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choose JOY

Sharon Wise helped turn around her son's company, **GrassRoots Turf**, and is now battling cancer with a positive outlook.

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Brian Horn
Editor, Lawn & Landscape

"When we hear stories of someone getting a serious illness or someone hitting a rough patch, it's sometimes a reminder that our problems could be worse."

Mrs. Brightside

Every month here at Lawn & Landscape, we try to provide you with content that will help you run a more successful business. This month, we have a stories on fuel management, equipment to improve your irrigation operation and much more — all of which will keep you looped into industry trends and give you some tips on how to be a better business operator.

But for our cover story, we are mixing it up a little and focusing on something that happened outside of the office or a jobsite, and how you could approach it.

Sharon Wise, who is integral in helping her son, Josh, and his company succeed, was diagnosed with cancer.

While some may become dejected and, understandably, feel sorry for themselves, that's clearly not Wise's approach.

One quote really stood out to me in the story, which is why part of it's on the cover.

"We all have control of only one thing — our attitude," Sharon says. (How do) we react to any given situation? I choose joy."

As a born pessimist, I am always a bit jealous of people with that type of attitude. When we hear stories of someone getting a serious illness or someone hitting a rough patch, it's sometimes a reminder that our problems could be worse.

As I write that last sentence, I hear myself telling someone like Sharon that statement, and her coming back with a rebuttal that she could have it worse and everyone should maintain positivity, no matter how difficult that may be.

I'm sure Sharon has her down moments. She's human — we all would. As you work your way through your issues on the job, you will have to make hard decisions and a positive attitude doesn't solve everything.

But if a negative outlook is on one shoulder and in your ear, and a positive outlook is on the other, think about what Wise said and choose joy.

— Brian Horn

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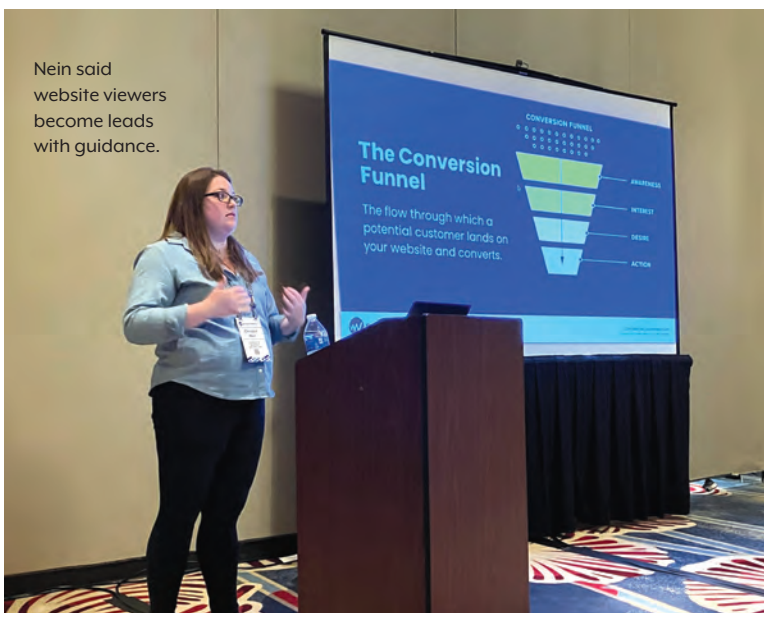
Driving visitors to different spots on your website is a science. **By Jimmy Miller**

At the recent WorkWave Beyond Service User Conference, Christin Nein, the vice president of product development at Coalmarch, told attendees that website design can be more about psychology than many people think.

"It's like herding sheep," Nein said. "You have to keep (people) focused, they're easily distracted, and they're all over the place."

Nein likens this herding process to a conversion funnel, which is how people interact with and navigate through your website depending on what they're looking for when they land on your site. At the top of the funnel is the awareness phase, then the interest level, desire and finally action.

Your number one goal of your website is to generate leads for your business by converting traffic into contacts. Ideally, they navigate from pages that boost their awareness of what your company does or who you are, then click on another page that shows their interest, another that shows desire for a service, then they take action.



Nein said website viewers become leads with guidance.

That's easier said than done, Nein said.



"Each step that someone takes on your website, you're losing traffic," she said. "On average, across all conversion-based websites, only 10% of the traffic that comes to your site converts into a lead."

Plus, not everyone starts at the top of that funnel where they already have awareness of what your company is all about. Nein likens this to shopping for laundry: Everyone knows Tide and is likely to seek it out.

They might stumble upon a generic detergent instead, and while they know its purpose, you also still need to read more to make sure it won't burn a hole in your clothes. Or, for some products, people might not recognize the product at all and need a lot more research readily available to know what the detergent is all about.

This is why designing your website for all three types of users — those with high, moderate and low brand awareness of your company — is so crucial to earning new clients.

At high awareness levels, Nein said people are searching for your company on Google by entering your brand's name (XYZ Lawn Care Company) and already knows your reputation and services. They're already pretty interested in doing business with you if they're searching your company by name, so giving them an easy way to convert into a lead on your home page is critical. They may need some extra education on your pricing, but beyond that, they're warm leads.

At moderate awareness levels, Nein said Google

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searchers might not know of your exact business but may be searching for something with the intent of purchasing a service. This is where they might search "lawn care near me," and Nein said these users must be told what makes your business unique.

Nein told attendees to avoid saying things about how great your service is – every company will say they have great service, she said. Instead, humanize your company with good staff photography on your website and talk about the great deals you offer like free re-treatments or same-day service – whatever you offer that incentivizes customers to pick you over competitors.

Finally, Nein said there are people who land on your website at low awareness levels. These people might be searching something like "what's this spotting on my lawn?" Your website should have educational blogs or offer resources so DIY-ers like these searchers can find valuable information on your website when they stumble upon it. Then, the website blog should lead them to another page where they can learn more about your services.

Nein reminded attendees that blogs alone aren't great lead conversion tools, but they're necessary to build up good search engine optimization, which will eventually lead to more clients over time.

Your goal is to give all users the easiest way to convert into leads as possible. Nein recommends the following:

- Simplify your webform service inquiry fields – Nein adds that she might keep it as basic as first name, last name, contact info and a comments section. Even having the option to leave your address might be too much.
- Add live chat
- Add click to text
- Consistent, modern branding
- Begin a customer referral program

"You have to use your website as a tool to get them to end up where you need them to," Nein said.

Crane Group acquires 5 landscaping companies, creating Fairwood Brands

All five companies within the Fairwood Brands will continue to operate using their individual names and brands.

CRANE GROUP, in conjunction with Appalachian Capital Holdings, acquired five businesses that will operate as part of a new parent company called Fairwood Brands — a nationwide family of companies creating and maintaining outdoor spaces.

Fairwood Brands includes five companies around the country that specialize in luxury residential landscaping and estate management. Crane Group will help grow those companies while adding others into the Fairwood Brands family over time. Fairwood Brands companies, which will operate using their individual names and brands, currently include:

- Bruss Landscaping, Chicago
- Enchanted Garden Landscapes, Phoenix
- Kuppe's Landscape Services, Detroit
- L.M.L. Estate Management, Ft. Wayne, Indianapolis
- Signature Landscape Contractors, Orlando

Between the Fairwood Brands companies, there are 240 employees and a combined $40 million in revenue.

All five of these companies offer a full suite of design/build, installation, maintenance and comprehensive estate management services for homeowners seeking outdoor living: landscapes, hardscapes, water features, outdoor kitchens, lighting and irrigation.

Fairwood Brands is the fourth current portfolio company for Crane Group, a Columbus-based, family-owned company. Over its 75-year history, Crane Group has launched or held 30 different companies.

