Difference makers

What makes the difference between you and your competitors? You may think you know, and you may have an answer you give to customers and prospects who ask, but do you really know?

Of course, this is a rhetorical question because no one could actually account for all the variances. It was from the strong in the landscape industry moving forward.

I’m not talking about just any company, I’m referring to ValleyCrest Landscape Cos., the nearly billion-dollar, Calabasas, Calif.-based national firm. CEO Roger Zino and Senior Vice President Dave Hanson gave a talk, “Raising the Bar—The Importance of Competing on Service & Quality,” at the Professional Landcare Network’s Great Escape event late last month in Anaheim, Calif.

A survival-of-the-fittest element—which was evident in full force during the 2007 to 2009 recession—has continued post-downturn and will persist, Hanson predicted. “The weak will get weaker,” he said. “Bad decision-making compounds itself over time.”

So, what will make the difference? Hanson and Zino focused on four factors.

Excellent relationships. “Loyalty, as we know, is tough to win and easy to lose,” Hanson said. “Those who stay close to their customers will win.” How? Professionals who are tied in with their clients may get a “last look” at a bid, for example, or a phone call rather than a cancellation from a client with service concerns.

Quality work. This one should go without saying, but Hanson put it into simple terms. The goal, he said, should be to have clients who may say “I want to get it cheaper,” but never “I want to get it better.”

Best-in-class skills, technology. “Technology is driving our future and we need to embrace it,” Hanson said. Clients’ communication needs have increased fivefold over the past few years, Zino added. Don’t miss the boat on documentation, client access to information or responding to inquiries in real time, he said.

Strong teams. The landscape industry’s labor situation shows little promise of improving any time soon. “You’ve got to treat your people right because the best people in our business are in demand,” Hanson said. “The way you’ll win is by keeping them on your team.”

Zino emphasized the importance of “career pathing,” showing employees they have a future with the company and not just a job today. He also said ValleyCrest strives to make its positions rewarding for employees through recognition, such as celebrating wins like positive customer survey results.

The labor component—specifically promoting the Green Industry to young, would-be landscape workers—is an area Zino said the industry as a whole needs to improve if it wants to compete with more glamorous, less labor-intensive and better paying trades.

“Being a gardener is a pretty goddamn good thing,” he said. “And we need to talk about it more.”