

EARTHWORKS INC.

Chris Lee, president of Alvarado, TX-based EarthWorks Inc., says it was some foresight in mid- to late 2008 that set his company up to be the fastest growing landscape company on Landscape Management's list.

"It was around that time that it became apparent to us that new construction was drying up, and that we wanted to move on to something different," he recalls. "The writing was on the wall that things were slowing down. There were 12 guys bidding a job, making it difficult to even make any money."

Lee says it became obvious at that point: Commercial maintenance was not going away, so he began to shift more focus there.

"City ordinances won't let you grow your grass to 12 in. tall, plus commercial buildings were still invested in keeping up their appearances," he says. "So we shut down the construction department, kept everyone employed, and just started pushing maintenance."

Of course, there's a lot of price pressure in the maintenance market, so Lee says he had to be

willing to keep prices competitive.

"What we realized was that even if we couldn't make a lot of money on a maintenance job, it was our best way to get future work from the client — things like installation, tree trimming and irrigation," he says. "We were willing to accept the lower-paying maintenance jobs, with the hopes of building a long-term relationship with the client."

Building that relationship also meant adopting an attitude of "we're all in this together," says Lee. "We gave clients some leniency and took some short jobs on maintenance without a lot of profit, just to keep our clients happy in these tougher times," he says. "Our idea was that things would eventually turn around — and when they did, we'd be the maintenance contractor already working with the client and get the first shot at any bigger jobs."

That's precisely how things have played out. With the company operating lean and helping clients through difficult situations as best they could in 2009, they were in the perfect position to take off in 2010.

"We kept our maintenance base strong, and did a lot of good will for our clients," says Lee. "So in 2010, people started coming to us and saying 'you worked with our sister property through tough times — I have some work I need done at my own property.' That's exactly what we'd hoped would happen."

Lee says that the company's good customer service has been the best way to build and maintain those relationships. He makes sure clients always get a call back on the day they called — even if it's just to say "I don't have an answer, but I'm working on it," says Lee. "If you consistently do what you say you're going to do, you'll win people over — even the most difficult ones!" **LM**

GROWTH WISDOM

"Don't be scared to make a decision. You're better off making a poor decision quickly than doing nothing at all. If we had sat back and waited for the construction market to dry up, we'd be in serious trouble today. It's better to keep moving than to stand still. If you make the wrong decision, at least you have things in motion and can work on fixing it. But sitting around will get you nowhere."