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BENCHMARKING YOUR BUSINESS

See how your company stacks up with others locally and nationwide with our exclusive research. **B1**

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73 STATE OF THE HARDSCAPE MARKET

Concrete information about how the hardscaping industry thrived last year.

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RADIO NETWORK

You have to have a vision

We talk with previous cover story subjects Pam Dooley, owner of Plants Creative Landscapes, and John Munie, president of Focal Pointe Outdoor Solutions, on the benefits of writing mission and vision statements. They touch on how these underappreciated declarations can assist with retention, growth, company culture and values. You'll also learn how often you should be revising these statements. To listen to the "Looking forward with mission and vision" podcast, head to bit.ly/llvisionpodcast.



How do you stack up?

Comparing yourself to someone else is human nature. Are you curious about how your company compares to others in your region? How about with those on the opposite side of the country? Our Benchmarking Your Business tool helps maintenance, lawn care, design/build and irrigation companies compare themselves to the national and regional averages we collected. See how your costs for labor, equipment, materials and more stack up with others in the industry. Check it out at bit.ly/lawnbenchmark.

What's ahead this year?

Harvesters Ed Laflamme and Alison Hoffman are optimistic about the industry's outlook in 2021. They say it's stabilizing and thriving after the challenges posed last year by COVID-19. Yet despite all this, the labor shortage isn't going anywhere, so learn ways to tackle this, too. Watch the duo discuss the high demand and what to expect this year on our website at bit.ly/eyeson2021.

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Lawn & Landscape's second annual Technology Conference is scheduled for Aug. 31 – Sept. 2 in Orlando, Florida. Have you registered yet? Pricing, hotel information and an evolving list of exhibitors is available at bit.ly/LLtechconference. Speakers, a schedule and more will be announced as the event approaches.

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Brian Horn

Editor, Lawn & Landscape

“For the report, we collect financial data from green industry professionals...to get a feel for where these numbers fall nationally and regionally.”

Numbers game

Budgets, line items, gross profit margin. Not the sexiest part of running a business. For a lot of you, it's your least favorite part of being the boss. You started a landscaping company because you enjoyed mowing lawns, installing a pristine hardscape or interacting with customers.

But all of that can be insignificant if you aren't at least breaking even. The numbers are critical to keep you in business and growing the bottom line.

That's why I am happy we are bringing back our Benchmarking Your Business report after a 3-year hiatus. For the report, we collect financial data from green industry professionals to get a feel for where these numbers fall nationally and regionally.

As part of the report, we also have a tool on our website that allows you to enter your financial data to see how you measure against the industry. You can access that tool at bit.ly/lawnbenchmark.

Also on that page, you'll find charts provided by columnist Jim Huston to help you understand what percentage of a budget you should be spending on a specific line item.

I know the landscaping market has tons of micro-markets. One company might be paying a certain rate, while another company located just one city over could be paying \$2 less. Regardless, hopefully this data will give you at least a ballpark idea of what your region pays.

We also have a few stories illustrating different methods of budgeting. Some of you don't budget at all according to our columnists.

If you fall into this category, I hope this provides you a place to start. If you already have a budget in place, maybe this helps you take that next step in fine tuning your plan to grow your business. – *Brian Horn*

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Real estate executive has high hopes for landscaping start-up

Phil Wood founded United Landscape last year and hopes to make a number of acquisitions by the end of 2021.

By **Brian Horn**

With a background in high-end residential real estate development as managing director of United Kingdom-based Catterson Wood, Phil Wood, pictured above, worked a lot with landscape professionals.

“A lot of developers, and obviously I knew lots of developers, they used to treat landscaping as almost an afterthought for development,” says Wood, now the founder of southeast Florida-based United Landscape. “I always knew that the landscaping scheme needed to be an integral part of all designs that are as important as the buildings we were putting up.”

With that perspective on landscaping, and just an overall interest in the United States landscaping market, Wood made the decision around the middle of last year to form United Landscape.

Wood tapped into some industry knowledge with this venture. Dean Murphy, former Terracare Associates and Monarch Landscape Companies executive, and Rick Cuddihe, president at Lafayette Consulting Co., are serving as non-executive directors.

“I think the team we’ve brought in, they’ve obviously got an enormous amount of experience with mergers

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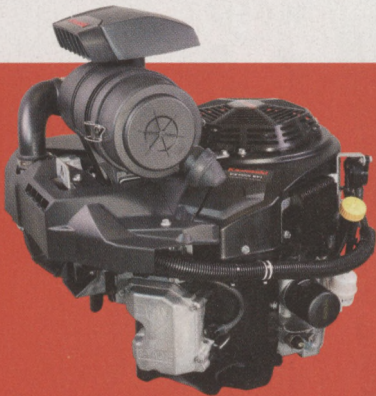


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and acquisitions and deal-making and raising finance, but we really wanted them to like the industry as well," Wood says. "Aside from Dean and Rick, all the other guys we've got in are really excited about the industry, which is really important for us moving forward."

Wood says a minimum of five acquisitions by the end of 2021 is attainable to come under the United Landscape umbrella. He says United Landscape is a financial sponsor group, which means that he works with a pool of funding sources - rather than operating as a single fund.

He's targeting companies in the \$2-\$5 million range with locations in central and southern Florida and a focus on commercial maintenance because of the recurring revenue, but also seeks to provide a wide range of green industry services and with residential customers.

"We obviously like those kinds of businesses who are heavily involved in (commercial maintenance), but we are looking at arborists, lawn care service, irrigation," Wood says. "We really want to offer the full gamut of services, ultimately."

➔ **PHIL WOOD IS TARGETING COMPANIES IN THE \$2-\$5 MILLION RANGE WITH LOCATIONS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN FLORIDA.**

He's also looking for companies that wouldn't need drastic changes.

"It's about us making incremental changes rather than fundamental change to the business," he says. "We don't want to change what has made that business successful, but what we can do is offer our group's operational, strategic and financial expertise to make those incremental changes, which I think make a big difference to the bottom line of those companies."

"In terms of making big changes, particularly with personnel, we see the personnel as the most important part of the business. It's just about making improvements rather than (wholesale) changes to these businesses."

Wood says the group is also flexible on what kind of owner is selling.

"If somebody wants to retire, we can deal with that," he says. "If somebody is ambitious and they feel they've taken a company as far as they can and want a group like ours to help them go to the next level, we can do that. So, the idea is we want to approach each of these companies in quite a flexible manner."

Visit united-landscape.com to learn more about the company.

VERMEER DONATES EQUIPMENT FOR MAKE-A-WISH CELEBRATION

Vermeer Wisconsin, Vermeer Corporation and KS Energy gave the young man battling cancer tools of the trade to start a landscaping business.

PELLA, Iowa — At a recent Make-A-Wish Day celebration held at the Vermeer Wisconsin facility in Madison, Wisconsin, Edgar Contreras was presented with the tools of the trade he needs to turn his dream of owning and operating his own landscaping company into a reality. Contreras is a 19-year-old from Milwaukee who is battling thyroid cancer.

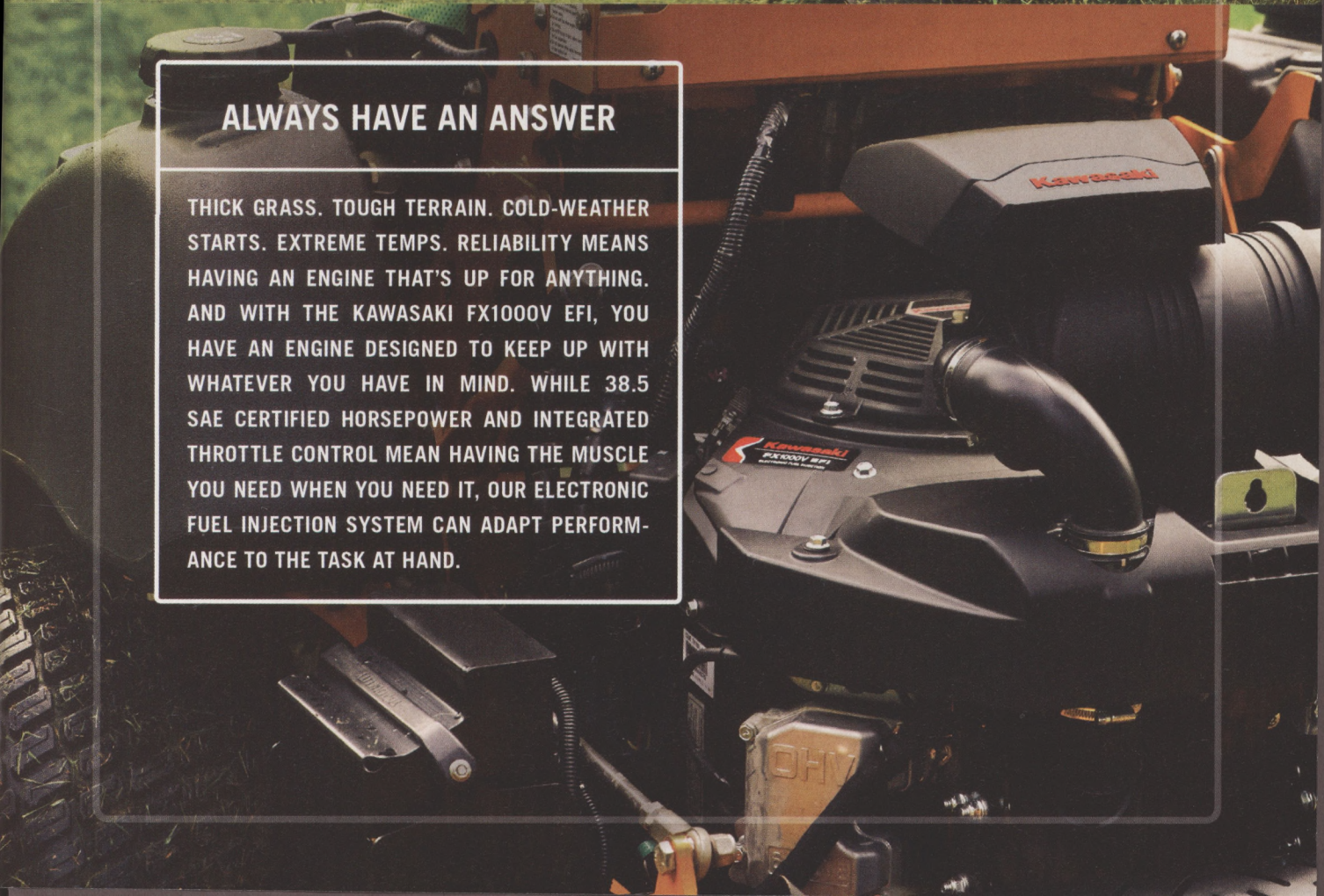
Orchestrated by Make-A-Wish Wisconsin, Contreras received a new Vermeer RTX250 pedestrian trencher, as well as a trailer to haul it with, an extended service package, an update to his truck's towing package, a generator, personal protective equipment (PPE) and a variety of hand tools. Donations were made by Vermeer Wisconsin, Vermeer



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Corporation and KS Energy Services Inc.

While presenting Contreras with his new tools of the trade, Chris Brouwers with KS Energy and Bear Reynolds with Vermeer Wisconsin expressed their commitment to helping Contreras on this career path by offering operator training, business development consulting and help navigating the challenges of starting a company.

“Everyone at KS Energy and the Klumb family supports Make-A-Wish Wisconsin and the organization’s efforts to fulfill dreams of children and their families,” Brouwers said. “This unique wish is near and dear to our hearts. Edgar is a wonderful person who has risen to the challenges life has put in his way, and we’re confident he will be successful in the landscaping industry.”

According to Forrest Doolen, the direc-



Edgar Contreras, 19, received a new trencher, and more equipment for his budding landscape business, through the Make-A-Wish initiative.

tor of marketing and communications for Make-A-Wish Wisconsin, the dream of starting a business is one Contreras shared with their team during his cancer treatment, but given the nature of his request, it took some time to grant.

“When Edgar said he wanted a trencher, we reached out to KS Energy, who in turn looped in the team at Vermeer Wisconsin and Vermeer Corporation,” he explained.

“The three organizations worked together to make sure they were providing more than just a piece of equipment – but also giving him the tools he needs to establish a business and support along the way.”

Growing up helping his father install irrigation systems is what spurred Contreras’ dream of owning his own landscaping business. He determined that owning a trencher would be the best way to get started.

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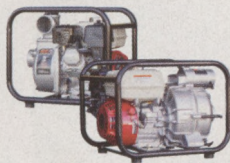
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SAVATREE ACQUIRES BIG TWIGS IN MICHIGAN

This will become SavATree's second office in Michigan and 51st branch office.

BEDFORD HILLS, N.Y. – SavATree, which provides professional tree, shrub and lawn care, has acquired Big Twigs Arboricultural Services of Orion, Michigan. This will become SavATree's second office in Michigan and 51st branch office.

Big Twigs has operated in the Metro Detroit tri-county area with general tree care and plant health care services. In addition to the current service offerings, clients will now have access to a wider range of services including professional lawn care, tick and mosquito treatments, deer deterrents, organic options and consulting services.

"We're thrilled to join forces with Big Twigs, a reputable company known for outstanding service," said SavATree CEO Carmine Schiavone. "Building density in Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties will provide clients with an enhanced portfolio of services as we continue to uphold an environmentally responsible approach."

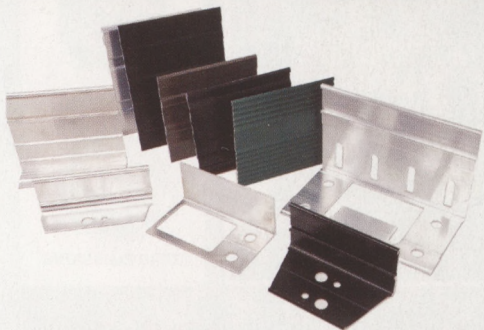
"SavATree shares our same philosophy and commitment to high-quality standards, making this a great fit," said Big Twigs owner Jon Knowlden. "I am confident that we will continue to provide our customers with top quality services."

BRIGHTVIEW ACQUIRES GREEN IMAGE IN LAS VEGAS

The company also recently revealed its first-quarter numbers.

BLUE BELL, Pa. – BrightView Holdings has acquired Green Image based in Las Vegas, Nevada. Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

"GTI and its more than 400 team members are a great strategic addition to our operations in the western U.S.," said BrightView President and CEO Andrew Masterman. "They bring a solid base of maintenance operations plus an impressive capability in landscape



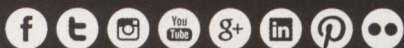
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development. This team of professionals has years of experience in horticulture, engineering, maintenance, design, architecture, and equipment management and I am pleased to welcome them to BrightView."


Founded in 2004, Green Image works on both landscape development and maintenance, including HOA streetscapes and entries, parks, common areas, play structures, athletic fields and water features.

"We look forward to the new opportunities our people will have joining the BrightView team," said GTI's Brock Krahenbuhl. "It's very exciting and we are ready for this new expansion in the landscape industry."

The company also recently revealed its first quarter fiscal results from 2021. The highlights from the numbers include:

- Total revenue of \$554.4 million compared to prior year of \$570.7 million.

- Net loss of \$12.0 million compared to prior year net loss of \$12.6 million, an improvement of \$0.6 million; and net loss margin of 2.2%, flat to prior year.
- Adjusted EBITDA of \$52.4 million compared to prior year of \$51.7 million, an increase of \$0.7 million.
- Adjusted EBITDA Margin of 9.5%, an increase of 40 basis points compared to prior year of 9.1%.
- Maintenance adjusted EBITDA of \$49.6 million compared to prior year of \$47.7 million.
- Maintenance adjusted EBITDA margin of 11.9%, an increase of 50 basis points compared to prior year of 11.4%.
- Completed four acquisitions since the beginning of fiscal 2021, with approximately \$80 million in annualized revenue.






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UNILOCK FOUNDER ED BRYANT DIES AT 85

A celebration of life was held virtually on Feb. 20.

Ed Bryant, founder of Unilock, passed away at his home in Horseshoe Valley, Ontario, on Jan. 28, 2021.

Born on Nov. 30, 1935, in Edmonton, Bryant spent his early years in Alberta. After two years at the University of British Columbia he enlisted in the military and was eventually stationed overseas in Soest, Germany. Upon returning, he worked in B.C. and Alberta on the pipelines with Mannix, a career path that ultimately brought him to Toronto where he received training in computers. He used this knowledge to help create one of the first companies, Global Travel Computer Services, to offer computerized booking systems to the travel industry.

However, an encounter while Bryant was building his home in Horseshoe Valley, ultimately led him to set the wheels in motion for an entirely new market, now known as the North American Hardscape Industry. A Swiss stone mason who worked with Bryant on his Horseshoe Valley home convinced him that paving stones were the answer for his sloped driveway. Unfortunately, at the time, no one in North America was manufacturing paving stones. To Bryant, this seemed like an intriguing opportunity, and soon the company that would become Unilock was born.

With the help of his new friend, Fritz von Langsdorff, he raised the capital to purchase a new Hess multi-layer machine and began producing one product (UNI-Stone) in one color (natural), at scale. In Ontario, immigrants from Holland and Germany took an interest in becoming paver installation contractors. Bryant's company helped train them, promoting the German DIN standard for pavers to ensure the quality of installations. In the late 1970s, Bryant and von Langsdorff traveled to the U.S. and formed the Uni-Group, first uniting companies who had purchased licenses to manufacture the UNI-Stone, and then adding other unique paver shapes.

Soon, Bryant had evolved Unilock from a manufacturing company to a marketing organization with full color product catalogs, installation videos, advertising campaigns and programs such as the Unilock Authorized Contractor program. In the 1980s, additions were made to manufacturing plants in Ontario, and new locations were opened in Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit and New York, followed by Cleveland and Boston in the 1990s.

Bryant and his beloved wife, Heather, built Unilock into one of the most respected paving stone manufacturers in the world. In 2012, Bryant received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, an honor bestowed upon Canadians for significant achieve-

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See what other attendees had to say about last year's event.

