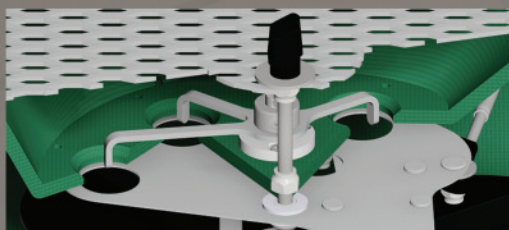


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Seth Kehne, president
of Lawn Butler in
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BY DILLON STEWART

ON THE COVER: PHOTO BY TYLER OXENDINE, WWW.TYLEROXENDINE.COM



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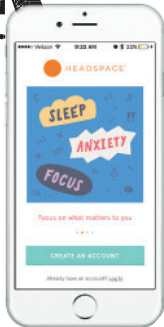


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Headspace

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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI
EDITOR

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Get curious

An employee slumps over in a meeting, unwilling to participate, seemingly disgruntled. An irate client calls, accusing your crews of leaving grass clipping all over the driveway. Your spouse points out you've been distracted by email lately and asks you to leave work at the shop.

When you experience negative feedback like any of these examples, it triggers a fight-or-flight response. Your face might get red, your blood pressure may rise or you may feel tightening in your chest. You get mad. It's a natural response, but it's also not productive.

I recently heard some useful advice about the best way to handle criticism on a podcast called "Radical Candor."

"Don't get mad. Get curious," is the tip offered by the hosts, Kim Scott and Russ Laraway. They are co-founders of management software company Candor. Scott is a former executive at Google and Apple; Laraway is a career-long operation manager across the Marines, Google and Twitter.

It's important to remember feedback may be negative and accurate, negative and inaccurate or somewhere in the middle. The worst-case scenario, of course, is that you get criticized based on incorrect information. How maddening!

Scott and Laraway say to train yourself to not get upset, and try to understand the kernel of truth in the feedback.


Remember, even when people are wrong, they are right about at least one thing: their feelings about the situation. What you have on your hands is a misunderstanding. It doesn't help to get mad about it. Find out where the misconception is rooted so you can eliminate similar problems in the future.

I'm glad I had this concept in mind the other day when I received a critical email about our April issue, which highlighted a story about recruiting workers from Puerto Rico.

The email's author disagreed with our cover treatment. "The combination of the photos being in black and white, the unprofessional appearance of the worker in the photo and the title itself cast a negative approach to this innovative idea," he said. He also accused *LM* of being influenced by the H-2B recruiter who ran a cover tip ad in the same issue. "It seemed very suspicious to me that you would have that type of cover page and a large advertisement for H-2B on it." (I asked him if I could print his comments as a signed letter to the editor, but he declined.)

It's simply not true that the story was tainted by the advertiser. The article fairly details the obstacles associated with the H-2B program. Our team also didn't intend for the cover to be negative—but we were going for dramatic. Everyone I interviewed emphasized the labor shortage (in fact, the word "desperate" came directly from some of my sources). We believed the cover should reflect the extreme situation.

Regardless of whether the feedback was accurate—and regardless of our intent—we recognize this reader's perception matters. So, we're not getting mad, although our initial feelings about the email included frustration and defensiveness.

We're recognizing there are positive lessons to learn among the negative feedback. We plan to absorb them—and to stay curious. 



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Q+A

What's your advice for landscape and lawn care companies when it comes to taking on debt?

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FromDesign2Build.com
Upper Saddle River, N.J.

"Some debt is necessary in business, but keeping it under constant management is imperative."

"You make wiser financial decisions when you're not using somebody else's money."

"We don't take business loans or debt. The upside is it's easier to sleep at night."

"Work with bankers to establish credit before you need it."

"...be careful, irresponsible debt can be a narcotic!"

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BIG PICTURE

CITY RETREAT

LOCATION Chicago

COMPANY Mariani Landscape,
Lake Bluff, Ill.

THE DETAILS The clients wanted to update their rooftop to extend their living space, so the landscape architect designed a series of outdoor rooms that tie together visually. This concept was accomplished by creating a seating space with an outdoor fireplace, public entertainment spaces with comfortable seating and an outdoor kitchen/dining area. A custom water wall provides separation but allows light through.

This historic building posed structural challenges, so the company assembled a team of experts to investigate and test the structure to determine what weight loads were possible. The team also coordinated with a roofer to verify the age of the roof and to determine how best to protect the roof membrane.

The landscape architect designed a custom grid support system to allow for the turf joints and paver patterns to give each outdoor room its own personality. A metal pergola over the dining table helps define the space without blocking views.

The project earned Mariani Landscape a 2016 Grand Award from the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Awards of Excellence program.

PHOTO A sequence of garden spaces act as the transition among the outdoor rooms.

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

PHOTO: LINDA OYAMA BRYAN



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RECOMMENDER

ISSUE BRIEF

STEP BY STEP

NEW STUFF

SAFETYWATCH

TIME-SAVING TEMPLATES



Chad Diller drastically cut the time he spent writing emails when he discovered templates.

"I realized I was constantly sending the same emails over and over, following up with the same responses," says Diller, who was a 20-year veteran of Tomlinson Bomberger Lawn Care, Landscape & Pest Control and now is an account manager for marketing firm Landscape Leadership.

Today, he says he has a template for just about anything, and he sends emails in around 20 seconds, as opposed to laboring over them for minutes. When he was at Tomlinson, he used them for scheduling service calls, invoice reminders, proposal follow-ups and customer service inquiries—just to name a few.

"Now, I just change a few points around and personalize the first sentence," he says.

Many programs like Outlook or Hubspot let users create a database of email templates, even allowing personalized tokens based on contact names and different titles depending on use. Or, people looking for an easy solution can create a template as an email draft and copy and paste the content into a new message each time.

"It works for anything you send over and over, and it saves a tremendous amount of time," he says.

“It works for
anything you
send over
and over.”

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JOHN DEERE

RECOMMENDER

What lighting fixtures do you prefer and why?

Landscape lighting companies look for quality, durability, price and more when purchasing products to create lighting projects, like this one by Light It Right in Barker, Texas.



ADAM LINNEMANN
OWNER, LINNEMANN LAWN CARE & LANDSCAPING
COLUMBIA, ILL.

"Volt Landscape Lighting is our choice at Linnemann Lawn Care & Landscaping. The products are high-quality and very reasonably priced. Most of their fixtures and power supplies come with a lifetime warranty and are available also in LED."



DAN BYWALEC
PRESIDENT, D&B LANDSCAPING
LIVONIA, MICH.

"I prefer Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting Products. What's great about Vista is their products are made right here in the good old U.S.A. They are truly handcrafted luminaries that are expertly engineered and durably constructed. They are supported by second-to-none customer service."

ISSUE >>> BRIEF



BY MISSY HENRIKSEN

The author is vp of public affairs, National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP).


H-2B: WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Even if you don't rely on guest workers through the H-2B visa program, you may find it helpful to be familiar with the program and how you can help. Access to a reliable, stable workforce is important to the future of the industry.

The program is once again a source of consternation. In 2016 Congress failed to extend an important provision known as the returning worker exemption (RWE), which allows workers who have been previously approved in any of the last three years not to count against the annual cap of 66,000.

This year, the cap has already been reached, which means that unless Congress acts and extends the RWE, many employers will be left without enough workers to fulfill their contracts or meet their client obligations, which may place their full-time workers and their businesses in jeopardy.

NALP and our H-2B Workforce Coalition allies have been working hard to educate Congress on the issue so they better understand the implications of inaction. Despite our efforts, many in Congress still view H-2B with skepticism or even outright opposition. Critics of the program contend that foreign labor undermines the wages and job opportunities afforded to American workers. Many also try to categorize H-2B as an immigration issue, which is extremely controversial on Capitol Hill.

How can you help? Congress members need to hear directly from their constituents about the program's value. They need to understand how H-2B allows seasonal businesses to hire a legal workforce when local workers aren't available. Join NALP at Legislative Day in July, attend a fly-in or contact your representatives today. 

“We made a business decision to bring DURATION CR® into our operation and it’s really paying off.”

Executive Landscaping Inc. in North Haven, Connecticut incorporated DURATION CR® controlled-release fertilizer into their business model. Account Manager Jeff Beam shares their story.

“You don’t just jump right in. We did our homework, and saw the potential of how DURATION CR® fertilizer could benefit our program.

Once we got things dialed in, we started applying it on our commercial properties. We liked the extended longevities, and saw the value of saving labor by making fewer applications.

And because of the consistent nitrogen delivery, we didn’t have to send our mowing crews out as much.

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STEP BY STEP

How to properly renovate a lawn


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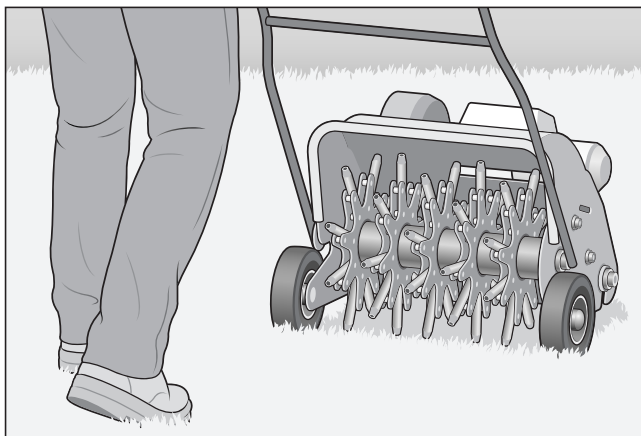
Lawn renovation involves restoring a deteriorated turfgrass area to an improved condition. But before getting started, contractors should correct the lawn's underlying problems. Drought, excessive shade, tree root competition, poor drainage, soil compaction, inadequate fertility, acid soils, weed or insect infestation, disease, thatch buildup, improper mowing and poorly adapted grass species may contribute to poor turf.

Most of these problems can be corrected by renovation, proper turfgrass selection and improved maintenance practices. The lower temperatures and increased moisture of early- to mid-spring make for ideal lawn renovation conditions.

The lawn must first be prepared for renovation by getting rid of any weeds and pests, which will compete with the new grass. For common broadleaf weeds like dandelions and plantains, a broadleaf herbicide containing 2,4-D may be applied; the seeding may be done in two weeks. A herbicide containing a combination of 2,4-D, MCPP and dicamba is suggested if the weed population contains many different weed species or hard-to-kill weeds, such as clover or ground ivy. A six-week waiting period will be required following use of this herbicide combination.

Follow these steps to properly renovate a lawn. 

SOURCES: Roanoke Landscapes; Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences

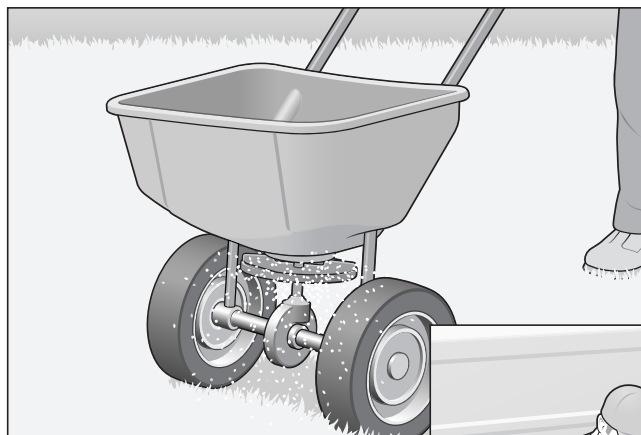


STEP 1

Cultivate the turf by dethatching and aerating. Apply lime in accordance with a soil test.

