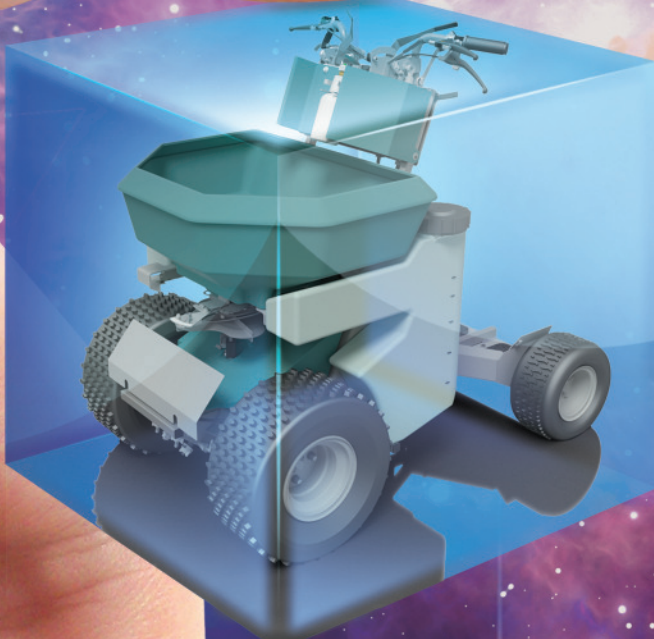


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LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

YOUR GUIDE TO GROWTH™

Mark Leahy
(left) and Brad
Leahy, owners
of Blades
of Green in
Edgewater, Md.

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Focus and a positive
company culture drive
business at Blades of Green.



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ON THE COVER: PHOTO BY DENNIS DRENNER

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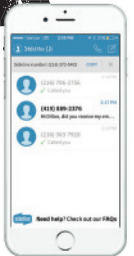
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"Weed out the non-believers."

"Do what you say. Say what you do."

"Free up the careers of your C and D players."

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See more great advice and complete answers from our Editorial Advisory Board in the online version of this feature at LandscapeManagement.net.



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BIG PICTURE

COASTAL LIVING

LOCATION

Marblehead Bay, Mass.

COMPANY R.P. Marzilli & Co.,
Medway, Mass.

THE DETAILS The client wanted an outdoor living area that would maximize his property's ocean view and accommodate his large, active family both day and night. The ledge throughout the construction area, coupled with the steep terrain and single access road, proved to be a challenge—particularly when trying to meet deadlines during the winter months.

A 10,000-lb. pneumatic hammer was used for two weeks to break out the ledge for the pool and terraces. The team built a concrete bunker room into the retaining wall for the pool and site utilities. The walls were then veneered with antique granite from a New Hampshire farmer's wall.

These, and other aspects of this project, earned R.P. Marzilli & Co. a Grand Award, Judges Award and Audience Choice Award last year from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program.

See more photos from this project at LandscapeManagement.net/BigPicture.

PHOTO: ROSEMARY FLETCHER PHOTOGRAPHY



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NEWS HOW-TO'S

LANDSCAPE
INDUSTRY
TRENDS,
VIEWS
AND TIPS

RECOMMENDER

ISSUE BRIEF

STEP BY STEP

NEW STUFF

SAFETYWATCH

TEAM SELLING



“We’ve seen an uptick in everyone’s numbers.”

A team sales approach instituted last year has proven to be an efficient change at Blades of Green, an Edgewater, Md.-based lawn care and pest control company. (See cover story for more details.)

Technicians are required to submit two qualified leads per day from their routes. These leads cost nothing to acquire, says President Mark Leahy.

Techs hand off these sales opportunities to the inside salesperson on their “team.” The reps quickly follow up with clients, and the techs and reps split the commission on any sales. An average tech earns about \$3,000-\$5,000 per year in these commissions—top performers may get twice that amount. In 2015 the company nearly doubled its technician-driven sales over the previous year to more than \$400,000.

“We’ve seen an uptick in everyone’s numbers,” President Mark Leahy says. “When you get them to work together, they’re all selling more.”

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RECOMMENDER

What set-up do you recommend for irrigation vehicles and why?

How TIS Landscape Services organizes its Rangers for irrigation. For more on this company's truck set-up, see the Web Extras section at LandscapeManagement.net.



JOHN TAYLOR
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
TIS LANDSCAPE SERVICES
HOUSTON, TEXAS

"We used to use Ford Rangers for service because they got better gas mileage, but the F-150s have caught up with them in that regard. So we tend to use white F-150s for service and management while using F-250s for crew/installation."



PATTY SIPE
CO-OWNER, HEADS UP SPRINKLER CO.
PLANO, TEXAS

"We strongly believe in no-notes vehicles. The Chevy 1500 vans we have are all late models that we purchased used for cash. We don't believe in leveraging our company for our workhorses. We've been running Chevys since our company began 21 years ago."

ISSUE BRIEF



BY SABEENA HICKMAN

The author is CEO of the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

SPREAD OF LYME DISEASE CONCERNING

Ticks that can spread Lyme disease now live in almost half of all U.S. counties, according to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Rebecca Eisen, a research biologist at the CDC, reports in the *Journal of Medical Entomology* that since the late 1990s, the number of reported Lyme disease cases in the U.S. has more than tripled.

To add to the bad news, Mayo Clinic researchers have discovered a new Lyme-disease-causing organism, called *Borrelia mayonii*, that's capable of intensifying symptoms.

These points are alarming news for an industry that performs its work outdoors. May is Lyme Disease Awareness Month. Landscape professionals need to know that Lyme disease is spreading, and if they once thought their area was free of Lyme disease-causing ticks, it may not be now. It's important to share safety precautions with employees and train them about prevention techniques.

With the danger comes an opportunity to help make clients' yards and green spaces safer. Clearing brush, pruning and keeping grass trimmed all help reduce the number of ticks around peoples' properties. Some companies also offer spraying for ticks.

The National Association of Landscape Professionals tracks and supports legislation that earmarks funding for Lyme disease research. You can help by getting to know your legislators and talking to them about this and other issues that impact your business. They need to know how the issue affects your company, your employees and your clients. 📍



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STEP BY STEP

Achieve good stripes

For many landscape pros, there's something satisfying about creating perfect stripes on a client's lawn.

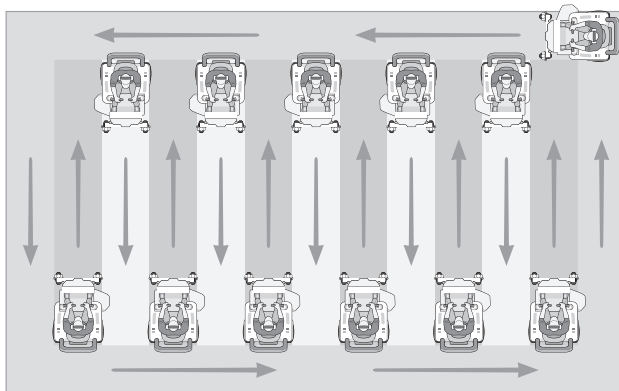
Achieving this high-end look is as simple as bending the blades of grass in different directions and waiting for the sun to shine, which creates "light" or "dark" stripes. When blades of grass are bent away from the viewer, the stripe appears lighter in color because sunlight is reflecting off the long, wide part of the blade. When the blades of grass are bent towards the viewer, the stripe appears darker because the tips of the blades are less reflective. Mowing a lawn in rows of alternating directions provides visible stripe patterns.

Contractors can intensify lawn stripes by bending the grass even further, which can be done by using a roller or striper to press the grass to the ground. Stripe intensity also can be affected by the height of the cut. Shorter grass will have less distinctive stripes because shorter blades reflect less light. Increasing the height of a lawn by as little as ½ inch can make a noticeable difference in lawn stripe intensity.

Consider turf type when trying to achieve lawn striping, as certain breeds of grass bend easier and provide a better stripe pattern. Warm-season grasses are typically more difficult to stripe because they're more rigid and harder to bend. Stripes are also affected by the position of the sun and may appear more intense at different times of day. Follow these steps to create different styles of lawn striping patterns. 

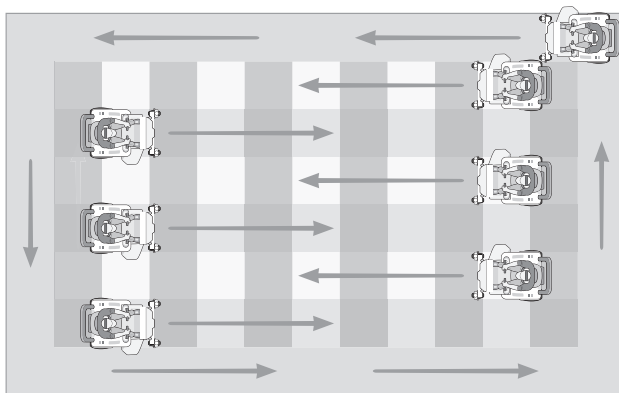
SOURCE: Scag Power Equipment, Scag.com

PATTERN 1: BASIC VERTICAL



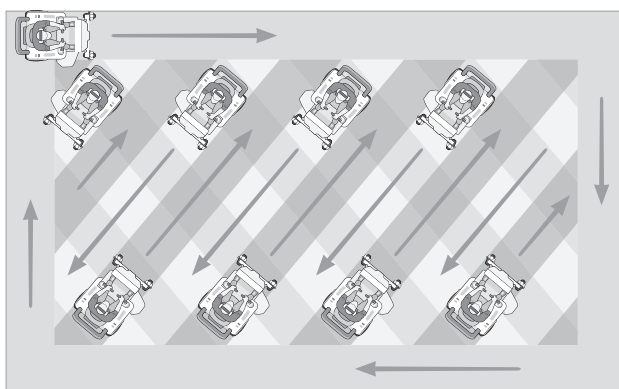
Begin by mowing the property's perimeter. Next, mow the remaining property in rows of opposing direction, using a "Y" turn at the end of each row to reduce any turf damage. Mow the perimeter again for a polished look.

