never even considered.

His honesty also comes through on sales, as he prides his company in selling customers only what they need, even if the customer is willing to pay for unnecessary services.

"You don't know how much work we've

turned away where a customer wants something and we say 'no save your money, do this,'" he says. "That's a company culture. I do not want to take people's money."

Kravitsky credits this mantra to his upbringing. His grandfather was chief of police and his sister was a cop who married her sergeant. His other brother and three cousins are PA State Troopers and two of his other cousins are magistrates.

"I guess with that background and the way we grew up, you do the right thing," he says. "And I hope we always do the right thing." Lawn&Landscape SNOW

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#### THINK BEFORE YOU SEND

Key etiquette guidelines for sending emails in a text world. By Ben Carpenter

ou understand that you'll need to structure your professional emails differently than you would a text or a tweet. But unless you had the good fortune to take an "Email Etiquette 101" course in college, you might be unsure of what, exactly, you should and shouldn't do before clicking "send." Here are some tips for effective email communication.

Read your email carefully before sending it. It takes only a few seconds to glance back over what you've written before clicking "send" - but those few seconds could save you a lot of grief. Specifically, make sure you've entered the correct email addresses. Confirm that you've included all of the necessary information and proactively answered any questions that readers might have. Look for and correct any typos.

Visit bit.ly/thinksend to read the full article.



How tractors with inverted snow blowers increased Deneigement Vanderzon's efficiency. By Brooke N. Bates

aul Vanderzon had a conversation with snow contractors six years ago that left them thinking he was crazy.

When he told them residential work made up of 60 percent of his snow removal business, they'd scoff, "There's no money in residential." But business was booming at Deneigement Vanderzon in Saint-Bruno, Quebec, with \$1 million in annual residential snow removal.

"I finally said, 'Stop telling me I'm not making money," Vanderzon says. "They asked, 'Well, how many driveways do you have?' I said, '3,000.' He looked at me like, 'You've got to be crazy. What do you have - 150 pickup trucks?' I go, 'No - 24 tractors.' Then he was calling people over: 'Check out this Canadian. He's crazy! He has 3,000 driveways but he does the work with tractors.' Since then, people are starting to listen."

Visit bit.ly/forwardthink to read more.

#### SUBSTANCE ABUSE By Jason Stahl

When dealing with a sensitive and delicate issue like employees and delicate issue like employees and substance abuse, it's far too easy to make regrettable mistakes. Our experts identify some of the most common areas where employers err. Read more at bit.ly/snowdrugs.



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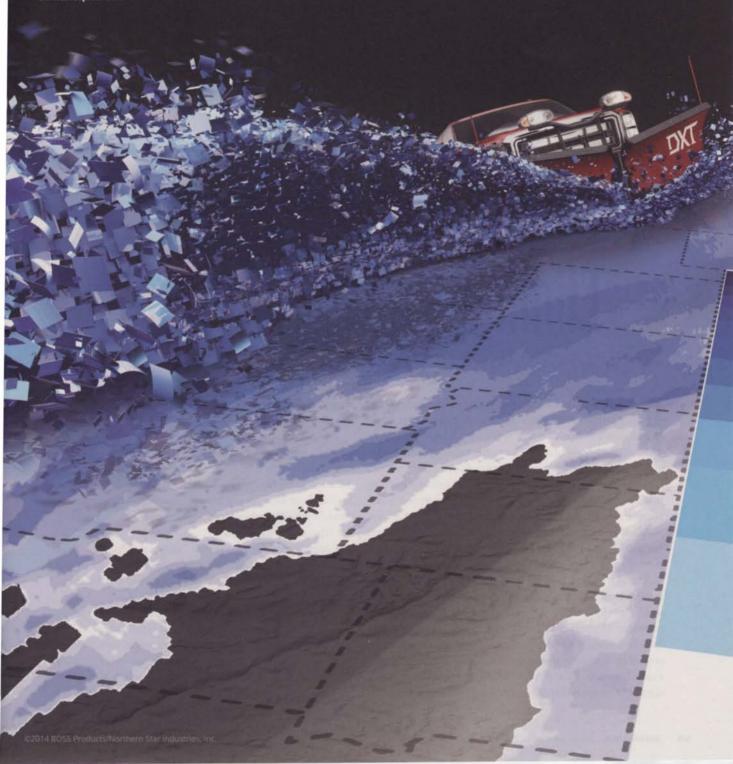








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## Eliminate operator errors

In-cab controls help improve accuracy and safety. By Stacie Zinn Roberts

ed high heels click across a parking lot. Click. Click. Splash. She's stepped in something nasty. A gooey brown liquid covers her shoe. She tries to wipe it off but recoils at the smell. It's cold outside. She rushes to her car and gets in, only to see she's stamped a pointy brown shoeprint into her car's interior carpet. She grabs her cellphone and calls the building manager who then calls you, the manager of the snow removal company. It appears that your snow removal operator has applied too much de-icer to the parking lot surface and a tenant has sloshed through it. She's not happy, the building manager's not happy, and now you're not happy.