STEP 2

Apply a starter fertilizer containing both nitrogen and phosphorus at the recommended rate.



STEP 3

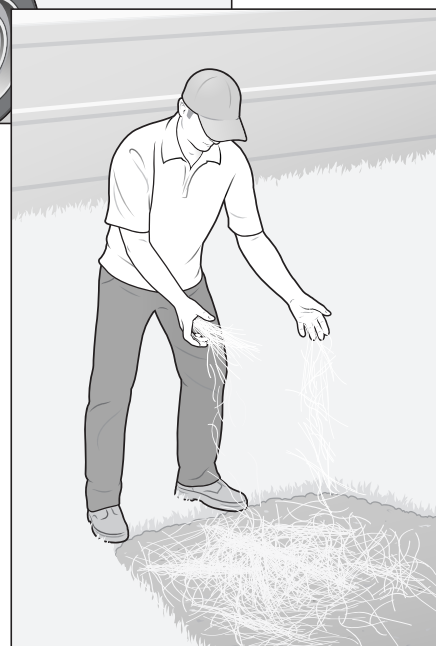
Repeat Step 1 to further prepare the seedbed. Then, overseed the lawn. When choosing the type of turf seed, consider seed quality, water needs, maintenance needs, sun/shade requirements and resistance to regional pests and diseases.

STEP 4

After seeding, drag the area to work the seed into the seedbed. Apply a light application of straw mulch to retain moisture and promote germination.

STEP 5

Keep the seeded areas moist until the seed has germinated and seedlings have become well-established, using enough water to wet the surface but not enough to cause runoff.





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NEW STUFF



1. ACC2 CONTROLLER

COMPANY: Hunter Industries

URL: HunterIndustries.com

The ACC2 features a transformer with the ability to safely run up to 14 valves simultaneously. The controller can be configured for commercial projects with 12 to 54 stations, six flow meter inputs and up to six pump/master valve outputs. Its large, full-color backlit display and reversible face pack simplify program setup and diagnostics, the company says.

2. FLEXIBLE LED FILAMENT BULBS

COMPANY: Super Bright LEDs

URL: SuperBrightLEDs.com

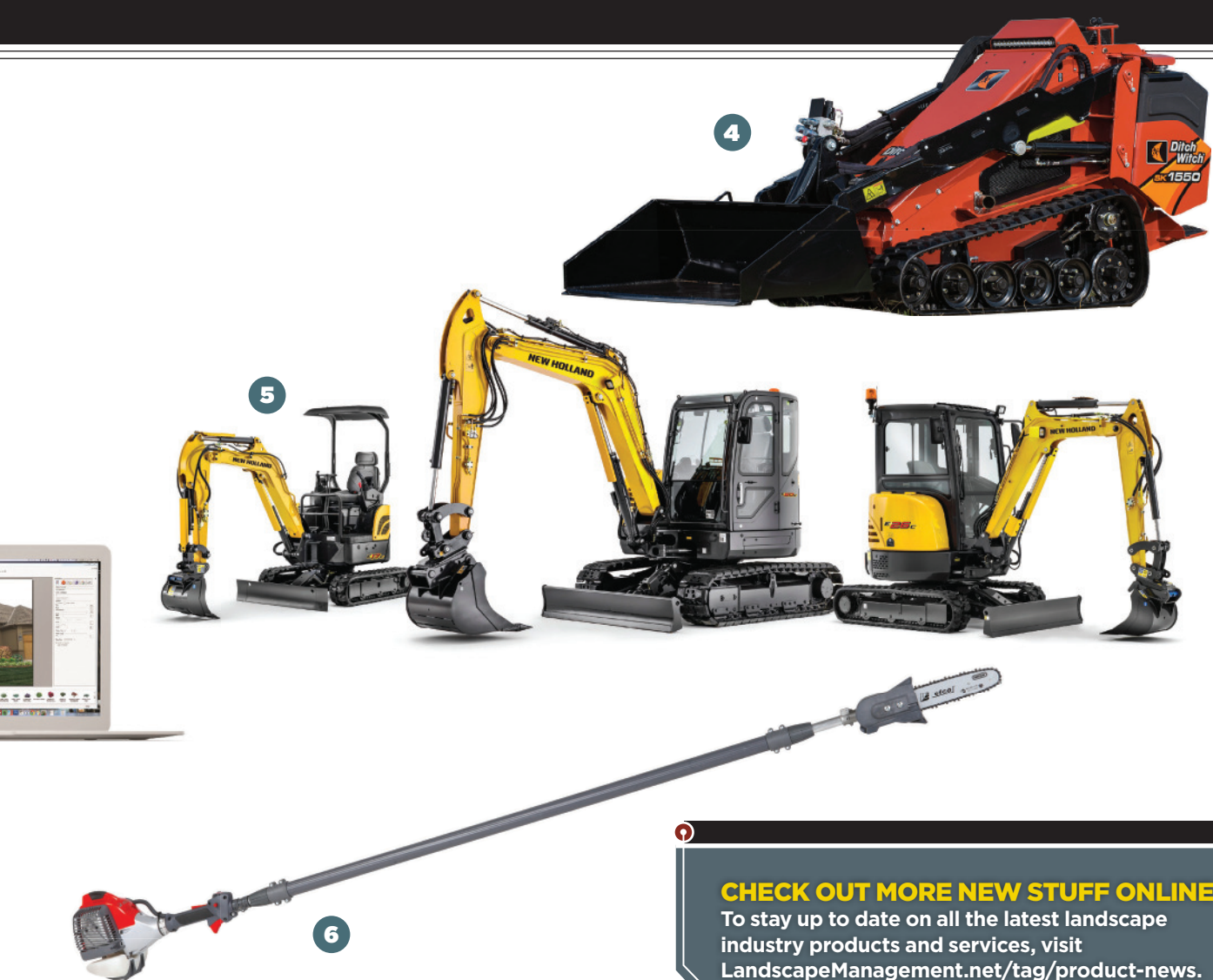
These vintage-style bulbs have quad-loop, spiral and heart-shaped COB LEDs designed to mimic the look of carbon filament bulbs. Available in G25 and T14 shapes with standard E26/E27 medium screw bases, the company suggests using the decorative lights for antique pendant lights and chandeliers, decorative light strands, patio lights, bistro lights and more. The lights emit up to 236 lumens of warm or ultra warm white illumination, use no more than 4.5 W of power and operate within a 110-130 v AC range.

3. PRO LANDSCAPE DESIGN SOFTWARE VERSION 23

COMPANY: Drafix Software

URL: ProLandscape.com

Drafix Software's latest version adds 3,000 high-quality images of both plants and non-plants, giving users the ability to create more diverse and higher quality images. The addition of features like "add soldier course," "irrigation color coding," "recent object tab" and "create customer toolbar" are designed to improve image quality, reduce design times and increase overall design efficiency, Drafix says.



4. SK1550 MINI SKID-STEER

COMPANY: Ditch Witch

URL: DitchWitch.com

Ditch Witch's SK1550 is the company's largest mini skid-steer model to date. It's powered by a 44-hp, EPA Tier 4 Final Yanmar diesel engine that directs 34.5 hp to the attachment. Equipped with a 94-in. hinge-pin height, the SK1550 is designed for flexibility, the company says. It offers a 1,558-lbs. rated operating capacity and is equipped with a 4.7-mph ground drive speed. The model's 74-sq.-in. ergonomic operator platform comes standard with dual-lever ground drive controls, allowing the operator to independently control each track.

5. C-SERIES MINI EXCAVATOR LINE

COMPANY: New Holland

URL: EquippedForANewWorld.com

New Holland Construction released a new, six-model line of mini excavators, ranging from 1.7 to 6.0 metric tons. Machine features include a rail and inter-locking type track and an auto-shift travel system that automatically down shifts when the load is sensed to increase torque and upshifts once the load is no longer sensed.

6. PTX 2710 POLE PRUNER

COMPANY: Efco

URL: EfcoPower.com

Designed for pruning and thinning all types of trees, the PTX 2710 pole pruner has a two-stroke engine that delivers 27 cc and 1.3 hp. The PTX 2710 features an adjustable five-position pruning head, telescoping pole that extends up to 12.5 ft. of overall length and the Always On ignition switch, which returns to the on position after each stop. The ergonomic soft-touch handle reduces vibration, Efco says. Additional features include a wide discharge chute, internal sliding supports, spring spacers and a professional harness.

SAFETYWATCH

SECURING A TRAILER LOAD

Here are a few guidelines for loading and securing your landscape equipment trailer. Remember to check with your state or province for specific regulations.

- Load larger and heavier equipment first, and move it to the front of the trailer. Load smaller equipment last. It may be damaged if you load it in front of heavier equipment.
- Next, secure the equipment. Push it against the front of the trailer, then secure the group of equipment at the back with a transport strap. It's important that it be packed together sensibly so it doesn't move when you brake or accelerate.
- Store handheld equipment and hand tools on special racks. Remember, you can do serious damage to small equipment if it's not secured. At the very least, a piece of small equipment should

be wedged into a spot where it can't move from the inertial forces of hard braking, accelerating or turning.

- You also must secure soil, mulch, grass clippings or leaves, which are often carried in the bed of the truck. A mesh fabric tarp is commonly used to secure these materials. The mesh allows some wind to pass through so the debris stays put, but the tarp itself doesn't blow away.

WATCH AND LEARN

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The decision to sell your company is one of the most difficult decisions you will make in your life. The very best time to sell your company is when three variables — marketplace, business and personal timing — are at their peaks. Rarely do these variables peak at the same time. Your task in selling your firm is to determine when you believe each of the three variables will combine to maximize the value of your company.

MARKETPLACE TIMING

Marketplace timing can be linked to several factors, but the two that generally have the greatest impact on the sale price of a business are the condition of the economy and the availability of similar companies — both of which are out of your

control. The good news is that you can determine when to enter the “For Sale” marketplace. While you wait, differentiate your company from similar firms already for sale.

BUSINESS TIMING

Selling your business at financial and operational highs is difficult to arrange and emotionally taxing to actually pull the trigger. But that is often when it will bring the greatest purchase price.

Measuring and maximizing the market value of your company involves many factors: current and projected financial performance, cash flow, margins, equipment condition and value, strength of management staff, status/existence of renewable contracts, client mix,

your transition plan, deal structure, and the perception/reputation of your firm in the marketplace. We can help.

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Are you ready to retire? Owners who plan carefully in advance of the exit date are most ready when the time comes and are best able to leave on their terms.

An exit plan is a comprehensive multifaceted written document that allows a business owner to efficiently transition out of his current firm into the next phase of his life. Do you have an exit plan? If not, consider assembling and maintaining an exit plan as part of your annual financial document preparations.