→ **IT WAS SO HELPFUL TO NETWORK AND LEARN ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES OTHERS ARE FACING WITH IMPLEMENTATION AND HOW THEY OVERCAME THE SAME CHALLENGES WE FACED.”**

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ments, in recognition of his business success and philanthropy.

Bryant is predeceased by his wife of 31 years, Heather; and son, Ted Bryant; hus-

band of Mary Bryant, and loving father of Roland Wood (Rita), Stacy Bryant, Jeannie Slade (Paul), Andrew Bryant (Kristina) and Sydney Bryant Kodatsky (Alec). He

will be sadly missed by his beloved aunts, Marge Woods, Norma Catrano and (late) Margaret "Peggy" Allan; siblings, Rick Bryant (Nancy), Sandra Wood (Stan), Lincoln Bryant and Beverley Bryant (Loretta), nieces, nephews, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, cousins and friends.

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SCHILL GROUNDS MANAGEMENT ACQUIRES THE OHIO VALLEY GROUP'S COMMERCIAL DIVISION

Andy and Kathleen Dangelo plan to focus on residential, design/build and their Sapphire Creek Winery.

NORTH RIDGEVILLE, Ohio – Schill Grounds Management has purchased the commercial division of The Ohio Valley Group in a carve-out acquisition that expands Schill's service area to the east side of Cleveland.

Schill will take over all of The Ohio Valley Group's commercial customer accounts for office, retail, mixed-use and industrial properties, while the owners of the family-run business will continue to serve residential accounts and focus more of their time on other entrepreneurial endeavors. About a dozen employees of The Ohio Valley Group will join the Schill family, and Schill will gain equipment and use of a portion of their existing facilities and office space.

Schill purchased Marion, Ohio-based McCoy Landscape Services last year and is actively seeking additional acquisitions within the commercial landscape space in Ohio and beyond.

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– Jamie Hageman, Manager, GreenLawn



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“We are excited to welcome these new Ohio Valley Group employees and customers to the Schill family,” said Jerry Schill, president and co-founder of Schill Grounds Management. “We look forward to working with our new teammates to provide our new customers with high-quality, year-round landscaping services.”

Selling the commercial division to Schill was part of a purposeful succession plan for The Ohio Valley Group owners Andy and Kathleen Dangelo.

Drawing on their love of horticulture, winemaking and travel, the Dangelos have created a winery and event space called Sapphire Creek Winery & Gardens. The Dangelos plan to focus on residential landscape maintenance and design/build projects through The Ohio Valley Group while expanding Sapphire Creek Winery.

“After spending more than 30 years growing our business and investing in our employees and customers, we are delighted to leave our commercial division in the hands of someone who will nurture it and care for it as much as we have,” said Andy Dangelo, president of The Ohio Valley Group. “Kathleen and I are very impressed with the Schill organization and thankful for the opportunity to spend more time growing our new business, Sapphire Creek.”

▶ GORE JOINS TAKEUCHI

Luschen Gore will serve as the company’s Mid-Atlantic regional business manager.

ATLANTA – Luschen “Lou” Gore has joined Takeuchi-US as its new regional business manager for the Mid-Atlantic region, which includes South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio. Gore will be responsible for all sales development and activity in that multi-state region, including dealer development, dealer recruitment, inventory control, collections, forecasting, program promotion and communication.

“Lou brings more than 20 years of industry experience working with dealer networks, dealer development and financial support,” said Henry Lawson, director of sales for

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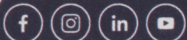
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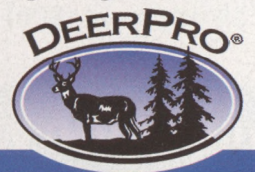
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Takeuchi-US. "His sales background, strategic-planning experience and impressive track record make him an excellent fit for his new role with Takeuchi. We look forward to his contributions and welcome him to the Takeuchi family."

A resident of Fort Mill, S.C., Gore comes to Takeuchi from his previous position as assistant vice president of OEM sales at TCF Inventory Finance. Prior to his tenure there, he spent nearly a decade with Textron Corporation in a variety of roles including director of finance, territory sales manager, channel development manager and sales director.

"I've spent most of my career in sales, and I understand the importance of being a highly motivated, progressive team player," said Gore. "I'm eager to apply my equipment knowledge, channel management experience and problem-solving skills to assist Takeuchi dealers and customers throughout the Mid-Atlantic region."

JOSH WILLEY NAMED TO 40 SUPERSTARS UNDER 40 LIST

Willey is the Green Lawn Fertilizing/Green Pest Solutions senior vice president of operations.

Josh Willey, the Green Lawn Fertilizing/Green Pest Solutions senior vice president of operations, was named to Chester County's 40 Superstars Under 40 List by Vista Today.

The 2021 List of Vista Millennial Superstars celebrates Chester County's business and professional leaders under the age of 40.

"Josh is just an overall great person both personally and professionally. Josh is an incredible leader. He has made an impact at Green Lawn Fertilizing and Green Pest Solutions since his first day and has been instrumental in helping build our leadership team and drive continuous improvement in all aspects

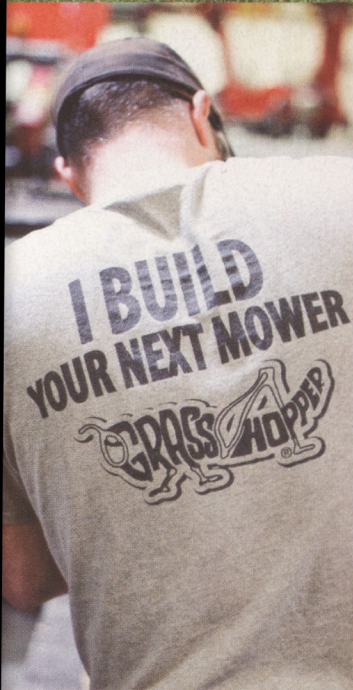
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of our business," said President/Owner Matt Jesson.

Willey has put an emphasis on training, development and education. He created a

leadership development program at Green Lawn and Green Pest to assist front line employee's development into management. In October 2019, Josh completed a

three month executive education program at Stanford University.

"It's an honor to be listed among this group of 40 young professionals who are having a huge impact on Chester County businesses," Willey said. "I certainly would not be where I am today without the help of countless colleagues throughout my career and I try whenever possible to pay things forward by helping others advance their careers."

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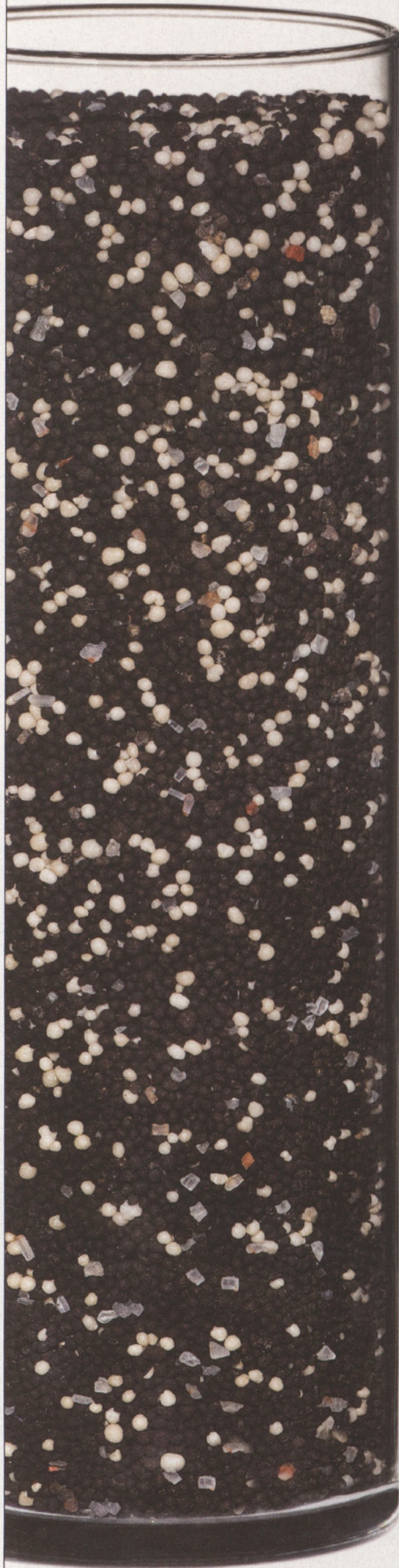
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KUBOTA UPDATES WHEEL LOADER LINEUP

The new R540 and R640 models feature increased life performance and panoramic views.

GRAPEVINE, Texas – Kubota Tractor Corporation announced an update to its wheel loader lineup with the launch of the new R540 and R640 models. The next-generation wheel loaders are available in both canopy and cab models and feature improved visibility, enhanced operator comfort and increased performance over the previous R30 Series models. Designed with landscape, residential and commercial construction operators in mind, the new R540 and R640 wheel loaders will be available at dealerships beginning in March 2021.

"Kubota dedicated a substantial amount of field research in the engineering upgrades that went into the new R540 and R640; they are built with operator comfort and productivity in mind," said Patrick Baker, Kubota construction equipment product manager. "These new models have an incredible amount of space and power for a compact machine. Plus, with the enlarged front window and full-sized right-side window, they offer an unparalleled view of the worksite."



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Engineered to meet the demands of the jobsite, both the R540 and R640 provide increased weight and improved lift performance over the previous generation. Featuring a 64-horsepower Tier 4 Final engine, the R640 boasts an operating weight of 11,563 pounds and delivers a maximum breakout force of 9,869 pounds and 8,161 pounds of lifting capacity. With a 54-horsepower Tier 4 Final engine, the R540 has an operating weight of 10,285 pounds and delivers a maximum breakout force of 8,183 pounds and 6,767 pounds of lifting capacity.

The new R540 and R640 wheel loaders feature several updates that improve visibility and safety for operators. Cab models for both the R540 and R640 offer a panoramic perspective of the environment with an enlarged front window and a

new full-sized, all-glass right-side window that is the same size as the entrance door, providing 360-degree visibility around the machines. The new right-side window also allows greater visibility of the front-right tire for better maneuverability.

The arms of the R540 and R640 have been redesigned for better visibility when connecting attachments with the hydraulic coupler, enabling operators to connect attachments without getting out of the cab. With new delta-shaped loader arms that run parallel and become narrow at the cab and widen at the end of the loader arms, operator visibility is enhanced when the bucket is lifted at full height. The R540 and R640 also feature standard LED working lights, a transition from halogen lights, making the equipment well-suited for low light operation.



KUBOTA'S NEW WHEEL LOADER LINEUP IS ALREADY AVAILABLE AT DEALERSHIPS NATIONWIDE.

Kubota's new R540 and R640 wheel loaders include comfort features designed to reduce operator fatigue and boost productivity. By moving the reconfigured console and switch layout to the right side of the cabin, operators have more foot and leg room, and all controls are just a finger touch away. With the multi-function control lever, all major loader functions and operational functions can be accomplished with one hand. **L&L**



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– Nathan Nielson, Ultimate Innovations Inc (Hawaii) –

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MORE BIDDING MISTAKES YOU DON'T WANT TO MAKE

→ **TRUCKS, FIELD EQUIPMENT AND THEIR RELATED COSTS** can cause big cost estimating challenges for green industry contractors. As mentioned in my February article, the total cost of trucks and equipment (T&E) for a landscape or irrigation company is usually 12% (+/- 2%) of revenue. Tree care companies usually run a little higher at 15% (+/-2%).

The primary issue facing contractors is how to accurately estimate T&E costs and ensure that their costs are included in their pricing and passed on to customers with an appropriate profit margin applied to them.

To do so, a contractor should first accurately calculate the cost per hour (CPH) for a truck or piece of equipment. Then, when pricing project or services costs, he or she should multiply the CPH for a specific item by the estimated hours that the item will be used on the project or in the service provided. (In rare instances when pricing tree care or lawn maintenance packages, I will average the daily run-time hours for mowers, chippers, saws, etc.) Too often, contractors average their T&E costs in their pricing. They often do so by including them in with their general and administrative (G&E) overhead costs. Another form of averaging is to allocate T&E costs in a bid by multiplying the man-hours in a bid by a company-wide average T&E cost per billable man-hour. The issue is accuracy – either overstating or understating T&E costs. The following example should help explain the problem with this second method.

THE PERIL OF USING AVERAGES. Mary owned a design/build company in the Northwest United States. Annual sales were just at \$1 million. Her T&E costs (fuel, straight-line depreciation, repairs, mechanic and misc. costs) totaled \$120,000 or 12% of revenue. She had three, three-man crews working an average of 42 man-hours per week for forty weeks (42 x 40 = 1,680 per man year or 15,120 for the entire crew). Minus vacation and holiday man-hours, total billable field man-hours were about 15,000 for the year. She calculated her average T&E cost per hour at \$8 (\$120,000 ÷ 15,000 man-hours).

Mary would price her projects with a 20% net profit margin (NPM) applied to her break-even point. She would include her T&E costs in the bid by multiplying the total man-hours in a job by her \$8 company-wide average T&E cost per man-hour. However, she would rarely see more than a 10% NPM on her year-end profit and loss statement.

The problem: Mary would estimate her T&E costs in a job having 500 man-hours in it at \$4,000 (500 MHRs x \$8). The \$4,000 would be accurate if the job required the average amount of T&E on it. However, this was rarely the case. For instance, if the job only required a three-man crew with a pickup truck and wheelbarrows, Mary would over-estimate her T&E costs. If the pickup truck CPH was \$12 per hour, it would cost \$4 per man-hour (\$12 ÷ 3 men = \$4). She would overstate her T&E costs by \$2,000 (500 MHRs x \$4). Add

a 20% NPM to the \$2,000 and she would over-price the job by \$2,500 (((\$2,000 ÷ (1.0 - 0.2))).

On the other hand, if a 500 man-hour job required her skid-steer, Dingo and pickup truck, the total T&E costs would probably be in the neighborhood of \$12 per man-hour or \$6,000 (500 x \$12). Mary would subsequently underprice the job by \$2,500. Guess which jobs Mary would win? She'd win the jobs that she underpriced and lose the jobs that she over-priced.

The solution: Mary has a cost estimating accuracy problem. She should estimate her T&E costs in her projects by estimating the number of hours that a Dingo, skid-steer, etc. would be used on a project by its specific cost per hour. If a skid-steer is estimated to be used on a project for ten hours and its CPH is \$350, the bid should include \$350 cost plus a 20% NPM or \$437.50 ((\$350 ÷ (1.0 - 0.2))).

CONCLUSION. When it comes to including your truck and equipment costs in your pricing, you want to be as accurate as you are practical. One exception to this rule is cost estimating packages of labor and equipment, such as tree care or lawn maintenance packages where it is almost impossible to be precise with the amount of hours a mower, chipper, chain saw, edger, blower, etc. will be used. In these cases, it is reasonable to average such hours.

Remember, every reasonable operational cost in your business should be passed on to your customers with an appropriate profit margin applied to it.

The challenge is not to overstate or understate such costs. If you do, you'll tend to win the jobs that you underprice and lose the ones that you overprice. The more work that you do, the less money you make. I don't think I have to tell you that's not good! **L&L**

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A GAME PLAN FOR STRATEGY

→ **THERE ARE ANY NUMBER** of powerful lessons we can learn about strategy. Painfully, they often come after we forge ahead without one.

Strategy will always be the way to win the battle for customers. And while most companies consider strategy through annual planning, I wonder if once a year is enough to win the war within your market.

For example, some companies form a strategy around selling their companies to private equity. But what does private equity value besides EBITDA? They are looking for recurring revenue/maintenance-focused companies with good management teams. And, of course, they look at customer retention, market share, profitability and enhancement success rates.

When organizations look at their financials at the end of the year, they typically look at growth and profit first. Unfortunately, if those two numbers look good, or if they grew 10-15%, they are satisfied.

This year, many businesses seemed pleased if their financials equaled prior results, especially given the pandemic. But in digging deeper, we're finding that they hit their sales goals due to construction or unusual enhancements, but contract sales did not grow. In fact, many contracts decreased. From a strategic standpoint, they lost ground on a key driver of value and it may have gone undetected.

Some landscape companies are actively ramping up sales and their strategy is to hire a sales person. I hear little in the way of whether or not they are targeting the right kind of sales person or the right kind of sales.

Today, we have access to an incredible amount of data. If we use market analytics to drive how we look at and execute strategy, we can not only see measurable results, but we can create a business that is both sustainable and attractive to customers and talent.

So how do we do that? First, think about strategy by job costing and separating customers by segments: residential, or commercial office, HOA/multifamily, retail, hospitality/resort, municipal, education/institution, industrial and healthcare, or other high-growth segment unique to your business now or in the future, such as senior living or green redevelopment.

Use data to determine which segments provide the best margins, the most enhancement work or customer retention histories. Then use this information to target your sales and marketing efforts.

Although marketing is often considered tactical in terms of its elements, such as flyers, collateral, or other content rich visuals, marketing must be strategically driven and your creative pieces have to be strategically driven, too.

Sometimes I'll look at a website and it's unclear what the company's core business is or in what market it operates. I'll see a website from a firm targeting commercial maintenance and see images of construction or residential projects. For companies where snow is critical to revenue, I wonder why winter services is an afterthought or barely mentioned at all.

In our conversations about the importance of eliminating silos, we typically think of operational silos – sales and ops, for example, when communication breaks down or there is slippage in service. Silos also exist with things, where flyers and websites and graphics look like they were created ad hoc, by teams or agencies who didn't talk to each other or share the same data. The lesson here is that if you confuse your customer, either through disconnects in service or messaging, you'll lose the sale.

To be successful, marketing must be part of the strategic big picture. All tactical elements and creative materials that support and drive sales have to align, just like our operational teams, in support of the greater objective. In other words, everything you execute – from installing plants to plowing snow to creating content – should drive revenue. And if it drives revenue, it needs a seat at the strategy table.