PATTERN 2: CHECKERBOARD



Begin by mowing the property's perimeter. Using "Y" turns at the end of each row, mow the remaining property in vertical rows in opposing direction. Next, mow the lawn in horizontal rows in opposing direction. Mow the perimeter again for a clean look.

PATTERN 3: DIAGONAL



This pattern is achieved using the same techniques as the "checkerboard" stripe pattern. Simply mow diagonally instead of vertically and horizontally.



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NEW STUFF

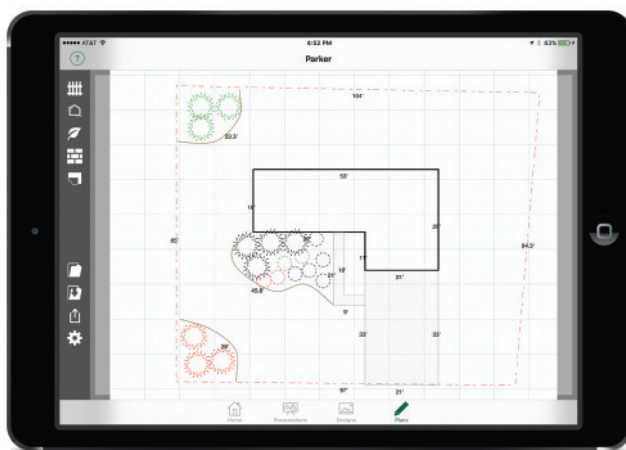
1



2



3



1. LIGHT LOGIC WIRELESS CONTROL SYSTEM

COMPANY: Unique Lighting Systems

URL: UniqueLighting.com

Unique Lighting Systems released an updated version of its Light Logic Wireless Control System. With the addition of internet access and a mobile app, Light Logic Plus gives contractors and homeowners remote control of their lighting systems. Using the website or smartphone app, Light Logic Plus controls outdoor lighting scenes, monitors maintenance issues and controls nonlighting aspects of landscape, like gates, security systems, ponds and fountains. The app is free and compatible with PC, Apple, Android and iOS devices.

2. Z960M ZTRAK

COMPANY: John Deere

URL: Deere.com

John Deere added the Z960M zero-turn mower to its commercial lineup. The 31-hp mower is available in 60-in., 60-in. Mulch-On-Demand and 72-in. deck offerings. The mower features a toggle style switch, rather than the push/pull PTO switch, and front tie-down points—updates that are included on all new John Deere zero-turn mowers.

3. CAD FOR IPAD

COMPANY: Drafix Software

URL: ProLandscape.com

Drafix Software's landscape design CAD for iPad is now available in its Pro Landscape Companion app. The new CAD component allows users to measure and design the site in a scaled drawing on the tablet. Users can then transfer the design to the computer for additional work. Pro Landscape Companion is free for users of Pro Landscape. It's currently available in the Apple Store; an Android version will be available later in 2016, the company says.



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. BOXER 950HD COMPACT UTILITY LOADER

COMPANY: Morbark

URL: BoxerEquipment.com

The Boxer 950 HD features the industry's highest-hinge pin height, which allows it to dump over a 6-ft. sidewall, the company says. It's powered by a 48-hp diesel engine and a hydrostatic operating system, with two joystick pattern options. Other features include an electronic display with onboard diagnostic capabilities and multiple mode settings, designed to let the user tailor the machine's settings to the application.

5. TC3000 CORDLESS TRIMMER

COMPANY: Shindaiwa

URL: Shindaiwa-USA.com

Part of the company's new Lithium-Ion 56-v cordless product line, the T3000 trimmer uses a solid shaft, designed for smooth, fast acceleration, and a 1.4:1 gear ratio, designed for increased cutting torque. Typical run time with the 2 amp-hour (Ah) battery is 29 minutes with a 12-in. cutting diameter and 22 minutes with a 14-in. cutting diameter. The 4 Ah battery increases run times to 60 minutes for the 12-in. model and 45 minutes for the 14-in. model. The Speed-Feed 400 trimmer head comes standard with a 0.080-diameter SilenTwist line.

6. TANDEM MODULAR GRID

COMPANY: Belgard

URL: Belgard.com

The Tandem Modular Grid retaining wall can be used in applications as diverse as deck skirting or outdoor kitchens, Belgard says. Each grid can be cut and used in modular configurations both horizontally and vertically. Available in five colors, the Tandem wall boasts the look and texture of natural stones, the company said. Tandem Modular Grid is available on the East Coast and will launch nationwide during the summer.



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- Avoid filling a hot piece of equipment, and never add fuel to a running machine. There is a risk that fuel spilled on the muffler or other hot component could ignite. Start a job with enough fuel to finish it, thereby filling a warm or cool machine, not a hot one.
- Always clear dirt and debris from the filler cap before removing it, so they don't enter the fuel tank.
- Remove the filler cap slowly, as pressure builds up inside the tank in warm conditions, and pressure inside the tank needs to be released slowly.
- Don't overfill equipment or cans; fuel tanks need room for the fuel to expand. Always leave the "neck" of the tank or container empty. Most spillage occurs while "topping off" the tank.

- Fill equipment in an area where spillage will not harm the surface if it's spilled.
- Wipe up spills and dispose of the absorbent material. Carry a special absorbent on the truck, use a rag or, as a last resort, use topsoil to soak up a large spill. Then, safely and properly dispose of the absorbent material after it has done its job.

WATCH AND LEARN

Visit LandscapeManagement.net/SafetyWatch to view a video about safe fuel handling and use it as a training tool for your team.



SOURCE: LS TRAINING SYSTEM, LSTRaining.COM

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GET SMART

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PAGE 29



Build and engage

How one lawn care company leverages Facebook. BY JIM MCCLURE

Many business owners don't see the true value in engaging and creating content for their online followers. Once my General Manager Kevin Adan and I embraced this tactic as another part of our marketing pillar, we saw our business grow.

Since my lawn care business began implementing a social media strategy over the past year, we've seen the benefits of regularly engaging with customers using Facebook.

From February to May 2015, our team generated more than 560 web leads, which we define as any time a customer comes directly to us through Facebook or our website. The result was the sale of 210 full programs, due to our online efforts alone.

We've learned it's vital to create conversations with your followers, take part in the conversations and, most importantly, use social media to prove you are a reliable resource to the online audience.

In the beginning, it may be challenging and seem tedious for those who are unfamiliar with the various platforms and their functions, but once you get into the habit of treating social media as another way to connect people with your business and its services, you will reap the rewards of doing so. Here are four tips.

1 Use social media as a format to provide relatable content. When looking for lawn care

advice, many people reach out to local lawn care providers on social media looking for free and quick help. This is the ideal situation for a business to increase its credibility among the general public. By sharing content over social media, a business can become part of the conversation and establish itself as a trusted source of information among an audience. For instance, we've found sharing our blog posts on our Facebook page has increased traffic to our website.

It helps to dedicate one or two people within your organization to understanding the nuances of an effective social media strategy. My administrative manager is in charge of our online pres-

ence. He spends four to five hours per week managing the accounts.

As a team, we also collaborate and brainstorm what our followers want to know, how we can present new information more clearly and how we can continue to build trust and authority in the industry. For example, if an employee recently received an amazing testimonial from a customer, we often share that for our "Testimony Tuesday" post.

Social media has the power to strengthen your relationship with casual followers so they return to your channels for reliable answers. If done correctly, the information will likely be shared by those followers with their friends and fam-



NEWSFEED

SYNGENTA SCHOLARSHIP

Turf, landscape and horticulture students are eligible for the Syngenta Agricultural

Scholarship program. The application, which requires an essay about how someone rooted in agriculture inspired you

to pursue a career in the industry, is due May 26.

PRIMERATURF GROWTH

PrimeraTurf added Superior Angran as an owner-distributor. Based in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Superior

has served the Caribbean market since 1977.

PRO HTS20 HYDRO-DRIVE

Classen's new self-propelled overseeder provides 13 seed rows in a 20-in. swath. The unit

features hydrostatic drive and a 9-hp Honda engine.



ily, ultimately exposing your brand to a new audience.

2 Learn the platforms and monitor them. It's also helpful to familiarize yourself with the many social media platforms. Learn what they are capable of and how they can make your social media approach easier. Programs like Hootsuite, or certain features on the social media sites themselves, save you time by allowing you to manage multiple social media accounts in one place. Using these features and programs, you can schedule tweets or Facebook posts to publish at key times or on certain days of the week.

In addition, take time to research similar social pages with a responsive and engaged following. Pinpoint some of the ways those pages share information and emulate those strategies on your own page.