1 How do you maximize the value of your company? Make your company as attractive as possible. Emphasize deal structure not sale price.

2 What is most important to a buyer? Sellers often assume buyers are most concerned with past financial performance. However, sophisticated buyers are more concerned with future revenues.

3 What is the most important decision for the seller? You will only sell your company once so it is imperative to surround yourself with competent advisors to maximize the value of your company.

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To maximize the return on all the years of hard work, it is imperative for business owners to surround themselves with experienced professionals to guide them through the business sale process.

You only get one shot to sell your company. The Pro-Motion Consulting team knows what makes a company attractive to a potential buyer. We help business owners organize all aspects of their businesses to help them get top dollar at closing and reap the maximum return for their years of hard work and perseverance.

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Every business is slightly different. Different businesses require different solutions to make them attractive to potential buyers. At Pro-Motion Consulting we recognize that not all businesses are the same. We will embrace the uniqueness of your company's attributes and customize a plan to bring you maximum value at the point of sale.

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The Pro-Motion Consulting team knows what makes a company attractive to a potential buyer.

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Compact construction equipment plays a major role in landscape contractors' businesses.



PAGE 26

TURF+ORNAMENTAL CARE

The new fertilizer fundamentals

LCOs are increasing productivity by changing the way they use fertilizers with enhanced efficiency and hybrid products.

BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER

There's always a better way to do something—even apply fertilizer. By embracing industry trends, some lawn care operators (LCOs) are saving time, money and manpower by changing the ways they use and purchase fertilizer. In particular, enhanced efficiency fertilizers and organic/synthetic hybrid products are seeing greater adoption.

“With more demands for LCOs to meet objectives operationally, economically and environmentally, they are looking at lots of different ways to run their businesses,” says Paul McDonough, national account manager for Koch Turf & Ornamental. “Especially when it comes to fertilization.”

COVERING MORE GROUND

McDonough says he's seen an increase in lawn care professionals switching to enhanced efficiency fertilizers (EEFs) and using fertilizer blends with higher

percentages of EEF technology and fewer fillers, which don't contribute to plant health. EEFs are fertilizer products that allow increased plant uptake and reduce the potential of nutrient losses to the environment when compared to conventional products. Sulfur- and polymer-coated urea products, natural organic fertilizers and stabilized nitrogen are all considered EEFs.

EEFs also allow for more time between fertilizer applications, resulting in the need to buy, store and transport fewer bags of fertilizer throughout the season, McDonough says. In many cases, costs may be higher per bag, but with less filler, EEFs can ultimately lower annual fertilizer costs.

“A lot of (LCOs) are smartening up to the fact that they used to buy product that had a lot of filler in the bag with a low analysis and a low portion of enhanced efficiency fertilizer,” he says. “Now they're realizing if they use a product with less filler and more enhanced efficiency fertilizer, the bag may cost more, but they can cover more ground

with fewer bags at a lower cost per acre.

“It's a different way to fertilize now—it doesn't have to be done every five to six weeks,” McDonough says. “LCOs can double or triple the time between applications with the technology available.”

Fewer visits to each property is not only an advantage to the contractor but to the homeowner, too, says John Fowler, vice president of sales for Anuvia Plant Nutrients' turf division.

“(Clients) really don't want to see you a bunch of times, so if you can deliver the same results in fewer visits, that's a huge advantage to the homeowner,” he says.

With the green industry's ever-present challenge of finding quality employees, the ability to provide fewer annual fertilizer applications per customer or an applicator's ability to treat more lawns per day reduces labor demands, McDonough says.

“It's not just the labor of making the applications but also loading and unloading the trucks, blowing off driveways and sidewalks,” McDonough says. “It's always a challenge finding dependable labor, so

Continued on page 20



NEWSFEED

SUPPLIER ALLIANCE

Bio Huma Netics—an Arizona producer of products under Huma Gro, Huma Gro Turf and

Probiotic Solutions—partnered with Reid Enterprises, doing business as Mesa Verde Resources in New Mexico.

LM150 COMPANY ACQUIRED

Rentokil Steritech, a pest control company in Reading, Pa., acquired the assets of Heron Home & Outdoor in Apopka, Fla. Heron is No. 116 on the LM150 list

of top revenue-generating firms with \$14,347,321 in 2015 revenue. All existing employees will remain on-board.

NEW SPOT SPRAYER

JRCO expanded its

lineup of commercial mower attachments to include a spot sprayer, which attaches to the JRCO front mount system. The machine features a 6-gallon tank and instant spray switch.



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Paul McDonough

Continued from page 18

contractors are looking at anything they can do to require less labor.”

RISE IN HYBRIDS

Jeff Leuzinger, sales manager for Healthy Grow, an organic fertilizer manufacturer in Pearl City, Ill., says the organic fertilizer market has grown considerably over the years. He has seen a particular increase in contractors offering hybrid programs, which use a combination of organic and synthetic products. Leuzinger says the biggest opportunity for future growth in use of organics is in the South where grass grows year-round.

“There is a lot of action when it comes to hybrid programs, giving everyone the

best of both worlds,” he says. “Contractors have a lot of customers who want to contribute in a positive way to environment. For them, using organics is a good way to do that.”

Rachelle Kemp, technical services specialist for The Grounds Guys, a full-service landscape firm headquartered in Waco, Texas, with more than 180 franchise locations throughout the country, agrees that hybrid programs are growing in popularity as more consumers become aware of the risks of misusing lawn care products. Hybrid programs are a happy medium for eco-conscious homeowners who still desire a green, healthy lawn.

“Some clients want organic but are not patient enough for the results, which typically take longer,” she says. “Today’s society is used to instant gratification, and organic fertilizers may not make the

color, bloom or other desirable features in the plant that clients are accustomed to, so synthetics offer a backup.”

Leuzinger says both customers and LCOs have embraced organic fertilizers for many reasons. New research and technology have resulted in more effective products, and increased effort is being made to understand soil health. LCOs are embracing these findings by incorporating them into their programs.

“People are seeing results, and we have better research in the last five years,” Leuzinger says. “There is a lot more happening and more discoveries being made in the biological world when it comes to soil health, which has helped develop products that work a lot better.”

Kemp says she is seeing an increase in LCOs who prefer granular fertilizers

Continued on page 22

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TURF INTERRUPTED: CONTROLLING YELLOW NUTSEDGE

We've all seen it: Perfect, deep-green turf interrupted by something that just doesn't blend in. No, not dandelions. This is worse. At least dandelions are honest, with their bright yellow heads. This intruder likes to pretend it's a grass, but it sticks out like a sore thumb. It's yellow nutsedge, and it's tough, persistent, and downright stubborn. But you can kill it.

Like most sedges, yellow nutsedge loves wet soil. Proper drainage is vital to achieving lasting yellow nutsedge control. But also like most sedges, yellow nutsedge is resilient. Its tubers can lie dormant for up to

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“Herbicides remain the most effective and economical way to control yellow nutsedge”

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Many LCOs now prefer granular over liquid fertilizers.



Continued from page 20

instead of liquid versions. She says granular products are easier to apply and have less drift and better residual. Granular products do not require a water source at the time of application,

and spreaders are less expensive than spray rigs. Kemp adds that some states allow granular applications without an applicator's license.

"It is also easier to dispose of the granular bags than the liquid bottles,"

Kemp says. "This makes for faster cleanup by putting granular bags in the trash rather than having to triple-rinse a bottle, wrap it and, in some cases, take it to the refuse station for chemicals."

REGULATORY IMPACT

Regulations are also playing a role in the way LCOs use fertilizers. Many states have bans or blackout periods that restrict the use of fertilizers containing nitrogen or phosphorus because of their impact on waterways. Leuzinger says this makes it difficult to apply any fertilizers—even organics—because phosphorus is one of the product's fundamental components. But some states, such as Illinois and Wisconsin, permit the use of phosphorus as long as it comes from a natural source. For example, the phosphorus source in Healthy Grow fertilizers is chicken manure, so it is exempt from the law.

"Some states really go too far on the phosphorus ban, which prevents us from being able to sell our products and prevents LCOs from enjoying the benefits of it," Leuzinger says. "I think the regulations hurt more than help."

McDonough says regulations make contractors and LCOs think differently about how they apply fertilizer, and they also strengthen the case for enhanced efficiency products.

"In some cases there are regulatory pressures to apply less product, so if you have to apply less product, you want to make sure what you're applying is having the maximum effect," he says. "You want to make sure what you put out is being used optimally." 📌

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

PHOTO: THE GROUNDS GUYS

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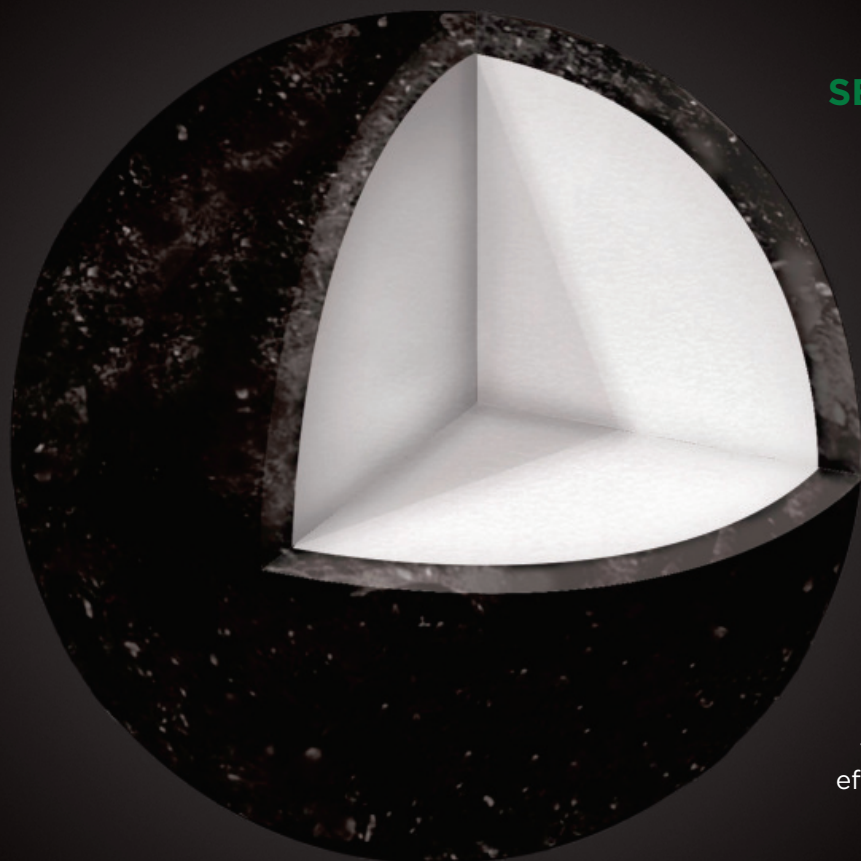
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Anatomy of an RFP

RFPs can be dozens of pages long. While it's important to read every detail in the document, here are four aspects that deserve special attention.