A FINAL THOUGHT. Link strategy across all functions to improve processes. Because processes, like all tactics, is the noise before defeat if it's not linked to winning.

In my experience, hoping it will collapse into place is never a strategy. But sharpen your skills over time, hone your ability to become a better strategist, better at masterminding your market, and understand your customer and lead your company to stay in play. **L&L**



WHILE MOST COMPANIES CONSIDER STRATEGIZING, doing so more than once a year might be necessary.



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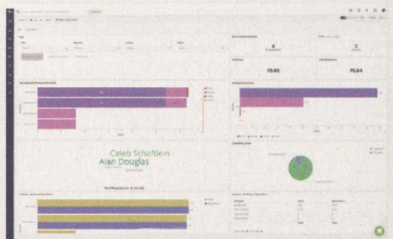
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AN OVERLOOKED REVENUE SOURCE

→ **THIS TIME OF YEAR**, most landscape contractors are busy setting goals and establishing budgets. Almost every owner I talk with is in growth mode and is looking for ways to increase revenue (and ideally, profits). What's one simple way to increase revenue and profits without having to spend thousands of dollars in marketing and advertising? Sell more services to your existing clients.

When I managed marketing and sales for a couple of different landscape companies, I often fixated on finding new clients to meet our aggressive sales goals. In the process, I forgot about our loyal existing clients who already knew us, appreciated our quality and, most importantly, seldom questioned our prices. New clients always seem more exciting to work with than existing clients. However, your close rate with your existing clients should be close to 90%, while close rates on new projects seldom exceed 40%. Selling to your existing clients should be a no-brainer. **The following are seven ways to increase revenue by selling to your existing clients:**

1. Sell more of what they already have. Many clients cannot afford to pay for their entire project at one time. Often, the project is broken down into phases to accommodate a budget and to get the installation off the ground. This presents a perfect time to stay in touch with your clients as they prepare for phase two or three of their project. The best thing is that the design is already done. You just need to update the budget.

2. Be proactive when suggesting enhancements. Account managers are missing a great opportunity to increase their sales if they are not proactively walking the property with their clients or the property managers. Setting up a minimum of two to three formal walks a year is great service. Bring suggestions for landscape improvements and proposals ready to be signed. Many account managers are hesitant to do that because they feel they are nickel and diming their clients. Keep in mind you are the experts, and your clients want your expertise.

3. Sell the same services at different locations. If you are performing maintenance for a client at their home, ask if they would like you to quote the maintenance at their office. Likewise, if you have completed an installation project at their home, ask if you can look at their office to offer landscape improvement suggestions to help bring in more clients, tenants, etc. Be aware though that the decision-making on a client's commercial property may be done by others.

4. Add maintenance for design/build clients. This is a perfect way to stay in touch with your client. As the landscape grows and matures, opportunities for landscape enhancements exist. In my experience, many design/build contractors are reluctant to add maintenance services. Typically, because they do not have a passion for maintenance or are not comfortable with that scope of work.

If that's the case in your business, it's wise to hire someone with maintenance expertise and passion. The worst thing you can do is to lose a great design/build client because you stumbled your way through maintaining their garden.

5. Add complementary design/build services. For design/build contractors, consider adding new services like lighting or sound systems which are real client-pleasers. You can either try to self-perform those services, or pair up with a good subcontractor in your area.

6. Add complementary maintenance services. Many of the maintenance contractors that I work with are adding mosquito control to their list of service offerings. It's high margin work that ties in nicely with your weed and insect control programs.

You could also add holiday lighting. This is a nice addition as it typically comes at a time of the year when your maintenance services have slowed considerably, and you have excess capacity to get the lighting installed.

7. Expand your color program. Many contractors perform one, maybe two, color rotations each year for their clients. Consider adding a third rotation which includes winter color displays with evergreen boughs, red dogwood and holly branches.

Other ways to expand your color program are to offer specialty color displays for holidays or color displays cheering on your favorite sports team. Adding unique containers to your client's front entry or patio can be a great way to add revenue.

As you can see, there are many ways to increase your sales and profits by selling to your existing clients. It is far easier to do that than to always be on the hunt for new clients. **L&L**

↓
THERE'S PLENTY OF WAYS TO INCREASE YOUR REVENUE, but looking within your existing customer base can be a great start.

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LEGISLATIVE LANDSCAPE is an occasional column by Andrew Bray, vice president, government relations, for the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

BIDEN'S EARLY ACTIONS

On January 20, President Joe Biden became the 46th President in American history. It was a different inauguration punctuated by the extra security and lack of crowds due to COVID-19, but a remarkable transition of power occurred, and we now look toward the Biden Presidency.

President Biden wasted no time issuing some significant executive orders while also laying out some key policy priorities. Biden's first executive orders were primarily directed at rolling back some of President Trump's policies like rejoining the Paris Climate Accord, ending what's been referred to politically as the "Muslim" travel ban and ending construction of the southern border wall. Other executive orders focused on COVID, the economy and racial equity.

We anticipate more to come, but at this point, the president has not rescinded President Trump's guest worker visa suspension. Regardless, it is set to expire on March 31 prior to the April second half cap date of entry. Recent reports indicate that he does plan to rescind Trump's guest worker suspension later in February.

In addition to the executive orders, President Biden immediately placed a regulatory freeze on rules that had not been finalized under President Trump and also put in place a list of regulatory actions under President Trump that will be closely reviewed and scrutinized in the interest of public health.

President Biden also began to lay out his policy objectives for his first term. His first legislative priority will be asking Congress to pass a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 "Rescue" package followed closely by a "Recovery" package that will focus on the economy and infrastructure. In his first week in office, President Biden also put forth the parameters of comprehensive immigration reform, which may have a significant impact on long-standing efforts to achieve comprehensive H-2B reforms and cap relief. We also believe large scale proposals on climate change, racial and gender equity are forthcoming, along with some likely smaller proposals on taxes and healthcare in response to legislation passed by the previous Congress.

It is remarkable that so many of NALP tier 1 priorities (environmental, immigration, labor and COVID-19 relief) will be at the forefront of many of these conversations. In no way does this mean we will get exactly what we want, but it means we have a lot of work to do to protect and promote landscape policy priorities during the debates.

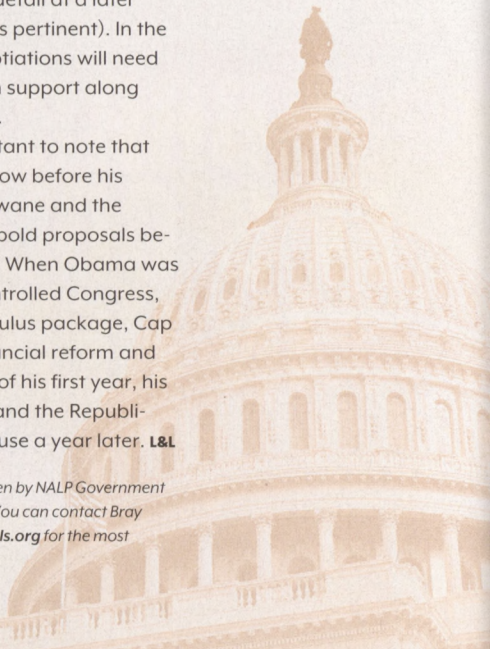
It is important to note that President Biden's proposed legislative agenda is just a road map for legislative priorities. In order to be made into law, President Biden's priorities must be negotiated, amended and passed by both chambers of Congress, which is not an easy task. Whatever Biden proposes is not what will be enacted into law but provides a "marker" for Congress to begin negotiations. The House and Senate are in Democratic majority, but the margins are thin, especially in the Senate, where there is no filibuster proof majority. President Biden continues to court 10 moderate Republicans, but in order to defeat the filibuster, all 10 must come on board.

Discussions will also continue about abolishing the filibuster or passing some of Biden's proposals through a process called "reconciliation" (we'll cover more in detail at a later date if and when it becomes pertinent). In the end, compromise and negotiations will need to occur to gain Republican support along with some of their priorities.

Lastly, it would be important to note that Biden has a very short window before his power politically begins to wane and the likelihood of passing these bold proposals becomes increasingly narrow. When Obama was elected and Democrats controlled Congress, they passed a massive stimulus package, Cap and Trade, Dodd Frank financial reform and then healthcare. By the fall of his first year, his political capital was spent and the Republicans took control of the House a year later. **L&L**

Editor's note: This article was written by NALP Government Affairs Department on Feb. 7, 2021. You can contact Bray at andrew@landscapeprofessionals.org for the most current information.

IT'S REMARKABLE THAT SO MANY INDUSTRY PRIORITIES are on the forefront of the new president's list of policy discourse.



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the right route

GPS tracking of landscaping trucks and equipment can help improve safety, reduce downtime and elevate transparency with employees and clients.

By Gregg Wartgow

Charles Nelson started his company, Stepping Stone Landscaping in Henrico, Va., five years ago. Two years later, he started utilizing GPS tracking technology. As a result, he has seen a reduction in manhours - and a level of employee accountability most landscape companies can only dream of.

The GPS tracking solution Nelson uses has broad functionality. He likes to focus on truck location and time tracking, along with a variety of vehicle performance data.

"One of the benefits I offer my employees is a cellphone with unlimited everything," Nelson says. "When I was first thinking about how GPS could help us, I also started thinking about how big our company cellphone bill already was. So, I decided to go with a GPS solution from our cellphone provider. I just plug a little device into the diagnostic port under the dashboard on the truck. For another \$10 a month, we added mobile hotspot."

The setup allows Nelson to monitor GPS data to pinpoint the location of a truck at any given time. Additionally, because the device is plugged into the truck's diagnostic port, Nelson is able to monitor things like unfastened seat belts, rapid acceleration, harsh braking and excessive speed. In fact, Nelson is set up to receive text alerts when a truck exceeds 50 mph.

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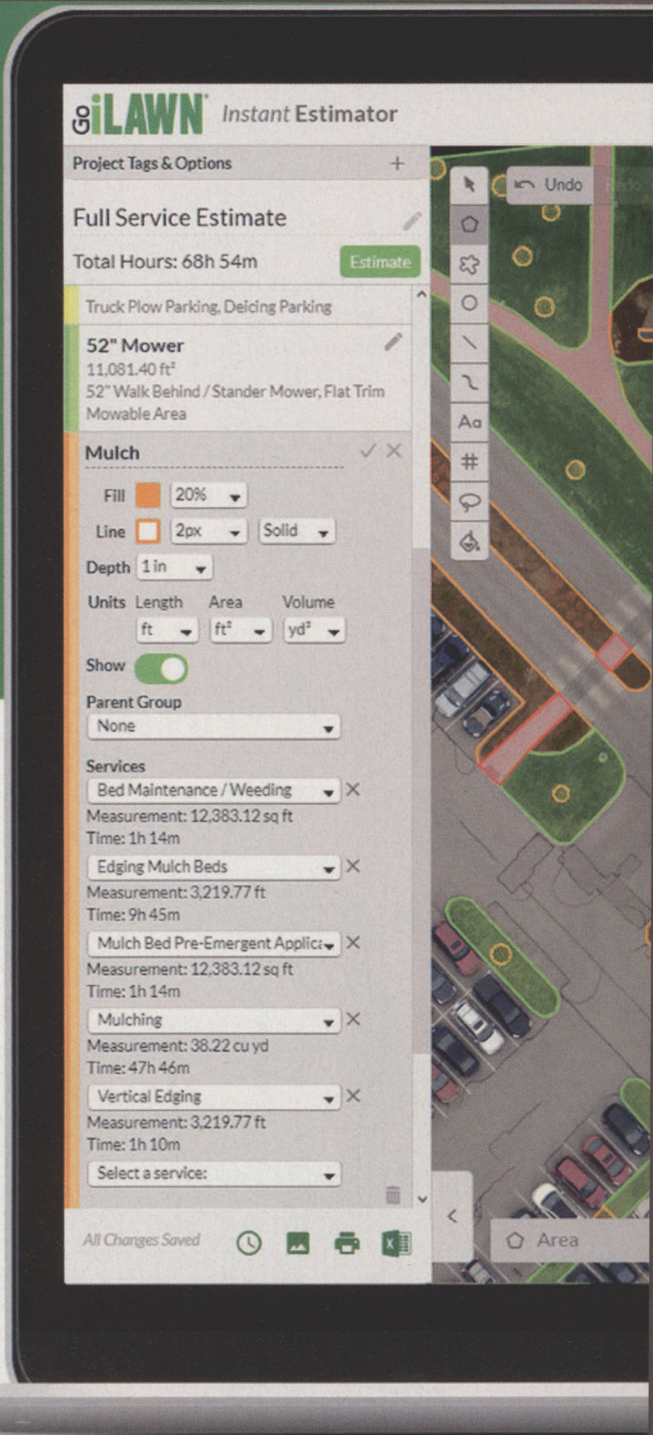
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“Now I have access to all kinds of information right on my cellphone or computer in the office.”

JOHN SANDERS, owner of 3G Landscapes & Lawn Care

“We generate weekly scores to see how our drivers are doing,” Nelson says. “So, it’s not only a safety thing, but also an accountability thing.”

BIG IMPACT ON BILLABLE HOURS. John Sanders, owner of 3G Landscapes & Lawn Care in Stillwater, Okla., began using GPS last year. His company had grown to three

crews, making it harder for him to keep track of where everyone was throughout the day. When a customer complained that their crew never showed up, it was nearly impossible for Sanders to refute it.

“Now I can pull my GPS log and show the customer that we were there to perform a service,” Sanders says. “This is especially important when we’re delivering spraying services.”

The GPS solution Sanders uses is wired into the truck’s communication system. “Now I have access to all kinds of information right on my cellphone or computer in the office. Tracking billable hours is no longer just a guess,” he says.

Back over in Virginia, Stepping Stone Landscaping specializes in landscape maintenance. Efficient routing and tightly controlled downtime are big drivers of profitability. GPS has more than paid for itself in this area alone.

“The biggest thing is having the ability to track idle time,” Nelson says. “I’m more forgiving in the winter months, but there is just no need to sit there and let a truck run during the summer.”

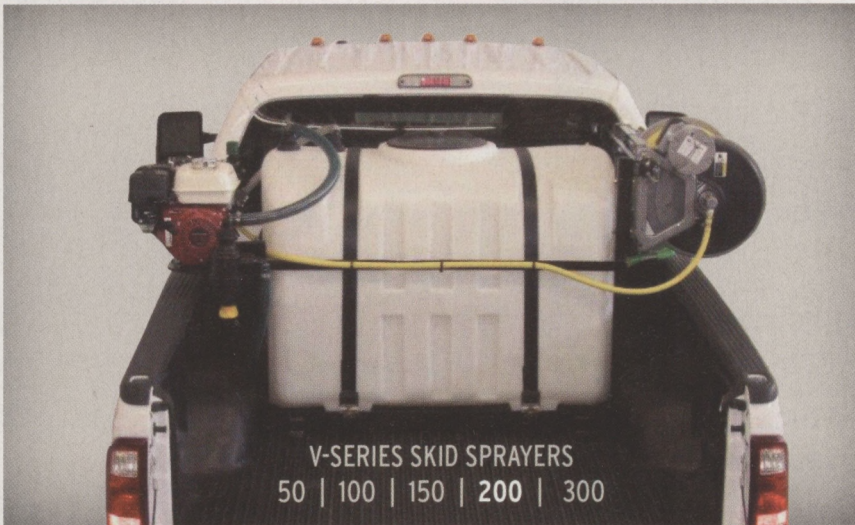
Another manhour-related benefit relates to time clock punches. There is a GPS tracking component built into the management software Nelson uses, but having an additional tracking tool in a crew’s truck provides a valuable backup solution.

“My employees are great, but they are human,” Nelson says. “Sometimes they forget to clock in when they arrive to a property. When that happens, I can look at the GPS data and sort all of that out.”

Speaking of punching the clock, GPS can help in one more way. Without GPS tracking, employees might punch out for lunch when they arrive to the gas station or fast food place. In reality, they should be punching out when they begin driving there. Sanders says GPS data allows him to identify when those times are.

Sanders also likes to keep track of a truck’s movements – especially if it travels beyond the company’s predefined 20-mile service radius. When a truck goes outside of

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WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET GOING.

You've probably heard this saying many times, but if there's one thing the past year has taught us, it's that the landscape industry is tough, and we're committed to moving forward together.

This year's Benchmarking Your Business report offers a rare glimpse into the different ways landscape industry professionals have adapted their businesses to thrive in the face of the rapidly evolving marketplace. We face many of the same challenges, and the perspective gained by learning how others have handled these challenges has never been more valuable than it is today. There are many pathways to success, so I hope the data in this report can help reveal new opportunities for you.

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All the best in your 2021 season and beyond!

Best regards,



Director of Marketing
Exmark and Z Turf Equipment



Jamie Briggs

Director of Marketing
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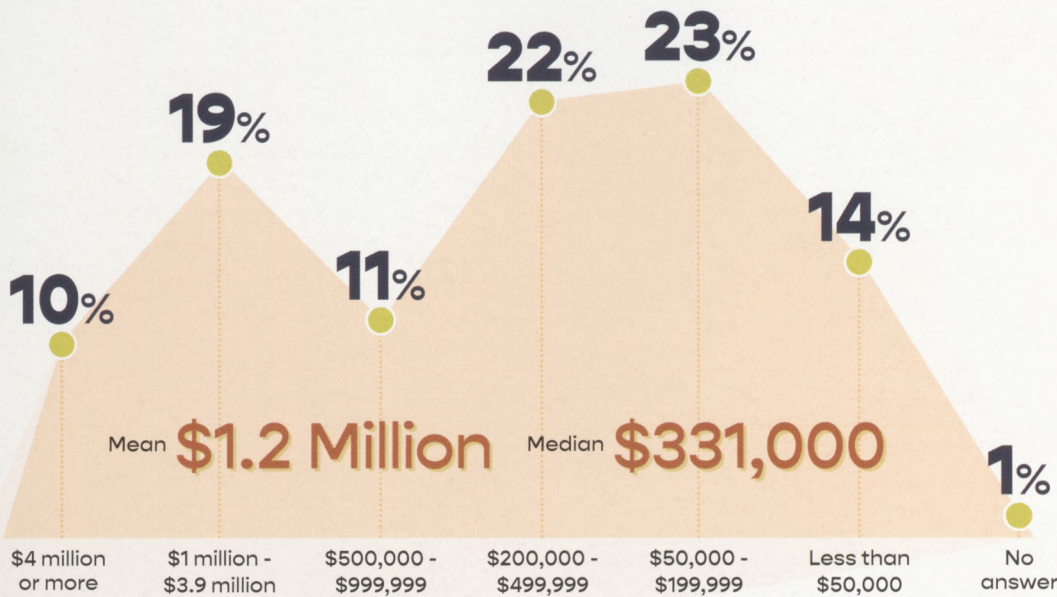
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It's been a few years since we last published our Benchmarking Your Business report, but with COVID-19 disrupting the world, it's a good time to check how the numbers look on a national level. We surveyed the industry on pay rates, profit margin and many other financial indicators. We've also revamped our Benchmarking Your Business tool to provide a place for you to enter your information and see how you measure against the industry. Visit bit.ly/lawnbenchmark to access the tool.