"Crane Group is eyeing bold growth ahead. As we do, I am thrilled to launch Fairwood Brands and invest in companies like these five whose core values align with ours and who deliver top-quality services," said Crane Group CEO Tanny Crane. "I'm excited to watch our incredible team help propel the success of these companies and others that will join the Fairwood Brands family."

Andy Swanson, founder of Signature Landscape Contractors, looks forward to Crane Group helping him grow the business he loves.

"This is an incredible opportunity to level up in every way," Swanson said. "Because Crane Group is a family-owned business, they understand who we are and what's most important to us. But they're also going to help us win big on the business front. I am 100% confident they are the right partner to help grow my business, and I look forward to what's ahead."

Scott Morris, co-owner of L.M.L. Estate Management, said he, too, is confident in the value a Crane Group partnership provides.

"We're working to raise the bar — for our customers and our businesses. It will be a huge help to have strategic and managerial support from the Crane Group team and to have industry peers to collaborate and share ideas with," Morris said. "We all share core principles and have very similar values in our businesses and in our communities. We're very excited to be part of the Fairwood Brands family and to partner with Crane Group."

United Land Service acquires 2 Florida-based companies

The company acquired Haverland Ag Innovations and Buccaneer Landscape Management.

UNITED LAND SERVICE has acquired Haverland Ag Innovations of Boynton Beach, Fla., and Buccaneer Landscape Management, a commercial landscaping company based in St. Petersburg, Florida. Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

Haverland Ag Innovations is a third-generation company that specializes in sports turf maintenance throughout South Florida. The terms of the sale were not disclosed.

"Joining forces with United gives us the opportunity to continue to grow and expand our service offerings throughout the state," said Haverland President Keely Haverland. "We are confident that partnering with a leading company in the industry will provide our employees with additional opportunities and our customers with enhanced services under one umbrella." "We are very excited to begin this partnership and service offering with Haverland and their loyal client base," said United CEO Bob Blandford. "Together we will maintain Haverland's long running reputation for high quality service by providing unwavering professional support to client properties, while also broadening our presence in sports turf market."

Founded in 2016 by Chris Witherington, Buccaneer is a full-service landscaping company specializing in commercial landscape maintenance, arbor care, irrigation and landscape installation with six locations throughout Florida. The acquisition of Buccaneer expands United's presence on the West Coast and South Florida.

"The Buccaneer team is excited to join forces with United and continue to grow and excel within the United organization," Witherington said. "We are proud of what we have done over the past 16 years and are excited to continue to grow with a company that still has the entrepreneurial spirit as United Land Services does."

United Land Services, headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida, was ranked in the top 25 largest landscape contractors with over 700 employees. They were no. 24 on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 List in 2022. L&L





TRAVELS WITH JIM
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TRAVELS WITH JIM follows Jim Huston around the country as he visits with landscapers and helps them understand their numbers to make smarter decisions.

LEVELS OF LANDSCAPING

IMAGINE A FOOTBALL TEAM where the owner, in order to save money, was also the head coach, the offensive coordinator, the defensive coordinator, the special teams coach, the equipment manager and the head groundskeeper. On any given Sunday morning, you'd find him mowing and striping the field. Now, consider green industry entrepreneurs. My personal (anecdotal) statistics tell me the following:

- About 2% of all green industry companies grow to $5 million or more in annual revenue.
- Approximately 12% make it to $1 million or more.
- Roughly 75% of all green industry companies have an annual revenue of $500,000 or less.

The question that I've wrestled with for almost 40 years of working with green industry companies is, "What systems, people and processes need to be in place for a company to grow through these various levels?" Here's my analysis:

HOW IT WORKS IN THE REAL WORLD.

Level 1: A new business owner usually starts out running a small two- or three-person install crew, or a four-or five-person maintenance crew, while actually working in the field. He or she sells the work, directly works with and manages field labor, runs the office and does the accounting. This size operation usually generates about $300,000 in annual sales.

Level 2: To get to the next level of $500,000 to $600,000 in annual sales, an owner has to hire crew leaders to run the crews. He or she should also hire (at a minimum) a part-time office assistant. This allows the entrepreneur to sell and manage more work. At this level, the owner is managing an office person and two to three crew leaders.

Level 3: To achieve $1 million in annual sales, an owner usually needs a full-time office manager who runs the office and does the bookkeeping. Additional crew leaders are also hired and put into place. It's at this level that the owner begins to hire and lead managers who, in turn, manage crew leaders who manage the field labor that performs the jobs.

Level 4: Once competent managers are put into place for all divisions, it's time to "put-the-pedal-to-the-metal," so to speak. This will get a company to about the $4 million mark. Of course, administrative staff need to be added as well. It's at this level that the owner needs to master working with managers for the field, office, marketing and so forth.

Level 5: To get to Level 5 — the 2% level — an entrepreneur needs to solidify his or her management team and make some key additions to it. It's around Level 4 that a company should start thinking about hiring a controller. This should be someone with a strong accounting and information technology (IT) background. The other important hire to consider at Level 4 is a human resources (HR) professional.

Once a green industry company reaches Level 5, its structure can vary dramatically. Since about 98% of all green industry companies fall below this category, I'll focus on them.

THE MINDSET OF A GREEN INDUSTRY ENTREPRENEUR (CEO). Green industry entrepreneurs (I'll call them CEOs) within a capitalistic framework think very much alike. First, they constantly think in terms of threats and opportunities. What opportunities might they pursue in order to increase their wealth? And what situations might jeopardize such pursuits and/or might threaten their existing accumulated wealth? Once an opportunity is decided upon, next the CEO needs to build a team as described above to pursue it. Simultaneously (and as the team grows), the CEO has to implement systems to direct and control the chaos. Otherwise, the organization will be like a raging river above flood stage — totally out of control. In addition to all of this, it's important that the CEO networks like crazy and builds an external team to include an attorney, CPA, suppliers, vendors, financial experts and so forth.

To grow through these levels, whether the goal is to reach Level 5 or not, the CEO has to think a certain way. An effective green industry CEO has to be somewhat schizophrenic, so to speak. He or she has to constantly be thinking strategically (the big picture) while building a team and the systems to handle all of the minutia and chaos (the little picture). Most people cannot handle this amount of craziness and chaos. This is also one of the reasons why so few green industry companies make it to Level 5 and beyond.

CONCLUSION. As you enter 2023 and pursue the opportunities while considering the threats (recession, labor issues, health issues, to name a few) that it might bring your way, ask yourselves these questions: What jobs do you need to delegate to a competent manager or field person? What team members do you need to hire and put in place? What systems does your team need to perform their jobs more efficiently?

If you and your team are going to flourish and have a winning season in 2023, it's important that you think about how you think — or more importantly — how you don't think. **L&L**


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WORDS OF WILSON features a rotating panel of consultants from Bruce Wilson & Company, a landscape consulting firm.

LEADING THROUGH A CRISIS

IF DOOM-AND-GLOOM HEADLINES are getting you down, you are not alone. I launched a landscape company in 2001, the beginning of a decade that included global upheaval, 9/11 and the Great Recession. In the end, the business went on to a successful acquisition in 2016.

I've been an entrepreneur most of my adult life and from my experience, economic downturns are a great time to build a business. Today I'm a CEO and executive coach, and when business owners ask me how to succeed during tough times, the answer is: remove distractions and focus on what will gain you the most ground. Surround yourself with experts in areas you don't know well, take decisive action every day, reinvent systems and processes that are more agile and effective, and invest in tools and practices that will make your business more competitive.

With that in mind, here are six areas to get right:

DIGITAL FLUENCY. Get up to speed on data. Your tech priorities should include an analytic program for forecasting and benchmarking; updated accounting and marketing software; network- and cloud-enabled devices; a platform that improves customer experience; and cybersecurity technologies to protect your information.

