

# Big contracts pay off for Lawn Patrol

A Texas company takes a measured approach to growth as it targets muni contracts. *By JONATHAN KATZ*

**T**ony Conley found a niche for his landscaping business after several years in the industry. When he first transitioned his business, Lawn Patrol Service, to commercial landscaping he tried to do it all.

The company grew too fast and took on unprofitable jobs. Conley adopted a new business strategy that focused on larger municipal and commercial mowing contracts and a more measured approach to growth.

“I learned that you have to pick and choose the jobs,” says Conley, owner of the Fort Worth, Texas-based company, which today has a 99 percent commercial customer base. “Make sure your company is the right fit for the job you’re bidding on.”

The company that Conley and his brother, Michael, started in 1998 with a “mower, Weed Eater and a truck” now generates revenue in the

millions, Conley says, though he declined to offer specifics. Today, Lawn Patrol’s service mix is 60 percent landscape maintenance and 40 percent lawn care, irrigation and design/build. It’s grown about 20 percent annually since 2004.

The road to sustained growth began about one year earlier. At that time, Conley wanted a more stable annual income, so he switched from primarily residential services to commercial accounts. Residential customers often canceled their service during the winter months. The lull made it difficult for Conley to cover his overhead costs. He sought commercial contracts that he could secure for 12 months or more instead.

Lawn Patrol’s first commercial contracts included day care facilities, chain restaurants and an apartment complex. The new accounts provided a steadier stream of income, but



Upgrading equipment helped Lawn Patrol and its owner Tony Conley secure a few big municipal contracts.

## The Ticker:

### MAINTENANCE

**Exmark** recalled its Quest ZRT riding mowers, involving 2009 and 2010 model years, due to loss of steering control and crash hazards. There have been nine reported incidents, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.



**Cleary Bros. Landscape and The Davey Tree Expert Co.** report personnel changes. Cleary Bros. added Hudson Puente as an arborist, while Davey promoted Craig Holcomb to vice president of operations support services.

**Kubota Tractor Corp.** expanded its Z300 series zero-turn riding mower fleet with the ZD326H, a diesel model with a 72-inch deck.

Conley encountered unforeseen challenges. For instance, his crews faced delays while they worked at the apartment complex because of heavy residential traffic. The constant presence of residents forced workers to shut off their equipment several times throughout the day for safety reasons.

The delays resulted in lost productivity and excess labor costs. Conley also underestimated the need for equipment investments when bidding on the jobs. His crews used 32-inch walk-behind mowers when they first started the commercial accounts. The lack of efficiency from the slower-moving equipment and interruptions from residents resulted in a net loss on the apartment complex account.

“The quicker you can get a job done safely and effectively, the more profit you should be able to make,” Conley says.

Realizing he needed an upgrade, Conley invested approximately \$300,000 in new trucks, trailers, zero-turn mowers and handheld units. He also began bidding on more municipal contracts. In the 2004 to 2005 time frame, Lawn Patrol won a three-year contract with the city of Fort Worth park system.

Crews typically spend a day mowing the large-acreage fields, which present fewer obstacles than standard commercial jobs.

“The work we do now is a lot easier to manage because we have seven or eight guys working on one project with a supervisor, so I don’t have pieces of equipment running all over town,” he says.

### GAINING MOMENTUM

The company’s reputation has paid off in the bidding process, Conley says. Current and potential commercial and municipal customers now know the company has the equipment and experience to handle large-scale maintenance jobs, Conley says. He added 6-foot and 15-foot tractor mowers so he could service larger sites, such as highway medians and airport projects.

The tractors give Lawn Patrol an advantage during the bidding process because few companies in the Fort Worth area own similar pieces of equipment. The tractors are costly, about \$50,000 to \$70,000 each, but the equipment is worth the investment if the company can land long-term contracts, Conley says. If properly maintained, the machines should last 15 to 20 years.

Three years ago the strategy helped the company win a five-year contract to mow the fields outside the secured area of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Lawn Patrol is a subcontractor on the project for TruGreen LandCare. The company had worked with Lawn Patrol in the past and was trying to meet a minority-participation goal. Lawn Patrol was a good fit, as a certified minority contractor through the local chapter of the National Minority Supplier Council, with equipment big enough to handle the job.

Conley purchased its second tractor specifically for the airport project along with a new truck for a total of \$170,000. A dedicated crew of four to five employees works at the site four days a week.

Since entering the municipal contract field, Lawn Patrol has faced some trouble finding enough workers to fill the jobs. The company operates with about 15 year-round employees, swelling to 45 total workers during the March to November busy season. Two years ago, the company began hiring employees through the H-2B seasonal worker visa program to address its hiring needs, Conley says.

The commercial accounts have provided the type of stability Conley was hoping to achieve when he first made the transition from residential services. Companies considering a similar move must move cautiously, he says. In 2005, Lawn Patrol grew by 50 percent, which was more than the company could bear.

“We took on more business than we could handle, we didn’t have the employees, we didn’t have the financial backing we needed to take it on,” Conley recalls. “It was a huge struggle for us.”

Today, Conley walks through planning scenarios to ensure he’s prepared for new business. When a contract is nearing the end, he looks at how he will allocate crews and equipment depending on whether the client renews the contract.

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*Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*

## The Goods: MAINTENANCE

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Also known as the Stander I, the new mower is available with a 36-in., 48-in. or 52-in. deck. Engines range from 18.5 to 22 hp.

#### WEIGH IN

The floating deck tilts side-to-side and front-to-back, allowing the mower deck to follow the terrain contours. It also improves the weight distribution for better handling on hills.

#### GO WITH THE FLOW

It's equipped with Wright's AERO CORE technology, providing improved airflow, cut quality and anti-blow out features, the company says.



#### GET COMFY

The floating standing platform absorbs rough terrain through elastopolymer bumpers that provide a dampened feel similar to a car.

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