

# More than mowing grass

Relationship building: The driving force behind Michael Lancaster's success as a businessman in the Green Industry. *By JON KATZ*



coworker Beau Bohannon, who was a regional vice president at Nanak's.

Michael Lancaster (seated) and Beau Bohannon (far left) emphasize career paths at Florida Landscape Consultants.

Lancaster handles most of the marketing and financial facets of FLC, while Bohannon is responsible for the operations. The company provides landscape maintenance, tree care, irrigation, design and outdoor lighting services for commercial clients. The duo relied on its experience and reputation to build FLC's client base.

**"E**verybody can mow grass," says Michael Lancaster, president of Florida Landscape Consultants (FLC). That's why he stresses the importance of building relationships.

Lancaster, 54, has worked as a sales representative, business owner and consultant for nearly 30 years in the Green Industry. During that time, he's seen how relationship building—with other business associates and with customers—can affect success.

To that end, Lancaster attributes FLC's fast-track growth to the bonds he's formed with customers and colleagues. The Tampa, Fla.-based company is on pace to generate \$4 million in 2014 and \$10 million by 2017. He started the company in 2012.

### ROAD TO SUCCESS

Lancaster entered the landscaping and lawn care business in the 1980s. He was

working as a district sales representative for General Foods Corp. when a friend asked him if he'd like a sales position at ChemLawn's commercial business unit in Tampa.

He said yes and took a crash course on agronomy and horticulture. Despite having no experience in the Green Industry, Lancaster quickly became a top sales representative.

In 1991, he decided to start his own commercial landscape business. After five years, Nanak's Landscaping in Tampa purchased it, retaining Lancaster as an independent marketing consultant for nearly 16 years.

Lancaster witnessed firsthand the importance of customer relationships three years ago when ValleyCrest then acquired Nanak's. He was displeased with the direction the company was heading, so he left after about a year to form his own firm with longtime

## 3 KEYS TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

*Green Industry veteran Michael Lancaster offers his top tips for customer loyalty.*

**1 Be honest.** "I don't promise the moon if I can't deliver it. Don't promise clients a weed-free lawn (right away) if they have dead stuff everywhere because they didn't look after their irrigation system or didn't spray chemicals at the right time. Be honest with customers in assessing what their landscape is. I make sure I describe everything I learned during the property evaluation process. Have a good understanding of customer expectations, what you can accomplish based on existing conditions, what your capabilities are and how much it's going to cost."

**2 Be reliable.** "If we're supposed to be at a customer's property on Tuesday at 9 a.m., we're there every Tuesday at 9 unless there's a rain issue. And even then I still communicate with the customer to let them know when we will be there. Reliability, to me, is to be on time, on schedule all the time. We do that with high degree of success because that's how we operate. A lot of that has to do with planning/scheduling."

**3 Stay in touch.** "See the customer often. What I hear all the time from new prospects is that nobody ever comes to see

them to assess their satisfaction, evaluate their needs or check quality to ensure they're getting what you promised them. That's huge. I try to see all of my customers at least once a month. Account managers, department heads and lead men see our customers routinely. Our account managers, who will have no more than three crews, go to the properties each day the crew is there—every job, every day. It's one of the most important characteristics of our company that helps us retain customers and keep satisfaction high. One of my bosses once said, 'If you're not talking to your customers, I guarantee someone else is.'"

### REASON FOR CHANGE

Ultimately, it was a clash in management philosophies that led Lancaster to strike out on his own. He says ValleyCrest's leadership team redesigned labor budgets, changed account managers and split busi-

ness among various branches. That meant, without an explanation, many customers lost account managers who had worked with them for years. The company lost a lot of business, Lancaster says. That culmination inspired him to go back into business

for himself, bringing along Bohannon, who has many years of operations experience to complement his sales/marketing focus.

"Always work hard to surround yourself with good people," Lancaster says. "Every successful business has a good core group of folks who are like-minded."

Employee empowerment is important for any business that's planning for long-term success, he adds. Account managers must have administrative skills and take ownership of their properties, Lancaster says. He also believes in promoting internally.

"You want your people to understand they have a path to a career," Lancaster says. "Our turnover rate is very low because we invest a lot of time and effort into our employees, and they can sense that. We treat them like they have a career here, and they act like it's a career."

*Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*



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## The Ticker:

### MAINTENANCE

Aftermarket outdoor power equipment parts supplier **Rotary Corp.** joined the **National Hispanic Landscape Alliance** as a supporting member. "Rotary recognizes the growing impact of Hispanic Americans in the landscape industry and supports the efforts of NHLA," said Ed Nelson, president and CEO of Rotary.

**Lawn Army** expects to license 12 franchise locations in 2014, including one in Miami, pending as of press time. Established in 2011, Lawn Army is a brand of HomeTask, a multi-brand franchisor headquartered in Seattle. Lawn Army currently serves areas in Washington, South Carolina and California.