Scope of work

This vital portion of an RFP details exactly what work must be completed and how often it must be done. Municipal RFPs can be extremely specific, often listing the exact numbers of trees or flowers that must be featured on the site.

Outcome and performance standards

The RFP will also detail expectations, which may include start and stop times, deadlines or schedules for when the work must be completed, property access details and the manner in which workers must conduct themselves. Often, the RFP will detail penalties for a failure to meet these expectations or even rewards for those exceeded.

Process schedule

The RFP process typically includes some sort of meeting, like a site walk; a question-and-answer process; a qualifying round for applicants; and more. The process schedule lists these important dates and deadlines, which are stringent.

Contacts

A well-written RFP will list the contact details for the person who will accept questions regarding the property or RFP. Questions are encouraged.

WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section at LandscapeManagement.net to learn about the difference between municipal and commercial RFPs and where to find them.


Ins and outs of RFPs

Commercial maintenance experts demystify this aspect of the sales process. BY DILLON STEWART

Request for Proposal, or RFP, refers to a process by which many municipal and commercial entities award jobs to third party contractors. It's as popular in industries like construction or even web design as it is in landscaping.

"The whole theory behind an RFP process, be it commercial or municipal, is to qualify the bidders so there's not unqualified competitors involved," says Mike Fitzpatrick, vice president of U.S. Lawns. "That leaves you with just a handful of competitors who are all qualified and now it does come down to numbers. We've seen in that type of situation the pro contractors are never that far apart on numbers."

For contractors vying to win their first commercial or municipal jobs, however, the chance to participate in an RFP process can be an introduction to the movers and shakers at property management companies and municipal entities.

"We teach landscapers all over the country, it takes an intentional effort at trying to build relationships with the decision makers on properties you'd like to bid on," says Ken Thomas, co-founder at Envisor Consulting. "A good bid package with the right contents, good graphics and a good message may be able to position your company in a better light." 

Pro tips

A quick RFP Q&A with our experts.

Q: Who wins RFPs?

A: "In the commercial world, you have the ability to offer your customer value propositions and service expectations, but if you're bidding in the municipal world, nine times out of 10 one or two percentage points (difference in price) is going to cost you the job."

—MIKE FITZPATRICK, VP, U.S. LAWNS



Q: What's a good entry point for smaller landscape companies?

A: "Some different market segments are less concerned with pedigree, like multifamily apartments and homeowner associations, especially smaller ones. They are more likely to allow a one-truck operation to bid their properties. Once you get into more professional organizations like BOMA, IFMA, CREW, their members are looking for companies that have some critical mass or are have owners who are members and are presenting themselves as professional landscape service providers."

—KEN THOMAS, CO-FOUNDER, ENVISOR CONSULTING



Q: What's the downside to the RFP process?

A: "It's really easy to bid work. We could fill up crews worth of commercial work, but you get to a certain size and notice where you put your time and energy, and these formalized bid opportunities aren't based on anything other than price. Plus, most contracts are annual, so you're fighting for your own work every year."

—MIKE VOORIES, COO, BRILAR





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DESIGN/BUILD+INSTALLATION

Small machines, big impact

Landscape contractors share their approaches to purchasing compact construction equipment and attachments.

BY LAUREN DOWDLE

When a job calls for some heavy lifting or digging, it's time to crank up the compact equipment and connect the attachments.

But before landscape contractors can dig into their next projects, they've got to make sure they have the right machines for the job their companies' needs.

There's no set way for landscape professionals to go about getting new equipment, since much of how and what they buy depends on their company's budget, size, schedule and project scope.

There are some tried-and-true methods to consider when it comes time to add compact equipment and attachments. Here's how three contractors handle purchasing equipment and what trends they are seeing with these machines.

CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE FLEET

There are some benefits to having the same makes and models throughout a fleet—just ask Steven Johns, owner of Envisioning Green in Caseyville, Ill.

"What's important to us is the consistency—having the same model, same

year—from crew to crew," says Johns, who uses John Deere equipment. "That's why we buy in big groups." The uniformity helps with safety, maintenance and ease of use from one job site to the next, he explains.

Serving residential and commercial clients in both Illinois and Missouri, Envisioning Green provides design/build, lighting, maintenance, pools and snow services. The company's annual revenue is \$2.5 million and growing.

Part of that growth has helped the company expand its fleet. In 2016, Johns bought three track loaders, one enclosed-cab wheel loader, two compact skid-steers and one compact excavator.

As for attachments, Johns has a wide range including rakes, trenchers, augers, forks, nursery jaws and buckets.

"We bought more (in 2016) than any other one single year. We're buying equipment, trucks and switching out our fleet," Johns says. "What we get is based on needs. If we're renting something a lot, there's something we can buy that will save us on labor or if it provides productivity, we'll budget it for next year."

UNIFORMITY

Some contractors advocate sticking to one brand, which helps with operator training, safety, maintenance and more.

Johns keeps a list of all of the equipment and attachments he thinks the company will need going forward on Evernote, a note-taking app, to share with the team. He also relies on his crews to tell him what they need to add to the fleet.

"Before a year or two ago, our operations manager and groups would figure it out, but we weren't including foreman and crew members," he says. "Now, we ask the crews what they need and create a list."

Johns buys all his equipment. He says it's a good option (compared to leasing) for his company and others that are committed to taking care of their machines until they're ready to resell.

"When you lease, it's not your problem if something goes wrong with the equipment, so people don't really care about (maintenance) as much," Johns says.

His crews can submit a ticket to their in-house maintenance worker using an app. This method helps keep maintenance a streamlined process.

Johns' biggest piece of advice for other landscape contractors is to try the equip-

Continued on page 28



NEWSFEED

FX INTRODUCES LED UP LIGHT

FX Luminaire released its new FR copper/brass up light, an extension of the NR

fixture. The FR is the smallest integrated LED directional up light offered in copper/brass by FX.

KUBOTA OPENS NEW HQ

Kubota Tractor held a ribbon-cutting ceremony at its new North American headquarters in Grapevine, Texas. Governor Greg Abbott, Kubota Presi-

dent and Representative Director Masatoshi Kimata and other state and local officials were in attendance. Kubota invested more than \$50 million in the three-story, envi-

ronmentally friendly office building. The building is 193,000 square feet, includes an on-site research and development facility and accommodates 600 employees.

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DESIGN/BUILD+INSTALLATION

Continued from page 26

ment before they buy it, taking advantage of short and long demo opportunities dealers offer.

Beyond the front-end concerns of purchasing equipment, it's important for owners to consider long-term aspects like service when deciding on a manufacturer and machines.

"Whenever you buy, you're committing to that brand and person," Johns says. "What happens when it breaks? How knowledgeable are the mechanics? How long have they been working in the shop? You also need to check their parts availability."

Johns says when his company purchased new machines, the dealer sales rep attended one of his company meetings to train his team on the ins and outs of the equipment.

"He opened the cab to go over all of the maintenance points with us," says Johns, who especially appreciated the insight now that everything's going from hydraulic to electronic. "It's a computer, so you have to take care of it."

ROTATE OUT EQUIPMENT

Some landscape contractors have their equipment-buying schedules nearly down to a science, like Matt Hutton, owner of Hutton's Landscapes in Savannah, Ga.

His company works with builders and offers design/build, irrigation, erosion control, dump truck, maintenance and chemical services. The company's annual revenue is \$16 million, and he also has a full-size concrete company.

Hutton's fleet includes equipment like JCB loaders, compact excavators and skid-steers. He also uses attachments



Be sure to take dealers up on their short- and long-term demo opportunities before buying new machines, contractors say.

like rakes, buckets, pallet forks, concrete hammers, tree booms and augers.

"We are more structured now and generally revolve equipment out every three years," he says.

The company leases its equipment with the intention of getting a low buyout in the future, so it can own the machines.

Continued on page 30

PHOTO: JOHN DEERE

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DESIGN/BUILD+INSTALLATION

Continued from page 28

"I want to stay ahead of the debt curve," Hutton says.

When it comes to choosing a brand, Hutton says it's important to go with a supplier that's committed to getting the machines back up and moving again quickly. "You're going to wear out undercarriages and other components, so service is huge," he says.

In addition to checking on a dealer's service offerings, Hutton seconds Johns' advice, saying it's imperative to operate a piece of equipment before purchasing or leasing it. "Get the piece of equipment, demo it and make sure it meets your needs," he says. "Shop around and get competitive quotes."

FIND A FINANCING PARTNER

Equipment and attachments are a big investment, so finding a company that can help with financing options is im-

perative, says Bill Kirk, owner of Kirksway Farms in Lansing, N.Y. He offers residential services like septic, drainage work, light excavation, fencing and lawn installation. The company has annual revenue of \$500,000.

Kirk has a range of equipment both large and compact, including skid-steers and excavators. He uses attachments like augers, rock rakes, landscape rakes and buckets. He purchases a few staple pieces of equipment and attachments, and he rents items the company doesn't use very often. "I might get attachments from a rental company that I can't justify having around," Kirk says.


When it comes to purchasing equipment and servicing current machines, Kirk relies on the relationship he's built with his dealer.

"It's all about the dealer when it comes to purchasing equipment," says Kirk, who uses Bobcat equipment.

"They have to be reliable."

Kirk urges other contractors to be smart about financing and partnering with a manufacturer that can help them. "You've got to have a financing network and someone who will work with you on it," he says. "Most major brands will have financiers."

He looks to buy equipment as needed, mainly early in the year. "We try to figure out what we'll need in the future and then order it at least a few months out," Kirk says.

With decades in the industry, Kirk has seen the evolution of equipment. He says he enjoys some of the newer comfort features and also components that help secure the equipment, like keypads. But one thing Kirk wishes compact equipment would have—compared to their larger counterparts—is GPS built in. 

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Nashville.

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Techs wanted

A lack of skilled technicians is taking its toll on the irrigation industry. **BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER**

The struggle to find quality workers is hitting irrigation harder than almost anywhere in the green industry. Experts say companies are struggling to keep up with seasonal demands due to a significant shortage of skilled irrigation technicians.



Scott King

“Labor is available,” says Scott King, owner of Preferred Building Systems, a water auditing and consulting company in Cape Coral, Fla., and president of the Florida Irrigation Society. “Skilled labor is what is very difficult to find.”

One reason for the shortage of skilled irrigation techs is the necessary level of expertise can take years learn, says John Butters, irrigation manager for Timberline Landscaping in Colorado Springs, Colo., and member of the Irrigation Association’s (IA) certification board. Most of Timberline’s technicians, whose ages average 41, started as laborers on installation crews and learned their expertise by working in the field for many years.

“It takes time and experience to become a good irrigation tech; it’s difficult

to teach in a single season,” Butters says. “It also requires above-average smarts and pretty good math skills at times. You’re usually out there by yourself and are expected to be able to diagnose and repair any problem. It’s not for everyone.”

Additionally, many people entering the workforce don’t see the irrigation industry as a desirable field to enter, says David Hartzell, general manager of New Jersey Best Lawns, Sprinklers & Fencing. They also don’t realize how much money they can make. The full-service landscape firm in Lakewood, N.J., pays technicians between \$35,000 to \$75,000 annually. Hartzell adds that the winter weather keeps his techs out of the field from Dec. 1 to March 15 each year. The company needs 10 to 15 fully trained service technicians to operate each year, and losing even one causes delays in service and startups.

