

MAJOR M&A ACTIVITY PG. 11 JOHN DENISON 1955-2017 PG. 28 THE BACKYARD DREAM PG. 64

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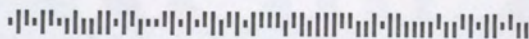
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## NUMBERS GAME

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2017 BENCHMARKING YOUR BUSINESS REPORT

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DID YOU KNOW?

➔ The average yearly salary for an owner/president of a lawn care or landscaping company is \$55,000. PG. B6

SNOW MAGAZINE



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# COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS TO GENERATE JOBS

Online review sites and social media serve as outlets to connect with customers.

**ONLINE REVIEW SITES** are a great opportunity for you to gather feedback and information from your customers. While some would argue that these sites are mostly used as a place for consumers to complain about their negative experiences with local businesses, that's rarely the case. There are more five-star reviews than one-, two- and three-star reviews combined. This is reflective of most consumer experiences, as well.

People turn to online review sites because they want to share the great experiences they had with others and let them know where to spend their hard-earned money. Review sites are

not just for consumers, though. They also provide an opportunity for businesses to insert themselves into the conversation by engaging with reviewers and expanding on the information they provide.

Think of it this way: a customer of yours, happy or not, decides to announce in front of 20 other potential customers about how their experience with your business was. Would you respond to them or simply stare blankly until they walked away? Naturally you would respond. Head to [bit.ly/customercommunication](http://bit.ly/customercommunication) for some ways to respond to reviews on social media and review sites.



## TELL US ABOUT YOUR OPERATION!

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## WAY BACK WHEN

**THIS MONTH WE'RE FEATURING OUR BENCHMARKING REPORT.** Take a look at our report from 2012 at [bit.ly/Benchmarks2012](http://bit.ly/Benchmarks2012) to see how industry averages have changed over the last five years. To explore more past issues, check out our archives at [bit.ly/backissuesil](http://bit.ly/backissuesil).

## INSTAGRAM

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We like to highlight the events we attend, and recently Editor Brian Horn went down to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for the annual RISE meeting.



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**Brian Horn**

Editor | Lawn & Landscape

The follow-up call is so important to getting out in front of any areas where expectations weren't met.

# Want vs. need

**A**s I began to make money as an adult, and was forced to spend money like an adult, I realized there is a difference between spending it on what you *want* and what you *need*.

The fun stuff usually falls under the “want” category and all the other stuff is a “need.”

Recently, I had to spend money on a need and not a want. My wife and I began to notice our back porch was slanted, which we knew wasn't going to be cheap to fix. So, we bit the bullet, took some bids and settled on a company we were comfortable with to pump up the foundation.

To make a long story short, the job was not done to our expectations – the porch is still slanted, there were piles of dirt everywhere and the report we got from our neighbor, who was home during the work, was less than spectacular.

We didn't even receive a bill or a warranty for the work, and while communication was great before the sale, it was non-existent after.

Because the salesman's voicemail was full, I had to call the main office and speak with the owner. After that conversation, the salesman got back to us right away and set up another visit.

When the company returned, a different salesman showed up, and he was very apologetic. He went over each of our complaints and explained why the porch couldn't be pumped enough to be even, but assured us that the foundation was

stable and covered by warranty. While the company eventually made it right, I wouldn't recommend them to anyone else. If the salesman would have communicated after the job was finished, this would have left a better taste in my mouth.

As I thought about how annoying this whole process was, and how I didn't even want to spend this money, I looked at it through the eyes of one of your customers.

Sure, you have clients who hire you because they don't have the time to maintain their property, but a lot of people who work with you want to because you'll make the property look great.

The homeowner is looking forward to the new patio you put in, and the property manager is excited to drive up and see how you've improved the complex they manage. They have high expectations because they want to spend money with you.

Remember to convey to your employees that your customers are excited to see your work when it's done, but with that comes with lofty expectations. The follow-up call is so important to getting out in front of any areas where expectations weren't met.

While it's not fun to hear complaints, that quick phone call is just another way to give the customer a reason to want to spend money with you. — *Brian Horn*

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Leading business media for landscape contractors.

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# Best-laid PLANS

When an unexpected death threw a wrench into Sebert Landscape's acquisition plans, the company had to make some quick changes.

By Kate Spirgen

**W**hen Sebert Landscape bought Wisconsin-based Kenosha Grounds Management in April of 2016, it was an ideal buy. The \$4-million, 30-employee company is located midway between Chicago and Milwaukee near a major highway, and Sebert had been looking for a spot outside of Illinois due to friendlier government regulations.


"The Chicago market is a big market and if we're going to continue to grow, we have to expand to other locations in order to create opportunities in our company," says Jeff Sebert, owner of the Bartlett, Illinois-based company. "Nobody wants to stay the status quo, at least in my organization. We like to challenge; we like to be able to create opportunities and grow and create something different that the industry hasn't quite caught up to yet."

According to Sebert, not only are Wisconsin's tax codes a little friendlier, the workers' compensation laws are better for employers. Add onto that the fact that Illinois is considering a service tax and the move out of state looked promising for the company's seventh location.

"We're talking just about \$1 million a year in costs that have to be passed on to the customer one way or another even though you'll certainly have customers saying, 'I'm not going to pay that. That wasn't in our contract or that wasn't in our proposal' or whatever the case may be so you're going to be fighting that issue, but we just have, unfortunately, a huge number of incompetent politicians ... in this state that have proven the fact that it's not a friendly state to do business in at all," Sebert says.

By April 2016, the paperwork was signed, sealed and



A man in a dark t-shirt and pants walks away from the camera on a paved path. He is carrying two dark buckets, one in each hand. The path is lined with large, mature trees with dense green foliage. In the distance, a white two-story house is visible through the trees. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The overall mood is peaceful and professional.

There's a lot on the line.

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delivered, and Kenosha founder and owner Rich Oscarson was slated to stay on for three years to help keep everything running smoothly during the transition.

Then, two days after the deal was done, Oscarson sent Sebert a photo of himself doing some work with prairie grasses, one of the company's signature services. "I called him up and chatted and I said, 'That's a great picture,'" Sebert says.

About 30 minutes later, Sebert got another phone call from an employee saying that there was a problem. Oscarson was on the ground, surrounded by paramedics, police and firefighters.

"He had a massive heart at-



**"WE LIKE TO BE ABLE TO  
CREATE OPPORTUNITIES**

**AND GROW AND CREATE  
SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAT THE  
INDUSTRY HASN'T QUITE CAUGHT  
UP TO YET."**

— Jeff Sebert, owner, Sebert Landscape

tack and we lost the owner and founder of Kenosha Grounds two days after the deal was signed," Sebert says.

The small, family-owned

company's employees were devastated and Sebert put its plans for changes on hold out of consideration for Oscarson.

The employees wanted to create a memorial, and so Kenosha installed the Richard Oscarson Memorial Prairie in a nearby park where Oscarson and his team had planted memorial trees in the past. Complete with a walking path, butterfly garden and memorial stone, Sebert felt it was a fitting tribute.

"Were just really supportive and worked with the employees to implement that memorial park area and I think that kind of helped everybody heal a little bit and understand that we were

part of helping them get through that," he said.

Kenosha is still operating under its original name and will for the next year or two before switching to the Sebert signature yellow.

In the meantime, a young former account manager is stepping up and taking the reins as branch manager. "He's quickly being educated what it means to be a branch manager for us," Sebert says.

As for more acquisitions, Sebert says there's a company he's looking at, and "hopefully something will come out of that," but the process is still in the early stages.

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# NOTEWORTHY TRANSACTIONS

Several large companies made sizable acquisitions this past month, including companies that are on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list.

## MONARCH ACQUIRES TERRACARE

Monarch Landscapes acquired Terracare Associates, adding another name to the relatively new company's portfolio.

Terracare is the sixth company under the Monarch umbrella, making it a more than \$200-million company with 2,000 employees.

Terracare ranked 22nd on Lawn & Landscape's 2017 Top 100 list with 2016 revenue of \$62.4 million. The company is based in Littleton, Colorado.

"We share similar values and operations principles," said Monarch CEO Brian Helgoe.

"It adds scale and geographic breadth to Monarch. And we think Dean (Murphy) and his

leadership team are fantastic. They have deep knowledge of the industry and they are great at integrating companies and building culture. We felt it was a natural fit."

All companies bought by Monarch will keep their brands, but Helgoe said unifying under one brand will be under consideration next year.

"We plan on having a common brand at some point" he said. "Whether it's called Monarch or not is to be determined."

Terracare was previously backed by Progress Equity Partners, a private equity firm based in Dallas. All of Terracare's employees and executives will be retained, and Murphy said they took the news in stride.

"I've told our people since the day I took over the organization, we were purchased with the intention of selling it down the road," he said. "Don't be surprised and it's not a big deal. This is the way all these deals go. Private equity holds, then, at some point, equity sells. This

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Pictured from left: Tom Tolkacz, CEO of Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care, and Daniel van Starrenburg, CEO of SavATree.

is part of the cycle and it creates opportunity. This creates opportunities for our folks to move into different roles and bigger roles in the future.”

Monarch formed in May of 2015 and is backed by One Rock Capital Partners, LLC, a private equity firm based in New York. In March of this year, Monarch acquired Land Systems in San Diego and Hort Tech Landscape Management in Indio, California.

In April of 2016, Monarch acquired Jensen Landscape in San Jose, California, and Northwest Landscape Services in Woodinville, Washington. Monarch also owns Signature Landscape Services in Redmond, Washington.

As far as future acquisitions, Helgoe said the focus is filling in where Monarch currently has companies in the Western part of the United States.

“If there is a great company or companies that have a customer-service focus, a great field-first culture, experienced landscape leadership and good operations, we are interested,” Helgoe said.

— Brian Horn

## SAVATREE ACQUIRES SWINGLE

SavATree acquired Denver-based Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care. This merger is the company's second in the Colorado market this year, and it aligns with SavATree's strategic growth plan. In addition, SavATree retained all of Swingle's 260 employees.

“We saw this as an opportunity to add talented people to the team,” said Daniel van Starrenburg, SavATree CEO.

Swingle was founded in 1947 and featured three locations in Colorado. With this acquisition, SavATree now has five locations in Colorado.

“The geography with their footprint and ours was a perfect match,” Van Starrenburg said. “We'll maintain all the offices. Given the legacy of the Swingle brand, we want to respect that and carry forward the legacy of the company. We plan to gradually merge brands over time, but will initially maintain the Swingle brand as ‘a SavATree company.’”

SavATree has been expanding in Colorado. Earlier this

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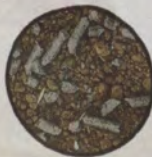
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year, SavATree merged with Denver-based Mountain High Tree, Lawn and Landscape. Van Starrenburg said SavATree plans to continue to look for opportunities to increase its market share out West.

“As we considered the best opportunities to move the company forward, we wanted to entrust the business to a company with similar core values and high-quality standards. SavATree was without a doubt the best option,” said Tom Tokacz, Swingle CEO. “By sharing similar philosophies as it relates to our customers, community and team members, I am confident our clients will continue

to receive expert service and our employees will have even greater opportunities with this best-in-class employer.”

John Gibson, president of Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care, has also joined the SavATree executive team as the company’s executive vice president of the western region, Van Starrenburg said.

Both companies were listed on Lawn & Landscape’s Top 100 list in 2017. SavATree was 17th on the list with \$89.7 million in revenue and Swingle was 81st on the list with about \$23.9 million in revenue. SavATree has been caring for properties throughout the Western region,

mid-Atlantic, Northeast and Midwest for more than 30 years.

“Our growth is largely a reflection of SavATree’s reputation in the communities we serve and within our industry. We are excited to welcome the Swingle team to the SavATree family,” van Starrenburg said.

“By unifying our similar cultures and building density in the Colorado marketplace, we see great benefits for both customer landscapes and employee opportunities.”

#### INVESTMENT FIRM ACQUISITION

Chenmark Capital Management, a Maine-based family

investment firm, acquired Massachusetts-based Maffei Landscape Contractors. Robert Maffei, company founder and CEO, plans to remain the company’s CEO through this partnership.

Chenmark Capital is an investment firm focused on acquiring and helping to support the operations of small businesses in North America. To date, Chenmark has four landscape companies in its portfolio.

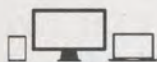
Maffei Landscape has grown into a large commercial and residential landscape contractor that serves Cape Cod and southeastern Massachusetts. The company generated about \$10 million in revenue last year.



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**Q: On some of our residential and commercial properties, we are seeing unusual growth on knock-out roses. The symptoms are abnormal reddish color of shoots and foliage, an abundance of new shoots and thorns. Is this herbicide damage?**

**A:** Most likely this is rose rosette virus. While some of the symptoms you describe might mimic herbicide damage, we are seeing a prolific amount of rose



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rosette virus on knock-out rose plantings in both commercial and residential plantings. Those symptoms of abnormal reddish growth, increased and rapid elongation of new growth, a proliferation of new shoots (witches broom), increased thorns, and deformed buds and blooms are

signs of rose rosette virus.

There is no cure for rose rosette and there is high risk of infection for other roses nearby. The removal and cleanup of all plants and leaves from the site as well as roots in the ground is essential. Do not compost the diseased plants. Bagging of debris is recommended.

Many properties have large plantings of knock-out roses, which allows for the quick

spread of the disease. Recommend to your client to replace the roses with some other colorful plantings.

**Q: My boxwoods on a residential property have circular tan leaf spots with a dark purple to brown border. Some stems are turning black. Leaves are dropping off. What is this problem?**

**A:** While you didn't indicate what species of boxwood you have, it sounds like boxwood blight. Boxwood blight is caused by the fungus Calonec-

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*With so many resources currently available that make it simple and affordable to transition to propane equipment, contractors can take advantage of the long-term rewards afforded by a propane mower fleet sooner than they thought possible.*

## AVAILABLE RESOURCES SIMPLIFY PROPANE TRANSITION

Two of the best resources for contractors to utilize from the outset of any fleet transition are available from the Propane Education & Research Council: PERC's Propane Equipment Dealer Point and its Find a Propane Retailer tool.

The Dealer Point, available at [propane.com/dealer-point](http://propane.com/dealer-point), allows contractors to search for nearby dealers who are knowledgeable about and carry propane equipment. Because dealers are screened prior to being accepted into the Dealer Point, contractors know that only the dealers dedicated to selling propane equipment who have the ability to answer questions about the fuel will show in results.

PERC's Find a Propane Retailer tool, at [retailers.propane.com](http://retailers.propane.com), helps contractors find their nearest propane retailer to help guide them through the fuel delivery process. Contractors can search for propane retailers by zip code and by services offered.

Just as finding the right partners from the outset will simplify the transition process, using available financial incentives will make it more affordable. The Propane Mower Incentive Program, available through PERC at [propane.com/mower-incentive](http://propane.com/mower-incentive), allows contractors to receive \$1,000 for each new, dedicated propane mower or \$500 for a certified propane conversion kit. State or regional organizations, such as Clean Cities or local environmental groups, may also offer incentives to help with new equipment costs.

Many contractors have also found that spreading purchases over several years lessens the burden on any one annual budget, especially as it may already fit into existing equipment buying strategies.

## LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF SWITCHING TO PROPANE

The "long-term" benefits associated with propane mower fleets will be seen in no time. For example, fuel costs can drop instantly compared with gas prices by working with a propane retailer. Many retailers work with a contractor to lock in an annual fuel contract. In addition to a lower price



per gallon in many instances, a fuel contract provides more stability and insulation from the ever-changing prices of oil.

Propane also increases productivity because it allows contractors to tailor their refueling programs to their individual operations. Typically, a propane retailer will either install an onsite fuel tank and train crews to refill empty propane cylinders, or a cylinder exchange program will be scheduled. With a cylinder exchange program, a propane retailer exchanges empty propane cylinders for full cylinders on a regular basis. Either option ensures contractors and their crews spend less time at filling stations and more time cutting.

Contractors may also see less maintenance-related downtime on machines because there are no chances of fuel contamination with ethanol. Because propane mowers use a clean, low-carbon fuel in a closed-loop fuel system, fewer clogs in fuel filters, fuel lines, and carburetors may be seen during routine maintenance.

Resources are ready and waiting for contractors wanting a smooth transition to propane and all the long-term benefits that it offers.

To hear from peers already building their businesses with propane equipment, visit [propane.com/commercial-landscape/testimonials](http://propane.com/commercial-landscape/testimonials).

*Jeremy Wishart is the deputy director of business development at the Propane Education & Research Council. He can be reached at [jeremy.wishart@propane.com](mailto:jeremy.wishart@propane.com).*

tria pseudonaviculatum. The blight has been confirmed in both residential and commercial plantings. Dwarf English boxwood and American boxwood are very susceptible. Cultivars of little leaf boxwood and Korean boxwood are less susceptible, but still become infected. Rapid defoliation of plants is common and what separates it from other boxwood disease. Boxwood blight can spread rapidly through a planting.

