

NEW DIREC

How landscape and lawn care pros use strategies from their first careers to improve their Green Industry operations.

BY **MARISA PALMIERI** EDITOR

For years, every Monday morning Bruce Ward boarded a plane from Columbus, Ohio, to Philadelphia to commute to his job as senior director of oncology sales for pharmaceutical company Cephalon. He'd fly home Thursday night either to Ohio or to an underused second home in Florida. Two weekends a month, he was off to a medical meeting. Such is the life of a corporate sales director.



TION

“Of the 26 years I worked in the pharmaceutical industry, I spent 22 of them in airplanes,” Ward says. “As much as I loved the people I was working with and the good work we were doing in oncology, I was ready to be sleeping in my own bed.”

On top of that longing for the comfort of home, Ward had the itch to be his own boss. In 2010, he and a Florida golf buddy in a similar situation teamed up buy a small business they could run together.

Within three months, Ward and his business partner Dan Buettin were owners of Florida Evergreen Landscape & Lawn Care in Fort Myers, Fla.

In the four years since Ward joined the Green Industry, the company has grown 50 percent. It has an anticipated 2014 revenue of \$3.3 million. That growth takes into account a considerable shift in client base from government contracts to more private work, including a push into landscape installations.

“It’s interesting because it’s a very different business from where I was, yet the fundamentals and how you behave and go about creating a vision for the future, those things don’t change,” Ward says.

He’s not alone in this realization. Other professionals who’ve pursued a new direction in the landscape industry also discovered the skills they sharpened elsewhere are universal—and they’ve seen their companies benefit as a result.

Among the skills people in their second careers bring are wisdom, introspection and decision-making abilities, experts in “second-act” careers say.

“They usually come with a broader palette of skills and many times deeper expertise,” says Dorothy Tannahill-Moran, a speaker, second career coach and author of *Career Mapping for*



BRUCE WARD

Co-owner,
Florida Evergreen
Landscape & Lawn Care
Fort Myers, Fla.

Former pharmaceutical
sales exec at Cephalon

Climbing Managers. “While the second career may not use all of those skills, they are an easier fit into a wide array of possible jobs.”

In industries where second-act professionals aren’t experts, they often have the self awareness and knack for networking to fill that gap with someone better suited for the job rather than try to do everything themselves, says Nancy Collamer, author of *Second-Act Careers*. “Those people have a good sense of their strengths, assets and abilities,” she says.

The result of businesses being run by owners in their second careers is often a calmer, more structured environment, experts add.

“Fewer things upset or disturb this group, as they’re better equipped to put things into perspective than many others,” Tannahill-Moran says.

MANAGEMENT AND TRAINING SKILLS

Patrick Hawkins was unsure how things would turn out when he left a 20-year career at DHL Express to join his wife’s family’s lawn care company, Lawn Cure of Southern Indiana, based in Sellersburg, Ind.

» WEB EXTRA

Read about a service quality audit program Hawkins picked up from his former career in the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

“I was dealing with thousands of people and budgets in excess of hundreds of million of dollars,” he says. “I didn’t know what to expect at first, but within a few months I realized every skill set I learned at DHL—and they put a lot of time and money into their managers—was all transferrable.”

For Hawkins, that meant focusing on people first.

“At DHL, I managed people every day. Here, I’m managing people every day,” says the president and general manager of Lawn Cure, which was founded 36 years ago by his father-in-law, Larry Messina. When Messina wanted to step away from the business in 2009, he retained a

2 percent stake and gave each of his daughters 49 percent. Hawkins’ wife Michelle and her sister Missy Fromme run the administrative side of the business and he came on board to handle operations.

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Q:

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT YOUR GREEN INDUSTRY ROLE COMPARED TO YOUR FIRST CAREER?

"When I was in the corporate world, for many of those years I had a staff of people to assist me and do a lot of the work. The scale is very different here. Now, as a business owner, you've got to be prepared to do everything."

—Bruce Ward

"It took me some time to adjust from a multibillion dollar corporation to a small, family-oriented business. Everything there was go, go, go—and very structured. We're a little more laid back here. It was different, but I think it made me take a couple steps back and put things in perspective."

—Patrick Hawkins

"A lot of the fixes we did in IT were, 'It's old, (so) throw it away and replace it.' We don't do that with a lawn. We take lawns that are a wreck and turn them into something beautiful."

—Nick Shaw



PATRICK HAWKINS

President/General Manager, Lawn Cure of Southern Indiana, Sellersburg, Ind.

Former DHL Express senior manager of contract relations

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Part of Hawkins's background at DHL was training and development, and he brought that perspective to Lawn Cure, revising safety training, on-road training and redeveloping the compensation structure for lawn care technicians.

Part of managing people is understanding culture, and Hawkins was sensitive to this truth.

"I knew from day one I couldn't go in like a bull in a china shop," he says. To learn the business at a faster rate and earn the respect of the company's production employees, Hawkins became one of them for his first six months on the job.

"I came in every day in uniform, loaded up my truck and went out to spray," he says. "I was coming in off the street having never sprayed a lawn in my life. Doing this made me be next to the technicians every day."

For one thing, he learned their jobs aren't easy. Hawkins revamped their pay scale, tying incentives to productivity, to benefit the employees and the company. "They can work more, hit their targets and get additional pay and time off," he says.