“There seems to be very little interest in the industry as a whole,” Hartzell says.

Another reason for the shortage of skilled technicians, sources say, is a decline in companies that focus exclusively on irrigation. Many companies now offer irrigation as one of their many services, and may assign the work to

basic laborers they already have on staff instead of hiring and investing in skilled irrigation technicians.

“Thirty or 40 years ago, there were a lot of companies that just handled irrigation,” he says. “Now, you have large landscape maintenance companies that have absorbed irrigation into their work.”

SPREAD TOO THIN

The shortage of skilled irrigation technicians is having a negative impact on the industry as a whole, experts say. Without knowledgeable technicians, systems are more likely to be installed and maintained improperly, resulting in water waste. Many drought-stricken areas of the country face severe water restrictions. Some places, like Florida, don’t have mandatory water use standards, which de-emphasizes conservative water use, King says.



David Hartzell

“The irrigation contractor gets a bad rap these days because, quite frankly, most are not required to conserve water,” King says. “If your feet were held to the fire when it came to how efficiently you used water, then it would be more important to have skilled technicians. Until some standards are established, there is no incentive to improve what is going on.”

The lack of qualified labor has forced some companies to change the way they

Continued on page 34

NEWSFEED

IA FLY-IN

Representatives from 11 Irrigation Association-member companies visited Washington,

D.C., to promote the importance of efficient irrigation in both the agriculture and landscape sectors.

Members met with 28 congressional offices and educated these policy makers on industry-related legislative opportunities, like the EPA’s WaterSense program.

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IRRIGATION+WATER MANAGEMENT

Continued from page 32

operate. For example, New Jersey Best has raised prices for new installations by 8 to 10 percent and now faces a 30- to 45-day lead time for new installs. Hartzell says the company has switched to Wi-Fi-based controllers to decrease the number of basic service calls and has begun to use flow sensors to detect leaks so systems can be shut down remotely.

Butters says his technicians not only do service calls but have property assignments as part of annual maintenance contracts. They are responsible for winterizing, spring startups, weekly equipment checks, repairs, the initial programming of the irrigation schedule and adjustments to that schedule throughout the season.

“(Our technicians) have a lot to do, and there is almost always a sense of being spread a little too thin,” he says. “I think our techs do a great job, but it always seems like we could use a couple more. You can’t just go hire another one because they aren’t there.”



John Butters

EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS

Industry organizations, manufacturers and distributors are trying to offset the technician shortage by providing education and training.

For example, the IA offers a certified irrigation technician (CIT) exam so field employees can gain more knowledge. The IA’s Irrigation Foundation supports technicians through its scholarship program. It also has worked with the IA’s professional development department to offer college students an academic track for the CIT exam and the certified landscape irrigation auditor designations.

Additionally, each year the Foundation hosts the Irrigation E3 Program during the Irrigation Show & Education Conference. The program provides



education and experience to irrigation students and faculty members. The Foundation also holds Faculty Academy each summer, a train-the-trainer program designed for agriculture and landscape irrigation educators to learn and take their knowledge back to the classroom.

According to IA data, 123 irrigation professionals passed the CIT exam, and 23 students and three faculty members participated in the Foundation’s E3 program in 2016. The IA also notes that 99 percent of its members say certifying irrigation professionals is important for the irrigation industry, and 94 percent say their company recognizes the value of hiring IA-certified professionals.

“We feel there is room for growth in all of our certification and education programs,” says John Farner, IA government and public affairs director. “We need to ensure that our workforce is educated and trained to not only meet the needs of the market, but also to ensure there is enough water for irrigation for future generations.”

Groups are making efforts on the local level, too. Through the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado’s Landscape Career Pathways Program, Timberline Landscaping has partnered with a local high school to teach students skills that will allow them to be job-ready upon graduation. The curriculum at Falcon High School in Peyton, Colo., is expected to begin

during the 2017-2018 school year. It aims to connect 15 to 20 high school students with the landscape irrigation industry through work/study programs and internships. While programs like these are steps in the right direction, Butters isn’t convinced they are enough to produce the number of skilled technicians needed.

“It’s not happening quick enough,” he says. “We need to force the issue a little more and devote more time and resources when we recognize ability in an individual. It’s hard to substitute or duplicate years of experience, but maybe we can do a better job of taking advantage of training and educational opportunities to speed up the process.”

Like Butters, many professionals believe that the future of labor in the irrigation industry is all about training, and needs to start with individual companies investing in their current employees. By making training a priority, companies may entice their irrigation techs to gain the knowledge and

know-how to be valuable assets for the long term.

“I think every company has to do the best they can and figure out where they are going to get the training,” King says. “If a trained irrigation tech knocks on your door and wants to work for you, take advantage of it. They’re in high demand right now.”



John Farner

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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RISK vs. REWARD

Lawn Butler leverages its conservative, debt-free philosophy for steady growth.

BY MARISA PALMIERI

Zero-debt disciples say your home's grass feels better under your feet once your mortgage is paid off.

There is something to the emotional and psychological effects of having no debt—or in Seth Kehne's case—running a debt-free company.

Continued on page 38

Seth Kehne, president of Lawn Butler in Knoxville, Tenn.

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You sleep easier at night. You make better long-term decisions. Essentially, you're free. There are drawbacks, too, and Kehne can list them for you, one by one.

Though he knows this philosophy has its critics, he says it has been a solid way to run his \$4.6 million, full-service business, which employs about 50 people.

Kehne says he believes this low-risk approach has put Lawn Butler on a path to reap the rewards of providing great service for his clients and growth opportunities for his employees.

FLEXIBILITY FIRST

Kehne grew up in a home that followed the advice "you don't buy something unless you have the money to pay for it." He stumbled into running a debt-free company when he bought an Exmark mower

his senior year in high school, put a trailer hitch on his hand-me-down 1983 Caprice Classic station wagon and picked up 12 mowing customers. His plan was to mow lawns to make it through college with no debt and plenty of spending money.

"The irony was I ended up having very little spending money because most of the money I made I put right back into the company," he says.

Kehne intended to go into financial planning or banking, but when he graduated from the University of Tennessee, he had built up a nice, growing business. He was enjoying himself, so he kept at it. Still, he wasn't sure about making Lawn Butler his career, so he chose not to take on any business debt after college.

"That's why we set it up (to be debt-free)," Kehne says. "In case I wanted to switch careers, then I'd have the ability to do that quickly."

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

COMPANY: Lawn Butler

HEADQUARTERS: Knoxville, Tenn.

FOUNDED: 1999

REVENUE: \$4.6 million (2016); \$5 million projected for 2017

SERVICE MIX: 40 percent mowing+landscape maintenance; 4 percent turf+ornamental; 55 percent design/build+installation; 1 percent snow+ice management

CLIENT MIX: 55 percent commercial; 45 percent residential

As the company has grown, Kehne's reason for remaining debt-free has changed.

"Fast forward 10-plus-years and I could (change careers) in theory, but our business is now more about our team," he says. "We have 50 team

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SAFE BY DESIGN

Until last year, Lawn Butler always had a low experience modification factor, or mod, for its workers' comp.

"Then we had an auto accident," President Seth Kehne says. "That was our only loss-of-work

injury in 16 or 17 years, but we realized we had a great safety record out of luck and not out of us being intentional or being good at implementing a safe workplace."

The management team was determined to change that, starting with a mandatory safety meeting every Tuesday morning. It's

anywhere from 15-45 minutes, depending on the topics, which are taught by managers.

New hires also go through the Greenius video safety training program and Lawn Butler's internal safety PowerPoint, which includes 125 "pain points" that either have happened or almost have happened at the company.

To squash any texting-while-driving risks, Lawn Butler also implemented a simple cell phone policy: Drivers may not have a phone in their hand while driving.

"It just takes the gray area out of it that 'I was looking at GPS' or whatever," Kehne says. The company has mounted tablets in its trucks for GPS and its software system, including time-tracking functions.

Due to its stepped-up safety efforts, Lawn Butler's mod went up, but its premium didn't increase.

"Unfortunately, it took an accident for us to realize," Kehne says. "But it totally changed our culture."



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members who depend on this company for feeding their families and improving their lives. If we don't grow, then we cannot have better opportunities for our team and their families."

Some critics would say he could grow more or faster by borrowing, but he's comfortable with the company's steady growth rate. Lawn Butler, which tripled in size over the last five years, has grown a minimum of 10 percent growth per year.

"Last year we were at 28 percent growth, which is a little bit more than we liked," he says, adding that it's difficult to grow that much in one year. He's budgeting for just under 10 percent this year.

There is also a spiritual component at play for Kehne, who identifies as an evangelical Christian. He says he doesn't believe debt is wrong or a sin—he has a personal mortgage on the company's facility, for example. But he notes every reference to debt in the Bible is negative or has negative consequences.

"I like to minimize as much risk as I can, and being debt-free is one way to do that," he says. "Debt-free is a little less about having no debt as it is about being very, very financially stable."

DEBT DEBATE

Kehne is aware that debt is a sensitive topic. In fact, he says other business



owners often vocally disagree with him about his approach.

"People can get heated about it," he says. "I'm like, 'I'm not saying you're doing anything wrong. This just happens to work for us, and we think it's the best plan for us.'"

Kehne agrees there are many reasons not to take a zero-debt approach, and that it's not for everyone. In fact, he can imagine a time when he might choose to take on debt. For instance, he would consider borrowing if he ever decided to enter a new market via acquisition or otherwise.

"I bet there would have been many years where we'd have made a better profit if we'd use debt to our advantage, and we've definitely had some headaches," he says. "But for us, the pros have outweighed the cons."

Cash flow can be tight, too, he says. There were many years when he didn't cash his own paychecks through the winter and early spring.

"It would be the end of March or April, and I would run to the bank and deposit three months' worth of paychecks," he says.

Problems like these are less of a concern now that Lawn Butler has matured and put into place some steps to mitigate them.

For example, the company uses a rolling budget implemented with the help of consultant Jeffrey Scott.

Kehne and his management team—which includes five account managers, two operations managers,

Continued on page 42

RIGHT FIT
Finding clients who seek value over price has become an important part of Lawn Butler's plan.

PHOTO: LAWN BUTLER

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Continued from page 40
a fleet manager, a marketing manager, an office manager and a controller—to review the company's budget every month and plan for the next month.

Managers also go on a two-day annual retreat to fine-tune the

next year's budget and discuss upcoming equipment needs, among other things.

From a financial standpoint, Lawn Butler depreciates its assets, even though they're already paid for. For example, the company bud-

gets and charges for equipment each month, so it has the ability to replace the equipment. Additional trucks or machines needed for growth come out of the company's income, which can cause a crunch. Kehne says it forces the company to focus on making a healthy profit on every job.

Continued on page 44

CHEESE!
Creating a team photo holiday card has become a Lawn Butler tradition.