The disease is spread through the splashing of rain or irrigation water and by your pruning

tools. The best control is exclusion of plants. If the disease is detected, infected plants and all fallen debris need to be removed and bagged on site. Transport in closed bags to the disposal site. Do not compost the debris. Fungicide sprays as a preventative may be effective. However, once infested, they cannot be controlled.

You might look for an alternative to boxwoods when replanting the area. This disease may also infect *Pachysandra terminalis* (ground spurge) and *Sarcococca* sp. (sweet box).

**Q: Several of our Zoysia grass properties have small circular spots that are brown to straw colored. The leaves have small areas that are yellow-green to straw colored with a reddish-brown border. What is going on?**

**A:** The symptoms you describe are classic symptoms of dollar spot. The small circular spots are often so prolific that the infected, diseased areas become much larger. Dollar spot outbreaks usually occur when temperatures are between 60-85 degrees Fahrenheit with a high humidity. This disease is particularly favored by warm days and cool nights with intense dew set. Also, low levels of nitrogen and drier soils tend to

add to disease development. To manage this issue, use adequate nitrogen levels particularly in spring and summer, mow grass correctly and at proper intervals, reduce thatch and irrigate to avoid drought stress. If necessary apply fungicides for control.

Rex Bishop  
NALP Technical Advisor

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## THOUGHTFUL THANKS

**IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, YOU'RE GLAD TO SEE NOVEMBER** roll around every year. For those of us not in the south, the landscaping season is at last winding down and we finally get to catch our breath. In Ohio, where I live, the weather is usually mild enough to still enjoy some time outdoors. And then there's Thanksgiving, hands-down the best day of eating all year.

Turkey, mashed potatoes and my mom's unbeatable cherry pie aside, Thanksgiving is primarily about being thankful for what you have. For business owners, it's also a great time to take stock of how you're saying thanks to all the people your company relies on for success.

**APPRECIATE YOUR CLIENTS.** Without clients, you have no business. No matter how good you think your product or service is, your clients always have other options. In every interaction you have with your clients, show them that you appreciate that they've chosen you, and train your staff to do the same.

Remember to actually say thank you, no matter if it's at the end of a phone call, an email or an invoice.



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

It's such a small thing, but I'm continually amazed by how many businesses fail to do this. Run a list off of your clients and their addresses and work methodically through it, day by day and name by name, to send a handwritten thank-you note to each one of them.

Support charities your clients are involved in when the organization's values and mission align with yours. Conduct surveys of your clients' satisfaction at the end of the season – valuing their opinion and input is a way of showing appreciation, too.

For your best clients, consider holding an event just for them. At my landscaping company, we invite our top customers once a year to be our guests at a special performance at the theater downtown and host a nice reception for them beforehand. The night is stress-free (for them, if not for my marketing director) and fun and absolutely, completely solicitation-free. It's an investment for my business that pays back in dividends all year through.

**APPRECIATE YOUR TEAM.** Just as with your clients, show your team your appreciation in every interaction you have. I'm not saying you have to profusely thank them every day for everything they do, but you should always treat your employees with re-

spect and professionalism. If you're in a bad mood, don't take it out on them. Smile and say hello when you see them. Often small business owners get so distracted by all the balls we're juggling that we forget the effect our demeanor can have on our teams. Remember they have lives outside of work, too. Show them you appreciate them by not pinging them incessantly with emails and texts on their off hours.

At my landscaping company, we hold a cookout once a month on Friday afternoons during the high season. It's a chance for my crews to relax, without a single production goal save to have fun and enjoy each other. Once a year, I invite my whole team to a Cincinnati Reds or Dayton Dragons game and a reception beforehand. We schedule this event for a Friday night and invite spouses too to make it easier for everyone to enjoy a fun night out.

Now, for a full confession: As much as I may think I have this whole gratitude thing figured out, I was made keenly aware of my shortcomings not that long ago when a trusted, longtime employee let me know how little he felt appreciated and why. I thought a lot about what he had to say and realized he was, unfortunately, right. He was so integral to the success of my company, and had quietly and reliably delivered so much for so long, that I took him for granted without realizing it.

I'm now taking steps to remedy that, from rethinking our compensation package to having regular one-on-one meetings with him. And to show him I heard him loud and clear, I gave him two tickets to a concert I knew he'd like and told him to take the day after off with pay. That single, small gesture doesn't make up for the rest, of course, but it's a start. He and I are on a better path now, and I'm grateful to him for giving me the chance to make it right.

I have a lot to be thankful for. **L&L**

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# AVOID A BUSINESS WHITEOUT



**THE WINTER DRIVE FROM WYOMING TO IOWA ON I-80 WAS TREACHEROUS.** Black ice, winds gusting over 60 mph, snowflakes the size of quarters and whiteouts were all too common. The stretch of interstate between Rawlins and Laramie was particularly nasty. I saw more than one 20-plus vehicle pileup with deadly consequences.

Pickup trucks, SUVs, 18-wheelers and autos were all pancaked together. The cause of such a chain reaction was often a whiteout, where a driver enters what is thought to be a small mist of fog that turns out to be a bog of thick white soup hundreds of feet in depth.

Iowa wasn't any better than Wyoming. Two inches of fresh snow covered the highway. Traveling around 55 mph, I kept a glancing eye on the two automobiles trailing me at a relatively safe distance. I didn't see the 18-wheeler sneaking up to pass me. When I did, it was too late. He passed me going about 65 mph and his draft instantly sucked up all the snow on the road. My visibility went from the length of a football field to only 1 foot ahead. Knowing that the cars behind me were in the same predicament, I couldn't slow down or slam on my brakes.

The 10 seconds of blindness seemed like an eternity. I strained to



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

see a reference point to grasp onto and provide me with direction. I was concerned when my passenger-side tires hit the rumble strips on the right side of the road. My concern turned into panic when the driver-side tires did, too. Fortunately, the reflector pole was only a slender pole. Unfortunately, it disappeared under the passenger side of the rental car, taking the air dam with it.

Had I been able to find a reference point (something that would point me in the right direction) outside of the snow-laden fog that engulfed me, I might have been able to avoid the pole and the \$1,500 bill to repair the Herzt rental car. However, being totally smothered in it, I wasn't able to see or find any way out.

**"WHITEOUTS" IN THE FIELD.** It was mid-August when a landscape contractor told me that he thought he'd end up doing just under \$800,000 in sales for the year. However, he was burned out after months of directing the field crews, selling all the work and running the office. Labor production issues and bad pricing had gotten him into a financial "pickle." He really needed to increase his sales by about \$150,000 for the year (just under \$1 million) in order to reach the amount that we had planned for the previous spring. This amount of revenue would give him sufficient profit to pay off his debt. Unfortunately, this young landscape entrepreneur was so wrapped up in minutia that he couldn't see the solution to his problem. He was in a business "whiteout," if you will.

This landscape contractor had worked in the minutia of his business instead of delegating it to competent staff. He was like a one-armed

sailor attempting to row a boat with two oars. The more he pulled on the one oar with his one arm, the more he went in circles.

The solution to this contractor's situation became clear as we talked. He had two very good crew members with management experience, one of whom could run the production side of the business. This would allow him to focus on the strategic issue of selling more business. The second crew member could eventually become an account manager to take care of customers and their needs. This would allow the owner to sell more business while maintaining a high level of quality control.

**CONCLUSION.** This young entrepreneur had fallen victim to his own business whiteout. He was blinded by all the minutia and felt powerless to do anything about it due to his burned out emotional state. To break out of this fog, he needed to rethink his whole business. He also needed objective reference points to keep him going in the right direction. These were provided by his annual budget which contained sales goals. However, he also needed emotional support and encouragement in the form of competent counsel.

Unlike my whiteout, which was fast in the making, a business whiteout usually festers for years before it reaches critical mass. Because it is so insidious, it can permeate a company undetected. Breaking out of this vertigo is often difficult. It requires one to get help in the form of objective reference points and competent counsel. If you get the right kind of help, good things can happen. Your vision will improve and you'll be able to see a bright future far down the road. If you don't get help and develop these objective reference points to tell if you're going in the right direction, you may wander for years going in the wrong direction. You may also wonder for years if you could have done better. **L&L**

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# FIGHTING FRICTION I

have become gofers for account managers and project 'firefighters.' They also, in some cases, get burdened with paperwork and other administrative duties. They can produce better results if they are free to supervise the crews, oversee quality control and train crew leaders to be more effective crew managers. The lack of clarity in what's expected of them is often the friction that prevents their success.

Paperwork is a constant source of friction. Fortunately, technology and tools exist to rescue you from the thing everyone loves to hate. However, often it's not the paperwork but the ambiguity of expectation that exists for those responsible for attending to it. This is a job design issue, and investing time into identifying expectations is the key to making documentation and data management more seamless. More and more companies are relying on a suite of new technologies that simplify and automate known areas of friction, such as timekeeping. When supported by knowledge and training – and done consistently by all involved – these technologies will streamline these processes and produce much more accurate job costing.

Consider investing in meaningful and measurable training to help your employees improve their skills, develop their strengths and tackle problem areas. When all employees are given equal opportunities to learn, they achieve uniform excellence at all levels, whether they manage the front lines, the back office or the public face of your company.

When performance falters, eliminate frustration internally and externally. Streamline information and data systems, clarify expectations and organize your business to reduce friction points and the number of steps it takes for you to engage your customer and for your customer to engage with you. **L&L**

## • ARE YOUR CUSTOMERS HAPPY with your performance but frustrated with your processes? Eliminating the friction points in your organization can help.

Friction is made up of the clogged arteries of unhealthy business systems and processes, the wear and tear of poor morale, bottlenecks and red tape – anything that loses sales, impacts service, wastes time and money, and prevents your team from doing its job.

There are superstar exceptions in every company – people who perform at consistently high levels no matter what hurdle they have to jump over. But for most companies, people with varying skills can all elevate their game if the company's culture is designed to enhance productivity.

If you're looking to reduce friction, a good place to start is job descriptions. Eliminating overlap and 'who's on first' ambiguity in job structure can make all positions and employees more effective.

Take sales for example. Selling enhancements is an important



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

part of what account managers are expected to do. Superstars hit great numbers but mere mortals often struggle. Why? Account managers have a lot on their plate, especially those who also manage crews. Selling enhancements ends up being more work for account managers who feel like they're already at capacity. They cannot turn proposals around fast enough. This results in customers losing interest and enthusiasm as they shift their focus elsewhere.

Some companies solve this by having estimators and designers pick up the slack on proposals (eliminating a friction point), making it easier to close the loop and sell enhance-


## “CONSIDER INVESTING IN MEANINGFUL AND MEASURABLE TRAINING TO HELP YOUR EMPLOYEES IMPROVE THEIR SKILLS.”

ments while ensuring that account managers perform to high standards.

Some companies have redesigned account management into two distinct roles: one to manage the customer relationship and one to manage crews. Unfortunately, while it sounds like a win-win, it's difficult to find people who can do both well.

As positions evolve so that everyone works smarter, the position of field supervisor is getting a lot of attention. Ideally a role designed to manage crews, field supervisors





**FROM THE GROUND UP: ADVICE FROM ENTREPRENEURS**

# **GROWING A LAND SERVICE & PRESERVATION COMPANY**

## **TIP #2 // YOU NEED A MENTOR**

“Try to find somebody that’s in line with what you do and how you operate. For me [and my mentor], we’re both Marines, have similar work ethics, we are both in the construction trade. He introduced me to some certifications that would help me break into the commercial market as a veteran, as a small business and as a minority business. Take advantage of free advice.”

**Robert Velazquez**, founder of Semper Fi Land Services, Aurora, Illinois

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# DEVELOPING LEADERS

**MANY GREEN INDUSTRY BUSINESSES STARTED OUT** as I did 33 years ago. You buy a truck, or a van in my case, put some equipment into it, print up some stuff, and work out of your garage. It's just you trying to figure out things on the run.

And for those fortunate enough to work hard, learn and grow, the business expands and eventually you need other people to do what you were doing, or things that were not even on your radar. So you become a leader, with your employees following your lead. And if you are like most young leaders, you figure that out on the run also. If you do learn and develop into a leader, others will follow, and your business grows to the next level.

If you're good, and all else falls into place, then your business could make that next jump, where you will then need to find and develop others to lead smaller groups within your business. And this is where the road ends for many small business owners, as they just cannot figure that one out. "I just can't find good leaders" ranks right up there with "I just can't find enough people" as the biggest



**BRAD JOHNSON**  
is founder of  
LawnAmerica.

challenges facing most businesses in our industry, or any industry.

So what's the solution? It's important to have the right strategy and a system for developing leaders in your organization. But one can't just throw money at the problem, bring in some high powered consultant, attend a seminar, or try to fix the problem with more information and training alone.

In the words of Peter Drucker, "culture beats strategy every time." And that culture is in large part dependent upon having solid values and having the right people on your team to work with. Building that great culture mainly rests on the shoulders of the leader.

**IF YOU WANT TO DEVELOP LEADERS IN YOUR BUSINESS, YOU EXTEND TRUST TO THEM.**

If you have people who are capable of developing into leaders, and I'll bet that most reading this actually do, then the most important thing you can do at that point is to trust them. Jack Welch has said that leadership is all about truth and trust. Trust can be earned, and it can be given. If you want to develop leaders in your business, you extend trust to them, and allow them to fail at times. I learned this firsthand seven years ago, as I left my business to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail in

2010, mainly for a good cause in raising money for local charities. I could say, "I trust you," but when I left LawnAmerica for almost five months, the leaders especially heard and saw "I trust you" very clearly. In fact, as I look back on the years before 2010 and the years after that, 2010 was a turning point for our business in many respects. It was then that we did a much better job of developing leaders, our company matured and brought even better results especially with profits.

Now I'm not saying to leave your business for months on end and you'll have folks just magically develop into leaders. You still have to have an intentional strategy. Individuals must take responsibility for their own leadership development, such as constant reading and learning from other great leaders. But people have to be trusted, and they need to learn in the trenches and not just in the classroom. They have to be free to make some mistakes, and learn from those mistakes.

There are no magic bullets or simple answers in developing leaders. But I've come to realize that the most important thing a business owner can do, even more important than trusting your people, is to look in the mirror. What type of leader are you? Who are you? Can you be trusted? Are you the type of person people want to follow, or do they just tolerate you? Do you tell the truth? Are you in the battle for them, or is it all about you?

People will learn leadership from you, from what you do or don't do, what you say, who you serve and who you are. So now as things may be slowing down in your business, it's a great time to take some time and get away from your business, seek solitude and take a humble assessment of who YOU are. Not perfect, still learning, but can you be trusted? You just may be the root of the problem as to why leaders cannot be developed in your business. **L&L**

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John Denison impacted many people in his lifetime, including his family. Pictured are John, his wife, Donna, and five of his grandchildren.

# losing an icon

After John Denison died in May, he left behind a legacy with Denison Landscaping.

By Megan Smalley

**J**OHAN DENISON BUILT A LEGACY in the landscaping industry. He started Denison Landscaping as a simple mowing business out of a truck in 1973 and that gradually evolved into one of the largest landscaping and nursery businesses in the horticulture industry. The company ranked 23rd on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list this spring, achieving more than \$60 million in revenue with nearly 600 employees.

In May, news of Denison's death came as a surprise to many — including his own family. He was 61 years old. His son, Josh, says his father had some health problems in 2016 but that he had recovered from those problems. "In the grand scheme of things, (his death) was a surprise," he says.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE DENISON FAMILY



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John impacted many people in his lifetime. The evidence for that was clear at his funeral, as more than 3,400 people attended. Josh estimates the funeral procession stretched 6.5 miles long.

"They even shut down I-495," he says. "It was a good celebration of life for someone who deserved it."

Many in the industry knew John as a man who could drive hard bargains and build a successful business.

"He was a really shrewd business person," says John Clark, secretary treasurer and owner of Manor View Farm in Monkton, Maryland. "John knew how to make money, even at low prices."



Denison always felt a need to provide for his workers, who depended on the company's success to provide for their families.

Yet not everyone in the landscaping industry knew that John had another side to him.

"He had a dichotomy," Clark adds. "He was a hard-driving busi-

ness person, yet also a soft-hearted guy who would do anything for anybody. The side of John that people in our industry didn't know was what a big heart he had."

**HUMBLE BEGINNINGS.** John always knew he wanted to work outdoors. Duane Denison, his older brother and president at Denison Landscaping, says John would spend his summers helping his mom and sister work on a farm.

His dream of working outdoors persisted even when he went to college in the 1970s, as he opted to study horticulture at the University of Maryland. From there, he received his applied horticulture degree.

While he was still studying at the university, he had already started what is today known as Denison Landscaping. All he had was a truck, a mower and a weed trimmer.



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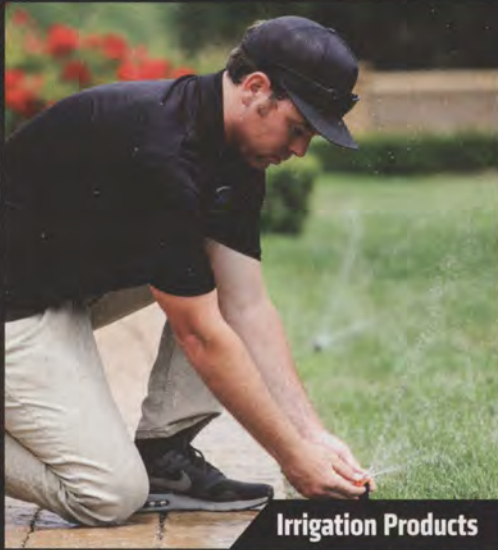


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Duane says John started small, asking the owners of local tire shops or gas stations if he could mow their lawns. His initial goal was to make enough money to pay off his student loans.