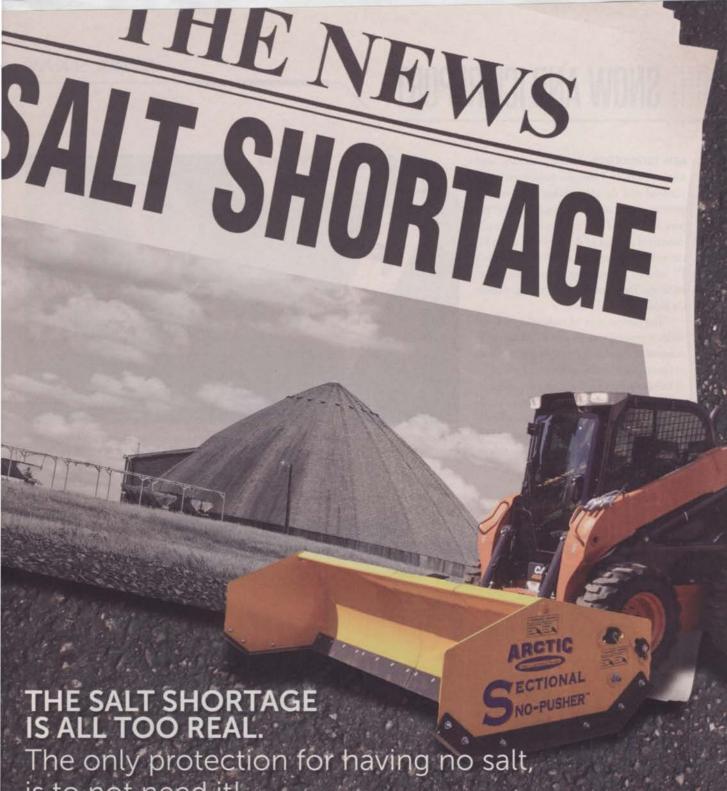
Several years ago, long before his company switched over to in-cab control systems that reduce operator error, a scenario similar to this actually happened to Bruce Moore, Jr., vice president of operations for Eastern Land Management in Stamford, Conn. Over-application of a liquid de-icing material created an uproar when an operator made a mistake while using manual controls. Even though the material was non-toxic, the client was so upset that Moore, keeping the customer's needs

in mind, switched the liquid de-icer to a treated salt material to retain his business.

A repeat of such an unfortunate incident today is highly unlikely since Eastern Land Management began installing in-cab controls in their fleet of 30 snow removal and de-icing vehicles. These controls work for all kinds of de-icing systems, regardless of whether you're applying a liquid de-icer, salt or sand. What the computerized in-cab controls do is take operator error out of the equation.

Computerized in-cab controls "allow us to put down the proper application rates for the de-icing materials so we can regulate the amount of material that gets applied to the surface," Moore says.

By having better, more accurate control, Moore says he can improve customer service as well as his company's bottom line. "If you make an over-application, it's costing us money as well as it's harmful to the environment and to the overall property in general. If you under-apply, it causes potential liability, potential slips and falls, and unsafe properties."



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#### **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

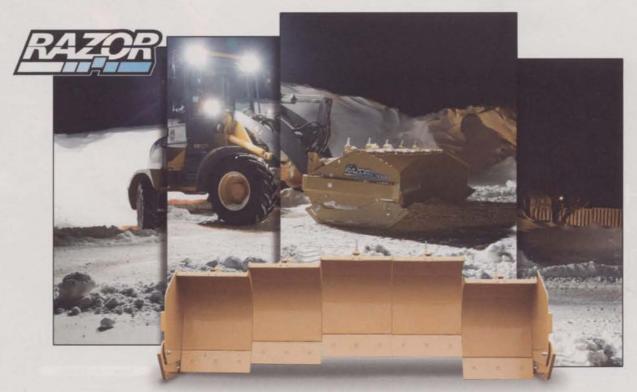
NEW TECHNOLOGY. At the Colorado and Utah offices of Terracare Associates, snow removal and de-icing makes up about 40 percent of the company's business. Over the past 12 years, Terracare has systematically converted its fleet of de-icers to include incab control systems. In all, 60 of Terracare's 75 vehicles are now equipped with in-cab controls. The remaining 15 vehicles mainly do plowing, not de-icing.

"The newest type of technology for vehicles is ground speed controllers that apply material at the same rate when moving slow or faster," says Justin Stewart, vice president of infrastructure for Terracare Associates.

"What the computers in trucks can do now is tell your sander to turn faster or slower depending upon your speed. So when you say you want to apply 'x' pounds per lane mile or



Computerized in-cab controls allow you to put down the proper application rates for the de-icing materials so you can regulate the amount of material that gets applied to the surface.





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#### **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

per distance, it will be consistent in first gear or second gear."

Stewart says that consistent application rates are important to make sure that you don't have icy spots or over-application where you have a lot of excess material just sitting on the ground.

