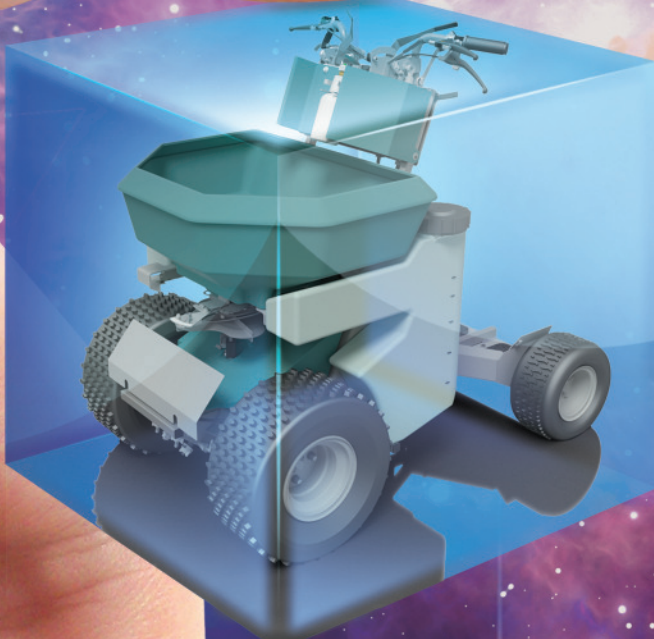


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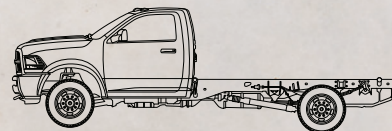
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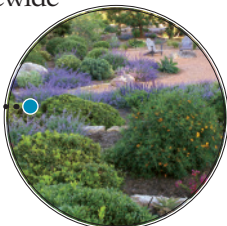
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David Katz, president, Elite Landscaping
BY DILLON STEWART

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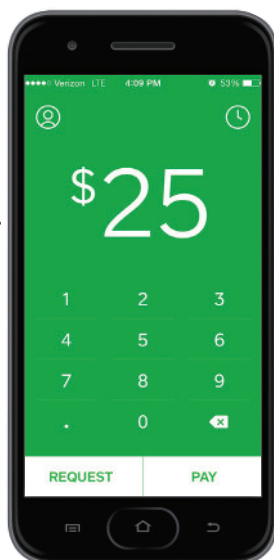


Last month, we launched **#LMgram**, in honor of the one-year anniversary of *LM*'s new design and brand. Snap a pic showing us where/when/how you read *LM* and post it to social media with the hashtag #LMgram. We'll pick our favorites and publish them here. And we'll also send you some *LM* swag! Congratulations to Ciara Ahern, who tweeted an issue of *LM* from Hamilton, Ohio, and Graham Oldreive, who reads his copy in a slightly questionable location. Your *LM* hat is on its way!

APP PICK

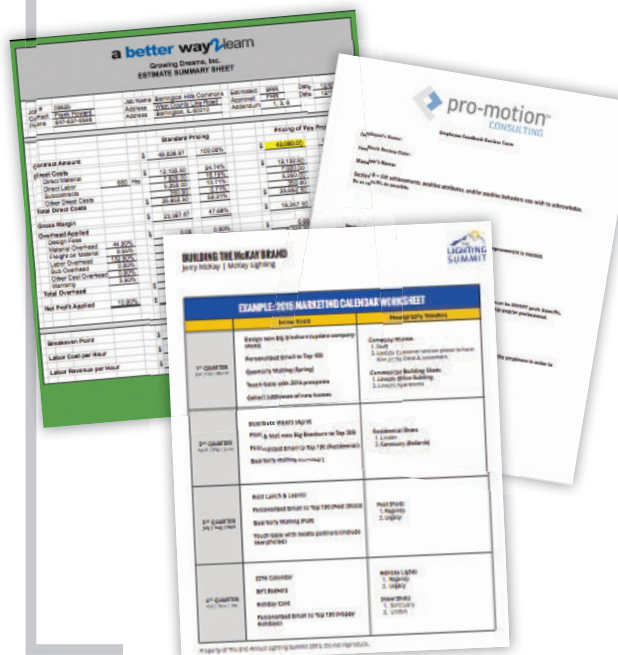
Square Cash

This simple app lets users send and receive money to pay off small debts, like a shared restaurant or utility bill, via email or text message. Free of transaction fees, the money appears in your inbox in a day or two. Now, there is no excuse not to pay off that lost bet from last week's football game. **iOS, Android • Free**



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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI
EDITOR

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mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net



Mariani motivation

If you ever have the chance to visit Mariani Landscape, do it. And if you're considering joining a peer group, give that a try, too. Both will motivate you. I promise.

I had the opportunity to do these two things last month, when I shadowed one of Jeffery Scott's Leaders Edge Peer Groups as its members conducted their meeting at Mariani Landscape. The company, which does about \$40 million in annual revenue, is focused on high-end landscape maintenance, architecture and construction.

The meeting, which spanned four days, included the peer group sitting in on live company meetings, touring the facility and interviewing key staff. Typically, the peer group members go through this routine at one another's shops. But at Scott's request, they made a guest appearance at Mariani to learn from one of the standard bearers in Chicago's competitive landscape market.

CEO Frank Mariani, President Fred Wacker and the entire team were generous with their time and knowledge. They opened their books and their minds—for mutual benefit.

“Italians are known for being passionate people, and it's a fitting description of Mariani.”

Italians are known for being passionate people, and it's a fitting description of Mariani. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more driven CEO. His intensity is infectious.

He says his wife, Sherri, jokes that his tombstone will be two-toned green,

like the company's trucks, and it will read, “I should have spent more time at Mariani Landscape.”

It's morbidly tongue-in-cheek, but it makes the point. Even today—with 42 years in the business—Mariani works 60- to 70-hour weeks. He sits on a local bank's board, belongs to networking groups and still goes on sales calls.

And he does things like open his doors to a peer group he doesn't belong to. There's no doubt he did so to give back to others in the industry, but that's not the only reason.

“We have to run faster,” he says.

Mariani's drive goes back to 1973, when he took over the company from his father, who died of leukemia at age 45. Mariani was just finishing high school. As his health deteriorated, Mariani's father began instructing him about how to carry on the business. “Don't ever take on a partner,” “Get rid of this customer and this customer,” his father shared, among other advice.

“I can still see it in his eyes,” he says. “He was worried about how this kid would be able to handle it all.”

Mariani was scared, but he had to provide for his mother and siblings.

That fear still drives him today, he acknowledges, despite the formidable business he's built, the talented team he's assembled and the pride they express for the great work the company does.

“The flame is always this close,” Mariani says, gesturing an inch from his face. He recalls a time when he was questioned about “wanting every job.”

Mariani's response? “Is this a trick question?” Of course he wants every job. 🍷



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Q+A

What one key performance indicator do you recommend companies track for success?

"We track our production numbers every day in all branches. That is our key performance indicator. Then we see how they stack up to our budget."

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"Are your gross and net profits aligned with your budgeted projections?"

"Net sales = [new contracts closed (annual contract value) - existing contracts lost (annual contract value)] calculated on a 12-month running basis."

"Assuming the obvious KPIs are being tracked, I would suggest that retention of high-potential people has the most impact on overall success."

"After company-wide net profit comes gross and net profit percentage by division. These are the critical big picture metrics that tell me if your products are making you money."

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BIG PICTURE

TOP TIER

LOCATION Suburban Colorado

COMPANY Lifescape Colorado, Denver

THE DETAILS The client's design goal for Denver-based Lifescape Colorado was to surround a manicured clubhouse with beautiful, native, mature-looking surroundings.

Plant materials were chosen based on aesthetics, multiple seasons of interest and their resistance to the local wildlife foraging.

The client's desire for a sense of maturity led to the decision to transplant dozens of 40- to 50-ft.-tall ponderosa pine trees salvaged from the road and golf course construction zones. The process took place during the heat of the summer, so the crew planted the trees during the cooler hours of the day. They immediately installed a working irrigation system around the new grove and achieved a boxed tree transplanting viability rate of more than 90 percent. This success rate, notes Lifescape Colorado's Michael Hupf, "astounded the client."

The results earned Lifescape Colorado a 2014 Merit Award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' National Landscape Awards of Excellence Program.

PHOTO Natural and manicured plantings fill in the terrace.

See more photos from this project, which earned a National Landscape Awards of Excellence Merit Award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals, at LandscapeManagement.net/BigPicture.



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ISSUE BRIEF

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SAFETYWATCH

MEET SMARTER



Craig McBryde, owner of Greenville, S.C.-based McBryde Landscape, recognized daily meetings with his entire staff were unproductive. His company does mostly commercial maintenance work and brings in \$1.3 million per year.

"We were wasting people's time having these big meetings in the morning because so much of what was discussed didn't pertain to each individual crew," McBryde says. "If crew one brings up a valid topic, you might spend 15 minutes working through it, but now you didn't get to touch on every other crew's information."

Instead, the company implemented on-site meetings with each individual crew. They cost each crew 15-20 minutes of productivity once a week, rather than up to an hour a day for full-staff meetings.

With the crew and a manager walking through each task at the job site, problems arise sooner and work is more exact. Customer service and satisfaction has improved, too. Some customers even sit in on the meetings.

Most importantly, lines of communication open with this technique. The meetings ensure each crew member understands exactly what's going on. Plus, crew members feel more comfortable asking questions in the intimate setting.

"You'll get more feedback," McBryde says. "With a huge group of people, it's hard to get up and ask a question. You might be afraid to get laughed at in front of a huge group."

“You’ll get more feedback. With a huge group of people, it’s hard to get up and ask a question.”

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JOHN DEERE

RECOMMENDER

Vehicles for mowing + maintenance

Which do you use and why?



Integrated Landscape Management's Isuzu setup (top); LandCare's new rig.



JOSEPH MACHCINSKI
OWNER, PANGAEA GARDENSAPES
OLALLA, WASH.

"I run a 2015 Toyota Tacoma TRD Off-Road with a 2014 Eagle 6x10 landscape utility trailer. The truck allows me to operate in tight quarters and it's economical. The trailer holds all my tools."



ROB BARBER
VP OF OPERATIONS,
LANDCARE
FREDERICK, MD.

"LandCare opts for the Ford F-450 Crew Cab with a 10-ft. stake bed dump truck, pulling a SureTrac 20-ft. enclosed trailer. This configuration was designed and built by the crews. The truck provides a safe, comfortable transport option for crews of up to six people. The removable side panels and dump capability make it versatile in four-season markets."