The company continued to add more employees and divisions, including a nursery, an irrigation division and a hard-scaping division.

"(My mom) told me that my dad always said, 'When we hit \$1 million, I'll retire,'" Josh says. "Then it was, 'When we hit \$5 million, I'll retire.' And then, 'When we hit \$10 million, I'll retire.'" John never retired, though.

As his company grew, John pushed the bar higher instead



John's family and other management personnel at the company plan to continue to grow Denison Landscaping in memory of John.

of retiring. Duane says that was likely because he loved the business and his employees.

"I asked him several times, 'John, when you started here,

could you have had the vision that it would get this big?'" Duane says. "The answer was no. His basic vision was to supply for family and to supply for his employees."

**A MENTOR TO MANY.** John served as a mentor to those within the industry. Kevin McHale, owner of McHale Landscape Design in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, got his start in the industry by working with John back in the early 1980s.

"I met him a month before I graduated college," McHale says. "I told him I was going to start my own landscape business, but I wanted to work for someone first. After the meeting, he said, 'I never hired a college graduate before, so maybe you can learn from me and I can learn from you.'"

McHale only worked at Denison Landscaping for about three  
*(continued on page 97)*



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# ROTOR READY

Head-to-head coverage and good installation will keep rotors efficient all season long. **By Holly Hammersmith**

## HEAD-TO-HEAD COVERAGE IS THE GOAL FOR MANY IRRIGATION CONTRACTORS WHEN INSTALLING ROTORS ON A SYSTEM.

Richard Briseno, director of operations at Ground Control Property Management based in Spring Lake, Michigan, strives for that head-to-head coverage, where each rotor is hitting the head of the next.

Ground Control Property Management serves both residential and commercial customers, with a stronger focus on residential customers. Property maintenance services include window washing, gutter cleaning, landscaping, mowing and fertilizing.

**DETERMINING PLACEMENT.** “I check how

many gallons we have coming out of the water source and at what pressure,” Briseno says. “I stick a bucket underneath the vacuum breaker and run it and turn it on full blast and count how many seconds it takes to fill the (5-gallon) bucket. Then you can do that per minute.”

Rotors are typically placed 36 feet apart, a standard for most brands, Briseno says.

“We always try to get the head-to-head coverage as close to 100 percent coverage as possible, so the spray reaches the opposite rotor,” says Kurt Meyer, president of Meyer Landscape & Design, based in



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## IRRIGATION

Moline, Illinois.

The company offers landscape consulting and design, hardscaping, irrigation and lighting services. Meyer Landscape & Design also

operates two garden centers and a nursery. It employs roughly 50 people.

Checking the manufacturer's specification is important, he adds.

"Certain heads can only throw so far so you can't go beyond the maximum amount," Meyer says. "You can always dial a rotor down a bit. But you cannot extend past the maximum throw."

**ROTOR PLACEMENT.** Both Meyer and Briseno say they determine where to place heads by hand and do not use any design software.

"I've been doing irrigation for 17 years. I don't use any kind of software. I just figure it out in the field," Briseno says.

Other common obstacles to consider include sheds, pools and patios, he says.

"I walk around and flag it all out. Then I draw it out on a piece of paper. We've already figured out how many gallons we have, then I can figure out how many heads I can use per zone. Then I just sketch it in on a piece of paper – how many flags are connected and where the valves are going to be," Briseno says.

Ground Control Property Management employs 12 to 15 people on average and has an annual revenue of about \$650,000.

While he still determines placement by hand, Meyer says his company does use an AutoCAD system to document the design and to make it easier for employees to follow the design.

"We have our own spreadsheets for the calculations. The AutoCAD system just makes a much more professional design. It's all drawn out to scale, so our guys can measure right off the plan and plot it right to the ground," he says.

A copy of that design is placed inside the irrigation system controller, Meyer adds.

Meyer Landscape & Design primarily serves residential customers and has an annual revenue of more than \$4 million.

**INITIAL ADJUSTMENTS.** When first installed, rotors are adjusted one week later, Briseno says.

"We go back and make sure that they've set because every brand will have at least one or two heads that don't stay in adjustment. It just happens," he says. Faulty heads are replaced with new ones.

Over time, Meyer says adjustments are few on rotors.



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"It's very rare to have them shift, but occasionally, kids running in a sprinkler or something like that, they may bump them and turn them," he says. "As far as adjustments on the rotor, occasionally, a nozzle will pop out, where you have to put a new nozzle back in it."

Irrigation systems in temperate climates are winterized at the end of the season, but the rotors aren't typically touched at that time, both contractors say.

"While we're turning them on (in the spring), we walk around to make sure everything's hitting where it's supposed to and make adjustments as necessary,"

Briseno says.

The area around each head is also cleaned out to mitigate dirt and debris entering the system, Briseno adds.

Meyer says during that spring tuneup he will also make sure no heads are broken.

**TYPICAL MAINTENANCE.** Customers at Ground Control Property Management are encouraged to run their system and examine coverage monthly.

"I tell them to take one Saturday a month and just run them for a couple minutes, just to make sure everything's still getting hit on their end to make

sure that they're happy with everything. I show them how to adjust the rotors," Briseno says.

Usually a customer will call if there is a problem or coverage is off, but calls are few, Meyer says.

Employees at Meyer Landscape & Design will visit commercial properties roughly every two months and check the irrigation system.

"It's usually very obvious if there's a problem. Our mowing crew will see that the head is blown, and those areas are a little washed out. Or, an area is either dry or washed out. That's when you see that you have a problem on the head,"

Meyer says.

If there is debris in the lines, it usually shows up in the first couple of weeks, he says.

"There is a screen inside of the pop-up, and inside of the rotor, that, it's a little filter that goes in the base of it. And those need to be cleaned out now and then," Meyer says.

**TYPICAL LIFE SPAN.** Unless a rotor takes direct abuse, such as being hit with a lawn mower or being driven over by a vehicle, Briseno says they can easily last 10 to 15 years. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

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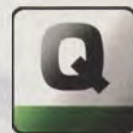
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# COMFORTABLE & CAPABLE



Car-like features, accessories and increased hauling capabilities are just some of the developments that have been made to the latest UTV models. **By Megan Smalley**

## **T**HERE'S BEEN AN EVOLUTION HAPPENING WITH UTVS THE PAST DECADE.

About 10 years ago, most UTVs were rugged work machines that featured very basic cab designs with no added bells or whistles. Today, the UTV is starting to look and function like an everyday car or pickup truck. More manufacturers are adding technology to the cabs: touchscreens, navigation tools and rearview cameras. There's also demand for heating and cooling, as well as heated and air-cooled seats.

While most UTVs won't incorporate all these luxuries in a single vehicle, most manufacturers predict this will become standard in the next couple of years.

"People are going to want the same creature comforts they have in their cars (in their UTVs)," says Kurt Reece, assistant brand manager for utility vehicles at Mahindra. "It's pretty amazing how the technology is going in this space and how quickly it's moving. Any technology you see in your day-to-day car, you'll start to see in these vehicles, too."

Manufacturers agree the automotive industry is driving advancements in the UTV market to make the cabs more like that of a car or a truck. Features such as adjustable seats, tilt steering wheels or cup holders are becoming the norm for UTVs.

An increasing number of UTVs offer entirely

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## KICHLER

## UTVs

closed-cab designs so they can be used in cooler climates. Some models feature full-sized doors instead of bars to make it easier for contractors to hop in and out.

"Back in the day, utility vehicles were more like a piece of machinery. Now, they are much more automotive-like in fit, finish and comfort," says Tom Mielke, product marketing manager for utility vehicles at Cub Cadet. "Nowadays, the (UTVs) are more comfortable. Frankly, you can work all day long (in them) and on the weekend use (them) to go trail riding or hunting or for recreational purposes. It's that crossover function that's another trend in the industry right now."

**“Nowadays, the (UTVs) are more comfortable. You can work all day (in them) and on the weekend use them to go trail riding.”**

**Tom Mielke,  
product marketing  
manager, Cub  
Cadet**

### ACCESSORIZED AND VERSATILE.

On top of the creature comforts being added to UTVs, manufacturers say UTVs are also becoming more accessorized and versatile. Mielke notes that his company's UTV sales are up simply because contractors seem more interested in purchasing machines with versatility.

UTVs can be used for myriad purposes, with the help of accessories and attachments. Adding one or two attachments can turn a basic UTV into a variety of vehicles: a snow plow, a mini hauler, a fertilizer spreader or a vehicle to cart workers around the jobsite.

Because versatility is important to contractors, Reece says Mahin-

dra offers more than 50 accessories and attachments for UTVs, such as post hole diggers, spreaders, tillers, mowers, rakes, cutters, hitches, lifts and blades to name a few. He says there are also different tire treads and tire patterns to pair with these vehicles so they best fit the application needed.

"We wanted to make sure the vehicles could be used anytime, anyplace, anywhere and in any condition," Reece says. "Ultimately, it's a versatility game and figuring out how to make these vehicles as efficient as possible."

Reece notes that Mahindra's flex hauler and long bed UTV models seem to be most popular among landscapers. Both models



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incorporate a cargo box that folds down on either side of the tailgate to convert it into a flatbed trailer. This feature allows landscapers to transport mulch, hay or other tools around a jobsite.

Cub Cadet faces similar demands from landscapers. Mielke says the company offers a variety of storage options to best serve these customers.

“We don’t know every single tool or gizmo someone will want to use for a job, so we created a system that has attachment points all over the machine where they can configure it how they want,” he says.

Landscapers in different regions of the country also require



Adding attachments can turn a basic UTV into a variety of vehicles: a snow plow, a mini hauler, a fertilizer spreader or a vehicle to move workers around a jobsite.

different options.

Roger Gifford, product manager for the RTV product line at Kubota, says this is one reason accessories are important to landscapers. “Accessorizing and mak-

ing it yours is the fastest-growing part of this segment,” he says. “The accessory market is really driven to the customer’s needs to make (the vehicle) theirs.”

He says one of Kubota’s mod-

els “keeps out weather,” giving users the ability to heat or cool the cab, defrost and wipe off snow or rain on the windshield. The company also offers other accessories for use in other conditions like

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# SAFETY MINDED

Some manufacturers shared their safety tips for when operating UTVs.

**“BE SMART AND BE AWARE.** We advise all our users wear a seat belt. Since the top speed of our vehicles is 35 mph, we recommend that our operators wear a protective DOT helmet at that speed. And for landscaper, make sure the materials you load and haul meet weight requirements of the vehicle, so do not overload it.”

– Kurt Reece, Mahindra

**“BE SAFETY MINDED WHEN OPERATING THESE TOOLS.** Do not be overly casual. Wear the seat belt, as the vehicles are often operated on uneven ground. Sometimes people get a ‘golf cart’ mentality with UTVs, but this is a bigger machine.”

– Tom Mielke, Cub Cadet

**“MAKE SURE IT’S ALWAYS INSPECTED BEFORE YOU START OUT WITH IT.** Look for fuel leaks, and if there are any, get it repaired. Keep the engine properly serviced. And if you work in dusty conditions, make sure the vehicle is inspected more often.”

– Roger Gifford, Kubota

**“IT’S LIKE ANY TOOL.** You have to exercise care and treat your tools with care in order to keep people safe at all times. People can sometimes get themselves in the wrong position if they’re trying to go too fast or if they’re not experienced with it.”

– Keith Wells, American Landmaster  
*(continued on page 59)*

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A close-up portrait of Michael Hornung, a middle-aged man with short brown hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a blue button-down shirt. He is smiling warmly at the camera. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

# NUMBERS GAME

**Michael Hornung** leans toward the high end of the pay scale to attract and retain employees, and opens his books to some employees. Find out how other contractors handle their financials in our **2017 Benchmarking Your Business Report**.





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The 2017 Benchmarking Your Business report offers the most current contractor data, so you can quickly understand how your business stacks up in areas such as profitability, budget management and contractor spending, among others. When combined with the real-time customer feedback you can gather via social media and online professional review sites, the 2017 Benchmarking Your Business report can give you a big-picture view of your business and opportunities for growth.

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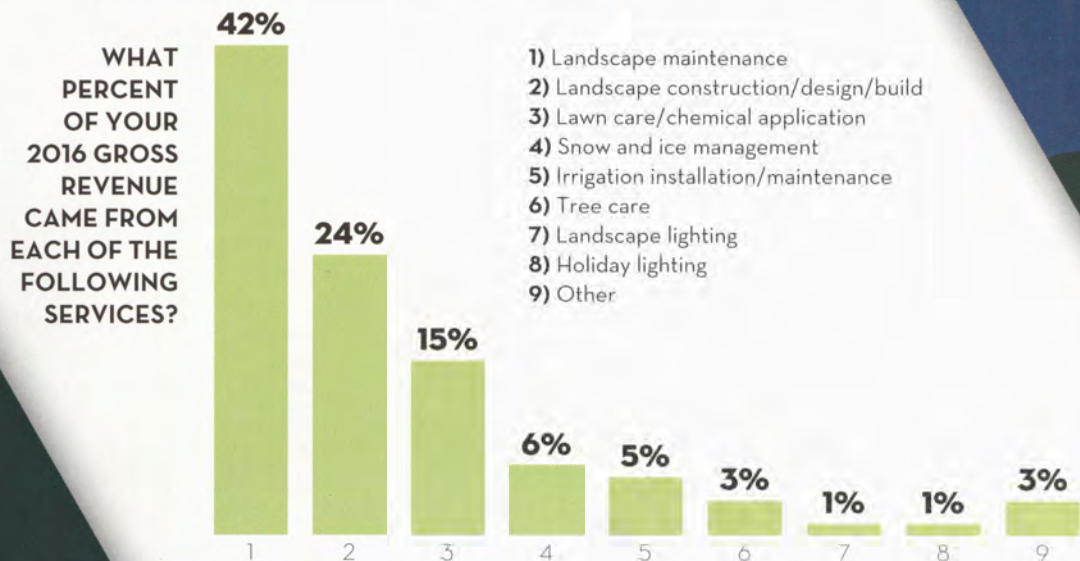
# MONEY COMING, MONEY GOING

Our research on how contractors are spending and making money will help you get a grip on where you are doing well and where you can improve.

**O**n this page and those following, you will find statistics from our 2017 Benchmarking Your Business Report, as well as stories illustrating some of those numbers. This supplement is designed to give you a better understanding of where you fit against the national numbers of pay, price, profit and other data you need to run a successful business.

The median response from those who took the survey shows an owner who runs a full-service landscape company that has been around 16 years, posted a 2016 gross revenue of \$297,000 and has a total of 19 employees (11 full-time, six seasonal and two part-time). He expects to finish 2017 with a net profit margin of 17 percent and expects that to increase to 19 percent in 2018. He also expects 2018 gross revenue to grow by 10 percent compared to 2017 revenue.

To get you started, here's a breakdown of the services contractors who took the survey are providing. You can also find our Benchmarking Your Business calculator to give you an idea of how you stack up in your region, and to download segment-specific budget calculators at [www.lawnandlandscape.com/benchmark](http://www.lawnandlandscape.com/benchmark). ●



## SURVEY METHODOLOGY:

The 2017 Benchmarking Your Business survey was designed jointly by Lawn & Landscape and Readex Research, and fielded from Aug. 7-21. The survey's 481 responses represent an estimated population of 14,700 landscape contractors. The margin of error is 4.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. Some charts do not total 100 percent due to rounding and because not all answers are included with some questions.

# SAVE SOME FOR YOURSELF

YOU OWN THE BUSINESS.  
ARE YOU GETTING PAID A FAIR SALARY?

## “WHY AM I MAKING MONEY BUT NOT KEEPING IT?”

That’s a common question that busy owners ask, wondering why they’re working so hard and not seeing the dollars in their bank account. After payroll, rent and all the overhead plus materials, there’s not a whole lot left over. So, where does that leave the owner? In some cases, the answer is – unpaid. There are two competing realities when addressing owner’s pay, says Jim Huston, president of J.R. Huston Consulting. “First is federal tax code and its regulations, and second is market reality and the need to be competitive in an open market,” he says.



At Country Club Lawn and Tree Specialists, partners Mark Black and Matt Brooks take equal pay and distribution, but use quarterly distributions to pay taxes.

Huston says, "I tell clients that my job is to help them make as much money as possible. Their CPA's job is to make it look like they're going broke and keep them out of jail."

Ultimately, owners need to get paid just as they would compensate a general manager of their businesses. Consider what you'd pay someone else to perform your function, Huston says.

