

CHANGING YOUR COMPANY NAME MIGHT BE A HASSLE, BUT IT COULD PAY OFF.

When **D.J. Vander Slik** was mowing lawns in Grand Rapids, Mich., at age 12, a customer asked him for a receipt. He didn't have any, so the homeowner helped him write something up, jotting down D.J.'s Lawn Service on the slip.

"I thought, 'Sure, that sounds good,'" Vander Slik says of his 12-year-old self.

The name stuck, and when he graduated from high school in 1999 Vander Slik turned his business into a full-time venture. He grew it steadily over the next decade, adding branches in Kalamazoo and Holland, and services like snow plowing, fertilization and weed control, tree and shrub care, design/build and irrigation.

By 2010, the company was ready for a change, and he asked clients their thoughts about rebranding at a quarterly focus group.

Vander Slik originally considered dropping his first name from the brand, but the client response was: "We always just call you D.J.'s."

"If I had to do it all over, I'd do something nicer and softer," he says. But with more than 75 trucks on the road in three cities, his clients and team convinced him that dropping D.J. could be "like committing suicide."

So, D.J.'s remains, but "lawn service" was ousted. The company is now D.J.'s Landscape Management, which reflects its full service offerings.

Vander Slik is not the first landscape contractor to go down this road. Like his, many landscape businesses were hastily named or took on their founders' monikers by default. As companies mature, want to change their focus or freshen their brands, they discover there are challenges—and costs—along the way.

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ILLUSTRATION: JEFF BENNETT



For a checklist of key things to consider when launching a new name, visit the Web Extras section of landscapemanagement.net.

BY MARISA PALMIERI EDITOR



BEFORE

D.J. Vander Slik's company worked with a local marketing firm to redo its logo when it rebranded. The goal was a fresh look that incorporated the new name and the old colors.

AFTER



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Choosing a name

Perhaps one of the most important things in the Green Industry, where new companies pop up every day, is to make sure no one else is operating under your name or one that's similar.

That's what drove Tara Gray to change her company's name in 2009 from The Other Side Lawn Co. to Green Paws Lawn Care. When she and her husband founded the company in 2004, they didn't research other company names. "We didn't know a whole lot about choosing a business name," she acknowledges.

In the company's third year there were several times when potential customers requested quotes from Gray, mentioning her

company also took care of their neighbors' lawns. When she looked up these addresses, she was confused because she didn't have any accounts on their blocks.

"This happened several times before we discovered there was another company named The Other Side Landscape and Maintenance that was located about 30 miles from us," she says. "While we weren't really in each others' service areas and our names weren't exactly the same, they were still close enough for us to decide to make the change. Since we were already getting calls about this other company we could see the possibility of problems."

The Grays spent that winter looking for a unique name, doing research online and at the state comptroller's office.

"I spent a lot of time just searching to make sure we didn't repeat our first mistakes," she says. They decided on Green Paws Lawn Care, a name Gray says ties their professional brand to their personal love of animals.

Vander Slik's company also conducted online research to see if there were other businesses with similar names in the state. Additionally, he worked with a local marketing firm to create a new logo and with Green Industry consultant Judy Guido. She has worked on naming strategy

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THE OWNER AS THE BRAND

One factor to consider when changing a company's name is whether selling the business is in the future, says Ron Edmonds, principal consultant of The Principium Group, a Green Industry M&A and exit planning firm.

Buyers may raise eyebrows at companies named for their owners, he says. It's a bigger problem when the company is being sold to a similar entity or owner. It's less of a concern when the company is being sold to a much larger business.

"A buyer will be very interested in understanding how dependent on the owner the selling business really is, whatever it's named," he says. "It's certainly possible that a business whose name is based on its owner's name is not dependent on its owner, but it raises a question."

All other things being equal, Edmonds would recommend against naming the business after the owner, but he acknowledges that it's logical for companies built on their owners' reputations to have their owners' names.