"If you stopped and you had a manual controller, and the person didn't shut it off when he stopped, he could leave a pile of material where he stopped," he says. "The new electronic controller will stop application when you stop, and start application when you go."

Advancements in application control have come a long way. At one time, operators had to park a vehicle and trudge outside in freezing temperatures to manually adjust a gate or manual hand crank. Later advancements

offered lever switches but little accuracy. Today, operators can adjust for speed and volume, applying heavier amounts in high traffic areas as needed. All of this occurs while he sits inside a warm cab making adjustments with the touch of a button. achieving efficiency and safety all at once.

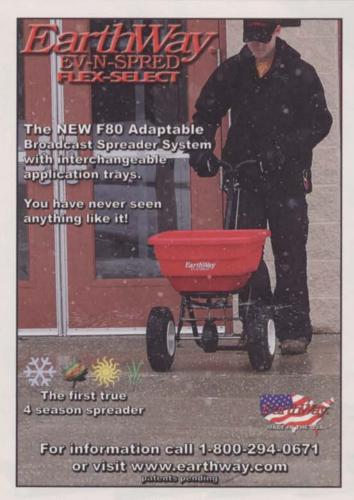
ACCURATE ESTIMATES. In the commercial marketplace, both Moore and Stewart say that using the in-cab control systems has helped their companies to price jobs more accurately, and be more efficient in materials ordering and actual use - all of which add to the bottom line. Although Moore could not say exactly how much the savings were for Eastern Land, his company's investment of around \$8,000 to outfit 10 de-icing vehicles was "absolutely worth it."

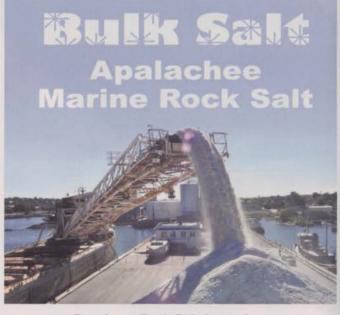
"For the amount of money invested, the payback was within a few months into the first winter season they were in use," he says.

Both Stewart and Moore say that learning the in-cab controls is fairly simple, requires little advanced training and happens on the job.

"I think it's very important to stay up with technology and stay up with the times. We try to stay on the cutting edge on everything that we do from summer time to winter time operations," Stewart says. "The world is changing so fast that if you don't work at staying up with it, you're kind of left behind." L&L

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





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# NO FRILLS

Find out how the simplicity of straight blades can make your next plow easier.

By Anne-Marie Hardie

ete Robison, vice president of marketing and development for Meyer Products calls straight blades the staple of the industry. "They've been around for 80 some years," he says. "From a units-in-the-market standpoint, there are more straight blades than anything else." Here's what to know about them just in time for the snow season.

THE RIGHT FIT. Straight blades are known for their efficiency and simplicity says Mark Klossner, marketing director for Boss Snow-plow. "Their controls are simpler. You don't have to worry about positioning the wings independently and for some people, that simplicity is key," he says. There are also times when the versatility of the v-plow is unnecessary. This is the case if you find the majority of plowing your company does is straight windrowing.





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#### **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

#### STRAIGHT BLADES ARE ALSO LESS EXPEN-

SIVE. The lower cost, Robison says, can be extremely appealing for those just looking to get into the industry. Scott Moorman, director of engineering for Buyers Products, agrees, emphasizing that contractors need to match their equipment to their business needs. "A straight blade is much less expensive and much simpler. So it's a matter of using the tool that's appropriate for the job," he says.

Straight blades weigh less than v-blades, and according to Moorman and Klossner, the lower weight of a straight blade is one of their main selling features. Most contractors purchase their truck first and their plow second, Moorman says. A contractor should look at the weight capacity of their vehicle before investing in a plow. Some trucks may not be capable of carrying the heavier weight of a v-blade plow.



"Their controls are simpler. You don't have to worry about positioning the wings independently and for some people, that simplicity is key."

- Mark Klossner, marketing director for Boss Snowplow

#### AESTHETICS COMBINED WITH DURABILITY.

When it comes to snow plowing, down time is just not an option for contractors," Robison says. "The plow has to be well-made and able to work under pressure."

As far as robustness is concerned, Moorman suggests looking at the structure of the plow, including the electrical connectors and whether there is good chrome on the cylinders.

"You can tell from looking at the construction. Mechanically, you want a solid beefy plow that can take some abuse, "he says.

Klossner says that the best way to tell the difference between the good and not-so-good snowplows is by looking at what happens to the plow during bad weather. "The manufacturer has to know exactly where to put the steel and find that balance between the right amount of steel in the design of the blade to make it durable and reliable, but keep it within the weight constrictions or restrictions of the vehicle manufacturer," he says.

Appearance of the plow is now also becoming a deciding factor, with stainless steel becoming increasingly popular. "Folks just



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like the way stainless steel looks and they like the fact that it is corrosion resistant," Klossner says.