Approximately what was your location's **2020 gross revenue**?



Approximately what percentage of your location's **2020 gross revenue** came from each of the following services?

*(residential and/or commercial)

- 41%** Landscape maintenance*
- 22%** Landscape construction/design/build*
- 17%** Lawn care/chemical application*
- 7%** Snow and ice management
- 5%** Irrigation installation/maintenance
- 2%** Tree care

In which state/province is your company location?

NORTHEAST

- New England
- Middle Atlantic

MIDWEST

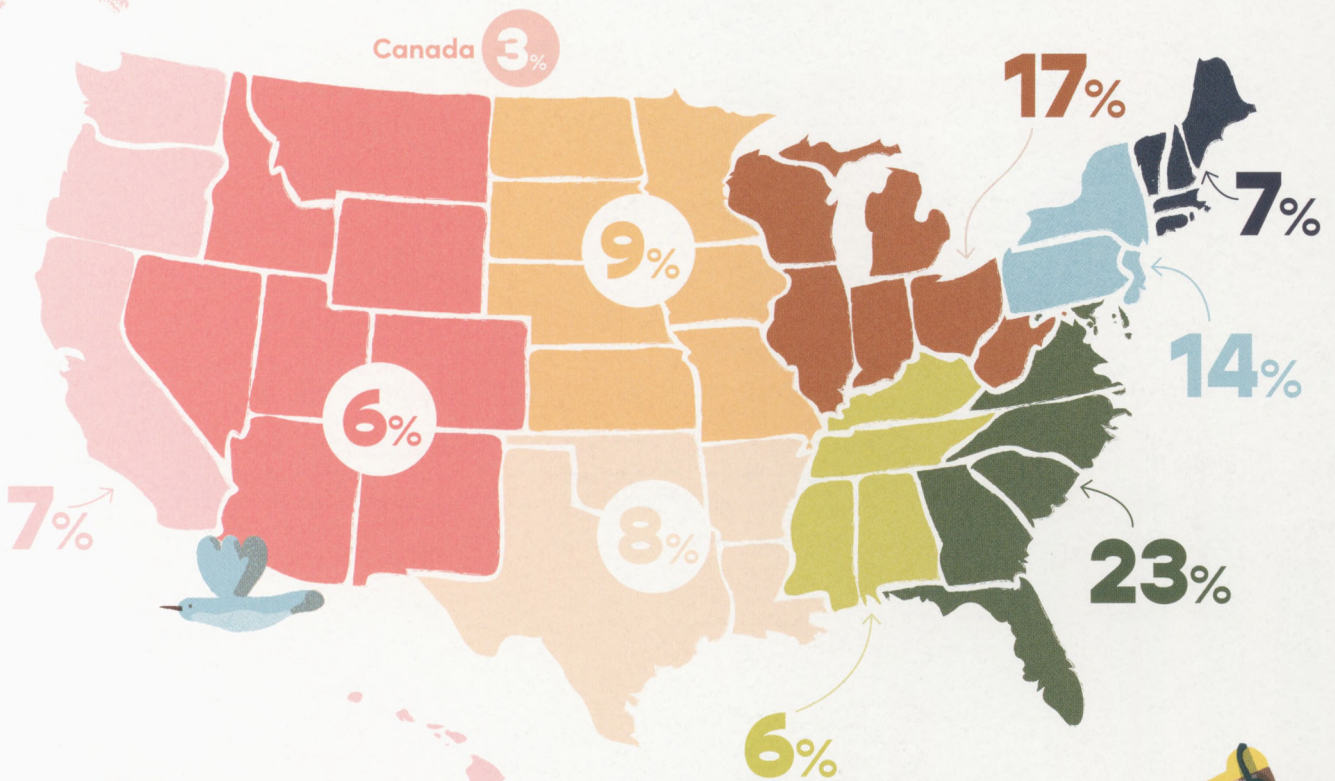
- East North Central
- West North Central

SOUTH

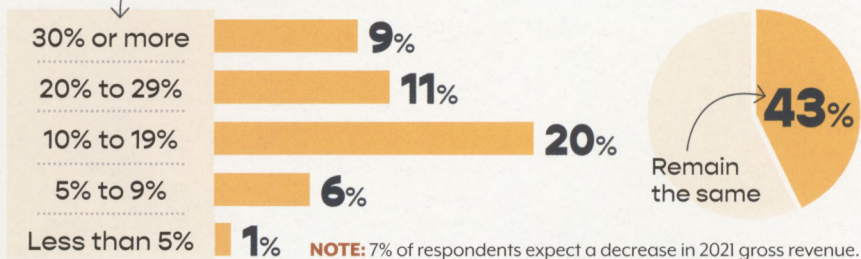
- South Atlantic
- East South Central
- West South Central

WEST

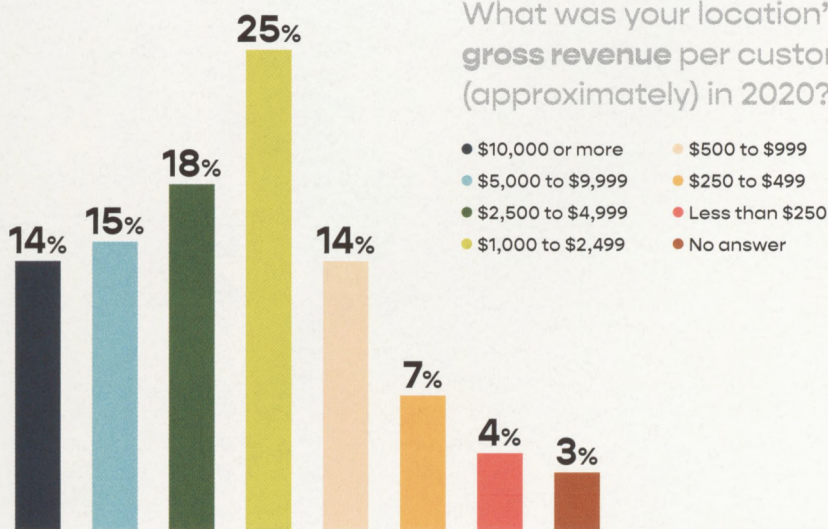
- Mountain
- Pacific



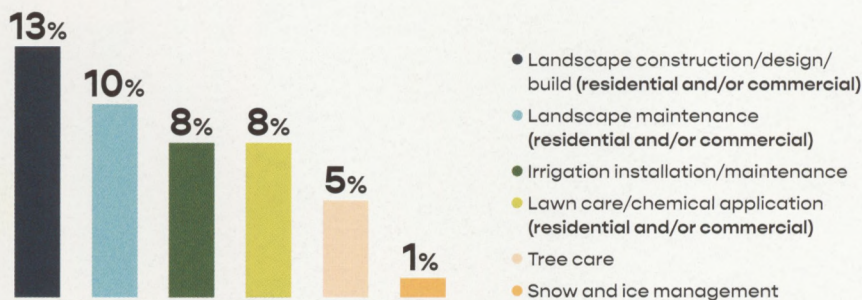
Compared with 2020, how do you anticipate your location's **2021 gross revenue** will change?



What was your location's **gross revenue per customer** (approximately) in 2020?



Compared with 2019, contractors said their 2020 total gross revenue increased by:



NOTE: Readex Research fielded this survey in January 2021. The margin of error for percentages based on 671 landscape contractors/lawn care operators is ±3.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Not all totals will equal 100%.

What does your location charge, on average, **per hour** for labor for each of the following services?

\$87.91

Snow and ice management

\$74.87

Tree care

\$65.42

Irrigation installation/maintenance

\$64.94

Landscape construction/design/build (residential and/or commercial)

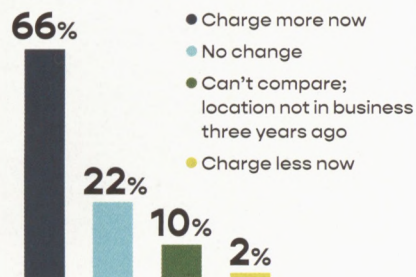
\$61.70

Lawn care/chemical application (residential and/or commercial)

\$53.40

Landscape maintenance (residential and/or commercial)

Compared with three years ago, how have your location's prices changed in general?



Pay IT OUT



Whether it's salary for employees or your slice of the profits, judging how to pay everyone on board can be tricky.

Story by **Jimmy Miller** × Illustrations by **Beth Walrond**

Figuring out how much to pay your employees – and, for that matter, how to pay yourself – can seem like a delicate situation. How much is too little for new laborers? When is it time to give someone a raise so they don't jump ship and join another company? And how do you evaluate your own job performance to pay yourself accordingly?

These are complex questions only further complicated by a global pandemic. And as landscapers nationwide refitted their trucks and restructured their companies to adjust for safety protocols, they also had to make on-the-fly decisions about payroll.

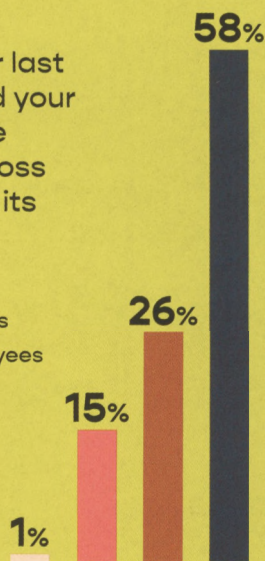
"In March and April, I was very frank with my staff. We had a huge project – the biggest commercial job that, in 18 years, we were ever going to undertake," says Benjamin Lewis, the president of Browder-Hite in Virginia. The project got tabled because the owners' funding source backed away due to the financial implications of COVID-19. "I thought, 'My goodness gracious, if this is the beginning of the year, I have no idea what this year will be like,'" he says.

For some, the adjustments were awkward – Lewis says his company enjoyed a great 2020, while at Clarke's Landscape Solutions, Jonathan Clarke says he suffered a 30% loss in revenue. Couple that with crews who didn't want to work, and he says the year resulted in a pay cut for everyone, including himself.

"I had to limit the amount of work I estimated, but my guys were paid consistently," he says. "I just adjusted my pay accordingly."

Following your last fiscal year, did your location share its profit and loss numbers with its employees?

- No answer
- Yes: All employees
- Yes: Some employees
- No





Tightening things up

For Paul Fraynd, the CEO at Sun Valley Landscaping in Omaha, Nebraska, all the necessary COVID-19 precautions were put into place almost immediately. They closed for a day right around when the rest of the world seemed to – the tipping point for him was when the NBA started cancelling games. And when they quickly reopened, they had to be particularly careful around their clients as 55% of the work they do is residential, largely either design/build or maintenance.

Then, Fraynd implemented a pay freeze across the entire \$6-million company that would later be lifted in July, so pay raises were temporarily suspended. Other perks for his 55 employees were also removed, including the complementary local zoo membership each of his employees enjoys.

But by the summer, Fraynd had a new plan in place: They reestablished a portion of the budget for pay raises and started divulging full financial information in monthly Zoom calls to the employees to be transparent. Between explaining that and asking for their input – they all collectively decided to keep pay raises over company parties, for instance – Fraynd says his company navigated the pandemic well.

“Honestly, people just want to go to work and feel safe,” he says. “We’ve built that trust by sharing the real facts. It

What was the national average **annual salary** for each of the following positions (in U.S. dollars)?

Chief Operating Officer	Chief Financial Officer	Owner/President
\$80,000	\$75,000	\$70,000
Salesperson	Account Manager	Landscape Designer
\$60,000	\$55,000	\$52,000
Supervisor	Office Manager	Crew Foreman/Leader
\$50,000	\$45,000	\$40,000

helps when you’re not making promises you can’t keep. That part kind of bonded everyone, like if you go to war together. Obviously, we’re not in battle, but still.”

Meanwhile, Clarke says his residential hardscape company – made up of somewhere between three and seven employees – struggled during the year. He says many of his employees left to collect unemployment checks, leaving it more difficult to properly cut the checks. Those who did good work were rewarded even despite the financial hit his company took, Clarke says.

“If I can rely on them to show up and do proper work, and if they’re good employees and I want to keep them around, I’ll always pay them more,” Clarke says.

Credit where it’s due

Lewis says it’s rare his 20 employees, who all do either maintenance or irrigation, don’t earn some sort of financial incentive opportunities. His office employees earn a salary while his field workers are paid hourly, but he says the crews have some “skin in the game.”

When his crews still finish up early on a job – for example, working 89 hours instead of 100 – he’ll still compensate for the time they saved working efficiently.

“I’m not a hoarder. I’m not looking to keep every dime,” Lewis says. “I have a philosophy that my employees come first. I operate from a Biblical standard that says pay the worker what he’s owed.”

For Fraynd, pay raises can be awarded from a budgeted 3% of total revenue. As always, in 2020, he left it up to his supervisors on how the pay could be awarded – some crews started paying \$1 more an hour across the whole unit, while others just handed \$3 more an hour to the employee



“There’s always going to be some subjective component, but we try to make (pay) as objective as possible, driven through data and numbers.”

Paul Fraynd, CEO, Sun Valley Landscaping



What is the pay **per hour** (national average) for each of the following positions it had (in U.S. dollars)?

● Experienced ● Entry-level

Mechanic
\$25 **\$18**

Construction Worker
\$20 **\$15**

Irrigation Technician
\$20 **\$15**

Spray Technician
\$19 **\$15**

Mower Operator
\$16 **\$13.63**

who made the biggest difference out in the field. It helps that they've established pay ranges for each position so they know the maximum someone can earn in each role – if someone wants to earn more than the \$18-\$22 crew mower earns, they must try and learn another role within the company.

And Fraynd monitors his competition to ensure they're paying among the best in the Omaha area. He noticed a huge spike in pay rates five years ago, and as a result, they "planted their flag in the ground" and paid the most in town. Soon after, everyone else recalibrated as well, meaning he's now trying to pay in the top 10 percentile.

"I struggle because I want everyone to raise up, but not everybody wants to. Some people are happy to make what they make, and we need those people, too," he says. "With the employees, you generally get what you pay for."

One for all

At some point, company owners have to assess how they'll make money, too.

With his smaller company, Clarke says he determines how much he'll earn based on how much remains after paying it out to his crew workers. And Fraynd says he'll always make sure his employees are paid their proper dues first before deciding his salary. Just like how he assesses the success of his crews, Fraynd says he tries to score his own performance as a leader, taking a cut from the overall sales. It behooves him to press his employees to perform well as much as it benefits them.

"We either make the sales and have the work or you don't. I think everybody's kind of familiar with that," he says. "There's always going to be some subjective component, but we try to make (pay) as objective as possible, driven through data and numbers."

But it can feel like a relatively subjective decision. Company owners might have a bias toward paying themselves too much, or they might shortchange themselves in the name of appearing like a team player.

Lewis says it helps to find a third party, such as a consultant, to help determine a company owner's pay. He and his consultant meet in the late summer to plot out the next year.

"As a general rule, I'm paid a salary, and it's generally a percentage of anticipated income through the year, and I also take draws on capital," Lewis says. "If we don't make sales in a specific quarter or failed to meet expectations, then I will not take a full-sized draw." ✕



Planning Pains

The experts say most of you aren't budgeting. Here's why you should and how to get started.

×

Story by **Jimmy Miller**

You don't need a crystal ball to predict the future – a budget should do the trick, at least for your business.

Consultant Bruce Wilson of Bruce Wilson & Company says it takes three or four years of practice, but setting a budget and doing so effectively can help landscapers measure how they set goals.

"You've got to be financially responsible as an owner," Wilson says. "If you don't budget, you don't know if you're spending more or less than you thought you were. It's a surprise at the end. And that's what happens to a lot of (owners)."

But Jim Huston of J.R. Huston Consulting Co. says budgets are few and far between in an industry with thousands of companies nationwide. He cites a Wall Street Journal article that indicated only about 14% of businesses set a budget every year, and in the green industry, Huston thinks it's closer to 10% or less.

"It's such a big, monumental task," Huston says. "People just don't know where to

start. (But) if you don't have anything to shoot for, you're going to hit it."

And Bill Arman of the Harvest Group says that creates an uphill battle for business owners. Sometimes, they run their companies out of passion without stopping to understand their goals. "There are thousands of companies out there that are really pretty skilled at the landscape part of the business," Arman says, "but they're not skilled at the business part of the business."

Getting started

Arman says the easiest way to dive into budgeting is to take it slow and steady. They start budgeting two months before the fiscal year begins, and at the Harvest Group, they promote what he calls a "mini budget." This essentially eliminates some of the more complicated facets of budgeting in favor of tracking the essentials.

This means company owners figure out where all of their revenue streams are coming from and then keeping track of gross margins within those revenue streams. A

look at past profit and loss statements and backlog of client work also allows contractors the opportunity to forecast profits in those revenue streams and the overhead costs of each segment of the business.