Additionally, with some of his engineering and transportation knowledge from DHL, Hawkins improved route efficiency by 25 percent in terms of how much in dollar volume each technician sprays per day. The savings came from condensing routes and letting go of some business that was too far out of a newly defined service area.

The changes have yielded good results. Lawn Cure, which will do more than \$1.7 million in annual revenue this year, was

already a successful firm when Hawkins took the reins, he says. Still, it has seen double-digit growth over each of the last five years.

"What's important is we've kept it a family business, but we've put some corporate structure in place," he says.

CUSTOMER SERVICE SMARTS

In 2003, when Nick Shaw opened his Lawn Doctor franchise in Griffith, Ind., he was surprised how quickly he could translate his information technology (IT) and retail backgrounds to his newfound career caring for turf.

Shaw started his career in retail, first at Sears and then at Kmart. He later put to use the IT skills he picked up at his college work-study job as a campus Apple support technician when he landed a dream role in 2001 as one of the first Apple Store "geniuses"—before the establishment's employees were given that moniker.

"Apple was looking for nerdy Apple tech support people who also knew about retail, so it was a perfect fit," he says. After a temporary training period in California—and a stint opening two of the original five Apple Store locations—Shaw was back living in Indiana, "working for the coolest company in the world," but his job was in Schaumburg, Ill.—a 70-mile one-way commute.

"The job was awesome, the people were awesome, but it was retail," which he says he was sick of, and the drive was getting to him. When an opportunity for a corporate IT position arose, he took that job for a short time before pursuing owning his own business. By 2003, he bought into Lawn Doctor,

PHOTO: LAWN CURE OF SOUTHERN INDIANA; ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK.COM/BEEBY

knowing his tech/retail background could be adapted to the customer service-oriented business of residential lawn care.

From retail and IT, Shaw learned he liked working with customers face to face. He also discovered he had a knack for communicating with them about the problems they needed solved.

"Computers are hard to understand," he says. "With IT, I'd sit down with somebody and figure out their concerns. Why were they getting this problem? It was about first learning what my clients needed to solve and then teaching them how to solve that problem."

Selling lawn care takes a similarly consultative approach, he says.

"We tell customers all the time, 'We can do everything 100 percent correctly, but if you're doing a few things wrong, your lawn isn't going to be perfect,'" he says, giving improper watering and mowing as examples. Like in IT, educating lawn care clients about the things within their control is key to being a great service provider, Shaw says.

His approach is working. He's grown his franchise from a one-van-one-man operation to six vehicles and 12 employees. He also has picked up two "Best of the Best" franchise awards from Lawn Doctor



NICK SHAW

Owner, Lawn Doctor of West Lake County (Indiana) Area

Former IT and retail professional, Apple Store employee

for outstanding sales and customer service practices.

LEADING THE WAY

The primary skill Ward brings from his first career is a focus on leadership. In his corporate life, he had to ensure the people who reported to him were good managers and leaders, so he delved into management/leadership articles and books. He developed a clear perspective on leadership that carries over to his role today.

"I'm convinced you've got to be a manager and a leader, but never lose sight that people follow leaders, not managers," he says.

What does that mean from a practical standpoint? Ward says it's about carefully making decisions and then communicating to employees about why they make sense and your vision for implementing them.

To that end, Ward believes once you've hired good people, trained them and given them the resources they need, you should "get out of the way and let them do their job."

"I'm a believer in that micromanagement breeds distrust," he says. "I learned very early on you can get so much more out of

people by treating them great."

In Ward's current business, that goes for employees and customers. For example, team members at Florida Evergreen are expected to thank customers every time they see them on the job.

"I don't care if it's a homeowner or someone who owns 50 condominium complexes," Ward says. "Tell them thank you. Thanking customers every time you see them matters. It did when I was in corporate America and it does here." **LMI**

Q ■ WHAT PROCESS OR PROCEDURE FROM YOUR PREVIOUS CAREER DID YOU IMPLEMENT AT YOUR CURRENT COMPANY?

"Focusing on a hiring process that brings in the right people. My business partner and I always knew there were areas of the business we wanted to improve upon with a focus on new business development and field quality control. Over the first three years we interviewed several people who expressed interest in these positions and we certainly could have hired some that would have done a *good* job. Instead, we waited, doing much of the work ourselves, until we found the right people that could do a *great* job."

—Bruce Ward

"I built a cost model, which is something we'd do at DHL to show our profitability for certain areas of the business. If I get a request for a large bid, I can plug in the square footage and other pieces of the job, and it will tell me how much it will cost me to do that job. We've learned that lawns between 4,000 and 10,000 square feet are by far our most successful product. Before, the mindset was the larger lawn the better, and that's just not the case. It also allows us to think through our marketing much better and that's what's helped us grow."

—Patrick Hawkins

"I am a gadget junkie. We have really embraced the advances in technology to make us more efficient. We use tablet computers in the trucks for mobile tracking and GPS to efficiently route vans from point A to B, but more importantly it's to get up-to-the-minute information about a customer's property. For example, you can see if there's a dog at the house and ask the homeowners to bring them in if necessary."

—Nick Shaw