Polypropylene is another material that is in demand, Klossner adds, with contractors gravitating towards this material for its ding resistance and the fact that snow seems to simply slide off of the material.

One other item to consider is how easy it is to attach and remove it from the vehicle. "Boss designed their plow to be easy to attach when it's snowing, dark and things may be frozen. We want that individual to be able to attach that plow as easily as possible, not just as quickly as possible," Klossner says.

Before shopping for your plow, take a visit to the dealership and look at the brands that you're interested in. Klossner stresses that contractors should pay attention to all the details from the design of the frame to the type of steel used and even the headlight system.

"They're going to see that some of the brands are a notch or two above the others and those features are put on the products to make their lives easier, to help their businesses grow as snowplow contractors," Klossner says.

#### SIMPLER DESIGN MEANS LESS TO MAINTAIN.

Straight blades have fewer moving parts and the design is simpler. The simplicity of straight blades remains one of their best-selling features. "Straight blades are much simpler with much fewer moving parts," Moorman says. "Electronically they have half of the connections, so there's just half of the things that can go wrong. "

However, if something does go wrong, a contractor should make sure that they will receive fast and efficient service. "Choose a brand and a distributor or dealer to buy it from that you can get good service from," Klossner says. Moorman agrees emphasizing that it is the after service that is often more important than the sales.

"Try to get a feel, before making that investment, what your cost down the road is going to be," he says. "Talk to the dealer on how warranty concerns are handled and how quickly. Does the dealer have the discretion to just do it? Or do they have to call the manufacturer?"

Overall, the simplicity, lower weight and robustness of a straight blade make it an extremely appealing option in today's market place. This plow is ideal for those new to the market place or contractors that require a robust plow for open areas. LSL

The author is a freelance writer based in Ontario, Canada.



## Death by call center

The way you handle client calls could be killing your customer base.

By John Tschohl

lease listen carefully as our menu options have changed."

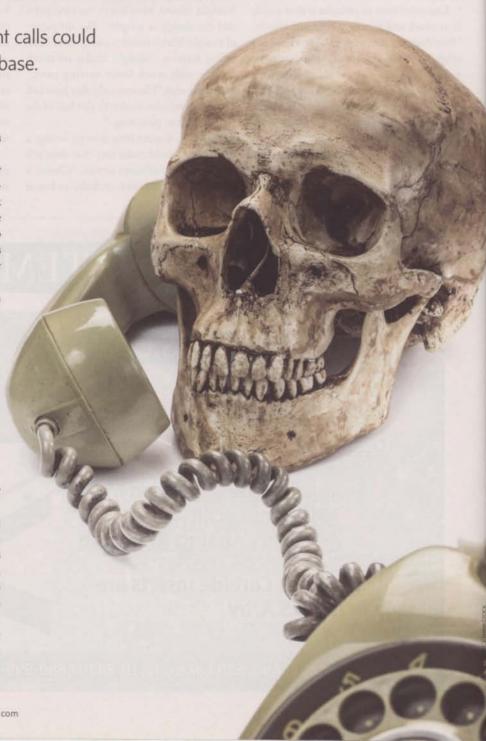
Yes, businesses have effectively succeeded in making customers go away. Small businesses need to ask themselves why they installed an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system. Was it to handle calls more efficiently for the business or was it to handle calls more efficiently for the customer?

If transferring the burden of getting in touch with you landed on your customer's shoulders, then your motivation was to make your business more efficient.

Congratulations! You are now in the customer prevention business.

This kind of operations-first and customers-second thinking will force you to spend more marketing dollars each year just to maintain your customer base. Statistics continue to demonstrate that to remain in business you must retain 60 percent of your customer base each year.

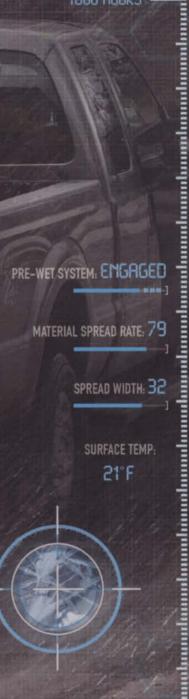
Knowing you are in the snow removal and ice management business, it is understandable that the majority of your calls come in while you are out dealing with winter events. You need a system to help you grow your business. Your customer's or potential clients need to get a problem solved right now. For example, they have a service question, or they wish to request an additional deicing application. Worse,



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#### **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT

your crew has made a vital mistake and it may prohibit their business from opening on time in the morning.

Take a moment to put yourself in your customer's shoes and note that there are a number of things that people hate about IVR's:

- Duplicate information. Answering the same questions over and over again.
- Being on-hold for a long time before getting to speak to a real, live person.
- Irritating music on hold/advertisement.
- Long menu. If there are too many options, callers will hang up before the third option.
- · Hard to understand
- Talking to a real-live person is No. 1 for callers, plain and simple.

"Knowing you are in the snow removal and ice management business it is understandable that the majority of your calls come in while you are out dealing with winter events. You need a system to help you grow your business. Your customer's or potential clients need to get a problem solved right now."