RELEVANCE. It's the new competitive advantage. Being relevant means that you are constantly adjusting your services and business model to be in tune with your market's needs and shows that you understand how your business resonates with your customers and the candidates you're looking to hire. If you're not relevant, your customers and job applicants may go somewhere else.

AGILITY. Nothing can match the maneuverability of an agile organization when it comes to outperforming. Higher productivity, faster time to market, better quality, higher engagement — the list goes on. But transforming the business you built yesterday to one that will be nimble and quick tomorrow is tough. You need to break down traditional hierarchies, silos and structures to become flatter. You also need to put information and decision-making in the hands of the teams and people that do the work.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT. Invest in building effective organizational leadership for both individuals and teams. It not only expands everyone's capacity to be effective in their role, but develops strategic thinking and the ability to look at the big picture and excel at solving problems from 30,000 feet. Industry associations, peer groups or executive coaching and training can help with leadership development. Not asking for help when you need it is a missed opportunity to identify blind spots.

RESILIENCY. Every CEO's resiliency playbook should include an effective crisis management plan that focuses on stress events outside your company's control, a scalable strategic plan to create, preserve or recover value as quickly as possible, and a SWT — strengths, weaknesses and trends assessment to help you course correct.

INVEST IN THE LONG GAME. Every business has four life cycles — startup, growth, maturity and renewal. Strong leaders make smart decisions about each stage the business is in, and how the market is changing and impacting growth. Your path to the finish line, whether it's in years or decades, should always include a succession plan, a positive cash flow, a scalable service and a value proposition that is second-to-none.

In the end, "winds of change" have the potential to create strong and successful businesses, and strong and successful competitors. As a long-distance cyclist and as a CEO, I believe in being alert to changes in the wind as an opportunity to gain ground. A headwind for one leader is a tailwind for someone going in the opposite direction.

The only question for CEOs in 2023 is, how will you partner with the wind to win? **L&L**

IT'S NOT EASY RUNNING A COMPANY. But there are several strategies for being ready when the inevitable chaos creeps up.

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CREAM OF THE CROP
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CREAM OF THE CROP features a rotating panel from the Harvest Group, a landscape business consulting company.

READY FOR KICKOFF

A BUSINESS OWNER FROM MASSACHUSETTS called me the other day to talk about the annual transition from the snow season to the landscape season, and what he should do to get all the employees on the same page to ensure prompt, aligned and optimal field execution. With 85-90 employees to consider, it is important for the business owner to design a well-crafted, organized "Landscape Kickoff Day" that is informative, fundamental and engaging.

As is common in these scenarios, the employee mix likely includes: (a) those employees who were employed throughout the snow season in either a full-time or part-time capacity, (b) former employees who were laid off during the snow season, and (c) new employees joining the company as they begin/continue their career in the green industry.

Rather than splitting the entire workforce into smaller groups on different days, or staggering their work times on the same work day, the owner preferred to have all the employees together at the same time, on the same day, simply partitioned into different groups.

Taking approximately four hours to complete, involving four distinct stations each employee must complete, here is the standard "Landscape Season Kickoff Day" configuration I commonly recommend.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE. This station is led by the company president who provides a factual, upbeat overview of the company history, brand, vision and mission statements, core values, success behaviors, dos and don'ts, business model, results from last year, goals, social media campaigns planned, website updates, organizational chart, company calendar and career ladder. Interwoven throughout this presentation is energy, respect, customer service and vertical trust throughout the company.

Optimism is the watchword, employee engagement is the vehicle, with teamwork the destination. This schematic requires the president to assume multiple roles including passionate cheerleader, employee motivator and cultural icon. The overall success of this kickoff meeting is largely dependent on the success of this kickoff session.

ADMINISTRATIVE. This station is all about paperwork, co-facilitated by a departmental manager and human resources. All key documents should be signed by all attendees before they leave the session: Employee Handbook, I-9 Form, Arbitration Agreement and Employee Confidentiality Agreement if necessary, Key Issuance Agreement, PPE Acknowledgment, W-4 Form, Benefits Enrollment, Cell Phone Issuance Agreement, Employment Application, Job Description, Performance Appraisal Form, Sexual Harassment Policy, EEO Policy, Direct Deposit Form, Image and Release Agreement, Vehicle Take Home Form, Time Off Request Form and any required state or federal forms or notifications.

The ability to secure all these documents signed by every employee at one time saves inordinate administrative follow-up and repetition, in trying to retrieve these compliant-oriented documents from the employees once they begin their routine landscape season field work schedule.

SAFETY. This station is all about hands-on proficiency and is led by a departmental manager and the safety coordinator. Due to increased litigation, the practice of simply reviewing innumerable safety videos has been replaced by actual hands-on demonstration of equipment safety thereby confirming the employee can actually start, operate, navigate and shut-off the equipment without injury. Would you trust a pilot who only practiced on a video game, YouTube clip or simulator? I didn't think so.

Based on position, standard hands-on equipment safety training typically includes: mowers, blowers, hedge trimmers, edgers, chain saws, weed eaters, skid-steers and more. Other common safety topics shared during this session include: safety tailgate training calendar, emergency action plan, fire prevention program, hazard communication program, injury reporting procedures, PPE requirements, lockout/tagout, heat illness prevention, eye wash station, drug and alcohol policy, hooking up a trailer, vehicle inspections, fuel mixture procedures and proper lifting techniques.

OPERATIONS. This station is led by a departmental manager and a field supervisor, and addresses daily work procedures including shift start time, meal periods, rest breaks, scheduled daily/weekly work hours, absenteeism/tardiness procedures, time sheets, time off requests, payroll periods, date of first paycheck, overtime guidelines, shop procedures, yard departure and arrival tasks, rain day procedures, training programs, customer service expectations and other items.

Detailed information of this sort provides employees with much-needed structure that clarifies roles and responsibilities and performance expectations.

In closing, a well-designed Landscape Kickoff meeting is uniquely pivotal in instilling the requisite company pride, administrative focus, safety awareness and operational efficiency necessary to promote organizational alignment, accountability and achievement. **L&L**

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Jennifer **Burnett**

EVP of Organizational Development, LandCare

Jennifer Burnett is an active member of the National Association of Landscape Professionals Women in Landscape Network (powered by Bayer) which provides a forum for industry professionals to support each other's professional growth. The Network is free to all industry professionals.

WOMEN ARE A SMALL MINORITY IN OUR INDUSTRY — a fact that we are working to change. If I could share a bit of what I've learned along the way to help other women develop their career path, I'd boil it down to four key lessons.

IT'S OK TO CHANGE YOUR MIND. I made up my mind that I was going to be an accountant when I was 16 years old because I liked math, order and inherited a little of my dad's OCD. I was working at a landscape company while waiting to start my CPA exam review course and I realized I was happy working there — I loved the culture of that company and was excited to go to work each day. So, guess what? I never started the review course or attempted the CPA exam.

LEARN FROM SUCCESS AS WELL AS FAILURES. I always knew I wanted to be a working mother, but I never realized how hard it would be to balance the two. Every day, I can think of something I didn't do or something I wished I had done better. However, I find it is important to reflect not only on what I want to do better, but also on what went well. Focusing on success is far more impactful than trying to avoid failures. Having the drive to be better each day is what keeps me going.

GET COMFORTABLE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE. Being comfortable is not always a good thing. The most important career decision I made was in response to someone asking why I would ever want to leave my position because I knew exactly what to expect each day. I realized complacency wasn't what I wanted, and that helped make a career move and join LandCare in 2015. The change came with little guarantee of long-term career success, but I felt the potential upside could be huge (and I was right!). Shortly after starting, I received the best career advice when I was told to "get comfortable being uncomfortable." I realized that I was going to have to continue to push myself out of my comfort zone to achieve the career growth I desired.