"You can be able to tell pretty quickly which revenue streams are performing and which ones aren't," Arman says.

From there, he adds company owners have to do something about the areas of the business that aren't performing well. If a segment of the business isn't turning a profit, he or she must decide if it's an estimating problem, cost problem or an execution problem.

For reference, Arman says it may be a cost or estimating problem if a company is successfully selling over 15-20% of its proposals and still not making money.

He also suggests that if a company owner suspects the quality of work may be what's holding them back, investing in training or watching the crews out in the field will help.

"A critical element is making sure you have the people to help generate and sustain that (profit). Budget ties into your planning process," Arman says. "Budgeting is pretty doggone important to run a business, and very few people do it. That's how we operate: Landscapers are ready, shoot, aim. We react."

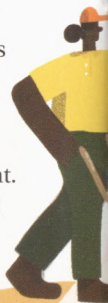
Checking in

Once a budget's in place, Arman and Huston both suggested checking it once a month and revising based on more current projections. Huston says this helps owners set clearer goals for sales, plus expenditures on overhead and labor productivity.

"You're turning on the scoreboard for people to understand if you're over or under these goals," Huston says.

Huston says checking back in with a budget helps landscapers identify pricing problems. He'll often ask his clients, "Do you know how much your two-man landscape crew needs to do daily to be profitable?"

The answer is often silence, so he breaks it down simply with a hypothetical: If the rate is \$45 an hour and they're working 10 hours, landscapers don't realize they need to bill \$450 per day, per client.





“If you really want to grow your company, you’ve got to get a sense for how you can predict the future. When you budget, you’re basically predicting the future. Then you actually perform according to your prediction. When you don’t, it helps you understand what you were thinking.”

Bruce Wilson, consultant, Bruce Wilson & Company

Without going back and utilizing the budget to evaluate profitability, they may never realize they’re not maximizing the revenue potential.

Plus, checking back in helps landscapers evaluate the structure of their companies. Huston says he’ll often go through each department of a company with business owners to determine where it needs the most work.

“Once people have a budget and go through the process two or three times, it really opens their eyes to their business,” Huston says. “They can basically look at it and all of its components and tell whether or not they’re on track.”

Looking ahead

Wilson warns that when contractors are forecasting using the budgets they’ve created, they shouldn’t oversimplify their projections.

Taking this year into account is a prime example: If contractors never tweaked their budgets between the start of 2020 and the end of 2020, they probably struggled. Wilson says the COVID-19 pandemic caused maintenance contracts to be reduced or canceled, and many landscapers never adjusted to account for these types of situations.

Additionally, there are other variable costs to consider in years that aren’t marred by global pandemics, such as material costs or labor. If contractors aren’t careful to account for

these changes, their projections will be skewed.

“If you really want to grow your company, you’ve got to get a sense for how you can predict the future,” Wilson says. “When you budget, you’re basically predicting the future. Then you actually perform according to your prediction. When you don’t, it helps you understand what you were thinking.”

Wilson says simply completing the budget isn’t enough – once you’re comfortable creating one, use it to your advantage. One way to do so is to find areas of profitability and push hard to secure more valuable clients within those revenue streams. They should be clients who value quality.

“When you win a job on low price, you’ve obtained a low-price loyal client,” Wilson says. “That client is probably going to go out to bid every year. To me, that’s probably an undesirable contract.”

Arman suggests joining an advisory board or trade association, so that business owners who have little experience have the help they need to get on track.

And when contractors get stuck, they should reach out to an advisory group or the company’s preferred certified public accountant.

“The lesson learned here is you find where your weaknesses are,” Arman says. “Since you’re the owner, you get to do the stuff you want to do.” ✕

What was your location’s average gross profit margin (approximately) for each of the following services provided in 2020?

32%

Landscape construction/design/build: **residential**

31%

Landscape maintenance: **residential**

31%

Lawn care/chemical application: **residential**

29%

Lawn care/chemical application: **commercial**

29%

Landscape lighting

29%

Landscape construction/design/build: **commercial**

29%

Landscape maintenance: **commercial**

27%

Tree care

27%

Irrigation installation/maintenance





Lawn Care

—On Time, On Budget

From pricing to paying people, lawn care operators sound off on best practices to stay on budget and achieve profitability.

Story by **Kristen Hampshire** × Illustrations by **Beth Walrond**



a service as a loss-leader to win work (bye-bye, profit) or fail to budget accurately and wind up spending more than they make.

“When you don’t plan or budget, then emergencies can pop up and you are not prepared or don’t have the funds to deal with it,” says David Jennett, president, Green Valley Pest Control & Lawn Care, Creston, Iowa.

Lawn care pricing can be different than landscaping services like design and installation. You’re dealing with different materials and a different division of labor – usually a technician and a truck rather than a three-man crew. The billing cycle is also different and based on a lawn care program vs. more frequent visits for mowing or week-long projects for construction. While all landscape services are selling time, the nature of lawn care does call for some specific planning.

As you study the benchmarking charts on page B4 of this guide, also take into account this boots-on-the-ground insight from lawn care professionals who explain how they buy materials, price services, pay their people and increase fees.

Investing in inputs

In early winter, Dayna Macbeth, operations manager at Fit Turf in Denver, Colo., sends a letter to area vendors and suppliers. “I reach out to those I’m interested in doing business with and let them know about the products we’d like to use,” she says.

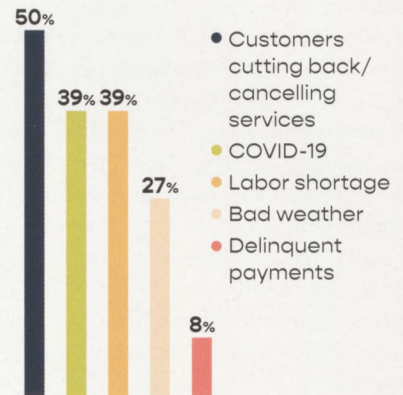
Macbeth collects estimates and compares them. “I have them compete, in a way,” she says. “I might say, ‘I’d like to order this weed control from you, but it’s \$5 more per gallon, so we might end up spending a couple thousand more dollars if we buy it from you.’ Often, I am able to get them or a territory boss to decrease the price.”

This year, Fit Turf saved \$3,000 on seed because of Macbeth’s due diligence.

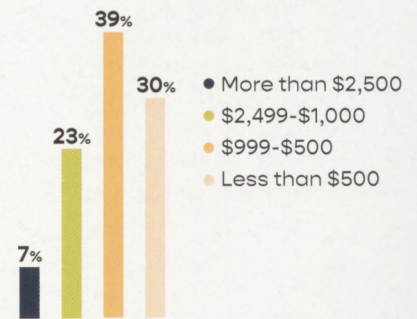
“You have to ask, ‘Are you willing?’” she says. “Even if a price is \$0.10 less per pound, we will save money as a company.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: The data collected here is based on almost 100 respondents who said lawn care services accounted for 50% or more of their revenue. Not all totals will equal 100%.

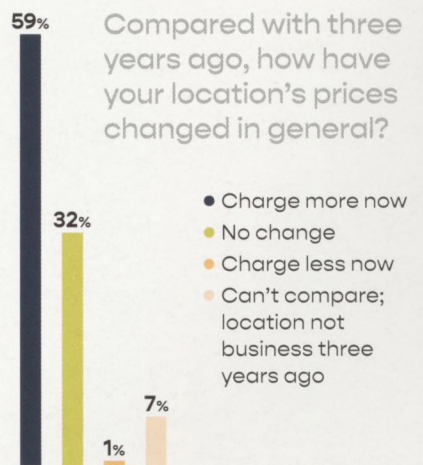
What top two issues do you anticipate that your business will face in 2021?



Approximately what was your location’s gross revenue per customer in 2020?



Compared with three years ago, how have your location’s prices changed in general?



Time is your inventory. You charge for time, improve efficiency to save time, and pay technicians for how productively they use time.

Are you protecting your time by managing expenses, pricing properly and paying a fair wage?

“Time is our inventory just like electronics are inventory for Best Buy,” says Adam Linnemann, president, Linnemann Lawn Care in Columbia, Ill. “How does Best Buy protect its inventory? They have a point-of-sale system, a security person at the door and cameras. They watch over their inventory. We need to watch over our inventory so we must make sure we are charging as much as we can, reducing non-billable time, and ensuring (your) team is recording time properly and not taking advantage of time.”

You know the old saying, time is money. Unfortunately, many lawn care operators find this out the hard way when they treat

30%

More than half (**53%**) of respondents say they expect their 2021 revenue to grow by 30% or more compared to 2020.

Early ordering helps Linnemann save up to 20% on lawn care materials costs. He attends supplier shows, where he has opportunities to pre-order product for the year. "We look at what we used in the past and what we will need for the upcoming season, and we get those prices locked in," he says.

Linnemann estimates spending about \$80,000 per year on herbicides, pesticides and grass seed. In spite of the early order commitment, he is not required to pay for the products until shipments are delivered. He receives materials as needed throughout the growing season.

Also, because Linnemann worked out 60-day terms with his supplier and doesn't pay for pre-ordered materials until they ship, he can collect on service invoices and apply those dollars toward his bill rather than using a line of credit. "By allowing us to invoice customers and collect payment from them in a timely manner, we can cover the expenses easier vs. swallowing that (materials) invoice in upfront charges," he says.

Again, the message is: Just ask.

"Sometimes, all it takes is asking if a vendor is open to giving you extended terms, and this can make it easier on your cash flow," Linnemann says.

As for Jennett, he purchases fertilizer pre-emergent in winter and pays a lump sum.

"Our spray herbicides, we buy as needed," he says. The same goes for grub control.

Equipment is "ride it until it dies," Jennett says, relating that the company focuses on the oldest pieces of equipment each year.

Linnemann adds, "Make sure you are recovering your equipment cost so you can replace it one day." By building equipment costs into pricing, you'll be prepared to replace trucks, spreaders, sprayers, hoses and reels and ride-on machines.

Price it right

How much do you earn per 1,000 square feet of property serviced? That's how Macbeth and Fit Turf Founder/President Paul Wagner look at pricing.

"The biggest mistake most lawn care companies make is underpricing, and some companies will use lawn care fertilization as a loss-leader - once they get the customer, they sell other services," Wagner says.

"Lawn care needs to be profitable," he continues. "So, in our market, we like to make \$14 to \$15 per 1,000 square feet with a 20% profit margin."

To determine how much he charges customers for lawn care, Linnemann gathered the production rates for 100 properties of different sizes. "We measure those online and get the square footage, then we track

how long it takes us to treat each property," he says. "So, if a yard is 10,000 square feet and it takes us 30 minutes, we'll back that out and say, 'How many thousand square feet can we do in this amount of time.'"

Basically, Linnemann takes an average of these production times and assigns a price per square foot. Then, he adds in materials cost, equipment costs and drive time, also figuring in the company's overhead. By using landscaping software, as long as the "input" numbers are accurate, the output provides pricing that meets the company's profitability goal.

Jennett relies on an Excel spreadsheet to compute expenses and figure out a fair price for lawn care services. The formula includes: materials, average labor cost and material costs.

"As lawn size increases, the price per square footage goes down because we recognize efficiencies and the cost of doing business," he says.

Pay to win good people

Good help is hard to find. And depending on the market, great help can be challenging to afford. But just as important as understanding that lawn care is about selling time, it's also about delivering quality - and that takes talent.

"This is an expensive market," Macbeth says about Denver, adding that Fit Turf pays slightly higher than competitors. Lawn care technicians are paid about \$20 per hour, and tree care specialists earn between \$19 to \$30, depending on their qualifications.

"We have an incentive-based pay structure for technicians," Macbeth says, noting that they are paid hourly but can get unlimited overtime as long as they are efficient. That pay comes as a bonus. The company also offers a "welcome back" bonus. "If you complete a full season with us, at the end you will receive \$1,000," she says. "After winter, if you come back, you'll get \$500."

A referral program pays technicians \$300 for every quality recruit that is hired. Fit Turf pays out \$150 after the new hire and \$150 more if the team member is still on board after three months.



**"When you don't plan or budget,
then emergencies can pop up
and you are not prepared or don't
have the funds to deal with it."**

**David Jennett, president,
Green Valley Pest Control & Lawn Care**



Another opportunity to earn and deliver high-quality service is to receive online reviews from customers. Technicians are equipped with review cards that say “thank you” on the front, and request feedback on the back. “Any time a technician gets a verified five-star review with their name in it, they get \$50,” Macbeth says.

Last year, one team member earned \$200 within several weeks. Also, technicians can earn a 10% commission on field sales in their name. “We have a unique pay structure for our area,” Macbeth says, noting that anyone who works for the company for five years or longer gets 100% of their health insurance premiums covered, with a value of \$400 for individuals and \$800 for families.

“This is really great for retention,” Macbeth says. “It helps us hang on to the great guys we have on our team.”

To gauge an ideal pay rate for his region, Jennett calls other company owners in his area to find out what their average hourly wage is. Because many of these owners are lawn care customers, they have a

13%

2020's increase in total gross revenue for lawn care/chemical application services (commercial and residential) compared with 2019.

\$72.71

Average charge for an hour for labor on lawn care/chemical application (residential and/or commercial)

93%

Respondent's customer retention rate

As of Nov. 1, 2020, the average respondent paid spray technicians the following per hour:

\$20 \$15

Experienced

Entry-level

relationship that is open and don't mind sharing this type of information, he says. “There are a couple of manufacturers in town we get a hold of, and employers like fast-food restaurants and service industry like plumbing and electrical,” he says.

Linnemann determines pay rate based on certifications, work ethic, employment history, flexibility and availability. For each additional license, technicians can earn about

\$1 more per hour. The company covers training materials and testing. “They simply need to ask and get signed up,” Linnemann says. “We pay for everything, so it's a matter of them wanting to excel in the industry.”

Overall, from purchasing materials to pricing and paying people, Linnemann says accuracy is key. He says, “The biggest thing for us is the software we use has a budgeting tool.” ✕



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"The peace of mind and added efficiency
have become invaluable to me."

ROBERT ORTIZ, fleet manager at Clean Scapes

that area, known as a geofence, Sanders gets an alert sent to his phone.

Routing was the primary reason Rich Stephens began using GPS two years ago. However, Stephens sought more than just a reduction in unbillable time. He also saw an opportunity to add value.

"Sometimes a client calls our office, wondering if one of our crews could swing by for an extra mowing or other service," says Stephens, owner and president of Red Oak Landscape Contractors in Arnold, Mo. "If we have one nearby, we might be able to squeeze another property in. This type of thing happens quite a bit during snow removal season. GPS has helped us generate additional sales."

TRACKING EQUIPMENT. Robert Ortiz is the fleet manager for Clean Scapes' Austin, Texas, operation. In addition to all of the company's trucks, GPS tracking is also utilized on a variety of "heavy equipment."

The tracking of equipment has become increasingly important as the Clean Scapes' fleet has grown. To minimize downtime and ensure accurate job costing, it has become essential to understand where a given asset is and what it is doing.

"Now we don't have to rely on word of mouth," Ortiz says. "For instance, a crew leader might decide to move an excavator from one project to another. But the crew leader might forget to let us know. With the GPS system we are using, we know the exact location of that excavator at all times.

"This is especially helpful if we have a piece of equipment that breaks down," Ortiz continues. "Sometimes it's hard to describe the equipment's location to a mobile mechanic or tow company. Now I just pull up a map on my phone, take a screenshot and send it along with any other notes I want to share."

TRACKING IS ANOTHER TOOL THAT BUILDS TRUST. Trust is an essential component to the successful implementation of GPS tracking. When presented the wrong way, employees may view it as oppressive oversight. When presented the right way, GPS tracking can be viewed as another tool in helping the company – and employees – achieve their goals.

"I'm pretty lucky in that many of my employees are in their early 20s," Nelson says. "They understand that technology and location tracking are really part of life today. Plus, the respect is already there in our company. It's kind of funny. Sometimes I'll randomly get a text saying, 'Charles, I just couldn't hold it any longer and had to stop at this gas station to use the restroom.' That's OK, because what this is really about is accountability." **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Wisconsin.



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THE ADVANTAGES OF ANALYSIS

While conducting 11,000 soil tests per year, Virginia Green has been able to grow its business and improve retention. **By Kim Lux**

Providing soil testing has not only helped Virginia Green increase its retention, but it's also helped the lawn care company's customers see them as the experts on all things dirt and turf.

Virginia Green was started in 2004 and now encompasses six locations to serve their 40,000 customers.

And while some companies may only turn to soil testing to find a solution to a problematic lawn, Virginia Green is fully embracing it.

Joe Donchez, sales manager with the company, and Jesse Johnson, a Virginia Green branch manager, cohosted a presentation on the impacts of soil testing with Real Green System's Beth Berry during Solutions 2021 Virtual.

"We use it year-round," Donchez says of soil testing.

"We do about 11,000 soil tests a year, so we can justify that we know the soils in Virginia better than anyone else."

A TOOL FOR ADVANCEMENT. Virginia Green offers its customers two packages – an estate package and a premium package.

"In the estate program, that includes a free soil test and analysis," Donchez says. The company uses an outside lab to process the tests.

"So, we pull those samples in January of every year when we're doing the first application," Donchez says. "(The lab) gets them analyzed and send us the results back...and then we determine whether or not they need additional lime applications."

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“We do 11,000 soil tests a year, so we can justify that we know the soils in Virginia better than anyone else.”

JOE DONCHEZ, sales manager, Virginia Green

Due to the nature of the soil in their area, Donchez says customers usually need at least one lime application per year.

“We’ll figure out if they need a 50-pound rate or two 50-pound rates,” Donchez says. He notes the average application costs about \$189.

Through the soil testing and lime applications, the company was able to virtually double its revenue for the service from 2019 to 2020.

“It’s been extremely successful for us over the past eight or nine years,” Donchez says. “When this started eight years ago, it was probably \$70,000 in lawn revenue that we had on the books, and in 2019 we did about \$600,000 and in 2020... we doubled our amount of lime sales and did about \$1.2 million in lime last year.