In this world of mobility and speed, the need to talk to a person to handle a problem or complaint is number one on your customer's list. They hate listening to a long list of options and no, they don't want to feed in their customer number or telephone number. They won't wait until you have the time to get back to them. And listening to "smooth Jazz' while holding for a stressed out and overworked operator upsets them

even further. It's far more important to them to have their problem handled right now.

#### IVR SYSTEM AS A CUSTOMER RETENTION

**TOOL.** One advantage besides saving money is that IVR systems don't sleep. They don't take lunch breaks. They don't go on vacations to the Bahamas. An IVR system can be available 24 hours a day to field questions and help customers with simple tasks.





But, there's no human being that can help you right away.

Here are a few steps you can take right now that will help preserve and increase your present customer base and make your cost saving IVR more consumer-friendly:

- Set up your IVR to connect to your cell phone for emergencies. "If this is an emergency, please press 1 and you will be connected to a representative immediately."
- 2. A little research. Do yourself, your business and your customers a favor. Have a number of your friends, family and employees call your business and time just how long it takes to ether get a warm voice or get so frustrated they hang up. Have them rank their frustration level on a scale of 1 to 10

with 10 being "I would never do business with them."

- Check out the competition. Have these same people call a competitor and apply the same ranking.
- 4. Change your first PRESS #1 Button to say, "Thank you so much for calling. If you are a present customer of ours, Press 2 now, leave your name and we will call you immediately. If you are a new customer and your call is not answered within 60 seconds, Press #3, leave your number and we will call you ASAP."
- Change your tactics. In your advertising materials let customers know that "We answer in 60 seconds or we pay."
- Always have a cell number for immediate contact with present customers.

I believe you can find great business examples in other industries. Take the experts at Vail Resorts. The employees there are totally consumed by customer service.

They go out of their way to notice what people need.

If you have to wait over a certain period of time for a lift, you will get a free lift ticket. If you look like you are having trouble skiing, you will get a free lesson.

The company is not in the skiing business, it's in the customer service business. The same holds true with snow removal and ice management.

It's customer service and peace of mind that your clients are really looking – and paying – for when they contract with you, L&L John Tschohl is founder and president of Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis.



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#### **SNOW PRODUCTS**

## Send in the SNOW

We're almost exactly a year away from when some states experienced their first snow of the season. Don't get caught with only your shovel, and check out these snow products.

#### **Doosan Snow Pusher Attachments**

**The pitch:** Doosan has released two new bucket-mounted snow pusher attachments for its 13- to 20-metric-ton weight class wheel loaders and tool carriers.

- The snow pushers are available in two widths. A 12-foot wide attachment weighs 2,200 pounds, while the 14-foot wide versions weighs 2,400 pounds.
- Both snow pushers are approved for use on the DL200-3, DL200TC-3, DL220-3, DL250-3, DL250TC-3, DL300-3 wheel loader models.
- Featuring a 47-inch high moldboard and a 1.5-inch rubber cutting edge, the snow pushers are designed for handling high-capacity snow removal. The Doosan snow pusher



design also features high-grade steel shoes and a 12-inch push beam for durability.

For more information: www.doosanequipment.com

#### SaltDogg SHPE3000CH Spreader

**The pitch:** Buyers Products now offers a polymer, chain-drive, electric SaltDogg spreader. With a double-wall, poly molded hopper, this new spreader, the SHPE3000CH, is ideal for sand and salt-sand mixtures.

- It has a 3-cubic-yard capacity and is intended for use on vehicles with a gross weight of 13,000 pounds or greater.
- The new poly electric SaltDogg spreader offers spread widths ranging from 5 to 30 feet for flexible coverage.
   It is powered by independent, 12-volt gear-motor conveyer and direct-drive spinner motors. The spinner assembly height is adjustable and easy to remove for cleaning, storage and hitch access.
- The spreader is equipped with a 12-inch-wide, steel conveyor chain, a 14-inch, six-vane, polyurethane spinner and variable speed controller. Two top screens protect against material loss and integral double doors with an interlocking gutter system and lid channels keep out water.



For more information: www.buyersproducts.com

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#### **SNOW PRODUCTS**



#### **SnowEx Liquid Solutions**

The pitch: SnowEx Liquid Solutions is a program designed to help customers successfully implement liquid pre-wetting, anti-icing and de-icing strategies through a series of equipment, materials and training solutions.

- In addition to its existing pre-wet systems, vehiclemounted sprayers and walk-behind units, SnowEx is expanding its product line of purpose-built brine application and handling equipment.
- Through its materials program, SnowEx offers resources to help customers evaluate options and select materials that will optimize equipment performance.
- SnowEx is providing how-to guides, application videos, specialized training events and more to educate customers about liquid strategies.

For more information: www.snowexsolutions.com





#### **SNOW PRODUCTS**



#### **Ventrac Drop Spreader**

The pitch: Ventrac's Drop Spreader is designed with a narrow frame and a 40" drop pattern, making it ideal for spreading material on sidewalks and other narrow walkways. The stainless steel construction prevents premature failure due to rust and corrosion.

