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Brian Horn

Editor | Lawn & Landscape

This industry is filled with people who have a lot of knowledge that they want to share, but also can admit they have a lot to learn.

Transition time

I hate the Pittsburgh Steelers. But, unfortunately for me, they have had a coaching succession tree that has led the organization to consistent success. The team has employed three head coaches since 1969, while my beloved Cleveland Browns, by my count, have employed 18 head coaches.

So it's safe to say while I can't stand the Steelers, I hope to emulate their coaching tree as I take over as editor of Lawn & Landscape for Chuck Bowen.

In case you missed it, June was Chuck's last column for Lawn & Landscape. He is now the vice president of communications for the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute.

When Chuck hired me seven years ago, he was carrying a lot of the load on his own until I joined him, along with another editor. Chuck worked his butt off to meet the expectations that you have had for Lawn & Landscape since its inception in 1980.

Chuck did a great job building relationships in this industry, and I hope to continue those and build my own.

I worked side by side with him since 2010, and I've been knee-deep in articles about skid-steers and zero-turns since then. I learned quickly that owning a landscaping company is more than just mowing lawns or installing

patios. It's marketing, budgeting, pricing, building a team – you know, actually running a professional company.

While Chuck has left big shoes to fill, we have to step into those and keep moving.

I say "we" because Chuck did not succeed on his own, and neither will I, which leads me to more changes.

We've promoted Kate Spirgen to my former role of managing editor. Kate has been with GIE Media since 2012 and with Lawn & Landscape since 2014 as our digital content editor.

We've also hired a new assistant editor, Lauren Rathmell, who is replacing our former associate editor Katie Tuttle, who is moving over to the marketing department at GIE Media. Lauren just graduated from Kent State University, and is looking forward to learning more about the green industry.

One thing I told Lauren about this industry is how enthusiastic you are about your work.

This industry is filled with people who have a lot of knowledge that they want to share, but also can admit they have a lot to learn.

And that's the way I'll approach being the editor. I have learned a lot, but there's more I need to know. Please contact me at bhorn@gie.net or call me at 216-393-0250. I'd love to hear from you. – *Brian Horn*

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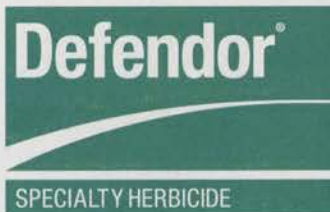
LAWN & LANDSCAPE HELD ITS INAUGURAL TOP 100 EVENT, an exclusive event for the highest-grossing lawn care and landscape companies in North America, June 6-7. Industry leaders from coast to coast gathered in Cleveland to network, learn from each other and, of course, receive their awards.

Read on to find out how Top 100 companies deal with company culture, hiring and mergers and acquisitions. Plus, get the lowdown on bridging the generational gap from the event's keynote speaker, Phil Gwoke.



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PEOPLE PERSON

Brian DuMont focuses on his people as his No. 1 priority, reaching out to at least one per day to ask them about something personal in their lives.

CREATING YOUR CULTURE

Top 100 CEOs share their best practices to make sure there is a good company culture in place.

During Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 event, a few industry leaders sat down to discuss best practices in their companies. Whether your yearly revenue is \$50 million or \$50,000, these are takeaways everyone can use.

When it comes to focus, Jason Craven, president and CEO of Southern Botanical, said at his company, quality comes first. "It's always been a big part of our culture," he said. When it comes to deciding what's right for the client, he gives his team leeway to make those decisions in the field.

Brian DuMont, president and CEO of Yard-Nique, said at his company, he focuses on quality, but said it can't be No. 1. "For me, it's focusing on people and letting them handle the rest," he said.

To do this, DuMont makes sure to put in his schedule to reach out to a different employee each day. He asks them about their families, themselves and anything else to show he cares as more than a boss. When an employee's daughter had an upcoming surgery, DuMont even scheduled it in his phone so he knew to ask how the surgery had gone.

"I make a big effort to empower people and focus on people," he said.

"The key is that the core values are not separable," said Joe Ciffolillo, president and CEO of Greenscape. Driving efficiency, increasing customer loyalty and increasing quality go hand-in-hand, and none can take more focus than the others.

Ciffolillo's company has also implemented a point system to recognize employees who step up on the job.

Ciffolillo's managers can award points to employees who are doing something well. The employees can then use those points to go online and buy new TVs, vacations, etc.

"It spreads like wild fire when somebody starts getting the points," Ciffolillo said.

For more on this story and other best practices from the Top 100, visit bit.ly/LLTop100practices. — Katie Tuttle



EVENT COVERAGE

INNOVATIVE HIRING

Even Top 100 companies aren't immune to the industry's hiring woes.

Being a Top 100 company doesn't make you immune to some of the hiring and retention challenges the industry is facing. But four executives from Top 100 companies gave their thoughts on hiring and retention during a discussion on the issue. Here are some thoughts from the panel: John Gibson, president, Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care; Jen Lemcke, chief operating of-

ficer, WeedMan USA; Christy Webber, president and CEO, Christy Webber Landscapes, and Tim Portland, chairman and CEO, Yellowstone Landscape.

ANALYZE THE PROCESS. If you are having issues with hiring, you need to step back and look at your recruitment process, Lemcke said. When resumes come in, what is happening to them? Are they being looked



"WE AS MANAGERS TEND TO FOCUS ON OUR PROBLEMS. WE TAKE FOR GRANTED WHAT WE HAVE RIGHT."

— Tim Portland, chairman and CEO, Yellowstone Landscape

at or sitting on a desk? Look at your referral bonus program and where you are posting jobs. "You need to be innovative; you can't keep complaining about not finding people," she said.

INVEST WISELY. Gibson said Swingle offers a \$1,500 referral bonus for an employee who stays a year. The company also invested in a contract recruiter for 30-60 days who, based on qualifications given from Swingle, found workers for the company. Gibson said there was initial hesitation in hiring the recruiter because of the cost, but he said the upfront costs paid off in the long term.



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FOCUS ON THE GOOD. “We as managers tend to focus on our problems. We take for granted what we have right,” Portland said. Portland tells his supervisors to celebrate success. If a crew gets a compliment from a customer or an employee does something well, take them to lunch or get them a gift card. “That makes them feel like they are succeeding,” Portland said, adding that those accolades coupled with company growth makes them excited to stay around. If you don’t celebrate, “that has a dampening impact on morale,” Portland said.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. Gibson said the team at Swingle asks behavioral questions. “We don’t ask as much about experience, rather how they would react to certain situations,” he said.

BE REALISTIC. Gibson said Swingle began realizing that some em-

ployees were only going to stay with them 12 to 18 months, so they started Succeed from the Start, a program that tells new employees what they need to know in their first 60 days. “So we can at least get them on a launch pad,” he said. Gibson added that the program gives Swingle the best chance to get the most out of the employee for the time they do stay, and it creates a positive atmosphere where the employee may recommend others to apply after they leave.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES. Swingle has what Gibson called “an employee journey.” It allows workers who may not be manager material to grow with the company and be cross-trained in a different division of the business. As they learn more skills, they are rewarded with pay increases. “It gives them an opportunity to do something different,” he said. — *Brian Horn*

BRIDGE THE GAP

Understanding the differences between the generations is the first step to better marketing and a happier workforce.

Each generation has its own idea of what greatness looks like whether it’s an individual, a product or an experience. Phil Gwoke, consultant with Bridgeworks, laid out the differences between the generations and how to understand them as he gave the keynote speech at Lawn & Landscape’s Top 100 event.

“Each generation is vital to the success of a community, a company,” he said. Whether you’re marketing to or working with people of different generations, it’s important to understand and respect their differences.

In general, each generation wants a different kind of working relationship. While Boomers



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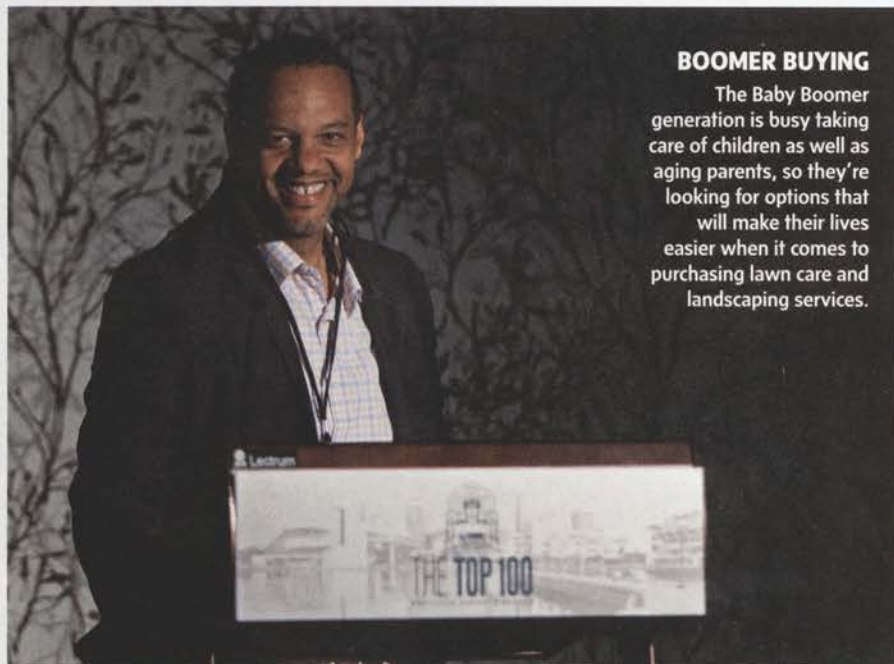
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BOOMER BUYING

The Baby Boomer generation is busy taking care of children as well as aging parents, so they're looking for options that will make their lives easier when it comes to purchasing lawn care and landscaping services.

want professional, productive and effective relationships, Gen Xers want transparency, honesty and efficiency. The newest addition to the workforce, Millennials, want relatable, authentic and accessible interactions.

GETTING THE WORD OUT. When you're marketing to the different generations, it's key to understand that they want and value different things. Boomers are stuck in a sandwich, Gwoke said. On one side, they're taking care of their children, and on the other side, they're taking care of their aging parents. "They want things to be easy," he said.

Gen Xers grew up being told they won't have it as good as their parents did. And due to a tumultuous atmosphere during their childhood, they find it hard to trust anyone, Gwoke said, citing the example of NASA. When Baby Boomers think of NASA, they think of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. But when Gen Xers think of NASA, the first thing to come to mind is the Challenger explosion.

So Generation X doesn't trust salesmen. They prefer to find out what end-users think, which is what brought us sites like Angie's

List. "Say you're an expert and don't push so much," Gwoke said. "They've seen so much fall apart that they can detect insincerity."

Millennials have a bit of a PR problem, Gwoke said, but they're expected to spend \$200 billion annually starting in 2017.

Threats of violence to Millennials were much closer to home than previous generations so they're more likely to live in the moment. Eighty percent are more likely to buy an experience than a thing so campaigns like Weed Man's "Transform your lawn from a burden into a paradise" work well, he said.

But Millennials aren't ever going to be loyal buyers. They've been hardwired to always be looking for the next best thing. Gwoke cited the difference between how Millennials and their parents look at phones. He (a Gen Xer) grew up with the same phone in his house his entire life. Millennials, on the other hand, upgrade their phones every two years or less on average.

"To attract them, lead with why you do what you do," Gwoke said. For more on how to bridge the generational gap in the workplace, visit bit.ly/LLTop100generations. — *Kate Spigen*



EVENT COVERAGE

BRINGING EVERYONE UNDER ONE ROOF

Learn the dos and don'ts of M&A from some of the top landscape companies in the country.

While M&A can be exciting, don't get caught up in the enthusiasm and emotion. Instead, make sure you're looking at things like location, business mix and, above all, culture. "At the very top of the list, the business has to fit into the culture of our organization," said Mike Bogan, CEO of LandCare. "The team members of the organization tend to follow their leader. If they buy in, their team will, too."

Expanding is a great opportunity, but it's also a painstaking process that requires detailed research when done properly. "Researching the company, you use everything that's available to you – interviews, customers, dealers, website, social media," Bogan said.

Look at the customer concentration and really dig in. Many companies are in the \$6-8 million range with about 350 customers, said Dean Murphy, president of Terracare Associates. "Sometimes it looks right when you first look at customers, but 30 to 50 of the largest are with the same company."

That's a customer concentration problem. Also consider how long customers have been with the company and whether or not the company you're acquiring has been raising their prices.

And don't forget to inspect the equipment. Terracare looks at each piece of field equipment and pulls oil samples from each truck. "It may sound excessive to some folks, but we do that," Murphy said, noting that if the oil looks bad, it's a sign that the company wasn't doing general upkeep.

On the other hand, Ruppert plans to sell 80 percent of what it acquires so Phil Key, partner, Ruppert Companies, and his team

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just look for wholesale numbers. LandCare also plans to sell most of the equipment from a merger or acquisition. They'll start with the owner's assessment and go from there.

PAY ATTENTION TO PEOPLE. It's important to look to the future as well, particularly in terms of strategic planning. "I think it's more efficient to understand market-wise where you want to go," Key said. And the one thing to never forget, no matter if you decide to acquire or merge with another company or not, is that you can always take away something from any company you're looking at. "Never think

you can't," Murphy said.

Once you've made the transition, it's a matter of communication with your customers to make sure they keep your services. Key said keeping the crews in place on the routes is always best. He says the process of transitioning takes about three months at Ruppert.

His company sends out an initial letter and schedules meetings with larger clients to explain how the transition will work. "To some degree, it's no different than transitioning when an employee is promoted," he said.

You have to keep the account managers engaged, Bogan said.



"THE TEAM MEMBERS OF THE ORGANIZATION TEND TO FOLLOW THEIR LEADER. IF THEY BUY IN, THEIR TEAM WILL, TOO."

— Mike Bogan, CEO, LandCare

If the higher-ups in the company don't want to be a part of what's happening, it's easy for them to leave and start their own business, taking a big chunk of your customers with them.

To make the transition as painless as possible, be transparent throughout the merging or

acquiring process. "Try to get out in front of negative anticipation," Murphy said. "Unfortunately, people have a sense that if you're sold, that means something bad — 'Something is going to change and I'm not going to like it.'"

He recommends trying to have individual conversations and allowing employees to ask questions to dissuade their fears.

At the end of the day, remember what you're really buying. It's not the brand; it's the people and the customer accounts, Murphy said. "To me, at the end of the day, we're going to run the business the way we're going to run the business." — *Kate Spigen L&L*



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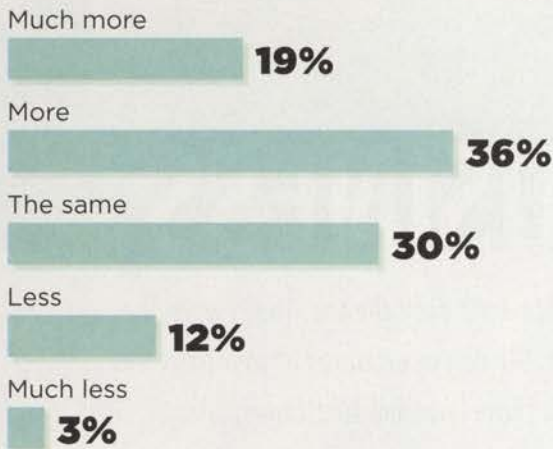
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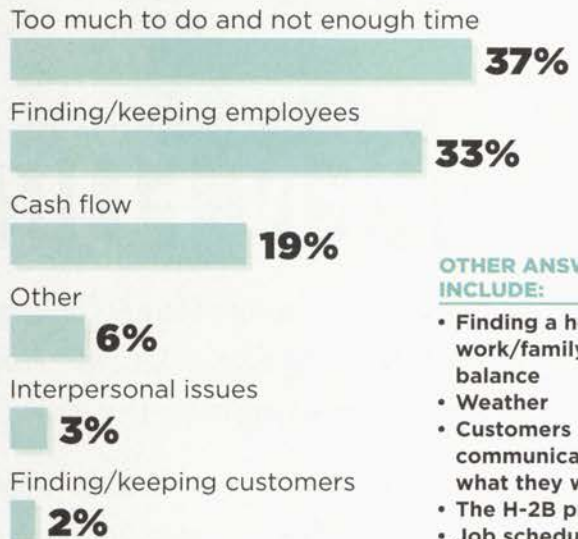
SUMMER STRESS ADDS UP

It's the busiest time of the year and sometimes it can be a race to the finish line at the end of the day. Below, you can get a look at how stressed out the average landscaper is. We'll be delving deeper into the problem in the September issue, so keep an eye out for that, plus more research and tips on how to manage.