The company bank account can't act as the owner's piggy bank – and yet, an owner needs to be paid fairly for the time and resources he or she dedicates to the business. "Do not try to pay yourself minimum wage and think you'll get away with it," says Mark Black, owner of Country Club Lawn and Tree Specialists in South Roxana, Illinois. (His accountant told him this could certainly throw up a red flag to the IRS.)

So what's the happy medium between taking fair compensation for the work you put into your operation and making good with Uncle Sam? Huston and owners we spoke with share how they take their fair share from the pot.

**A FAIR SHARE.** Jeff Bowen is like most owners who remember their first year in business – for him, that was 24 years ago. "I am not sure I collected a big paycheck every week consistently," he says. (Some weeks, he went without.)

"By the second year in business, we were much more efficient with our accounting and I tried to take a paycheck every pay period."

Bowen and his wife own Images of Green in Stuart, Florida. They decided on taking 5 percent of the gross revenue as owner's salary.

He admits, the number was really quite arbitrary, based on the bare minimum his family needed to manage household expenses and not much more.

Now that the business' revenues are in the \$1.5 million range, he takes 10 percent and his wife takes a nominal amount as compen-

“

IT'S SO EASY TO GO TO  
THE 'WISHING WELL' AND  
PULL OUT WHAT YOU  
WANT, BUT YOU HAVE TO  
PAY ATTENTION TO THAT  
MONTHLY P&L.

”

Mark Black, owner, Country  
Club Lawn and Tree Specialists

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OF YOUR COMPANY?**

\$100,000 OR MORE	19%
\$80,000 - \$99,999	9%
\$60,000 - \$79,999	20%
\$50,000 - \$59,999	12%
\$40,000 - \$49,999	14%
\$30,000 - \$39,999	8%
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5-19 YEARS:	\$55,000
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**MEDIAN OWNER'S SALARY IF  
THE COMPANY'S MADE:**

LESS THAN \$300,000:	\$40,000
\$300,000-\$999,000:	\$65,000
MORE THAN \$1 MILLION:	\$90,000

sation for her payroll duties. "I'm a hands-on guy, so I'm selling; I'm in production; I'm involved with the administrative part of the business in the office every day," he says.

"I call myself an owner, but I act more like a general manager because that's what I do. I'm doing all of the big-picture things like keeping focus on goals, setting expectations for the future and a whole lot more."

Bowen will draw a salary slightly less than 10 percent of gross income this year because the numbers are slightly below what he anticipated – though cleanup from Hurricane Irma will definitely change that picture.

He expects his pay will amount to \$128,000 this year. His advice: "You can run a business, but if you can't pay your personal expenses, then the business may not be doing what you want it to do."

**KNOW YOUR NUMBERS.** Black and his partner, Matt Brooks, are 50/50 partners in his business, and they take equal pay and distribution. They also considered how they'd pay a manager to do their jobs. However, "You have a wide range there," Black says.

Black and Brooks pay themselves a modest salary. The quarterly distributions they take are to pay taxes. "Yeah, I'm taking a distribution out of the business, but I'm sending it right to Uncle Sam," Black says.

He says they do not pull out any distributions from the company's profit during the year. "We wait until the end of the year and make sure we reinvest a minimum of a month and a half of payroll back into the business," Black says.

By doing so, the business has payroll covered in January and part of February, before lawn care renewals come in. The money set aside acts as a safety net.

After reserving those dollars, paying taxes and accounting for upcoming purchases – a new truck, equipment – Black can see what profit is left in the business. "From there, we look at that balance and say, 'Can we take back from our business?'" It depends on what's going on that year.

"Some people use their business as

**\$55,000** AVERAGE SALARY  
FOR OWNER/PRESIDENT





Paying yourself minimum wage won't cut it with Uncle Sam, but it's important to make sure you are fairly compensated.

a personal piggy bank, and that's the last thing we do," Black says.

"A lot of owners cannot disseminate between personal and business, and that is where they get into trouble. It's so easy to go to the 'wishing well' and pull out what you want, but you have to pay attention to that monthly P&L."

**OWNER'S SALARY BENCHMARKS.** Huston benchmarks owner's pay by estimating a budget for three categories: 1) field pay, 2) general and administrative overhead salary and 3) dividends (determined by the owner and CPA).

Field pay factors in activities like designing, supervision and work performed on the job.

Owner's G&A salary is for

the time spent running the company. Ask yourself: What would you pay someone else to run your business?

"Dividends are determined by the tax code and profitability of the business," Huston says.

The figures here do not include benefits like medical insurance or vehicle expenses. And, while realistic, the numbers will vary depending on the company and its profitability.

**\$300,000 in sales:** If your business is in this arena, here are some figures to consider.

- Fair market value for your work in the field with crews: \$32,400 (\$18/hour)
- Total G&A overhead salaries for the business: \$36,000 (this includes owner + other admin)
- Owner's G&A salary:

\$27,000 (\$36,000 - \$9,000 for a part-time office person)

- Dividends based on profitability: \$15,000 (the company makes 10 percent year-end net profit in dividends and the owner takes half.)

- **Total owner's salary:** \$74,400, which is 24.8 percent of total sales

Next, Huston applies the same calculations to a business that does **\$1 million in sales**

- Owner works 0 hours in the field
- Total G&A overhead salaries: \$120,000 for all salaries
- Owner's G&A salary: \$78,400 (minus the full-time manager making \$41,600)
- Dividends based on profitability: Year-end 10 percent net profit and 50 percent payout is \$50,000

- **Total owner's salary:**

\$128,000, which is 12.8 percent of total sales

Going back to the question many owners bring to the budgeting table – "Why am I making money but not keeping it?" – these benchmarks provide a guideline for figuring a fair owner's salary rather than rolling the dice or treating the business bank account like the proverbial piggy bank.

There isn't a magic number when determining the owner's salary, Huston says.

But these guidelines will get you on track to get paid fairly. As Andrew McCurry of Father Nature Landscapes in Birmingham, Alabama, says, "Financial health is extremely important. If I treat the business well, it will treat me well." ●



# MONEY & MOTIVATION

OWNERS SHARE HOW THEIR PAY AND INCENTIVE PROGRAMS DRIVE PERFORMANCE.

**E**MPLOYEE PAY CAN BE A STICKING POINT FOR WORKERS. If one technician feels he's working harder than another and not getting compensated – well, that's not great for morale. And if workers figure they can get paid better by another company in town, then you could have some serious retention problems. For owners, the issue gets even more complex: compensating people fairly for production, efficiency, quality and an overall contribution to the company's profitability.

What's the best way to pay people and how do you incentivize them with meaningful bonuses that inspire camaraderie (not contention) and drive quality production vs. more hours for more pay? Michael Hornung, president at ValleyGreen in Sartell, Minnesota, focuses on paying at the higher end of the market so he can attract and retain the best people possible. His bonus program promotes teamwork and rewards senior technicians for training up the new talent.

Hornung implemented the system in 2003, and has tweaked it a bit over time. It's based on efficiency per hour, service calls and callbacks. He calculated what technicians should produce per hour and per week. For example, new technicians are expected to make about \$125/hour, or \$5,000 in production per week. With this efficiency and zero callbacks, a technician could make \$2 to \$3 per hour more as a bonus. This is rewarded per paycheck. (Hornung says the bonus per hour ranges, but he uses this standard as an example.)

Measuring callbacks allows Hornung to follow up and make that connection with clients. Hornung says the production expectation isn't lofty because he wants quality to be the main priority. That said, without efficiency, the company will not be profitable, and he wants his people to share in the reward of working smart. When they know their pay picks up when they reach goals, they remain motivated.

Also built into the program is an incentive for experienced technicians to take on trainees. (All new techs

spend up to three weeks training with a veteran tech.) "Some experienced techs used to say, 'I don't want to help the new guy because the route is out of my area,' and so on," Hornung says. "But, now, when they go help that new salesperson, they can hit their production hours based on what they did on their own route. That has put our experienced technicians in a position where they feel like they are not being dragged down by helping the new person, and the new person isn't afraid to ask for help."

**PAY PROGRAMS.** At Lawn Cure in Sellersburg, Indiana, employees work four 10-hour days at the lawn care operation and must meet weekly spray goals. "Anything they spray over their goal, they get 'banked hours,'" says Missy Fromme, co-owner. "They can use those banked hours as paid time off or they can be paid out."

The banked hours are figured per week, so they could earn an hour off or an hour of pay every paycheck. And, if technicians sell a service while they are in the field, they can earn a commission on that sale for the full season, Fromme says. "If they sign the person up that day and

spray the lawn that day, they get a 15 percent commission for all six rounds they sell," she says. "If they just pick up the customer but don't spray the lawn that day, they get 10 percent of the sale for the full-year program."

Not every technician has a sales mentality or desire to bring in new business. And that's OK, Fromme says. "But, this does incentivize technicians," she says.

Meanwhile, because Lawn Cure lays off employees for six weeks from the end of December until mid-February, they are paid a year-end bonus that essentially makes up for the time they are off. "It's like they are paid for the six weeks while they are off work," Fromme says.

At Country Club Lawn and Tree Specialists in South Roxana, Illinois, employees are incentivized based on three criteria: production volume, cancellations and attendance. Owner Mark Black calls it a "performance bonus" because he doesn't want employees to be overly focused on volume. And, he sets realistic goals. "I can't make the goals any easier," he says. "The minimum goal is \$12,000 a month in billing, that's \$600 per day. The

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WANT TO MAKE  
MORE MONEY,  
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TO PICK MORE  
APPLES.  
”

Jim Huston,  
J.R. Consulting

maximum percentage bonus is \$18,000, which is \$850 per day."

For every cancellation, a technician loses 3 percent of his or her bonus. As for attendance, technicians who are late to work lose 2 percent that month, and 4 percent for missing work.

Employees can make up to \$1,500 per month in bonus dollars if they work diligently, Black says. He doesn't want to micromanage, but if modest production goals are not being hit, he will dig deeper. He can find out through a mobile GPS app how long a truck was sitting



on a property. "If we see that there are several houses in a row where the truck is sitting for 45 minutes, that's costing us \$5,000, so we'll call the technician out," he says. The reality is, workers can sit in the truck for an extra 10 minutes and check their personal mobile devices and cruise through social media updates.

At For-Shore Weed Control in New Jersey, owner Mike Matthews felt the bonus system was too personal, so he brought on Jim Huston of J.R. Huston Consulting to help create a fair program. "How I felt about an individual employee was a distraction for me," Matthews says.

For-Shore now has a program that measures how much money a technician brings into the company vs. the cost of earning that money. The company sets a threshold, and dollars earned per technician beyond that goal can be used as a bonus. "Technicians can earn a percent of the gross beyond that threshold," says Nathaniel Matthews, partner in the business.

Bonuses range from \$4,000 to \$15,000, and the program is explained at spring training each year. The system allows For-Shore to spot "sleepers" or employees who aren't tooting their own horns but are doing a knock-out job with production. "There are people who clock in, work and go home, and then you see their production and quality numbers and they're the ones going home with the \$15,000 bonus," Matthews says.

**A PIECE-RATE APPROACH.** Huston is an advocate of a piece pay rate system that focuses employees on productivity vs. hours. It's not only a compensation system; it's a reward program, too, and pay plus bonuses are tied to production.

"Say you're picking apples at 35 cents per bushel – well, probably 35 cents an apple these days," Huston says. "If you want to make more money, you've got to pick more apples – be more productive, more efficient." In landscaping, owners first must know their expenses and how much a crew "costs" per day. Say the per-crew billing goal is \$1,000 per day. And the crew gets paid 30 percent of what the company bills.

"Now, you have to maintain quality standards, but laborers realize if they want to take home more money, they can't drag a 10-hour project out to 12 hours," Huston says. "With this model, the employee is focused on producing more work."



**WHAT WAS YOUR LOCATION'S AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARY FOR THE FOLLOWING POSITIONS?**

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER (COO)	<b>\$70,000</b>	CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER (CFO)	<b>\$62,000</b>
SALESPERSON	<b>\$50,000</b>	ACCOUNT MANAGER	<b>\$46,000</b>
LANDSCAPE DESIGNER	<b>\$45,000</b>	SUPERVISOR	<b>\$44,000</b>
CREW FOREMAN/ LEADER	<b>\$35,000</b>	OFFICE MANAGER	<b>\$35,000</b>



**WHAT DOES YOUR LOCATION PAY PER HOUR FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING POSITIONS?**

<b>MOWER OPERATOR:</b> EXPERIENCED VS. ENTRY LEVEL	<b>\$14.00</b>	<b>\$11.00</b>
<b>CONSTRUCTION WORKER:</b> EXPERIENCED VS. ENTRY LEVEL	<b>\$15.50</b>	<b>\$12.00</b>
<b>SPRAY TECHNICIAN:</b> EXPERIENCED VS. ENTRY LEVEL	<b>\$18.00</b>	<b>\$13.00</b>
<b>MECHANIC:</b> EXPERIENCED VS. ENTRY LEVEL	<b>\$20.00</b>	<b>\$15.00</b>

This is how other industries measure performance and assign pay. For example, take an automobile service technician. Each repair task is assigned a standardized rate, say three hours for a brake repair. "If the job takes two hours, the technician gets paid for three," Huston says. "If the job takes four hours, he still gets paid for three. So, if a technician wants to make more money, the formula is to perform more work at an acceptable quality standard."

When you assign a piece rate for a task or per crew, and offer a percentage of the gross if a task or crew comes in under budget, employees get the monetary benefit of working smarter. "It's an incentive built right into the pay structure," Huston says. "People can see the direct correlation between how they perform and what they get paid."

When employees are focused on working more hours for more pay, it cuts into a company's profitability because it increases the labor rate without addressing efficiency. ●



# WHAT'S YOUR PRICETAG?

## PRICING IS A CONSTANT PRESSURE FOR LANDSCAPE BUSINESSES, WHETHER YOU'RE OPERATING A LAWN CARE COMPANY, DESIGN/BUILD FIRM OR COMMERCIAL MAINTENANCE BUSINESS.

PRICING IS A PERENNIAL ISSUE FOR THE LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY. HERE ARE THE BENCHMARKS TO BE SURE YOU'RE COVERING YOUR EXPENSES AND MAKING A PROFIT.

**By Kristen Hampshire**

Pricing is the one common frustration because no matter the market or economic landscape, you'll always face low-bidders and feel cornered by clients who try to squeeze the profit out of a contract.

"It's important to know your numbers, know where you need to be and know when to say 'when' on lowering a price," says Jim Huston, president of J.R. Huston Consulting.

Huston describes a contractor who wanted to lower his hourly labor pay rate by \$2 an hour because it would decrease the cost of services by 10 percent and allow him to pick up more work. "We really dug into the numbers and discovered that he could lower the hourly rate," Huston says. Well, that contractor did, in fact, end up adding many more clients because his market was particularly competitive. "If you know your costs, then you can

make those decisions," Huston says.

So, what's the best way to figure out pricing so you know when to draw the line and know what flexibility you might have to give a customer a break? Huston suggests a bottom-up approach that will give you a minimum price to charge for services. "You'll have low-bidders in your market that will come up with some ridiculous price and you need to know when to walk away from a job," he says.

A bottom-up pricing strategy tells you:

- How low you can go with pricing
- How much room you have to value-engineer a contract to retain a client or compete against another bidder
- The bottom-line price you can build up from, and perhaps generously, depending on the market and economy

**GET YOUR BREAK-EVEN.** Before you can figure your minimum price, you've got to have a solid budget that aligns with industry benchmarks. With an accurate budget, you'll know the costs for labor, labor burden, payroll (taxes), equipment costs, subcontractors, equipment rentals, vehicles and materials. You'll also know your indirect costs, including general administrative overhead.

**Find your break-even point:** Add your direct costs and overhead. This is your break-even point – the money you've got to bring in to stay in business.

**Add net profit margin:** Now that you have the break-even point, apply the net profit margin. For example, in today's healthy market, a residential design/build contractor can apply a 20 percent net profit margin to the break-even point.

**Do the math:** You're pricing a job where materials cost \$3,000, labor is \$2,000 and labor burden is \$500. Equipment is \$1,500. That's \$6,000 of direct costs. Your general and administrative overhead expense is \$2,000 for a break-even point of \$8,000. Apply a 20 percent net profit margin to \$8,000 for a price of \$10,000.

**Set your pricing minimum:** Start the price for this project at \$10,000. If your market allows, charge more. But if a competitor offers to do the same job for \$8,000, let it go! You'll make absolutely no profit if you match that low-ball price since your break-even point is \$8,000.

"In a depressed market or recession, the customer's primary concern is, 'How low can you go?' 'How you value-engineer this price and come back with a lower number?'" Huston says. "So, you need to know when to say no in a recessionary or tough market.

"Now, we are not in that market – it's the other end of the spectrum, and in a robust market, the client's primary concern is, 'When can you start?'"