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OTHER UNLEVERAGED FIRMS

Running a business with zero-debt isn't common, but it's also not unheard of. As of February, there were 13 companies with a zero debt-to-capital ratio on the Standard & Poor's 500 index. They include:








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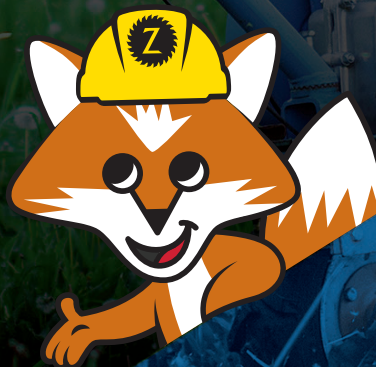
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COVER STORY

Continued from page 42

"We try not to do charity work except for charities," Kehne says of the company's focus on capturing revenue for all the work it does.

Additionally, Lawn Butler now requires minimums and multiple services for maintenance work (it won't just mow for a client), it's shedding clients who don't pay well or on time and Kehne declines to bid on any jobs where the clients are seeking more than three bids.

RECRUITING ADVANTAGE

Over the last few years, Kehne has focused on making Lawn Butler a place that people want to come work. Recruiting and retaining workers is a top challenge for the company, like it is for many landscape firms. Lawn Butler dabbled in the H-2B visa program last year, but Kehne didn't like its uncertainty, so



BRIGHT IDEA

A yellow paint job awaits all Lawn Butler trucks, which are bought in gently used condition.

he opted not to go that route again in 2017.

Instead, his team is concentrating on building a great workplace. For example, Lawn Butler set up "career ladders" so employees can map out

their opportunities with the company and see what it takes in terms of training, experience or education to get a raise or promotion.

He says his rule of thumb is you should enjoy your job at least three and a half out of five days a week. If you don't, you should get another job.

"We tell people, 'If you're not happy here, let us know and we'll give you Fridays off to look for a new job,'" he says. "We want people to do what's best for their family."

It sounds unorthodox, but Kehne says it doesn't make sense long-term to keep unhappy people around.

Not surprisingly, part of the company's recruiting and retention strategy centers on the company's financial position.

"There are lots of our team members that worked somewhere and didn't get a check when they were supposed to," he says. "We haven't been late on payroll since I was in college, so we talk about (being debt-free) as a security."

IN THE LONG RUN

You might picture a debt-free company to be driving around old trucks, running beat-up equipment or falling behind the technology curve, but that's not the case for Lawn Butler.

Continued on page 46

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Continued from page 44

Kehne buys new equipment, typically for less than \$10,000, and next-to-new vehicles.

"Many times we buy trucks with 1,000-20,000 miles that have depreciated 20-35 percent," says the self-proclaimed "equipment junky," adding that paying cash allows him to take advantage of deals that don't last.

Soon after he acquires a vehicle, Kehne has it painted bright yellow, which is another investment.

"It's expensive to do that to each truck, but it's proved our best way to advertise," he says. "Every week I hear someone tell me that they see our trucks everywhere—they stand out."

In recent years, Lawn Butler has switched to propane mowers, added a new software system and implemented GPS tracking—all of which Kehne says are long-term investments that benefit customers and play into his low-risk approach.

After outgrowing its old software, Lawn Butler switched to Aspire, which Kehne says has been vital in ensuring the company doesn't take shortcuts on important but easy-to-sidestep tasks like job costing. It's also helped on the client side because it has improved data tracking and scheduling, so there are fewer miscommunications, he says.

The company's investment in propane mowers started gradually with a

TRAINING THAT MAKES 'CENTS'

Along with a debt-free operating philosophy, education is a big part of the culture at Lawn Butler. President Seth Kehne says his goal is to incorporate financial training into the culture to emphasize the company's strong position and to provide visibility into how the company works.

For example, last year, Lawn Butler hosted a meeting where it split the employees into groups. Each group received 100 pennies, representing the company's total budget.

"We said, 'Alright, what percentage do you think we spend on labor, equipment, materials, etc.?' " Kehne says.

When the groups allocated their pennies, the results were all over the place. The point, he says, was to have a conversation around equipment, maintenance costs and labor costs, so the team can understand the consequences of their actions.

"The first time we started talking about finances a few years ago, some employees thought our net was around 50 percent," Kehne says. "Literally, guys thought that for every dollar we made I got to take home 50 cents and do whatever I wanted with it."


"Our hope is that by talking about finances, the guys are more focused on being better stewards of their time, equipment and everything else," he says.



few machines after Kehne read about the fuel's benefits, but it eventually turned into an entire fleet changeover.

Although the mowers were about \$2,000 more apiece, Lawn Butler appreciates the benefit of locking in fuel prices for the year (fewer surprises), reducing waste from spills and eliminating the potential for theft.

Finally, investing in GPS has been a boon for Lawn Butler because it reduces liability and provides visibility for the operations staff in case the need for rerouting vehicles comes up.

Kehne says, "Everything we purchase or implement, we make sure it has the greatest return in the long run." 



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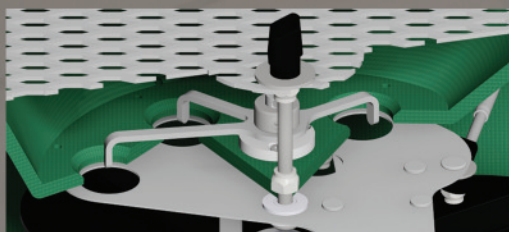
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SNOW+ICE

GUIDE

Map it out

Kevin Shackleford's site mapping and marking system places his plow crews ahead of the game when the snow starts to fall.

BY EMILY SCHAPPACHER



When Winter Storm Jonas dropped several feet of snow throughout the eastern U.S. in January 2016, Kevin Shackleford's plow crews had their work cut out for them. Fortunately, Shackleford, owner of Shackleford Landscape Group based in Bear, Del., had implemented a snow site mapping and marking system a few seasons earlier that positioned his plow crews to be prepared when the snow started to fall.

"Once it starts snowing, everyone has a lot going through their heads

and that's not the best time to try to explain stuff," says Shackleford, whose company provides 50 percent maintenance, 25 percent snow removal, 15 percent fertilization and 10 percent landscape installation services to a 60 percent commercial, 40 percent residential clientele. "The system was very beneficial last year when we got hit with 3 to 4 feet of snow, so we rolled it out more intensely this season. We are trying to alleviate the problems that can occur during plowing season."

Shackleford says his site mapping and marking system helps his operators

plow the company's commercial properties more efficiently and effectively. He uses maps of each property taken from Google to draw out the snow-plowing plan, which indicates where crews should begin plowing once they arrive on-site and where they can place large piles of snow. The maps are color-coded and broken down into individual plowing zones to help make the job more manageable. They are reviewed by crews in the office and are also kept inside the trucks, so crew members can refer to them as needed.

"By printing out the maps and going over things with the guys, we're



Kevin Shackleford

all on the same page,” Shackleford says, adding that the company also discusses contingency plans for what to do if cars happen to be in the way. “Just in case someone has to jump in and take over for someone, or if there is a large snowfall and we have to run people on rotation, we keep maps on the trucks for backup.”

In addition to the maps, Shackleford places a combination of color-coded stakes and poles on each property to help with visibility once the snow piles up. Red stakes indicate fire hydrants, yellow and orange stakes are used to mark curbs, purple stakes indicate stormwater drains and blue stakes are used to mark manhole covers.

Once the property is marked, crews drive through the site a few times to confirm the best route. Marking the property helps prevent any code or safety violations by, for

“MAPPING OUT AN ENTIRE SITE MIGHT BE TIME-CONSUMING DUE TO PLANNING FOR DIFFERENT CONDITIONS, BUT IT’S WELL WORTH IT.”

example, keeping hydrants accessible to fire departments. Keeping stormwater drains clear also aids in the snow’s natural melting process.

“Once you stack the snow on-site the job isn’t over. We still need to monitor the site for refreezing of melting snow at night,” Shackleford says. “By keeping stormwater drains clear, we maximize the site’s natural drainage design, which is to our advantage.”

Shackleford says he starts soliciting his snow clients in July and

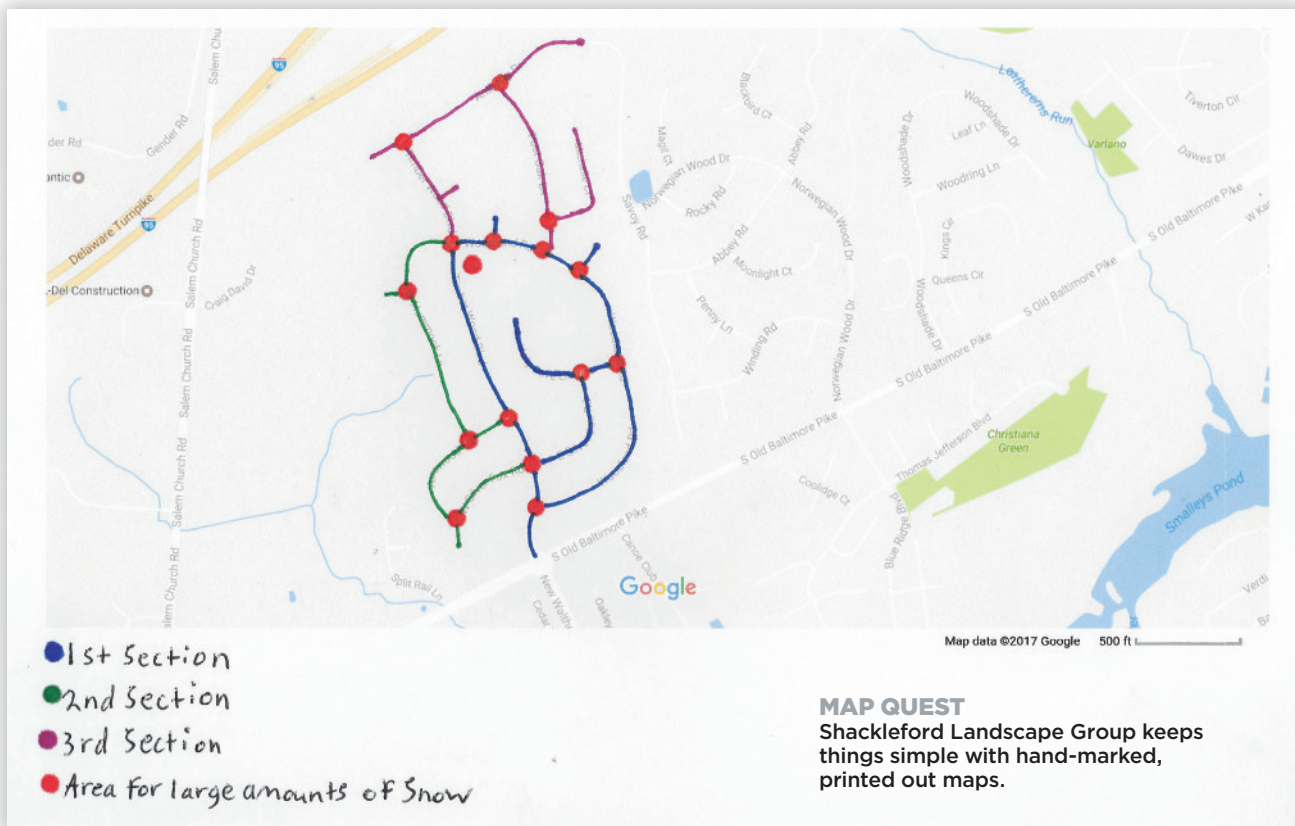
August and finalizes contracts in October and November. He uses the remaining window of time before the first snow to map and mark each site. Each process takes one to three hours, depending on the size of the property. Shackleford says this is time well-spent.