HOW STRESSED ARE YOU TODAY COMPARED TO A YEAR AGO?



WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST SOURCE OF STRESS AT WORK?



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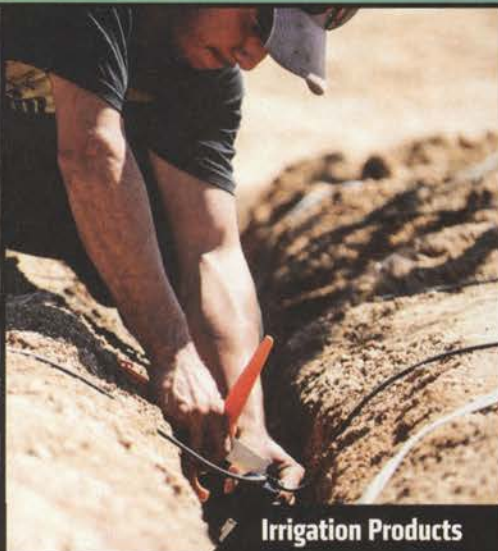
- Finding a healthy work/family/life balance
- Weather
- Customers not communicating what they want
- The H-2B program
- Job scheduling

Source: Lawn & Landscape exclusive research of 500 contractors

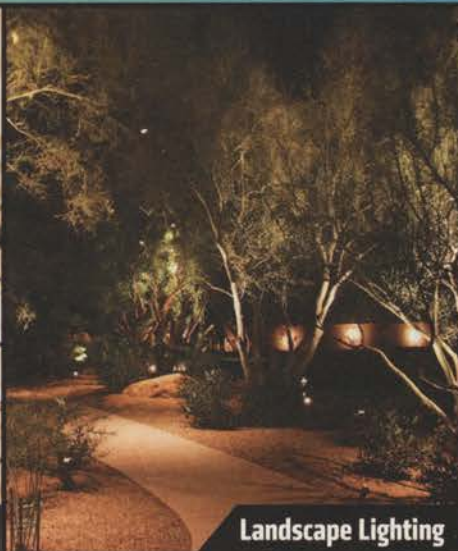
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MAIN MOTIVATIONS

● **“IT’S HARD TO DO A REALLY GOOD JOB on anything you don’t think about in the shower.”**
— Paul Graham

The other week I came across this quote from Paul Graham, founder of YCombinator, a leading provider of seed funding for start-ups in Silicon Valley. Graham and team count tech giants like Airbnb, DropBox, Reddit and Instacart among its successes – in other words, he’s done pretty well.

The quote jumped out at me because it so neatly distills what it means to think like an owner. As an owner, you are never not thinking about your business, even – sometimes especially – during your down time, when you’re performing a mundane routine like taking a shower. And that’s how it should be. As Graham’s quote makes clear,



MARTY GRUNDER is a speaker, consultant and author. He owns Grunder Landscaping Co.

that’s how it has to be if you want to do a really good job and succeed.

What’s trickier is how you get your team to think like an owner – a question I often hear from those who are frustrated that their staff doesn’t seem to care about their work in the same way they do. And indeed, most don’t or won’t, for the simple reason they are not invested – literally and figuratively – in the way you are. They don’t

own the business and consequently they don’t own its challenges or its profits. I take great care of my Jeep, keeping it immaculately clean and maintained, but put me in an airport rental and I don’t care so much.

That said, I also think most employees care more than owners tend to think they do, and there are concrete steps you can take to motivate them to care more. Here are my top three:

1. GIVE THEM AUTONOMY. No one likes working for a micro-manager. Have confidence in your team to make good decisions and then give them the reins to do it. You don’t need to be a part of every interview, purchase decision or communication. Clearly articulate your vision for your company, clarify roles and create a meaningful reporting structure that keeps team members regularly accountable – and then back off. You’ll be surprised by what your team can accomplish without you, and the confidence you’ll instill in them in the process will inspire them to do their best.

2. FOCUS ON RESULTS, NOT TACTICS. There’s more than one way to skin a cat, as the saying goes. At Grunder Landscaping, we have a sales team of three—me, our landscape architect, Brent, and our landkeeping lead, Kent. The three of us regularly discuss and share our tactics for closing deals, but we each have our own approaches, influenced by our personalities and preferences. And that’s fine—I hire people, not robots. What matters is the results, and Brent and Kent consistently meet or surpass their numbers. They care about the job they do because they’re left to do it in their own way, making it a true reflection of their talent and skill.

Anytime I catch myself thinking there’s only one way of doing something and it’s my way, I think of Pete Rose at home plate confort-

ing himself into that weird crouched stance that shouldn’t have worked but did, for him. No batting coach would tell you to take a pitch that way, and yet Rose remains the all-time leader in hits.

3. SHOW THEM A FUTURE. Everyone wants a bright one. Do what you can to help your team achieve theirs. Establish a compensation structure that rewards hard work. Provide paths for advancement. Foster their professional growth, whether it’s by sending them to industry conferences, signing them up for webinars or passing on articles or books that expand their horizons.

At our annual MGI conference last February, my friend Todd Pugh, founder and CEO of Envirosapes, told us about the Growing Day he holds every year at his company. Todd invites all of his employees to the main office for eight hours of learning and barbecue. He has experts come in to teach his team about personal financial planning and how to set long-term goals. He brings in the CEO of the local hospital, who started out as the health center’s scaffolding guy, to speak about his own path to success. He hangs posters up of longtime team members that show how they’ve risen in the ranks. This, Todd explained, helps his employees see there are profitable roles other than owner and they can have a great future at his company if they work hard. “If they can see it,” he said, “they can believe it.”

Will these three steps lead your team to think like an owner all the time? No – that’s your job. But they will get them thinking more like you more of the time, and that’s invaluable to your bottom line. **L&L**

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ACCOUNT FOR EVERY HOUR

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in the Midwest was doing about \$2 million in annual revenue but barely breaking even at year's end. He had no idea what the problem was. A residential maintenance contractor in California needed to bill \$700 per day for his two-person crew. When analyzed, he was billing far less than his goal.

His crew was getting paid for nine man-hours of work each per day but the contractor was only billing his clients for the time that the crew was on site – missing an average of two hours of revenue per day per man. An irrigation client on the east coast had 11 service technicians working 10-hour days. The service billing rate was reasonably priced at \$80 per man-hour. Unfortunately, the contractor was only billing for onsite time, which averaged eight man-hours per technician per day.

I hear it all the time – billable versus non-billable man-hours. “The time that my crews spend on the jobsite is billable time but the drive, load/unload, training or tailgate meeting time is non-billable time.” That same thinking often applies to many of the other costs a company incurs. “If we charged for all the costs (marketing, equipment repairs, insurances, employee benefits, spouse’s time in business) that my business



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

has, we wouldn't get any work.”

This mentality is one of the biggest reasons so many green industry contractors don't make the profits that they should. Every legitimate cost that you have in your business should be passed onto your customers with an appropriate margin applied to it.

WHAT'S A LEGITIMATE COST?

A legitimate cost is what I call a fair-market value (FMV) one, and is reasonable for a business to incur. As such, it is also reasonable to expect to pass this cost onto a customer. If you pay your crews for 10 man-hours per day, it is fair and reasonable to charge your customers for 10 man-hours per day. If you pay your

crews for drive time to and from a job, it's reasonable to charge your clients for it. You should also build a reasonable salary for the time that you spend on the business into your pricing structure. A reasonable rent for your office and facilities should be built into your pricing structure too, along with the cost of all of your utilities, equipment expenses, and insurances.

Costs that are not reasonable or fair-market value may include non-business-related vacation expenses, a spouse's automobile costs, an unrealistic salary for a spouse or excessive margins applied to materials. These costs should not be included in your pricing structure.

HOW IT SHOULD WORK. When I prepare an annual budget, it is comprised of reasonable costs.

I do essentially the same thing as the SEC. This allows me to calculate accurate man-hour and equipment

rates that reflect all legitimate costs as well as market conditions.

The residential landscape installation contractor in the Midwest wasn't charging for his trucks or his drive time. He started doing so and added about 8 percent to his bottom line. The California residential maintenance contractor adjusted his rates for new clients to reflect drive time. He also analyzed all of his routes to see how close they were to hitting the \$700 daily revenue goal. He then gradually increased rates for existing customers. The irrigation service contractor focused on billing \$800 per day (\$80 x 10 man-hours) per technician for labor. To achieve this goal, he would bill a trip charge of \$80 to the customer and give the customer up to thirty minutes on site. Time beyond the 30 minutes on site was billed at \$20 per 15-minute increment or part thereof. Labor revenue per technician increased dramatically, anywhere from \$80 to \$160 per day.

GET PAID WHAT YOU'RE WORTH

Too many green industry contractors fall victim to the myth that they have man-hours and costs that are non-billable. This is absolutely false when it comes to legitimate and reasonable costs, but most contractors cannot distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable costs. This is why I teach my clients to prepare an annual budget that includes reasonable costs. This allows them to calculate labor and equipment rates that reflect market conditions and include all of their costs. Remember: Every legitimate cost you have in your business should be passed onto your customers with an appropriate margin applied to it. If you apply this business lesson to your company, it will add thousands of dollars to your bottom line. If you don't, you'll more than likely stay in the company of thousands of green industry contractors who are barely and unnecessarily scraping by. **L&L**

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7 SIMPLE STEPS

I AM ASKED REGULARLY BY OWNERS, “Am I doing the right things for my company?” While there is no one-size-fits-all answer, there are seven simple things you can do to have a positive impact on your workplace.

1. BE ACCESSIBLE.

Set aside quality time for direct reports on a regular basis. Use the time to mentor, motivate, boost morale and make sure you are on the same page with goals and expectations. Employees find great value in time with you. It's both empowering and a learning opportunity, so do it consistently.

2. BE THE VOICE OF YOUR COMPANY'S MISSION.

Employees look to owners for clarity of purpose. Simply put, let them know what is important to you,



BRUCE WILSON is principal of green industry consulting firm Bruce Wilson & Company.

what you expect from your team and why. Back up your words with actions and put your money where your mouth is. Employees want to work for companies where the boss invests in them professionally, and where they can grow their skills through training and flourish.

3. BE THE PULSE-TAKER.

The best way to gauge your company's vital signs is to stay on top of how employees feel. One-on-one meetings help with this. Ask your employees if they feel your company cares or if they are given opportunities to grow. Successful companies institutionalize their search for and commitment to talent; the key is understanding what talent attributes you need and building your business around a diverse group who embody them.

4. BE CONNECTED.

Find an effective way to com-

municate and inspire interaction with people on your team. Share updates and progress, celebrate wins and acknowledge losses. Allow for an exchange of ideas and opportunities for collaboration. Call employees by their first names; learn what's on their plate and what makes them tick.

5. BE THE STANDARD BEARER.

Good ownership requires reinforcement of company standards. Owners need to remind everyone what they expect in the way of deliverables. Standards of behavior and quality can slip if the owner doesn't lead with the message or by example. When reinforcing the standards do not forget context. Employees are more likely to live up to and perform at higher standards if they know why it impacts the outcome.

6. BE THE COMPASS AND THE RUDDER.

Set direction, make the growth strategy clear and maintain a steady course. When times are tough, keep employees focused on the big picture and bring them into the conversation. If your company is struggling to hire, if there are fluctuations in accounts or if employees are stressed, be a realistic cheerleader. It's a leader's role to remind them that the problems will work themselves out. Providing timely guidance and a personal touch when it's needed most will always be relevant.

7. BE A CO-PILOT.

The best leaders know they can't fly solo. Develop a team of wingmen or advisors, join a peer group or seek counsel from an informal group of outside directors. Communal inspiration comes in a number of forms. Learning from other CEOs and owners who share similar challenges and having a sounding board to test ideas for growth is an empowering way to feel less lonely at the top. **L&L**

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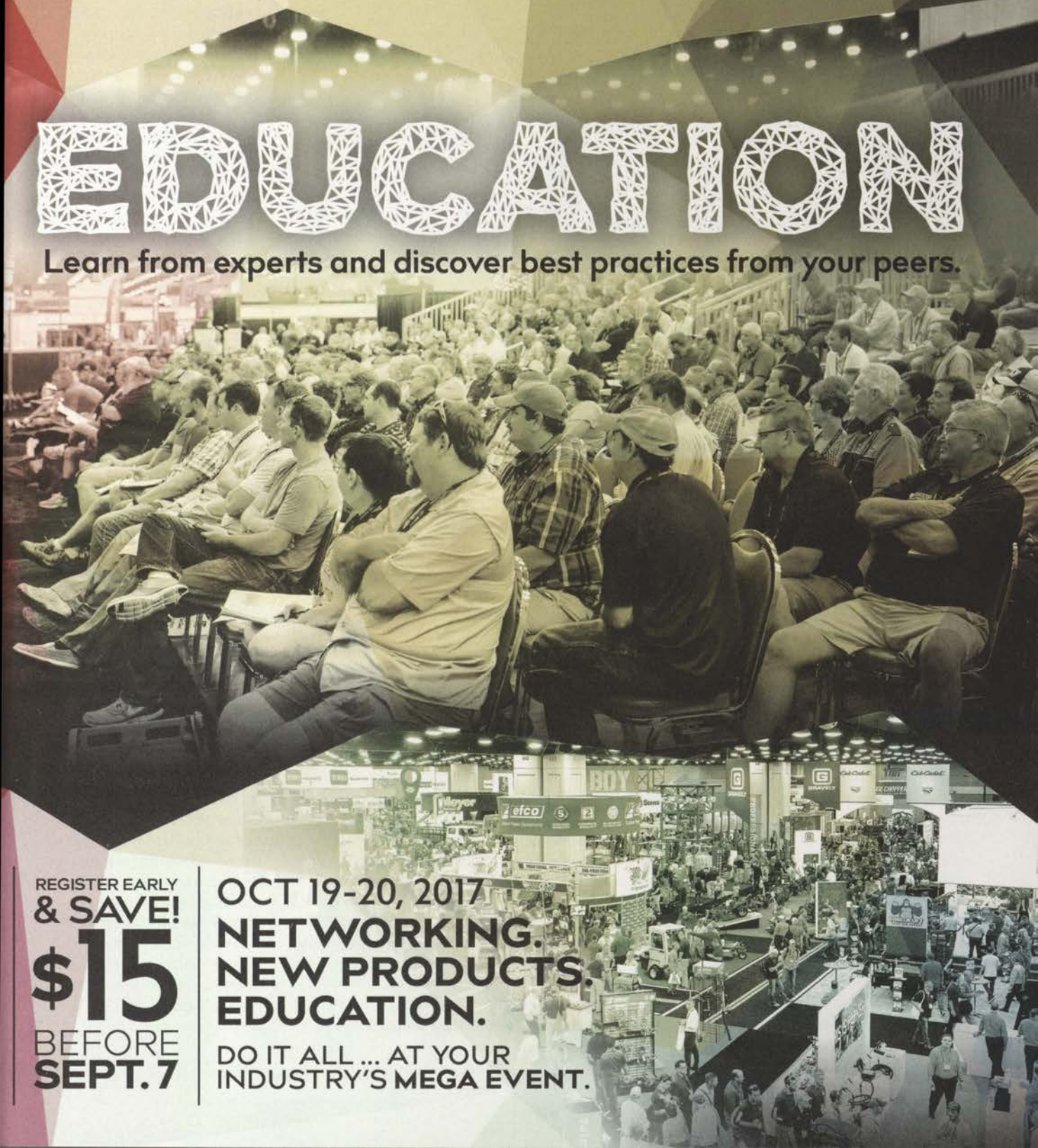
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DON'T KILL THE BUZZ

THE TOPIC OF POLLINATORS IN LAWN CARE is one of the most fascinating I have encountered in my career. Each time I think I have my arms around the subject, another unexpected twist or turn will come my way and smash all of my preconceived notions of how we care for lawns, interact with our customers, and act as good stewards of the environment.