Keep in mind that the public uses each social media platform a different way. Don't load content in the same way for each social platform, i.e., having Facebook posts sync with Twitter. Based on my team's experience, we find our Facebook and Twitter users engage with us differently, and we've found it doesn't always make sense to post the same thing on both platforms because the response won't be the same.

It's a good idea to stay up to date on changes within each social platform. For example, a recent report said Twitter could make changes to its timeline algorithm that may have a significant impact on the life cycle of a post.

With establishing a strong social media presence comes monitoring the sites, keeping up with the conversations users are having and answering the questions they're asking. Careless and inactive observation can lead to unanswered questions that can jeopardize the businesses image and create a negative reputation of being unresponsive and unreliable.

Posting content also comes down to trial and error. My administrative manager looks at the analytics of each

post. If he sees that content posted on Monday mornings doesn't receive many likes or comments, he considers trying a different time and day. It's helpful to compare the successful posts with the poorly executed ones and analyze all the factors that may have caused one to do better or worse than the other.

3 Remember to spark conversations and be the helping hand.

A common mistake is waiting for online users to ask all the questions. Be a resource for people by initiating the conversation. Often we pose questions to people such as, "What are your top lawn care concerns?" This tactic opens



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TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE

the door for the conversations and comments to begin. When we take this approach, we find that other people reach out to us with the same concerns as those who publicly comment. The social media pages literally give you the platform to be the go-to person for others. Those people who may not have asked a question still read the conversation trail and can get their questions answered.

4 Keep marketing and social media efforts separate. I can't reiterate this point enough. The biggest mistake a business owner can make is blurring the lines between his or her marketing efforts and social media tactics. While social media is a component of marketing, when you shove them in the same box, it can get messy. Be genuine with

“The biggest mistake a business owner can make is blurring the lines between his or her marketing efforts and social media tactics.”

—JIM MCCLURE



your intentions to help rather than only promote your business. You don't want followers to feel intimidated to reach out over social media or worry that they'll be hounded as a lead. Whether they use your services or not, you want to be viewed as their go-to person for whatever they need within your area of expertise.

When a business uses social media properly, it speaks volumes about the company. You want it to be known that you treat your online followers with the

same level of respect you give to current customers. Continue to make them a priority, even if they're not customers. By being genuine, followers' overall impression of your business will be positive. Whether or not they're in the market for your services now, a year from now or when they acquire a new home with a lawn some day, they will think of you. 🍷

McClure is owner of Weed Man Roswell in Georgia (Facebook.com/WeedManRoswell).

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MOWING+LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE



3 reasons to consider a satellite

Companies embarking on their first expansion might want to consider a satellite over a branch location. Here we tell you why and explain both terms.

BY DILLON STEWART

If you're confused by the differences between a branch and a satellite, you aren't alone.

"What I see happen a lot in the industry, companies call what are satellite yards, branches," says Bruce Wilson, consultant with the Bruce Wilson & Co. "The whole thing within the industry is muddled."

But if you're considering an expansion, it's important to know the difference.

A branch office has a full staff—crews, a sales team, possibly mechanics, management and an administrative staff. It is led by a branch manager, who reports to the main office or headquarters, and it could operate independently of the main office, if it needed to.

A satellite, on the other hand, is merely a launching pad for crews. Satellites come in all shapes and sizes and don't have a full administrative staff, if they have any office personnel at all. Sometimes it's just a place to park trucks and equipment overnight.

Most importantly, a satellite is a great first step for those looking to cut down on drive time and up response time without the overhead costs of a full branch. Here's why:

1 Relatively inexpensive: Without a full staff or, sometimes, even a brick-and-mortar facility, satellite yards require much less overhead than a branch office. Also, satellite yards vary in form. Some have a small office space for a designer or salesman dedicated to the coverage area. Others are fenced-in spaces where a company stores supplies and equipment. In Stamford, Conn., where land is scarce and expensive, Eastern Land Management, one of Wilson's clients, has three small satellite yards, which aren't much more than unused parking spots, around town. This keeps the company from having to move into a bigger space, which can cost more than double in rent. "With some of our satellite operations, we rent space from clients at large corporate centers for about \$5 a square foot," says owner Bruce Moore. "That's just raw land—no building, just storage space, like a fenced-in lot."

2 A good first step: Before taking on the overhead of a branch, a satellite yard is a good first step for companies looking to expand. It lets companies build revenue in an area before committing to a full branch, which shouldn't come before a specific area is generating \$2 million-\$3 million in

Continued on page 28

PHOTO: ©ISTOCK/COM/DEERBLUE4YOU

NEWSPEED

SAFETY REPORTING 2.0

The WorkplaceAware report management program, offered in mobile and web-



based formats, allows team members to remotely report near misses, accidents, faulty equipment and other safety concerns.

MONARCH ACQUISITIONS

Monarch Landscape Holdings acquired San Jose, Calif.-based Jensen Landscape and Woodinville, Wash.-based Northwest Landscape

Services. The private-equity-backed firm entered the market last May. Its companies bring in more than \$80 million in annual revenue, combined.



TALL GRASS



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MOWING+LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE

Continued from page 26

revenue, some say. A satellite is a good place to start because it's easier to manage, says Jonas Pattie, co-owner of The Pattie Group in Cleveland, Ohio. "It takes less resources and less expense. And all the client is worried about is, 'How fast are you in my driveway and how much am I paying in travel time?'"

3 Seamless communication: With improved communication technology, many companies elect to open satellite yards because they don't need a full administrative staff in all locations. Colin Taheny, vice president of Ryco Landscaping in Lake in the Hills, Ill., uses smartphones, a GPS fleet management system and BossLM, a business management software for landscapers. "You're now able to bridge a lot of the administrative things, eliminate or reduce physical offices and spread out further with satellites," he says. 📱

Conjoining culture

Whether you're opening a satellite yard or a branch office, merging company culture and quality standards can be tough. Even if you hire leadership from within, which Bruce Wilson and others recommend, a newly opened wing of a business should be under the owner's thumb. Wilson says it's important to make sure expansion locations don't feel like "step children." Barbecues and other events that promote inclusion can help, but nothing can replace the presence of an owner or high-ranking employee. "The ownership has to spend time in both places," Wilson says. "The owners have to be visible. I even recommend they have a desk where they go and work sometimes. That's how the employees get to know them, and they get to see the culture working the way the owners want it to."

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Self control

App-controlled landscape lighting systems allow homeowners to adjust their lighting through a computer, smartphone or tablet.

BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER

Do your clients want the ability to control their landscape lighting? Because there's an app for that. App-controlled landscape lighting systems have been on the market for about two years, and some contractors are seeing an increase in clients interested in the ability to operate their lighting systems from the convenience of a computer, smartphone or tablet. Manufacturers are responding to this demand by improving technology and introducing more products that are easy for contractors to install and easier for homeowners to operate.

"Most of the major manufacturers now have some sort of lighting control," says Chris Davey, senior marketing manager for Unique Lighting Systems, a lighting

manufacturer in Riverside, Calif. "There has been so much development on the control side of the lighting industry in the last year or two. It's been a race to see who can outpace each other."

With an app-controlled landscape lighting system, the app controls the system's transformer, which sends commands to the system's different zones. Through the app, the homeowner can dim or brighten the lights, change the time the lights turn on and off or change the color of the lights if the system has that feature. Most products operate through a Wi-Fi or Bluetooth connection, depending on the manufacturer.

For example, the app-controlled transformer manufactured by Vista Professional Lighting in Simi Valley, Calif., operates via Bluetooth. Danny Cuñado,

product manager, says the company chose Bluetooth instead of Wi-Fi to make installation easier for the contractor. With Wi-Fi, the contractor needs access to the homeowner's wireless IP address to set up a connection. With Bluetooth, the contractor can virtually plug in and go. While installation may be easier, the downside to a Bluetooth connection is it has a shorter range than a Wi-Fi connection, which can be a problem on large properties or on properties with large transformers.

"All you have to do is get into Bluetooth range and use your phone—the whole point of building it this way was for ease of use," Cuñado says. "The downside is we don't have the range of Wi-Fi."

Unique Lighting System's newest app-controlled product builds on the company's



MOVING FORWARD
As homes integrate smart technology, landscape lighting apps are a logical next step.



CONNECTIONS
App-controlled outdoor lighting systems rely on Bluetooth and Wi-Fi.

NEWSPEED

PRO LANDSCAPE EXPANDS

Drafix Software, creator of Pro Landscape design software, acquired the business

assets of Visual Impact Imaging's Earthscapes software. Terms of the deal were not disclosed. Drafix will

offer support to Earthscapes customers as the image library and key features are added to Pro Landscape.

RETAINING WALL LIGHT

Super Bright LEDs

added an 8-in. retaining wall light to its lineup. Designed to last 30,000 hours, it can be used for patio lighting, outdoor step lighting, deck lighting,

retaining wall lighting, stonewall lighting and under rail lighting, the company said. It emits up to 185 lumens of natural white or warm white illumination.

DESIGN/BUILD+INSTALLATION

original wireless control system with the addition of an internet gateway and a mobile app. Homeowners have the ability to remotely control up to four scenes, including water features, gates and seasonal lighting displays.

“Every lighting system has to have a controller, so for every job that’s installed, the contractor has to select some sort of control,” says Rusty Baptist, Unique Lighting Systems product manager. “We view our app-controlled system as an upsell.”