Huston says labor is such a problem now that virtually all of his clients could do 20 to 30 percent more work if they had the labor to do it. "Labor prices are going up, so now is the time to raise your prices because as you have huge demand and a limited supply of

## COMPARED WITH THREE YEARS AGO, HOW HAVE YOUR PRICES CHANGED?



## DOES YOUR LOCATION CHARGE FOR ITS LANDSCAPE DESIGN?



## WHAT DOES YOUR LOCATION CHARGE PER HOUR FOR LABOR FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING SERVICES?

SNOW/ICE MANAGEMENT	\$85.35	TREE CARE	\$71.98
IRRIGATION INSTALLATION/MAIN.	\$61.60	LANDSCAPE CONSTRUCTION/DB	\$58.36
LAWN CARE/CHEM APPLICATION	\$56.83	LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE	\$46.11

qualified contractors, prices go up," he says.

Huston suggests pushing the limit on pricing in a healthy market. "If you are getting every job, your numbers are too low," he says.

**HOW LOW ARE YOUR NUMBERS?** A residential design/build firm should get 70 to 90 percent of bids submitted. However, in the bid-build market, you should win one-third of the jobs you price. "And in the commercial market, you should win 10 to 15 percent of what you price," Huston says. "If you win more than that, then you really need to look at pricing because you could be too low."

**MAINTAINING MARGINS.** Knowing your lowest price can help no matter your market, and applying those industry benchmarks is a way to stay on track toward profitability.

At For-Shore Weed Control in New Jersey, a specialty focus on gravel landscape services allows the business to earn a nice margin without too much competition from area businesses. The company has more than 18,000 clients and has been in business for 30 years, growing steadily during three decades.

"We have competition, but that has never been the driving force in any decision we make," says owner Mike Matthews. When he first started the business, his theory was to make the service affordable for everyone and to focus on doing volume. "I was using a simple 10 percent rule – if materials cost \$10, I'd charge \$100," he says.

That model wasn't sustainable, though, because For-Shore took on more expenses as it grew, including health insurance, more equipment and vehicles. "Things got more complicated as we grew, and that's when we brought a consultant into the picture to help with a budget and our pricing," Matthews says.

The pricing now accurately covers the company's overhead and direct costs, allowing for an appropriate net profit margin while giving the business an edge in the market. For-Shore is still a volume-focused business. "We keep the efficiency high, volume high and density high and that has been our secret to profitability," Matthews says. ●



DO YOU KEEP THE NUMBERS TO YOURSELF OR SHARE THEM WITH THE TEAM? HERE'S WHO NEEDS TO SEE THE BOOKS - AND WHY HAVING AT LEAST A SECOND (OR THIRD) SET OF EYES IS HEALTHY FOR YOUR BUSINESS.

## MICHAEL HORNUNG TELLS HIS EMPLOYEES, "YOU DON'T WORK FOR ME. YOU WORK WITH ME."

The president of ValleyGreen in Sartell, Minnesota, draws a picture on the white board of a wagon wheel with spokes. The wheel is ValleyGreen. Next to each spoke, he writes the name of an employee until the entire team is represented.

"We are all a spoke in the wheel," Hornung says to his people, relating how their efforts keep the business moving forward. When a spoke breaks or is missing, the integrity of the wheel is compromised. "When I draw this and the team looks at it, they really get it. They really do," he says.

Hornung wants his employees to realize that their performance impacts the organization. Those who lead crews or play supervisory roles are given the budget information they need to really understand the impact of their performance.

Who gets to see the books? Which managers get the numbers and which numbers should they see? Hornung subscribes to a modified version of open book management. The books are completely open to his operations manager and office manager. "They have to know what's going on with the income and expenses," he says.

# WHO'S LOOKING AT YOUR BOOKS?

By Kristen Hampshire

For other managers, certain “pages” of the books are opened so they can understand budgeted numbers and actual revenues for areas of the business they are responsible for overseeing. For example, a manager overseeing marketing and sales will see just the marketing numbers. “But he doesn’t deal with the fertilizer expenses or truck repairs every day,” Hornung says, because that can get confusing.

If a technician learns that a crew can produce \$1,500 a day, “That technician thinks, ‘Whoa, that’s a lot of money,’” Hornung says. “And yes, it is. But when you shake it out – vehicles, building costs, overhead expenses, administrative staff – the goal at the end of the day is a 10 percent profit margin.”

Hornung has taken the time to explain to his people how dollars are earned and spent in the business through a budgeting 101 workshop. But that can be risky, in a way.

“The big misconception is that all managers need all of the information,” says Jim Huston, president of J.R. Huston Consulting. “They don’t need to know how much the owner is making or the salary of employees or the profit of the company. They just need to know the gross profit margin for their particular division.”

**ANOTHER SET OF EYES.** Not all owners are comfortable sharing the numbers, but they could end up keeping the books too close to their vests.

Who should see the numbers? According to Huston, the owner, the bookkeeper (or controller) and your CPA. “If you have a general manager, they’ll also be involved in the books,” he says.

If the owner is the only one involved, it creates a bottleneck.

“If all the decisions have to be made by the owner, and he or she is the only one with the information,

At ValleyGreen, Mike Hornung, left, operates his company under a modified version of open book management. With him is Operations Manager Bill Klein.



you have to wait for the owner to address the issue. Instead, owners need to empower the people running various divisions to do their jobs,” Huston says.

When division managers have the numbers they need, “They make decisions that are closer to the client and to job performance,” Huston says.

Managers should gain access to scoreboards so they understand how their teams are performing and whether their divisions are profitable. They should see the sales and direct expenses: field labor, field labor burden, materials, equipment, vehicles, rental equipment and

subcontractors. They should also know the target gross profit margin.

“You have books for two reasons,” Huston says. “One is to meet the income tax requirements of the IRS. Second is to make sure the business is operationally significant.”

Maintaining financial records is absolutely required by Uncle Sam. And, your books will give you that scoreboard information that lets you know whether the hard work you’re putting into the business is producing a profit, which is the point of running a for-profit organization. In order to be sure the books are





else would have caught that. It's great to have another set of eyes from someone you trust and respect."

**SHARING WITH A FILTER.** Every Friday morning at 8 a.m., Father Nature Landscapes has a financial meeting. It includes the owner, Andrew McCurry, his business partner, the office manager, project managers and the production manager. "We sit down and look at our register balance, payables, receivables, who we need to collect from and what bills we have written that week," McCurry says.

Seeing the numbers helps the group understand where the business stands and what expenses are coming down the pike.

But not every detail of the budget is shared, McCurry says. Some money is "taken off the table" by his office manager when she prepares the report because dollars might be set aside to pay out bonuses. Since that money is not part of payables or receivables, it's set aside – not part of the report the team views on those Friday meetings.

"We're giving those bonuses as a gift, and we also don't want to show inflated numbers," McCurry says, noting that the money is earmarked. "We do show the numbers that are relevant to the managers."

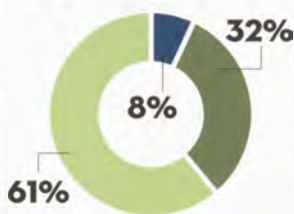
The fact that McCurry and his management team are on top of the numbers, reviewing and discussing them weekly, is the key. The practice emphasizes to man-

sound from a tax and operational standpoint, share the numbers with those key people (bookkeeper, GM and CPA).

The benefit of at least one more set of eyes is catching mistakes. Hornung says that Huston has picked up on the tiniest blips on his budget that have opened up opportunities for savings.

"He'll notice that my rent is a half-percent higher than it should be and ask, 'Why?'" Hornung says. "Well, we have more square footage than we need, but no one

### DO YOU SHARE PROFIT AND LOSS NUMBERS WITH EMPLOYEES?



- YES: ALL EMPLOYEES
- YES: SOME EMPLOYEES
- NO

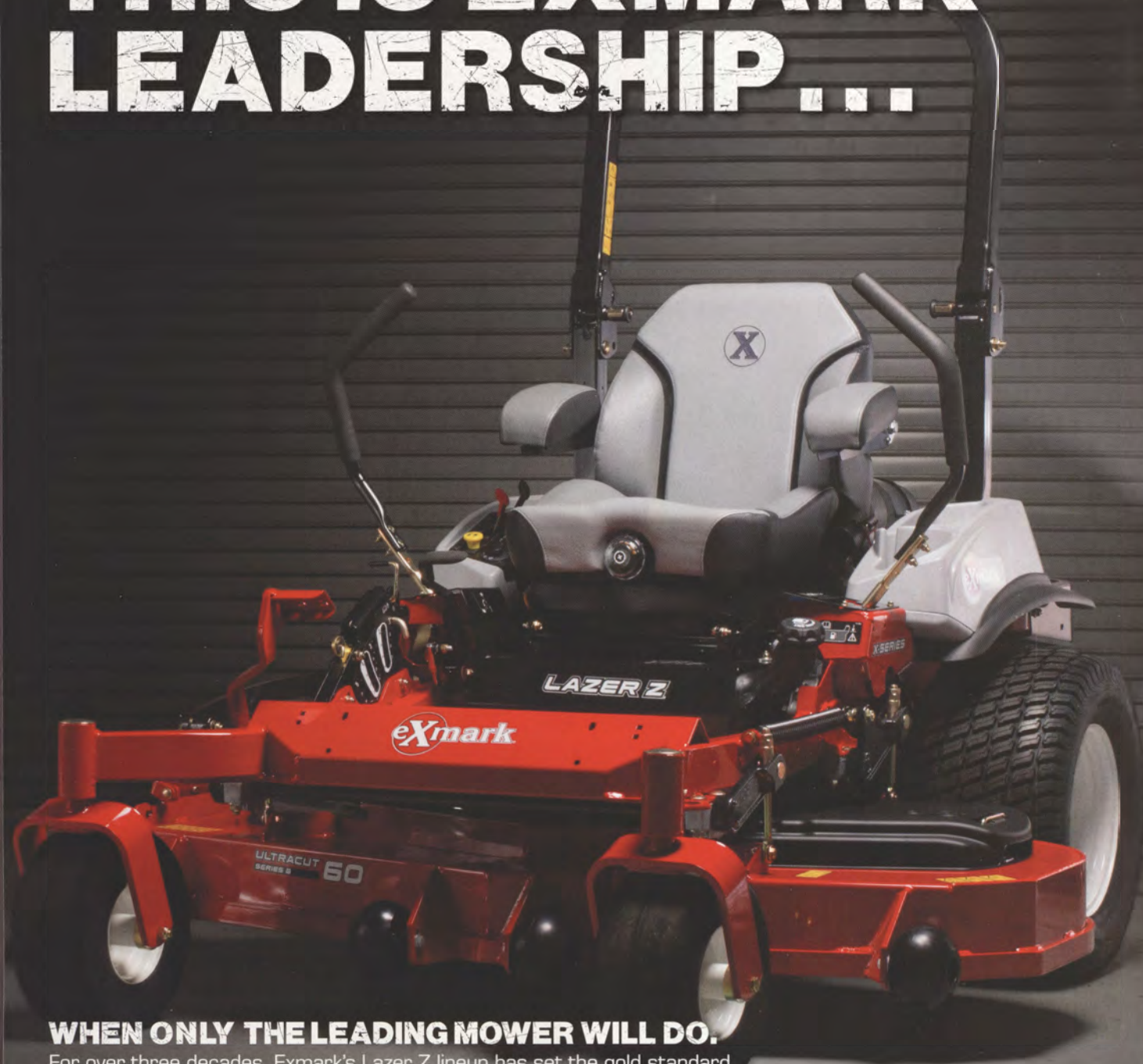
agers the importance of constantly monitoring what's going on financially in the business, measuring performance and working toward goals.

But, McCurry also recognizes that when numbers are passed around without employees understanding exactly what they're looking at, the knowledge can be "too much information."

Exposing every number can create emotional stress and even resentment if employees do not understand how a budget is built and what financial obligations are required to run a business, McCurry says.

It goes back to the wheel and spokes: when the team understands that their specific roles help move the company forward, they can be focused on doing their part. "When we do share numbers with managers, we want to be sure they understand those numbers totally," Hornung says. "That is why they see what they need to know to do their jobs and to be part of the team." ●

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“Accessorizing and making it yours is the fastest-growing part of this segment.”

Roger Gifford, product manager, Kubota

## COMFORTABLE & CAPABLE

(continued from page 42)

rear lighting, side lighting, racks and guards.

Another demand he's noticed is being able to convert UTVs from single-row vehicles to two-row vehicles. This option adds to the machine's versatility, enabling anywhere from one to four riders on the machine.

“That way, you can either move around a crew and some equipment, or you can have two people in it and carry a larger amount of equipment,” Gifford says.

**MORE GREEN AND MORE POWER.** Traditionally, UTVs run on gasoline or diesel. However, it's becoming increasingly common to see electric or hybrid UTV models. Keith Wells, director of sales and marketing at American Landmaster, says there seems to be much more interest today among UTV users in alternative fuel.

Although gasoline and diesel are still more popular, he says electric is gaining momentum. American Landmaster currently offers one electric-powered UTV model.

“Everything is moving toward electric,” Wells says. “There's still a lot in development and refinement needed before electric gets across the board, though.”

Mielke agrees that landscapers shouldn't be surprised to see alternative fuels powering UTVs. In general, he says alternative fuels are particularly beneficial for the landscaping industry.

“A lot of landscapers work in quiet neighborhoods or near golf courses,” he says. “In the same way that they want to leave a minimal (emissions) footprint, their sound footprint is something to think about. Electric vehicles are quiet and let them work toward zero emissions.”

UTVs are also increasing in power and hauling capability.

Wells says he's noticed an increased demand for UTVs to have faster speeds and more power to pull heavier loads. He says his company's UTVs can haul anywhere from 500 to 2,000 pounds.

Reece compares a UTV to a small work

truck in that both are capable of hauling similar loads. He notes that some of Mahindra's UTVs can haul about 1,200 pounds.

“It's just a more fuel-efficient alternative

to a truck,” he adds. “It's essentially easier to use, easier to get in and out of. Especially in a landscape application, you're able to take these vehicles where a work truck can't go.” L&L

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Nathan Halslip  
Facilities Manager and Lead Keeper  
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f t p y

# TRAILER MAINTENANCE

Clear landscaping trailers of clutter to protect equipment and save crews time on site. **By Catherine Meany**



## Lean management

Landscape Associates in Wisconsin uses a lean management approach to organizing its trailer setups to boost efficiency.



**Y**OU'RE ALREADY TAKING THE TIME to maintain your equipment to ensure that it performs optimally on the job, but how much care do you put into the way it gets there? Maintaining a clean and organized trailer can prove to be a major asset to landscaping crews.

For Gerry Andrews, president of Landscape Associates in De Pere, Wisconsin, applying a lean management approach to his trailer setups seven years ago served as an important step in making his company as efficient as possible. Lean management is based on five S's: Sort, Shine, Straighten, Standardize and Sustain. You sort everything out, clean it all up, organize it and keep it that way, Andrews says.

"When we first started this, our toolboxes would be totally packed with tools, and you could never find anything. It turned out we had seven different types of shovels. After we went through the five S's, we are down to two shovels," he says. Once the different types of equipment were streamlined, the next step was to determine the best way to organize them.

"We've gone through and made an assessment of what should be on the trailers and where it should be located so we can easily find it. We've standardized that and have photographs posted of what should be where so that we can be consistent and all the trailers are set up to be exactly the same," he says.

This uniform system enables employees to quickly find equipment, no matter which one of the six Landscape Associates trailers is used that day. Each truck is assigned a color, and all the tools on the truck are

## TRAILERS

color coded accordingly. If crews double up on a job, it's easier to ensure that the right equipment returns to the right truck.

**KEEPING TRACK.** At Landscape Associates, the foreman is responsible for making sure all of the standardized equipment is loaded on the trucks and ready for their crews for the day. If the job requires any extra equipment, it will be listed on the foreman's work order and can be checked out from the shop. Likewise, if something breaks, the foreman is supposed to tag it and check out a replacement tool from the shop until the repairs are made.

Andrews performs spot inspections once or twice a month to ensure everything is still where it is supposed to be. Those results then become part of the twice-a-year performance evaluation ratings, he says.

At other companies, such as Byron Smail Landscape Contracting in Roaring Spring, Pennsylvania, this organizational responsibility is shared, says owner Byron Smail.

"In the morning, I make sure everything is organized. But at the end of the day we come back and like clockwork, our guys know it's time to clean up and get ready for the next day," Smail says.

**TRIAL AND ERROR.** While everyone will have different needs for their trailers based on the amount and types of equipment they have, contractors can figure out where to start by looking to other businesses for inspiration.

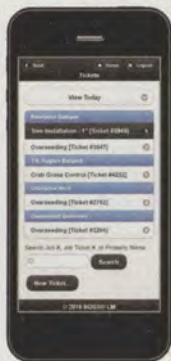
Andrews got a lot of ideas for his own trailer setups from ones he'd seen at trade shows or at other companies. For instance, Landscape Associates has two Tony Bass Super Lawn Trucks in its fleet for technical maintenance crews. The back half of these trucks can dump and the front half is a trailer with a large walk-in box with a ramp. These trucks have been ideal for work at residential sites or other sites

that don't need big mowers. Andrews' team customized many configurations used in Tony Bass trucks and others to work on their own trailers. Also, every winter, Andrews' team evaluates their storage configurations and tweaks it to increase efficiencies, he says.