"The challenge is to bridge from the reputation of the owner to the

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—RON EDMONDS,
THE PRINCIPIUM GROUP

reputation of the business and its team," he says. "Using the owner's name for its 'rock star' quality often makes a lot of sense, until it becomes time to sell or transition the business." —M.P.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Green Industry company names run the gamut from those based on their owners' names (The Brickman Group) to ones that evoke the pristine turf their clients seek (TruGreen). Here are a few names we like and why they work. —M.P.

OFF THE WALL

YARDAPES | New Milford, Conn.



Origin: When President Shayne Newman and a friend were mowing lawns in college in the late 1980s, Newman's friend referred to the duo as "yard apes," and it stuck. Newman incorporated the business a few years later, adding a logo created by another friend who's a graphic artist.

Why it works: "The main thing is it's easy to remember," Newman says. "What I feel works is people can remember the name, go to the website and let the website do a lot of our marketing."

"It's also part of our company culture. The employees take pride in being called a YardApe, and it's about being a part of the family and the team."



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for some of the industry's biggest players, including convincing ServiceMaster to drop ChemLawn from the TruGreen LandCare name in 1999 (it was going to be TruGreen ChemLawn LandCare), and also with ValleyCrest Cos. in 2002 to rebrand all of its divisions under the founding name of the company. For 30 years the parent company had operated as Environmental Industries Inc., and the landscape maintenance division was known as Environmental Care.

Rolling out the change

With a seasonal business, timing is an important part of the name change game.

Because of the time commitment required, Gray says her company had to do it in the winter off season. "This wouldn't be something you wanted to do during the spring and summer months," she says.

Dennis Garland, co-owner of The Grounds Guys of Elizabethtown, Ky., found that the best time to rebrand his company from G-N-S Lawn Care when he joined The Grounds Guys franchise system was in the fall, around the time many commercial maintenance contracts were being renewed. He says he benefitted from rebranding right before those proposals went out, selling \$175,000 worth of commercial maintenance work right off the bat. In some cases, explaining the brand change was a talking point that helped get him in the door and close the sale.

After about six months of preparation, Vander Slik's goal was to complete the rebranding activities in one month, so there weren't materials or equipment with the old logo floating around, but it was challenging.

"We wanted to bring it all out for the start of the new green season," he says of his decision to

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PROFESSIONAL TOUCH

BARRINGER & BARRINGER | Charlotte, N.C.

Origin: President John Barringer, a former banker with an MBA, started his company as Barringer & Assoc. in 1985. That name was taken when he incorporated, so he decided on Barringer & Barringer.



Why it works: "This name does two things for us: It's professional sounding, which we believe is part of our value proposition, and it has the integrity of the person who stands behind the product," Barringer says.

Barringer & Barringer, Inc.
Landscape Services

STRAIGHTFORWARD

OUTSIDE SOLUTIONS | Sykesville, Md.



Origin: President Chad Beidel came up with his company's name with simplicity in mind. "I wanted something simple that communicated that we are in the business of helping," he says. Plus, he wanted a name he could expand on one day, if necessary, to provide services other than landscaping, such as siding, windows, doors, gutters, roofing, decking, pools and more.

Why it works: "It's simple, communicates what we do, tells people we can help them with their needs, and gives us a broad scope of services to provide," Beidel says. "It also rings to the tune of being a solution from an outside source, someone other than yourself."

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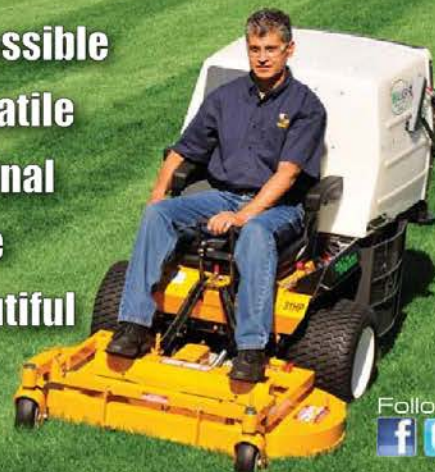
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make the change in January 2011. “But we were still plowing snow so we couldn’t take all of the vehicles out of circulation.”

Getting the word out

To promote his rebranding effort, Garland sent a letter to all of his clients sharing the news about joining the franchise system and explaining the benefits.