“Mapping out an entire site might be time-consuming due to planning for different conditions, but it’s well worth it,” he says.

Shackleford says his snow site mapping process saves his crews time and prevents potential damage to clients’ properties as well as to his equipment.

“When you’re working long hours during a blizzard, you might have someone doing 8- to 10-hour shifts, so there will be fatigue and guys aren’t going to be as sharp as they were at the beginning of a

Continued on page S14



MAP QUEST

Shackleford Landscape Group keeps things simple with hand-marked, printed out maps.



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SNOW+ICE GUIDE




STAKE SMART

Color-coded stakes and poles signify key property elements, like fire hydrants, curbs, stormwater drains and manhole covers.

still has to make adjustments to the plans, particularly for new customers' properties. He evaluates what worked, what didn't and any ways to improve the service provided to the client.

"I would definitely say to invest in the planning phase," he says. "It's kind of time-intensive, but it saves time, money and energy when you get into larger snowfalls. Your guys are going to know what to do."

"Marking and mapping properties is commonly overlooked in the snow service business," Shackleford adds. "The value of doing it isn't realized until a large snowfall occurs." 

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

Continued from page S12

shift," he explains. "If you can have stuff marked out, it helps crew members and saves us time. There are fewer surprises."

For contractors interested in implementing a snow site mapping process, Shackleford suggests

spending significant time on the planning and organizing phase. This prep includes meeting with the clients to talk about their property and help identify any hypersensitive areas the company should pay particular attention to. Even with all the preparation, Shackleford says he

NEWSFEED

GLOSSARY INPUT SOUGHT

The Snow & Ice Management Association (SIMA) seeks industry members to improve its

Glossary of Terms. The document defines terms and provides tools for requests for proposals and contracts. Since

the glossary's launch in 2015, SIMA has engaged snow contractors, property managers, suppliers and other experts to ensure the terms reflect the current industry environment.

NEW SKID-STEER PLOW

Fisher Engineering released the XRS skid-steer plow, which features a new oscillating plow mount. The mount is standard

on the XRS plow and optional on the HD2 and HDX skid-steer plows.



PHOTOS: SHACKLEFORD LANDSCAPE GROUP

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BY PHIL HARWOOD

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

The year-round snow business

“There is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.” – Morpheus, *The Matrix*

I'll just say it. Every snow business should be a year-round snow business—a “snow-only” business, if you will. I believe that with all of my heart. Let me explain.

To be performed optimally, the professional snow and ice management business (snow business, for short) is a full-time, year-round endeavor, with specific tasks to be performed each month of the year. It's also a highly profitable endeavor, unless mismanaged, and should never be degraded by the unnecessary distractions of a low-margin business unit.

There are three common models for snow businesses. The first is for the snow business to be an operating division within a larger company with two or more divisions. For example, a full-service landscape contractor may have several divisions: maintenance, construction, irrigation, tree care, lawn care and snow. In this model, the snow business

is often neglected for several months of the year due to the demands of the other divisions.

The second common model is for a snow business to be established as a separate legal entity but to coexist with one or more other legal entities for other services under an umbrella of common ownership. In practice, this portfolio strategy often functions the same as the first strategy by failing to provide year-round attention to the snow business.

The third model is for a snow business to truly operate as a “snow-only” business, without interference or restrictions from other divisions or entities. There are many successful examples of these companies throughout North America. In the words of Morpheus from the movie *The Matrix*, “There is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.” These firms are walking the path.

The interesting thing is that in each of the three models outlined above, the snow business *could be* operated as a year-round “snow-only” business. It's not about the structural model; it's about seeing

the value of devoting sufficient resources to the snow business throughout the year. It's about optimizing the snow business and never allowing other divisions to restrict investment or attention—especially if the other divisions are lower margin divisions.

The Snow & Ice Management Association has created many helpful tools to help snow professionals with their snow businesses, including a number of best practice checklists and guidelines. A quick look at these tools will clearly indicate the need for a year-round, all-in approach to operating a snow business at a high level.

The snow business has come a long way, baby. Back in the day, anyone with a four-wheel drive vehicle and a plow was in the snow business. Today's snow professional is a highly-trained expert; is educated in snow and ice science, equipment, technology and best practices; and has a commitment to continuing to elevate the industry.

The days of a snow business being a way to make a few extra bucks in the “off-season” are long gone. For today's snow professionals, the “off-season” begins in the spring. It's a year-round business, whether you realize it or not. The sooner you recognize the opportunity afforded by taking this approach, the more prepared you will be to compete with those players who have already made the commitment. How much longer will you treat your year-round snow business like a hobby?

Now is the time to get on board. The train is leaving the station.

“IT'S NOT ABOUT THE STRUCTURAL MODEL; IT'S ABOUT SEEING THE VALUE OF DEVOTING SUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO THE SNOW BUSINESS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.”



SNOW BLOWER LINE

COMPANY: Loftness Specialized Equipment

URL: Loftness.com

Skid-steer snow blowers are offered for a wide variety of flow rates, starting as low as 15 gpm. Seven models are available in 72- to 84-in. widths. They include a universal coupler, a single motor design and an electric spout rotator. A total of 11 rear-mount, PTO-driven tractor models are also offered with one-, two- or three- auger configurations.



3X PRO

COMPANY: Cub Cadet

URL: CubCadet.com

This snow thrower uses a patented three-stage system to plow through snow up to 50 percent faster than a traditional Cub Cadet 2X two-stage snow thrower. Its 4-in. accelerator breaks up packed snow and ice, while 12-gauge steel side panels and an optional hydrostatic transmission provide strength. It can easily cut through 18 in. of heavy, wet snow, the company says.



WINTER CAB

COMPANY: Grasshopper

URL: GrasshopperMower.com

The fully enclosed, full-view, metal winter cab fits 700 and 900 Series FrontMount mowers equipped with joystick-controlled DriftBuster Snowthrowers, Little Bully Dozer Blades, CleanSweep Rotary Brooms or a 60-in. V-plow. Electric windshield wipers and LED lights are standard. Options include a 16,000-btu heater, lower panels for manual-lift implements and a yellow beacon strobe light for increased visibility.



RB-400

COMPANY: Western Products

URL: WesternPlows.com

This walk-behind rotary broom is a combination sweeper and plow blade that cleans pavement along buildings, curbs and sidewalks. The plow helps remove heavy snow, while the centrally driven broom delivers a clean finish. Rotation speed and down-pressure are adjustable. The pivoting broom head also allows users to direct the snow trajectory.



SP5 SPREADER ATTACHMENT

COMPANY: Bobcat Co.

URL: Bobcat.com/attachments/spreader

Compatible with most Bobcat loaders, this spreader features a 5.75-cu.-ft. hopper. A weather-tight, variable speed 12-v DC motor allows users to vary spreading patterns from 4-40 ft. Spinner wheel rpm is regulated from the operator's seat by a rotary dial mounted in the loader cab.



TENSION FABRIC BUILDINGS

COMPANY: Legacy Building Solutions

URL: LegacyBuildingSolutions.com

Combining rigid-frame engineering with tension fabric membranes, these customized buildings feature long, clear spans, with straight sidewalls that maximize the usable square footage inside the structure. Options include lean-tos, mezzanines, sidewall doors and more.



BULK PRO SERIES

COMPANY: SnowEx

URL: SnowExProducts.com

Offering hopper capacities of 5.25 and 9 cu. ft., respectively, the redesigned SP-1575 and SP-1875 (pictured) two-stage spreaders can handle bulk materials. Spread width is variable up to 30 ft. on the SP-1575 and up to 40 ft. on the SP-1875. A digital system status display and audible warning protection are also integrated into the control.



GRANDSTAND MULTI FORCE SNOW REMOVAL UNIT



COMPANY: Toro

URL: Toro.com

This snow-only model is equipped with the Flex-Ride operator platform and can be equipped with a 5-ft. Boss snowplow attachment. Winter tires are standard for traction on slopes, while options include light and flasher kits for increased visibility. The machine's design also allows users to easily mount and dismount to remove obstacles in its path.

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LET'S GROW

CASE STUDY: OUR WAY

ROUGH ESTIMATES

Dan Gordon, our resident CPA, offers advice on estimated tax payments.

➤ PAGE 50



BY DANIEL GORDON

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

Estimated taxes: To pay or not to pay

Have you ever noticed line 79 on your individual income tax return (form 1040). It's your estimated tax penalty. You paid your taxes and you may have even received a refund, so what gives? Per IRS rules, it's not just enough to pay your taxes for the year. They must be paid at prescribed time intervals. The year is divided into four due dates for estimated tax purposes. Generally, those dates are April 15, June 15, September 15 and January 15.

You must pay federal estimated taxes in 2017 if you 1). expect to owe at least \$1,000 in taxes after subtracting your tax withholding (if you have any) and tax credits, 2). and you expect your withholding and credits to be less than the smaller of 90 percent of your 2017 taxes (the annualized method) or 100 percent of the tax on your 2016 return. If your 2016 Adjusted Gross Income was more than \$150,000 (\$75,000 if married filing separately), substitute 110 percent for the 100 percent requirement (the general method).

If you have income from self-employment, interest, dividends, alimony, rent, gains from the sales of assets, prizes or awards, then you may have to pay estimated tax because these items generally aren't subject to withholding but are subject to tax. If you also receive salaries and wages, you may be able to avoid having to

make estimated tax payments on your other income by taking more tax out of your paycheck.

Here are five additional points you should consider regarding your estimated taxes.

1 To figure your estimated tax, include your expected gross income, taxable income, taxes, deductions and credits for the year. You can use the worksheet in the estimated tax for individuals form (form 1040-ES). Also, consider changes in your situation, like increases or decreases in business or investment income. If you're having problems calculating your estimated taxes using the annualized method, consider using the general method. However, if you've made significantly more money in 2017 than 2016, you may owe more taxes on April 15, 2018.


2 Ask your CPA to prepare tax projections using several income scenarios and have them updated as the year progresses. This option may be appropriate as income projections change, and depending on the president and Congress, there may be tax changes ahead for this year.

3 You can make more than four estimated tax payments. To do so, make a copy of one of your unused estimated tax payment vouchers, fill it in, and mail it with your payment. If you make more than four payments, avoid a penalty by making sure the total of the amounts you pay during a payment period is at least as much as the amount required to be paid by the due date for that period.