ROBERT CLINKENBEARD
CO-OWNER,
INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
TEMPE, ARIZ.

"We feel we were the pioneers in our area of the Isuzu stake bed trucks (pulling trailers) when we first started ILM. They have the automatic dump on them, so you're not having to waste any time double handling stuff. They're almost like moving dumpsters."

ISSUE BRIEF



BY MISSY HENRIKSEN


The author is VP of public affairs, National Association of Landscape Professionals.

DETRIMENTAL OVERTIME RULE IN THE WORKS

You've probably heard about the new overtime rule that's been proposed by the Department of Labor (DOL). The proposed rule would increase the minimum salary to qualify as an exempt employee from \$23,660 per year to \$50,440 per year. That would mean that any employee who makes less than \$50,440 a year would be qualified to get overtime if he or she is not qualified as exempt. Exempt employees include professional and executive positions, as well as outside sales and a variety of other positions.

We surveyed NALP members to understand how the proposed rule might affect their businesses, and we provided that information to the DOL. Respondents detailed many negative anticipated effects including potential layoffs or pay cuts for employees; less flexible schedules for managers and supervisors; high administrative costs in the implementation of the rule; and loss of benefits to employees reclassified as hourly, non-exempt employees.

In addition to more than doubling the baseline salary qualifications, the DOL also has an aggressive plan for annual increases to the salary basis, giving employers only 60 days to adjust to the increases. Historically, the DOL has updated salary levels every five to nine years—not continuously.

This rule, if implemented, could have significant impacts to landscape industry businesses. The NALP is following the issue closely and lobbying on behalf of the industry, but it's also important for you to speak with your congressmen and make sure they know this rule will hurt your business. 



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STEP BY STEP

How to sharpen mower blades

Smart operators know that to get an even, clean cut every time, they need to keep their mower blades sharpened.

Start by referencing your equipment's owner's manual, and review the manufacturer's recommendations on how to check, replace, sharpen and balance blades.

Make sure you have all needed personal protective equipment (PPE). You should wear gloves when handling or working near the blades and eye protection when grinding.

Disconnect the mower's spark plug wire so it doesn't start while you're working on the blade. Next, block the blade to keep it in place while you remove the mounting bolt and nut.

Once you have the blade off the mower, use a grinder, hand file or electric blade sharpener on the blade. Run the blade perpendicular to the grinder to remove nicks.

Make sure to keep the original bevel when grinding by holding the blade at the proper angle, which is listed in the owner's manual. Grind the blade until it's sharp.

Sharpen both blade edges equally, moving the blade back and forth across the grinder. If the blade becomes too hot while grinding, dip it in water to cool it.

After sharpening the blade, check that the cutting edge meets its manual's specifications. If it's too thin, the blade will be easily damaged.

You also need to make sure the blade is balanced. If it isn't, the blade can cause mower vibration and damage. You can see if it's balanced by sitting it on the center hole. The blade should be balanced when resting on the hole. If it's not, grind down material from the back edge of the heavier side of the blade.

When the blade is sharpened and balanced, reattach it to the mower. 

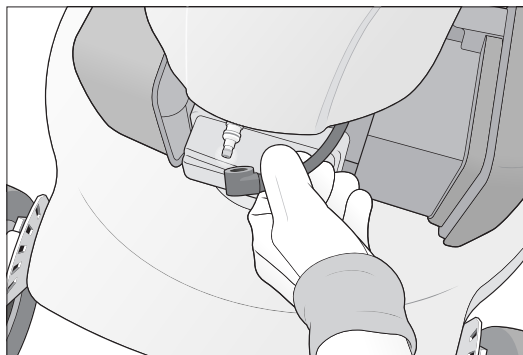
SOURCE: Nick Minas, John Deere product manager

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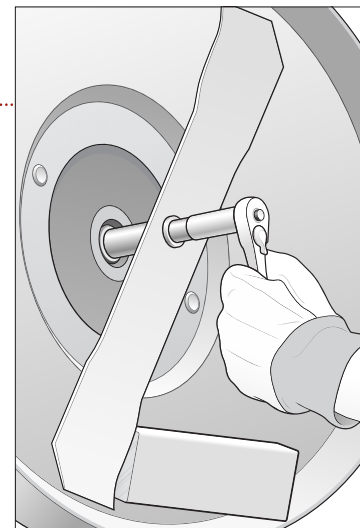
STEP 1

Put on gloves and eye protection, and disconnect the mower's spark plug wire.



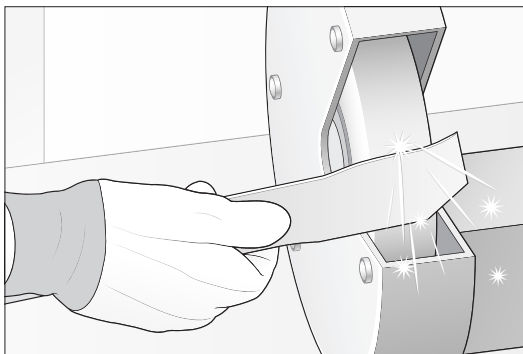
STEP 2

Block the blade, and remove its mounting bolt and nut.



STEP 3

Use a grinder, hand file or electric sharpener to sharpen the blade. Hold it at the proper angle to keep the original bevel.



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NEW STUFF

**1. QF DRIPLINE HEADER****COMPANY:** Rain Bird**URL:** RainBird.com/QFHeader

This dripline header eliminates the need to build a PVC header, Rain Bird says. Its preinstalled fittings (compatible with any manufacturer's 16-17 mm dripline) rotate 360 degrees and incorporate a protective ring. Available in 100-ft. self-dispensing coils of $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. or 1-in. tubing and with fitting spacing of either 12-in. or 18-in., QF Header can be used as either a supply or exhaust header and connects to the zone using standard $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. and 1-in. compression fittings, lock fittings and insert fittings with clamps.

2



3

**2. 2.2-GAL. & 5.0-GAL. SURECAN****COMPANY:** SureCan**URL:** SureCanUSA.com

SureCan gas cans feature a rotating nozzle and allow users to control the flow of fuel by depressing the thumb trigger release. The design also gives users sight into the gas tank as they pour. The 2.2- and 5.0-gal. fuel cans include a trigger safety lock, self-ventilating system, comfortable hand grip, durable design and two childproof caps, according to the manufacturer.

3. 2016 NPR DIESEL TRUCK**COMPANY:** Isuzu Commercial Truck of America**URL:** IsuzuCV.com

Isuzu's newest diesel truck features a 13,000-lb. GVWR and a 33.5-in. frame, which will accept bodies up to 102 in. wide and 91 in. high. Four wheelbases—109, 132.5, 150 and 176 in.—will accept body lengths up to 20 ft. The truck is powered by a 3.0-liter 4JJ1-TC turbocharged and intercooled diesel engine, which produces 150 hp and 282 lb. ft. of torque at 1,600 to 2,800 rpm. The engine has a B-10 diesel engine life rating of 310,000 miles, according to the company.



CHECK OUT MORE NEW STUFF ONLINE

To stay up to date on all the latest landscape industry products and services, visit LandscapeManagement.net/tag/product-news.

4. 10-WATT LANDSCAPE LED SPOTLIGHT

COMPANY: SuperBright LEDs

URL: SuperBrightLEDs.com

The 10-Watt Landscape LED Spotlight features a 360-degree swiveling head and a ground-mounting spike for tree uplighting or plant accent lighting. It's energy efficient, using a long-lasting Cree chip-on-board LED with an output of 770 lm in warm white, the company says. A waterproof rust-resistant black aluminum housing protects the LED and other internal components.

5. PB-580 BACKPACK BLOWER

COMPANY: Echo

URL: Echo-USA.com

Echo's PB-580 backpack blower features a 58.2-cc 2-stroke engine delivering air volume of 510 cu. ft. per minute and air speed of 215 mph. At 70 dBA, it's designed to keep noise down. The blower weighs 22.6 lbs. in tube-throttle configuration and 22.9 lbs. in hip-throttle configuration. Its full-padded backrest provides upper- and lower-back support, and the shoulder straps are user-adjustable. It also features a vented back pad, which allows air to circulate around the user, and a four-point vibration reduction system.

6. VANGUARD V-TWIN BIG BLOCK EFI ENGINE

COMPANY: Briggs & Stratton

URL: VanguardEngines.com

The EFI technology is available in Vanguard's 33- and 37-hp Big Block engines. It features an automotive-based closed-loop EFI system for up to 25 percent better fuel economy than carbureted Big Block engines. The Big Block EFI engine also offers diagnostic features to arm fleet or dealer technicians with information about the engine's performance, the manufacturer says.

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QUALITY, VISION & VALUES

interview

BY:

BRENT & TERECE TEDDY



Nearly twenty years ago, starting out exclusively as a lawn maintenance business, it didn't take long for Teddys Lawn & Landscape to transition and extend their roster of services; it was only two years later when they added full landscape installation and snow and ice management to their service offerings.

Understanding the importance of increasing their bottom line, this Michigan-based company has been on the road to success ever since. Now in 2015, the company has several full-time landscape designers and certified landscape technicians on staff, as well as a snow management team like no other in the business.

One of their secrets behind all of this success? Using real-time technology to improve the company's productivity, efficiency and sales. Brent and Terece Teddy, share their insights and talk about the current success of their business:

Q: Can you describe a success story for us?

A: Before we started relying on technology, everything was done the 'old fashioned way' (with paper), and it was challenging to keep track of where our crew members were and what project they were on. Back in February 2015, Michigan was hit with the third largest snow storm in history, known as the 'super bowl' storm. Thankfully we had already implemented LMN software! During the storm, being able to track all of our assets in real-time, we were able to make critical decisions and move equipment around as necessary to ensure all of our clients were serviced effectively.

Now, thanks to LMN, whether it is the person answering the phone or managers on the road during the day: anyone can log in and see where the crews are and know what jobs are being completed and when. If the schedule has to be changed on the fly, the online tools are easy to use – and any changes can quickly and efficiently be made.

One of the challenges after a storm of this size is also the billing and reporting. With LMN's GPS verification, the real-time reporting gives us the necessary back-up if customers have any questions on any services performed on their site.

Q: What types of challenges has your company overcome?

A: During the snow season, dispatching a large number of employees can be a challenging task. The set up for the LMN system for snow removal is easy to enter, track and manage. From simple data, to setting up the tasks for that specific job is critical during a snow event.

LMN also allows you to download a site map that a crew can use, where you can see the boundary lines, and any other notes needed on a site. If a change needs to be made for the next event, it is easy to go into that job and change it. It is a necessity for crew members to leave detailed notes about how the job was completed and if they noticed anything on a site while they were there. LMN allows you to do this, and everything is documented quickly, so the team can complete a job and not spend time filling out unnecessary paperwork.