YOU'RE NEVER REALLY READY. You may have heard the following statistic: Men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them. I have not shared this with a woman yet who doesn't relate. Many women still struggle to put ourselves out there if we are not 100% confident that we're ready. However, the test shouldn't be, "can I do all the things this job requires?" The test should be, "do I have the aptitude, motivation and attributes to be successful in this role — and am I willing to learn everything necessary to perform the job well?" If you can answer "yes" to that question — then go for it.

In 2019, I saw an opportunity that I wanted to pursue — to enhance and lead the learning and development function for LandCare. I didn't have the typical background or qualifications for the role, but what I had to offer was my industry and organizational knowledge and a vision to help our teams learn better and faster. I saw an opportunity to centralize our development programs, to onboard new team members more effectively, improve engagement and increase our internal promotions. We're still in the beginning stages of making this a reality, but I can confidently say that we have accomplished a great deal so far. **L&L**

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choose joy

Sharon Wise helped turn around her son's company, GrassRoots Turf, and is now battling cancer with a positive outlook.

BY JIMMY MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CONNOR BARBER





Sharon Wise has lifted spirits and profits at GrassRoots.



What started out as a mother helping her son with his business financials has turned into a years-long partnership.

CYNTHIA VANHORN AVOIDS GROWING TOO CLOSE with her patients. She's a registered nurse working in the oncology unit, so she sees some people at their lowest moments. If cancer itself isn't exhausting the patients, it's the treatments. She says some patients stop enjoying their lives — they stop traveling, they stop working and they stop socializing.

Not Sharon Wise. The hospital paired her and VanHorn together for Sharon's first infusion in November 2021, where VanHorn quickly realized she'd grow close with Sharon.

"You really have to balance yourself — you have to avoid getting connected on this level with a lot of your patients or else you'll get burnt out," VanHorn says.

"There are still a few patients that draw you in, and Sharon is one of those," she adds. "There's something about her — she's real sparky and has a zest for life. She has a zest for taking things as they come."

When Sharon attends a work conference for her son's company, GrassRoots Turf, she takes pictures and brings them back to show VanHorn. Sharon's been known to hand out money to nurses who know anyone who's down on their luck, asking them, "Do you know anyone else who needs blessed yet?"

She's even found a way to turn chemotherapy treatment into a running joke: Her drug is now an orangish-red color, and she recently texted her friend, "I'm finally getting some Tennessee





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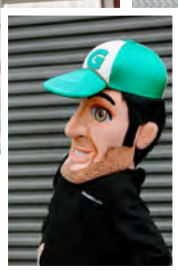


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As her son Josh needed help with business financials, Sharon stepped in, reshaping GrassRoots for good.



From left: Cory Hewatt, Tara Wise, Josh Wise, Sharon Wise, Bob Wise, Matt Wise, Kelly McDonnell

orange in me." As a big Georgia Bulldogs fan, Sharon jokingly expressed some apprehension about the drug that's colored like her rival school's, but VanHorn recalls hearing Sharon say, "If it's Tennessee orange that gives me more time, so be it."

"If I could design a perfect patient, it's Sharon," VanHorn says. "Do what you need to do to take care of yourself, but go live your life. Don't be stuck in just trying to stay alive."

Sharon has continued to work at GrassRoots through her cancer diagnosis, too. Over the last six years, she's helped her son, Josh, change the company. Because of her efforts, GrassRoots is nearly debt free and has refocused itself on select services. Josh says Sharon — who's now the team's chief financial officer — has gone above and beyond for the company.

"She sees her position as her mission and her calling," Josh says, "not to pay bills and balance accounts, but to love, guide and advise employees as family.

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With the help of her three children, including Josh, Sharon has been fighting cancer tirelessly since her 2021 diagnosis.

A GRASSROOTS EFFORT. Sharon remembers Josh mowing lawns with his father, Bob, when he was just 14. When he got older, she recalls Josh enjoying working in sales at a landscaping company but feeling like things could be run more effectively. When he was 21, the landscaping company was sold, and the new employers told him he'd sign a noncompete or he'd lose his job.

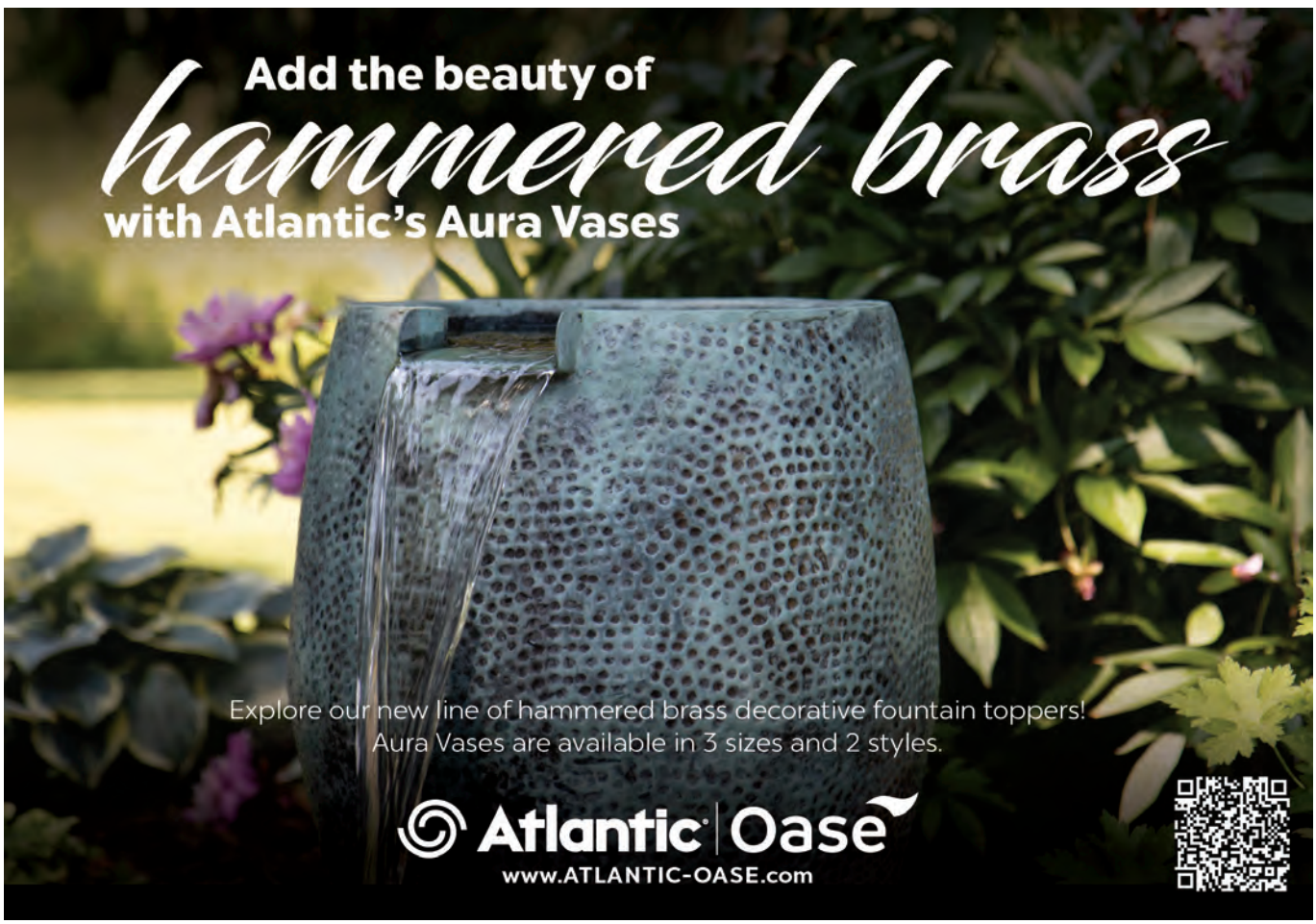
Josh didn't sign the deal. He started his own company, which now runs at $7.2 million in annual revenue and 28 employees. But the early goings were not always easy: Sharon remembers seeing her son swamped by big-picture management, day-to-day operations and the financials.