4 The disadvantage to using the annualized method as opposed to the general method is the calculation of your estimated tax payments may be more complex. Plus, your estimated

tax payments must be recalculated at the end of every quarter. If you make an estimated tax payment using the annualized method for a quarter, you may change to the regular method for a subsequent quarter, but you must recapture the difference between the annualized income installments and the regular installments by adding the amount of the differential for all previous periods to the regular installment for the next payment period. For example, if you estimated a tax of \$1,000 under the general method, \$250 would be due each quarter. If you used the annualized method for the first quarter and paid \$100, and then shifted to the general method for the second quarter, the second quarter installment due would be \$400 (\$250 for the second quarter plus \$150 unpaid for the first quarter).

5 An underpayment penalty is imposed on each underpayment for the number of days it remains unpaid. A penalty may be applied if you did not pay enough estimated tax for the year or you did not make the payments on time or in the required amount. A penalty may even apply if you have an overpayment on your tax return. The penalty is essentially an interest calculation at a rate of 4 percent per annum. It's not necessarily the worst outcome.

Many CPAs include 2017 estimated tax vouchers with their clients' 2016 tax returns. When there is a material balance due on 2016 returns, vouchers are prepared using the safe-harbor estimate under the general method to avoid 2017 underpayment penalties. Check with your CPA to ensure he or she has considered the underpayment penalty when doing your tax planning. 



LET'S GROW

Of millennials and dinosaurs



BY KEVIN KEHOE

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

In March, I was in Provo, Utah, at the National Association of Landscape Professionals' National Collegiate Landscape Competition. If you have not been to this event (formerly called Student Career Days), you need to go. These kids are your future salespeople, account managers and operation supervisors. Their relationships with—and uses of—technology are totally alien to many of us, and they're central to their career choice. In short, the technology you use can make all the difference in recruiting the best of them.

One reason they choose our industry is the opportunity to “work outside.” And like most of us, they despise administration and paperwork. If your software systems (or lack thereof) keep them inside doing paperwork, they are *out*.

“The technology you use can make all the difference in recruiting the best (students).”

So if you're serious about having the best and brightest work for you, consider your technology strategy and investment to be at least as important as your equipment strategy. Millennials want to work for companies that provide tools that allow them to manage the business in real time, make the work exciting and operate outside with minimal paperwork.

Make no mistake, dinosaurs were perhaps the most successful species in the history of the planet. Today's



dinosaurs—including those of us born between 1950 and 1970—are also pretty successful, but we're not as natural with, or adaptable to, technology as millennials are.

Many dinosaurs can recall a time B.C.—before copiers. We used mimeograph machines. Millennials cannot conceive of a time without smart devices. We dinosaurs know a life before the smart device, and it worked. Up to a point. So can dinosaurs adapt to the new technologies? Yes, but *only if they want to*.

Until four years ago, I used a flip phone. I actually took pride in resisting a smart device. Today, I could not function as efficiently and effectively without it.

What happened? I realized that I missed the point of the technology. The technology wasn't just for me, it was for everyone else. The device made everyone around me more effective and efficient. There

were fewer miscommunications, fewer dropped balls and more things got done.

If you're like me, you like nothing better than getting more things done in day and having more people running around doing things for you with complete transparency as to what they're doing, so you can make sure they're getting done. That's today's mobile technology at work.

Smart devices, software and technology can't provide wisdom—that's earned by experience. But they can leverage that wisdom, giving you the tools—and the reach—to direct, monitor, coach and decide in real time, so everyone wastes less of everything, gets more done and, most importantly, gets more of what they need from you: leadership. ☺

OUTSIDERS
Many people pursuing landscape careers, like these students at the 2017 National Collegiate Landscape Competition, choose the industry so they can work outside.

CASE STUDY: OUR WAY

Off to a good start

LandCare's Spring Safety & Equipment Rodeos kick off the season well.

BY CASEY PAYTON

There are many ways to train your team—some more impactful than others. For LandCare, a Frederick, Md.-based national landscaping firm with 50 branches across 20 states, holding a Spring Safety & Equipment Rodeo at the start of the season has been an effective way to train employees on topics like equipment use and safety practices. Each Rodeo is customized to the specific branch's needs. For example, some might be focused on horticulture training, while other branches might focus primarily on mowing. Across all the branches, however, safety is always a priority.

At this year's spring Rodeo for the Dallas West branch in Grand Prairie, Texas, Branch Manager Joel Butler says many important topics were covered and employees walked away better educated and ready to start the season. Yet, one of the biggest benefits employees gained was a strengthened sense of camaraderie.

"With these Rodeos, we're reducing accidents and injuries—and that's one of the most important reasons we do it," Butler says. "However, another important piece is the team building that takes place. Our crews get to mix and mingle and spend time fellow-

shipping before the season kicks off. Before we start the training, we first enjoy a sit-down hour lunch together."

For the training component, the Dallas West branch joins with vendor partners Exmark and Horizon, who offer instruction on their products. Butler says the involvement of these vendors is a "big key to the event's success." Suppliers not only help train but also share some of the event's costs. For instance, Exmark and Horizon arranged for an ice cream truck to come in to treat everyone to dessert. They've also supplied gift cards to the winners of some of the games played during fun competitions.

Overall, Butler says the food cost—approximately \$400 to feed 40 employees—was less of an investment than the time off in the field, which can add up quickly. But he says there's no doubt the value they've gotten out of the event far surpasses the costs.

"It's hard to put an exact dollar value on improving safety, reducing accidents, better training and team building—but it's absolutely worth the investment in doing this," Butler says.

Making sure employees have fun and feel valued is also important, adds Ed Schultheis, fleet director for LandCare. He says it syncs with the company's core values, one of which is to "have fun with a commitment to teamwork."

"One competition we did—blowing a tennis ball through an obstacle course—was particularly well received," Schultheis says. "There's a strong teamwork component to the

game. And, of course, the competition part of it is naturally fun for everyone."

There's no question the event is a boon for employees, but Schultheis says it's also been a great way to strengthen the relationship with the company's key suppliers.

"We rely on our vendors for their expertise, and we truly value our relationships with them not only for this event but throughout the season," Schultheis says. "Strengthening our relationship with our vendors at the start of the season is very valuable so that when repairs are needed or issues arise, we know they have our back." 

Payton is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.

SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: LandCare

LOCATION: Frederick, Md.

ANNUAL REVENUE: \$165 million

SERVICE MIX: Not reported

CLIENT MIX: 100% commercial

EMPLOYEES: 1,800 full-time/
1,800 seasonal



While the subtopics vary, each Rodeo is designed to improve safety and education.

PRODUCT FOCUS

WALK-BEHIND MOWERS

TURF TRACER X-SERIES

COMPANY: Exmark

URL: Exmark.com

Standard features include a patented Enhanced Control System (ECS); a heavy-duty electromagnetic power take-off (PTO) clutch; and a single-belt deck drive. The 52- or 60-in. UltraCut Series 4 cutting decks feature fabricated construction and durable large-flange cutter housings. Engine options include carbureted gasoline, electronic fuel injection (EFI) gasoline and EFI propane configurations.



BIGMO 34-IN. HYDRO

COMPANY: Sarlo

Power Mowers

URL: Sarlo

Mower.com

This commercial-grade mower features a 34-in. cutting deck, hydro transmission and the patented Twin Track Deck. The cutting system has an in-line spindle design built into a compact platform.



GM 210

COMPANY: Greenworks Commercial

URL: GreenworksCommercial.com

This high-torque, zero-exhaust brushless mower offers Greenworks' 82-v lithium ion battery, with a 21-in. cut path. SmartCut technology adjusts speed from 2,800 to 3,330 rpm. Other features include push-button start, steel deck with bull bar, ball-bearing wheels and vertical storage.



21-IN. COMMERCIAL HEAVY-DUTY

COMPANY: Toro

URL: Toro.com

The rear bagging system boasts a wide opening and ramped tunnel to maximize bag fill. It holds 2.1 bushels and features an easy-empty design. Additionally, the blade brake clutch system on select models allows the operator to disengage the blades without shutting down the engine.



HRC216K3HDA

COMPANY: Honda Power Equipment

URL: Honda.com

Users can start the fuel-efficient Honda GXV160 commercial engine while standing behind the mower; the flywheel brake safety system stops the engine and blades when the user lets go of the brake lever on the handle. The hydrostatic-drive mower can be adjusted to eight different heights. The 21-in. deck is made of steel and features front-axle and bumper protection.





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RESOURCES

Letter: Look out for E0

In response to “Confusion at the pump” (March), I’d like to suggest that some fortunate consumers of gasoline in the U.S. might still be delighted to see a pump offering E0 (typically in rural areas) and would be well-advised to select that product for their outdoor power equipment products.

You will have none of the troubles of ethanol fuels of any blend level—the usable E10 or the damaging E15. Trouble comes both from the serious operational troubles that could occur as well as from when the fuel has deteriorated and damage to the engine results.

It’s certainly worth seeking out if it’s available somewhere in the neighborhood.

JOHN FISCHER, Palatine, Ill.

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INTERVIEWS: Tuesday's 7:00am to 9:00am

RESUMES email to: **paulw@fslandscape.com**

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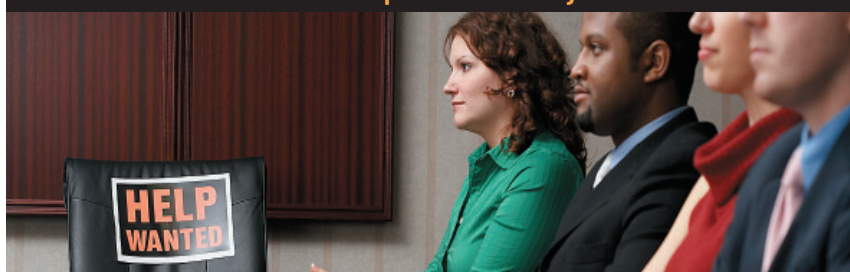
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Business development/sales

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Vice President

2016-present
President

"There aren't many jobs where if you need to go ease some stress you can hop in a loader or a backhoe and go destroy a dirt pile across the street."

Starting in junior high, Gamester ran his own landscape company, where he maintained lawns, performed small projects and managed one employee. "I always knew I wanted to be entrepreneurial."

"For (employees) to know that I've been in the trenches, and I'm not afraid to go back in, reminds them that I understand it."

"It's one thing to be a member, but when you're involved, that's where you reap your benefits. If you go to the events and don't participate, you miss the opportunity to get what you really need."

Present
Chairman of the Board
Snow & Ice Management
Association

"Our business is dependent on the weather and living things, so there's a lot of variety. I'm never bored."

"I was working here as a summer gig. Little did I know (the owner) was laying the groundwork for me to work here when I graduated."

When he's not in the office or on the golf course, Gamester spends time at home and by the pool with his wife, Rebecca, and their sons Griffin, 5, and Gavin, 2. "Both my kids love baseball," he says. "I'm really excited that we're finally able to get the tee-ball set out."



WORDS OF WISDOM "Build a good team." • "Stay focused. It's very easy to get off track as an executive or someone running a company. It's easy to slip into day-to-day minutia and not look ahead." • "There are always two sides of the story. Get all your facts together before you react." • "Don't be afraid to invest in the future of the company—whether it be in equipment or people."

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