Q: How does Teddy's handle their maintenance business?

A: Teddy's has a growing landscape maintenance division that requires our crews to complete multiple jobs per crew every single day. Specific details for each maintenance job is essential to make sure every job is completed correctly. Without these notes, this would require call backs, complaints and so on because

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the job was not completed as promised to the client.

LMN allows you to put in these notes and specs. Landscape maintenance requires you to return to complete the same task over and over at the same site during the season whether it is weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. The notes are saved in the system until you change them. If you have your initial data put in correctly you never have to change it, post to a schedule for a particular day and you are ready to get the work done.

Also, with being able to see where our crew is in real-time, stress levels go down because you are not always wondering what is done and where your people are. Instead of wondering you start looking at how long it is taking them, how much material they used and are they hitting the budget for particular properties. This is something before that you would not know until days if not weeks later.

Q: With the upcoming snow season right around the corner, how will your company leave the competition in the drifts?

A: No more snow binders - Hallelujah! The amount of time and money that was spent on snow binders will pay for your LMN. This year will not be spent modifying snow binders; instead if a change or addition is made, we will simply add it to the system.

At Teddy's, we consider ourselves one of the top snow management firms in Southeast Michigan. This is why we are looking at adding LMN's Jobsite Watch. This will help keep us as a leader in snow management in our market. We believe that clients will come to expect this from a professional snow management firm.

Q: Have you ever attend a workshop led by LMN?

A: We attended a workshop last February at Schoolcraft College. This workshop benefited us greatly as we learned how to set up a budget which included equipment cost recovery, actual staff costs and overhead recovery. Once you are actually looking at the real numbers in front of you for what a piece of equipment actually costs you and an hourly employee including overtime, taxes, and insurance you will learn one or two things. You will have been lying to yourself for years for what it actually costs you and that you can actually afford to invest in some equipment, making you more productive and profitable!

Q: What other online resources have helped your company's success?

A: We love LMN's free demo/instructional videos on www.learnlmn.com; they are a great tool for new staff and getting them up to speed on the system without having to involve other staff members to train them, or pay to send them for training like with other systems in the market.

Last, we also like how LMN takes your suggestions into consideration. If you think of something that could be more beneficial to your company, the LMN team will take your idea and try to incorporate it. Anything that would make sense that they did not think of before is heard and considered to be implemented into the system. We have made numerous suggestions since we have started using the program and we appreciate that some of them have been implemented and we are using them today.

Q: If you could 'forecast the future', what do you see down the pipeline for your company? Is there any exciting news that you could share with the readers of these publications?

A: Teddy's is excited for the future as we continue to grow at a substantial rate. It's not about how much we can grow a year, it's more about how much we can grow while keeping focused on our quality, vision and values. We are growing at a healthy 40-50% per year and are excited to invest in staff, technology and equipment to keep our company on top.

One of the things that we have wanted to add is an internship program. We enjoy passing along the knowledge we have learned and believe that our company would be a great place for future horticulturists and snow specialists to learn.

Teddy's Lawn & Landscape was established in 1996 by Brent Teddy. Starting mainly as a lawn maintenance business, Teddy's Lawn & Landscape now has full-time landscape designers and certified landscape technicians on staff, as well as a snow management team like no other in the business. Teddy's has always maintained its image as a family-owned, local southeast Michigan business and pride ourselves on being honest and professional.
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DOWNLOAD IT

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Ed. Note: Thanks to Schill Grounds Management in North Ridgeville, Ohio, for participating in our SafetyWatch photo shoots. Schill and Landscape Management do not practice or condone the unsafe methods demonstrated during photo staging.



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IN CHECK

A California design/build company with a laid-back vibe stays organized with a checklist system.



PAGE 29

TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE

Five years later

Has New Jersey's landmark fertilizer bill made an impact? **BY LINDSEY GETZ**

In January 2011, New Jersey enacted a three-phase, state-wide fertilizer pre-emption bill, touted by the state as the most restrictive fertilizer legislation in the country. The rollout included application blackout dates, public education, a professional certification requirement and a provision restricting the type of fertilizer that can be sold in the state.

Nearly five years later, some lawn care and landscape business owners in the Garden State say the law remains a major hurdle for their businesses, and they question whether it's done any good.

BLACKOUT DATES CHALLENGING

The constraints on workdays have been the most challenging obstacle, some lawn care professionals say. Under the ruling, commercial fertilizer applicators are prohibited from applying nitrogen or phosphorus fertilizer between Dec. 1 and March 1, which shortens the season. Products containing potassium, lime and composts aren't restricted. Homeowners can't apply fertilizer after Nov. 15 and before March 1.



Jeff Cooper

Jeff Cooper, president of Lawn Connection in West Berlin, N.J., says his 30-year-old company had to lay off six full-time, salaried technicians to accommodate constraints on work dates for the first time. Before, it laid off only hourly or seasonal employees, not technicians, during the slow months. The \$3 million company has 10 full-time and 14 part-time employees.

"I am now restricted in new hires, since my work time has become shortened, and I'm forced to use part-time workers instead of full-time hires,"



TOUGH STUFF
Lawn Connection in West Berlin, N.J., is just one company feeling the financial effect of the 2011 state fertilizer law.

Cooper says. It's created problems for the company in terms of training, scheduling and recruiting, as part-time workers typically aren't the same caliber as full-time employees. He says the reduced workdays cost the company hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost revenue.

"It's very tough for us to hire full-time employees when we only have eight months to do our work," he says. "We valued every day we had to produce already. When days are taken out, we feel you can't make that time up; you can only try to soften the hurt."

David Newman, vice president of operations for franchisor Lawn Doctor, says its franchisees in New Jersey are also struggling with the hard start and stop dates for fertilizer applications.

"This year, our franchisees in the area got a very late start due to the weather this spring, but we will still have to finish fertilizer applications by Dec. 1, regardless of the weather at that time," Newman says. "It has definitely had an impact on labor, as well. Owners have had to lay off their applicators earlier and bring them back later than they would have previously."

But blackout dates are not the only gripe. Paul Bruni, co-owner of Delaware Valley Spray Service, in Hainesport, N.J., says state Department of Environmental Protection and county board of health inspections have increased over the past five years. The company does about \$1 million in annual revenue with eight employees and a part-time secretary.

Continued on page 24

NEWSFEED

COSMETIC PESTICIDE BAN

Montgomery County, Md., became the first major locality in the U.S. to ban the use of

cosmetic pesticides on private lawns, the *Washington Post* reports. The ban goes into effect in 2018.

It excludes agricultural land, gardens, athletic fields and golf courses and does not prohibit the sale of pesticides within the county.

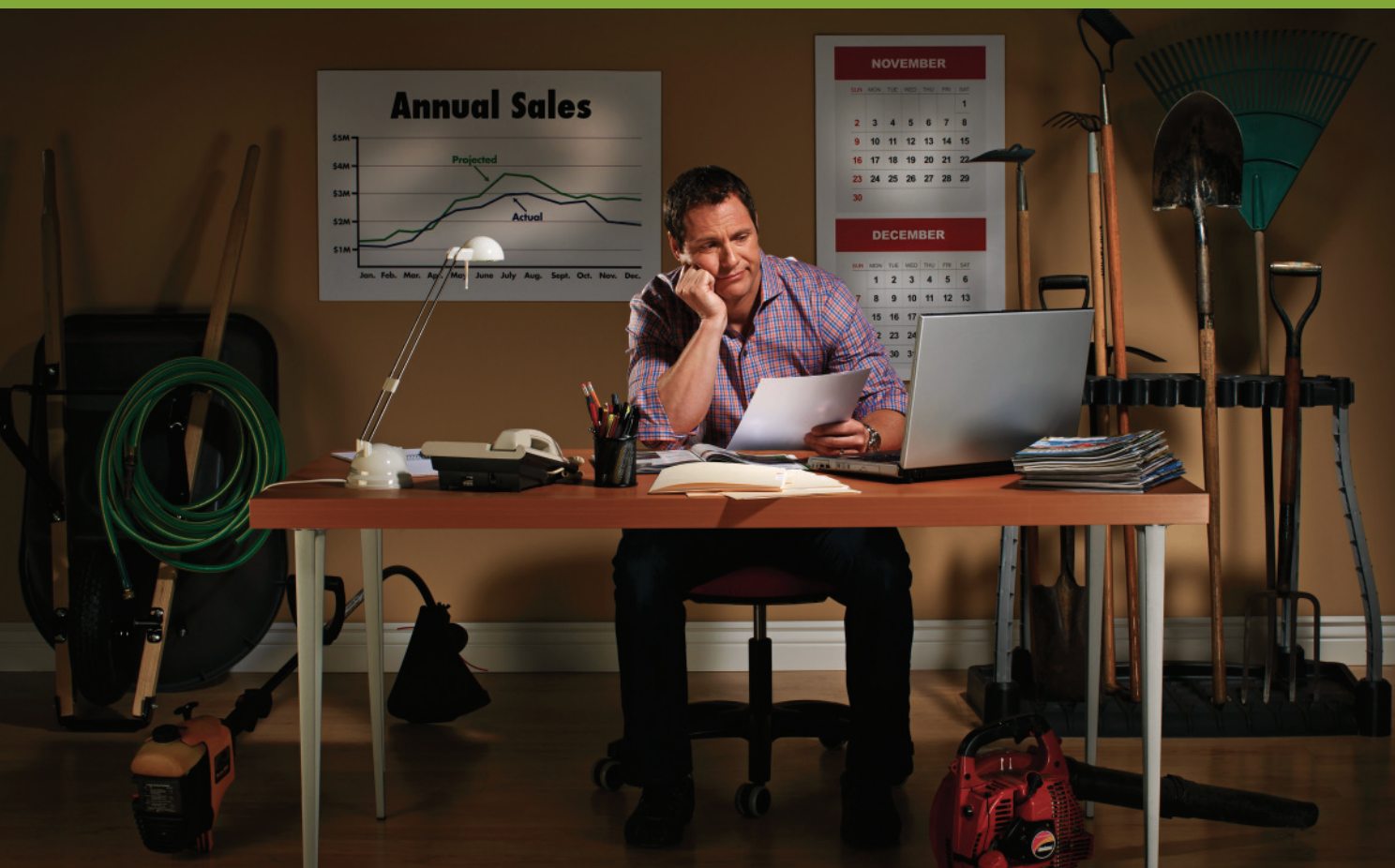


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TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE

Continued from page 22

His trucks always pass inspections, but he says it throws off his routes. He's also concerned about the impression customers get when they see his vehicles being inspected. Despite his frustrations, Bruni says he understands why New Jersey passed the law. He points to untrained, unscrupulous operators.