She's got a background in accounting and finance, so Sharon offered to come in one day a week to help her son pay bills. One day turned into two, then three. Eventually, it was almost daily phone calls or days in the office. Sharon sold off her company that did insurance annuities and joined the team full time.

"I knew that he needed the help, and the more I helped, the more I enjoyed it," Sharon says. "I basically became a partner with him."

The changes were made quickly: Sharon devised a five-year plan to get GrassRoots out of debt while upgrading their fleet of trucks to newer models. They also implemented new employee benefits like a 401k plan and life insurance.

But there were two other major decisions Sharon helped settle: For one, the company's growth meant they either needed to open more branches or franchise GrassRoots. They ultimately





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decided on franchising, which Sharon says was the right call.

"(Josh) cares about people. He wants people to be successful," Sharon says. "The franchisees are like partners. They're like brothers with Josh. He's on the phone with at least one of them all the time."

The team also had to make some difficult decisions with managers and departments that, for varying reasons, didn't make GrassRoots more profitable or productive. Josh says he and Sharon analyzed the company's divisions and found that while the spray unit made sense to keep aboard, lawn maintenance and pest control didn't.

But Josh didn't sell off those divisions to other companies. Chris McCrory is the team's franchise field coach and has been with GrassRoots for nine years. He and Josh say GrassRoots allowed the managers of those divisions to split with the company and create their own businesses.

Some are still operating, while some aren't. What's important to McCrory is that he saw compassion from his company's leadership. Sure, the team shed some divisions as a byproduct of improving profit margins, but he remembers how excited those managers were to ship off and start their own companies. What's more, Josh didn't charge them any additional money to maintain the clients they already had under the GrassRoots name. He also sold them equipment at really good prices, McCrory says.

"(They) had a heart, Sharon and Josh. They didn't want to just throw them to the curb," McCrory says. "I mean, who does that? Who gives somebody 100 customers for nothing?"

CANCER DIAGNOSIS. The hospital still operated under strict COVID-19 visitation rules when Josh and his two siblings were called in November 2021. Under most circumstances, they only allowed one visitor at a time. But now doctors told the Wise family they could come in all together. Josh knew then there was going to be some bad news.

Just days prior on Halloween, Sharon had three liters of fluid drawn from her chest, but she figured it was largely due to her then-recent bout with COVID. However, doctors confirmed that it was instead peritoneal carcinomatosis - Stage 4A. Though Sharon warns anyone not to search that term on the internet, she had to break the news to her children.

"Of course, we're all in there crying," Josh says, "and she looked at us and said, 'You guys all have each other. Your father and I won't always be here for you.'"

Sharon began treatment that same month, and after a full invasive surgery in March, a PET scan revealed she was cancer-free at the time. She still took a cancer pill daily, but that spring, she was still able to attend her grandchild's graduation from high school.





Despite her cancer, Sharon still hasn't missed a single payroll cycle at GrassRoots.

Within six weeks though, Sharon's tumor marker numbers grew, and another PET scan revealed the cancer was back and aggressive. Her current cancer treatment plans will carry through to February where another PET scan will determine the status of the cancer.

Even still, Josh says Sharon is still living her life. She was able to celebrate her 50th wedding anniversary as planned this September in the Florida Keys. She recently went through Dollywood in Tennessee with her family. And a day after a recent chemo treatment, she was back out at the outlet malls shopping for Christmas gifts.

Plus, Josh says Sharon's still treating GrassRoots as though it's business as usual. She's still working in the office daily and hasn't missed a single payroll for the team. There was one day she was too sick from treatments to come into the office, but even then, she managed to call Josh and guide him through the process while she was bedridden.

"You would never know she's battling cancer," Josh says.

Beyond that, Sharon says there's been no limitations. And she adds that the employees don't treat her much differently than before — she's still the "office mother" she had been since she joined GrassRoots. Sometimes, Sharon jokes that she's had technicians come by to apologize for letting a swear word slip nearby, but that's always been the case. Things are still humming along at GrassRoots, and Sharon's still helping to steer the ship.

"At first, it probably was tip-toey: Do we talk about it, do we not talk about it? A lot of people get an illness, and they don't want to talk about it," Sharon says. "I'd come in and say I feel good about it. I think my coming in and being as diligent as I have been lets them all know that life goes on. You control your attitude."

At a recent conference, a young woman noticed Sharon's hat and approached her to say that her mom had recently passed away with cancer. Her mother had received her diagnosis, went straight to the couch and never got up to enjoy life again.

"She said, 'I just wish she would've had your attitude,'" Sharon says. "When I feel good, I just go do things."



LED BY FAITH. Sharon also attributes this mentality to her faith, which has become the backbone of everything at GrassRoots.

Decades ago, Sharon stood up from the back pew at the small Sylvester Baptist Church in Atlanta. She approached the pastor up front to tell him she wanted to accept Jesus. Sharon remembers being surprised to see her mom sitting in the front row.

"I said, 'What are you doing here?' Sharon recalls. "And she said, 'I knew you were coming down here."

Though Sharon grew up in public schools, she found herself working at Dominion Christian Schools from 1997 to 2010, which grew her faith as she raised three children. All these years later, Sharon's spiritual influence is prominent at GrassRoots. Josh says he used to really keep politics and religion outside the workplace, but Sharon has helped bring out the company's faith-based mentality. She opens up each meeting with a prayer, and the company painted the words in Proverbs 22:1 up on the wall above the team's kitchen area.

"It's a joke at times — sometimes, this place is more of a church than a workplace," Josh says.

Josh adds that the way his mother has handled her journey with cancer is an inspiration to others in the office. It's a testimony to what strong faith and the right mindset can do for a person. He remembers an employee coming to her office and later, Josh saw on security cameras his mother embracing the employee and crying with her. She was going through hardships and Sharon was there to help.

"My mom had given her some cash out of her own pocket. She gave her some motherly advice," Josh says. "She's always praying for all of us."

Sharon has also helped create a fund at the company for employees when they hit hard times. Josh says one family had a son that had third-degree burns after a tragic

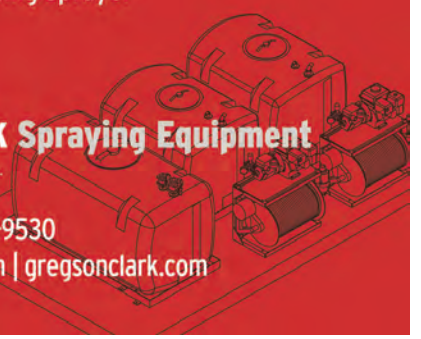
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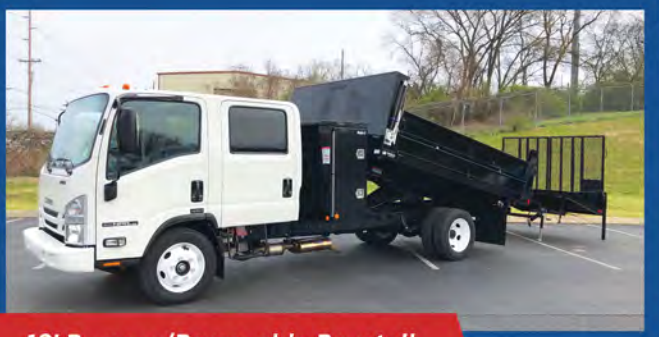
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accident. Another slipped and fell in a bathroom and broke her ribs.