Pollinators like the honeybee and bumblebee have been having a tough time of it in the past few years. If it's not colony collapse disorder causing entire hives of honeybees to disappear suddenly, it's the varroa mite, poor nutrition or pesticide exposure that ails them. The challenges to commercial beekeeping, those hives that travel across the nation pollinating everything from almonds in California to blueberries in Maine, have seeped into the native bee populations, affecting them as well.

The bulk of the problem lies outside of professional lawn care, as we are only responsible for a tiny fraction of the pesticides used in agriculture and we have no need to employ commercial pollinators in our industry.

That said, we come under intense scrutiny for our use of all pesticides, not just insecticides, because we tend to be the 'low-hanging fruit' for those environmental activists who feel the need to do something when



BOB MANN is the corporate agronomist for Lawn Dawg.

confronted with a crisis. New laws and regulations are passed, usually targeting the very people who use pesticides responsibly and ignoring completely those who have no training at all.

As we start the new lawn care season, it's a good idea to pause for a moment to consider the products we use and how we use them. By reviewing some simple principles, we can provide our customers with the results they expect and enhance pollinator safety, too.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY. Understand the weeds, insects and diseases that infest your lawns, their life cycles and the best management practices for controlling them. Have a working knowledge of cultural practices that

can be employed to reduce the need for pesticides. Know what products will control best while impacting least. For instance, knowing that preventive grub controls have a definite window of time for application is not only essential for good control, it helps you to avoid applying when there's no chance of success.

ERADICATION IS NOT AN OPTION. A solid best management practice is to understand the number of insects the lawn can tolerate without damage being apparent. Consider that a healthy, well-managed lawn can tolerate up to eight to 15 Japanese beetle grubs per square foot successfully. Even with a well-executed insecticide application, not every insect will be controlled. However, eradication should never be your goal, but rather it should be managing the insect population below the damage threshold.

KEEP THEM SEPARATE. Insecti-

cides kill insects and honeybees are insects. That simple arithmetic should always be in the back of your head as you formulate your lawn care program. When you do decide an insecticide application is the best course of action, your awareness of pollinators in your environment will go a long way towards protecting them – keep the pesticides over here and the pollinators over there.

In lawn settings, turf grasses do not require pollinators for reproduction, but many lawn weeds do. Controlling flowering weeds prior to an insecticide application will keep pollinators from being attracted to the lawn. Another good strategy is to mow off weed flowers prior to an insecticide application.

The formulation of the insecticide has an impact as well. When sprayed on the lawn surface, insecticides are right on the leaf surface where pollinators can incidentally encounter them. Using a granular formulation, such as a fertilizer/insecticide combination product, allows the insecticide to fall quickly to the soil surface out of reach of pollinators. As always, read and follow the label directions to the letter, including passing along to the customer any information and instructions, such as watering the product in after application.

"BEE" THE EXPERT. These days, almost every turf grass conference has at least one session devoted to the issue of pollinators. Cooperative extension services nationwide have online resources available on turf grass management that are indispensable. Pesticide manufacturers have developed literature that serves to educate both you and your customers on the safe use products.

The National Association of Landscape Professionals has training and resources available. Another fantastic resource is industry message boards where you can interact with your peers, asking questions and offering advice. **L&L**



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Company Profile | Ecological Landscape Management

Ecological Landscape Management adopted an organic approach in the '90s and has grown business by leaps and bounds ever since.



SOILFUL LIVING

James Sottilo builds sustainable landscapes from the soil up to inspire healthier connections.

By Brooke N. Bates



SOME LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS WANT PRISTINE PROPERTIES that are meticulously maintained. But James Sottilo would rather see landscapes full of life – being enjoyed by people, pollinators, beneficial pests and, most importantly, all the right soil microbes.

“There’s nothing worse than perfectly crisp hedges and quiet green lawns. And there’s nothing better than seeing a kid walk into a landscape and be mesmerized by bees buzzing or butterflies flying. That’s the exciting part; that’s a living landscape,” says Sottilo, who founded Ecological Landscape Management (ELM) in 2010. “We’re looking to build a thriving ecology on these landscapes, not make them sterile environments.”

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With that focus, ELM offers organic lawn, shrub and plant maintenance services that reduce input requirements over time. By focusing on each site's health from the soil up, Sottilo and his team build strong foundations for more sustainable landscapes.

ORGANIC ORIGINS. Sottilo entered the field in high school, spending spring and summer breaks working for a tree care company his friend's father owned. After studying horticulture in college, Sottilo worked for several companies, initially as an arborist.

In the early '90s, the company where he worked began focusing on integrated pest management



All of ELM's landscapes have customized compost teas created by Sottilo.

and plant health care, so Sottilo started thinking about ways to reduce chemical inputs. But then, a personal health scare made him get serious about organic living.

"In the mid-90s, I was diagnosed with a bizarre bone cancer. I was one of only 10 people in the world with that specific cancer," says Sottilo, who has completely

recovered since a surgery replaced his upper jaw with prosthetics 21 years ago. "Looking at me now, you'd never know what I went through, but that really pushed me to find more organic ways of working with the landscape to minimize inputs. I made a decision to live a healthier, more holistic lifestyle."

That cemented Sottilo's focus on sustainable landscaping. As plant health care manager, Sottilo helped the company adopt an organic approach during the 90s – then grew the division by 25-30 percent annually.

Sottilo later partnered with the owner of that company to run a sustainable landscaping firm



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in the Hamptons from 2001 until 2009, where he honed his expertise in soil management. When the recession struck their high-end residential clients, Sottilo gravitated back into urban landscapes and started his own company.

"When I opened Ecological Landscape Management in 2010, the goal was to understand how to optimize the urban landscape," he says. "A lot of these public projects were built on waterfronts, so fertilizers and pesticides were not allowed. So the question was: How do we build a better ecology without the use of any inputs, or only with organic inputs? It forced us to understand

the foundation by looking at soil from a different point of view."

FROM COMPOST TO CONSULTANT. ELM begins by carefully analyzing a site's soil profile. Then, based on the nutrients needed to support the plant palette (which is usually determined by the architect or designer), Sottilo concocts a customized compost tea for each landscape.

ELM spends eight months adding specific food sources to each project's compost pile to build the ideal microbial balance. For example, "compost piles for Memorial Park in Houston are going to be grown out with rudbeckia on them, because

rudbeckia are incredible mycorrhizal colonizers. So, when they add the compost to the soil, it already has the exact microbial components we want," Sottilo says. "There's more of a science to it than just throwing fertilizer on a landscape."

With this approach to manipulating soil nutrients, ELM reports an average plant loss of half a percent – compared to the industry average of 8 percent. The firm carefully tracks microbial increase over time so clients can see results, in the landscape and in the metrics.

During restoration of Central Park's Grand Army Plaza, for example, project delays kept

nursery stock above ground too long before planting, and the newly installed London Plane trees showed signs of stress. Sottilo's soil tests revealed low microbial carbon and nitrogen content and weak mycorrhizal colonization rates. He prescribed a sorghum cover crop to break up compacted soil while releasing carbon and producing mycorrhizal spores. Within six months, the microbial biomass grew 67 percent while mycorrhizal colonization rate increased from 6 to 14 percent.

Sometimes, ELM's role is concentrated during the capital phase of a project. Other times, the firm may provide ongoing

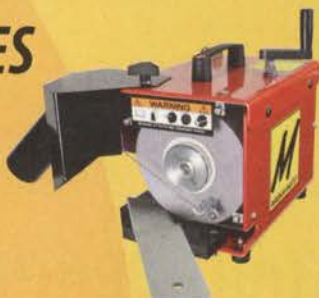
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maintenance – including organic soil amendment applications, soil moisture management programs, pruning or other services. ELM also releases beneficial pests like lacewings, ladybugs, scale destroyers and predator mites to combat pests and disease naturally.

Compost teas composed the bulk of ELM's work when the firm first started. Then the firm transitioned from services into sustainability consulting, with a focus on "increasing the acclimation of the landscape and the overall ecology of the site." Sottilo says consulting now constitutes a quarter of his business, and he plans to keep growing in that direction.

UNCOMMON COLLABORATION.

To influence a site's ecology from the ground up, ELM has to get involved in large-scale landscape projects early on – which requires constant collaboration with other firms. Over time, Sottilo has built a reputation and relationship with other landscape contractors, landscape architects and property managers. As these partners have grown and expanded across the country, they've taken ELM with them.

"They see the value, not just in our service but also in our creative ideas for making projects more sustainable," Sottilo says. "They bring us in on the front end of projects and integrate us into the

overall process, so we're part of the design or engineering team's presentation to project owners."

To build on ELM's experience, Sottilo also pulls independent experts into projects. He may involve a soil scientist, agronomist or mycologist specialized in mycorrhizal fungi – like the one who recommended rudbeckia for Memorial Park.

"We're bringing in perspectives outside the traditional landscape realm to figure out the best way to approach projects," Sottilo says.

This kind of collaboration isn't common in the industry, and Sottilo doesn't want local contractors to feel threatened –

he wants to partner with them.

"I wish there was more peer collaboration in the industry," Sottilo says. "The most important thing is for everyone to understand their niche, because nobody can be an expert in everything. Collaborating with a team of experts provides a better end product, and also gives project owners more confidence that you're looking out for the best interests of the project more than your own personal best interests."

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH. Partnerships have expanded ELM's reach beyond its headquarters in Smithtown, New York. The firm works on high-profile projects



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Soil test in real-time

James Sottilo doesn't just look at soil from one point of view. "We don't do a soil chemistry test and say, 'The pH is off; let's add calcium or lime,'" says the founder of Ecological Landscape Management. "We're testing mycorrhizal colonization and we're testing soil chemistry, living biology and physical components. We're developing a soil management program based on four dimensions rather than just one. It gives us a more holistic view of how to fix the problem, instead of just applying a Band-aid to the immediate situation."

The biggest challenge to this approach was that it often took two or three weeks to get soil test results back from labs. "Sometimes there are biological rhythms, like the expansion of leaves, that we may miss by the time we get the data back to make a decision," Sottilo says.

While lecturing at a community college, Sottilo met professor Judith Fitzpatrick, a microbiologist who had developed several diagnostic kits for the medical industry. Using ELM as her "field exploration team," Fitzpatrick began developing a way to test soil microbes. She introduced The MicroBiometer – a tool that scientifically measures microbial biomass, which Sottilo says is the main indicator of soil health. The test only takes 10 minutes, and syncs to a mobile app so soil experts can provide results and recommendations immediately.

Sottilo says the MicroBiometer also adds long-term value by allowing clients to scientifically monitor sustainability over time.

"The numbers illustrate an increase in carbon sequestering as clients change their practices, so they can look at data and say, 'OK, we're saving carbon, we're reducing these inputs and we're becoming more sustainable,'" he says. "Without that data, you're just throwing a dart in the dark."

coast to coast, including Central Park, Harvard Business School and the St. Louis Gateway Arch. ELM's business is 60 percent commercial work, 30 percent government and municipal, and 10 percent high-end residential.

"At any given time, we'll have anywhere from four to eight projects going on out of state," says Sottilo, who travels every couple weeks, visiting each site about once a month.

With annual revenue near \$1.4 million, ELM maintains about 12 percent annual growth and 24 percent profit margins with only seven employees. Sottilo says the movement to green up urban spaces will continue to

catapult the firm's growth.

"In high-end public and commercial campuses, sustainability is the primary driving force over project design. The residential market wants it too, but there's still a learning curve until the maintenance industry can provide organic landscaping beautifully and affordably," says Sottilo, noting that ELM is working to develop residential programs that offer sustainable landscape management at the right price. "As science continues to move forward at a rapid pace, the materials will become available to maintain that aesthetic at a lower cost. It will only be a couple of years before it's all in place." **L&L**



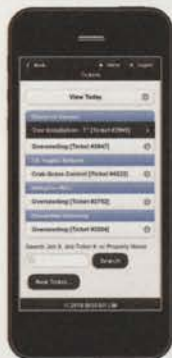
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FAMILY FIRST

Before they could move forward as successful business partners, Mark (left), Tim (center) and Michael Pugh had to establish a way to communicate as both brothers and colleagues.

...WE REALIZED
THAT WE NEEDED COUNSELING
BECAUSE WE WERE GOING TO
DESTROY THE BUSINESS.

BROTHERLY LOVE

When being blood almost made them draw blood, the Pughs had to change the way they operated their business.

Story by Brooke N. Bates | Photography by Jen Howell



THE TRANSITION FROM BROTHERS to business partners wasn't easy for the Pughs. In fact, two of the brothers came to blows in a conference room, which eventually led to family counseling (more on that later.).

But when their father suddenly passed away, leaving behind several flower shops in Memphis, they had to learn how to work together – or they would fall apart.

BROTHERLY LOVE

When Bill Pugh died in 1987, Mark, president and owner, was only 16, Tim, vice president and owner was 19 and Michael, chief financial officer was 22. The older Pughs helped deliver flowers for years. But Mark's busy sports schedule didn't allow him to work regular hours, so he landscaped around the neighborhood.

They had no idea they'd end up owning their father's business, spinning off several companies or expanding throughout the region.

"I actually took a leave of absence from my job for a few months to help dad's partner with some of dad's responsibilities because I thought we were going

to sell the business," says Michael, who was managing a sporting goods store at the time. Instead, with their mom's help, Tim, bought out their father's business partner to keep the flower shops in the family.

"One day my brother's driving a delivery van, the next day he's the owner of the company," Michael says. "The employees were twice our age; they'd known us since we were 10 or 12, and now we're their bosses.

"To have that much responsibility all of a sudden in your early 20s was a challenge. We had no clue how to divide up our responsibilities – or even that we needed to. It took us years to

figure out where we fit and how to respect each other."

MERGING OWNERSHIP.

Although Tim and Michael shared a 10-by-10 office, they struggled to get on the same page. Tim might write a check without telling Michael, leading to an overdrawn account. Employees picked up on the discord, so if they didn't get the answer they wanted from one brother, they'd go ask the other.

The Pughs worked long, hard hours – even refusing to pay themselves to ensure that employees got paid – but times were tough. When the Gulf War hit in the early 1990s, the economy

contracted and the flower shop business shrank from six locations to three.

The brothers rebranded the business to stay top-of-mind in tough times. They worked with marketing consultant John Malmo, who suggested branding the name Pugh's Flowers with a cute cartoon skunk – an unlikely icon that quickly caught on.

Meanwhile, Mark's landscape business was booming. The acquisition of a small commercial maintenance company introduced him to yearly commercial contracts, which eventually became his sole focus as a full-service commercial maintenance contractor.