"Ultimately, the law punishes companies like us that were doing things correctly and didn't require this kind of regulation," he says. "Those habits (like leaving fertilizer on the ground) were what separated successful companies from the unsuccessful ones.

"But now those bad habits have cost the industry on a larger scale," Bruni says. "Better training might have been the answer before putting a major law into effect."

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Fertilizer runoff into Barnegat Bay, a 42-mile inlet along the coast of Ocean County, N.J., was the catalyst for the state passing a stringent law.

So, has it done any good? Officials say it's too soon to tell.

It's difficult to quantify what impact the legislation has had on the bay at this point, according to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP).

"The fertilizer law is the most stringent in its kind in the nation, but the requirements were issued in phases," says Bob Considine, press director for the NJDEP.

The first phase, starting in 2011, required the use of best management

practices and public outreach. In 2012, the second phase initiated a certification program for professional fertilizer applicators and lawn care providers. And the third phase, which started in 2013, requires manufacturers to provide fertilizers with at least 20 percent slow-release nitrogen and no phosphorus, unless deemed necessary by a soil test.



INFO IS POWER
Experts say lawn care pros should promote their proper fertilization techniques to keep legislation at bay.

PHOTO: LAWN CONNECTION





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"So it's only been about a year and a half since the real guts of the law has been in order—and that doesn't account for the folks who were still using the older fertilizer they had in their own stocks," he says.

Some industry members thought the New Jersey law would make way for other states to enact similar laws. To date, only Maryland has done so—to protect the Chesapeake Bay. Its Fertilizer Use Act of 2011 went into effect in fall 2013. Among other restrictions, it requires professional certification and blackout dates between Nov. 15 and March 1, though it allows professionals to apply water-soluble nitrogen to lawns at a specified rate from Nov. 16 to Dec. 1.

Landscape industry experts say if fertilizer is applied properly to turf, runoff is not a concern.

"The science shows that if fertilizer is applied to grass, that's where it stays," says Gregg Robertson, a government relations consultant for the Pennsylvania Landscape & Nursery


Association. Robertson has been involved in pushing for research to dictate whether a similar law would be passed in Pennsylvania. To date, no new fertilizer legislation has been enacted there..

Robertson and others say that "emotion-based" evidence is what pushed through tough fertilization laws in New Jersey and Maryland. That's why people fighting similar legislation in other states say spreading "science-based" information is vital. Robertson points to an Environmental Protection Agency report, which said a "dense vegetative cover of turfgrass" reduces pollution and runoff.

"If you ask the general public if fertilizing lawns is bad, there seems to be a tendency to say 'yes,'" Robertson says. "As an industry we need to overcome that. Environmental sciences are on our side. The problem is a lot of people don't know that. Even some folks within the industry mistakenly believe that fertilizing is bad—and that's hurting the cause."

Professionals who are taking care to properly fertilize lawns must promote it, says Peter Landschoot, Ph.D., professor of turfgrass science at Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Landscape business owners should inform customers and the public that they clean up fertilizer that lands in the street and on driveways by blowing it back onto the turf—and that they use deflectors on their spreaders to keep fertilizer on turf," he says. "Spreading the word on enhanced efficiency nitrogen fertilizers is another way business owners can promote responsible fertilizer use."

The most important message to get across to the public, Landschoot adds, is that a healthy turf acts as a buffer against nutrient runoff. "I still run into decision makers who are convinced that just as much runoff occurs from lawns as from impervious surfaces," Landschoot says. "Education is the key." 

Getz is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.



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MOWING+LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE

Q&A on M&A

We tapped green industry mergers and acquisitions expert Ron Edmonds to get an update on the consolidation activity in the landscape market.

BY MARISA PALMIERI

LM: How would you characterize the level of interest and activity among all buyers when it comes to the landscape industry?

Ron Edmonds (RE): The level of interest among buyers is at a very high level. This phenomenon is mostly across the board, including private equity, regional companies and local companies. The only missing thing right now is serious activity from BrightView, as the largest commercial landscape company. I expect that will develop soon. I know they are looking at opportunities.

LM: How about private equity buyers, specifically?

RE: There is a high level of interest among private equity buyers, both

those with existing investments seeking add-on acquisitions and companies seeking platform investments.

LM: Do you see this level increasing or decreasing over the next year?

RE: I see it likely to increase somewhat as new players (such as Five Seasons Property Management, which recently entered the market with the acquisition of Reliable Property Services and TR Gear Landscaping; for details, see Newsfeed and chart on page 27) begin an active acquisition program. This will probably stimulate activity from companies wanting to take advantage of acquisitions and those that will need to do some acquisitions to protect their turf, avoiding losing out on desirable acquisitions or losing ground to larger competitors.

LM: What types of companies are they looking for?

RE: The interest is probably strongest in the Southeast, South Central and

Western states right now. There is emerging interest in the Midwest.

The interest is strongest with the larger companies. For most private equity companies, a platform investment would need to be \$15 million to \$20 million or higher in revenue. That limits the playing field a lot, so companies that meet their size and business parameters are going to be well received.

I see there being some improvement in market sectors that haven't had much action in the past. The market for maintenance businesses in the \$5 million range is pretty good. For smaller businesses, residential and design/build oriented, the market is weaker. I think residential services could become very attractive. The market for design/build will remain limited for the most part, but there is some activity in that sector.

The biggest challenge that business buyers face is a lack of businesses of any size for sale with realistic price expectations. Valuations are not exciting and

Continued on page 28



PHOTO: ©ISTOCK.COM/ISTOCKDAILY

NEWSFEED

MAINTENANCE M&A

Five Seasons Property Management, a new firm based in Southeastern Pennsylvania,

acquired Reliable Property Services, based in St. Paul, Minn., and TR Gear Landscaping, near Cincinnati.

PROPANE INCENTIVES

The Propane Education & Research Council renewed its incentive program. Contractors can apply to receive \$1,000 toward a new propane-

powered mower and \$500 toward a qualified conversion.

MORE CONSOLIDATION

SCG Partners acquired the assets of three companies in Melbourne, Fla.

The companies—Green Leaf Landscaping & Irrigation, M&M Professional Grounds Maintenance and A New Look Lawn Care—will operate as Green Leaf Landscaping & Irrigation.

Private Equity Investment in the Landscape Industry

Target	Sector	Investor	Type	Status	Original Date	Exit Date
The Brickman Group	Landscape Services	Leonard Green & Partners	Private Equity	Exited	2006	2014
The Brickman Group	Landscape Services	CIVC Partners	Private Equity	Exited	1998	2006
The Brickman Group	Landscape Services	Banc One Investment Management	Private Equity	Exited	1998	2002
The Brickman Group	Landscape Services	KKR	Private Equity	Active	2014	
The Brickman Group ¹	Landscape Services	MSD Capital	Family Office	Active	2014	
The Dwyer Group (The Grounds Guys)	Landscape Franchise	The Riverside Co.	Private Equity	Active	2014	
Environmental Pest Service	Lawn Care + Pest Control	Concentric Equity Partners	Private Equity	Active	2010	
Girard Environmental Services	Landscape Services	NorthCreek Mezzanine	Mezzanine	Active	2011	
Green Leaf Landscaping & Irrigation	Landscape Services	SCG Partners	Family Office	Active	2015	
LandCare	Landscape Services	Aurora Resurgence	Private Equity	Active	2011	
Landscape Workshop	Landscape Services	McKinney Capital	Family Office	Active	2012	
Lawn Doctor	Lawn Care Franchise	Levine Leichtman	Private Equity	Active	2012	
Lawn Dawg	Lawn Care	Brighton Partners	Private Equity	Active	2009	
Lawn Dawg	Lawn Care	Tenth Street Capital	Mezzanine	Active	2009	
Massey Services	Lawn Care + Pest Control	AEA Investor	Mezzanine	Active	2012	
Merit Service Solutions	Landscape Services	L2 Capital	Family Office	Active	2011	
Reliable Property Management ²	Landscape Services	Private Capital Management	Private Equity	Exited	2002	2015
Rotolo Consultants	Landscape Services	Triangle Capital	Mezzanine	Active	2015	
Signature Landscape Services	Landscape Services	One Rock Capital Partners	Private Equity	Active	2015	
Somerset Landscape	Landscape Services	Tregaron Capital	Private Equity	Active	2014	
Terracare Associates ³	Landscape Services	Progress Equity	Private Equity	Active	2009	
Terracare Associates ³	Landscape Services	Patriot Capital	Private Equity	Active	2009	
Terracare Associates ³	Landscape Services	Harbert Mezzanine Partners	Mezzanine	Active	2009	
TruGreen ⁴	Lawn Care	Clayton Dubilier & Rice	Private Equity	Active	2007	
ValleyCrest ⁵	Landscape Services	MSD Capital	Family Office	Exited	2006	2014
Yellowstone Landscape Group ⁶	Landscape Services	Gridiron Capital	Private Equity	Exited	2008	2015
Yellowstone Landscape Group ⁶	Landscape Services	Brookside Mezzanine Partners	Mezzanine	Exited	2013	2015
Yellowstone Landscape Group	Landscape Services	CIVC Partners	Private Equity	Active	2015	

1. Rollover from ValleyCrest, now BrightView; 2. Sold to Five Seasons Property Management; 3. Carved out of American Civil Constructors; 4. Spun off from ServiceMaster; 5. Merged with The Brickman Group, now BrightView; 6. Sold to CIVC Partners.

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MOWING+LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE

Continued from page 26

most actual sellers are pursuing a sale because they have a reason to.

LM: Is this a trend people should pay attention to, even if they aren't thinking of exiting anytime soon? Why or why not?

RE: Certainly, business owners should pay attention. For one thing, the business sales market is cyclical. It's pretty good right now, and I think it's likely to stay strong for the next two to three years, but it's very hard to predict the future. An economic downturn would have a serious impact. Rising interest rates may have some impact. The biggest issue right now is the availability of cost-effective labor. If minimum wages rise significantly or the immigration scenario is even more hostile, the impact on business sales

“ Valuations are not exciting and most actual sellers are pursuing a sale because they have a reason to. **”**

—RON EDMONDS



could be significant. Many business owners considering selling their business cite the availability of labor as a big motivator for them. Buyers definitely are paying attention to that issue and at some level, it may discourage them. Sellers whose plans involve exiting in the next five years or so should pay close attention now and consider their options carefully.

LM: Are there any other types of buyers we should be paying attention to, such as facility management companies or others?