"Seeing a need to assist them, Sharon began a fund that would be available to help our GrassRoots family," Josh says.

McCrory says Sharon and Josh have fostered a culture for helping at GrassRoots. One day before Thanksgiving break, an employee got in a huge wreck. The other driver, who caused the accident, had no insurance and drove away. The employee was going to miss six months of time to recover. Everyone in the office donated PTO, and Sharon donated some money.

"They definitely care for all their employees. You definitely don't feel like just an employee and they're a manager-owner," McCrory says. "She really gets involved with the employees on a personal level. It's more than just, 'I'm an owner and here's your paycheck.' She'll advance salaries all the time to help make ends meet."

A HOPEFUL OUTLOOK. Josh admits that he dreams for a day where his mother will be cancer-free, but he and Sharon both know her days on earth might be numbered. Despite that, he admires how her story has already influenced those around her.

"I hope it touches a lot of lives. I hope people realize the stupid little stuff we let get in our way, at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter," Josh says. "I do know everything happens for a reason. At the end of the day, I've already seen so many people touched by her story."

VanHorn, the nurse who's still helping watch over Sharon's treatments, is among those people.

"That's who Sharon is," VanHorn says. "She definitely created a legacy that's going to live on."

Others are stepping in to bat for Sharon, too. McCrory's wife, Mary Ann, works at Northside Cherokee Hospital, and she was able to help get extra visitors to be able to stay the night with Sharon during COVID. In an all-too-familiar story, Sharon was able to create a bond with Mary Ann that's still going. She visited multiple times to make sure Sharon always had enough pillows, ice, blankets and water during her hospital stays.

"This is what made Sharon feel like she had someone there for her when she needed somebody," McCrory says. "That was really cool."

Sharon says she's thankful for everyone who has prayed for her and looked out for her since her diagnosis. She's even thankful for her health, as she still hasn't vomited from chemo, and she says she's had "more good days than bad."

"We all have control of only one thing — our attitude," Sharon says. "(How do) we react to any given situation? I choose joy." L&L

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape.

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It is important to mention that these are times of great change for our industry, with new technologies and innovations emerging at a rapid pace. The industry is adapting and growing with new ways to improve the services and offerings that we provide to our clients. As members of the Lawn & Landscape industry, we have the opportunity to stay on the cutting edge of these developments and to continue to push the boundaries of what is possible in the field of landscaping.

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The decarbonization of our industry is a key step toward achieving our goals for the environment but it also represents an opportunity for us to strengthen the industry's capacity for innovation and competitiveness. Together as an industry, we are making a real difference, and I am excited to see what the future holds for us all as we continue to evolve in this ever-changing landscape.

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PAIN AT THE pump

Landscapers and lawn care operators across the country say **RISING FUEL COSTS** can cause headaches, but there are a few ways to alleviate the pain.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Not all percentages will equal 100% due to rounding. Results are based off of more than 300 respondents.

PHOTO © KOONSIRI | ADOBE STOCK



Hollie Arnell

Owner of Roots Landscape Design and Consulting // Boise, Idaho

Hollie Arnell says Idaho is one of the most isolated states in terms of proximity to a refinery, which means fuel costs can be outrageous without some creativity.

That's why Arnell and the Idaho Nursery and Landscape Association, where she serves as the executive director, partnered with a gas station to get good discounts for fleet management.

Arnell also runs her company that she started 13 years ago, Roots Landscape Design and Consulting. It has 18 employees and they're a year-round company. At Roots, Arnell didn't implement a gas surcharge. Instead, she just raised her jobs $2 a man-hour rate. But at the association, she knows a lot of people who line-itemized their fuel cost increases, which she believes isn't a great idea.

"You're adding fuel to the fire by pointing (the increase) out," she says. "If you're going to increase your rate, just increase your rate."

Arnell says she knows some lawn care companies that increased their costs by $6 but lost some long-time clients because the customers felt slighted by the price jump.

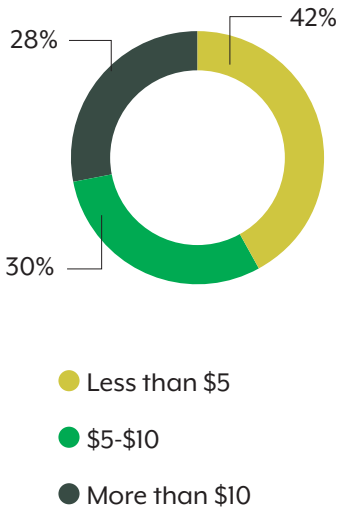
"They're also still feeling the pain at the pump," Arnell says of the clients. So, she set out to avoid doubling down on that fuel-related pain.

Arnell still grew her company by roughly 23% in the last year, so she doesn't think that this year she'll raise prices again. Fuel prices won't make her change those bids — if anything does, it'd be if she can add some labor, which would mean she'd need to pay more workers. Even then, most of her employees have been with Arnell for eight or more years, and she commends the group for growing a family-like relationship.

"If they've asked for raises, I've given them to them because they're worth it," Arnell says, adding she still doesn't foresee raising prices on clients to pay those employees. "If that means I have to take a little bit less to keep them on board, then I'm happy to do that."

— Jimmy Miller

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FUELING PROFITABLE

Dan Bywalec

President of D&B Landscaping // Livonia, Mich.



Right now, in the midst of an unseasonably warm winter, Dan Bywalec says the business has been able to save a little on fuel costs, but that's not always the case.

"Fuel consumption always goes down in the winter when we have little snow," he says. "This year we're really down. We've only had about seven inches of snow so far here in the Detroit area since the beginning of the snow season. Right now, the fuel costs aren't as bad as they normally are."

But over the course of the last few years the company has been hit hard by high fuel costs.

"It's definitely impacting the business," he says. "Just looking back to last year for what we paid for fuel and gas and everything, we paid about $196,000 in 2021 and our year-end this year was about $247,000. It truly has impacted us."

In Michigan, Bywalec adds taxes associated with gas and fuel are astronomical.

"I look at the invoices from our fuel supplier and just freak out," he says. "The taxes are overwhelming. It's definitely been a rude awakening these last few years."

Bywalec notes that on one invoice recently, the company purchased 144 gallons of gas at $2.65 a gallon. Also included in the bill was $80 in fuel taxes plus an environmental fee and sales tax — bringing the total to $489.66

"I don't think people realize the taxes that we have to pay on all of these fuel consumptions," he says.

Bywalec adds these high fuel costs are also making it hard to retain longstanding partnerships with customers.

"It's very difficult right now to set up a three-year or long-term contract with commercial establishments, which is something a lot of people in our industry want to do," he says. "But I don't feel like we can hold that price for that long or even know what kind of percentage increase to add year-to-year because we don't know what the big picture is going to be."

For D&B Landscaping, a fuel surcharge might be a solution to the issue, but Bywalec says implementing one effectively is a delicate balance.

"It's a tough commodity to put a surcharge on," he says. "The fluctuation of gas and diesel fuel makes it difficult. It's hard to find that percentage line.

"We do have it in our contracts that if the price of gas goes over $4 a gallon there would be a surcharge," Bywalec adds. "But I really think it depends on the customer and what kind of relationship you have with them."

Bywalec says some clients will get really upset at a fuel surcharge and he isn't sure that the money recovered is worth risking that relationship.