ONE DAY MY BROTHER'S DRIVING A DELIVERY VAN, THE NEXT DAY HE'S THE OWNER OF THE COMPANY." - MICHAEL PUGH



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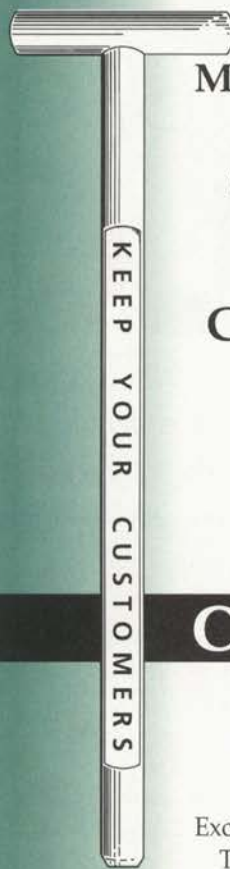
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When Mark saw the Pugh's brand gaining traction, and his brothers saw the commercial landscape business growing, they realized they needed each other. "Subconsciously, we knew we could be better together than we could be on our own," Mark says. "The draw for Tim and Michael was the rapid growth of the landscape company and the diversification that it brought."

Michael knew there was no way to grow a retail flower shop the same way they could grow commercial lawn care, which brought in steady income year-round.

"What we brought to the lawn care side was top-of-mind awareness and name recognition, and the value of that branding was tremendous," he says. "It gave the lawn care business instant credibility when people saw Pugh's logo on the side of the truck because they'd seen the flower shops in town for years."

The Pugh brothers merged ownership of their businesses in 1992. As part of the family brand, the landscaping company became Pugh's Earthworks. Mark gave two-thirds ownership to his brothers and gained one-third ownership in Pugh's Flowers.

BRAWLING BROTHERS.

The problems that began brewing in a two-Pugh office started seething with three brothers on board.

"I was used to being autonomous and then when we merged, I had to be accountable to two partners," Mark says. "All of a sudden to have somebody telling me what I should or shouldn't be doing and questioning what I was doing was very difficult for me – which was very frustrating for them. So you can see where the lack of respect continued to build."

For example, Mark would be in the field, he says, "and then all of a sudden I'd get a call from Michael about cash flow. He didn't understand I'm covered in mud, knee-deep in a hole, fixing an irrigation head. It was the timeframes of how and when we interacted that really caused the strife – not so much what we were interacting about."

Clashing schedules and unclear division of duties caused interruptions and frustrations all around.

"Part of the problem was that we didn't have any boundaries set up – for ourselves or our employees," Michael says. "I'd be in the middle of running payroll and somebody would come into my office and say, 'Michael, you've got to come out here and help us.' I couldn't stop what I was doing, and they didn't understand why. It caused Tim more problems because I'd make the employees mad, so that caused some friction."

Although employees wanted the brothers to succeed, they started to worry.

"The employees could hear the screaming matches," Michael says. "We had no private space to have a meeting; we were right there amongst employees, so there was no way to have a disagreement without people hearing about it."

"So it started to affect the employees: 'Are they going to close the business? Are we going to have jobs?' And that went against everything our dad wanted."

It affected the family, too, because the brothers were reluctant to get together outside of work. They did it "for mom's sake," Mark says, "but didn't enjoy it."

Ultimately, the tension erupted when the feud got physical.

"When it finally came to blows, me and Michael were actually fixing to have a fist fight in our conference room," Mark says. "That's how bad it had gotten."

"We grew up beating each other up, and then you get in a business setting and you have





KNOW YOUR ROLE

Once the Pughs delegated responsibilities, it allowed each brother to focus on his particular strengths, making the operations run much smoother.

to figure out how to respect one another on that level. We realized that we needed counseling because we were going to destroy the business.”

LEARNING TO SHARE RESPONSIBILITY.

When fists started flying, Tim, who Mark says has always been the peacekeeper, sug-

gested counseling. “We just needed a third-party mediator to listen and say, ‘Look, you don’t respect what he does; he doesn’t respect what you do, and if you can’t figure out how to respect one another, it’s not going to work,’” Mark says. “We just had to get over ourselves.”

It only took a couple of counseling sessions to straighten out. The counselor interviewed everyone individually and asked what they each like to do and what they gravitate toward in the business.

“It was pretty clear that I’m not a people person,” Michael says. “I’m an introvert. I like accounting and technology. Tim’s always been the people person in the family, and Mark’s always been the worker bee. When we figured out that everybody had a responsibility and a niche to fill, that was the turning point.”

It was a natural decision for Tim to take charge of Pugh’s Flowers, Mark to lead the landscape company and Michael to become chief financial officer of both. The counselor had them create an organizational chart to establish clear chains of command. Once they divided their responsibilities, they could defer to each other and focus on their strengths without fighting for control.

“By going through counseling, we found a way to respect one another, and having multiple businesses was key to that,” Mark says. “The three of us jointly own all of the businesses equally; they all operate separately. The separation and clear delineation of roles keeps us from killing one another. The three of us have very different skill sets. That’s a prime reason why we have been successful.”

The first change the counselor recommended was separate offices, so Michael relocated to another flower shop for a few years. “Everybody needs a private space,” he says.

“Especially when it’s a family business, it’s hard to share space 24/7. Part of our problem was when Tim and I got mad at each other, there was nowhere to go blow off steam except right there in front of him. When I moved my office, that smoothed things out.”

The counselor’s next recommendation was carving out time for regular communication.

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The Pughs set a weekly “brother meeting” to touch base, often having lunch away from the office before discussing business. Then, once a month (still to this day) the brothers have a longer meeting to review each company’s operations and finances.

About 15 years ago, the Pughs consolidated their businesses into one location in Memphis that serves as retail headquarters for the flower shops, with space behind the building to house landscaping and corporate offices located upstairs. The family businesses fill all but 4,000 square feet of the 20,000-square-foot building, and the 3 acres out back have doubled to 6 acres as they’ve bought out surrounding neighbors to accommodate growth. Each brother has his own office now – next door to each other.

As the brothers have matured and gained business experience, it’s become easier to make joint decisions. “The biggest thing we did is changed the way we interacted,” Mark says.

REFOCUSING ON THE CORE:

Why Earthworks dropped design/build to focus on maintenance

PUGH’S EARTHWORKS has grown from a one-man mowing and mulching crew into a full-service commercial maintenance contractor.

“We do basically everything,” says president/owner Mark Pugh, who co-owns the business (and three others) with his two older brothers. “Typically, our package includes weekly mowing, chemicals, mulching, seasonal flower displays, leaf removal and irrigation maintenance.”

Actually, Earthworks used to do basically everything, until four years ago, when the company reined in its design/build division to focus on maintenance.

“Design/build was difficult on our maintenance side, because you can never staff properly for the peaks and valleys,” Mark says. “We would always end up having to pull some maintenance employees over to construction projects, and in turn we shorted ourselves on maintenance, and then we’d have to play catch up.”

“The margins on construction work far exceed, almost double, maintenance. But maintenance was our bread-and-butter, and that’s really the core of our business. At that point, we were at about \$1.5 million on the construction side, and we decided to get rid of that, take those same resources and refocus them toward maintenance.”

Earthworks still has designers on staff to do enhancements and new landscapes for existing customers, but “what we got away from is design/builds for new clients,” he says.

It only took one year for maintenance to recoup the construction revenue, while strengthening the company at its core.

“Our business has become more predictable, which is what we wanted,” he says. “By getting rid of that small segment of our business and refocusing it, we streamlined our maintenance and improved all of the things that we wanted to improve.”



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WE REALIZED THAT WE NEEDED COUNSELING BECAUSE WE WERE GOING TO DESTROY THE BUSINESS.” - MARK PUGH

“We still have our moments, they’re just not as frequent or as heated as they used to be. There’s a shared commonality now that we can vocalize more than we could in the past.”

They still disagree – like when Mark wants a new truck but Michael wants to make sure they can afford it – but “that’s why it’s good there’s three of us,” Michael says, so there’s always a tiebreaker.

“We may argue, but when you get outvoted and the decision is made, once you leave the room you’re on board. We present it to employees as a unified front.”

As a result, communication

and camaraderie have become central to Pugh’s company culture. They regularly provide donuts or pizza for the staff to show employees their appreciation.

They also have two-day managers’ retreats off-site for training, strategy sessions and socializing.

“It allows guys to interact with one another away from work, away from tension, in a fun environment, so that will carry over when they do get into tense moments,” Mark says.

“That’s one of the most important lessons we’ve learned – is the importance of communicating outside of work.”

DIVERSIFYING WITH SPIN-OFFS.

Once the Pughs learned to work together, their companies grew organically. They began spinning off separate businesses – creating value for customers and opportunity for employees.

The first spin-off, Lickety Split Couriers, grew out of the flower shops. The company had a delivery department with seven or eight trucks on the road each day delivering flowers.

When the economy took a turn in 2007, they filled that void by delivering other products. When the flower business picked back up and continued to grow,

the brothers separated it into a courier service.

The next addition came a couple of years ago when Earthworks’ pest control division spun off into Rosie’s Pest Control.

“We’ve always looked at pest control because it’s a very good business with recurring income. We have such a large pool of clients that have pest control, so we’ve got a built-in customer base,” Mark says.

“To keep costs down, we started it within our landscape company, using Earthworks employees, but once we built enough clientele, we split it out.”

(continued on page 95)



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**WILL
GRUCCIO
& MICHAEL
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Vineland Landscaping is faced with weighing their subcontracting options to lessen their heavy workload.

Making headway

Our Turnaround Tour winners made it through the spring, but the work is just beginning. **By Brian Horn**

NOW THAT THE BUSY SPRING IS OVER, our Turnaround Tour winners have settled into the season and are getting a grasp on their numbers, managing workloads and getting rid of overhead. As The Harvesters, Bill Arman and Ed Laflamme, continue to work with them, they are seeing some good progress, but a lot of room for improvement.



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Wade's Lawn Service: Back to basics.

Last time we checked in: Wade's

Lawn Service revamped their sales strategy and brought their fleet up to standards. They also ironed out some hiring issues by paying a few dollars more an hour, which



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has worked with recruitment and retention. The company also over-hired at the start of the season knowing there would be turnover, and co-owner Deborah Wade says they have enough workers and are happy with the staff.

"The amount we are paying them, they are fine and working here," she says.

Latest update: Wade's must get back to basics when it comes to figuring out gross margins, and how much revenue is coming from maintenance and how much is coming from enhancements.

Deborah has hung a whiteboard in her office with all their employees' names written on it. The board will also have the hours someone worked in maintenance and enhancements and is a straightforward way to keep track of how much time a worker spent in each area.

The workers will write the hours they spent on maintenance work and on enhancement work on their route sheets. Deborah can collect those and then transfer that information to the whiteboard.

"It's going to help us see where we can tweak some things," she says. "It's going to help us get better systems in place as far as labor hours and who needs to be where and doing what. It's just making sure we have people in the right box."

Bill and Ed's take: Ed and Bill think the Wades are making money on jobs but no one is sure because there is no system to track it on a detailed scale. The whiteboard is a good place to start to find out where revenue and profits are produced. Once a daily revenue number can be established, then a more accurate budget can be built.

"We're going to track them daily, and then weekly," Bill says. "Then we're going to get that weekly into a month. Then we are going to get the month into what we call the mini budget. Then we can have a trajectory to see

where we are going with the financials both revenue and gross margins. That's all we care about is revenue and gross margin."

Bill and Ed would also like to change the way Wade's bills for mowing. Instead of charging per mow and billing at the end of the month, they want to figure out how many mows they do in a season for a customer, and average that out on a monthly payment schedule. For example, if a company mows 30 times a year and charges \$75 a mow, they can multiply those two numbers and then that by seven (if it's a seven-month season), which would come out to about \$321 a month.

"We are trying to get them to charge that at the beginning of the month, rather than wait until the end of the month, for cash flow," Bill says. "That's a big step for these guys and their customers."

Vineland Landscaping: Identity crisis

Last time we checked in: Vineland Landscaping was working on improving accounts receivable, and have moved some clients to pre-billed contracts so they will pay for maintenance services before they are performed, similar to what Ed and Bill want Wade's to do. They also hired a virtual assistant as a friendly reminder for clients to pay. At 30 days, the client gets an email and at 60 days they get a call. The company discovered customers aren't annoyed, but more embarrassed they haven't paid yet, says Will Guccio, president.

"We were always of the mindset that we don't want to harass people because no one likes that," he says. "At the end of the day, people are actually happy about it, which is really interesting, because I did not think that would be the case."

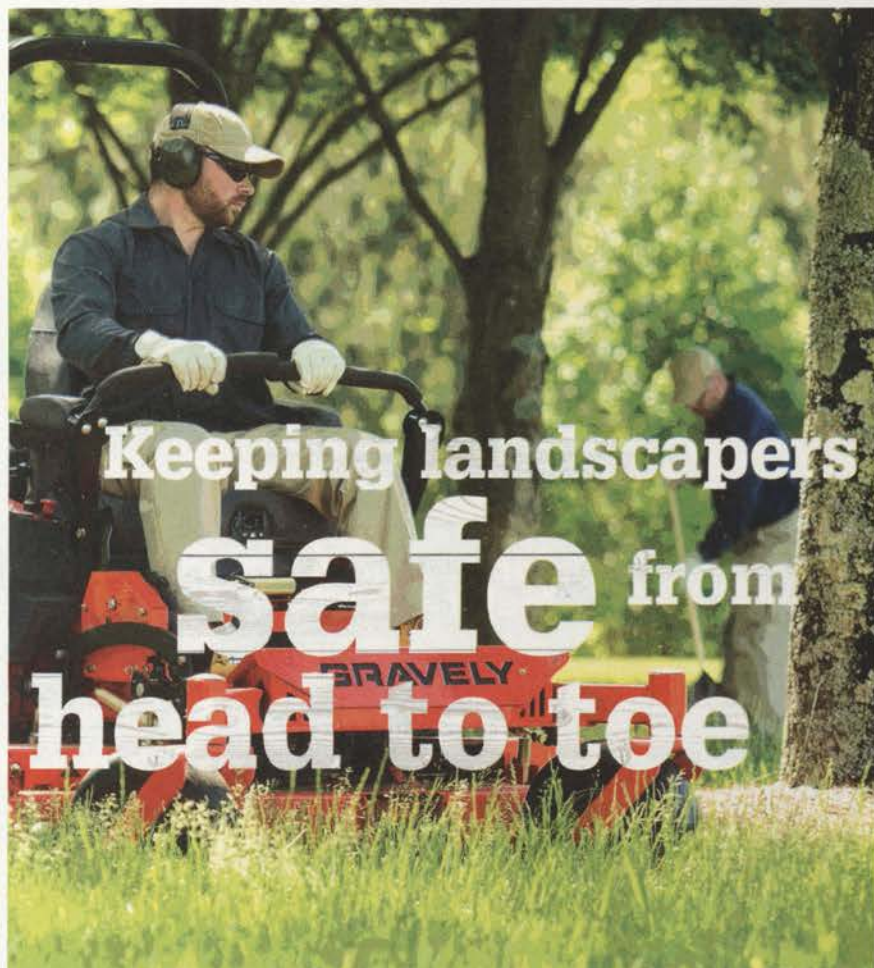
Guccio alerted close customers ahead of time that they would be contacted via email as a reminder so they weren't offended. Over all, he was happy with the change.

"It still is a problem, but it's better than where we were. I won't think that it's fully corrected until next year, but we're in a better place," he says.

Latest update: Two major problems arose recently, the first of which was taking on too much work. Guccio says he wouldn't have been able to get the equipment or em-

ployees soon enough to maintain the quality of work Vineland wants to deliver.

One idea floating around was dropping some subcontract work Vineland was do-



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ing. But that may have meant damaging their reputation with the company they were working with. So instead of dropping the subcontracted work, they did something they never have before and subbed out maintenance work.

"We came up with the solution of subcontracting to a sub that we're very close with and who understood the quality we have to have," Gruccio says. "It's a smaller, local company, and they've been wanting to work together, maybe at some point even have a partnership."