“So, it’s been really beneficial to our

customers and our retention and even the overall growth of our company,” he adds. “Our retention rates have been improved year over year about 4-5%. We’re at that 89th percentile from a retention standpoint.”

DIGGING IN THE DIRT. But Johnson points out that the importance of the soil test goes beyond the revenue boost. They can obviously help technicians determine what pH level the soil is at and how to improve it so the lawns are more adaptable to treatment.

“There’s a lot of agronomics that goes into it as well,” Johnson says. “The pH is the level of acidity in the soil. The range for pH levels is from 0-14. Ideally, turf and most plants prefer to at a 6.5 or so.”

If a lawn’s pH level is too low, a lime treatment can help bring that number up.

“It helps it take up the fertilizer and nutrients we’re putting out, which makes the lawn look nicer and helps with sales and retention,” Johnson says.

Donchez says using a precise amount of fertilizer is just a good financial practice.

“If you use soil testing correctly, you can drop fertilizer use,” Donchez says. “That’s another way of saving your money.”

Soil testing can also take a look at the organic makeup of the soil.

Johnson says magnesium and calcium are the two primary components in the company’s area but there are others.

Donchez says this provides additional opportunities to upsell more treatments.

“We’re going to be selling an additional winter potassium application to those customers who need it,” Donchez says. “That will help to increase another vertical.”

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LAWN CARE



Soil testing gives technicians a list of all the organic materials in a client's lawn to find out what nutrients are lacking and what may be too abundant.

MAKING THE SALE. After the results from the test come in, Virginia Green sends them directly to the client so they can have a visual to understand the data.

"It's a nice, color-coded document," Donchez says. "It's kind of like looking at your own blood test...you really want to take a look at it. Now, can they interpret it? No, but that's why we call and have a conversation about it."

Those conversations traditionally lead to additional treatments. But it's not the only chance clients have to choose those services.

"We send out a spring and fall upsell through emails, and that's a nice click-to-buy thing," Donchez says. "We'll sell a couple hundred off of that. We're just sending an email at the touch of a button."

"Our customers respond very well to it," he adds. "We've noticed our customers saying, 'We're Amazon people. Send me an email and I can click add to cart.'"

Even though most of the sales are done via email, that doesn't mean the company's technicians aren't knowledgeable on the benefits of soil testing, since they are the ones having face-to-face interaction with customers.

"We're training our technicians before we send them out there to have a conversation with a customer," Donchez says.

NEW IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER. When it's time to perform the lime application, or other treatment, there are plenty of choices out there – including some new products.

"These are marketed as you get a faster response and need much less product than standard lime," Johnson says. "Which is true. It does give you a quicker jump in pH with less product. The problem with it is it's a temporary jump. So, you don't get the duration of the pH staying in that adequate range for as long."

Johnson equates these products to a band-aid rather than fixing the real issue.

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“If you use soil testing correctly, you can drop fertilizer use. That’s another way of saving your money.”

JOE DONCHEZ, sales manager, Virginia Green



Jesse Johnson, branch manager, says sticking to traditional methods of lime applications is more beneficial than the latest innovations.

“To me, the best way to go about it is to use the traditional limestone,” he says. “It’s going to take longer to see that response, but it will last much longer than those more

costly products that are being marketed.” Donchez agrees and says in the long run, the costs end up evening out.

“It’s a marathon, not a sprint,” Donchez says. “If you do the math...at the end you probably have the same product costs.”

The duo say costs are also a contributing factor on why organic lawn care isn’t utilized more.

“Nobody wants to pay that organic price,” Donchez says. “Everyone wants to talk about it...but when you show them the price, everybody’s out.”

Donchez and Johnson say there may be a time when soil testing becomes mandatory, so lawn care companies making it a part of their process now can only help them down the road.

In Montgomery County Maryland, soil testing is already mandatory. And 2021

started things off with a new president, and EPA leader, so changes are expected.

“Well with the change of guard, it’s probably not far away,” Johnson predicts.

He adds that in Northern Virginia, more bills are being introduced to add restrictions to lawn care.












“I really recommend to all business owners to make sure you’re in touch with your representatives because they could have a huge effect on your business,” Johnson says. “We do all we can to make sure we’re in front of it.”

Donchez says setting up peer groups with others in the industry is also beneficial. In fact, he invites anyone to come check out one of Virginia Green’s facilities and see how they operate.

“It’s an open invitation,” he says. “We’re happy to do that.” L&L

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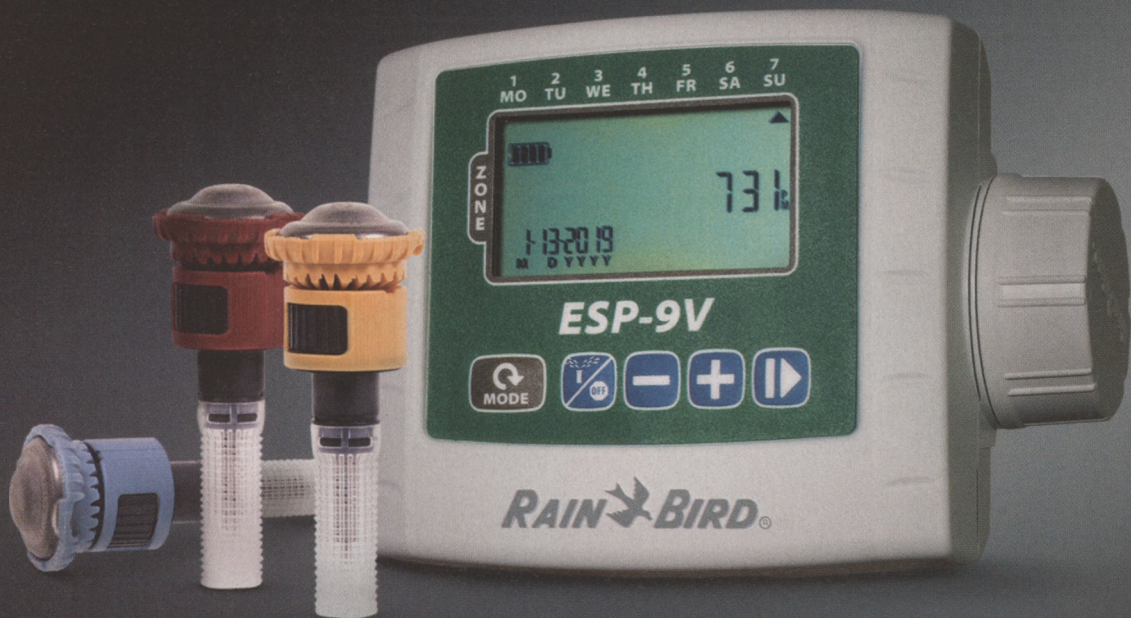
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Getting behind the right mower

Walk-behind mowers allow even the newest crew members to deliver high-quality results.

By Kim Lux

Joe Maitland, owner of J. Crew Property Preservation in Zion, Ill., likes to keep his company running like a well-oiled machine, where the end results are always pristine and clients are completely satisfied.

“When you’re used to giving them that white glove service from day one, there’s an expectation that’s created,” he says.

In order to keep this reputation up, Maitland relies on something simple – his walk-behind mower fleet.

“We’ve got about 15 walk-behind mowers,” Maitland says. “Typically, we’ve got four crews going, so they each got three mowers on their trailers. And then, we have a fifth trailer we use as kind of a backup.”

EASY TO OPERATE. Maitland says he prefers walk-behind mowers because they are easier for crews to maneuver and result in a better cut.


“I like the flexibility of them,” he says. “Not only in small spaces, but the fact that you’re not tearing up the grass as much. Guys will get going so fast on a stand-up or sit-down that they won’t be as conscious about it until they turn around and see what they’ve done to the grass. Whereas with the walk-behind, you have a little more control, and you can actually lift up the back end as you’re making a turn, to ease the weight on the grass itself.”

And better turns allow for nice, clean stripes. “It gives it that curb appeal the client is looking for,” Maitland says.

Utilizing walk-behinds also allows for Maitland to adjust his crews without worrying about someone’s experience level.

“With the walk-behinds, when you have to add crews, or add someone from another division, there’s a level of comfort,” he says. “It’s a good machine to start on. And it’s a sound machine mechanically.”

ABOVE: J. Crew Property Preservation Owner Joe Maitland says he favors walk-behind mowers, as they always deliver a clean cut.



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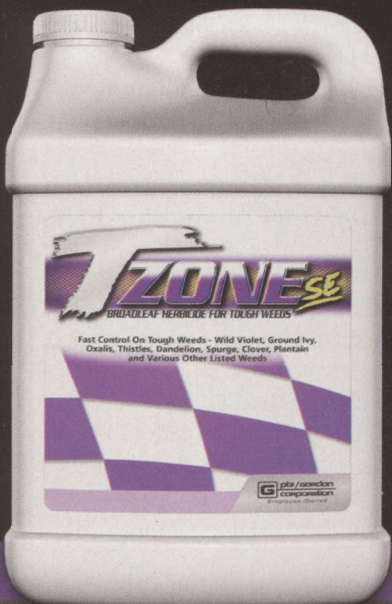
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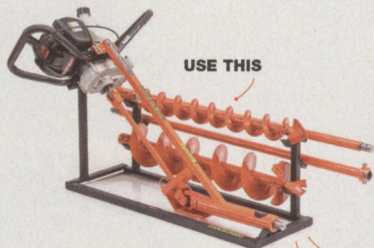
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“With the walk-behinds, when you have to add crews, or add someone from another division, there’s a level of comfort. It’s a good machine to start on.”

JOE MAITLAND, owner of J. Crew Property Preservation

“You can’t just throw a guy on a zero-turn or stand-up who’s never had any lawn and landscape experience,” Maitland adds. “The center of gravity is just really different. So, the walk-behind gives the new guy precision when he’s cutting, but he can also handle the machine a lot better.”

Maitland says the compact nature of the mowers is another perk because it allows him to fit more machines on his trailers.

While there are no downsides to walk-behind mowers that’d keep Maitland from utilizing them, he does admit that they can be difficult to operate in the rain.

“They tend to slip a little more,” he says.

MINIMAL MAINTENANCE NEEDED. Maintaining the mowers is also simple, according to Maitland.

“The one good thing is lawn mowers are pretty low on the maintenance side of things compared to other machines like our mini excavators,” he says. “Every day our guys are looking at fuel levels, oil levels and how clean the filter is. It’s pretty easy.”

Maitland says crews additionally check the intake for any leaks and tire pressure. “They’ll move all the pivot points with grease, just to make sure everything is running smooth for operation,” he says.

But not all the maintenance is done at the shop. Maitland says upkeep on the jobsite is equally essential.

“We perform some routine maintenance throughout the course day while we’re cutting,” he says. “Guys will blow off any standing grass or anything from the top of the deck and making sure underneath the deck is clean. Unfortunately, commercial properties have a lot of trash, so we just make sure we don’t have anything touching the blades. Sometimes plastic bags and things will get wrapped around them.”

Additionally, Maitland says that with walk-behinds, counter pins from the hand gears and braking mechanism may come loose, more so than with other mowers, and get lost between jobsites. He says he always had a few extras on hand just in case.

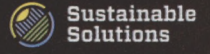
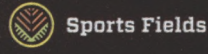
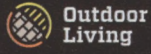
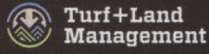
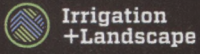
“You can usually pick them up at your local hardware store,” Maitland says.

UPGRADING ALL AT ONCE. Because walk-behinds can be less expensive than other mowers, replacing a fleet of them can be a less demanding investment.

“I like the price point when it comes to fleet deals,” Maitland says. “When I go in, I typically buy five to seven mowers and a trailer. Around the time that our manufacturer’s warranty is up, I try and go ahead and replace that fleet.”

Maitland mentions that he’s tried several brands of mowers over the years and finally found one he’s really impressed with and plans to use for the indefinite future. He says working with a reputable dealer also makes the purchasing process better.

“Dealer support is always the number one thing for me,” Maitland says. **L&L**



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On The Road Again:

How the right tools can help you manage, every day

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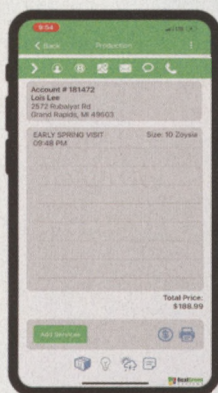
everything else. From the day-to-day grind of scheduling and service to the big-picture planning of sales and marketing, you need tools that make your job easier. Tools that work the way you and your company do, especially when it comes to labor and route management. With Service Assistant and its complete portfolio of integrated, automated add-on solutions, Real Green Systems has the software you need to run every aspect of your lawn care business effectively.

Grow From Anywhere with Mobile Live

Your mobile technology should simplify running your business on-the-go. That's where Mobile Live comes in. It's the ideal solution for today's remote workforce, enabling quick communication and sharing of key information. With Mobile Live, you and your staff will have the power of remote data syncs, mobile routing and scheduling, customer communications, the ability to accept PCI compliant, data-encrypted in-field payments and so much more. It's the app that makes it easy to do everything you need to do from any web-enabled device.

With Mobile Live, you can instantly see where all of your techs are and connect quickly with the whole team. You can make informed routing and tech assignment decisions, even responding to new call requests with the closest available tech for the fastest possible service. Techs can input property conditions, start/stop times and any other customer notes.

Mobile Live also makes it easy to connect with customers. The Call Log feature enables users to add and make calls, view customer history and send alerts and reminders in real-time. You can also create a library of custom Quick Texts for pre-loaded company-approved communications, then use them to send customers personalized messages with specific feedback about their services and properties by adding them to invoices, receipts, tech notes and more.



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factors: Number of trucks out in the field, number of properties scheduled for service that day, services each customer is scheduled to receive. With Routing Assistant, easily customize routes by highlighting the information key for each visit: Flag stops for new customers, past-due customers, ASAP customers and customers who need extra care. You can select which days are the best to perform applications on specific customers' properties and which days to avoid. Schedule same-day service, re-route crews already in

“Our biggest growth has been from using Routing Assistant to tighten up existing routes. We have been adding one to two routes per year for the last six years.”

*Elizabeth Durkin, Grass Masters,
21-year Real Green Systems customer*

the field and add more stops – Routing Assistant users report being able to manage 6% more customers every day.

With Routing Assistant, you can see all of these factors at a glance and optimize your route accordingly. The visual route designer makes it simple, drag and drop route planning makes it fast, and smart map technology makes it accurate, down to turn-by-turn directions. Because it updates in real time, Routing Assistant helps keep your technicians on route and on schedule, even when unexpected roadblocks show up along the way. They'll be able to provide prompt, reliable service, increasing customer satisfaction and helping your business grow.

For more information on how Real Green Systems and its products can help grow your business visit www.realgreen.com or call **877-252-9929**.





MULTIPLY YOURSELF AND YOUR COMPANY

To create a well-oiled organization, you will need to understand how to attract, retain, and reward your employees.

By James Manske

We all know that great owners can't build a great business alone. To create a well-oiled, thriving and successful organization, you will need to understand how to attract, retain and reward your team members. I will walk you through all the stages of building your team, and share what I've learned growing my company.

Step 1: Evaluate & Plan

This step is the most important. It helped with the success of my company. Before you even decide to hire, you must do this.

Write down everything you do on a typical workday, in and outside of work. Where do you spend your time? Take note of all the tasks that have taken your time away from building your business. Your workday may involve the following: mowing, fertilizing, building retaining walls, sprinkler repairs, billing, payroll, marketing, maintaining equipment, data entry, bookkeeping, etc.

Now that you know where you spend your time, can you hire or pass along the work to someone else? For example, do you spend 75% of your workday billing out invoices and doing paperwork?

Can you hire someone to take over these tasks from you and pay them \$40,000? If so, with the extra time you open up, focus on building your business. Make phone calls, meet potential customers and reach out to existing customers. Not only can you move on to more critical tasks, but team members will also be able to help with other office duties on their downtime and bring fresh ideas and new perspectives to the table. I guarantee that you will pay for that team member's salary in no time.

Now it is time to define the new positions. Your new team members need to know what their daily duties will entail. This will ensure that both you and your team understand their role and your expectations. Performance reviews are easy to do when job requirements are known.

Now, calculate and write down the de-



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“Implementing an employee referral program has been one of my company’s ultimate advantages for bringing in new team members.”

JAMES MANSKE, CEO of Elkhorn Lawn Care

sired compensation plan based on position. There are plenty of local and state resources to find comparable pay scales for the position you are looking to fill. Or, simply search other companies’ open positions in your industry for reference.

Step 2: Avenues for Hiring

There are many websites and avenues which offer help when seeking new team members. These sites are an excellent source for specific positions and very difficult for others.

Ensure you include relevant keywords for the job, such as:

- “Minimum __ years of experience.”
- “Valid driver’s license in the state of __.”
- “Must be able to work in __ weather conditions.”

These are just a few of the many examples that will help you narrow down your ideal team member. Always research all applicants on these sites. Look at the work history timeline. Have they changed jobs or their careers frequently? Call their references and past employers. Look for any grammar issues in their resume.

Implementing an employee referral program has been one of my company’s ultimate advantages for bringing on new team members. By offering a referral bonus to existing employees, I have numerous individuals acting as head-hunters! Once the referred person is hired and begins work, I compensate the employee that brought in the new team member with a monthly bonus.

The monthly bonus typically stays around \$200-300 with a max of five months. The referral bonus after the five months is between \$1,000-\$1,500 per referral. It is a great way to grow your organization and have current team members earn extra money at the same time.

Step 3: Onboarding Process

You’ve selected the right person for your company, now what?