RE: Facility management companies

are active in the market, including both companies that were born from the landscape industry (like Merit Service Solutions) and others that have always been an intermediary. That's not likely to be an enormous part of the market, but it will continue to be a factor.

Snow removal is a hot topic today and is getting more interest from buyers than in the past. I think that's partly because of the way Brickman touted its snow business in connection with its sale a couple of years ago. That glow may wear off if we have a couple of poor snow years in a row. 



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DESIGN/BUILD+INSTALLATION

California dreaming

A laid-back attitude and standardized processes equal success for Montecito Landscape. BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER

Most Montecito Landscape projects begin with what Lisa Cullen calls a “descriptive interpretation” of the client’s requests. There’s no need for detailed drawings, she says, because those would only hinder the creative process that drives her and her husband, Chris Cullen, to create the artistic, imaginative landscapes—or “the look”—they’ve become known for during the company’s 45 years in business.

“You start with a concept of what you’re going to do, but as the job progresses, things change,” says Lisa Cullen, who co-owns the Montecito, Calif., company with her husband. “You find a boulder or you just decide to go in a different direction. To be honest, most of the landscape design is done in the ground.”

This easy-going attitude prevails at Montecito Landscape, where the goal is to bring the unique character of Montecito to life for every client. But perhaps the most important goal is to uphold the good reputation the company has earned throughout the years. The company has implemented policies and procedures to ensure their clients get the best.

“In a smaller town, your reputation is of utmost importance and word of mouth is vital,” Lisa Cullen says. “You can do all the advertising you want and put stuff on Twitter or whatever, but without good word of mouth, you ruin your own business.”

Coming from a family of artists, Chris Cullen worked as a sculptor and musician before following his passion for nature and starting Montecito Landscape in 1970. Lisa Cullen, who also has worked as a



ARTISTS AT HEART

Chris Cullen and Lisa Cullen strive to make their clients happy and bring the unique character of Montecito to life in their designs.

professional artist, joined the company about 15 years ago. Today, Montecito Landscape offers landscape design/build services to residential clients. It doesn’t do maintenance, but it does offer complimentary three- and six-month check-ups to do pruning and make sure a client’s landscape or garden is thriving.

The company has grown from “Chris and his truck” to eight full-time employees serving clients in Montecito and neighboring Santa Barbara, Calif.

CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS

With record-breaking drought plaguing California for the past four years, the Cullens have witnessed how mandatory water use cutbacks have changed the way many homeowners view

their landscapes. Lisa Cullen says her crews have been busy removing lawns and replacing them with drought-tolerant landscapes. This summer’s excessive heat prompted the Cullens to be even more cautious about what they planted and when. Lisa Cullen recalls several instances of advising customers to hold off installing new plant life until the weather cools down or winter, hopefully, brings some much-needed rain.

“We’re thinking of the environment, the customer and doing what we think is right,” she adds. “Also, we guarantee our plants, so if we don’t stay within what’s ethically right to do, it’s going to bite us in the butt anyway.”

Like other aspects of the business, Montecito Landscape’s plant guarantee

NEWSPEED

NOW IN SPANISH

LMN rolled out a Spanish language version of its time-tracking app, LMNTime.

BOBCAT UPDATE

Bobcat expanded its offering of Tier 4 Final-compliant skid-steer and

compact track loaders by transitioning to a 3.4-liter diesel engine in its 700- and 800-frame-size loaders. The models include the Bobcat S750, S770 and S850

skid-steer loaders; T750, T770 and T870 compact track loaders; and A770 all-wheel steer.

BELGARD REBRANDS

Belgard unveiled its



new brand identity and logo at

the Hardscape North America trade show last month.

DESIGN/BUILD+INSTALLATION

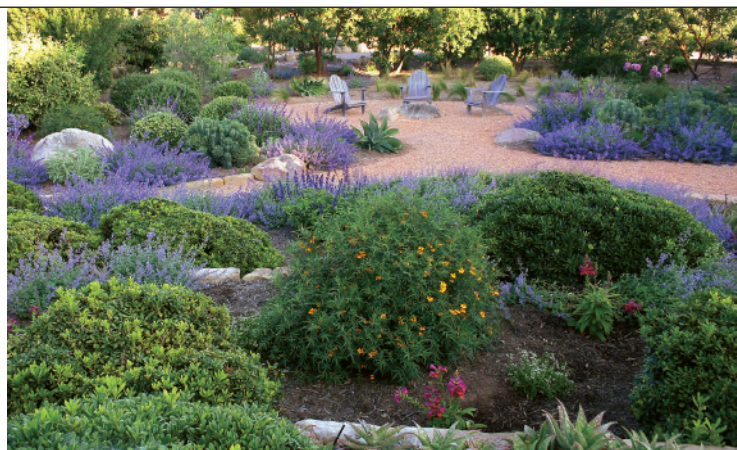
is a lenient policy to keep customers happy. If a plant dies, the company replaces it. If a year goes by and a client says something just doesn't look right or hasn't grown in properly, the company exchanges it for something different. The Cullens even have replaced a driveway that a client didn't like after it was installed. They are comfortable with "unspecific" guidelines because of the level of trust and understanding they have built with their clients over time, she says.

"We guarantee what we do," Lisa Cullen says. "Part of why we can have such a generous guarantee is because our

customers are the people we choose to work with."

Montecito Landscape is particular about who it does business with and doesn't hesitate to part ways with customers who don't align with the company's philosophies. For example, if a customer wants to replace his or her natural lawn with artificial turf—a process Montecito Landscape philosophically disagrees with—the Cullens are OK with saying, "We are not your man."

"I know turning down work seems funny for a contractor, but we've been in business for so long that we have to do what's consis-



tent with our brand and our philosophy," Lisa Cullen says.

DRIVEN BY CHECKLISTS

Things at Montecito Landscape retain a laid-back, West Coast vibe until you get to Lisa Cullen's checklists. That's when consistency, accuracy and routine take over to ensure the company's standards are met both on and off the job site.

Lisa Cullen created the company's checklists by modifying ones she used while working as a management consultant and a catering manager.

The step-by-step lists map out each function that occurs within the company—tasks as diverse as scheduling a consultation, making a sale or finishing a job—taking the guesswork out of what's

PHOTO: MONTECITO LANDSCAPE



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Montecito Landscape guarantees plants and replaces items clients aren't happy with.

supposed to happen next. Lisa Cullen is in the process of creating a checklist for the company's bookkeeper. She says she's constantly tweaking processes, and she even follows her own checklist during her weekly financial planning sessions.

"There is never a time our office manager doesn't know what to do in a specific situation, and anyone could come in and pick up that form and be able to do the process," she says. "It's on-the-job training that saves you an immense amount of time because everything is predetermined."

Each checklist takes Lisa Cullen about an hour to cre-

ate. She first goes through the steps for a specific task herself, then reviews the list with the employee responsible for that task to make sure she didn't forget anything.

For example, the job completion checklist includes tasks such as wiping dirt or handprints from windows and walls, making sure all plant tags have been removed and ensuring that irrigation heads are facing the right direction. The lists save time and give employees confidence because they don't have to wonder what to do next, she says.

Since implementing the checklists, the company's repeat and referral business


doubled, which has decreased the need to earn customers through traditional marketing efforts.

Another way the company strives to stay close to its customers and continually improve is with its customer survey process. Upon completing a job, every client receives a survey, encouraging them to provide feedback about what worked, what didn't and what they liked or disliked about working with Montecito Landscape.

While most of the surveys come back positive, Lisa Cullen says they've helped the company make adjustments here and there, such as imple-

menting the three- and six-month follow-up visits. And she's sure to share the best reviews with the crew.

For the Cullens, it's all about doing what you love and doing it well.

"We do it because we love it," Lisa Cullen says. "It has never been our design to get too big because I think you lose that personal connection with the customer, and we like having that personal touch. I guess that's why we've been in business for 45 years." 

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.

WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section on LandscapeManagement.net to check out or download Montecito Landscape's job completion checklist.



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IRRIGATION+WATER MANAGEMENT

9%

A perspective on the California drought and landscape water use.

BY DONALD HODEL AND DENNIS PITTENGER

Landscape water use in California accounts for 9 percent of the total statewide water use (see chart at right). Thus, if we never watered another home or public landscape, park, sports field or golf course in California, the state would save 9 percent of its average total water consumption. This does not seem like much when one considers the essential functions and innumerable benefits landscape plants provide by enhancing the quality of our lives and making urban areas livable. Trees, shrubs, groundcovers, lawns and flowers provide oxygen, carbon sequestration, rain capture, dust and erosion control, shade, energy savings in heating and cooling, wildlife habitat, recreation, enhanced property values, psychological well being and much more.

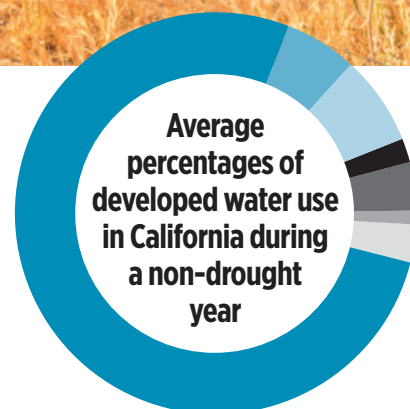
Of that 9 percent, residential use accounts for 7 percent, while parks, golf courses, sports fields and similar large landscapes account for 2 percent. Landscape irrigation is estimated to account for about half of annual residential water consumption statewide. That amount varies from about 30 percent in many coastal communities to 60 percent or more in many inland suburban communities.

HIDDEN COSTS OF GOING DRY

In addition to the amenities and benefits we would lose by letting landscapes go dry, many hidden costs are associated

with this strategy. And little, if anything, is ever said about them. Letting landscapes go dry will lead to damage and even death of plants. For trees, such damage could mean dropping branches and tree failures, leading to significant property damage, human injury or death. Lawsuits would certainly follow. The risk of fires would increase, too. By changing landscapes to low-water-using plants or to nonplanted, nonirrigated areas, labor and material costs for plants, installing or retrofitting irrigation systems and other materials could be significant. Converting lawns to artificial turf is also expensive.

Lawns, which have been singled out as water-wasting culprits, are estimated to use 40 percent to 60 percent of that 9 percent, or just 3.5 percent to 5 percent of total statewide water use. Cool-season grasses, of which tall fescue is the most common turfgrass, are among the most water-demanding landscape plants. However, research at the University of California has shown that warm-season grasses require 20 percent less water, when properly managed and irrigated, than tall fescue. So considerable water can be saved without removing turf altogether. Also, the research revealed that most woody trees, shrubs and groundcovers, including those traditionally used in California landscapes, perform well with 45 percent to 55 percent less water than tall fescue.