While construction helps keep maintenance afloat, Gruc-

cio and his partner D'Orazio need to decide if they want to keep it long term. Gruccio is passionate about maintenance while D'Orazio is passionate about construction work.

"The difference is in maintenance, theoretically, it's systemized," Gruccio says. "The business runs itself once you get it to a certain point, which we're not at, but I can see how it can become systematic. In construction, it's impossible to become systematic, because you constantly have material orders. You constantly have issues on jobs."

But construction work is profitable for Vineland and it's actu-

ally supporting the maintenance work while the duo improves their accounts receivable.

They've asked Bill and Ed to find a company they can visit to see how a construction and maintenance company should work.

"My partner is in charge of operations and we're not as efficient as we should be," Gruccio says. "He takes responsibility for that. I mean, he's doing a great job, but we want to see what we can change to get where we need to be. For me, I want to see what a larger company what it looks like from their CEO's perspective."

Bill and Ed's take: Ed says Vineland panicked a bit in dealing with the "100 days of Hell" and the new work they booked. Ed describes the 100 days of Hell as the start of the season to the Fourth of July, when work settles down. Subbing out the work took place of possibly buying new equipment, which they may have only needed temporarily.

"You can't just go run out and buy trucks for \$50,000," Ed says. "You only need it for six weeks. Go rent trucks"

After getting through the 100 days of Hell, Ed and Bill received the phone call about possibly dropping construction.

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The Harvesters try to drive people to recurring revenue, which is why they admit they don't like construction. "We are guilty of that," Bill says. "We'll always sort of pooh-pooh construction because we've seen them go way up and we've seen them go crash into the ground."

But Vineland is making money off construction, and enough money to support the maintenance division, so Bill and Ed recommended Vineland continue doing it. And once the construction job is done, Vineland is doing a good job of getting the maintenance work on the job.

"If you are just doing construction for construction and there is no line to long-range maintenance, then it better be making you money," Bill says. "Otherwise you are just wasting energy."

Freedom Lawn & Landscapes: Making progress

Last time we checked in:

Heather and Jeremy Dirksen updated their fleet and replaced old non-profitable clients with new profitable ones. Overall, things were going well and Freedom Lawn & Landscapes continues to make good progress.

Latest update:

Heather and Jeremy Dirksen are operating Freedom on a big piece of land with a big shop, a small garage and a cabin that was about 1,200 square feet that they were using for an office. Since they didn't need that much space, they moved their office to the garage, and have rented the cabin out saving

about \$1,500 a month.

"It was way more for what we needed for an office, but for its location, and for the garage that we got and the big shop, it was a good price," Heather says.

Freedom also had a safety inspection performed after hearing how it helped a company that had a fatality.

"They were able to go back and show that he had done an inspection, they passed the inspection, and that they had done everything within their

power to train the employees to prevent accidents like that that happened," Heather says.

But it's not all sunshine at Freedom – one of their oldest spray trucks broke down and Jeremy isn't confident it'd be worth the cost to fix it, which means they may have to purchase another one.

"We haven't decided a number. I mean, if it's a couple grand, we might fix it, but if it's any more than that, we probably won't," he says.

Bill and Ed's take: The company is in a great spot and heading in the right direction, but Bill and Ed would like to see Jeremy continue to delegate field work so he can work on bigger picture items.

"The problem is he gets swallowed up by it and it takes all his time up," Ed says. "As he grows, he has to grow out of that. Then I'd like to see him run the operational part of it, but not be required to work in it. By next year he should be there." **L&L**



JEREMY & HEATHER DIRKSEN

Freedom Lawn & Landscapes moved their office to the garage and are renting out the cabin on their property, which is saving them about \$1,500 a month.



DON'T GET IN OVER YOUR

Contractors share their best dos and don'ts of pool and spa work. **By Catherine Meany**



A POOL IS THE FOCAL POINT OF AN OUTDOOR LIVING SPACE.

It's the foundation from which the rest of the landscape design evolves. For many contractors, that's why they've chosen to add the service to their business rather than subbing it out.

"Pools are a component of the overall picture," says Mike Mainland, project manager at Steven Dubner Landscaping in Long Island, New York. "The ability to design and execute the construction of the pool completes the ability to handle the entire exterior; that's why we've always done it."

If a landscape revolves around the pool, a landscaping business should also center on perfecting pool installation and maintenance. Before a contractor dives head first into this line of work, here are five dos and don'ts we've gathered from some of the pros:

HEAD




DO LOOK FOR A NEED IN YOUR MARKET AREA. Fransen Group added pool and spa services two years ago when they realized that there were not enough pool companies in the Louisville, Kentucky, area to keep up with the demand. President Alex Fransen hired a friend with 15 years experience installing pools so that they could hit the ground running. Two years later, pool and spa work alone keeps several employees busy full time. The crew does an average of two site visits each evening and converts about 70 percent of those to jobs, Fransen says.

“It’s probably been our easiest sell and one of our most expensive as well,” he says.

In other markets, there may be a need for a certain pool aesthetic or type of customer service. In New York, Mainland has found that requests for higher-end, higher-priced pools such as rim flow, knife edge and infinity pools have grown substantially. Over in Poughkeepsie, New York, Elite Landscaping has found its niche with clients who are looking for more attention from their pool installers, says President David Katz.

“Our business model is about very attentive, custom, concierge service, which is not always the case. It doesn’t make a business good or not good because they don’t have a concierge service, it just makes a difference to some clients. Some want budget and some want attention,” he says.

DO EDUCATE YOURSELF. While Fransen was lucky to find an experienced pool installer and was able to hire him on, not

 Pool installations can be a case of trial and error for beginners, but there are always learning opportunities available – even for experienced installers.

everyone will have that opportunity.

Contractors can take advantage of educational programs available through organizations such as the Association of Pool and Spa Professionals and the National Swimming Pool Foundation, through manufacturers’ training systems or through home improvement licensing and certification programs, Katz says.

“There’s a lot of ways to be educated, and that can be daunting in itself,” he says. “When you go into a seminar where you become enlightened about how much you don’t know, you may start to panic. That’s why people don’t ask questions because they are embarrassed about what they don’t know and they don’t want to feel ignorant or exposed.”

Even with years of experience, there are opportunities to continue learning.

Prior to 2004, Elite Landscaping would sub out pool care and maintenance because its staff was not yet skilled in that area. They were then invited to get involved in the Northeast Spa and Pool Association education program and became certified to offer those services, Katz says.

“I would encourage everyone to seek any level of education. When you build a pool the same way for 40 years, you become stale and irrelevant. It is imperative that you update your knowledge regularly. There isn’t one company that isn’t going to learn something,” he says.

DO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE. Some education comes from trial and error. With each installation, contractors will become familiar with the intricacies of each type of pool, and develop best practices for each stage of the process.

Contractors will need to address site-specific conditions such as where egress points of the pool are, how the design of the pool affects circulation and hydraulics, and the area’s specific code requirements, Katz says.

“We did the best we thought we could do and then we learned that we could do it better. I learned most of what I know by seeing somebody else doing it and seeing how I could do it more efficiently. We’ve made as many mistakes that anyone can make, and we’ve learned from those mistakes just like anyone. The factor is how you resolve it. You’re going to make mistakes and then you’re going to beat yourself up about it if you care about what you do. Just go back and take care of it and do better the next time,” he says.

“Understand the systems that you’re installing and understand your limitations.”

Mike Mainland, project manager, Steven Dubner Landscaping

DON'T RUSH THROUGH IT. Pool installation work is front-heavy. First and foremost, contractors need to consider the logistical factors of physically bringing heavy equipment or cumbersome fiberglass shells across town and onto a property, Fransen says.

“All of those things add cost, you can get burned on that. There’s a lot of liability and a lot of legwork. A pool goof-up is very costly and you can lose all your profit on the job with a very minor screw up. If you’re not installing correct drainage and pump systems, you can have catastrophic failure down the road that will fall back on whoever installed it,” he says.

Once construction begins, contractors must be diligent. Mistakes are much more difficult to fix after the fact. Patios can settle and crack. Backwater can build up. A pool can even float out of the ground if the hydrostatic pressure is imbalanced, Mainland says.

“That can be a rather painful and expensive lesson to learn. Understand the systems that you’re installing and understand your limitations. Be cognizant of the ground conditions. Has it been disturbed? Does it need to be removed? The most important thing for a pool is that it’s built on solid, load-bearing ground,” he says.

As a result, contractors may need to implement grade beams, well points or other compensating design precautions to complete the project safely and successfully, Katz says.

DON'T DO IT FOR THE MONEY.

Katz cautions contractors to evaluate whether their business has the capacity to take on pool installations. It might be more profitable to build a referral relationship with another business rather than take on the work in house. This symbiotic relationship could limit liability and add profit.

“The truth is, there’s a percentage of profit that’s made

on every job, and it’s far less on quality hardscaping projects,” Katz says.

He adds that the labor, commitment of materials and the liability is more intensive.

“If you’re going to expose yourself to this kind of work and you’re not going to make more than you would in the stock market, then you really have to decide why you’re doing it,” he says. “If you can get a referral fee and get involved with facilitating the management of it, you might make the same amount of money with half of the headache.” **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Kentucky.

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DUE

YOUR MOWERS ARE PROBABLY your most heavily used equipment, but coming up a tight second are your aerators, dethatchers, and seeders. Making the right purchase and keeping each piece in top condition will not only keep business humming along smoothly, but can be vital to growth. Brandon Harris, sales and marketing leader of Tee Time Lawn Care in Plainfield, Illinois, experienced this in the fall of 2014.

"We had grown by 2,000 customers that year, which was great, (but) we were also falling way behind in aerations and seedlings," Harris says. "We got our CEO at that time to purchase two new Ryan ride-on aerators and we ended up getting all of our work done, and selling another 500 aerations that season," Harris recalls.

GET OFF TO THE RIGHT START. Making the right purchase isn't always a time for bargain hunting. Spending a bit more up front is often more cost-efficient in the long run.

Brad LaBree, warehouse manager of Virginia Green Lawn Care in Richmond, Virginia, says he likes to stick with a brand he trusts, and then looks for the lowest price.

"We own 57 Classen spilt aerators, and 32 Classen single drive aerators. We also own three Lawn Solution ride-on aerators," LaBree says.

Combined with diligent care and maintenance, that approach has worked well for the company. "After 12 years, (we're) still using the same aeration equipment that we started with. I have not had to replace a small engine on anything that we are using."

Harris says another important factor at purchase time is insurance.

"I look for long-term quality and equipment with warranties," he says. "Ensuring your equipment is covered and produces top of the line work is what you need, and if it takes a little more financially up front, it does pay off in the long run."

It's important to consider the type of clients you'll be servicing. Do you need your machines to maneuver tight corners and places or do you mainly work in open fields? Finally, look into ease of routine maintenance, such as oil changes or chain replacements, and availability of parts.

- Adhere to a schedule for lubricating moving parts, such as chains, wheels and tines. A common guideline is lubricating after every 40 hours of use. Check with your specific manufacturer for their recommendation.
- Brush clippings and organic matter away from tines, gears and wheels, and around motor.
- Always wear gloves and use a brush when cleaning slit seeder blades.
- Inspect chains daily and adjust to correct for excessive tightness or slack. A poorly fitting chain can result in further damage to the chain or sprockets.
- Aerator tines wear down over time, so monitor their size and replace when more than an inch of tine is gone (or the amount recommended by the manufacturer). Replace any bent or broken aerator tines.
- On painted surfaces, lightly sand away any rust and then touch up with a light coat of enamel paint.
- Empty your seeder's seed bin, discs and discharge area thoroughly before storing it. Unexpected germination can cause damage.

KEEPING THINGS RUNNING. Keeping up with routine care and maintenance can improve daily operations and reduce lost profits due to a down machine.

"Nothing will last forever, it all depends on what kind of maintenance you do to that machine," LaBree says. "I change the oil, spark plug, the air filter and tines plus inspect everything that moves on the equipment. I've also showed the technicians how to adjust the chains and keep them lubed. A dry chain can wear faster than an oiled chain."

The best way to make sure preventive maintenance is performed is to establish a system that works for your crews — one that both allocates time for the repair and documents when the work is done. Harris says that all technicians at Tee Time Lawn

Care are taught to clean and care for equipment daily, and record their work on a check-in sheet that goes to their staff mechanic.

Creating a routine for annual maintenance can also promote longevity.

"Our team literally breaks down anything without a warranty (at the end of the season) and rebuilds it with our on-staff mechanic," Harris says. "We send (anything under warranty) to the proper care professionals for care."

TAKE TIME FOR SAFE STORAGE. Between getting your clients ready for winter and putting your machines away properly, the end of the season is a busy time. But, paying extra attention to your equipment at the end of the season will get you up and running faster once when spring arrives.

Take time to thoroughly inspect and clean each machine for any damage before putting it into storage. Drain or treat any fuel remaining in the tanks.

LaBree had trouble with gas left in a tank over the winter one year. "The machines sat for three-fourths of the year so the gas would go bad and had to pull the carburetor off and clean it out," he says. "Then I started using an additive, and that helps dramatically."

LaBree ends every season by maintaining the oil, air filters and spark plugs to keep the engine running smoothly, and also adds an additive to the gas to prevent possible damage from ethanol in the gas.

Finally, let your equipment dry out completely before storing it in a place where it will be protected from the elements.

Your equipment is what keeps your business running, and with the right purchases followed by diligent upkeep, every investment you make will be money well spent. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Massachusetts.

DILIGENCE

Take the time to research and care for your fall equipment. **By Debbie Swanson**

MAKING SURE YOUR FITTINGS are solid is a basic step to ensure an irrigation system stays trouble-free for years, yet it's often overlooked or rushed. "You can't get sloppy," says Mitch Kalamian, president of Solena Landscape Company in Huntington Beach, California. "Taking shortcuts will undermine the foundation of the whole system."

In warm climates, schedule 40 or 80 PVC pipe is typically used. While there are a variety of push or quick fittings now available, many contractors still swear by older methods for longevity's sake. Solvent weld – which is just a fancy term for glue joints – is still commonplace with PVC.

After laying out your design, cut the PVC to length. Follow the old adage to measure twice, cut once. Use a pipe cutter, which has a ratcheting mechanism that makes the cleanest cut. A hacksaw is not recommended, as it leaves behind too many burrs, or jagged edges, which are where leaks start down the road, Kalamian says. If burrs do remain after cutting, use a file or sandpaper to remove them.

The next step is to dry fit your connection. If it's good, wipe purple primer inside the fitting and on the outside of the pipe. Hit the entire pipe all the way around a couple of times. Next, apply glue where you just applied primer. Be generous but don't let it get sloppy. Slip the fitting in and give it a twist about halfway around, which spreads the glue. Hold in place for about 15 seconds until the cement grabs.

While some contractors only use primer on main lines, Kalamian believes in priming all lines. "This is one of the biggest newbie mistakes we see," Kalamian says. "People skip primer, but the primer breaks down the coating of the pipe to ensure adhesion. It's a few extra seconds of work for very little extra cost, and it makes a better connection." Another tip: Duct tape the cans of primer and glue together to keep them upright



While there are a variety of push or quick fittings now available, many contractors still swear by older methods for longevity's sake. Solvent weld is still commonplace with PVC pipe.

DRIP-FREE FOR LIFE

Do the prep work to make your installations last.

By Arricca Elin
SanSone

and handy as you move around the yard.

Poly pipe, sometimes called tube, is used in areas where the ground freezes because it's more flexible and less susceptible to freeze-thaw cycles than PVC. "We make our connections old-school because they last forever," says Joe Sganga, owner of Irrigation Solutions, LLC in Southampton, New York. He prefers 1-inch diameter minimum poly. Use a pipe cutter to make a clean cut, then make the connection with an insert fitting, which has barbs that go into the tube. Place stainless steel crimp clamps (not screw clamps) on either side of the fitting, push the fitting all the way into the tube, then clamp.