"Everybody is feeling the same pinch," he says. "Is that $96 really important when they are already spending thousands of dollars a month?

"I've talked it over with the people here and we're not really sure if we want to put a surcharge on those people," Bywalec adds.

— Kim Lux



PHOTO COURTESY OF D&B LANDSCAPING

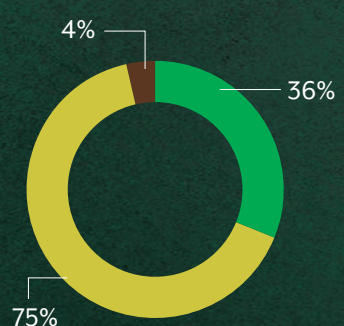
IF YOU HAVEN'T ADDED A FUEL CHARGE TO CUSTOMERS' BILLS, ARE YOU CONSIDERING ADDING ONE?

41% yes

59% no

HOW DO YOU PURCHASE YOUR FUEL?

(CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY)



Richard Bare

CEO of Arbor-nomics Turf // Norcross, Ga.



As the price of fuel (and everything else) increases, Richard Bare says his lawn care company is raising prices slowly but surely.

"We went up on our prices last year 20% and I thought that was crazy," he says.

But it turned out that customers were receptive of the price increase.

"When you raise prices during inflation, people allow it," Bare says. "But when you go up on prices for really no reason at all, well then, they get really upset and you get a lot more calls. It's like reading the tea leaves out there with your client list and what they're expecting."

When budgeting for 2022 and 2023, the company took fuel costs into account, but Bare noted it didn't make a huge impact on profit margins.

"We were thinking it'd be a big deal, but it wasn't an issue," he says. "(Fuel) is somewhat of a minor expense on the P&L. It didn't impact us that much.

"Customers think it impacts us a lot, but it's more so labor," Bare adds of fuel costs.

Not only is it hard to find labor, but companies are dependent on the labor they do have to drive to work every day. Because of this, Arbor-nomics gave employees bonuses when gas prices were at their peak.

"We gave everyone a nice $1,000-$1,500 bonus in June and then again at Christmastime and boy, was everyone appreciative of that," he says. "They could tell we really care about them personally. Their fuel costs are more of a concern. A lot of them may live out quite a ways and drive an hour to work in a pickup truck or something so they really appreciated the boost."

When it comes to combatting fuel prices, some add fuel surcharges into contracts, but Bare says he's never had any luck with those. He prefers just steady price increases year-to-year when inflation is high.

"We tried it one year and the reaction was horrible," Bare says of implementing a fuel surcharge. "The phone was ringing off the hook and people were really angry.

"So, the following year we just went up on our prices 5% and hardly got a call about it," He adds.

While gas prices have been high at times, they are fluctuating — unlike diesel fuel which has remained steadily high, Bare says. And because of this, the company is looking to replace a lot of its diesel truck fleet with gasoline-powered models.

"We're actually converting over to gasoline trucks," Bare says. "Which I'm a little upset about because I love diesels. The increased costs of diesel played a role. Diesel prices haven't been as competitive like gasoline has. We're not seeing them go up and down as much."

However, there's been one unforeseen hurdle that's been a concern for Arbor-nomics.

"The one thing about the gasoline trucks that we weren't expecting was we're having a terrible time with thieves coming in at night and cutting off our catalytic convertors," he explains. "We think one guy has broken in four times in three years to steal catalytic convertors."

— Kim Lux

PETER GALLO

Managing partner of Pampabay Landscape Construction // Atlanta, Ga.

After locking in their prices a year in advance, Managing Partner Peter Gallo and his team at Pampabay Landscape Construction felt like there wasn't much they could do about fluctuating fuel costs.

Gallo's team primarily uses diesel fuel, which had even more significant price jumps in South Carolina – though in mid-January it's hovering around $4.25 a gallon, it had hit $6.15 at one point. So, Gallo went to his general contractor, who told Gallo they were already hearing about all sorts of price jumps.

"They were hearing the same thing from every subcontractor," Gallo says. "What they said was, 'Fellas, what's up? Don't come back today, tomorrow, next week.' They understood it was an open wound and they wanted to stop the bleeding."

What the contractors above Gallo really wanted to know was how they could soften the blow on fuel costs. But that wasn't it: Since they were hearing about it from everyone, they just wanted a list of all the rising costs. Gallo says his team felt the pinch most with freight costs and materials themselves, too. But the contractors understood this because they were hearing it from their subs in all trades, not just landscaping.

"They wanted us to just come in one swoop . They didn't want to hear endless stories," Gallo says.

Ultimately, the rise in fuel costs resulted in two additional measures for Gallo: putting a line item under their bid to allocate a number based on total machine hours, and then closely monitoring machine run time with his employees.

The second bit is particularly important for Gallo, who says every landscaper should be avoiding fuel overuse. He's seen some employees stop for lunch or sit on the phone talking to his girlfriend while trucks were running, burning diesel fuel. Educating the employees on why it's important to avoid this is critical, he says. Tracking equipment with GPS or other similar devices is important.

"When you put a guy in a machine, he has no idea how much diesel he's using," Gallo says. "Everyone should be aware of their consumption. It just goes back to best practices."

— Jimmy Miller

Barclay Winn

CEO of Winn Nursery, Norfolk, Va.

Barclay Winn says that fuel costs have been impacting the company's cost of doing business since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"During COVID we never closed…before it, we were running three-man crews in one truck, and ran about 15 crews a day to jobsites. But because of the COVID, we had to go down to two-man crews in a truck and that not only increased what we were spending on fuel, but also the miles we were putting on trucks," he says.

Additionally, as landscape contractors, Winn says the nature of their workload is already unpredictable but adding in fluctuating fuel costs and it's even harder to bid jobs accurately.

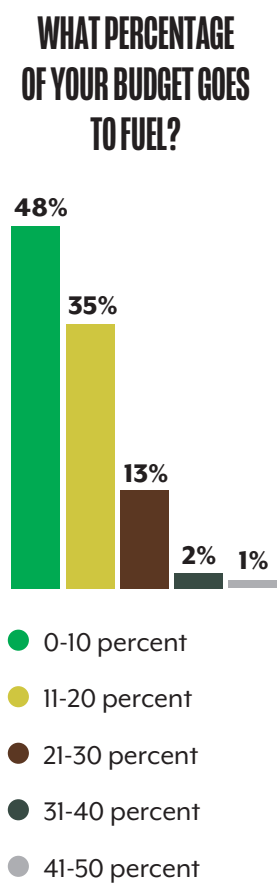
"We've basically have had to just eat it," Winn says of the extra fuel costs. "We've just got to try and be more efficient and work harder and smarter. We've tried to adjust to the prices — but we're bidding on projects that we won't be able to start until at least this time next year."

Winn says if prices stay high for much longer, he expects a drop in projects across the industry.

"I think if people in our industry, and all the construction industry, don't all start figuring out ways to cut costs, you're going to see projects that'll stay on the drawing board and not come to fruition," he says. "You'll see people pulling back. I see a significant slowdown in the next year or two."

One way the company is looking to save some money is being as efficient as possible with their routing and jobsite visits.

"Most of our crews go straight to a jobsite and stay there all day except for lunch, so they aren't rolling all day like a maintenance company would be trying to hit 10 different spots," he says. "When we go to jobsites as project managers, we plan the visits and try to be efficient when we're there. We'll try to meet with the construction superintendents, the architects and all of them in one visit.



"We work a 60-mile radius and now rather than checking on a job twice a week, maybe you only get out there once a week or once every two weeks for quality control," Winn adds.