- The compression roller system allows operators to accurately spread both coarse and free flowing materials.
   An easy gate adjustment allows for fine tuning flow rates based on the type of material being spread and the desired quantity being applied.
- The wireless remote control regulates five motor speeds for quick flow adjustments from the operator seat. An agitation system prevents material bridging and eliminates the need for a traditional, noisy vibration motor.
- With mounting options for a 2" receiver hitch or a category one three-point hitch, the Ventrac Sidewalk Drop Spreader can be easily attached to other sub-compact tractors, ATV's or UTV's, making this a very versatile unit.

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#### **DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

## ASCA provides contracts to membership

Members get reduced-cost deal for snow-and-ice contract templates and additional legal counsel. BY KEVIN GILBRIDE

he Accredited Snow Contractors Association (ASCA) has collaborated with Josh Ferguson, an attorney with Philadelphia-based Kent/McBride P.C., to offer standard contracts and sub-contracts at a discounted cost to members.

These template-style contracts include language to protect snow and ice management contractors both before and during litigation. In addition to the template contracts, alternative scope of work and indemnification language will be provided.

Ferguson works primarily in the areas of commercial premises, motor vehicle, contract and construction defect litigation, and has litigated cases throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He has also been retained as general counsel for a wide variety of businesses, including but not limited to those in the snow removal and landscaping industries. As a result of his experience he has created thorough contracts that will help protect your business and also potentially reduce your insurance premium.

The new standard contract or sub-contract are available for \$500 each, or both contracts are available for \$750. As these contracts are templates, it is recommended that contractors have all contracts reviewed by their own attorney to ensure com-

pliance with state and local laws and ordinances. Ferguson's general counsel services will be offered to

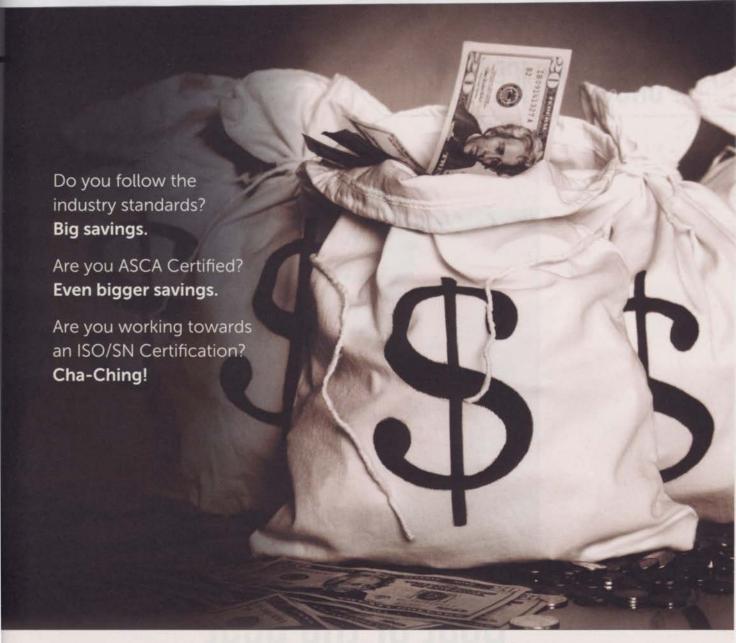


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ASCA members at \$150/hour, a significant rate reduction. If you have further questions, please contact Ferguson directly at iferguson@kentmcbride.com.

The arrangement is just another asset available to ASCA members that not only strengthens their business operations, but will also help curb frivolous slip-and-fall claims.

Frivolous slip-and-fall claims have led to not only skyrocketing insurance costs, but has forced insurance providers from the market, all of which negatively impacts the ability of snow and ice management contractors to provide a vital winter service. Strengthening winter service contracts with accurate and appropriate language is just another weapon our industry has to fight these often bogus claims. L&L



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## **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT



# Best of the best

The ASCA presented its 2014 Leadership Award winners at its annual Executive Summit in August. For full profiles of the winners, visit www.snowmagazineonline.com and find the September issue link.

arl Bolm, above, owner of BSR Services in St. Louis, started BSR in 1984 with a pick-up truck and a used snow plow as a way to make ends meet during seasonal layoffs from his job as an airline baggage handler. "Over the years, I fell in love with the industry, and with building a little enterprise," Bolm says.

With a fleet of 25 Missouri DOT-type trucks and another 575 owned by contractors, BSR manages the logistics of snow and ice removal for a collection of corporate accounts that reads like a Who's Who list of the St. Louis business community.

Early on, Bolm realized he couldn't personally own or manage all the necessary equipment to grow a viable business, so he wrote a business plan to involve strategic partners and seasonal help. His knack for recruiting people he can trust – and building relationships – helped BSR grow a brand reputation and a corporate culture known for excellence.



om Canete owner of Canete Snow Management in Wayne, N.J., exhibits an entrepreneurial streak beyond his years. Canete expanded beyond his paper delivery route at age nine and started cutting grass and shoveling snow for customers and a business that continues to grow today.