"We had to go back and retrofit our enclosed trailers with heavier plywood to attach stuff to the walls securely. That was probably one of our bigger challenges. Those trailers bounce around, so we had to find ways to modify hardware to hold the equipment securely and keep it where we want it to be," Andrews says.

Smail Landscape Contracting's team also built their own

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custom wooden shelves to store their tools on the box trailer walls. Their storage system continually evolves based on trial and error, Smail says.

**OPEN OR CLOSED.** Smail Landscape Contracting has two open trailers for mowing crews and two enclosed trailers that can be locked and stored at the job site on multi-day projects, Smail says.

“When we first got the box trailers, I had gotten them for mowers because I thought it would be like a garage on wheels. That worked really well until we realized we could be more efficient with the open trailers,” he says.

Andrews’ mowing crews also



Every company should configure their trailer to meet their needs, based on the equipment they use.

use open trailers for mower storage and transport. However, with open trailers, contractors need to consider rust and weather damage issues. “We are probably going to move away from the open trailers to protect the equipment from weather,” Andrews says.

**BELLS AND WHISTLES.** When choosing a trailer, contractors should consider the storage potential and the functionality of the vehicle. Open trailers may be preferred for housing mowers, but other vehicle options like dump trailers may be more versatile.

“Dump trailers are the way

to go for landscaping trailers,” Smail says. “They are better than dump trucks. They are cheaper, less maintenance, and you can haul more material legally.”

For Andrews, keeping trailers tidy also helps his employees feel valued and take responsibility for their work.

In return, he continually looks to upgrade the trailers and outfit them with the latest luxuries, whether it’s a new coat of paint or a microwave for the crew to have hot lunches.

“I want the guys to take pride in the trailers and any request they make, we fulfill it,” he says. **L&L**

The author is a freelancer based in Kentucky.

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## BUILDING THE BACKYARD DREAM

Woodfield Landscaping's Peter Curro wants to deliver on his clients' wishes for properties that feel like a great escape.

By Kristen Hampshire

**T**HE CONFERENCE ROOM AT WOODFIELD LANDSCAPING in Fallston, Maryland, is where clients experience their first “wow” and realize the potential of their properties if they move forward with a new landscape plan. There’s a sizeable table and it’s a comfortable space at the headquarters. But the most compelling part is the flat-screen television mounted to the wall. The lights dim and clients look up. They see pictures of their yard as it is. One after the next, President Peter Curro moves through a deck of images that he and his crew collect before the meeting.

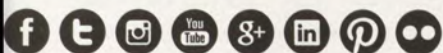
“When they come in to our office and see their backyard up on the screen, that makes a world of difference,” says Curro, who started the business in 1990 after nearly two decades growing a career at a local nursery. “I always wanted to be in design/build landscape. It’s what I always had in the back of my mind.”





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Clients can see this passion when they begin flipping through the project idea book, which is the next step after their property photos are displayed on the big screen. “We have a book of projects that are a range of prices,” Curro says. “Going through those pictures helps us talk about the budget so we can get a good idea of what they have in mind.”

So, there’s the big-screen picture show of before pictures – the property as it is. And the inspiration book of Woodfield Landscaping’s completed projects, tagged with price points so clients can see what it costs to develop some of their backyard dreams.

This in-house experience does a couple of things. For one, it saves Curro and his team the time and resources required to meet clients at their home. And, he says, “It eliminates the tire kickers.” Those who make the effort to go to Woodfield Landscaping’s office are serious about moving forward with some sort of plan.

Also, this sets the tone for the approach Woodfield Landscaping takes on projects – and that’s an in-house way of doing business. The company is a full-service design/build firm with a robust pool division. Crews complete projects from breaking ground to building pavilions and poolside outdoor kitchens. These days, poolscapes make up 75 percent of the company’s revenue, Curro says.

“We have a niche,” Curro relates. “There’s really no direct competition because we can do the whole project,” he says.

**AN IN-HOUSE APPROACH.** When Curro started the company nearly two decades ago, the installation projects were fairly basic – “junipers on hillsides,” he says. But more complex and larger-scale jobs began landing on his desk as the years progressed, a product of consistent advertising, word of mouth and branding. From the beginning, Curro drove a red truck emblazoned with the company logo and crews still drive red trucks (his favorite color). “So people can see my trucks driving around and they automatically know it’s Woodfield,” he says.

Creating a professional image has always been important. And advertising is also a priority. Curro credits his nursery retail back-



**TAKE A DIP:** While Woodfield Landscaping has a strong focus on pools, the company also installs patios, outdoor kitchens, retaining walls and other outdoor living components.

ground for this. “We have always advertised,” he says. Today, his advertising is focused online. He has a website marketing pro who manages the company’s site along with Google ad words. Curro spends an estimated \$5,000 per month on advertising through the web from mid-January through November. “People who want pools start shopping after Christmas,” he says.

The market Woodfield Landscape operates in surrounding Washington D.C. has also been economically stable with high-end residential clients who are interested in investing in their outdoors. “The high-end residential client is really who we focus on,” Curro says. Many jobs are in the \$100,000-plus range, though his team also designs and installs landscapes that are \$50,000 or less. But more work is focused on those complete outdoor room concepts that include swimming pools. “We’re doing the pool, its travertine decking, the pavilion, the outdoor lighting, the landscaping – everything that goes around the pool,” Curro says.

And this work is completed by the in-house team. “We have subbed a few things out in the past, and it was always a problem. The sub didn’t show up or there was some sort of issue,” Curro says. “That was not good for our customer relations because our focus is making sure they’re happy at pretty much any cost. That’s our referral base.”

Of course, completing jobs in-house means having a trusted team that can do all of the work. For Curro, that skilled labor team is largely

## PAVING THE WAY FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

**T**HERE'S NOTHING MORE REWARDING than creating an accessible and pleasing environment for those in need of comfort. Woodfield Landscaping had an opportunity to play a part in an extensive project at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in 2008 when it was renovating the exterior property to make it more patient and visitor friendly.

Walter Reed is known as "The Nation's Medical Center," and is one of the country's largest and most renowned medical institutions. It includes 7,100 staff members who serve military families and the nation's active duty, returning war heroes, veterans and the country's leaders.

Woodfield Landscaping's paver vendor, EP Henry, told President Peter Curro about a project. It was supplying pavers for 10,000 square feet of space to transform outdoor areas. Curro was interested in the project and helping as the installer.

The project took two months and Woodfield provided services at a reduced labor cost. The company installed the pavers, along with four outdoor kitchens and a playground. The project made the property more accessible for wheelchairs, and an inviting place for family and friends to visit their wounded loved ones.

"It was a phenomenal experience," Curro says. "We were able to help make the experience better for the patients' families."

The paver spaces provided areas for gathering. Previously, surfaces were not finished. "The facility has a hotel where loved ones can stay, but they had no place to go outside," he says. "Now, they have barbecues, outdoor fire places, a playground for the kids and everything is paved so they are not sitting in the mud. It was an amazing project."



his loyal H-2B staff who have been with him for 17 years. As Woodfield added services to the business, he trained his crews in the field. "I'm always on the jobs overseeing progress," he says. "So, over the years the team has learned exactly how to do things and what is expected."

Most of that dedicated team has been with Curro since 2001. "We needed employees at the time, and one day we were laying sod and some Mexicans showed up and were looking for work," he says. "I said, O.K., but then realized they were not legal. So, they went home and I found out about H-2B and got them all legal. They came back the following year and have been with us ever since."

H-2B has been critical to

keeping services in-house at Woodfield Landscaping, he says. "You need a very good crew, and a crew that is going to show up every day," he says.

**BREAKING INTO POOLS.** The pool goes in first, then comes the landscaping. The problem was, Curro's clients who were having pools installed were dealing with contractors that strung out projects and weren't reliable. A pool project that should have taken weeks would be a work in progress for six months, holding up Woodfield Landscaping's schedule and frustrating its clients.

So in 2006, Curro decided to do something about that.

"I said, 'We can do this,'" he says. "I called up San Juan

pools, and they had a dealer nearby who wasn't doing so well. I bought out his license and he worked with me for a short time. I learned how to put in those (fiberglass) pools, and learned how to do concrete and vinyl liner pools on my own."

By bringing pool installation in house, Curro could better control the quality and job schedule. Plus, he could present that true, complete outdoor room to clients.

He quickly realized that building pools would be a revenue-generator for the business.

"One day, I sold three pool projects, and collected \$250,000 in deposits because we sold the patios, retaining walls and everything else included that we can do in house," he says. **L&L**



# BEATING THE LABOR CHALLENGE: WINNING THE RIGHT JOBS

**I**n business, especially the landscape business, saying 'no' can be just as important as saying yes. To grow a successful business in this industry, you want to identify the jobs that make money and those that don't – and long before your jobcosting. The sharpest companies in this industry can start to identify these jobs before you even price them.

And why is that so important in landscaping? Most companies are battling a severe bottleneck right now – their labor. And it's a real challenge to solve to solve. There are plenty of vendors available to help you provide materials – and there are new and innovative products launched in our industry every year. Equipment vendors are ready and waiting to sell you, lease you, rent you, or even rent-to-sell you equipment that will save you time.

But adding more crews is another problem altogether. First you must find good, skilled bodies looking for work. That's in one of the most significant challenges in our industry today. It's hard to find good people. The second challenge is that – even if you can find more people – your costs are not limited to just payroll. Adding staff requires more trucks, equipment and tools to do their work! Then you'll need to add sales/design/operations staff to sell more work, and to supervise it. With enough growth, you may even need a bigger yard and shop. Adding people is a complex, multi-layered problem.

With that in mind - let's go back to identifying the best jobs. Take a minute to review this next example. There are four unique jobs. Study each one of them, then rank these jobs from best to worst. Use your gut, common sense, or even a calculator –and try to put them in order from the best job for your company to the worst job. **(Example 1)**

Finished? Did you write it down? This exercise is so much more interesting if you actually follow along.

Identifying the best job isn't as simple as it might appear. Here's a few common approaches:

- **Net Profit** – the obvious approach. If your eyes went right to the bottom line, you could see that Job A had the highest net profit, and Job B had the lowest. There's the answer. Case closed. Or is it that simple?
- **Gross Profit** – some companies focus on maximizing gross profit. Since overhead is a relatively fixed number, they try to maximize their gross margins. In that case Job A would still be the best job and Job D would

be the worst.

- **Revenue** – Job C will generate the most revenue. It's also pretty profitable. Maybe your gut tells you that's the best job, even if you don't have hard numbers to back it up.
- **Material Cost : Labor Cost** – If you're really into crunching numbers, maybe you looked to see that Job D had the best ratio of materials cost to labor cost ... And since materials are so much easier than labor, you went with that job.

It's not a simple challenge. Each one of those jobs is different with varying revenue, man hours, equipment and material costs. Further complicating the challenge is that they each recover a different amount of overhead and their gross and net profit margins are different too. For most owners, salespersons, and estimators, picking the best job is done with a little gut ... and a lot of hope.

While there is no one, single correct way to analyze a job, there is another way we like to look at jobs. I like to review jobs through the lens of our biggest bottleneck –

my available field labor. It's a pretty safe assumption that, for most of the readers of this article, good labor is hard to come by – and hard to add more of. And if that sounds like you, then its imperative for you company to identify the jobs that **make the best, most profitable use of your available field labor.**

Let's simplify this example by explaining it a different way. Imagine you were a simple 1-crew company, with 3 people in that crew, and you could work 8 months of the year, for 40 hours a week. That's 1,280 crew hours, or about 3,840 total available man hours (based on a 3-person crew) to get work done. Given a short season, and only 1 crew – it's vitally important that they work on the most profitable jobs possible.

If you only had 3,850 man hours, you have enough to complete:

- Job A – 11 times
- Job B – 17.5 times
- Job C – 7.7 times
- Job D – 48.13 times

So, what would your company's total numbers look like if that happened? Let's look at the numbers as if we completed each job (over and over again) by its number of potential times? **(Example 2)**

Job D and Job B generated a lot more revenue per man hour invested. So if we did jobs like that all year, our sales would be significantly higher than if we did jobs like A and C.

Reality dictates that your crews need a truck, trailer, tools and equipment no matter which jobs they did – and that our overhead costs are fixed, no matter which job you completed. We're still going to need the basic business operating expenses to run our company. So we'll



Mark Bradley is the CEO of LMN – one of the landscape industry's leading estimating and mobile timetracking software packages. For more information or more articles like this, visit [www.golmn.com](http://www.golmn.com).

EXAMPLE 1	JOB A	JOB B	JOB C	JOB D
PRICE	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$10,000
LABOR COSTS	\$8,750	\$5,500	\$12,500	\$2,000
MAN HOURS	350	220	500	80
EQUIP COSTS	\$2,000	\$5,000	\$3,000	\$1,000
MATERIALS COST	\$1,500	\$7,000	\$8,500	\$3,700
OVERHEAD	\$6,250	\$6,250	\$10,000	\$2,500
GROSS PROFIT	\$12,750 (51%)	\$7,500 (30%)	\$16,000 (40%)	\$3,300 (27%)
NET PROFIT	\$6,500 (26%)	\$1,250 (5%)	\$6,000 (15%)	\$800 (8%)

EXAMPLE 2	JOB A	JOB B	JOB C	JOB D
PRICE	\$275,000	\$436,000	\$307,000	\$480,000
LABOR COSTS	\$96,250	\$96,250	\$96,250	\$96,250
MAN HOURS	3,850	3,850	3,850	3,850
MATERIALS COST	\$16,500	\$122,500	\$65,000	\$177,000

EXAMPLE 3	JOB A	JOB B	JOB C	JOB D
PRICE	\$275,000	\$436,000	\$307,000	\$480,000
LABOR COSTS	\$96,250	\$96,250	\$96,250	\$96,250
MAN HOURS	3,850	3,850	3,850	3,850
MATERIALS COST	\$16,500	\$122,500	\$65,000	\$177,000
EQUIP COST	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
GROSS PROFIT	\$112,000	\$168,000	\$96,000	\$156,000
OVERHEAD	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$100,000
NET PROFIT	\$12,000	\$68,000	-\$4,000	\$56,000

EXAMPLE 4	JOB A	JOB B	JOB C	JOB D
PRICE	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$10,000
SUBTRACT MATERIALS	\$1,500	\$7,000	\$8,500	\$3,700
DIVIDE BY MAN HOURS	350	220	500	80
THROUGHPUT/HR	\$67.14	\$81.82	\$63	\$78.75

assume that, over those 8 months, we had the same equipment and overhead costs no matter which job we performed. (Example 3)

Now we're starting to see a big difference. If you ranked the jobs now, you'll likely prefer B, D, A, then C. Check back to your earlier exercise. Did you rank them in that

order? What if there was a number that could help you analyze these jobs without the complication of what we just did? Well there is. It's called **Throughput Per Hour**.

**Throughput** is a complicated word for a very simple concept. It's just the money that stays in your company after you pay your ven-

dors their costs. It looks like this:

$$\text{Job Selling Price} - \text{Job Material Costs} - \text{Job Rental Costs} - \text{Job Subcontractor Costs} = \text{Job Throughput}$$

Since labor is our biggest bottleneck, and increasing labor is likely to add other expenses as well (like equipment and overhead), we

need to maximize our **Throughput** (money left in the company) per **Man Hour**.

To calculate **Throughput Per Man Hour** for each job, simply take the job's price, subtract your vendor costs (Materials, Rentals and Subcontractors) and divide that number by the number of estimated man hours.

If you go back to our example jobs, we didn't have any rentals or subcontractors so the calculation is really easy.

Amazingly, the **Throughput Per Hour** would rank the jobs from best to worst in the exact same order as if we had one crew to work on those jobs all year. **Throughput Per Hour** will show you the jobs that generate the most **retained revenue** per man hour worked. And since we're all struggling to find good man hours, I believe this is another great number to have in your toolbox.

And a little bonus for those readers who use LMN – your LMN budget will provide you a **company throughput per hour** – the number you need to hit to make your budget a reality. Benchmark each estimate's throughput per hour vs. your company throughput/hr to make sure your jobs are helping you hit your targets and not holding you back.

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ment industry had been deficient in presenting itself to the outside world (clients, insurance companies, attorney's and lawmakers). And second, the insurance companies did not understand the snow and ice management industry. As a result, they buried it under other policies. This is the reason they lose \$2 for every \$1 in premium for their snow programs. Third, our lawmakers had absolutely no understanding that we, as an industry, were in peril. We desperately needed voices and advocates to lobby for our best interests.

The ASCA was founded based on this research, as are the four pillars on which we are based.

**THE FOUR PILLARS:**

**1. Written industry standards:** We knew many very good contractors were out there doing things well, but the deck was stacked against them and they were fighting their own battles individually. Whether that battle was fighting a slip-and-fall claim or combating less professional contractors in the sales game, they all were doing the same things internally yet fighting alone. The Industry Standards committee is made up of individuals from these companies. Utilizing their best practices, we assembled nearly 30 pages of the best practices for the snow and ice management industry. These standards cover employee training, preseason site inspections, in-event documentation, post-event processes and much more.

We then had the standards accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). ANSI is



After extensive research and conversations with industry professionals, the ASCA was formed.