There are several key items that you need to have in your onboarding process. Consult with your attorney based on your business needs. **This quick list is an example of what should be in your new hire packet:**

- **Employee Contact Form** - Name, address, cell number, emergency contact, etc.
- **I9 Form** - Works in part with E-Verify to ensure work eligibility
- **W2** - Collect data for payroll and tax needs
- **Team Member Handbook**

The handbook is the bread and butter of information to provide to new hires. It should lay out the critical details about your business. This outline should be general and not include specific contract information for employees. Each page needs to be initialed, ensuring your new team member has read and fully understands your company’s policies. **Some examples of what should be in your employee handbook may include:**



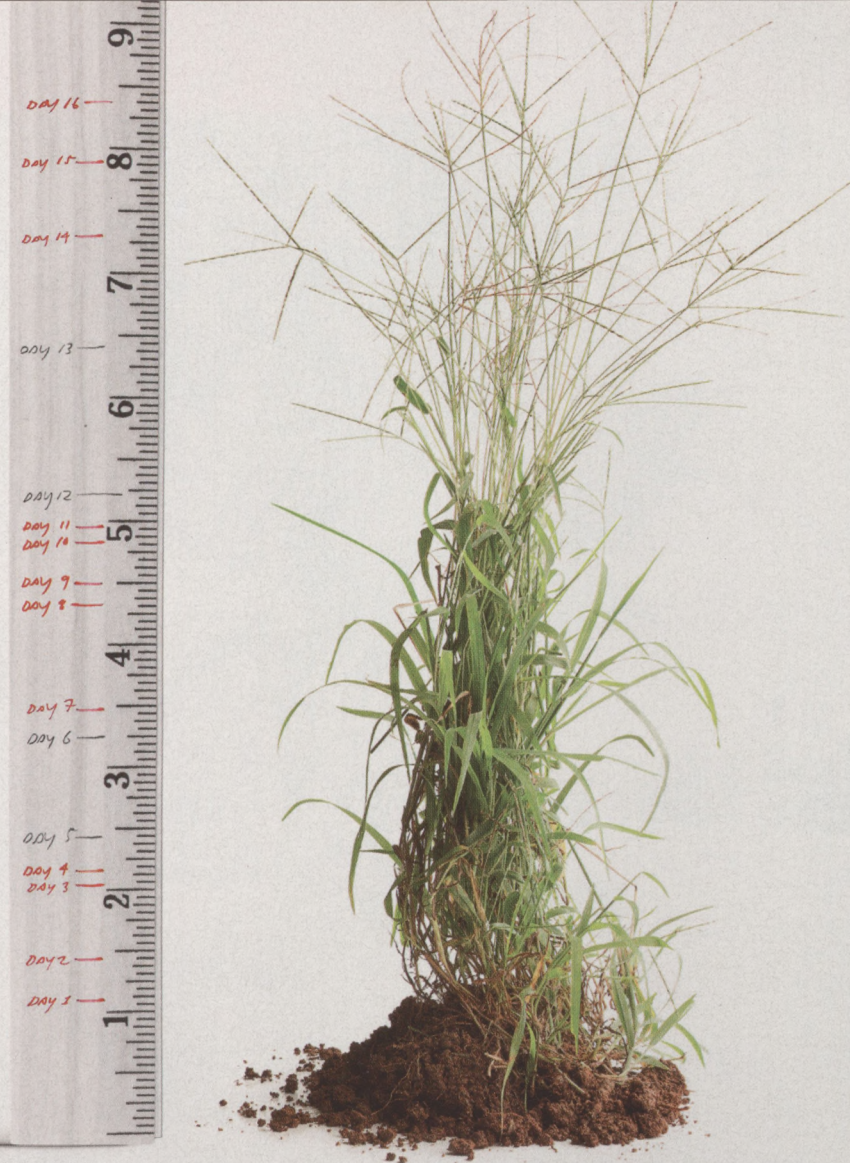
Elkhorn Lawn Care CEO James Manske says in order to retain good employees and keep the business growing, his team meets weekly to brainstorm new ideas.

- Mission statement, vision and core values
- Hours of operation for all staff members, including observed holidays
- Payroll procedures, including clock in/out requirements
- Dress code and appearance of all employees
- Sexual harassment/Relationships statement
- Safety procedures
- Drug and alcohol procedures
- General conduct on and off the jobsite
- Use of company resources and equipment
- Driving expectations

One thing you may also want to consider are contracts for salary positions. Employee contracts are typically for salaried team members or those that have foreman/management positions. These contracts should have detailed lists of the employee required responsibilities and day-to-day tasks.


Include a detailed description of their rate of pay and observed holidays. The yearly amount of sick days, PTO, vacation time they will have and also their sales commissions, if applicable. If you offer any health

Continues on pg. 72





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safety stars

Reboot and refine your health and safety program with tips from industry leaders who have a safety-first mindset.

By Kristen Hampshire

Picture it. A crewmember is edging a suburban lawn, working his way toward the corner while he zeroes in on the job. Wearing ear protection, he's focused on the finish – and he doesn't see the young boy barreling up the sidewalk. Suddenly, the edger fires back as it hits a root, and the guy loses control of the equipment just as the boy is passing him. The blade catches the kid's leg and suddenly, the ambulance is on its way.

This is just one of the case scenarios that Affiliated Ground Maintenance in Erie, Pa., shared with employees during a weekly safety tailgate. President Crystal Arlington and her husband, Rich – the company's business manager – also operate an expert witness firm. “When we bring case scenarios to the table, it makes people think,” Crystal Arlington says.

A driver backs up a truck in a parking lot without a spotter. (Crash.)

A team lead operating a mower neglects to secure the safety shoot. A rock ricochets into the client's kitchen window.

“The best thing I ever did was hire expert

witnesses as staff,” Arlington says, adding that several other employees share this credential and a penchant for playing it safe.

Safety talk segues into training, and over the years, Affiliated Ground Maintenance has created a portfolio of protocols to guide everything from operating a mower to laundering pesticide-contaminated clothing. Don Mahoney says the safety protocols at Mahoney Associates in Southampton, N.Y. “initially came from the school of hard knocks,” but as the company evolved and grew, it adopted formalized programs and protocols, relying on industry resources and a peer network.

“Safety in the beginning was pretty much wearing earmuffs,” he says, comparing the bare-bones approach to today's thorough safety culture. Every new team member is issued ear and eye protection, and five-point break-away high-visibility vests.

“There are so many resources out there,” Mahoney says, sharing how his company eventually became a National Association of Landscape Professionals (NALP) Stars Safe company. “One of my favorite ways

to learn about safety training and policies is what I call, ‘R&D’ or rob and duplicate. If you're in a network or have a good peer group who have figured it out and put manuals and programs together, generally they are willing to share with you.

“Safety is so important for multiple reasons,” Mahoney continues. “It separates you from the pack and when we shop for insurance or are up for renewal, if we can go to a vendor and give them a binder that shows the past couple of years of safety training and equipment you give out, it shows that you are committed to safety.”

Team members sign in for every training meeting so there's a running record to track attendance and emphasize accountability.

You can never assume that someone knows safety. “Experience using all of the equipment does not mean that they've had to work on the side of a highway or major street,” says Chris Testa, general manager, United Right-of-Way, Phoenix, Ariz. His company serves Departments of Transportation (DOT) and municipalities where traffic is a real risk.

The key message Testa sends to team members: “Everyone has to look out for each other.”

Here are other important take-aways to emphasize to employees about operating safely.

TEACH FROM SCRATCH. As Testa said, just because a new worker shows up with a decorated resume doesn't mean you can write off safety training. Different companies train differently.

“If the person has 10 years of experience riding a piece of equipment, we will put that to the test to verify,” he says. “We still put him through the same process to make sure we are comfortable sending him out with a crew.” A crew leader and supervisor observe the new hire and provide pointers.

WATCH OUT. “Be aware of your surroundings” is a main message at Affiliated Grounds Maintenance. Spotters are key for backing a truck out anywhere, any time. Safety cone placement is job one when crews arrive on

a site. "As soon as they drop their feet from the truck, the first thing they should do is mark the work area with orange cones or flags," Arlington says.

LISTEN UP. Safety tailgate meetings before launching the day's work are a common activity at many landscape companies. But Affiliated Grounds Maintenance flips the switch on these gatherings sometimes and uses them as feedback sessions. "Those 10-minute meetings aren't just for us to teach safety. It's also to get insight from the staff on what happened while they were on the job, what made them feel uneasy, what equipment isn't working right or what on a site is not safe," she says. This information is noted and might eventually end up being integrated into the company's safety protocols.

Testa spends time during some safety meetings to review situations that occurred during the week. "We talk about what was done right and examine what we might have done differently," he says. "For example, should we have put out 10 cones instead of seven, or should there have been a crash attenuator device in place?"

You want the team to stay frosty.

"When your experience modification ratings are down and your insurance premiums are looking pretty good at the end of the year, you don't want to get complacent," Testa says. "Even when everyone feels, 'Oh, we've got this nailed, we are a safe

company, we've gone 292 days without an incident,' you can't let your guard down."

That's why Testa doesn't just document accidents, but he also records "near-miss" incidents to use for upcoming training exercises. "Maybe a car didn't see our truck until the last minute and there was no accident, but there could have been," he says. "Bring that up and ask them to write about it. Then, talk about it."

READ, SEE, DO. Every piece of equipment comes with a manual, and Arlington makes sure that team members pay attention to the fine print. Next comes hands-on training, starting with a demonstration. Then, she or supervisors watch as the crewmember takes a turn. "I do it first, you show me, then we do it together - and we have videos and literature," she says.

CHECK 1, 2. Drop-ins on site keep employees accountable, Arlington says. "It's the only thing we have in our back pocket that really works."

Mahoney adds. "Because of human nature, we constantly reinforce safety and do random inspections," he says. "Every so often, a manager will make sure they hand out the DOT compliances forms to the fleet manager. They never know when they are going to get a spot check, so it's about being consistent but not consistent so everyone stays on their toes."

COVID CONSIDERATIONS. The pandemic introduced a whole battery of health and

DON'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN.

Don't let an employee's years of experience or anything else deter you from keeping safety at the forefront of your operation.

safety topics to tailgate meetings, guided by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations. Frequent hand-washing, social distancing, mask wearing and contactless customer service are some of new protocols landscape companies put in place to stay open as essential businesses. "All of our trucks are wiped down daily and we are in cleaning mode - handles on equipment, rakes and the green buckets if they are lugging leaves, all of that gets sanitized," Mahoney says.

GET INVOLVED. Don't expect your insurance carrier to facilitate everything. "We stay engaged with employees and with the insurance carrier and get whatever medical information we can to manage the claim," Testa says. "The last thing you want is for a situation to spiral out of control, and a lot of companies operate under the perception that 'the insurance company will be on top of it.' We have been involved in situations where possibly a reporting deadline was missed and the next thing you know, it looks like we handled it wrong. As a business we like the price, and we would have filled it out and gotten it in on time."

The operations manager at United Right-of-Way is dialed into the workers' compensation claims process and protocols. Naming a point person keeps safety situations organized.

Ultimately, the safety message must come from the top. Safety is more than saving money on insurance. "The cost savings is merely an added benefit," Testa says. "We don't have a great safety slogan or anything like that, but I can say that we do take safety very seriously." **L&L**

Safety measures should be the first priority once crews arrive at a jobsite.

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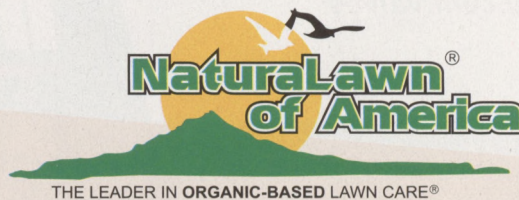
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OVER 30 YEARS and Just Getting Started

NaturaLawn of America has enjoyed over three decades of lawn care success, and has many more planned.



Technology is changing how business is done, and even though NaturaLawn of America (NLA) has been more than successful for the past 33 years, they aren't living on past wins. The Frederick, Maryland-based lawn care company is ready to embrace the changes on the horizon.

"Our gasoline-powered equipment and vehicles will change as technology in electric and solar power advances become more common place," says Jesse Catron, senior vice president.

NLA will also continue to pioneer the use of innovative organic materials and will continue to reduce any reliance on standard N-P-K products.

"The use of any synthetic control materials will be replaced totally and only organic, bio-logical, or bio-rational products will be used in our NLA system," says Theresa Smith, senior vice president.

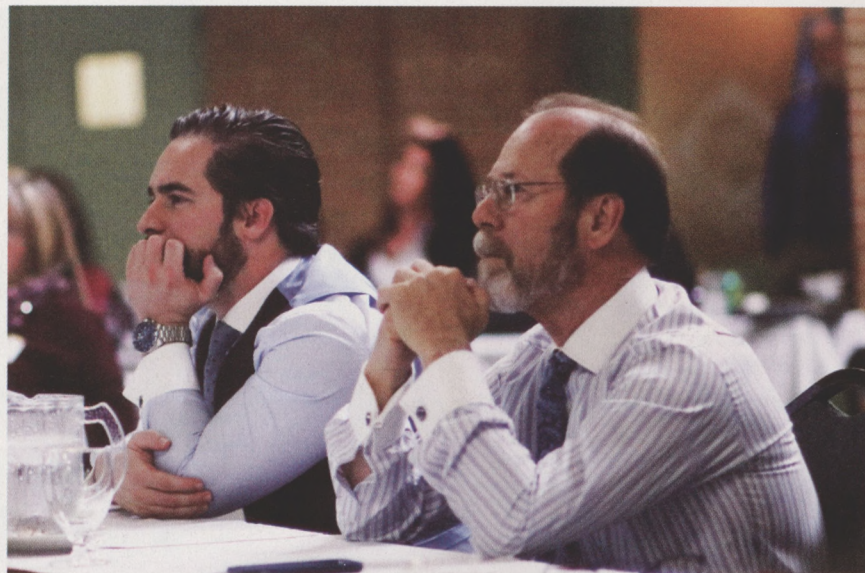
But one aspect of NLA that will remain a focus is its customer service.

"Our business philosophy has always concentrated on providing a level of service that delivers more value than what customers perceived, expected, or requested and at an attractive and reasonable price," Jesse says. "That is one facet of NLA which will not change in the years to come."

A LOOK BACK. Being deemed an essential business helped propel NLA to a host of major victories. The company continued to increase its customers base, added two new franchise owners and revenue out-paced expenses.

"Even with the modifications to operations, customer communication, and training via online techniques, we were able to keep everyone employed and our customers well cared for," Smith says. "We adapted our operations to meet safety standards and we conducted innovative ways to communicate with our customers."

The end result was a 13% growth in the company revenues which now exceed \$80 million. NLA also added two additional states to its service area, bringing the total to 26 states, and average revenue per



TOP: Senior Vice President Jesse Catron with Phil Catron, founder and president
ABOVE: Senior Vice President Theresa Smith

owner increased from \$1.8 million to \$2.2 million this year.

"We feel 2020 was a very blessed year for us all at NLA," Theresa says.

NEXT YEAR. And what's going to make 2021 so great? After all the larger a company becomes, the harder it is to achieve

double-digit growth, which is why the company will have controlled growth, focusing on helping current owners prosper.

"While many franchisors want to add as many new owners each year as possible, we look to bring on only 2-3 new independent franchise owners," Jesse says. "Support for a new owner is critical and in

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WHY NATURALAWN?

NaturalLawn isn't a one-trick pony.

In fact, there's a number of avenues a franchisee could pursue.

"A NaturalLawn of America franchise has tremendous value from not only being the leader in organic-based, environmentally, pet and family friendly lawn care but you can grow into providing all-natural pet- and family-friendly flea, tick and mosquito services," says Blaine Young, vice president of franchise and business development. "It is like getting the benefit of three franchises in one."

Having grown every year, that will not change in 2021 as NLA will open in two new states, Mississippi and New Hampshire, and NLA wants to continue to expand in the years to come.

"We are looking for more people that have our values and beliefs to join our franchise family," Young says. "Service, focus and innovation is our mission statement, and we went from an idea Founder Phil Catron developed in the basement of his home to the powerhouse in the green industry very quickly."

The company plans to continue growing its pet and family friendly services due to customer demand. Customers can enjoy their lawns the same day with no down time while knowing their two- and four-legged loved ones are safe. In 2020, NLA was named the Editor's Choice by Modern Dog magazine.

"Your pets want to go outside, and you want to be able to let them out with peace of mind," Young says. "With over 60% of households in the U.S. owning a dog, this is extremely attractive to our customers."



ABOVE: VP of Franchise and Business Development Blaine R. Young

order to ensure the best chance of success for a new franchise business, the franchisor should have a strong infrastructure.”

NLA believes by limiting the number of new owners per year to a very manageable figure, they will not only receive the support they need, but more veteran owners will also be supported and not get lost in the shuffle or neglected by the NLA Home Office Support Team.

THE NEXT GENERATION. While a successful 2021 is a priority for NLA, succession planning has been a main focus for several years.

With Founder Phil Catron continuing to scale back on his workload, Theresa and Jesse are ready to lead the company. Over the past year, Phil has reduced his day-to-day involvement by more than 20% and this will continue to increase over the next 12-18 months.

“Our Department Heads and Strategic Team Leaders pretty much conduct the overall business operations without any direct involvement from me other than to answer questions or provide resource information which would help them in their areas of responsibility,” Phil says.

He'll miss the interaction he has with employees at the home office and in the field, but he knows the company is set up for growth even after he steps away.

Succession planning is top-of-mind for everyone, and they've been in that phase for several years. At three different NLA owner meetings, Leaving a Legacy, Planning for the Future and Leaders and Leadership have been the topics on the agendas.

“One of the most important aspects of the transition I have is the mentoring of Jesse and Theresa and coaching them through the myriad of business decisions which take place during the business' operation,” Phil says. “To help us through this process, we brought in an outside consultant to assist in developing the future organization structure and roles the three of us would play.”

Turning the business over to family members can get dicey, but, when done right, it's a great benefit to the organization. It provides a continuity of culture and



Diego Antonio



Justin Sapp

NO TRAIN, NO GAIN

Growth is paramount at NLA.

Diego Antonio, who recently become a franchisee in Manchester, New Hampshire, said new owners training helped introduce him to the lawn care industry as whole.

