

There's a lot to be learned from student business owners who have found success.

By Beth Geraci

FYI

Wesley Chiles

COMPANY: **Chiles Enterprises**

SCHOOL: **Virginia Tech**

STARTED BUSINESS AT AGE: **10**

CURRENT AGE: **21**

kid out there. But it was also the best thing anyone ever said to me. It fueled my fire even more. It made me want to be the best damn grass cutter out there, the best damn landscaper out there.”

Chiles’ business took off last year, after he acquired a small retail garden center that led to 63 percent growth for the company from 2011 to 2012.

Matt Turner, 30, shares Chiles’ ambition. The owner of Turner Landscaping in St. Paris, Ohio, launched the business in 2001, when he was 19 and a freshman at The Ohio State University.

“I thought if I started when I was in college I could grow a client base while I was in school, so when I got out my business would be strong,” he says.

Turner, who graduated in 2005 with a degree in landscape horticulture, started with just six clients. Today, Turner Landscaping is a \$360,000 business with one foreman, 2 full-time laborers and about 300 clients. The company blossomed in 2009, when Turner acquired the pond maintenance and installation divisions of Green Vista Water Gardens. “I saw a niche I could tap into. I saw an opportunity, and that’s when we really took off,” Turner says.

The company has grown by 10 percent to 20 percent every year since then, thanks to adequate staffing and a focus on customer service, he says.

“For us, it’s not about volume,” Turner says. “It’s about the quality we do. We keep ourselves small, do a great job and build a relationship with every client. Then word of mouth spreads.”

Craig Ruppert, CEO of Ruppert Landscape, Laytonsville, Md., knows a lot about growing a business. After all,

COVER STORY

Ruppert Landscape has grown exponentially since 1971, when he launched it as Ruppert Lawn Maintenance in his dad's garage.

Ruppert started his business like so many others—with a mower and a used pickup truck he bought for \$800. “I was a 17-year-old high school student from a large family of eight who had to contribute to our tuition and had to be able to help pay for any extra activities we participated in,” recalls the founder of one of the industry's largest companies. “I had a lawn mower and figured if I worked hard I could succeed.”

And succeed he did. Today, Ruppert Landscape is a \$72.5 million company with 725 employees. Ruppert grew his business from a \$20,000 operation with one full-time employee (his



FYI

Michael Field

COMPANY: Premium Properties, Spicer, Minn.

SCHOOL: University of Minnesota, Crookston

STARTED BUSINESS AT AGE: 17

CURRENT AGE: 26

2012 REVENUE: \$150,000

brother Chris) to what it is today by doing what he says is most important of all—keeping his employees “content and productive.”

Ruppert says he made mistakes and learned from them. Eventually, he and his management team became adept at recognizing and preventing potential mistakes before they happened, which helped grow his business all the more.

Doing it right

Chiles was 13 and cutting grass for a new client. The day after he started, she called him. “Are you insured?” she asked him. “No ma’am, I’m not,” Chiles replied. He lost the job.

The next week, he obtained a \$1 million insurance policy. “That was a turning point in my professional development,” he says. “I became a legitimate business. I started paying taxes. I got safety gear. I said, ‘This is what I’m

doing and I am going to meet or exceed their expectations.”

Turner, meanwhile, started out with insurance from the get-go, on the advice of his father. “From Day 1, we had all the necessary insurance. We had a business plan. We had an accountant, everything,” he says. “We weren’t just a push mower and a truck. We weren’t just fly by night. We ran it correctly.”

Michael Field agrees that having a business plan is important. The 26-year-old is the owner of Premium Properties, based in Spicer, Minn., and a 2010 graduate of the University of Minnesota, Crookston. He started his business when he was a junior in high school, working multiple jobs to keep

continued on page 54



“We weren’t just a push mower and a truck. We weren’t just fly by night. We ran it correctly.”

—Matt Turner



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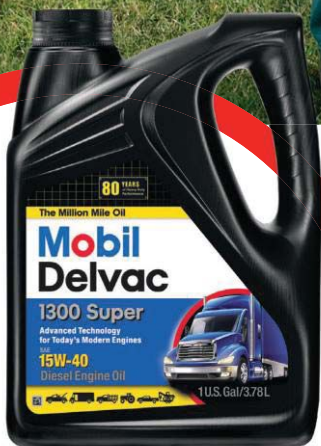
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COVER STORY

continued from page 52

it afloat, much to the chagrin of his parents, who worried he wasn't getting enough sleep.

Field always strove to be professional, going back to those early days, when he took out an \$800 ad in the local paper. He hoped to get 10 new customers from that; he got 20, along

with many customer referrals.