# WHY WE NEED THE ASCA

BY KEVIN GILBRIDE

I'm often asked about the motivation behind the creation of the ASCA. Recently, this caused me to reflect and wonder how many times since our inception I've been asked that very question.

In 2011, Lawn & Landscape's sister publication, Snow Magazine, held a sponsored two-day event with 60 of the Top 100 snow and ice management companies in attendance. The last 1½ hours of the conference was spent in an open forum discussion. This was an opportunity for Snow Magazine to tap into the knowledge of business leaders in one setting and to gain insight into the issues owners of snow and ice management companies were facing. This session was moderated by myself, Snow Magazine Editor Mike Zawacki, and Snow Magazine Leadership Award

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recipient Troy Clogg.

After 90 minutes, 60 of the brightest minds in the snow and ice management industry agreed the top three issues facing the snow and ice management industry were insurance, insurance and insurance. At the time, I recall thinking, "Ha, I can't believe they are complaining about insurance again!" But I remained neutral and committed to investigating the insurance issue.

After a year of intense due diligence – research and meetings – the team came to a stunning conclusion. Insurance was not the problem. Instead, it was a symptom of a much deeper and more complex problem, sort of like how grouchy behavior and a runny nose precludes a winter cold.

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Almost 30 pages of accredited standards are available for all ASCA members.

the most credible standards organization around. It gave the standards credibility. This is important because the first place a plaintiff's attorney goes when they get a case is to ANSI to see if there is a standard. The standards are available to all ASCA members at no charge.

**2. Education:** ASCA-C education is based on the premise that the outside world can't differentiate one contractor from another, especially the insurance world. ASCA-C ensures that not only have you received a copy of the industry standards, but you have read and understand them. This was a direct result of the insurance meetings we had, and their lack of faith in the snow industry.

**3. Verification:** Again, a result of the insurance meetings, but a solution that addresses so much more. The ISO 9001/SN 9001 quality management system ensures that your company has the processes and procedures in place to ensure service quality. It ensures that you have implemented the industry standards in your company. Additionally, this system improves your processes and procedures, improving your company and provides you with a real sales/marketing differentiator.

## NOW THAT WE HAVE OUR SHIP IN ORDER, WE CAN INFLUENCE REAL CHANGE. AND THAT COMES FROM CHANGING THE LAWS.

**4. Positive legislative change:** The first three pillars are snow and ice professionals taking steps to better represent themselves and the industry to the outside world. Now that we have our ship in order, we can influence real change. And that comes from changing the laws. ASCA and our members are working at the state and federal level to enact legislation to limit liability for snow and ice management companies and to reduce frivolous lawsuits. Currently, with legislation active in eight states, and many more on the cusp, we are using our collective voices to enact change.

In the end, the insurance problem was much more than that. To solve any problem, you can either put a Band-Aid on it and wait for it occur again, or you can get to the root of the problem and fix it, which is what we are doing here and it is working. Today, companies that follow the four pillars are showing tremendous growth, improved efficiencies and decreasing insurance premiums. Even better, these companies fight and win when a slip-and-fall claim is field against them. **L&L**

The author is the executive director of the ASCA.

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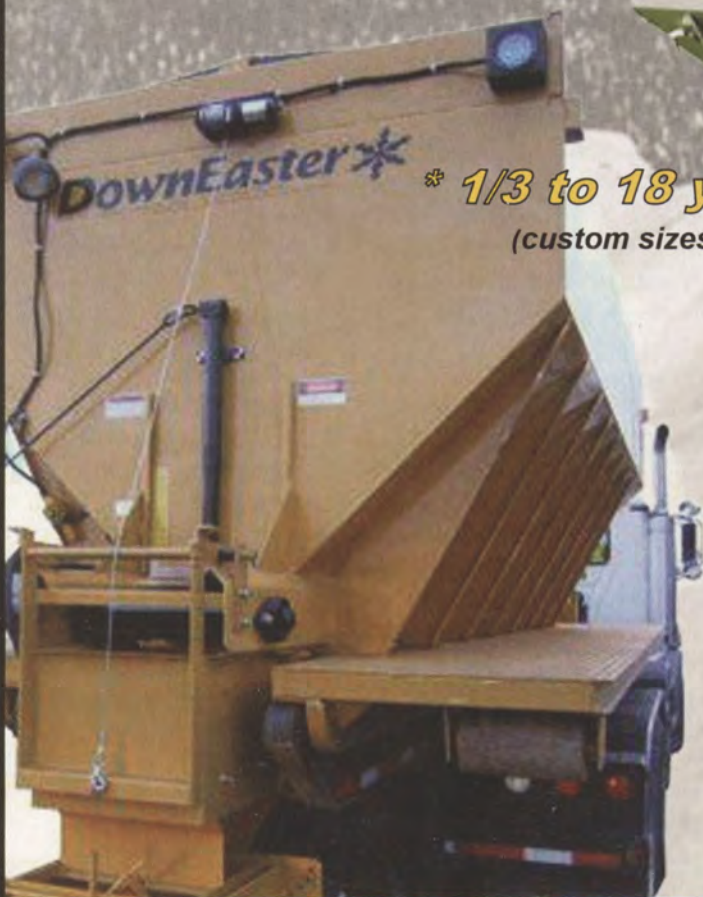
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# SMOOTH SAILING

Learn how to keep properties  
ice-free all winter.

BY HOLLY HAMMERSMITH

**A** mild winter, such as this past one, left many snow removal contractors with a surplus of ice melt product. Ice melt materials, with proper storage, can be kept and used in the coming months, they say. In the Midwest, rock salt is king when it comes to ice melting applications.

“We really got lackadaisical throughout the years because it was so readily available. Then as this shortage took place, it’s been my experience you really want to plan ahead,” says Tom Barry, founder of Battle Creek Landscape Service, based in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Barry says prices were reasonable up until the 2012-2013 season. Then there was a salt shortage and prices have been higher ever since.

“I don’t see them ever going back down that low,” he says.

Battle Creek Landscape has been in business and offering snow removal service for 30 years. Its annual revenue is about \$1 million. During peak season, 20 employees are on staff.

**PURCHASING.** After the rock salt shortage, Midwest suppliers went to a pre-purchase plan, Barry says. All of his salt is purchased cash on delivery now. To free up funds, Barry says Battle Creek Landscape changed its business model and requires retainer agreements from all of its commercial clients.

“We like to give the analogy of we’re an insurance provider and by locking in with us, you’re guaranteed the quality service that you’re used to getting from us,” he says.

Going into each season, Barry says he prefers to purchase at least the same amount of salt that was used during the prior year. His company also uses a liquid brine application to augment granular applications.

“Then we try to have some sort of buffer. Usually we like to have 50 to 100 extra tons in reserve over what we used the previous year,” he says. “We’re still in negotiation with our different suppliers. If we don’t have something here by end of September we get nervous.”


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Meridian, Idaho, general manager Mike Martin purchased about 10 to 12 1-ton pallets of granular product last season. During peak season they employ 24 individuals.

Martin purchased about 20 pallets, for his \$1.5-million company, but right now he is sitting on four pallets of unused product.

"We're sitting on almost \$1,400 worth of inventory that can't make us any money until next year," he says.

**MANAGING A SMALLER OP.** As a smaller operation, Elijah Stiner, owner of Stiner Brothers based in Piedmont, Oklahoma, says

his experience buying ice melt is a bit different than it is for larger companies. Primarily a fencing contractor, his company also offers landscape maintenance, and commercial snow removal. Stiner Brothers has an annual revenue of about \$500,000 and five to seven full-time employees on staff year-round.

He only uses calcium chloride, available in bags from big box stores and uses his contractor discount of 10 to 15 percent off, depending on the store.

"We just try to have what we used the year before on hand," Stiner says.

He says they did the same this year, but a mild winter left

him with about 4,500 pounds of product. He will use it next winter. If planning for a harsh winter, Stiner offers a few tips.

"Be the first one at the store, get up early," he says.

Stiner will call ahead to every store before showing up. Last year, the product was put in stores as early as September, he adds. Sometimes it's marked down at the end of the season.

"If you can afford to, buy it in bulk and store it," he says. "It's always better to have more than not be able to have any."

**STORAGE.** Barry's company has a storage barn designed to hold up to 200 tons of salt at a time.

Instead he doubles it and has about 400 tons inside. This has maxed out their space.

"We made it work but we're at our limit right now," he says.

A front-end loader is used to scoop the salt, which is contained on three sides by blocks.

Martin says he stores granular ice melt in a 15-foot covered trailer, but the trailer is rotting from exposure to the product. His company uses both magnesium chloride and calcium chloride in granular form.

"I wouldn't recommend it to everybody because we have to do a lot of work on that trailer every year from the actual rot that's happening," he says.

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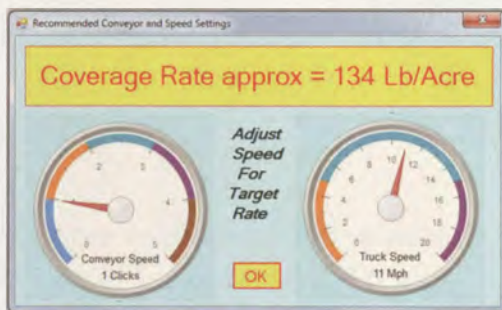
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Additional magnesium chloride is kept on site in trailers at client locations. Unopened magnesium chloride is placed in a "Marine barrack" like storage area, he says. This is where four pallets currently reside. Magnesium chloride can clump if not stored in a climate-controlled area.

**TRACKING.** Since first experiencing a shortage, Barry says his team implemented several tactics to track, measure and record salt usage. One tactic is the use of a DICKEY-john computer controller on his truck's salt spreader. "We got real accurate measurements of all of our parking lots. It's a computer controller that

measures and changes the application rates based upon the speed of the vehicle," Barry says. "If the vehicle starts to slow down, the computer tells the applicator to slow its process so it'll put down less product."

Barry hopes to make a return on his investment in the controller within three years. Before purchasing the controller, they "measured" salt visually.

"It was accurate to a degree but because the salt prices were cheap we didn't have to be spot on," he says.

Martin says his company's controller tracks salt purchasing.

"We know down to the bag count," he says. "We know ev-

ery year what we've purchased and what we use and what we have left."

**SUPPLIERS.** Negotiate early and often with suppliers, Barry says. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Use more than one supplier."

Going with the supplier with the lowest price is not always the best tactic, he says. It's important to keep a relationship going with a few suppliers.

Martin says he typically makes a deal with his suppliers at the beginning of the season.

"I have three to four vendors that we buy the granular magnesium chloride and calcium chloride, and only one vendor

that sells us the liquid," he says.

Fortunately, the liquid magnesium chloride can be sold back to the supplier at season end for the exact same price he originally paid. Martin recalls a two-day snow event last November where the area was hit with 16 inches. There was a shortage of magnesium chloride and instead they had to purchase overpriced, low-quality rock salt.

"We were paying about 35 to 40 percent more for about a week and a half, and it was junk and the guys that had it knew they had it and they would just mark it way up," Martin says. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

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## PRICING WITH CONFIDENCE FOR PROFIT

BY MIKE CALLAHAN

**A**fter several years of following many industry-specific Facebook groups and working with more than a few snow and ice removal companies, I have learned that there are many firms that have not standardized their pricing. To be more specific, their pricing for snow and ice removal services seems to be left to chance. This inevitably makes turning a profit much more difficult.

Our company's plan for ensuring a profit included standardizing our pricing. We have implemented the standardization into our scheduling and estimation system and use job costing reports to update production numbers for future winters. If your company is struggling to turn a profit, consider following these steps to begin standardizing your pricing.

**UNDERSTAND THE COSTS.** There are three major costs to consider: (1) cost of your labor force, (2) cost of equipment and (3) overhead recovery markup. First, you must consider the cost of your labor force. This includes considering average hourly wage as well as labor burden (i.e., unemployment insurance, FICA, workers' compensation or health insurance). Calculating an average hourly wage allows you to have a handle on approximately how much you will be paying in field labor no matter who is in the field working at any given time. It's important to consider equipment costs. Each type of equipment setup will come with its own specific set of expenses that can be calculated hourly. In this hourly rate, be sure to include replacement costs, interest on

**TAKE THE TIME UP FRONT, PRIOR TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE ESTIMATION SEASON, TO STANDARDIZE YOUR PRICING SYSTEMS.**

loans, inflation, maintenance and repairs, including oil changes. The final part of the equation is to look at projected profit and loss statements and calculate the overhead recovery markup, which includes non-field labor, general/administrative costs, material markup, equipment markup and subcontractor markup. Once you know the total costs of doing business, you will be able to price jobs to meet anticipated profit margins.

**UNDERSTAND PRODUCTION RATES.** By analyzing job costing reports from your customer relationship management software, you can use the previous year's data to calculate future pricing per square foot. By using job costing data, you should be able to create an average production rate for each type of crew in your fleet. For example, the reports for our company list each crew "type of equipment and plow size" as well as the time it took to clear the exact square footage of the property. Since we are very particular about which crew setups are used on each type of property we maintain, the data we collected through tracking start and stop times each time we plow a property gave us a very accurate production rate regarding what our crews were able to clear each hour. By tracking and analyzing this data following each snow and ice event, we now have a production rate that crews can realistically achieve in our market. This also allows us to avoid relying on industry benchmarks for pricing work.

**CREATE A PRICING MATRIX.** In its simplest form, a pricing matrix is a table that breaks out specific intervals of area with an associated price you charge for your services, budgeted time to complete the work on the property, associated expenses and desired profit margin for the jobs bid out. Once this data is entered into a system, our office and estimators go into the software and utilize a measuring tool and a prebuilt estimate template to produce property-specific prices that reflect the equipment used. The system produces a budgeted time, associated overhead expenses and a projected profit margin. We run job costing reports mid-season and end-of season to confirm crews are meeting anticipated budgeted times and profit margin and to confirm our projections and update historical production rates.

Take the time up front, prior to the arrival of the estimation season, to standardize your pricing systems. Although it may take some intensive labor, the return on investment will be well worth the time spent. It is critical to have a plan that will lead to fruitful profits instead of leaving things to chance. **L&L**





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# Promoting the PROS

The internet is inundated with outdoor living ideas. How do you cut through the noise and promote the value of a professional?

By Kristen Hampshire

**S**EARCH PINTEREST FOR ‘OUTDOOR LIVING’ and instantly thousands of enticing patios, pergolas, fire pits and perfectly appointed landscape beds populate the screen. Scroll down, keep scrolling. Click, save. Click another. Now, pull up Houzz. Oh, that furniture could belong at a resort! Click, save. Now wait – is that a how-to video on YouTube? Nice.

This is your inquisitive client: hungry for information and finding all the trappings of an ideal outdoor experience on a mobile device, including the instructions for building it. If HGTV sparked a DIY craze, then social media started a raging bonfire.

As a landscape professional, how do you talk to clients about making these outdoor dreams a reality? What conversations are critical to include in your meetings with prospects who bring their Pinterest “likes” to the table? And, for the DIYers, how do you explain the meaning of a qualified professional?

Diana Grundeen might illustrate the reality of designing complex outdoor living projects by asking how the homeowner has fared with other DIY attempts.

“Our team comes in and this is what we are trained to do. We have the tools, and we can build the space in a week,” says Grundeen, owner of Trio Landscaping in St. Paul and Minneapolis. “Speaking of that experience gives clients confidence that we are professionals.”

The work of a professional positioned next to a typical DIY project can show the difference an experienced contractor brings to a project, says Rocky Morton, owner of Indy’s Finest Fence in Indianapolis. “You get what you pay for,” he says. “You can have your husband out in your yard for two months digging post holes, or we can set the posts in one day.”

**PAINTING THE ‘PRO’ PICTURE.** Indy’s Finest Fence builds about 500 fences per year and has a team of 20 employees who do the work. Morton is proud of the company’s high ratings on Facebook, and he advises people to do their homework.

As a fencing company, Morton runs into many people who get an estimate, suffer from sticker shock and say they’ll do the job themselves. After all, they saw pre-fab materials at the box store, so it can’t be that hard. “It seems like anyone can build a fence. You set your posts and nail your wood,” he says. “But a lot more goes into it than that.”

Professionals like Morton know this is the case. But how do you explain that “a lot more” aspect of the job to a potential client who’s excited about the DIY thing? Morton might bring up common mistakes: not digging posts to the proper depth, which results in a fence that can’t withstand the wind and eventually ripples. Or, failing to properly identify utility lines before digging. “If you hit an underground utility wire, you are liable,” he says.

Morton also talks materials. “We get a better deal on quality products,” he says, emphasizing a relationship with industry vendors that

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When homeowners share saved pictures from Pinterest, Diane Grunden of Trio Landscaping says to ask them why they liked those saved pictures.

supply commercial-grade hardware and wood that you won't find on sale at the box store.

"Some will want to do the PVC panels they pick up at the hardware store or the wood privacy fences, but the quality is way less than what we install," Morton says. "We use a true

1-inch x 6-inch dog-eared board vs. hardware stores with thinner 5/8-inch x 5 1/2-inch boards. We push people on 'you get what you pay for.'"