Sganga says the most common mistakes he sees are when contractors use tube that's too small in diameter, or they let dirt or rocks get into the pipes. He also believes it's crucial to train your technicians thoroughly. "We have people come to us who say they have prior experience, but they have to work in the field with one of our crews for a minimum of three years before they can go solo," Sganga says. "It's a tough industry. We want to be sure they learn to do it right the first time so we're not going out on callbacks." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in the Northeast.



DEEP IN THE SNOW

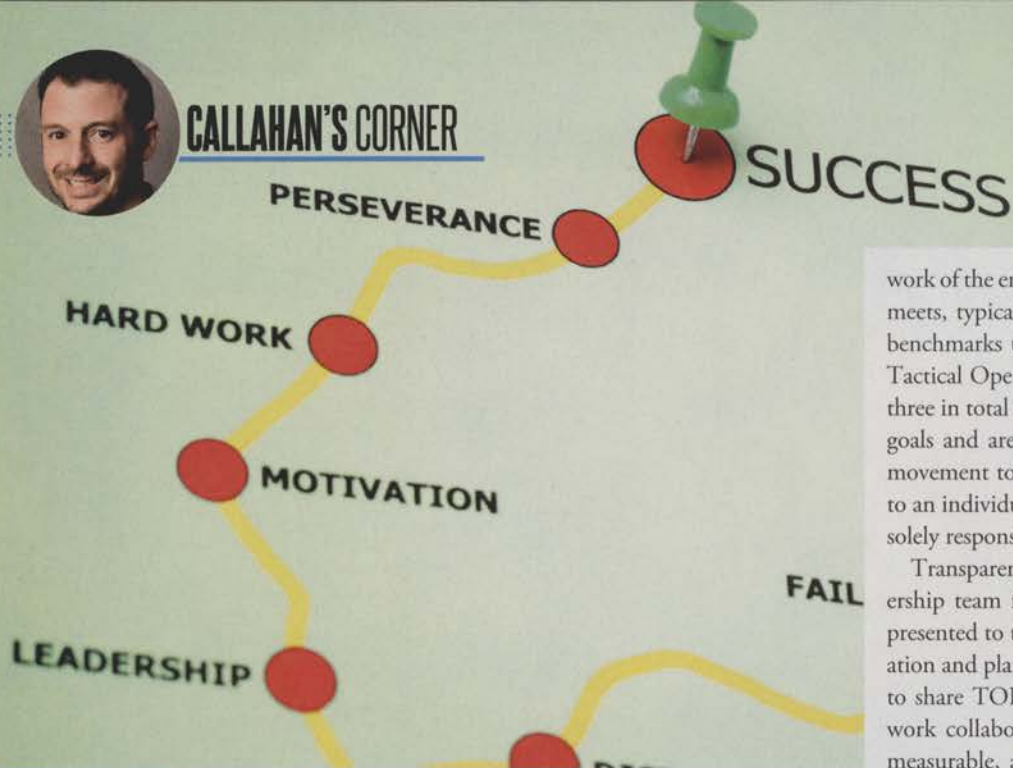
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PHOTO COURTESY OF PRECISION SNOW REMOVAL



A ROADMAP FOR SUCCESS

If you are anything like me, you are an entrepreneur who dreams big, has the drive to make things happen and does not rest until you have found a way to make your goals a reality. At Callahan's, we are striving to grow our snow business sales and bottom line profit in a very big way. Callahan's is using a simple goal setting and execution approach which serves as our road map for success.

This success begins with a laser-like focus on a BHAG or Big Hairy Audacious Goal. In their book, "Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies," James C. Collins & Jerry I. Porras state, "a true BHAG is clear and compelling, serves as a unifying focal point of effort, and acts as a clear catalyst for team spirit. It has a clear finish line, so the organization can know when it has achieved the goal ..." Every step after is one taken in an effort to achieve this end. Planning follows this path: First, establish yearly priorities, then set quarterly goals that align to the year-end outcomes and finally develop and commit to "the big three" weekly executables which drive all stakeholders to meeting quarterly benchmarks.

The core leadership team meets off site on various occasions each year to address strategic planning. First, the team meets, typically for three days, to address long-range strategy by establishing several yearly priorities for the company. The yearly priorities are created to directly support the attainment of the BHAG and govern the



work of the entire company. Next, the leadership team meets, typically for two days, to address short-range benchmarks that will drive progress. These quarterly Tactical Operating Priorities or TOPS are limited to three in total to ensure that we remain focused on the goals and are able to effectively manage continuous movement toward success. These TOPS are assigned to an individual on the leadership team who becomes solely responsible for the desired outcomes.

Transparency is key and therefore, once the leadership team finishes strategic planning, the work is presented to the entire company for further consideration and planning. At this point, TOP owners begin to share TOPS with members of the company who work collaboratively to establish SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) goals that will encourage execution of the TOPS. These goals are divided up amongst the members of the TOP team and the final step includes creating the weekly "big three." The weekly big three are executables that each individual is to engage in on a daily basis. A point system is used to ensure appropriate accountability and progress to meeting quarterly TOPS. An example of the big three for a member of the office team may include: weekly credit card processing on a specified day, weekly payroll processing, and completing daily/weekly billing.

The work does not end with planning and goal setting. There is a cycle of continuous meetings that foster collaboration, accountability and further planning. Quarterly meetings allow for progress reporting by TOP leaders regarding the measurable progress for the TOPS they are responsible for. After this the majority of the time is spent performing a SWOT analysis for each division of the company including commercial and residential snow removal. During this analysis, we address the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for each division. Weekly staff meetings allow for members of the team to review the week prior and discuss the current week through the lens of the following questions: What were the problems we faced last week? How can we help you perform better this week? What are we expecting for the current week?

It is critical to maintain a strong focus and commitment to strategic planning in order to grow your company. Without this focused cycle of continuous improvement, it is easy to forget about our goals with the ebb and flow of the winter season. Having both a strategic long-term view and laser-like focus on short-term executables has allowed us to grow and scale our snow operation with a clear road map for success. L&L

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DEEP IN THE SNOW

The business model for this Ontario snow removal company is ever-evolving. **BY HOLLY HAMMERSMITH**

Precision Snow Removal began in 1992 as a landscape company with a focus on landscape overhaul and construction. But, about six years ago, the company transitioned to primarily offer snow removal.

“Landscaping is such a seasonal business, and at the time we were having a fairly large turnover in staff,” says Kent Peddie, president of Precision Snow Removal, based in Ottawa, Ontario.

With the change in business model, Peddie has less employee turnover. “It’s a fairly different skill set,” he says. “When you’re doing landscape construction work, you need staff members who probably have been in school for

one or two years.”

Then field experience is required.

“With snow removal, you need to have a strong back if you’re doing a lot of the hand work or otherwise it’s mostly equipment operation, and that’s a much easier skill set to pick up and to learn,” Peddie says.

CHANGING GEARS. Precision Snow Removal has an annual revenue of \$800,000 to \$1 million with about 85 to 90 percent coming from winter work. The remaining revenue comes from the green season, during which the company will do some landscape construction, subcontracting for other companies. In addition, Peddie says he earns some off-season income through equipment rental.

Customers are split half and half between commercial and residential. The commercial side is primarily condominiums, homeowner associations and businesses. Peddie says he plans to further grow the commercial side.

“For us to expand our residential work, we would have to then enter into a new neighborhood which already has

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some large players that have virtually control of the whole market," he says.

To compete in that market, Peddie says he would need to sell mostly based on price – which is not a business move he wants to take.

"Our superior training methods and our emphasis on keeping up to date with current technology and best practices – that will give us a leading edge moving forward, marketing to the larger accounts," he says.

PREPPING FOR THE SEASON. Customer contracts usually begin in November and end in April, Peddie says.

As soon as the 18-week season ends, preparation for the next season begins – including meetings with property managers seeking quotes for the next season, Peddie says.

"Starting at about mid-June, we'll start putting a push for new quotations and starting in July, we'll begin the recruiting processes," Peddie says.

Commercial contracts are sent out before residential contracts, as commercial customers usually plan ahead a little more. Residential customers usually make a decision by the end of September to early October.

This past season, snowfall was nearly twice the average in the

region. "We needed additional staff to handle all of the snow," he says. "Our recruiting and hiring process was virtually ongoing."

Instead of wrapping up recruiting and training in the fall, Peddie says he was still hiring new workers in February.

On top of that, customers were hit with extra bills due to the higher-than-average snowfall.

INTENSIVE TRAINING. During peak season, the company has 48 employees, including six full-time managers. The remaining staff are seasonal hourly employees who come from landscaping backgrounds, roofing, renovation or the military.

"Anything we can do prior to the first snowfall that would make our job easier during the first snowfall, will be a huge benefit for us," Peddie says. "Training is just critical."

Classroom training includes slideshow presentations of equipment features and operation. Another class focuses on customer relations. And there is training for specific operational techniques – such as how to clear parking lots and driveways, and best practices for snow removal, Peddie says.

After the classroom training, all employees take a written exam. The exam is not a pass or fail exam but it is useful for

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THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

Many snow contractors will balk at spending \$30 on one shovel, Peddie says.

"That doesn't make a lot of sense in my mind," he says. "You want to give your staff the best tools you can for the job at hand."

This includes looking for shovels that have shock absorbing properties for repetitive hand and arm movements. Peddie says they use a lot of shovels with a D-shaped handle.

"That really lessens fatigue over the course of a shift, because as you're shoveling as the shovel hits small imperfections in the pavement, that sort of ripples up the tool and it actually hits and absorbs into our team members' wrists and arms," he says. "Imagine doing that for eight hours in a row or 12 hours in a row."

Weight of the shovel is also important, he adds.

"A larger shovel would just start exhausting one's muscles over the course of a long shift, so if it's a heavier snowfall, we encourage them to use shovels that are smaller and if it's light or fluffy snow, then we encourage them to use larger shovels," Peddie says.

revealing employee strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, exams reveal which employees need more education.

"What we did learn from the tests, some potential recruits and potential team members really don't have the best reading and writing skills," Peddie says. "That was good for us to know, so that if we gave them detailed documents in terms of what to do at each job site, we would realize they probably can't read this."

Finally, field training begins.

FLEET STRUCTURE. The Precision Snow Removal fleet is structured uniquely – there are 27 skid steer loaders – along with three other machines. There are also 14 to 18 pedestrians removing snow with shovels and snow blowers.

Teams operate from three different sites or

hubs – or storage equipment sites.

"Then even if they have to drive a machine for half an hour, 45 minutes to start getting to the route, it's more efficient for us to do that than have them self-dispatching out of locations that might be closer," Peddie says.

The hubs provide support and accountability.

"If machines have a hard time starting, they're able to help each other," Peddie says.

A few pickup trucks are driven by managers to inspect commercial properties, and trucks are used for salting as well. Pedestrian crews also use the pickup trucks equipped with shovels and snow blowers.

"A lot of our market is in urban Ottawa. The streets tend to be narrower because they're old cities and that's why we use skid-steer loaders. We specialize in these unique and tight areas," he says. **L&L**

2017
SNOW & ICE
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UNDIVIDED ATTENTION

Have you been asking yourself what went wrong when customers switch to another snow and ice contractor?

Here are three questions that capture your customers' attention.

BY STU SCHLACKMAN



You may be asking yourself, “Why didn’t I get the follow-up meeting with that recent prospect?” You asked all the right questions and got the answers you needed to qualify them. You had their budget, knew their goals and needs, and their time frame to make the decision. You knew who the decision-maker was, were keenly aware of your competitors in play and felt that you had the perfect solution to meet their needs.

So why didn’t it work out?

Unfortunately, this happens to many sales professionals, yet only one will earn the customer’s business. While you may be asking good questions, you may not be asking the right questions. You want to ask the type of questions that make the customer take notice of who you are and what you have to offer. What makes them pay attention to you? What are the questions that get the customer to say, “Tell me more.”

Customers get bored when you ask the basic surface questions. These are the questions that you need to have answered to better understand the customer’s situation so your solution can be positioned to meet the customer’s needs. Customers already know their situation. They want to know what makes you different from the pack, and how you can help them in a way that provides value no one else can deliver. And remember, the last thing your prospects want on a first appointment is a presentation! This meeting is not about you and what you offer. It should be all about your customer and how you can help them meet and exceed their needs and achieve their goals and objectives. Customers want the conversation to be all about them. In other words, let them talk — you should be listening.

What questions you should ask? Customers engage best when they are asked specific and targeted questions that pique their interest and highlight the consequences of unsolved issues. There are three critical types of questions you need to ask to build momentum and ensure that you get the next meeting.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES? To build the critical trusting relationship, you need to understand what’s really going on. Ask them, “What issues are you facing that most need to be resolved?” Do not start by asking what type of solution they are looking for or how much they will spend. Aim to learn where they are experiencing pain, how bad is the pain and how long has it been going on.

WHEN THE CUSTOMER SEES THE IMPACT OF THEIR ISSUES IN MULTIPLE AREAS, WE CAN START TO CRAFT A VIABLE SOLUTION.

The best sales people dig deep when it comes to understanding customer issues. You can further understand the pain by asking “why” questions. When you ask “why,” you’re bringing the customer into the past which allows them to elaborate on what happened in the first place.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE? Ask them, “How long have you been having this issue? Is it getting better or worse? Do you have any thoughts on why?” These probing questions will demonstrate that you are truly interested in understanding their situation to the fullest extent. It means you are building credibility with the customer and showing them you care. This approach takes the conversation to a better level of understanding and often they will even discover something they hadn’t seen before. Helping your customers understand the cause of their issue helps you understand which solutions to offer and helps them think through the situation.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT? Impact questions help to create a sense of urgency about the issue. Now that you more fully understand the problem and how it was caused, it’s time to talk about the possible impact on the business. Ask them, “How do you think this issue is having an impact on productivity, customer service, revenues or operating expenses?” When you can help them understand the impact, they are one step closer to taking action in your direction. When the customer sees the impact of their issues in multiple areas, we can start to craft a viable solution. You can start to help them see the future in a positive light by asking “what” questions. “What” questions focus on the possibilities. Now you can work with customer as a partner because you have a solid understanding of their issues, how they came about and how they are impacting the business.

Good selling is all about going below the surface by asking thoughtful, probing questions that help to uncover the key issues, the root causes and finally the impact their most painful issues can have on their business. As the saying goes, “If you ask better questions, you’ll get better answers.” The best sales professionals have great skill in asking the more significant thought-provoking questions that make a difference in the customer dialogue. **L&L**

The author is a sales expert and accomplished speaker.



A LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

BY KEVIN GILBRIDE

Earlier this year, the Massachusetts House of Representatives introduced Bill H.2369 – an act relative to prohibit contract provisions requiring subcontractors to assume liability for negligence of others. In short, it's an all-encompassing piece of legislation that fulfills the same mission as the Accredited Snow Contractors Association's model legislation, namely prohibiting your clients from pass-

ing on their negligence through hold-harmless agreements and indemnification clauses. The difference with H.2369 is this legislation would cover all industries, not solely snow and ice management.

The ASCA has kept a watchful eye on H.2369, and this week returned to the Massachusetts State House to support the legislation, not only to ensure its legislative momentum, but to protect the

interests of the professional snow and ice management industry in H.2369's legislative language.

Mike Weiss, founder and president of Weiss Commercial Property Services, has championed H.2369 and maintains constant communication with state legislators on its progress. In early June, Weiss and myself visited 20 state senate and house offices to share our industry's message with state

legislative representatives.

H.2369 has been assigned to the Labor and Workforce Development Committee. This is a joint committee with both state house and senate representatives. We stopped into each committee member's office to educate and generate support.

We also met with the office of the bill's sponsor, State Representative Thomas A. Golden, Jr. (D-Lowell), and offered supporting statements for him to use to help pass H.2369.