- 77%** Agriculture
- 6%** Indoor residential
- 7%** Outdoor residential
- 2%** Large landscape management
- 4%** Commercial/institutional/industrial
- 1%** Other
- 3%** Environmental

SOURCES: CALIF. DEPT. OF WATER RESOURCES, 2013 CALIFORNIA WATER PLAN UPDATE CHAPTER 3. UCLA INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY, SO. CALIF. ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT CARD, FALL 2009

Many water conservation strategies call for an end to lawn irrigation or removing lawns altogether. But remember that removing lawns will only bring water savings if they are replaced with: 1). no plants and turned-off irrigation, which results in the loss of the essential functions and benefits of landscapes; or 2). trees, shrubs or groundcovers. And these must be cared for and irrigated according to their requirements, which can be expensive if done properly.

NEWS- FEED

EPA AWARDS TORO

The Environmental Protection Agency honored the Toro Co. with its 2015 WaterSense Partner of the Year award. Toro was recognized at the WaterSmart Innovations Conference in Las Vegas on Oct. 8.

TAPIGO TO LAUNCH

Several large landscape company owners are betting on a software company called Tapigo, which is developing a series of field service web and mobile applications. Tapigo apps are designed to eliminate the paper-work associated with landscape industry processes, starting with irrigation maintenance.




However, if water is turned off to lawns, many trees and shrubs solely dependent on lawn irrigation will suffer, decline and possibly die. Research has shown that many, if not most, common trees, shrubs and groundcovers not traditionally considered drought tolerant or low-water use are very drought tolerant once established—if they are cared for and irrigated properly. Thus, replacing lawns or other landscape plants with so-called drought-tolerant or low-water-use plants, like desert and Mediterranean-climate plants or California natives, is unnecessary to reduce a landscape's water demands significantly and meet mandated cutbacks.

CAN WE CONSERVE OUR WAY OUT OF THE DROUGHT?

California will be unable to conserve its way out of a serious drought by only wringing severe water savings from the 9 percent of water that landscapes consume statewide. Focusing primarily on water conservation that targets removing all lawns and severely damaging landscape plantings is not the answer. The statewide policy for the past decade has been to support the water demands of population and other forms of growth through conservation of urban landscape water use. But this policy is a failed long-term strategy because the water saved in landscape irrigation has been reallocated to meet the fundamental indoor water needs of increased population, which, in turn, has resulted in a hardening of water demands because there is less easily conserved water in times of drought.

Additional reliable sources of water must be developed, other uses of water restricted and/or, when faced with projections of 10 million more people in California by 2025, growth must be mitigated. Yet, these options have been rarely discussed or presented as long-term means to balance water supply and use in this unprecedented drought. Politicians and other leaders and officials appear ignorant of the facts about the science and technology of landscape

water requirements and irrigation management, and they seem to be out of touch with Californians' quality of life requisites. Crucial public policies and decisions on water use and distribution must be based on science, not the perception that severe limitations on landscape water use will drought-proof the state.

We argue that landscape plants are worth the investment in water even in this time of severe drought. Landscape plants are worth having and saving for a host of reasons, and irrigation to ensure their health is a beneficial use of water. Through appropriate plant selection and proper management and irrigation, we can have our cherished landscapes, enjoy the innumerable amenities and benefits they provide and still save water. 

Hodel is an environmental horticulture advisor and Pittenger is an area environmental horticulturist for the University of California Cooperative Extension.

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KEEPING SCORE

How to win with key
performance indicators.

BY MARISA PALMIERI

PHOTO: ©ISTOCKCOM/MELTONMEDIA

Imagine a sporting event where the players take the field without knowing the rules to the game, with no clock and without a scoreboard. How would that go over?

"You can't play a game if you don't know whether you're winning," says Timothee Sallin, president of LegacyScapes in Groveland, Fla.

It's the same in business, he says. To win, you need to keep score. And there's no better motivator for your team.

For instance, if you instruct a project manager to build a job with \$100,000 in six weeks, and you don't huddle with him until it's over, there's a good chance he'll run over budget or over time. "On the other hand, if I give him an update on the numbers every week and he can see how he's doing, he's trying to win the game and it's fun," Sallin says. "He's going to be more successful if he knows the score."

Experts say there are a variety of ways to keep score with key performance indicators (KPIs). You just have to figure out which ones work best for your company. (See page 7 for ideas.)

Here's a look at how LegacyScapes and two other landscape companies track KPIs.

KPI: Gross margin per project

Company: LegacyScapes

Location: Groveland, Fla.

2015 Revenue: \$10.3 million (anticipated)

Client mix: Primarily commercial

Business mix: Primarily design/build + installation

LegacyScapes tracks many KPIs, including EBITDA, customer satisfaction and quality measures. Perhaps the most vital one that keeps the company on pace for profitability, though, is gross margin on every job during the construction process, says Sallin.

He defines gross margin as the difference between revenue and direct costs.

"We want to know how we're doing on a project during construction in order to make adjustments if we need to," he says. "That's very different from saying we want to know how we did at the end."

On the type of major construction jobs LegacyScapes builds, gross margin is often a moving target because of change orders. It's challenging because it requires the company to track real-time data on

direct costs (labor, material and subcontractors). But it's vital, Sallin says, to ensure each job is a success.

About two years ago, the company committed to tracking gross margin per job with up-to-date information because it was struggling with profitability on some jobs.

Sallin encourages other companies to do the same.

"I know how much we've struggled to get these systems in place, and it's still not perfect," he says. "I think a lot of companies don't do it because it's hard and they don't see the value, but the payoff is there for the company who can get organized."

Since LegacyScapes committed to this KPI, it's increased net profit by more than five points, Sallin says.

Getting it done

Step one was to track costs in as close to actual time as possible.

"There's no point in looking at numbers that aren't accurate," Sallin says.

LegacyScapes uses its cloud-based payroll software to track labor costs. Foremen have Chromebooks and input their crews' hours from the field.

Many landscape companies still track hours manually with punch cards or paper time sheets, so it might be a week or two before those numbers hit the accounting system. This lag in reporting makes it difficult to track gross margin accurately, Sallin says, but if you can enter the information daily, you can get close to real-time labor data.

To track materials, LegacyScapes tightened up its purchasing process to code every purchase order to the correct project. As soon as the office receives an invoice, it's entered into the accounting software, and

“I THINK A LOT OF COMPANIES DON’T DO IT BECAUSE IT’S HARD AND THEY DON’T SEE THE VALUE, BUT THE PAYOFF IS THERE FOR THE COMPANY WHO CAN GET ORGANIZED.”

—TIMOTHEE SALLIN, LEGACYSCAPES



it automatically reflects in the company’s construction management software, Spitfire Project Management System, which integrates with its accounting software. It’s important to have an employee account-

able for entering invoices and coding them to jobs as quickly as possible, Sallin says.

“If you don’t have that person or discipline, it will fall apart because of invoice backup,” he says.

After collecting all the data, LegacyScapes reviews progress during monthly project management meetings, in addition to making it available to foremen and project managers remotely.

“We really want them to be aware of where they stand on the job,” he says. “If you’re really in a hole and you’re 30 percent of the way through the job, you still have 70 percent of the way to catch up. If you wait until the end of the job, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

KPI: Payroll percentage

Company: 360 Lawn Care

Location: Rock Hill, S.C.

2015 Revenue: \$650,000

(anticipated)

Client mix: 70% residential;

30% commercial

Business mix: 60% mowing + landscape maintenance; 30% design/build + installation; 10% other

Brandon Guffey, a former advertising sales representative, dabbled in landscaping for a few years before deciding to leave media sales in 2011 to launch 360 Lawn Care. He preferred cutting grass to sitting behind a desk, so he signed a lease on a shop and started a landscape business.

The first few years were a slog, and Guffey knew he had to find a

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way to make more money.

"Last year we did \$320,000, and we spent \$318,000," he says. "I started freaking out a bit and trying to figure out what I'm doing wrong. It seemed like my pay could never increase and there was never any profit."

So Guffey began looking into purchasing a franchise as an option, and he began taking landscape industry education courses.

He decided not to go with a franchise, but he learned one thing from the franchisees he interviewed during his due diligence process: His payroll percentage was way off. The franchise owners said their payroll was expected to be around 25 percent, leaving about 60 percent for overhead and at least 15 percent for profit. Guffey's payroll in 2014 was 67 percent.

**"ONCE WE
STARTED
TRACKING
OUR PAYROLL
PERCENTAGE, WE
STARTED GENERATING PROFIT."**

—BRANDON GUFFEY, 360 LAWN CARE



"A lot of it was 15 minutes here and 15 minutes there," he says. "If you have a four-man crew, a 15-minute break equals one hour of payroll."

Armed with that information, Guffey made some changes.

"I created a spreadsheet to start tracking everything and increased all of my bids," he says. "So if I'm bidding a job at \$100, my payroll better not be more than \$25."

Currently, his payroll is around 30 percent. It's not where he wants to be, but it's a marked improvement from last year. And he expects to end the year with about 10 percent net profit, up from half a percent last year.

Guffey was able to drastically reduce payroll with simple measures, such as enlisting a supervisor to fuel trucks rather than sending the entire crew to the gas station, giving crews the hours budgeted for each job and tracking all these figures in a spreadsheet. In other words, he started keeping score.

"That's the only thing I've really changed," he says. "Once we started tracking our payroll percentage, we started generating profit."

In the midst of these improvements, business has nearly doubled. The company will likely hit its \$650,000 revenue budget this year, Guffey says.



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He has 12 employees now with plans to add a dedicated fertilization crew in 2016.

He's also looking for a better system than spreadsheets.

"My primary job is tracking payroll percentages and providing the guys with their (budgeted) hours," he says. "It's a lot of paperwork. And that's one of the reasons I left advertising."

KPI: Client credits

Company: Taylor Irrigation

Location: Houston

2015 Revenue: \$1.5 million (anticipated)

Client mix: 80% residential; 20% commercial

Business mix: 36% irrigation + water management; 18% mowing + landscape maintenance; 39% design/build + installation; 7% other

Taylor Irrigation strives for perfection on every job, says John Taylor, president and CEO. That's why the company gives client credits on any work that falls short.

"If we don't do the work to our standards, even if the client is completely satisfied, we give a credit," he says. "It protects your reputation with clients, and, in-house, we can keep track of those credits and say, 'We must not be living up to our own standards.'"

In short, the value of overall customer credits on the books serves as a barometer of quality. It's typically around 1 percent of revenue, and the company reviews it weekly.