Today Field's is a \$150,000 business that has grown largely from customer retention and referrals. The Premium Properties owner has clearly defined contracts for his customers and a no-profanity policy for his employees. He mails out his invoices with postage-paid return envelopes. And his workers wear



FYI

Tim Rowe

COMPANY: **Tim's Landscape Care, Cherry Hill, N.J.**
SCHOOL: **Loyola University Maryland**
STARTED BUSINESS AT AGE: **14**
CURRENT AGE: **23**

safety gear and embroidered polo shirts.

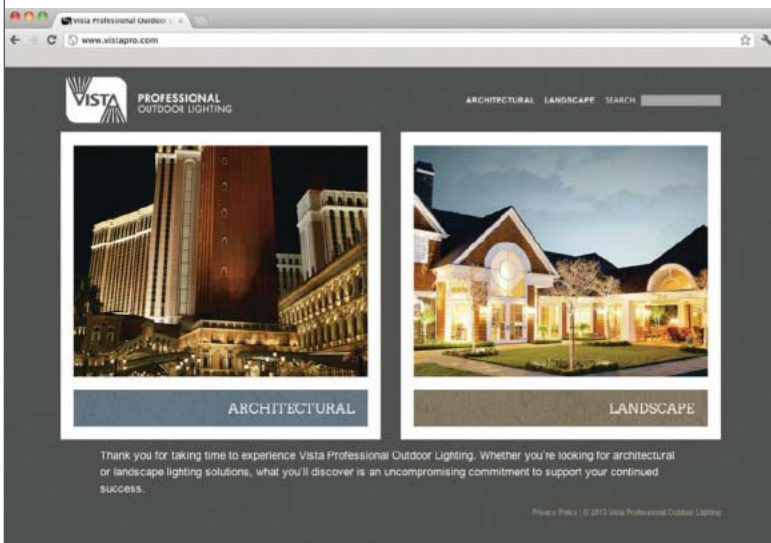
Like Field, Tim Rowe, a 2011 graduate of Loyola University Maryland—where he swam and made the dean's list—started his business as a teen. However, he didn't incorporate the company under its current name, Tim's Landscape Care (TLC), in Cherry Hill, N.J., until this January.

Despite his youth, throughout the years, Rowe acquired new clients through advertising—specifically by passing out fliers. It was something he'd done since he was 15, when his dad bought him a riding mower and Rowe strove to build his business. "Every spring, I printed out a thousand fliers and passed them out throughout the whole neighborhood," Rowe says.

He thus established a clientele that grew through name recognition and word of mouth. Rowe, a gifted swimmer, also grew his customer base through his swimming network, using it to obtain his biggest job yet—a \$50,000 residential account (as shown in the photo above).

It came just last fall, after Hurricane

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Sandy battered New Jersey. It was on hill on a street corner, the ideal advertising spot. “That job really helped me out with visibility, which led to other jobs right down the street,” Rowe says.

Knowing the value of a degree and networking

Ruppert has valuable advice for students with burgeoning businesses: “Work hard and don’t be afraid to ask for advice. Align yourself with others in the industry. Pay close attention to the numbers early. Join trade associations as soon as you can. And most importantly, remember the most valuable asset in our companies is our people.”

Chiles may still be in school, but he’s already living some of that advice. “I have a lot of resources at the university. If I don’t know something, I can just pick up the phone and call a professor and find the answer,” he says.

Chiles puts what he learns in school into practice on the job. “It’s always relevant,” he says, whether it’s keeping accurate records or making his company logo.

AJ Davis, 23, also knows the value of a college education—and those associations Ruppert mentioned. He founded Davis Outdoor Jobs, Apalachin, N.Y., in 2008, when he was a senior in high school. A 2011 graduate of the State University of New York-Delhi, Davis says his degree in landscape design and management helped build his business—now climbing to \$200,000.

“Once my customers saw I had a degree, they were more willing to let me try other projects,” he says. “I graduated and then the following summer I got two big

PHOTO: TIM ROWE

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jobs from customers we already had. They were worth substantially more than my other jobs.”

Before graduation, Davis was doing mostly mowing and maintenance work. After graduation, the installation side of his business grew. And he makes it a point to never stop learning.

As a student he attended the Profes-

sional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) Student Career Days. Today he belongs to the New York State Nursery & Landscape Association and a business networking group called BNI.

Field, meanwhile, says



» WEB EXTRA

To learn about landscaping students on the rise today, Visit the Web Extras section of LandscapeManagement.net to see what went down at this year's Student Career Days, hosted by the Professional Landcare Network.

his degree in turfgrass management/horticulture and the things he learned in college “were absolutely essential” to his success in the Green Industry.

Having worked for a landscape maintenance company in high school, he also sees the value in mak-

ing mistakes at other companies before starting your own.



“You have to continually improve, or the new guys will have an advantage.”