Finally, Weiss and I met with Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R-Gloucester). Senator Tarr was encouraged by the bill's progress, and added he felt posi-

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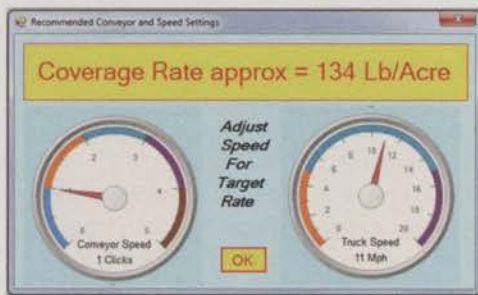
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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

2017
SNOW & ICE
Report

Lawn/Landscape SNOW

tive about the bill's continued forward momentum.

If you are a Massachusetts snow and ice management contractor, please reach out to your elected representative and ask them to support H.2369 when it comes up for consideration.

In other legislative news, The ASCA is planning a snow and ice management industry Legislative Day on the Hill in Washington, D.C. for Sept. 11 and 12.

A tentative agenda and specific details about a host hotel for the event are being finalized, and the ASCA will make a more detailed announcement will be made in the coming weeks.

The association's board and

the Government Affairs Committee elected to begin holding its own Day on the Hill in D.C. this year, as opposed to partnering with the National Association of Landscape Professionals. We've experienced great success in the many years we've taken part in Day on the Hill in conjunction with NALP. However, as we've grown as an association and our legislative message has become more focused, the board believes it is the right time to begin scheduling an initiative solely for those in the snow and ice management industry.

We welcome snow and ice management industry professionals from across the nation to take

WE HAVE TO BUILD AN AWARENESS OF WHO WE ARE AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS AN INDUSTRY TO OUR CONGRESS MEMBERS.

part in this event. We have to build an awareness of who we are as individuals and as an industry to our Congress members. While some details are still being finalized, it is important to get the initial information and, most importantly, the dates out in the industry to those planning to participate.

Those individuals planning to attend the ASCA's Day on the Hill should email me as soon as possible at kgilbride@gie.net.

Once we have an idea of the number of attendees and the need for rooms, we will find a hotel in the area that can accommodate our group. **L&L**

The author is the executive director of the ASCA.

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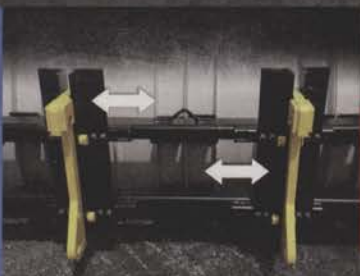
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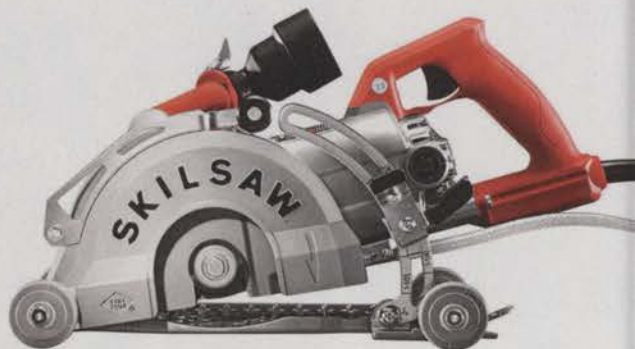
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The pitch: The iQ360x is a 14-inch masonry power saw with fully-integrated dust collection on a single source.

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- This OSHA-compliant unit cuts stone, brick, pavers and tile up to 4.5 inches high and 12 inches long, and is compact and light-weight for easy transport.

• Using the iQ QUICK-SPIN filtration system, the dust is captured in the cartridge filter and then self-contained in the lower chamber for easy disposal, cleanup and recycling. This dust containment has a capacity of up to 50 pounds.

For more information: IQpowertools.com



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time to shine

Holiday lighting is set to take off this year.

By Katie Tuttle

CHRISTMAS MUSIC. RED AND GREEN. Outdoor holiday light displays. You may not want to believe it, but it's almost that time of year again. And while your customers may not be thinking about it yet, this year's trends should be on your radar.

Most companies in the holiday lighting industry only have two months to get all of their customers' work done, which means planning ahead is important. It's also important if you're thinking about getting into the industry.

"Obviously the economy is booming right now," says Mike Marlow, vice president of Holiday Bright Lights in Chicago. "Whoever's getting into this business is going to grab a good market share this year."

Marlow says he's seen an increase in commercial properties requesting holiday lighting.

"More cities are asking for more lights on the properties now," he says. "More businesses are seeing they can get more attention to the building and more community spirit ... It's not just about homeowners anymore."

He says companies that focus on the niche market of commercial properties will see a rise in decorating profit.

"Let's say a typical lawn and landscape company might have 300 (customers)," he says. "Out of those 300, there might only be 25 to 50 of those accounts that are doing holiday lighting. I bet you there are only four or five (landscapers) really going profitably after commercial accounts."

SHINE ON

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HOLIDAY LIGHTING

This winter, and in the next five to 10 years, Marlow says to expect more RGB lights and fewer static lights. These are red-green-blue changing lights.

"You can put something on a house or even in a tree and a professional guy can set up special colors and have it go through different functions and that can be programmable," he says. It's set up over Wi-Fi so if a customer calls, the company can change the colors to what they want.

Taylor Olberding, operations manager for Heroes Lawn and Landscape in Omaha, Nebraska, says RGB "pretty much solves all the problems of color" when it

comes to holiday lighting.

When it comes to colors, Olberding says his client base is split 50/50 with warm white colors who have the same decorations every year. Returning clients also often want more than the previous year.

As the displays grow, they get more creative he says. Anything that can include nighttime and daytime appeal, is a plus.

"Garlands and bows you see during the day, so adding stuff to the trees that makes a statement and then is lit up at night," he says, "you see it around the clock."

LED lights are also continuing an upward trend, which

shouldn't come as a surprise. "Out of 120 residential properties, maybe six to 10 of them are incandescent," Olberding says. Marlow guesses about 90 to 95 percent of displays are now LED.

He's also seen a lot of companies going with commercial grade field bulbs or C9 bulbs for long life. "Those are big key elements," Marlow says. "You have to have the right product to make it last many, many years. That's how you become more profitable each year."

Marlow also says connectivity is a reason why more people are going with LED over incandescent.

"I can connect 40 LED

strands, but I can only connect five incandescent," he says. "That's more cords on the job."

Now is the time to start stocking up on these new items because decorating season will be here before you know it, and Marlow is expecting it to be a big year.

"I talked to a guy in Nashville who said he thinks Christmas is going to be double (in 2017) and it was insane last year," he says, adding that the man went to different suppliers to stock up on landscaping materials and they were completely out of product. "The last time this happened was before the economy dropped in 2008." **L&L**



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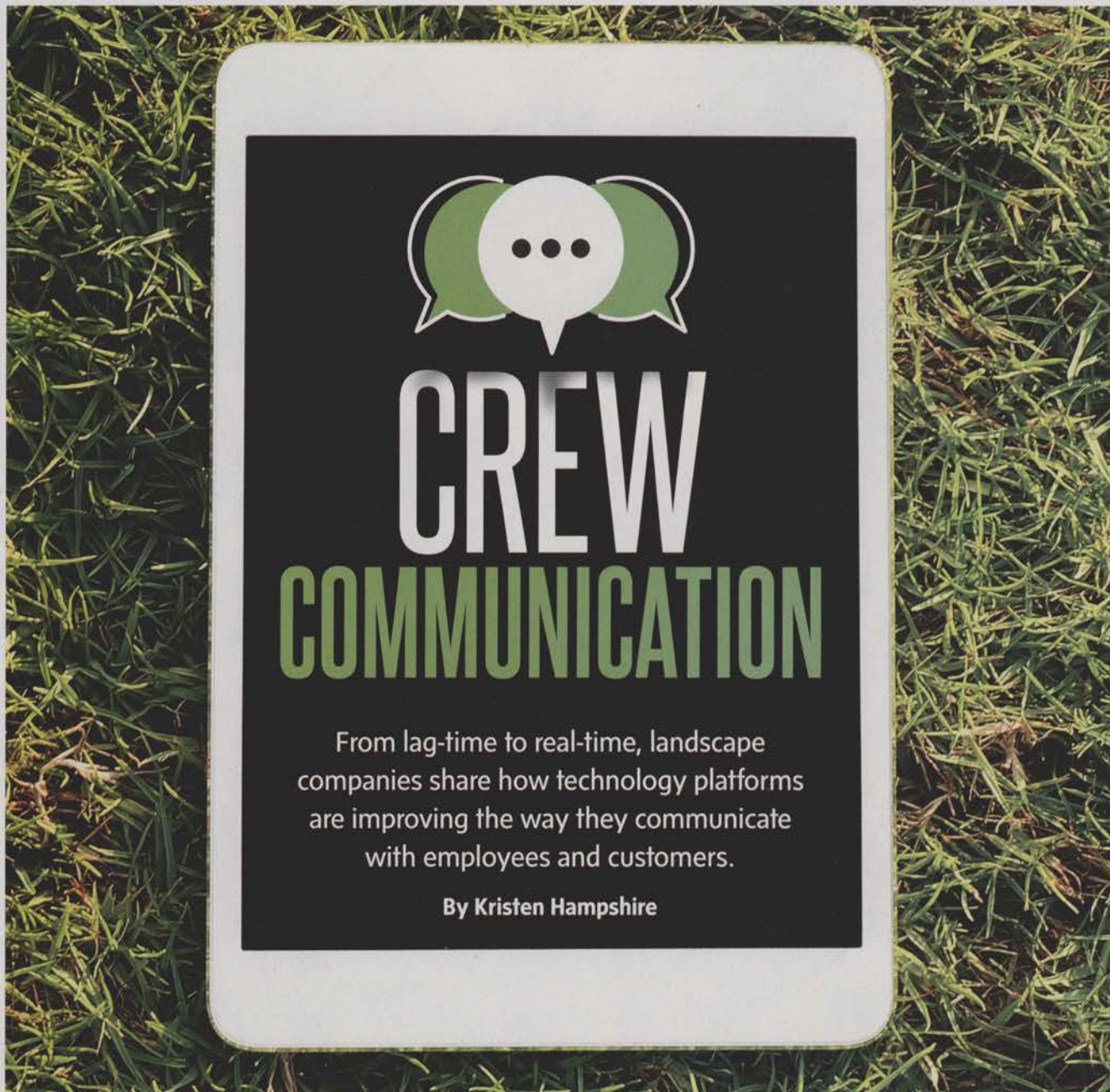
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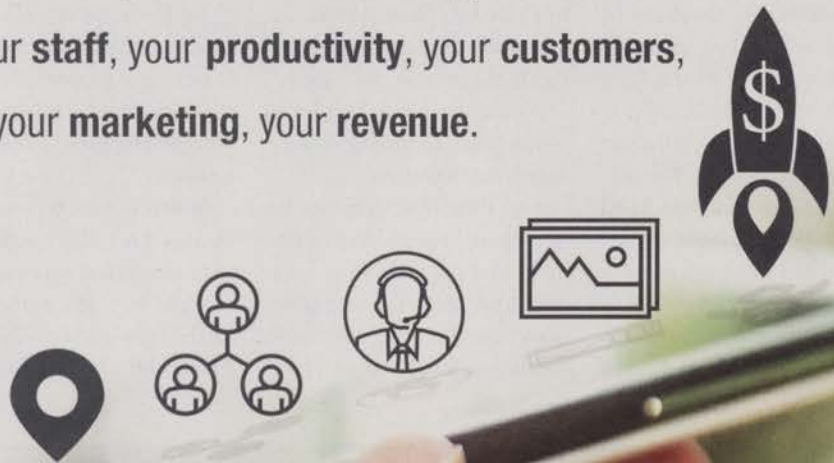
STAYING CONNECTED WITH CREWS IN THE FIELD – seamless information sharing in real-time – improves operational efficiencies and enhances the customer experience.

“It’s important that as an industry that we all keep thinking of new ways to involve technology in what we do so we can be more efficient and better serve customers,” says Michael Mayberry, chief technology officer, Level Green Landscaping, Marlboro, Maryland.

Lawn & Landscape spoke with three companies that are implementing technology platforms that boost crew communication, and more.






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DRIVING COMMUNICATION WITH TECHNOLOGY.

There's no shuffling paper at Fit Turf, where every driver is equipped with a tablet, mobile printer and access to the company's software so routes can be adjusted in real-time. Information can be traded to and from the main office electronically.

"We are progressive in the way we work," says Paul Wagner, president of the Colorado-based company, which offers lawn care, tree care and mosquito control. "We have a big flat screen in our main office so we can track drivers at any minute of the day,

and we can push invoices to them."

If a service call comes into the main office, the administrator can see which driver is within a mile of that account. "We can push that service call to the driver so they can handle the situation right away."

Fit Turf simply delivers better service when technology is driving communications.

And, there's less frustration for employees because they can be updated about customers' needs while they are in the field rather than returning to properties to handle issues the next day.

TECH TIPS:

- **EQUIP THE TEAM.** Wagner provides tablets for every driver so they have the means to remotely fill out service forms and communicate with main office.
- **SELL THE SYSTEM.** Getting buy-in from the team is critical – they are the ones in the field using it on a daily basis. By showing them how technology can make their jobs go more smoothly – and how it builds better relationships with customers – Fit Turf easily sells employees on why using the technology matters.
- **SET EXPECTATIONS.** There's no other option than paperless at Fit Turf, so crews know they are required to use the tablets and communication system that's in place. With improved communication comes greater accountability. "Customers are happier and there's less friction in the office," Wagner says.

Fit Turf has access to information via tablet. "If a technician is treating a property, he can be more efficient because he knows what he's supposed to do," Wagner says.

When a sales representative signs on a new client, notes about the property and its requirements are put into the software via tablet right on site. This keeps service consistent with what was

promised, Wagner points out.

If a technician is on site and notices a property needs a service or treatment, he or she can make that note via tablet and the information is recorded into the system. "Customers get an email after we do a treatment that breaks down what we did, who did it, along with a picture of the technician," Wagner says.

So, the real-time technology

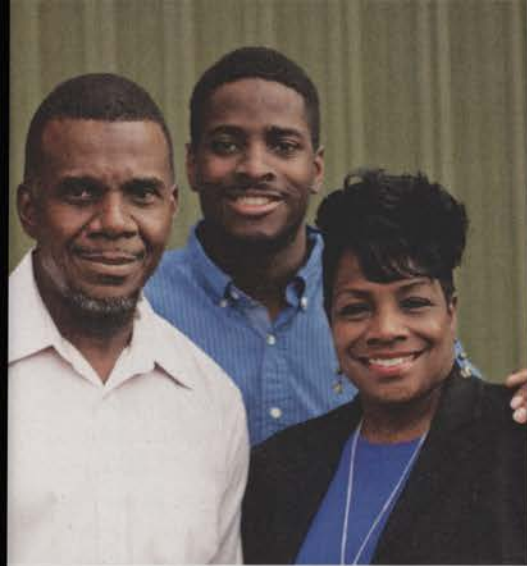
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TECHNOLOGY

not only benefits employees because they can immediately get information they need to deliver the service each customer expects, it also builds relationships between technicians and clients.

Specifically, a pre-service email the day before treatments includes details about the service along with a photo and bio of the technician. "Then, we follow up service with an email that says, 'This is what I found, this is what I did,'" Wagner relates.

There's no extra work for technicians. They're recording notes in the field that fill the blanks for these service emails (and update the main office). "We might offer some recommendations, such as

'Water your lawn more,' or 'Trim this area of your tree,'" Wagner says. "If there is more elaborate information we need to share, we can go into that detail."

Tablets have a voice-to-text feature so technicians can seamlessly record information as they perform service.