“All of my bigger commercial accounts, I visited them in person to show them The Grounds Guys corporate binder,” he says. “It was right when we were renewing our contracts with them, so it worked in our benefit as a way to explain ‘Look what more we have to offer.’”

Phil Klemme, owner of The Grounds Guys of Union, Mo., used public relations tactics to get the word out about his company’s rebranding effort. He joined The Grounds Guys franchise system last fall, after operating for seven years as Platt Landscaping, a business he purchased from his former employer in 2004. With the help of the franchise’s parent company, The Dwyer Group, he sent press releases to the local newspaper and invited a reporter to a party he held at the chamber of commerce for

Landscape company owners who have rebranded, including those who’ve switched to franchise systems like The Grounds Guys, agree that relettering trucks is the greatest expense. Rebranding enclosed trailers, like the one pictured above, can cost more than \$1,000.

employees and other business associates.

“It was a great photo opp for the paper,” Klemme says. “We got great exposure. It’s something worth contemplating for others who are rebranding.”

Adding up the costs

Changing the trucks over was the most painful part of the process because it was the biggest expense, Vander Slik says.

“The hardest thing, ultimately, was taking those old labels and vinyl lettering off the trucks and trailers,” he says. “You’re talking about taking vehicles that have been in service for five to seven years and putting new logos on them.”

Vander Slik estimates he spent about \$20,000 on the vehicles alone (about 75 trucks, plus trailers, a hydroseeder, bark blower and other equipment). Vinyl lettering on a typical pick-up

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MAKING IT OFFICIAL



Legally changing the name of a business can be both surprisingly simple yet quite complicated, says Michael Duffy, a business attorney with Duffy Law in Philadelphia.

There are two types of business names: those on legal documents and those used when interacting with the public. Changing the legal name of the business involves completing a form with the state's secretary of state, and often businesses won't actually change their names. They obtain a fictitious entity (aka a "DBA"), which links the new name to the old entity without having to lose either.

"As long as no one else has that exact combination of letters, you are allowed to use it for legal documents and the like," he says.

It can get complicated when using the name in the course of business. The primary concerns are trademark issues.

"Even if a name is available for registration, if it's confusingly similar to another existing business' name or trademark, you might be liable for trademark infringement," Duffy says. "You have to make sure there is no risk to using that name in your market to avoid a big hassle down the road. Also, you want to take steps to protect the new name, such as trademark

registration, to avoid the same."

Duffy cautions companies to consider the implications of entering a new market.

"For example, Green Lawn might have been in business for 50 years in Texas, but when it wants to expand into Florida it finds there's already another Green Lawn business there," he says. "Either company might be forced to change its name, or both might be allowed to keep it based on a variety of factors. Green Lawn Texas might be even allowed to keep its name in the home market but go by a completely different name in Florida."

A good attorney is essential in such situations, Duffy says. For more information on trademark registration, visit uspto.gov/trademarks/basics/. —M.P.



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truck costs about \$200; the enclosed trailers were \$1,000 to \$1,500 each.

All told, he says the rebrand cost about \$35,000 or more, including business cards, uniforms, stationery and the website.

Klemme agrees that rewrapping his trucks was the biggest expense when he rebranded. "I spent about \$11,500 on 10 trucks and the large equipment alone," he says. "Fortunately most of my trucks were white, which is a Grounds Guys requirement; the one that was maroon cost me \$2,000."

Companies that have rebranded say the paperwork aspect of changing their names was surprisingly simple and cheaper than they expected, as many of them opt to file as a fictitious entity or "DBA" (see "Making it official," above.)

That was the case for Klemme. "I kept it simple," he says. "I'm registered with the state of Missouri as an LLC, so I went with the DBA so I didn't have to spend several thousands of dollars getting a new federal tax ID."

Going this route cost about \$350 including attorney fees vs. more than a thousand dollars if he set up a new business. Garland did the same thing; it cost him about \$250.

More than anything, contractors who have rebranded say the biggest cost was their time.

As Vander Slik says, "It was worth it, but it was a tremendous effort that I hopefully won't have to do again any time soon." LM