Scott Erickson, owner of Erickson Outdoor Lighting in Mound, Minn., says he has seen an increase in the number of clients requesting lighting systems they can operate with their phones. Erickson, whose company offers outdoor lighting services to a 95-percent residential clientele, says the app-controlled products aren’t something he’s pushing just yet, but he has installed a few systems for customers who have asked for them. Erickson says the system installation is straightforward, but he has run into technical glitches, such as the transformer not picking up the signal or noise on the line. He notes he’s had good experiences with manufacturers’ technical support staffs, which have been able to walk him through any issues he’s come across.

“I’m dabbling with it a little bit,” Erickson says of the app-controlled systems. “They are really cool and they work, but they can be tricky. I am not pushing it because I think my time is better spent in other areas, but I will offer it if it’s needed to sell the job or if it’s that much of a difference maker.”

For example, he sold an app-controlled system to a high-end neighborhood in Minneapolis so the community could change the color and the look of the lighting based on different events or holidays.

“I pushed that project because it was a pretty flashy neighborhood, and I knew it was a customer who didn’t have budget restrictions,” Erickson says, adding that app-controlled lighting system transformers can cost up to three times more than a typical transformer.

Cuñado confirms the app-controlled transformers cost more, and the price fluctuates based on the size and scope of the project. For example, Vista Professional Lighting’s transformers range from 75 watts to 600 watts,



PHOTO: UNIQUE LIGHTING SYSTEMS

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SALES OPP

Experts say app-controlled lighting systems are a great upsell for contractors.



and the price will increase accordingly. The company offers training programs to help contractors learn about the systems and suggests contractors sell them by emphasizing their convenience and ease of use. Cuñado says he has seen contractors

sell them both as an upgrade and as part of the original installation package.


"It does cost a bit more, but you're paying for that convenience," Cuñado says. "It's a much lighter transformer; the installation is easier. That's how we sell it to the contractor, and that's how they sell it to the homeowner."

Phil Colarusso, owner of Luminated Landscapes in East Aurora, N.Y., is a bit skeptical about the current landscape lighting app frenzy. Colarusso, who has provided landscape lighting services to a 95-percent residential clientele since 1989, compares the trend to the movement toward LED lighting. When he started experimenting with LED about five years ago, he would spend \$125 on a bulb that was "absolute junk." But manufacturers have come a long way, Colarusso says, and now provide quality LED bulbs.

He predicts a similar progression when it comes to app-controlled landscape lighting systems.

"A few years ago we took baby steps with LED, and now we're running so fast there are a lot of skinned knees," Colarusso says. "We are in the infancy of apps in this industry. There has been a big learning curve, but manufacturers are stepping up to the plate."

Colarusso has an app-controlled landscape lighting system on display in his showroom but has yet to have a client buy in to the idea. He predicts the trend will pick up speed as the technology improves and more homeowners become familiar with it. Manufacturers agree that, with the growing use of smart devices and apps to control things as diverse as garage doors, heating and cooling systems and doorbells, the landscape lighting system is a natural next step.

"I think everything we do these days is becoming more and more automated," Cuñado says. "It's something we're all getting used to as technology evolves. We love these gadgets that make things easier for us." 

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

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IRRIGATION+WATER MANAGEMENT

Making sense

Irrigation experts discuss the ins and outs of soil moisture sensors.

BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER



“What is a good irrigator trying to accomplish?” asks Brent Mecham. “We all are striving to do the same thing, and

that’s use the least amount of water possible while making sure the plants are healthy.”

Using soil moisture sensors is one way irrigation professionals can accomplish their goal. Mecham, the industry development director of the Irrigation Association (IA), discussed soil moisture sensors as a water management tool during an IA webinar in March. The presentation included information from Diganta Adhikari, product engineer at Irrometer Co., a water management tool manufacturer in Riverside, Calif., and Jon Peters, director of sales at Baseline, a manufacturer of irrigation management products in Boise, Idaho.

The experts discussed common types of soil moisture measurements

and how the process can save water, money and resources.

Adhikari cites two studies that show the water and energy savings that can come from using soil moisture sensors to make irrigation decisions, one of which applies to landscapes. It compares a stand-alone timer with a timer that has a soil moisture sensor built into the control. The timer with the sensor showed a 39.3 percent water savings, equivalent to \$176 per month, based on the cost of water in that area.

“Water savings aren’t only water savings; they are tied to other things,” Adhikari says. “Water doesn’t move from point A to point B by itself—you have to use energy. So any savings in water are also savings in energy and nutrients.”

KNOW THE TERMS

There is terminology specific to soil moisture that irrigation contrac-

tors should know to understand the process.

Saturation is when the soil is filled with water and almost all the air in the soil has been displaced.

“This is not a favorable growing condition for any plants because roots still require air,” Mecham says. “Saturation happens when we over-irrigate or we get an extensive amount of rain.”

Field capacity is the “ideal condition we’re looking for where plants are the happiest,” Mecham says. It’s the level of soil moisture left after gravity has drained out any excess. At field capacity, there is adequate moisture left in the soil, but there is also air and oxygen for the roots.

Management allowed depletion, or MAD, is the desired moisture deficit at the time of irrigation. “Management allowed depletion is where the contractor gets to make a decision about how much water he will allow to be extracted from the soil or how much water he will allow to deplete from the bucket,” Mecham says. “Typically in landscaping we’ll say



Brent Mecham

NEWSPEED

IRRIGREEN AT CPS

Colorado Pump & Supply (CPS) is now distributing the Irri-Green Genius Irrigation

System to contractors in Colorado and Wyoming. The smart-phone-driven system is designed to precisely

and efficiently irrigate lawns based on the exact contour of the landscape.

STAINLESS OPTION

Toro added a new stainless steel riser



option to its line of T5 RapidSet Series rotors. The models feature a reinforced riser and nozzle base assembly constructed from commercial-grade 304 stainless steel.

50 percent—we'll let the tank get half empty, and then fill it back up."

Permanent wilt point is the minimal point of moisture a plant requires. At this point, there may be some moisture left in the soil but not enough for the plant to survive. Oven dry means soil is dried in an oven and nearly all the water is removed. The weight of the oven-dried soil is used to provide a reference to measure the field capacity, MAD and permanent wilt point.

Mecham explains that a plant's root zone is typically divided into four parts, indicating how a plant takes water out of the soil. Though the top quarter of the root zone provides 40 percent of a plant's water, he recommends placing a soil moisture sensor in each of the four areas of the root zone to monitor how the water moves through the zones and the soil profile.

"Not much water will be coming out of the bottom 25 percent, so typically the moisture won't be changing a whole lot, but we do know it will be changing a lot in the top 25 percent," Mecham says. "And if you're talking turfgrass with roots that are only 6-10 inches deep, we're looking at only a few inches of soil supplying a lot of water to the plant."

MEASURING MOISTURE

Mecham groups soil-moisture-based controllers into two categories: those with sensors that enable irrigation on demand when soil has dried out and those that disable irrigation when soil is accurately moist. There are a variety of soil moisture sensor technologies used in the industry, such as electrical resistant granular matrix sensors, electrical conductivity probes, frequency domain reflectometry sensors and tensiometers.

The webinar focused on volumetric and tension-based soil moisture measurements. Volumetric soil moisture measurement gauges the amount of water

in relation to the total soil mass, expressed as a percentage generally ranging from 8-45 percent. A volumetric soil moisture content sensor provides a number contractors can use to control the irrigation system and know when to start and stop watering.

"Imagine you go out into the landscape or field and dig up a cubic foot of soil that weighs 100 pounds and you cook it until it's dry and it weighs 50 pounds—that would be 50 percent volumetric soil moisture content," Peters says.

Soil water tension is the physical force or suction the roots of a plant have to apply to the soil to extract water and nutrients. Adhikari compares the process to a dry sponge that's been dunked in a bucket of water. At first, water will drain out of the sponge freely. Then water will drain out of the sponge when it's squeezed. Eventually, no matter how much force is applied, no more water will drip from the sponge.

"How much force or tension do the roots have to exert to get moisture out of the soil?" Adhikari says.

"Are the plants in a happy state, such as saturation, where barely any force is required to get the water out, or are they in a state where a lot of force is required to extract the water?" With tension-based equipment, a reading closer to zero indicates saturation and higher numbers indicate drier conditions, Adhikari says.

"Any time your gauge reading says you're between 0 and 85, the plants are in a happy state. You're at full capacity of water and 50 percent MAD," he says. "If the number goes over 85, you've crossed 50 percent MAD and you should be irrigating."

Ⓜ

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



Jon Peters



Diganta Adhikari



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Brothers Mark Leahy and Brad Leahy, owners of Blades of Green in Edgewater, Md., talk a lot about company culture. It's their primary focus these days, as they strive to grow their \$5.3 million lawn care and pest control company by more than 15 percent per year.

Ask them what they mean by "culture," and they agree it can be difficult to define. But they've done so in their company's vision statement, which hangs on the wall in the office.

"You've got to repeat it, repeat it and repeat it some more," Mark Leahy says of the company vision, values and culture.

He relays an anecdote about a new hire to serve as an example.

Blades of Green has a strict no-smoking policy. The new hire wanted to smoke, and the technician training him told him it wasn't allowed. Later that morning, the tech couldn't find the new guy. Soon after, he saw him walking down the street smoking. By lunch, the tech had called his manager to say, "This guy's not for us."