The result of tracking customer credits so closely has been an overall decline in the value of credits issued, Taylor says. But the purpose for tracking goes beyond that. It's more about analyzing where and when the credits pop up, keeping the team members accountable and using the information as a training tool, he says.

"Everybody hates to lose money," he says. "I've found with the staff, you don't

"EVERYBODY HATES TO LOSE MONEY. I'VE FOUND WITH THE STAFF, YOU DON'T HAVE TO YELL OR CRACK THE WHIP. WHEN THEY HEAR WE'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE THE MONEY ON A PROJECT THAT WE THOUGHT WE WOULD, IT GETS THEIR ATTENTION."

—JOHN TAYLOR, TAYLOR IRRIGATION



have to yell or crack the whip. When they hear we're not going to make the money on a project that we thought we would, it gets their attention."

In fact, the company internally refers to the metric as CEUs—for continuing education units—because the team considers them to be "lessons learned," Taylor says.

"There might come a point where this is no longer a useful tool, but for now, it provides us with a great deal of information and puts us in a position to deal with problems we wouldn't have known about before," he says.

How credits are tracked

Taylor Irrigation has tallied a running total of client credits for a long time, but during the last two and a half years, it's tracked them on a spreadsheet with 10 additional data points, including truck, day of the week, time of year, division, manager and more.

The credits are sortable by each of these fields, so the management team can identify trends.

"It allows me to see that the B truck has a problem with planting seasonal color, for example," Taylor says. "That means we have to empower that truck when it comes to seasonal color, so maybe that means more training."

The idea to develop this KPI came from the data the company has access to as an Angie's List member, Taylor says. These tools include lists of the top five complaints by market, average response times by market and more.

"Those tools give us data about the competitors in our market, and it inspired us to say, 'Let's create our


own tools,' so we can split them out from division to division, time of year or day of the week," he says.

The company already tracked customer credits, and Taylor realized it could be a good KPI if there was more information attached to it.

To collect the information, each of Taylor Irrigation's division managers completes a job summary sheet for every project. It includes a space for client credits, which are issued at the discretion of the manager or Taylor. The office manager enters that information into a master spreadsheet when she invoices the job. The spreadsheet includes other company details, such as revenue and profits, and all employees have access to that information, Taylor says.

The team also reviews the credit levels during a weekly managers' meeting when it discusses projects in the pipeline and recently completed jobs. The managers then address any credit-related concerns with the team in the field. If something appears to be a trend, they'll bring the crew into the conference room and say, "What can we do to make this better?"

The key is for management to use the information as an opportunity for instruction—not to be punitive.

"A lot of times in our industry, when a boss sees something's wrong, he blows a gasket and someone's in trouble," Taylor says. "By involving your people in the solutions, your team will want to take responsibility for making it better." 

WEB EXTRA

To learn about how Taylor Irrigation measures employee performance, visit the Web Extras section at LandscapeManagement.net.

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BUSINESS BASICS: NUMBERS

LET'S GROW

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GO TIME

Get columnist Kevin Kehoe's take on the state of the landscape market, which he calls "good, not great."



PAGE 42

BUSINESS BASICS: NUMBERS

Minimize your taxes now



BY DANIEL GORDON

The author is a CPA who caters to landscape and lawn care firms. Reach him at dan@turfbooks.com.

While tax prep season doesn't begin for many people until late January, now is the time to reduce your 2015 tax; waiting until 2016 is really just reacting.

There's no significant increase in marginal rates on the horizon, which makes planning easier. But hold on. The section 179 accelerated write-off for certain assets has again been reset to a maximum of \$25,000.

179 DEDUCTION

Section 179 of the Internal Revenue code allows small businesses to deduct in the current tax year the full purchase price of equipment that qualifies for the deduction, even if it's financed or leased. During the past several years through various last minute tax extender bills, this deduction was raised to a maximum write-off of \$500,000. But without another tax extender or law change, this \$500,000 drops to \$25,000 for 2015. Most business equipment applies to Section 179, including machines, computers, software, furniture and some vehicles.

A Section 179 limit at \$500,000 is significant to most small businesses and it would benefit both political parties to extend the law before the end of the year. It could mean a reduction of an additional \$475,000 of taxable income for company purchases made during the year.

If this law isn't extended, all is not lost. You will still be able to depreciate the cost of the equipment over its useful life, usually five to seven years.

NORMAL TAX PLANNING

To help you keep your stress level down, you need to know what

deductions are available and have the information and documentation available to take advantage of those deductions.

First, you need an accurate profit and loss statement and an accurate balance sheet. All figures should be reconciled to bank statements. Most expenses that are reasonable and necessary to carry on your business are deductible. Some expenses, such as penalties, are not deductible. In addition, business meals and entertainment meetings are only deductible at 50 percent. For these expenses you'll need a business log that records the expense, who attended these meetings and the business purpose of these meetings. If you come under audit and you don't have these records, the deductions will be disallowed.

POSTPONING INCOME/ACCELERATING DEDUCTIONS

In an environment when taxes are not expected to rise, tax planning can be summed up in four words: Postpone income; accelerate deductions.

This strategy can help move the taxpayer into a lower tax bracket in the current year. It also can help the taxpayer avoid crossing the threshold that he or she is subject to the net investment income tax (an additional 3.8 percent on investment income) or subject to losing all or part of certain deductions (i.e., the dependency exemption). Strategies to postpone income include:


- Pushing a large job from this year to next, if there is flexibility;
- Pushing the sale of a gain-generating asset into the next year;
- Structuring the sale of a gain-generating asset as an installment sale;

- Deferring any year-end bonuses;
- Using the like-kind exchange provisions (Section 1031) to defer recognizing gain on dispositions of business or investment property; and
- Delaying the collection of outstanding accounts receivables until the following year for a cash basis taxpayer.

Again this strategy serves to reduce taxable income, so there's either less income to tax and/or moves the taxpayer into a lower tax bracket. Strategies to accelerate deductions include:

- Making fourth-quarter state estimated tax payments this year;
- Prepaying property taxes due the following year and prepaying January's mortgage in December;
- Bunching medical and dental expenses into the current year if it's expected that those expenses for the current and following year will exceed the 10 percent of adjusted gross income floor limitation applicable to such expenses;
- Moving future charitable donations into the current year; and
- Selling stock losers in your portfolio before year end.

It's never too early to start thinking about taxes and ways to minimize them. Reconciling your books and producing an accurate set of

financials is a great start. Discussing those financials with your CPA will give him or her the proper information to project your liability. If done early enough, he or she will be able to suggest ways to reduce the ultimate liability and/or prepare you for any tax payments you may have to make. 

WEB EXTRA

For Gordon's tax tips on retirement planning, visit the Web Extras section at LandscapeManagement.net.

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¹2014 Employer Health Benefits Survey, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, September 10, 2014. ²One Day PaySM is available for most properly documented, individual claims submitted online through Aflac SmartClaim[®] by 3 PM ET. Aflac SmartClaim[®] not available on the following: Short Term Disability (excluding Accident and Sickness Riders), Life, Vision, Dental, Medicare Supplement, Long Term Care/Home Health Care, Aflac Plus Rider and Group policies. Individual Company Statistic, 2015. ³Eastbridge Consulting Group, U.S. Worksite/Voluntary Sales Report. Carrier Results for 2002-2014. Avon, CT. Coverage is underwritten by American Family Life Assurance Company of Columbus. In New York, coverage is underwritten by American Family Life Assurance Company of New York.

LET'S GROW

State of the market



BY KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kevinkehoe@me.com.

I did a video interview at the LM booth during GIE+EXPO last month. I was asked to comment on the state of the market. It felt like being asked for a two-minute solution to Middle Eastern politics. You don't want to get it wrong, but two minutes doesn't do the topic justice. That being said, here are my thoughts and recommendations.

“Now is the time to harvest the cash bounty created by growth.”

The industry is good, not great. The rising economic tide seems to be floating most boats, but not enough are taking advantage of it from a cash-generation perspective. Yes, revenues are up, but profits in too many cases are not. Now is the time to harvest the cash bounty created by growth.

But it doesn't seem to be happening. Remember 2003-2007? Companies grew in that economy, but for far too many, their costs grew even faster. The net result: Cash was consumed,

debt accumulated and balance sheets weakened. So when the crash came, the crunch was terrible. You don't want to do that again.

THE GOOD

The economy is better. But don't fool yourself; it's not great. It just looks great compared to how lousy it was. And when this pent-up demand gets spent and the buyers are tapped out, look out.

Consolidation is good. The ValleyCrest and Brickman merger is great. It means real capital is flowing into the industry. Witness all the investment companies looking to do deals. At the same time, there's some exodus of talent from the merged entities. These are experienced managers from two good companies.

THE BAD

Talent is scarce. Labor, foremen and account managers, especially, are in short supply and more expensive than ever. This singular constraint can result in outkicking your coverage and ruining your profits.

Supply is rising. Success breeds success—and more competition. This trend is good except when it comes to pricing. Though prices are no longer going down, they are not keeping pace with cost increases.

WHERE TO FOCUS

These threats and opportunities should drive your business planning and budgeting next year.

● **Recruiting.** It's an everyday job.

Put someone in your company in charge of this important activity. Be prepared to pay a bit more to get and retain talent. Look for exodus talent from the ValleyCrest/Brickman merger.

● **Sales.** Become more selective. In the simplest terms, you want customers that will pay a little more, appreciate your work, be lower maintenance and pay their bills on time.

● **Technology.** Invest in mobile-integrated technologies. They can increase personal productivity, letting you leverage overhead expense, and reduce costly mistakes that result from poor communication and inaccurate reporting.

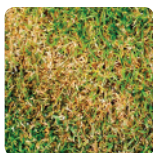
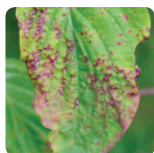
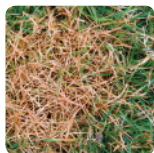
We'll see the emergence of several larger local/regional companies in every market. You can be one of these guys. These guys are going to generate solid cash returns by applying the strategies outlined above. Or you can repeat history.

That's it: My two-minute take on the state of the market. Act now and don't repeat history.

Editor's Note: Kevin Kehoe's video—and much more—to come on this topic next month in the annual LM Industry Pulse report.



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CASE STUDY: OUR WAY

Extra credit

How one landscape company added \$100,000 in sales by redefining its referral program. **BY CASEY PAYTON**



For the past few years, Mark Borst, owner and president of Borst Landscape & Design in Allendale, N.J., has been offering a customer referral program where clients could earn a \$250 invoice credit for referring a new customer.