Wagner says implementing this technology has improved crew communication with the main office and employee retention. There's no misinformation and unfulfilled expectations.

"The key is to sell your staff on the advantage of using this vs. other ways," Wagner says, acknowledging that training is critical to be sure employees

adopt the technology. "Once they get comfortable with it, they embrace it and realize it makes their job better and more efficient. They love using it."

RUNNING BUSINESS IN REAL TIME.

Kris Ashby owns two landscape firms in Utah. Elite Grounds in Pleasant Grove has 57 maintenance crews, and Spectrum Landscape Services in Midway runs a dozen. "All of our trucks have GPS—I like real-time information," he says. "I wanted the same out of my scheduling and billing system."

Ashby was looking to accelerate the billing process so he could collect faster. And, he wanted to move toward a web-based system that would allow him to share information with crews instantly, whether that's an updated route or a service note for an account the crew will be visiting that day.

Ashby oversees 90 employees; most are in the field. "It's hard to get real-time with everyone," he says. He needed greater accountability and accuracy with labor hours. So, he implemented software a year and a half ago at Spectrum Landscape Services, and at Elite Grounds just this year.

"It's the ability to see what's happening in the field real-time,



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TECH TIPS:

to communicate with managers and change schedules on the spot," Ashby says.

When a crew arrives at a job site, the crew leader clicks "in" on the job and then "out" when it is complete. "This information goes into the system immediately so I can figure out billable hours faster," Ashby says.

If he notices that certain jobs are taking longer than what was budgeted, he can make adjustments to those account fees down the road – and he knows to charge more for similar properties. "It makes us more profitable," Ashby says.

Also, this information helps Ashby and managers find out

why a certain job is taking longer. Is it because equipment is not performing optimally? Is it because the crew could be doing the job more efficiently? Where's the weak link?

"We are not waiting until the end of the month or end of the season to look at numbers," Ashby says. "We're looking at numbers daily."

The system has also helped Ashby evaluate routing efficiency. "We can track oil changes, and even instant damage reports can be filed whether it's for equipment

• **LATEST REPORT.** Daily reports show budgeted vs. actual time on each job. "I can ask the manager to explain why a job was completed especially fast, or why a job was lagging," Ashby says. The performance of equipment and personnel can be monitored, and this information helps the team. "We can take care of problems in the field much faster."

• **DELEGATE A CHAMPION.** "Make sure you have someone on your team who really understands the technology," Ashby says. He appointed one staff member as the leader of adopting the technology, and this person was charged with training supervisors.

• **MAKE THE COMMITMENT.** Adopting new technology is not an overnight process. Ashby admits his goal to implement the program within three months was aggressive. But he also realizes that fully embracing the technology will take a good year. "Everyone has a different learning level, and we have to work with people at their speed," Ashby says. "It doesn't matter if we have to spend 10 hours with one person and 30 minutes with another, we just want to have the system working cross the board."

or an issue with a truck," he says. "We have so many trucks, trailers and equipment that we need that extra accountability. Now a manager can report damage, and it goes into the system immediately so we can be aware of it."

To assist with integrating this software, Ashby delegated one

tech-savvy employee to the task of overseeing the process. "We gave him a three-month goal for learning the system, which is really aggressive," Ashby relates. "This was in January (at Elite). And we wanted the system up and running in March."

Customer information, job

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costing details, materials prices and more were uploaded into the system. The investment in time was significant, but now both companies can stay in close contact with crews and customers. That's priceless. "If I'm out looking at a property, I can take a picture, upload that and then contact the manager responsible for the property and show them so they can reply," Ashby says. "It's constant communication."

Also, the technology is allowing the businesses to run leaner. There's no payroll department or extra administrative professionals in the office. "There are about five people in the main office and no real 'departments,'" Ashby says. "Doing digital is saving overhead expenses."

CREATING COMMUNITY.

Facebook connects the Level Green family – all 200-plus employees can check status updates and find out what's going on within the company and realize they're a part of something bigger than their branch alone. "We have some branches that are 20 or 30 miles apart from each other, so our Facebook page is nice because it gives us an opportunity to share what's happening at different locations," says Michael Mayberry, chief technical officer at the Marlboro, Maryland-based company.

The Facebook page is not solely for internal use. But of the 358 likes, many are associated with the company as employees or family members. A status update might share pictures from a barbecue at one branch, a customer appreciation lunch or a team-building fishing trip.



Meanwhile, Level Green operates two blogs. One is focused on technical information and articles for clients. The Level Green Culture Blog is all about the team, a back-stage look at operations and opportunities at the business.

Culture blog topics include articles like, "An Inside Look at Our DC Management Team," that talks about the company's management training program that prepares candidates for positions as an operation manager or account manager, or, "Up Close" blogs that highlight an individual at a company, share how they got into the industry and a bit about what drives them as a worker and individual. For example, branch manager Paul Wisniewski shares the "power of thank you," and why he uses those two words often with his team to let them know how much their hard work means to the company.

"Not only do people in our company learn about others they work with, but our customers get to know us better, too," Mayberry says. "We think that's very important. We want to have a family feel and so we make sure that our customers also get an opportunity to be a

"We have so many trucks, trailers and equipment that we need that extra accountability. Now a manager can report damage, and it goes into the system immediately so we can be aware of it."

Kris Ashby, owner, Elite Grounds and Spectrum Landscape Services

part of that, too."

As for crew communication in the field, Level Green is working to optimize its system, which currently consists of an intranet with certain forms that allow for viewing from the main office.

For example, a Property Service Report that crew leaders fill out on their cell phones addresses tasks covered on the site.

"The form is automatically emailed to the operations manager and account manager for awareness of what was done that day, and then upon reviewing those the account manager can forward the form along to the customer," Mayberry says.

Level Green is in the process

of developing its own electronic system that will connect the dots between the forms and information it currently collects via Excel. "We are working to move to a computer-based system for scheduling – we use Excel a lot," Mayberry says. "That way, crews can communicate through the web while they are in the field."

Mayberry says Level Green considered off-the-shelf options. "But we want something that fits exactly what we need, and we want to be able to adjust and tweak every aspect of the system, so developing it in house allows us to do that," he says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.



TECH TIPS:

- **CAPTURE ATTENTION.** Level Green uses Instagram to showcase its projects – a way to visually communicate capabilities to customers. Mayberry takes these photos and posts to the social media site. "It basically allows us to have a digital portfolio that we can refer customers to."
- **BE PATIENT.** "No matter what you try to implement, it's not going to go perfectly because there are so many variables with technology," Mayberry says. "It takes patience and understanding."
- **FIND A FIT.** "When it comes to technology, it's not always going to go right the first time so you have to persevere and really work to make it fit your needs," Mayberry says, explaining why Level Green has waited to develop its own system rather than using an off-the-shelf option.

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ABOVE: GIE+EXPO attendees will have the opportunity to explore 900 exhibits on the show floor and see six demonstrations Thursday and Friday.

DEALERS CAN PICK AND CHOOSE from new Dealer Workshops sponsored by BOB-CAT at the Dealer Resource Center during this year's GIE+EXPO. During the show, dealers can stop by for educational programs like Profit Dealer Boot Camp led by Bob Clements and his team on Wednesday. Industry experts will lead two sessions of new 30-minute workshops continuing Thursday and Friday.

Other new dealer workshops this year include, the UTV University and Technician Training and Certification. Dealers will also have an exclusive lounge area in the resource center.

Acclaimed author and expert economist Alan Beaulieu will deliver the keynote address on Dealer Day at this year's GIE+EXPO. Beaulieu has delivered economic analysis seminars to thousands of business owners and executives for the last 25 years.

In his expo session titled "A

Good Year Ahead," Beaulieu will help attendees understand the complexities of economic information, explain the current economy, and translate that into what it means for businesses today. The "Kick-Off" keynote will begin at 1:30 on Oct. 18. GIE+EXPO begins Wednesday, Oct. 18 for dealers and Oct. 19-20 for other industry participants.

Co-located with Hardscape North America, GIE+EXPO attendees will have the opportunity to explore

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Free concerts return to Fourth Street Live! with Runaway June opening for headliner Uncle Kracker on Oct. 18. The Crashers with Alaska and Mandi perform Oct. 19 and V-Groove closes GIE+EXPO on Oct. 20.

Eight National Association of Landscape Professionals workshops will cover an expansive selection of topics for an additional \$85. Workshops include:

- The 4 Keys to Crush Your



GIE+EXPO will feature 20 acres of outdoor demo space, giving attendees the chance to test products being displayed on the show floor. It will be open all day Thursday and Friday.

Goal by Jeffrey Knight of Ewing Irrigation and Landscape Supply

- The Success Marketing Strategy for Growing Your Landscaping Business by Christopher Yates of Success Landscape Marketing

- 50 Sure-Fire Ways to Reduce Cost & Increase Profits by Bill Arman and Ed Laflamme of The Harvest Group

Hardscape services will take center stage at several workshops as well for an additional \$50.

New products are a must-see

as exhibitors plan to launch several new products. The 20-acre Outdoor Demonstration Area will be open all day Thursday and Friday.

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Michael, left, Tim and Mark Pugh eventually learned how to get along and run their business.

BROTHERLY LOVE

(continued from page 44)

Before spinning off the company, the Pughs met with their long-time marketing advisor John Malmo to conceptualize the pest control brand. They came up with an image of Rosie the Riveter and the tagline, “Women declare war on bugs!” Most of the techs are women, at least on the residential side, because most of their residential pest control clients are women.

The Pugh brothers share ownership of these two newer companies with key employees who have grown with each division. “As we’ve expanded and diversified, we’ve tried to promote from within because we want (employees) to have opportunities to own their own business, too,” Michael says.

“We’re always looking for opportunities because we want to keep the people we have,” Mark says. “We’ve got to innovate and grow and create opportunities for younger guys to be able to come up through the ranks. The addition of this (pest control) business allowed us to offer ownership to some key employees in our landscape company.”

GROWING STRONG.

Since spinning off as Rosie’s, the pest control business has doubled in size. Pugh’s Earthworks – the largest company in the family – grew by \$1 million in 2015 (a 10-12 percent growth) but saw a relatively

flat 2016. This was buffered by record profitability in both the courier business (which grew 15 percent last year) and the flower shops (which grew 4 percent last year, following 8 percent growth in 2015).

Eventually, Mark wants to spin off a chemical division, but for now the Pugh brothers are focused on growing their existing companies. Earthworks has six locations (in Memphis, Nashville, and Jackson, Tennessee; Jackson and Southaven, Missouri; and Little Rock, Arkansas) and Rosie’s has potential to expand into all the same markets. “The scale is tremendous because we can open up Rosie’s Pest Control in every landscaping office as an add-on,” Mark says.

Pugh’s Flowers has doubled in size over the last decade as other flower shops consolidate. With three shops in Memphis, and a recently acquired fourth location in Southaven, the flower shop’s long-term growth strategy will include more acquisitions. Meanwhile, as customers of the courier business start requesting deliveries outside of the city – like from Memphis to Little Rock – the Pughs are looking to expand across the region.

“The growth potential of the businesses is huge,” Mark says. “All of the markets we’re in can still grow and we’ve identified other markets within our regional footprint where we want to go. There’s (lots of) opportunity, and we’re not just looking at it (in terms of) one specific location; it’s about capitalizing on our regional presence.” **L&L**

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STATE OF THE INDUSTRY REPORT

Shake the money tree

Landscapers across the country are raising prices (and profit margins) as the economy improves. by Brian Horn

AS COSTS FOR LABOR, MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT CONTINUE TO INCREASE, landscapers are finding some solace in their success with raising prices. Nationwide, almost two-thirds—63 percent—of landscapers say their revenues were down last year compared to the same time last year. But those who have raised their prices are seeing a different picture.

POLITE PASS

When Randy Newland presents customers with a price increase, he doesn't know if they will accept, but he is hoping they are at least open to negotiating.

"Sometimes it's a percent, up to 10 percent," says Newland, owner of New Way Landscape & Tree Services, Newlandville, Mo. "I don't know if they will accept, but he is hoping they are at least open to negotiating."

"We will probably say we can't perform to expectations at current rates and we will offer our go-go-go solution," he says. "The only customers he doesn't increase prices for are those who have been with the company less than a year, and any

New Way Landscape & Tree Services
 Location: Newlandville, Mo.
 Revenue: \$1.5 million
 Services: Lawn care, tree care, mulch, irrigation, etc.

contracts for military housing, since those are non-negotiable contracts. Newland's increases have been for cost of things, and he can't recall the last time he increased prices for existing customers to improve profit margins. But he is doing that by building in a 7 to 10 percent increase on new work he's building on this year.

"All of us in Sun Diego are pretty close to the same bid rate," he says. "It's all a fraction of hours, which equals a monthly price. Say we come in at \$4 per hour and someone comes in at \$3 per hour, well we probably aren't going to turn down the job, we'll just adjust the rate hours."

"If we lose them, we lose them. ... We really want good, quality clients."

Liza Lightfoot, Arent Gardening and Landscaping

Lawn & Landscape



DRAFT YOUR DREAM TEAM

- **HAVING A SET OF PRINCIPLES** for building teams is vitally important. Without them, you are sure to hire the wrong people far too often. I have developed a set of principles based on experience, knowledge and a little help from my friends.

I recently had the opportunity to test my principles for building teams with a very difficult partner who was a very successful executive coach. Even though he taught these principles to others, he did not live them and, consequently, had very high staff turnover.

So, if you want to build a high performing team, you must establish some ground rules. These ground rules are the basis for healthy relationships and healthy communications. Here are just a sample that I like, but you might want to have your own and have more than these:

- Honor all agreements. Clear up any potential or actual broken agreements as quickly as possible.
- Be on time or be early to all appointments, meetings and deadlines. Respond to all requests/contacts within 24 hours.
- Finish what you start. Organizational integrity depends on individual integrity. Do what you



JONATHAN GOLDHILL is the founder of the Goldhill Group, a consulting firm based in California.

say, say what you mean and don't say it mean.

- Stay in exchange. Commit to maintain open and honest communications in all your business dealings.
- Demand compliance with the rules. You must be willing to call people out when they break the rules and be called out when you break them.
- Do whatever it takes to win. Support a performance-based culture where accountability and results are prized, but not at the peril of people or processes.
- Drive a true sense of urgency into your team. Demand performance based on measurement and become unreasonable

about demanding results from yourself, your team, the market and the universe.

Keep in mind that trust is a two-way street and requires communication, so consider these tenets around the subject of trust and communication:

- Communicate trust. Find ways to build trust in them. Show them regularly that you do trust them. Let your partner take the lead on a project. Tell them you trust in their ability to perform a job well or manage a challenging client relationship.
- If there is friction, consider that maybe it's you who's difficult to get along with. Try fixing yourself and you may end up fixing your teammate.
- Show them that you're not greedy. You're working to build the same money pile for the most part anyway. Send them a client that you could have taken

for yourself. Do anything to demonstrate your willingness to share.

- Show them that you have their back. People resist you and put up walls out of fear of losing something. Maybe it's their pride. Maybe it's money. Let them see you are looking out for them and not out to get something from them.
- Ask their opinion on a variety of decision-making topics. Follow their opinion with, "I think you're making a good point." If you don't go with their opinion, simply be upfront about the matter. Start with, "This time we're going to do something different."
- Let them shine as well. Don't take every opportunity to be the spokesperson for your team. On that next speaking opportunity, let them do it or at least ask them if they would like to.

A team that plays together stays together. Celebrate all wins. Build momentum and energy in your team by stopping to recognize the wins both large and small. Commit to track them and review them with the team regularly.

Hold one another accountable. A team that holds one another accountable:

- Ensures that poor performers feel pressure to improve
- Establishes respect among team members who are held to the same high standards
- Develops an ability to learn from mistakes
- Avoids excessive bureaucracy around performance management **L&L**

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