The fact that the technician understood the company's values and felt empowered to inform his manager that someone was violating them is one instance of the company culture at work, Mark Leahy says.

Likewise, Blades of Green customer service representatives (CSRs) are permitted to give client credits up to \$250 on the spot if they feel they need to do so to make someone happy.

"If you think it's the right thing to do, you need to do it," Mark Leahy says of the mentality he tries to instill in his employees. "Tell us about it, but do it, even if it costs us money. In the long run, it's going to cost us something, whether it's money or our reputation."

That sense of empowerment is what the Blades of Green culture strives to achieve, and it's part of what its owners believe will drive the company to "25 by 25"—or \$25 million in annual revenue by 2025. It's a stretch goal, no doubt, but it's one the Leahys are confident they can make if they can continue to foster a positive company culture that attracts and retains excellent employees.

FINDING FOCUS

"I've got the same story every guy in the industry's got," says Mark Leahy of how he got his start. He began mowing lawns as a kid to earn extra money with his kid brother (Brad) sweeping the sidewalks for him. He bought his first car with his mowing earnings before he had a driver's license. First operating as MJL Landscaping, he eventually changed the name to Blades of Green—a play on the Nintendo hockey game Blades of Steel—and graduated from the University of Maryland, earning his degree in turfgrass management.

After Brad Leahy graduated in 1999 from High Point University, he joined his brother, and they've been working together—even sharing an office—ever since.

Key moments for the company have been adding fertilization and weed control, nixing mowing, walking away from landscape

Empowered to grow

Focus and a positive company culture drive business at Blades of Green.

BY MARISA PALMIERI

PHOTO: DENNIS DRENNER



Mark Leahy (left) and Brad Leahy, owners of Blades of Green in Edgewater, Md.

installation and entering the pest control market (see sidebar, "An unfoolish move," on page 38).

"Once we saw there was enough demand for fertilization, and you just needed a couple thousand customers to have a solid business you could work on and grow, it was a major turning point," Brad Leahy says.

Since focusing on their niche, the brothers have turned inward, defining their company's values and striving to make it a great place to work.

"We care about our clients and our people," Brad Leahy says. "It may sound simple, but when you have a bunch of people working toward a common goal of exceeding customers' expectations, it's a much better place to work. We're not just trying to get the most production."

To that end, Blades of Green has cut lawn care production standards this year by about 20,000 square feet per route per day. A typical lawn for the company is about 10,000 square feet. It's a surprising move but one the brothers believe will pay off.

Reducing production expectations allows technicians to spend more time on properties doing evaluations. They're looking for sales opportunities—such as tree and shrub problems or pest concerns—and other things clients might like to know about, even if it's not related to a service the company provides (such as a clogged gutter).

The business case for reducing production targets is an expected sales increase and improved route density, Brad Leahy says. He adds, "Even if we don't sell anything, it builds value for our customers."

PEOPLE PUSH

Getting and keeping great people is the No. 1 challenge for Blades of Green, like it is for many landscape industry firms.

"What we've discovered is the right person just doesn't show up on your doorstep," Brad Leahy says. "So we've put a considerable amount of money into recruiting, training and our culture because not only is it hard to find (people), it's harder to keep them."

To address the first part of the equation—finding good candidates—Blades of Green hired a full-time human resources director last year.

It's been a big help, the Leahys say, and it's changed their approach in some areas. For example, the company's help wanted ads focus on the workplace environment, not the job itself.

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

COMPANY: Blades of Green

LOCATION: Edgewater, Md.

REVENUE: \$5.3 million in 2015; \$6.4 million projected for 2016

PROFIT CENTERS: 70% turf + ornamental care; 30% pest control

CLIENT MIX: 95% residential; 5% commercial

EMPLOYEES: 49 full-time equivalent; 5 seasonal

VISION: "Our vision is to change the way people think about our industry by creating a culture of environmentally sustainable practices, work/life balance and consistent growth for individual team members and our business. Our culture will consistently exceed the expectations of our clients by empowering our most important asset—our people!"

See page 11 for a tip from Blades of Green about making sales teams more efficient.

“(Ads) used to say ‘lawn care tech,’ and list the duties,” Brad Leahy says. “Now, a lot of our ads don’t even say what we’re hiring for.”

The company’s turnover rate is about 20 percent, Mark Leahy says.

“We always want to be top grading,” he says. “We think we can always be getting better people. We rate employees as A, B and C, and we want all A and B players.”

As for the second component—keeping good candidates—the company is also investing in retention initiatives, such as events for training and camaraderie.

Every season begins with a kick-off, typically in March, which includes presentations from management, suppliers and team-building activities. The whole company gathers again for a similar halftime

Continued on page 38

FOSTERING ‘FRED’S

At Blades of Green, the management team has read and embraced the tenets of “The Fred Factor,” a 2004 business book by Mark Sanborn.

It’s a parable of a mailman named Fred, who wowed the author by going above and beyond in his presumably mundane job as a postal carrier.

The book discusses “taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary,” no matter your role at a company—or in life. The idea really clicked with the Blades of Green team.

“It’s about always doing the right thing, even when nobody’s looking,” says Mark Leahy, owner and president of Blades of Green. “It’s going above and beyond with the client’s interest in mind.”

“Fred’s” understand the following concepts, outlined in the book:

- Everyone makes a difference;
- Everything is built on relationships;
- The importance of continually creating value for others; and
- How to reinvent themselves regularly.

New hires at Blades of Green learn what it means to be a “Fred” during their onboarding process. Management awards team members who demonstrate these principles with “Fredbucks,” which are certificates ranging in value from \$5-\$100. Once you get \$100 in “Fredbucks,” you can cash them in for gift cards or other prizes. Additionally, managers give out “Fred of the Year” awards at the annual holiday party. The winners get \$100 and their names added to a plaque in the office.



Blades of Green managers award team member Gidget Trott with one of the company’s “Fred of the Year” awards.

PHOTO: BLADES OF GREEN

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TEAM TIME The Blades of Green team gathers for its 2015 “Halftime” event to celebrate its hard work, participate in training and outline goals for the rest of the year.



AN UNFOOLISH MOVE

Nobody likes to be called a fool, especially not Mark and Brad Leahy, owners of Edgewater, Md.-based Blades of Green.

But that's what happened when they attended a meeting for pest professionals held by Real Green Systems in early 2008. Veteran pest management professional Don Jamison told them, “You guys are damned fools if you don't get into pest control.” About a decade earlier, the owner of Jamison Pest & Lawn in Memphis, Tenn., had sold a previous business with 30,000 customers to Terminix.

Mark Leahy left the meeting thinking, “I don't want anyone to call me a fool in front of a bunch of people and mean it.”

At the time, the brothers were running Blades of Green as a primarily landscape installation and lawn care company. Jamison's comments stemmed from his belief that pest control was a better business model because of the opportunity for recurring revenue. Pest problems are also “an easier problem to solve” for clients than weed-filled lawns.

So the Leahys sat down with Jamison the next day, and they walked away with an outline for their pest business.

“We just needed the licenses,” Mark Leahy says.

Not long after, a supplier connected them with pest control operator Neil Blackwell, who was considering selling his business. They couldn't work out a deal, but Blackwell agreed to train Brad Leahy, who then worked for him for a few months. About 18 months later, Blackwell had a change of heart and agreed to sell his business to Blades of Green and work for the company for five years. That agreement expired late last year, but Blackwell just signed on for another three years.

Today, with Jamison's and Blackwell's mentorship, and the team's hard work, BOG Pest Control has grown to nearly \$2 million in revenue.

Continued from page 36

event in July; there's a crab feast in the fall if the team meets its aerating and seeding goals; and the year wraps up with the holiday bowling party, where the coveted “Fred of the Year” awards are handed out (see sidebar “Fostering ‘Fred’s” on page 36).

As the company grows, communication among departments and levels becomes as important as ever.

That's part of the reason ride-alongs are a big thing at Blades of Green. They're done by “everybody and anybody,” Mark Leahy says. For example, a CSR will ride with a tech or a tech will sit in the office with a headset on. “They're there to observe, help out and learn, so everyone understands everyone's job isn't easy.”

Roundtable sessions, Which the Leahys introduced about a year ago, are another way to keep people happy and improve communication. Once a month, the owners and the HR director sit down with two pest techs and two lawn techs to give them a chance to voice their opinions.

“We ask them what they like, don't like, what we should keep doing or stop doing,” Mark Leahy says. The feedback is often related to wanting more communication and more training, he says, but it's also about things the company leaders didn't even know was a concern.

“The first meeting there was a big complaint about uniforms,” Mark Leahy says. “We didn't even know there was a problem. A couple phone calls later, and it was fixed. The roundtables have changed a lot of things.”

Continued on page 55

WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section at LandscapeManagement.net to learn about how Blades of Green is adapting to and preparing for environmental regulations.

SNOW+ICE

GUIDE



Weathering a dry winter

With the proper contract models, low snow seasons do not have to devastate snow management companies.

BY DILLON STEWART

For many people, this winter wasn't that bad. In fact, the U.S. experienced its warmest winter in recorded history, according to the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration. But for those in snow management, it was less than ideal. One *LM* Facebook follower, who did not return a request for additional comment, vented that he would sell off his snow equipment after the slow season.