Borst says it helped a little but “wasn’t a grand slam.” So this year he upped the offers. In addition to a customer referral incentive, the company added a customer service upgrade bonus and a signing bonus for new clients. These are also doled out as invoice credits at \$250 and \$150, respectively.

“Even in other industries—such as your phone or cable companies—the focus is always on getting new business,” Borst says. “You see a lot of incentives for new customers. But if you turn some of that focus inward and think of ways to reward existing business, you can grow your company that way, too. We have to remember that without existing business, we wouldn’t be where we are today.”

Borst says the program has issued about \$8,000 in credits, and it has generated around \$100,000 of business between referrals and upgrades. He can directly link 40 new clients to the referral program.

But the investment in existing clientele has been the key to success, Borst says.

“I realized that by only rewarding for new business, we weren’t doing as much as we could for our existing clients,” Borst says. “That’s why we added the customer service upgrade bonus. The rewards always seem to

be focused on new customers, but I want my existing clientele to know we value them—even if they’re not bringing us new customers. These upgrade bonuses have been a great way to reward existing clientele.”

Borst says the program has had the added benefit of helping close the deal on some jobs.

“We had clients who were on the fence about whether they wanted to upgrade their services, but this bonus was the deciding factor,” says Borst, who adds that the bonuses were advertised through e-mail blasts and on monthly invoices.

One potential challenge is stacked bonuses. For example, if an existing customer refers a new one, the existing customer earns \$250 and the new customer earns the \$150 signing bonus.

“Now you have \$400 going out,” Borst says. “You just have to be mindful of that.”

Borst advises others considering bonuses to be careful of the language you use. If you have too many bonuses that can be stacked, it might be worth saying something like “not combinable with other offers.”

For now, Borst has allowed the bonuses to stack, as it’s been worth all the new business.

Some clients embrace the referral bonuses—a few of his lawn care clients paid for their whole season by referring so many new clients.

Since it’s a credit to the account—not cash in hand—the money is kept in house, but Borst says the company did get “dinged” on a few jobs where customers chose to apply the credits to small projects. For example, one cus-

tomers earned a \$250 referral credit and applied it to a \$200 job. That meant he still had \$50 as a credit in his account after a completed job.

“But on the flipside, the bonuses helped us sell a \$60,000 job,” Borst says. “That shows that in the long run, it’s worth it. The majority of our customers applied credits to maintenance renewals. In those cases, they save some money, and we helped secure their renewal with us—so it’s a win-win.”

And even when the incentives are applied to smaller jobs, Borst says the credits help create a sense of “goodwill” among clients, who may book bigger jobs in the future. Borst reiterates that finding ways to reward existing customers is vital, and he believes it’s why this program has been so successful. 📌

Payton is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.



Mark Borst

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

COMPANY: Borst Landscape & Design

LOCATION: Allendale, N.J.

REVENUE: \$7.5 million

EMPLOYEES: 85

SERVICE MIX: 25% design/build + installation; 22% snow + ice management; 53% mowing + landscape maintenance, including lawn care

CLIENT MIX: About 30% commercial; 70% residential

» BACKPACK/HANDHELD BLOWERS

↓ 40V MAX BRUSHLESS BACKPACK BLOWER

COMPANY: DeWalt

URL: DeWalt.com

The 40V Max generates up to 450 cu. ft. per minute (CFM) of air volume at 140 mph. Just one 40-v Max 7.5Ah lithium ion battery is required to operate the tool, but the backpack blower features two battery wells for extended runtime. The handle's activation switch allows the user to choose which battery to pull energy from or to lock the tool off for transport and storage.



BBX7600N 75.6 CC MM4 BACKPACK BLOWER

COMPANY:

Makita USA

URL:

MakitaTools.com

Engine seizure from improper fuel and oil mixing is one of the most common failures of 2-stroke power equipment, according to Makita. To combat that problem, the manufacturer offers the MM4 series 4-stroke engine power equipment, including the backpack blower model BBX7600N, pictured. It offers the convenience of one gas can for the equipment trailer (and no more fuel mixing).



436LiB BLOWER

COMPANY: Husqvarna

URL: Husqvarna.com

A tap on the 436LiB's control panel starts it instantly, and cruise control maintains constant speeds while the power boost setting allows removal of debris, leaves and dirt. It features a slim, narrow design and soft grip, the manufacturer says, and it can be paired with a Husqvarna battery system for longer runtimes.



SSBL BLOWER



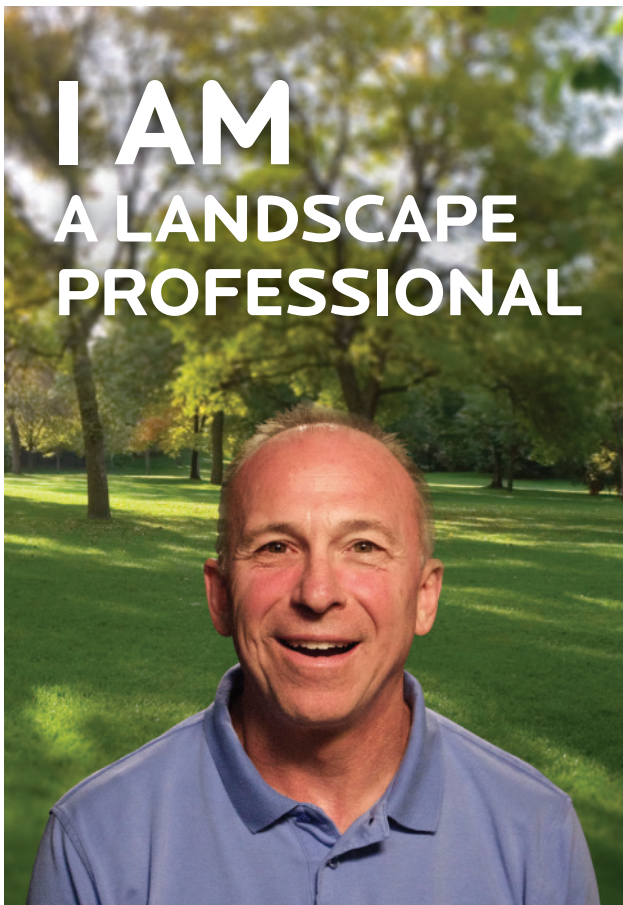
COMPANY:

Honda Power Equipment

URL: PowerEquipment.Honda.com

The Honda VersAttach features six-in-one flexibility with a wide range of interchangeable attachments, including a string trimmer, hedge trimmer, edger, cultivator, pruner and 11-in.-diameter blower (Model SSBL, pictured). For easy switching among attachments, the unit is designed around Honda's SureLoc joint locking system.

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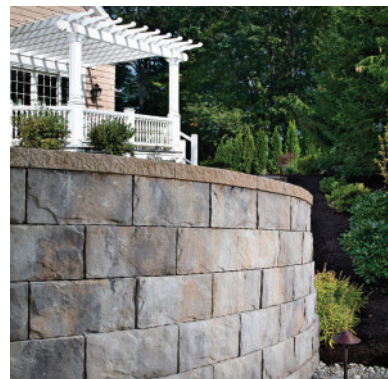
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MEGA-TANDEM RETAINING WALL SYSTEM

COMPANY: Belgard

URL: Belgard.com

The Mega-Tandem Mass Segmental Retaining Wall system provides a natural appearance of chiseled stone. The system can be used to create curved or straight retaining and free-standing, landscape walls.



MOBILE APP

COMPANY: Pavestone

URL: Pavestone.com

Built for use on iPhones, iPads, Android phones and Android tablets, the free Pavestone mobile app provides a menu of options highlighted by a “project planner,” which considers details like design elements and product specifications. Other features include a “search products” function, idea gallery, video gallery, project calculators and more.



STORMPAVE

COMPANY:

Pine Hall Brick Co.

URL: PineHallBrick.com

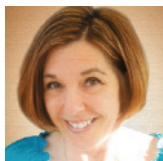
StormPave pavers, made of clay and water, enable stormwater to be naturally filtered. Their use can qualify for LEED credit in one or more categories, depending on variables such as paver color and proximity of the project to Pine Hall Brick’s plants in North Carolina and Georgia.



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SafetyWatch list of hazards

The list of hazards in this photo includes, but is not limited to:

- Lack of gloves;
- Fueling without a funnel; and
- Fueling over turfgrass.

What did we miss? We invite you—as employers and workers in the landscape industry—to share your expertise. Email your responses to LM Editor Marisa Palmieri (mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net). We'll publish your responses with the online version of this story.



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Katz met his wife, Debbie, in high school and has stood by her as she battles metastatic, stage 4 cancer. "Every moment I get to be by my wife's side is a vacation for me," Katz says. "My wife is a remarkable woman. I don't spend any time away from my wife. I didn't marry her to get away from her." They have a 29-year-old daughter, Shelley, and a 27-year-old son, Mitch, who serves as general manager at Elite Landscape (pictured below).



"(Running a business) takes a strong stomach, perseverance and insanity. It's not a team sport. I have really good people that work with me, but if everything falls apart, they go and get another job."



David Katz

**PRESIDENT
ELITE LANDSCAPING
POUGHKEEPSIE, N.Y.**

EDUCATION

Mahopac High School
Mahopac, N.Y.
Class of 1977

SUNY Cobleskill
Nursery management
and landscape design
Cobleskill, N.Y.
1977-1979

SUNY College of
Environmental Science and Forestry
Landscape architecture
1979-1980

WORK EXPERIENCE

1980-1985
Whispering Pines
Nursery & Florist
Landscape, nursery and
garden manager

1985-Present
President
Elite Landscaping

2005-2010
President
Metro NY/NJ Chapter Association
of Spa & Pool Professionals

2006-Present
Board Member
Northeast Spa & Pool Association

2013-Present
Design/Build Specialty
Group Member
National Association of
Landscape Professionals



"My focus, from the time I was in 7th grade, was to become a landscape architect. I grew up studying and reading about landscaping architecture."

"(In class) if I didn't see the connection with where I wanted to go with my life, it didn't really interest me. I focused on classes to do with the design process."

"I work between 4:30-5:30 every morning. I go into work somewhere between 6:00-6:45 a.m. And I leave my office between 6:00-8:00 p.m. I love what I do. I love solving problems."



WORDS OF WISDOM On peer groups: "The common theme is misery loves company, and everybody needs support. The reality is, unless you own your own business, it's very difficult to understand the intensity." • "Absolutely any kind of continued education is invaluable. You can get educated on the Internet, in the library, professional classes or training. All of those things are just invaluable. There is nothing you can't learn, and there's no reason you can't learn it unless you don't try."



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