—AJ Davis

Phil Allen, a professor of landscape management at Brigham Young University, says that's exactly the advice he's hearing from landscape company owners today.

“They say you'd be smarter if you work for somebody else for a while, figure out the business and the laws, and then go on and do your own if you want to,” he says. “The laws are more complicated today. It's a more complicated world than it was 20 years ago.”

If at first you don't succeed

Allen, who has been a professor for 22 years, has seen many of his own students man the reins of their own landscaping businesses. He's also heard company business owners say they like to hire people who owned their own small business and failed.

“The person who failed can be a more valuable and loyal employee,”

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Allen explains. "Sometimes if you've failed at something, you're not as anxious to go out and try it again."

Dean Trondle knows what it's like to try in this business and fail. He grew his company too big too fast. He informally started his landscaping business with a friend when he was in high school, a "summer hobby," Trondle calls it. By their senior year, the duo had 120 mow-and-blow accounts and was making \$60,000 in revenue.

Once in college at Bob Jones University in Greenville, S.C., Trondle bought out his friend. He sold his first annual contract to a homeowners association his freshman year. "That showed me the light that it could be a career," he said. His sophomore year, he hired his friend BJ Flora as his operations manager, named the company Cut Above Enterprises and got serious about it. "I'd go to classes, work till dark and then go home and do my home-



"We had a strong brand, a strong logo, but that only carries you so far. If you don't have a strong model underneath, it's not sustainable." —Dean Trondle

work at night," Trondle says.

Working toward his accounting degree, Trondle used the knowledge he acquired in class to organize his finances and strengthen his business plan. "I feel like I gleaned more practical knowledge because I was applying it right away," he says.

Before Trondle graduated from college in 1999, Cut Above already had obtained a huge maintenance account at Bob Jones University and had more than \$1 million in revenue. "That helped us with credibility," Flora says. "Once we landed Bob Jones, our com-

munity recognition just skyrocketed."

The duo began picking up more properties around Greenville and connected with local property managers. By 2001, the company was primed to do \$3 million in revenue and had a staff of 73, including a full-time mechanic and managers for irrigation, installation, maintenance and chemical applications.

But in 2001, the bottom fell out when the company's acquisition of a TruGreen Landcare branch went awry. "I tried to do the acquisition and I lost [business] to a competitor," Trondle says. "By the end of the first month, a



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lot of customers cancelled on me, and I realized I was going to be hurting.”

When he looks back, the TruGreen acquisition is Trondle's only regret. “I think I was a bit naive,” Trondle says. “Success breeds an unrealistic pride. I had gleaned a lot of success early on, then I realized I needed to eat humble pie in a way. No one wants to eat it, but it refocused my life.”

In March 2002, Trondle was 26 and had \$1.6 million in personal liability. He sold the business to Flora, who made it his priority to downsize the company. Working for his dad to make extra money, Flora hired a couple of people to run the company for a year before he rejoined the business full time. “We paid down the debt and



BJ Flora

COMPANY: Cut Above Enterprises, Taylors, S.C.

SCHOOL: Bob Jones University

BOUGHT BUSINESS AT AGE: 25

CURRENT AGE: 36

2012 REVENUE: \$1 million

FYI



laid a stronger foundation,” he says. “I have no regrets—none at all. Probably because it's worked out so well.”

Indeed it has. Cut Above's 2012 revenue is \$1 million. Its maintenance division grew 30 percent in the past year and its landscape division about 15 percent.

“Now I'm closer to living the American dream,” Flora says. “I've got a good business. I've got good guys working for me, and I've got more family time.”

That's what Chiles is aiming for. “I want to grow my business to the point where I could just write the checks and look at the numbers,” he says. “And when I get to that point, I don't know, I might want to dabble in real estate.” **LM**

» WEB EXTRA

Want to learn more from these student-teachers? Visit the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net) to see their top 10 tips for running a successful business.

PHOTO: BJ FLORA

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How social media makes your firm more likeable, trustworthy and attractive to new customers.

While many companies are busy adding social media to their marketing practices, they're not fully understanding the magic that makes it work: its humanizing qualities that make your business more approachable. For the most part, businesses are simply adding a social layer to their marketing, like a fresh coat of paint. What

they should be doing instead is baking the qualities of social into every aspect of the business—from operations to sales, marketing and customer service.

This is especially true for small business, where effective social media use realistically calls for owners and management team members to become directly involved. After all, these are the individuals with the decades of

vital experience for capably processing and responding to the engagement that social media technologies make possible. To delegate those interactions to lower-level employees risks compromising what social media does best: humanizing your business to make it more likeable, trustworthy, and therefore more attractive to the new customers that have yet to learn about it.



BY **JEFF KORAN**