According to those who have found success in the snow game, slow winters don't need to be devastating. In fact, with a proper mix of contracts, slow winters can be routine and profitable.

Phill Sexton owns and operates snow contracting firm W.I.T. Cos. in Albany, N.Y. This season, Albany experienced its lowest recorded snowfall in history. Typically, the city gets about 60 inches. This year, some areas had 10 inches or less—

including a late season dusting.

"The most significant snow-storm we had all season was in April," he says.

If he's learned anything from being in the business for decades, it's that profit should not rely on snowfall. Sexton, who is also director of education and public outreach for the Snow & Ice Management Association, says contracts should be set up to guarantee a snow company comes out on top.

"I structure contract terms so that it doesn't really matter how much it snows," he says. "If you're in a contract agreement that relies on how much snow you get to earn revenue, you can get in trouble."

COVERING OVERHEAD

The first step to getting through a slow winter is selling enough guaranteed seasonal contracts, before the season, to cover overhead for the entire winter.

Paul Opdyke is the CEO of Serene Surroundings in Plymouth, Mich. The \$5.5 million company, which performs 30 percent snow management work to a 90 percent commercial client base, also experienced a below average snow season.

Like Sexton, Opdyke's contract style prevents low snow seasons from devastating the company. His company mixes per-season contracts and per-push contracts. He strives to maintain a delicate balance between the two contract styles.

"If you have the right mix, you're in good shape in a low snow winter," he says. "For us, the right mix is based on what our expected gross margin is going to be for that season's snow work."

If Opdyke expects a 60 percent gross margin for the upcoming year, for example, he makes sure 60 percent of the upcoming season's work is coming from seasonal contracts. Seasonal contracts guarantee revenue, and that ensures the company's overhead is covered for the season. On the other side of the scale, per-push or per-event

contracts cover the company's field labor and material cost expenses.

"The insurance is in having enough work sold and having the right contract mix," he says. "If we budget correctly and sell correctly, it doesn't matter if it snows at all or it snows double our average. We're good."

If you're not covering overhead through guaranteed contracts, a low snow season can force a company to cut labor or lose money. Though Opdyke says it shouldn't happen, companies that find themselves in hot water can seek relief from vendors and financing companies.

Whether it's putting off payments or extending terms, Opdyke has found that most vendors are more than willing to cut a deal to help customers out, but don't wait until the end of the season to let creditors know there's a problem. He stresses keeping in constant communication throughout the winter and being honest.

Building this type of relationship takes work, he says, and it's important to assign someone that responsibility. At Serene, the company controller is in charge of fostering that relationship and making sure the vendors understand what's going on.

"We did have to do a little bit of that for security and some breathing room," he says. "It was just calling

CONTRACTOR TURNED METEOROLOGIST

Predicting how much snow a season will bring is difficult, but it's not futile. While Phill Sexton, owner of W.I.T. Cos. and director of education and public outreach for the Snow & Ice Management Association, wasn't expecting a record-setting year, he assumed it would be slow. That's because Sexton has a system of monitoring and analyzing weather predictions and patterns throughout the winter. For a few thousand dollars a year, a service called Weather Works—which employs a team of 20 meteorologists—predicts, monitors and analyzes weather patterns. He consults the team every couple of weeks for updated seasonal and monthly predictions based on how weather patterns have shifted. The service provides a fairly accurate prediction of the few weeks to follow, Sexton says. You don't have to break the bank for help, though. The National Weather Service and the good ol' fashion Farmer's Almanac can help contractors understand and study historical weather data and patterns, which is essential when it comes to properly setting up contracts.

every month and saying, 'Hey, I know I owe you X amount of money, but is it OK if I pay you Y until spring?' Typically, you should be able to work stuff like that out."

A MUTUAL AGREEMENT

Once you make sure overhead is covered, using certain contract formats can help make sure your company stays in the black.

Sexton's company uses a ceiling/floor model. Basically, it means he and his clients go into the season with an agreed upon maximum number of plows and an agreed

Continued on page 42



JUST ASK Creditors will typically work with companies that run into hard times.

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At a glance, snow pushers look a lot alike. Don't be snowed.

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SNOW+ICE GUIDE

Continued from page 40

upon minimum. If the ceiling is reached, the client pays for additional work performed. If the number of plows falls below the floor, however, the contractor owes the client. Typically, the floor is 25 percent below the standard number of plows and the ceiling is 25 percent above the standard number of plows.

This season was the first time Sexton had to exercise the floor. But he didn't just cut a check. The contract gives customers a credit for the following season. The money comes from untapped labor and material costs after he covers his overhead. Some companies allow clients to use the credit on summer enhancements or maintenance work. In Sexton's contracts, the credit goes towards next year's snow work. This

tactic helps the company retain snow customers. If the customer does not renew the contract, he or she does not receive the credit.

"As long as you're willing to protect me for a heavy season, I'll protect you for a light season," he tells clients.


Ultimately, it's important that customers understand what they're paying for. Sexton explains to clients that they're paying for a level of preparedness, not services performed.

"I'm selling (clients) an insurance policy that says if it snows we'll be ready at a certain capacity," he says.

For example, Sexton sees Albany as a 60-inch market, which means he'll plow about 30 times. So his base price might cover a client for 30 plows. The ceiling is decided by how many times above that number the client wants him to be ready to plow. So a client

might negotiate his or her ceiling to cover 35 plows. By paying for a higher ceiling up front, he or she will pay less for those five extra plows than if they breached the standard ceiling. It goes the opposite way, too. The client can sign up for 25 plows in a season and pay a lower sum up front. But if Sexton has to plow 35 times, the client will pay more for those additional plows.

Because he says inches can be misleading, he bases his contracts on number of occurrences. Depending on the level of expectation from the client, inches do not necessarily determine the amount of work that will be performed.

"It doesn't matter how much it's going to snow," Sexton says. "What matters is when it does snow you have the resources available. That's what they're paying for." 



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BY PHIL HARWOOD

The author is president and CEO of Pro-Motion Consulting. Reach him at phil@mypmcteam.com.

Snow service procurement best practices

One of the most difficult challenges for snow and ice management professionals is educating customers and prospective customers about the realities of the snow business. Far too many buyers of snow and ice management services make purchase decisions without understanding how to optimize their relationships with service providers. Because of this knowledge gap, they make poor and untimely contract award decisions, resulting in the selection of less qualified providers, more costly services and, ultimately, less value.

At the same time, far too many service providers are ill-equipped to advise and educate buyers about the optimal way to purchase snow and ice management services, even though they're keenly aware that there's a better way. As a result, neither the buyer nor the seller receives the full value they're seeking. Both are left wishing for a better way.

In response, the Snow & Ice Management Association (SIMA) recently took several steps to assist professionals in this area. Some solutions were offered at last year's Snow & Ice Symposium, and this year's Symposium, being held in Providence, R.I., is sure to have another slate of topics to address this issue. In addition, there was a significant step taken and announced to the industry in March.

TIMELINE LAUNCHED

After months of development and peer review by a variety of industry stakeholders, SIMA finalized and release a document called "Best

Practices in Snow Service Procurement: 52-Week Visual Timeline." The document is an overview of the annual cycle of a snow and ice management operation, from two different perspectives, featuring colorful easy-to-read graphic images. One perspective is that of a facility or property manager—buyers of snow and ice management services. The other perspective is that of a service provider—sellers of these services. The timeline document is free and available to download at sima.org.

This timeline has two primary uses. The first and most obvious use is as a tool for educating customers and prospects. By fully understanding the annual cycle of snow and ice management, they will be able to make more intelligent purchase decisions. After seeing the tool, buyers will quickly realize that there are optimal windows of time for each activity in the yearly cycle of a snow business for both planning and execution. The result most likely will be a much better outcome for both the buyer and seller.

I see this as a great tool to be introduced early in the sales process. It also could be made available to prospective customers on your website or included with proposals in either printed or digital form. When buyers see this document early and often, they will be more likely to absorb the information and make decisions accordingly.




The second and less obvious use of the timeline is for internal planning and execution. The best practices outlined on the timeline really are just that—best practices of leading-edge snow and ice management providers.

A simple comparison of the best practices with your current practices will expose areas of opportunity. Which practices might your company need to improve this year?

For example, one of the best practices is for snow and ice management contracts to be renewed in the spring, immediately following the end of the snow and ice management contract period. Some top snow and ice management pros have been taking this approach for years, and it is now considered an industry best practice, to be adopted by everyone. Of course, changing old habits and entrenched decision-making processes may result in quite a delay for complete adoption to this standard—if it ever happens. Regardless of adoption, the standard applies.

At your next snow-planning meeting, take a few minutes to review the best practices timeline. Look at the recommendations built into the timeline and identify areas that require change to conform to the standards. Most importantly, decide how you're going to use it for both sales and operations.

Best wishes for a successful spring and summer. 



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BOSS EXT

COMPANY: BossSnowplow

URL: BossPlow.com

The Boss EXT expands from 8-10 ft. and back with the touch of a controller. That width, combined with angled, forward-pitched wings, means more snow can be moved faster, the company says. It also features a chainless lift system and a fully enclosed, high-performance hydraulics system.