That includes the nails—something most homeowners never ask about. "If they don't use the proper nails, they'll start rusting

and will pop right out," he says.

Of course, the timeline aspect of installing a fence is also a selling point. A complete fence project is done in four days: one day for setting posts, two days for allowing concrete to set and one day for completing the panels.

Morton also focuses on explaining that a fence is an investment. "You're paying for the labor to install a fence, but it's worth it," he says to homeowners.

**PREPARE FOR A SALE.** It's not unusual for Grunden to meet with a homeowner who wants to share a Pinterest page of saved pictures—ideas for what an outdoor space could become. This is all well

and good, but she digs deeper. "Did you tag why you like that picture?" she asks. "You need to have that conversation with those clients who have a huge book of materials to really find out what it was from each of those pictures that they were desiring."

Grunden brings her own portfolio of work, but first she asks the homeowner some questions. How do you want to use the outdoor space? Will you entertain and how many people might you invite? Do you sit at a formal table or prefer a more casual seating area?

"Then, you have to be the psychologist and watch their facial expressions—what clicks,"

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Grundeen says. “You can’t ask them upfront, ‘OK, how big do you want the patio and where do you want to build it?’ Get a feel for them and their space.”

This is the value of a professional. In many ways, clients are wooed by the process. Then, Grundeen will get out her portfolio. She’ll show examples of spaces she has completed that align with the feedback the homeowner provided about using the outdoor space. She supplies some estimated price tags, too.

When a homeowner mentions doing parts of the project him or herself to save on the budget, Grundeen doesn’t shut down the opportunity. But she walks them

through what the project entails.

“Millennials almost feel a disconnect with being outside, so to them, it seems kind of cool to be able to play out in the dirt,” Grundeen says. “If there is a certain part of the project they want to connect with, they should be able to do that and I guide them.”

She asks those clients: Do you have a skid-steer and know how to drive it? Do you want to spend the next month doing that job? (The answers are usually no.) Grundeen then says, “How about we have our crews come in, set up the patio and bed lines, and we can figure out what plant material you want to put in and what material you want the crew to put in.”

**LET AVID DIYERS ‘OWN’ A PIECE.**

Expertise and experience are two selling points that professionals bring to a project that the DIY enthusiast can’t replicate. “Landscape design has a certain amount of science, common sense and a lot of intuition and artistry,” Grundeen says.

Helping homeowners understand this process underscores the value of hiring a pro. When she markets her work, she is clear about the fact that there is a design fee. This sets the tone for professionalism.

“By the end of the first meeting, we’ll understand where we want to go with each other and the opportunities that are there

for a property – and at that point, we decide how to move forward,” Grundeen says. Most of the time, people are ready to take the next steps with a pro. It goes back to that open conversation, understanding homeowner’s goals and translating that into a realistic picture.

And, for those DIY die-hards who hire you but still want to have a hand in the results, Grundeen encourages them to go ahead, tell their friends that they put in the landscaping (even if it was only installing a few plants). Sometimes, the permission to hire a pro and still have a project “belong” to the homeowner is what’s really desired. **L&L**



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**L**awn & Landscape is looking for companies in the industry to submit the best work they've done. We'll feature some of the best submissions we receive in future issues of the magazine. All we need are a few high resolution photos (preferably before and after) along with some information on why you are submitting this project. We're open to taking a wide range of jobs – pools, patios, driveways, rain gardens, xeriscapes, etc.

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Please email submissions or any questions to Editor Brian Horn at [bhorn@gie.net](mailto:bhorn@gie.net).

# 5 QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU HIT SEND

Try these tips to up your open rates. **By Chris Heiler**

**I** LIVE ON THE TOP FLOOR of a contemporary mid-rise apartment in downtown Austin, Texas. While I take great pride in my horticultural skills on display on the balcony, a need for lawn care services for my 70-square-foot concrete and steel space does not exist.

My living circumstances, however, do not seem to disqualify me from receiving dozens of email newsletters from well-intentioned lawn and landscape companies from around the country (oddly, none in Austin).

Living where I do, I'm a customer of the furniture store two blocks up the street where I've purchased a media console and dining room table over the course of the past 16 months.

Because of this, of course, I'm on their email list. On a recent Sunday I received an email promoting their "up to 70% off" sale on select store items. I bit, and spent the next 10 minutes on their website.

Only a day later I received two more emails from store, separated by only a few hours, with these subject lines:

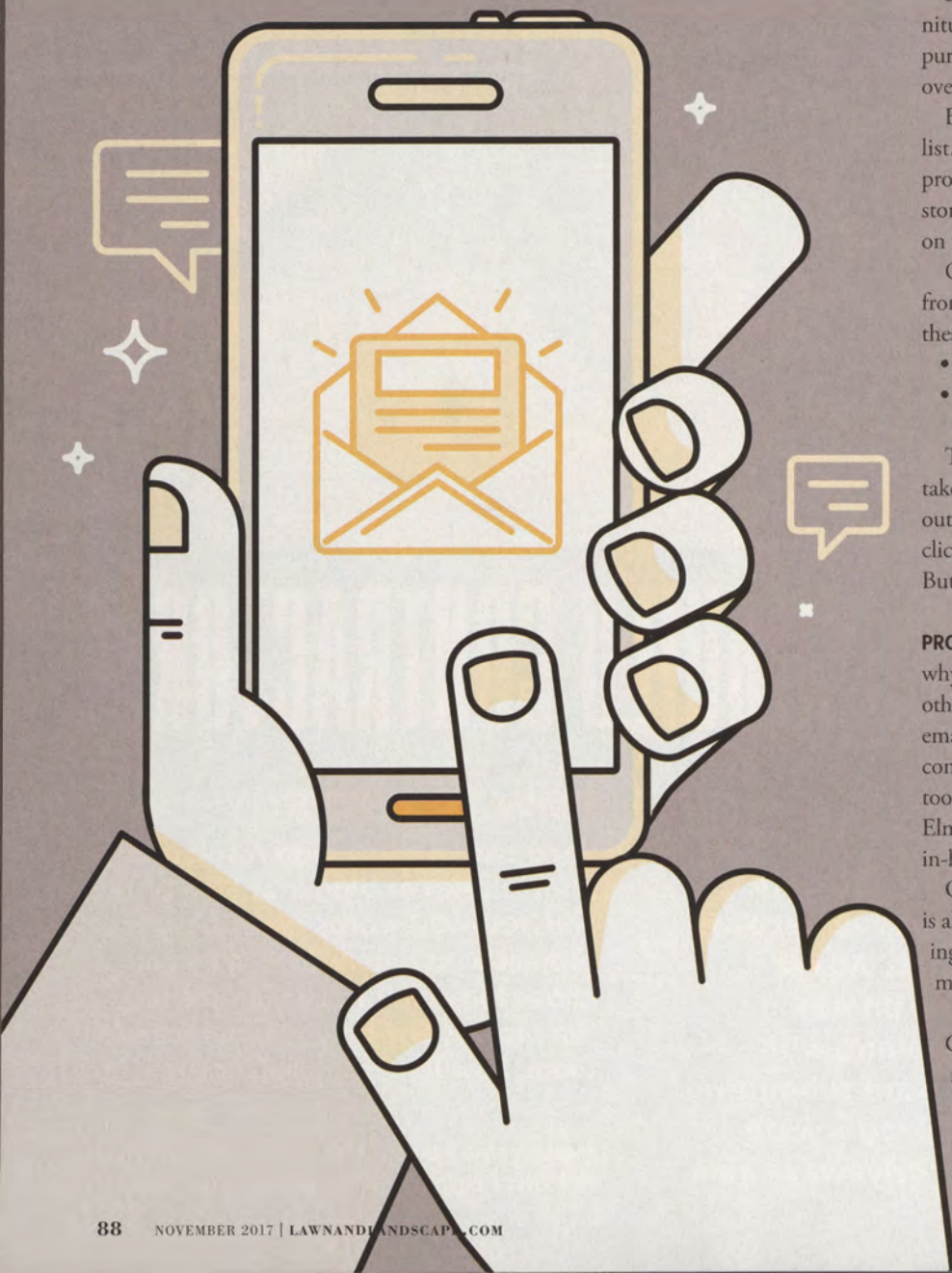
- **Email 1: Saw Something You Loved?**
- **Email 2: We Can't Stop Thinking About It Either...**

The second message beckons, "Come back and take another look (we wouldn't want you to miss out)." It took some serious self-restraint not to click through to that super-cool, navy blue Eve Buttoned Chair. It was "70% off!"

**PROBLEMS WITH EMAIL MARKETING.** I understand why so many of you send email newsletters and other email promotions. When executed properly, email can keep you in front of your important contacts and be a highly effective cross-selling tool. I get it. The problem is that, unlike West Elm, you do not employ a professional team of in-house marketers who can drive real results.

Our industry's copycat approach to marketing is also not helpful, "Look at Joe Blow Landscaping – they're using Constant Contact to send monthly newsletters. We should do that too!"

While this has worked out great for Constant Contact, for those of us on the receiving end, not so much.





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**BEFORE HITTING SEND.** Not all companies are in a position to orchestrate compelling, results-driven email marketing campaigns. How do you know if you are? Look in the mirror.

If you answer each of the following five questions in the affirmative, then email should absolutely remain in your marketing arsenal. If you answer “no” to any of these, then you should put your email marketing efforts on hold until you make the necessary changes (and take me off your list please).

**1. Are you giving me more than you're asking for?**

If you email your contact database frequently, use the “give,

ask” approach. Meaning, deliver something of value at least twice as often as you pitch your uber-amazing products and services. I don't mind being pitched, but provide something useful first.

**2. Does your email newsletter help me solve a problem?**

I'm an apartment dweller in Austin. I have problems, but lawn care isn't one of them.

**3. Are the right people on your list?**

If you are email blasting your customers, prospects, suppliers, networking group, extended family, PTA and some random guy in Austin, then you're doing it wrong.

**4. Do you include a direct call to action?**

A single, direct call to action is all you need. More than that and you risk losing your reader's attention. Ask them to do one thing:

Claim your \$25 discount on your first lawn application

Request an instant quote to protect your family from ticks

**5. Are you using email marketing software and tracking past performance of campaigns?**

I'm truly amazed by how many email blasts I still get from peoples' personal Outlook accounts. You know, the ones with a thousand other victims cc'd. Please, stop it.

Instead, use professional email marketing software that allows for easy subscriber opt-out as well as performance tracking like click-through-rate and unsubscribe rate.

How did you do? Do you have a happy list of contacts and a go-to source for repeat and new revenue or only wasted effort?

Be purposeful marketing via email, like the furniture store. Stay away from the copycat approach that is so prevalent in our industry. Oh, and remember to remove me from your list. **L&L**

Chris Heiler is the founder and CEO of Landscape Leadership, a digital marketing serving lawn and landscape companies around the country.

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**Lawn & Landscape**

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## LOSING AN ICON

(continued from page 32)

months, but he maintained a relationship with John until his death. McHale says the two of them made a few trips to nurseries together over the years. One particular nursery trip from the 1990s has always stuck out in McHale's mind.

"I remember being with him on a nursery trip where he bought 600 3-inch Cal Bradford pear trees for \$29," McHale says. "At the time, the going rate was \$100 a tree. When we got back to the car, I said, 'You are going to see the devil for that deal.' He laughed and said, 'No I'm not. Those trees were grown too close together. I just saved that guy a huge bulldozer fee!'"

"An hour later, John bought 400 more Bradford pear trees from another nursery and paid \$150 each. He didn't attempt to negotiate. When we got back in the car, I asked, 'What's up? You didn't even try to get a discount.' He looked at me and said, 'That guy's wife has cancer.' That was John: intuitive, relentless and compassionate."

**MOVING ON.** Since John's death in May, operations at Denison Landscaping remain busy and profitable. Duane even estimates 2017 will be a more profitable year than 2016. But for family and friends who were close to him at the company, things at work seem strange without him there.

"There's a different feel to coming to work every day," Josh says. "I'm not sure if that will ever change back to normal."

Since John's death, Donna Denison, John's wife, became the CEO and sole owner of the company and the land he owned. Although she hadn't been involved in the company on a day-to-day basis before John died, Duane says she has done well with the transition.

"I was absolutely amazed at how much Donna knew about the company," he says. "John was aware she was a 50 percent owner in the business and that she needed to know what was going on. For Donna to step in has been an easy and rewarding transition."

The company also promoted Elbert Munroe, a 33-year veteran at the company, to serve as its COO. In addition, John's son Josh remained the company's vice president of labor and human resources; his son James Denison remained vice president of the residential division; and his daughter Katelyn Denison remained corporate counsel for the company.

At the end of this year, Duane says the company plans to evaluate each of its divisions to decide where to invest most of its time.

"The family is committed to continuing John's legacy," he adds. "We'll never replace (John), but we'll continue to keep the name prominent in the industry." **L&L**

# Other memories and stories

"John had one of the most unique offices that you would ever see. He had a lot of taxidermy animals in there: two grizzly bears, a polar bear, a zebra skin, a lion, a mountain lion. There were statues in his office made by an artist in Milwaukee and the statues are so life-like down to the moles and freckles on the arms. John bought several pieces from him, and one is a man sitting on a chair with a Denison hat and jacket. People would come into his office, meet with John and when they'd leave, they would turn and apologize (to the statue) for interrupting. It was just things John enjoyed seeing in his office."

**Duane Denison, president,  
Denison Landscaping**

"Since his passing, I've replayed my favorite Denison stories in my mind a dozen times. I'm always listening for the lesson within, but ultimately I'm overcome by the hilarity of the moment or his rather colorful presentation. There are only a handful of personalities in this industry that are known nationwide, Big John Denison was among them."

**Jon Flanders, president, Botanico Inc.**

"The side of John people in our industry didn't know was what a big heart he had. There was a house where nuns lived and it was in poor condition. They were living in extreme (poverty). John would go to the grocery store on Fridays after work to buy groceries for them. He eventually fixed up their property for them and built a park there. (John) never wanted people to know about it. He was very personal about those things. As big as his fortune became, he put it back to the community without much fanfare."

**John Clark, secretary treasurer and owner, Manor View Farm Incorporated**

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# PROPER PROCEDURE

**THE FIRST QUESTION TO ASK YOURSELF IS:** Do we have a process for interviewing? Many companies in the service industry answer this question with, “well, sort of.” So, what happens when there is no defined process or the defined process is not followed consistently? Increased turnover and bad hires – two things that no one wants and no one can afford.

Speaking of affording, how much is turnover even costing you? Companies need to consider both hard costs like ads, time of managers and paperwork, as well as soft costs like lost productivity, service issues and quality. There is research that indicates the cost of turnover for an hourly position in the service industry costs about 16 percent of their annual salary. For a \$12/hour employee, that will cost your company between \$3,000 and \$4,000, depending on the seasonality of the position. Take the number of terminations last year and multiply that by \$3,000. Was that number higher than expected? And more importantly, what could you have done with that money instead?

Now back to the main discussion about the interview process. While everyone's process may vary, the critical aspect is that everyone understands, buys in, and follows the pro-



**KORY BEIDLER**  
is director of training and development at LandCare.

cess every time for every candidate. Then collectively as a group you can improve the process over time.

Here are the principles of who should be involved in interviewing:

1. There should never be one person at the company/branch who does all the interviewing. Just because someone may be good at interviewing or enjoys it, the decision of who is involved depends on which manager is hiring the employee. A hiring manager cannot delegate their interviewing responsibilities.
2. The hiring manager absolutely needs to be involved with any interviewing for their area. If

the hiring manager is new at interviewing or doesn't feel comfortable, that's fine. They still need to be there and start practicing until they get better. After all, if you have a title that manages employees, you have responsibility to select, train and develop your team.

3. Whoever wears the 'HR' or 'recruiting' hat in the company should be responsible for the first round of screening/qualifying all applicants for. Ideally, this person is not also going to interview the candidate, unless they happen to be the hiring manager. The screening can occur when a candidate drops off an application or over the phone.
4. If you have multiple leaders who will interview the same candidate, make every attempt to have the interviews com-

pleted independently and only review notes after all the interviews are complete. This will help eliminate any bias prior to interviewing a candidate.

5. Use panel interviews only for certain salary positions that are going to work across multiple business units in the company. If you do use the panel technique, there should be a maximum of three panelists so the candidate feels comfortable and can make eye contact with each person.
6. Use caution when the big boss often wants to interview each candidate. If they are going to work with or report to the big boss, then include them in the interview process. Otherwise, just schedule a short meeting with the big boss at the end of the interview process for the 'seal of approval,' if needed.
7. When hiring a crew member, involve the supervisor of that crew. Often the production manager makes the mistake of doing all the interviews without any involvement of the supervisor/crew leader. This can be accomplished by having the candidate come back at the beginning or end of the day to meet and greet the supervisor, or possibly the entire crew.

Yes, it does take time and dedication to follow a well-defined interview process for each candidate. You can claim to not have the time for a potentially slower process, but just remember you're throwing away \$3,000 to \$4,000 each time you rush the process. Maybe a few dedicated hours of your time turns out to be quite worth it. **L&L**

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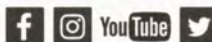
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