Little things mean a lot. “The whole nine yards.” “Bang for the buck.”

You hear those expressions a lot when you visit Levinsky’s Landscaping in Colchester, Vt.

Peter, Jonathan and Mark Levinsky, ages 40, 35 and 32, respectively, combine their individual drive and business sense to power a 12-man company that sells landscaping, mowing, chemical application, and snow plowing services. They’re dedication and work ethic is plain to see, which explains why they’re still a success after eight years in business.

But success doesn’t come easy, because of two factors they find most challenging: a relatively short season, and price-cutting competitors.

The eastern United States is a challenging area for anyone in the lawn care or landscape business. A hundred miles can chop a week, so time is a great motivator. You can’t sit still. You need men who feel the same way you do about success.

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People who work for nothing

Remember Mr. Haney, the nasal-voiced huckster on “Green Acres”? He had a business for every day of the week season, and you need men who feel the same way you do about success.

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“What’s in question is not a person’s right to a decent living. The trouble is, ‘instant landscapers’ apparently don’t know the first thing about professionalism, and don’t want to learn.

Poor quality shows up later

Though the Levinskys do well, they have a hard time convincing customers or prospects that less is not always better when it comes to quality. Poor quality work is always an intangible before the fact.

Then there are the annual battles with condominium managers who will award contracts to the lowest bidder, regardless of quality, reputation, or whether or not the company carries workmen’s compensation.

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the plan is to lay low.

"During (recession)," says Peter, "instead of experimenting, and expanding into areas that compete with established businesses, we're better off identifying what our particular niche or niches are, and developing them to the highest degree."

Getting together

It's time to talk. "We feel that a real falling in our profession up here is that we don't get together as a group in the off-season," says Peter, who would like to see more discussion among competitors. "A little talk could go a long way. Sit down and discuss pricing. I think people should bare their souls a little bit. If somebody is sitting there who is (pricing) so ridiculously low, some of us should be able to ask: how do you come up with your prices? What's your goal? Where do you want to take your business?

"I'm partially to blame for not taking it to the next step and doing something about it. Now, during the '90s, I'm going to have to. Nobody wants to get together and say, 'this is what our rate should be.' A lot of companies will chase 1000 accounts for $10 each, because it's impressive to say, 'I do 1000 accounts.'"

Other ways to beat the competition

1. If you plow, make it pay.

Snow plowing shouldn't come cheap. "The man in the truck is worth over $100 an hour," Peter asserts. "There's liability, wear and tear on the truck, the driver, I may have to come back a second time and clean up something I missed. You don't go out and plow for $10 or $15."

Oil is changed on all trucks after every big plowing run. Peter says he wonders if people realize how many miles are put on a truck in reverse during snow plowing season. "Then there's the equipment and maintenance: sanders, cutting edges, hydraulics; changing the plows when it's 10 degrees below zero, and we have to bring torches out to loosen the fittings. Changing a flat in 18 inches of snow at 3 a.m."

Which is why landscapers are exasperated when people want work done for nothing. "We read Condo magazine," says Peter, "and a writer says to condominium boards, 'play one landscaping group against the other.' You can't be in this business and do the snowplowing for nothing."

2. Be environmentally diplomatic.

Vermont has its share of rules and regulations on pesticide use, and is active in the environmental movement. Knowing that an overly defensive posture can hurt a company's image, the Levinskys have a "live and let live" philosophy. "We're going to have to accommodate a certain percentage of the population," says Peter. "We're not going to win (environmentalists) over to our camp. Personally, I have no problem with them and I feel I can accommodate them. From a professional standpoint, we have to present an image that we appreciate where they are coming from. If somebody can show us a better way; if there is a safer way, less toxic, less harmful, more environmentally friendly, we're willing and capable of incorporating it into our business.

"We don't have a problem with the people who are against herbicides and pesticides," adds Jonathan. "It's just that we're the ones that have to deal with the people when their lawns are full of crabgrass, chinch bugs and sod webworms. Then what are we supposed to say to (customers)?"

But the procrastination so characteristic of anything legislative can go only so far. Then, it's time to get to work, and negotiate later.

"A lot of the people on boards of condominium associations take an active interest, they will listen to the pros and cons (of pesticide use)," says Jon. "But as the lawns become more visibly effected, there is a clamor for action. They say, 'enough talk; let's continue the program until something better comes along. Until there is a more effective or safer way of doing things.'"