HSS SERIES

COMPANY: Honda

Power Equipment

URL: Honda.com

The HSS724A, HSS928A and HSS1332A models are manufactured domestically in Swepsonville, N.C., using domestically and globally sourced parts. The new snowblower models replace the existing HS Series. Key features include fingertip steering control, reversible skid shoes and a three-year commercial warranty.



SNOW PUSHERS

COMPANY: John Deere

URL: Deere.com

John Deere's snow pushers help to remove large accumulations of snow from sidewalks, parking lots and driveways. Designed with reversible and replaceable rubber cutting edges, they can create paths ranging from 96 in. (SP8) to 120 in. (SP10). The optional pullback edge is ideal for opening confined areas and working around vehicles, buildings, fences and other obstructions.



HDV V-PLOWS

COMPANY: SnowEx

URL: SnowExProducts.com

HDV heavy-duty V-plows are available in either powder-coated mild steel or stainless steel and blade widths of 8.5 or 9.5 ft. They feature flared moldboards reinforced by two angled ribs, with an integrated snow catcher to keep snow from spilling over the top. A 1.25-in. center pin is positioned to make the plow completely flat when in straight blade mode.



LD PUSHERS

COMPANY: Sectional Sno-Pusher, a product division of Arctic Snow & Ice Products

URL: SectionalSnoPusher.com

LD pushers are compatible with several types of lighter-duty equipment, including backhoes, skid-steers, compact loaders and tractors. The patented steel moldboard design is made up of 32-in.-wide individual sections, each featuring spring-loaded trip edges. The separate sections move independently, allowing the unit to contour to the surface.



TORNADO POLY HOPPER SPREADERS

COMPANY: Western Products

URL: WesternPlows.com

The updated Tornado's compact control system now features four standard accessory buttons and a dedicated blast button, while an LED display alerts when the hopper is empty or needs adjustments. It also offers an enclosed accessory hub, featuring dump and work light buttons at the rear of the hopper, as well as Fleet Flex technology, a universal wiring and controls system.

BUSINESS INSIDER

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BUSINESS BASICS: NUMBERS

LET'S GROW

CASE STUDY: PROBLEM SOLVER

QUICK READ

When creating dashboard reports for your company, consider the simplicity of a baseball box score, Dan Gordon says.



PAGE 48

BUSINESS BASICS: NUMBERS

Create a company box score



BY DANIEL GORDON

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

With information coming at us from every direction, it's difficult to digest it all and use it to grow our businesses. As the facilitator of several industry peer groups, I've noticed the same topic comes up repeatedly at our meetings: how to develop the most useful dashboard to run our companies.

A dashboard organizes key business statistics into a summary report for leadership to assess the results of their efforts. It can be as simple as a spreadsheet that contains certain key performance indicators (KPIs) or it can be an elaborate report that contains charts, graphs and variance analysis. But the bottom line is that it's created to get a snapshot of the company's status in all functional areas. If your organization has multiple managers, you may want to develop multiple dashboards to guide them in overseeing their areas.

INSIDE THE BOX: Baseball box scores are the ultimate dashboard report.

It's difficult to create an all-encompassing report because the information comes from many different places, such as

operational software and financial software. While programs exist to help consolidate this data, the user first must define exactly which KPIs are required before the dashboard design can begin.

GETTING STARTED

So how do we go about designing a useful dashboard? The most useful and succinct dashboard I've seen is a baseball box score. A baseball box score gives information at a team level, giving the score inning by inning. In addition, it gives statistics on each player such as at bats, hits and errors committed. All this data appear in a neat little box so any reader can understand who won and how they won.

Using the baseball parallel, think of the team statistics, such as inning-by-inning score, as your financial information. Think of the individual player statistics as your operational information. If you're executing operationally and from a marketing perspective, then the financial indicators should fall into place. It's nice to have all these items in one dashboard so the user can draw relationships, like how an increase in production or revenue per employee affects profitability or how a reduction in sales lead cost will boost profitability.

So how do we design a dashboard that's simple to look at but powerful in terms of giving us information to grow our business?

When designing a dashboard, consider the following:

1. Make it appropriate for its purpose. Only include information that will help the person it's intended for make better decisions. For example, if you're creating a dash-


board for your operations manager, he'll want to see route values, route efficiency, revenue per technician, as well as items like number of customers served and retreatments. He may not be as interested in liquidity ratios or other balance sheet relationships. Save these for your CFO.

2. Ensure the data points are easily measured and comparable to prior and future periods.

Consistency is key. For example, many companies struggle with their definitions of retention (i.e. first-year retention or how long customers must be on the books before they're counted as customers). If your management is constantly tweaking the definition, the dashboard statistic will not be as meaningful period to period.

3. Keep related data points together. Look at the dashboard as a storyboard that guides the reader through several KPIs that allow him to draw conclusions about the business and therefore make better decisions.

4. Make it easy on the eyes. While they may look cool, too many colors and graphs could take away from the objective of giving the user a bird's-eye view of the area being reported on.

Optimal dashboard design combines relevance, usability and aesthetic presentation to provide maximum value to its users. If designed properly and disseminated timely, dashboard reports can help management define what information is important and educate the team on priorities by putting the statistics in front of them. In addition, dashboards are important tools for setting realistic goals for individuals and promoting specific action to achieve those goals. 



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PRESENTERS:



Judith Guido

Chairwoman, Guido & Associates

Judith Guido has held executive-level marketing positions at some of the largest companies in the landscape industry, including ValleyCrest, now BrightView, LandCare USA, TruGreen-LandCare and Yellowstone Landscape. She has been involved in

more than one hundred industry M&As and is recognized as an industry thought-leader, keynote speaker and trainer.



Reinie Drygala

Global Manager, Intelligro

Reinie Drygala, who's been with Intelligro's parent company Suncor Energy for more than two decades, launched Suncor's new Intelligro business unit. Since taking on this opportunity, Drygala and his team have introduced a portfolio of products, under the CIVITAS

and PureSpray brands, in the turf and ornamental, golf and sports and other markets.

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“Am I really making money?”

PART II



BY KEVIN KEHOE

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

Can you really trust your numbers? That depends on how you manage your workflow and transactions. I spoke about this challenge at the GIE+EXPO 2015 and the response was, “Wow, my numbers are only as good as my management system? That’s scary!” In simple terms, the numbers accounting turns out are only as good as the numbers provided by sales and operations. And we know how good that can be in an industry that values getting the work done versus diligence in paperwork.

TRANSACTION MANAGEMENT

Starting with the end, your P&L reporting *by profit center* is driven by transactions—all of which are linked in a common flow. You want reports where revenues (both earned and invoiced—more on this in a future article) are properly matched with the cost of goods sold (COGS) to produce reliable gross profit performance. This job cost flow (see bold arrows in chart) is different from the accounting flow because transaction timing is different for the two, meaning open jobs don’t

conveniently end at month end and billing cycles don’t match the work. That’s not to mention vendor bills that arrive long after the work is done or changes to payroll that happen weeks later.

As a result, your financials can provide a distorted picture of your gross profit at the same time they’re providing little in the way of useful information for sales and operations. This explains why, despite all the time invested in accounting, many sales and operations people keep their own numbers.

Only job cost reporting can provide the useful information we need. The best way to get there is to manage work by the ticket. A job may have one or several tickets. The ticket originates with the estimate (price, hours and materials), which targets a desired gross profit. It’s the ticket that tracks COGS (labor and materials) applied to the job through the daily time sheet kept by the crew and by the purchases made by operations to the job or by allocations from yard inventories. Get any of these transactions wrong and, yep, you get inaccurate job costing. And since job

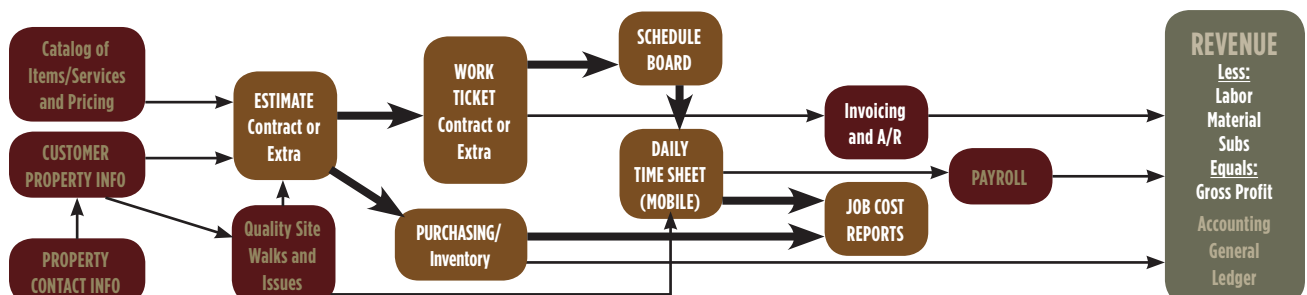
costing for any period must end up on the financials, you get numbers that don’t reflect reality.

Yeah, I want to throw up, too. It takes so much work to get it right. And people say landscaping is an easy business, which is obviously not true from an accounting point of view. But managing transactions is essential to good numbers. Yes, it takes staffing to do it and that’s overhead. But if you don’t do it, the cost of “bad numbers” are bad decisions and reduced gross profit.