"I shoveled the driveways and sidewalks by hand for two years until my grandfather gave me a snow blower that I had to pay off by doing chores on weekends at his house," Canete says.

After college, Canete threw himself into his growing business and today owns and operates the 22<sup>nd</sup> largest snow and ice management company in the United States. In addition to Canete Snow Management, he operates Canete Landscape and Canete Garden Center in his home state of New Jersey. He manages all three operations with the same zest and zeal he had when he was dragging his mower behind his moped but he has learned that delegation is essential.



ason Dickey, director of operations for Schill Grounds Management in North Ridgeville, Ohio, had his first exposure to the snow industry working for a local snow removal outfit while enrolled at Baldwin Wallace University near Cleveland.

After graduating with a degree in accounting, Dickey interviewed with several accounting firms but could not see sitting behind a desk doing tax returns or auditing books for the rest of his career. In his first industry job, Dickey worked both inside and outside combining his accounting skills and his enjoyment of being out in the field where the action was.

"I enjoyed the challenge of clearing multiple parking lots during a major event and the satisfaction of getting the site ready to go for the client by the next day," Dickey says. "I wasn't going to find that in accounting."



ike Jones, owner of True North in Kansas City, worked in a struggling landscape and snow removal business at age 25.

That experience gave Jones a few "aha" moments that ultimately changed his professional life.

Although that company eventually failed, Jones milked a lot from the experience, including the realization that he loved the snow removal business.

"Having played sports in high school and college, I loved the all-out battle," he says.

Two years later, Jones struck out on his own and founded Kansas City-based True North. The company was the fulfillment of an idea he had been nurturing for a long time.

"I was passionate about the business, I thought I was good at it and I knew I could utilize other people's assets to make money," Jones says.

## **SNOW** AND ICE REPORT



Above: The 2014 class of Leadership Award recipients. From left: Mike Jones, Carl Bolm, Tom Canete and Jason Dickey. Right: Pete Schultz, Pleasant View Landscapes; Tom Hougnon, Reliable Property Services; Luke Muldoon, Pleasant View Landscapes; and quests.





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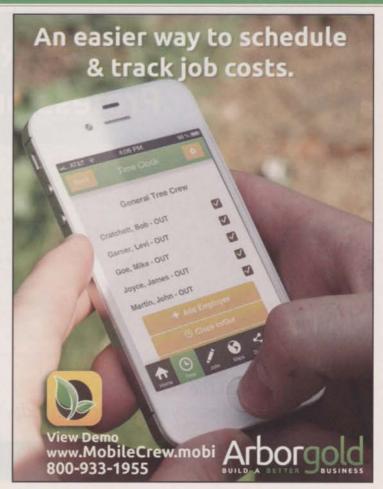
As an Owner, Manager, CFO and Industry Consultant, Dan has been involved with the development of several service companies from inception to \$15 million in annual sales levels and beyond.

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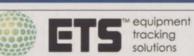
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in the season a second and third shot at improving their NPS score. "The more responsibility employees have in the organization, then the higher the potential for the upside (incentive pay) gain," Johnson says.

NPS can indicate when an employee isn't delivering service up to Lawn America's standards. "A few years ago, someone was bringing in a Net Promoter Score of 50 percent, and everyone else was in the sixties and seventies – that tells you something is wrong," Johnson says.

This indicates that an employee is not spending enough time building customer relationships, Johnson points out. And, because NPS is monitored on an ongoing basis, the employee can change that score by improving performance.

A scoreboard allows employees to see every day where they stand with their route's NPS. And, the firm posts reply cards with 9 and 10 scores on a bulletin board.

NPS has taken several years to implement

– Lawn America began the process about

five years ago – but once the concept is ingrained in the company culture, it becomes so much more than a survey question. It's a way of doing business to gain more "promoters" and rescue "detractors."

"Our culture is to do a great job for the customer, develop relationships with our clients, get their feedback and reward our people not just on Net Promoter Score, but on other indicators of service quality, like response time and customer net gain," Johnson says.

## Survey says

ords matter. That's what Barrett's Lawn Care discovered about crafting a survey that gets results. The company gets about an 80 percent return rate on its annual survey to 150 customers, asking them to rate the company in six categories using a 1-to-5 scale.

An old survey question was soliciting simple yay or nay responses and not bringing in helpful feedback. It was: "Are there areas we can improve on?" Customers simply replied yes or no without elaborating. By reworking that question with a "please explain," and some comment lines, the company gathers important feedback that can drive operational changes for the Bristol, Va. company.

For one, the company always invoiced customers for "mowing" in general, and clients said they wanted more detail on their bills, specifically when services were performed. "Now, we include the dates the property was serviced," says Megan Barrett, office manager. "For the most part, yards are mowed on the same days every week, but rain can throw off the schedule and customers want that detail on their monthly invoices."