“Getting to know the different teams I would be working with from purchasing, marketing, sales, IT, operations and senior leadership gave me the confidence to know there is always an expert I can reach out to,” he says. “That is very powerful for a new franchisee.”

Justin Sapp, a new franchisee in Oxford, Mississippi, said the new owners training was very detailed and prioritized the support NLA has designed to help make new franchisees successful.

“I was extremely impressed at the level of support I will get not only in the first three years of my franchise but for the life of my franchise,” he says.

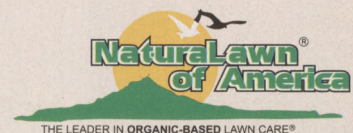
operating philosophy and will be the key to a successful transition.

“Both Jesse and Theresa have literally grown up in the company and have been a part of its evolution over the past 30-plus years,” Phil says. “They have spent a number of years working in and around different areas of the business and developing relationships with the franchise owners.”

Speaking of franchise owners, what can they expect from the next generation of NLA leaders?

“Overall, the franchisees, our customers, and the Home Office personnel can expect to see two bright and energetic profession-

als take over the reins of a 30-plus-year-old company and lead it into a new and innovative future, Phil says. “A future which will be exciting and beneficial for all involved.”

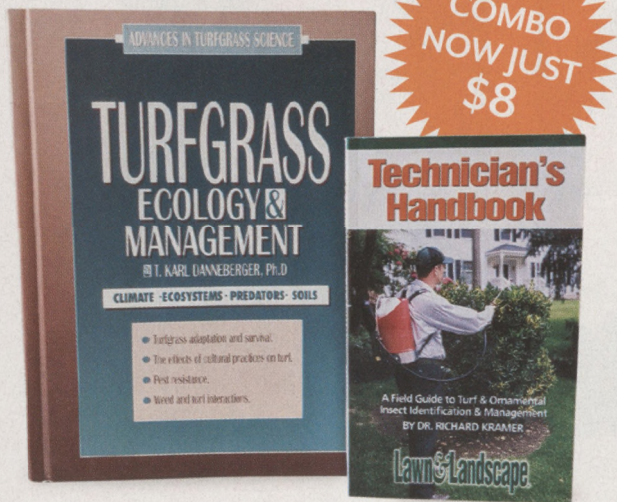


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Continued from pg. 62

coverage or retirement programs, give specific details of what the company will provide. Remember, these contracts are to be signed by both the employee and the employer.

RETENTION AND GROWTH. Within our company, we are very keen on improving our skills. There are many things we do to keep our management’s skills sharpened and continually growing. I have broken down what some of our team schedules tend to look like:

On a weekly basis, we perform sales meetings to discuss new promos, new leads, what works and where we need improvement.

Our management team also reads books throughout the year. We have an assigned chapter for the week. On Fridays, we get together and discuss what we liked or disliked, what we can implement and any ideas that can relate to our industry.

These books are typically self-help, sales and customer service-related books. Throughout the year, some of our team cannot attend or did not have the chance to read, but we still meet. The biggest component is consistency. Include as many people as you would like to better yourselves and everyone’s futures.

Quarterly, our management and office staff go over what services to focus on selling and promoting for the next quarter. We discuss advertising ideas we have for upcoming services and ideas on how to grow specific divisions. It is an excellent opportunity to brainstorm ideas on creating better processes and find avenues to increase sales before seasonal services begin.

During this time, we also perform a S.W.O.T. analysis. This stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. We write down our current thoughts and company details next to each letter on a whiteboard.

The goal is to move all weaknesses and threats into the strengths and opportunities columns for the next quarter.

Lastly, after each year, we pull together all the management team and heads of departments. We do a thorough review of our company Profit & Loss statement. It helps us to compare where we stand year over year for all sales and expenses.

We give praise to the divisions that have extraordinary growth and encouragement to the divisions that did not do as well. We brainstorm on how to be more efficient and economical in raising our bottom line for the next year.

These ideas are just a glimpse of some of the tools and methods I currently use to grow my company and team to greatness. Your company needs a team of winners to be successful. You need to come up with ways to find and keep those winners happy.

I encourage you to break out of your normal traditions and do something that may seem odd or monotonous to grow your business. By treating your company like a process-driven machine, I guarantee you there will be no limit to your success. **L&L**

The author is owner/CEO of Elkhorn Lawn Care in Elkhorn, Nebraska.

STATE OF THE HARDSCAPE MARKET

**CONCRETE
INFORMATION**
about how the
hardscaping
industry thrived
last year.

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THE RIGHT MIXTURE OF OLD AND NEW

“The more things change, the more they remain the same.” – *Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr*

In an industry that must stay on the cutting edge to appease ever-changing trends, new technology, and consumer tastes, it's refreshing at times to know that many of the latest and greatest entries into the market are not necessarily new at all.

Mother Nature is the top supplier of hardscapes, and she's hard to beat. Travertine, porcelain, granite, quartz: these beautiful materials bring a level of awe to any application. Even more mystifying, however, is probably the concrete paver technology that can produce that same level of awe, but with other features that natural materials just can't match. Regardless of naturally occurring or factory-produced products, hardscape options abound for any project or budget, and they are plentiful.

Hardscapes are a fixture in almost any landscape application, and for good reason. The variety of materials, shapes, colors, textures and sizes are hard to beat in other offerings, and the ability to customize to get that show-stopping look your customer desires makes hardscapes the go-to for many designers, architects and installers.

Beyond mere aesthetics is the inclusion of features that promote water conservation, easy maintenance and wear-resistance, among others.

In fact, as more and more communities across the country embrace the idea of water conservation and xeriscaping, it's no surprise that hardscape sales have seen double-digit growth over the past few years. Pio-

neer, specifically, has seen an increase in hardscape sales of over 30% in the last two years alone.

While the idea of being "water-wise" is not a new idea in the Southwest, after being hit with drought conditions year after year, we have never seen as many options, or the level of innovation coming out of hardscape suppliers as we are witnessing today.

Good thing, too! We know our customers aren't satisfied with only what we're prepared to sell them. They want more. They want options. They want innovation, and they want the WOW factor.

While many will ultimately and happily purchase the hardscapes we typically stock, knowing that we have access to permeable pavers, high-end materials and textures, custom sizes, and leading-edge technology is what sets us apart from our competition. Instead of just connecting with suppliers that are constantly pushing the status quo, we as a landscape materials supplier can be a better partner to our customers – professionals and amateurs alike.

Years ago, we knew that investing in hardscapes was the right choice. The breadth of assortment we see today means we're able to find a solution for every need, and we cannot wait to see what our suppliers come up with next!

Thank you,

PAUL TUDOR

President

Pioneer Landscape Centers



STRONGER THAN **SOLID** **GROUND**

The hardscape market was booming in 2020 for contractors and 2021 looks just as good, according to the State of the Hardscape Market survey. More than 60% of contractors would categorize consumer confidence in the market as “strong” while only 4% said weak and 35% said average. Backlog is also solid with 25% saying theirs is six weeks or more. See how you compare by combing through the data on the following pages.

Note: More than 200 hardscape contractors took the State of the Hardscape Market survey in mid-January. Not all percentage totals will equal 100%.

Matt Caruso
owner, Decra-Scape,
Sterling Heights, Michigan

It's been a record start for Decra-Scape, Caruso says.

"We may have the biggest backlog in our 31-year history coming into this season," he says. "The residential sector has exploded since travel/vacations have greatly minimized and with so many working from home, it seems they are doing what they can to fix things up. Even as far as turning their yards into an oasis of sorts."

Hardscaping is the only service Decra-Scape provides, and Caruso says while residential is doing very well, commercial "was quieter than usual for us." He adds that he's not sure how 2021 will end revenue wise.

"The second half I'm not so certain about," he says. "It seems to me uncertainty is looming, and we are not out of the woods just yet. I can only control what I can control so we are busy getting after it and excited for the season to get under way."

Kevin McHale
owner of McHale Landscape Design,
Upper Marlboro, Maryland

Hardscape work has always been consistent for McHale Landscape Design, McHale says, but he expects revenue to increase by 20% this year.

He says that scheduling and finding qualified subs have been a couple of their toughest challenges.

"We handled the challenge by creating a masonry division which employs 15, two-man masonry crews," he says. "These are true stone and brick masons that report direct to the job and work eight hours per day, which is typical of that industry."

Justin White
CEO, K&D Landscaping,
Watsonville, California

"Hardscaping is one of the most commonly requested type of projects we receive," White says. "I think our clients are wanting low-maintenance yards and areas to gather outdoors, especially now that they are spending more time at home."

Compared to planting, irrigation and other softscapes, White, whose company services central California, says hardscape has seen a larger spike in demand over the last 6-12 months.

"The low water/low maintenance mentality on the west coast has fueled this trend," he says. Even though finding qualified workers and getting products on time due to COVID delays in the supply chain are challenges, White says it will still be a positive 2021 for hardscaping services.

"I believe it will be a great year for all residential outdoor services. Hardscaping will be near the top of that list, just below outdoor kitchens," he says. "I think people have adapted to spending more time in their own backyard and less time at the local pub or restaurant. Hardscaping is a great solution to create usable space and reduce maintenance of the yard."

**Residential
vs. Commercial:**

66% of respondents said **76%-100%** of their hardscape business comes from residential customers while almost **80%** said less than **25%** came from commercial customers.

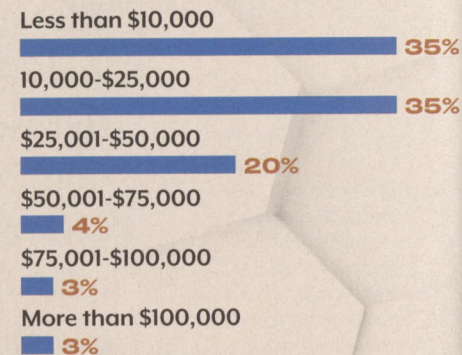
What is your company's overall gross revenue for 2020?



What is your company's hardscaping revenue for 2020?



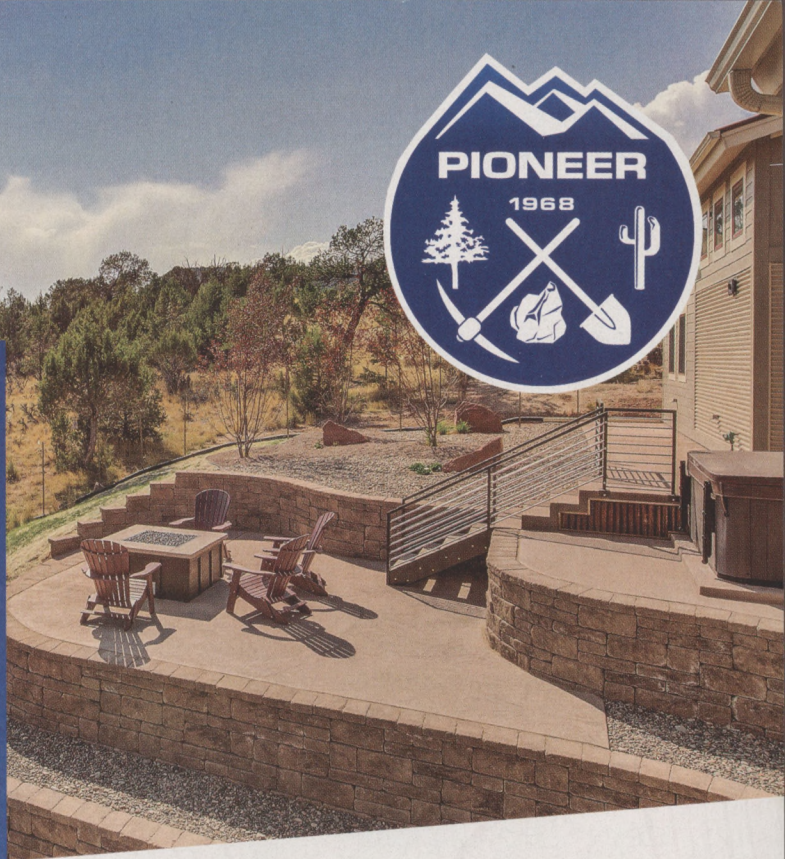
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Bob Wambach
landscape design and sales,
Proscapes, Madison, Wisconsin

Proscapes has been on a steady growth pattern in terms of total revenue of approximately 15% annually, but last year was nearly 30%. Wambach attributes the increase to people working from home because of COVID.

He says the average job size has doubled from \$30,000 to \$60,000 with many more in the \$100,000 range. The average client has changed in the last few years from 55 to 35 years of age.

Wambach doesn't see an end in sight. "I know I have completed more proposals and designs this year than any other winter," he says. "We are also booked out further than I have ever been going into the season." He adds the goal in 2021 isn't more sales, it's more net profit. "We are likely to space out the calendar more," he says. "We will be taking on less work overall, but the projects so far are larger and high-end."

Jennifer Chaplin
CEO, Botanica
Yuba City, California

Chaplin says she has seen an increase in residential customers who are looking for concrete or pavers, and more commercial projects call for decomposed granite as mulch in planters.

"In 2020, our hardscape sales were twice what they were in either 2018 or 2019," she says.

Chaplin says a cement shortage due to COVID-19 was her toughest challenge, especially when ordering large quantities.

"We immediately made changes to our crew schedules to accommodate the delays, and we made changes to how we bid future projects to account for projected price increases and delays," she says.

She foresees an increase in hardscape sales for residential projects in 2021.

"I believe we will see an increase in sales of patios, outdoor kitchens, fire pits and seating walls in 2021," she says. "People are trying to make the best of it, and I hope we can help them do that."

Ian McCarthy
president, Blue Claw Associates
Osterville, Massachusetts

McCarthy says he has seen an influx of people looking to buy property on the Cape and Islands, and those looking to convert a summer home to a year-round residence. With that influx comes more construction and renovation work, and thus more landscape and hardscape projects.

"The current era of buyers are more sophisticated with their wants than those in the past," he says. "Decades ago, a simple brick patio or walkway would suffice, but now clients are looking for outdoor kitchens, fire pits and fireplaces, outdoor lighting, swimming pools and spas, waterfalls and extensive terracing and walls."

The materials have become more interesting, McCarthy says, like utilizing different granites and wall stone and more custom fabrication, as well as concrete products looking much more like real stone.

"We are expecting a 50% increase in revenue in 2021 due to these demands," he says "With the events of 2020 creating this influx of activity, the lack of spending on vacations has enabled clients to spend more money on their hardscapes." **L&L**

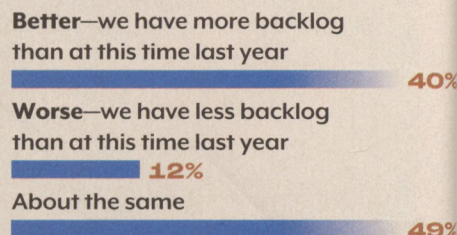
What are the most popular hardscape elements your customers are requesting?



What is your backlog for hardscaping projects going into the 2021 season?



How does that compare to this same time last year?



How would you categorize customer confidence in your market?



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SePro Corporation	thestewardsofturf.com	INSERT
SiBore Drill LLC	siboredrill.com	56
Smartgate Conveyors	smartgateconveyors.com	50
STIHL	stihlusa.com/products/battery-products/ap-series	29
Switch-N-Go	switchngo.com	51
Syngenta	growwithsyngenta.com	63
Techo- Bloc	techo-bloc.com	7
Toro Irrigation	toro.com/psn	67
TruFuel	trufuelgo.com	48
Turfco	turfco.com	21
Valley Green, Inc.	valleygreenusa.com	50
Wilber-Ellis Co	wilburellis.com	2

* denotes regional advertising

AN AVERAGE DAY

Kevin Shackelford, CEO,
Shackelford Landscape Group



Even though Kevin Shackelford doesn't spend as much time doing daily tasks in the field like he did in the early days, there are still some things he hasn't changed from those hours he clocked while on a mower. That includes his food choices.

Interviewed by **Brian Horn**

"I have a basic peanut butter sandwich for lunch or fast food since I'm usually on the go," says Kevin Shackelford, the CEO of Shackelford Landscape Group in Bear, Delaware. "My lunch food choices have stuck with me since I was in the field, day in and day out." Shackelford manages almost 25 employees and is 100% commercial, providing snow and landscaping services. **Here's Shackelford's average day.**

I wake up at 5 a.m., take a quick shower and hop on top priorities to get them done. For breakfast, I bring oatmeal or buy breakfast – something with bacon, egg and cheese. I try to avoid caffeine like coffee and energy drinks because I don't like the crashes associated with them. However, during snow operations, I do drink them to stay awake.

It's about a 15 minute drive to our main headquarters. If I'm going to our other locations, then it's about an hour to an hour-

and-a-half away. I listen to a diverse pallet of music ranging from hip hop, to R&B, to pop, to some country.

Sometimes I'm in the office at 6:15 or sometimes 9 a.m. My branch manager starts the day and does stretch-and-flex, and if I come in at 9, then we have a quick debrief and go from there.

In the morning, I also usually lead safety meetings although I have a safety director. I'll hop in to help keep things from getting boring. I've learned keeping things fresh and exciting is key to employee development. I'll also help my team quote projects and talk to clients about what they are looking to get done. Although I have an awesome team, I do have clients who like to hear from me and see my face, so I pay them visits regularly.

We regroup at lunch and go over key objectives to accomplish before day's end like post-mower morning check. After lunch, I'll do site visits and visit with those on the front lines. Simply going out in the field has done wonders for my operation.

Around 4 or 5 p.m. we have crews back in. I normally leave end-of-day tasks to the branch manager who makes sure crews are back and any incidents are reported that day. There are times I come in to do maintenance or other stuff for fun.

If it's summertime, we try to be done with work on Fridays by 3 to give our team time to go boating, jet skiing, or sleep at home – whatever they wish.

In the evenings I like to spend time with family and friends and relax and recharge for tomorrow. I'll head to bed around 10 p.m.

On weekends, if a client calls, we will get it done. Some clients we have prefer we do major projects on weekends due to less traffic and distraction to their business. **L&L**



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