WORK FLOW MANAGEMENT

What can you do to get your numbers right? I suggest conducting an internal audit of your paperwork flow, comparing it to the chart below. Identify the weakest links and fix those with a new process (procedures and responsibilities—more about this in a future article). Do this *before* you think about any software purchase. Take my word, it’s better to fix what you do before embarking on an integrated software system, even one that can manage your transactions more fluidly without all those spreadsheets. 📊

Landscape Work Flow Chart



CASE STUDY: PROBLEM SOLVER

GPS: Beyond maintenance

Texas Turf Management invested in a GPS tracking system as a vehicle maintenance solution, but it got much more. BY CASEY PAYTON

THE PROBLEM: Nolan Butterfras, owner of Texas Turf Management in Houston, was tired of having to take his diesel trucks into the local lube shop for oil changes and routine maintenance. Remembering to check the little windshield sticker on the fleet was inefficient and easy to forget. Butterfras knew there had to be a better way.

THE SOLUTION: Investing in a GPS vehicle-tracking system for two-thirds of his 21 trucks, Butterfras solved his vehicle maintenance problem but discovered numerous other benefits.

He says the benefits of implementing GPS software from vendor GPS Insight have been a reduction in costs, greater efficiency and even peace of mind. He spent about \$100 per truck to install GPS, and he pays a few hundred dollars a month for the service.

The ability to locate the trucks at any time has come in handy with customer complaints, a theft and even a potential lawsuit. For example, an attorney contacted Butterfras, claiming that his client was involved in a hit-and-run with a Texas Turf vehicle. The accusing party even had a license plate number. But when Butterfras logged into the GPS system he was able to prove the vehicle was 31 miles away from the scene of the alleged crime—and had been the entire week. The complaint was immediately dropped.

In another instance, Butterfras was able to use the GPS history to follow the route a thief had taken with one of his trucks to see if and where the vehicle was dumped. In the end, police

tracked down the truck, trailer, one mower, four blowers and a trimmer. He lost one mower.

While these situations would have made the GPS system worth the investment, Butterfras says, using the system daily has been the biggest benefit of all.

The ability to see crew locations allows management to call in nearby reinforcements if one crew is struggling to finish a large job on time, and the system provides the quickest route for the crew to take to the job.

Regarding routing, Butterfras says he's saved big in electronic toll collection costs. After installing the GPS system, he learned his crews were often taking toll rolls, even when there were faster, non-toll routes.

"It was almost as though the Beltway was the only way they knew how to get around—even if it meant getting off an exit and backtracking," Butterfras says. "Re-routing their daily routes lead to time and fuel savings, as well as saving \$900 a month for EZ TAG."

More savings come from the original reason he sought out GPS: To improve truck maintenance methods.

"Before implementing GPS, my brother or I were manually checking each vehicle for the sticker from the lube shop to see when it was due," Butterfras says. "Or we'd write the approximate miles and dates on a board. It wasn't very accurate, and many times we'd forget to look and




Nolan Butterfras

wind up being 2,000 miles over before we got around to the oil change."

Using the GPS system to automatically track vehicle maintenance needs, Butterfras has done away with manual record keeping and brought some

work like oil changes in-house. Even with overhead factored in, he says he saves \$225 per vehicle per year.

With greater efficiency and better routes, since adding GPS the company has doubled its landscape maintenance work while increasing profits by 22 percent on the maintenance side alone, Butterfras says. He says that's pretty much unheard of in his competitive market.

"The bottom line is that it saves time and money," Butterfras says. "The vehicle maintenance may have been my main objective and is my favorite use, but it's helped us in so many other areas." 

Payton is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

COMPANY: Texas Turf Management

HEADQUARTERS: Houston

REVENUE: \$5 million

EMPLOYEES: 47

CLIENT MIX: 99% commercial

SERVICE MIX: 50% maintenance; 50% landscape installation



GPS vehicle-tracking systems can be a great way to combat and prevent vehicle and equipment theft.

POSTEMERGENT HERBICIDES



TRIBUTE TOTAL

COMPANY: Bayer

URL: BackedByBayer.com

Tribute Total provides postemergent control of *Poa annua*, goosegrass, dallisgrass, Virginia buttonweed, doveweed and sedges, as well as kyllingras and other broadleaf weeds. The herbicide is absorbed by the foliage and carried to the site of action in the growing points of the susceptible plant.



LOCKUP

COMPANY: Dow AgroSciences

URL: DowProvesIt.com

Labeled for use on warm- and cool-season grasses, LockUp controls such broadleaf weeds as white clover, dollarweed and dandelion at low use rates. It's available



Dow AgroSciences



SPECIALTY HERBICIDE

from distributors nationwide on granular fertilizers in single, two-way and three-way herbicide combinations.

Q4 PLUS

COMPANY: PBI/Gordon

URL: GordonsProfessional.com

Q4 Plus Turf Herbicide for Grassy & Broadleaf Weeds controls a variety of weeds, even yellow nutsedge. The product is highly selective on cool-season turfgrasses, the company says, and is labeled for select southern turf species—making it ideal for listed bluegrasses, ryegrasses and fescues.



CIVITAS WEEDFREE BRAND CONCENTRATE

COMPANY: Civitas

URL: CivitasLawn.com

Recently approved in California, this hybrid selective herbicide is free of offensive odor. Its micro-technology delivery system penetrates most weeds, resulting in less active ingredients required to kill weeds down to the root, the company says.



Escalade²



ESCALADE 2

COMPANY: Nufarm

URL: Nufarm.com

As a three-way, fast-acting herbicide, Escalade 2 controls more than 240 broadleaf weeds. It will be dependable and consistent regardless of cool, hot, wet or dry conditions, the company says.

MONUMENT

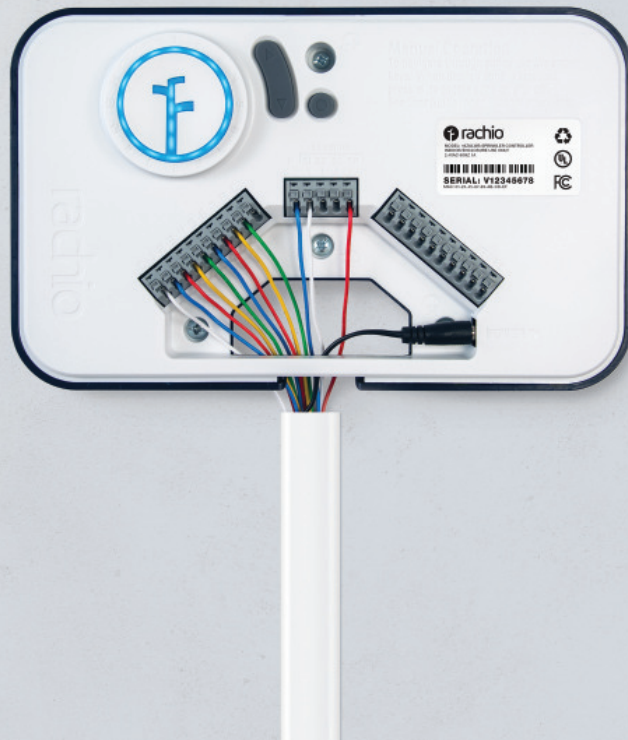
COMPANY: Syngenta

URL: GreenCastOnline.com/Lawn

For warm-season turfgrass, Monument 75WG herbicide controls all major sedges along with 40 other weed/grass types including dandelion, crabgrass (suppression), nutsedge, clover and spurge, as a postemergent broadcast or spot treatment.



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BACKSTORY

INTERVIEW BY DILLON STEWART



Rudy Larsen

OWNER
LAWN BUTLER
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

EDUCATION

Woods Cross High School
Woods Cross, Utah
Class of 2006

WORK EXPERIENCE

2004-2005

Staffer
Marshall Radio Telemetry
Salt Lake City, Utah

2006-2010

President
Lawn Butler
Salt Lake City, Utah

2006-present

Owner
Lawn Butler of Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah

2011-Present

CEO
Scandia
Salt Lake City, Utah

2013-Present

Board of Directors
Building Owners and Managers
Association of Utah



Larsen and his wife, Jena, have two sons, ages 5 and 2. His 5 year old often accompanies him on business trips; he's been to Florida, Idaho, Philadelphia, San Diego, Los Angeles and Hawaii—just to name a few.

“My passion is really in business. I’m happier with what I do now, but one thing I miss is interfacing with our customers.”



Larsen calls Scandia an “investment group.” Its 10-company portfolio includes Lawn Butler; Smart Rain, a water technology company; and Rubicon, a general contracting firm.



Watch a video about Larsen being named the National Association of Landscape Professionals' 2016 Young Entrepreneur of the Year at buff.ly/23BGWLO. “Our industry is very large, and there’s a lot of talent out there. So I was really flattered and humbled that I was selected for that honor.”

WORDS OF WISDOM “Gandhi said: ‘Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength.’ When things don’t go your way, you can say, ‘I’m done. This isn’t for me,’ or you can work to improve your situation, which is where strength comes from.” • “If you love landscaping don’t start your own business because you will be so far away from the landscaping side. Obviously if you want to run a couple crews, you can be very submerged in landscaping, but you’re still going to spend a third of your time doing the business side of it. If you have this dream to be an amazing landscaper, go work for a great organization and be a great landscaper.” • “Systems and processes are absolutely critical to a growing, successful organization. You’ve got to have a good system for estimating and quantifying the production of those jobs. If you don’t, you’re not going to be successful, and you’re not going to make money.”

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weed control.

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