Another suggestion gathered via surveys was to give customers a way to easily

#### Barrett's Lawn Care

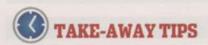
Megan Barrett, office manager
Location: Bristol, Va.
Established: 2003
Employees: 13
2013 Revenues: \$460,000
Customers: 70% residential, 30% commercial
Services: landscape maintenance, firewood,
snow removal

return payment by including return envelopes with mailed invoices. (They are not postage-paid envelopes.)

When Barrett's Lawn Care receives feedback, or a rating, that prompts concern, owner Josh Barrett personally calls on the customer to find out what the company could do better. "He is the face they relate to, so he is the one who does that calling if there is a problem," Megan Barrett says.

She collects and organizes all of the survey feedback into a spreadsheet so she can average out how the company performs in the six categories, which include quality, customer service and employee performance. The spreadsheet allows the company to identify trends, Barrett says.

Surveys are generally distributed once annually in July or August, and Barrett allows about a month for surveys to trickle in before compiling results. "There is not a deadline, but most people return the surveys along with their monthly payments – sometimes we have stragglers," Barrett



Keep it short. Brief surveys will not overwhelm customers, and you'll have a better chance of getting more feedback, Barrett says. The company keeps its surveys to just six questions, four of them focused on "rating" and two providing comment space.

Bundle the survey. By including the survey along with a monthly invoice and a return envelope, Barrett believes it's top of mind and customers take the time to fill it out and return it with payment.

Submit surveys early. Barrett's Lawn Care distributes surveys in mid-summer so it can respond to customer concerns and "make it right" while the season is still in full gear.

says, adding that there is really no formal follow-up to encourage customers to turn forms back in. Still, the company collects feedback from most people.

The survey process has been a success at Barrett's Lawn Care, giving the company a forum for asking customers: How are we doing? "Sometimes, there are customers who you think are perfectly happy and there are things they want changed, and as a result of the survey we can ask them if they are happy instead of just assuming that they might be," Barrett says. L&L

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#### TIPS FROM THE TOP

Interviewed by CHUCK BOWEN





## **Jordan Lavin**

#### **// CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER**

I started a lawn mowing business when I was 15 years old. Westwood Property Maintenance. I used to borrow my mom's car (once I turned 16) to pull the little trailer I had until I could save enough money to buy a truck.

I came out of my college horticulture program and bought a Nutri-Lawn franchise. I ran the franchise for five years, sold it and transitioned straight into a corporate operations role.

I was 22 at the time, just into my second year as a franchisee and after a day-long visit to my operation, a fellow franchisee said me: "You've got two options. You can sink or you can swim. The choice is yours."

It certainly felt like I was starting to sink. It was tough love, a reality check that I needed to change my style of running the business at that time. It was a realization that as the driver, you're in control of everything that happens, good, bad or indifferent.

We're currently 100 percent Canadian.

The Canadian market is strong. It's a great market. The economy has stayed very strong from 2008 on. We have a mismatch of legislation we operate under, but the market as a whole is a great market to operate in.

In a four-year window, we went through donot-call legislation, economic meltdown and pesticide ban, and guess what? We're in the business of applying pesticides; we get our customers by phoning them and they gotta have money in the hole. To stay in business you have to get creative, and you've gotta stay positive. You have to look at every one of these adversities and try to find the opportunity, or guess what? You're dead.

It's made us very agronomically savvy when it comes to both education and diagnosis. We spend a lot more time on curative practice than we ever did. We do a lot more slit-seeding, top dressings and turf renovations now.

From 2008 and 2009 on, when these pesticide bans started to become more official, the

municipalities were empowered to make local decisions, so that was a total dog's breakfast.

We'd send a truck out and you could be in three municipalities in a day and all three operate under different legislation. You could use products in this market and not that market. And throughout that transition period, between when they banned pesticides and when we actually came up with workable, natural solutions that were accepted for use, we had a couple of years that we went through a lot of turmoil. At one point, we're hand pulling weeds. Try to figure out how to run a lawn care company by hand pulling weeds.

In the Ontario market, we're treating insects the same way we always would in the sense that we're still going out with a truck and doing 30 applications a day off of a truck with a tank and a hose. We're using nematodes for grub control and we're using a couple different soap products for chinch.

We've put a big push the past couple of years on the customer nourishment experience. It all starts with a very detailed evaluation, which is done on a tablet. Right from the customer's lawn we hit submit, and it instantaneously sends them this form with all the dispositions already in place. We try to involve the customer in the science of it.

Our average spend per customer is on the increase, but it's not as easy to bring new customers to the table as it once was. The new generation of homeowner doesn't buy lawn care like the previous generation of home owners necessarily did.

There's always, always, always going to be a market for lawn care and there's always a market for people to have decent turf. I think we've done a damn good job of ducking and weaving and coming up with products that solve the problems that we have. LEL

2013 Revenue: \$22.7 million

Company: Nutri-Lawn

Location: Toronto

Top 100 Ranking: 55



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