Winn says a good relationship with suppliers can also be key to saving time, money and fuel. "We try to plan ahead," he says. "We've negotiated with our suppliers to have the materials dropped off here rather than us go pick them up. Their prices are going up, too, for many reasons. If we need other items we make sure to find everything anyone might need and get it all on one trip."

— Kim Lux

CHARLES GLOSSOP

CEO of Hantho Outdoor Services // St. Louis Park, Minn.

Charles Glossop never wanted to nickel-and-dime his clients – after all, they've formed a strong customer base in Minneapolis and have service areas anywhere from Illinois to Nebraska. These strong relationships prevailed during COVID-19 and Glossop hopes they'll continue to prevail as fuel prices continually soar and plummet.

That's not to say he didn't raise prices on his clients. For long-term seasonal contracts, they might've implemented a fuel surcharge. But by and large, they instead implemented increases ranging from 12-18%. This covered higher labor and fuel costs.

"We received no pushback at all," Glossop says. "I think for a lot of our clients, they are also dependent on deliveries of materials and they know what the cost of doing business is, how much labor has gone up, and then the cost of commodities."

Hantho Outdoor Services relies heavily on diesel-fueled trucks to power through snow season – Glossop estimates that on any given snow event, they're running 1,500 to 3,000 gallons of fuel in the Minneapolis area alone.

Thankfully, the prices have gone down a bit to $4.50 a gallon, but Glossop is still waiting to figure out how much they may need to increase — or not increase — costs for contracts to account for fluctuations this season.

Glossop says they've invested in some fuel transportation trailers where they can store fuel onsite or take it out to a jobsite. "When we get a large snow event," Glossop says, "we have to go, we have to roll, and we have to produce. We do whatever it takes to fuel our equipment."

One challenge they face on that front is that lots of gas stations close by 10 p.m., a lingering effect from staffing issues and COVID-19 adjusted hours. Just 10 years ago, Glossop says those stations were open 24/7, so it's a challenge to make sure they've got some fuel waiting in the wings in the event of an overnight snowfall.

"We have to be smarter and make sure that the auxiliary tanks we use are always filled," Glossop says. L&L

— Jimmy Miller

The new era of landscaping

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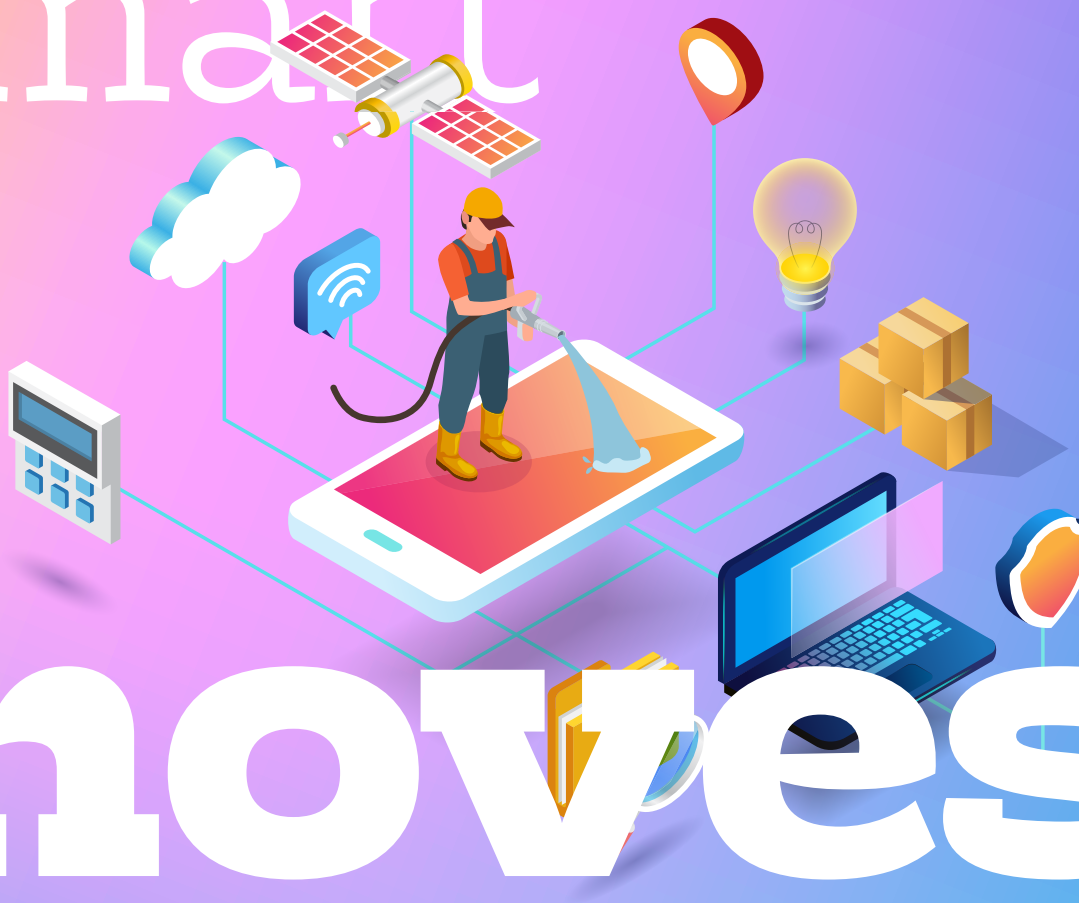
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Smart moves



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"You can talk to your appliances and other devices in the home, and we feel it shouldn't be any different in an outdoor landscape system," says Orion Goe, senior channel manager, Toro, explaining how smart irrigation systems have evolved from weather stations to wireless controllers. Now there are robust app-based platforms that give consumers and professionals a real-time view of an irrigation system with data-driven alerts.

Today, "smart" means Internet connected, says Rain Bird's Joe Porrazzo, marketing group manager of the contractor division and lead for the residential controller team. Advancements are making the technology easier for landscape professionals and their clients to adopt.

With a focus on connectivity, integration, usability and data, the smart controller space is evolving at a fast clip — albeit behind home automation — and an intuitive ecosystem is on the horizon. There's demand for it. Customers are looking for more than savings on their water bills, Goe says. "Five years ago, we talked only about water efficiency in dollars and cents, and how, 'The system will save you this much,'" he

The smart irrigation controller space is advancing with a focus on connectivity, integration, usability and data.

By Kristen Hampshire

ILLUSTRATION: ELEMENTS FROM ADOBE STOCK AND ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



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Today, "smart" irrigation devices can do more than pause watering when it rains, as the technology is continually advancing.

says. "Now, dollars and cents are just as important as the water you will save because we are in a water crisis. It's economic and ecological conservation."

And basically, smart systems are expected today.

"Modern consumers are accustomed to doing everything from smartphones, and now they expect that kind of functionality in every appliance they buy," says Dave Shoup, product manager, central control systems, Hunter Industries. "Like many things in tech, it has gone from an exclusive function of very high-end controllers to a standard. Customers can enjoy their own remote access to the irrigation system, as well as allowing professionals remote access."

For professionals, the labor savings, profit possibilities and sales add-ons with smart controller systems are a real opportunity. With commercial and residential customers' savvy, thanks to our friend Alexa, and other smart home systems, irrigation industry experts expect this arena to continue accelerating with even more capabilities.

"Automation users monitor and control resources over many types of devices — HVAC, alarm systems, pumps, tanks — and they are not understanding the benefits of including irrigation in these large custom systems," Shoup says.

REDEFINING SMART. First, let's rewind and redefine "smart," because the idea has morphed during recent years. "Smart controllers have come to mean many things to different users," Shoup says. "Many use it to mean controllers that automatically adjust irrigation amounts based on climate or soil conditions."

This can be accomplished with local sensors or online data.

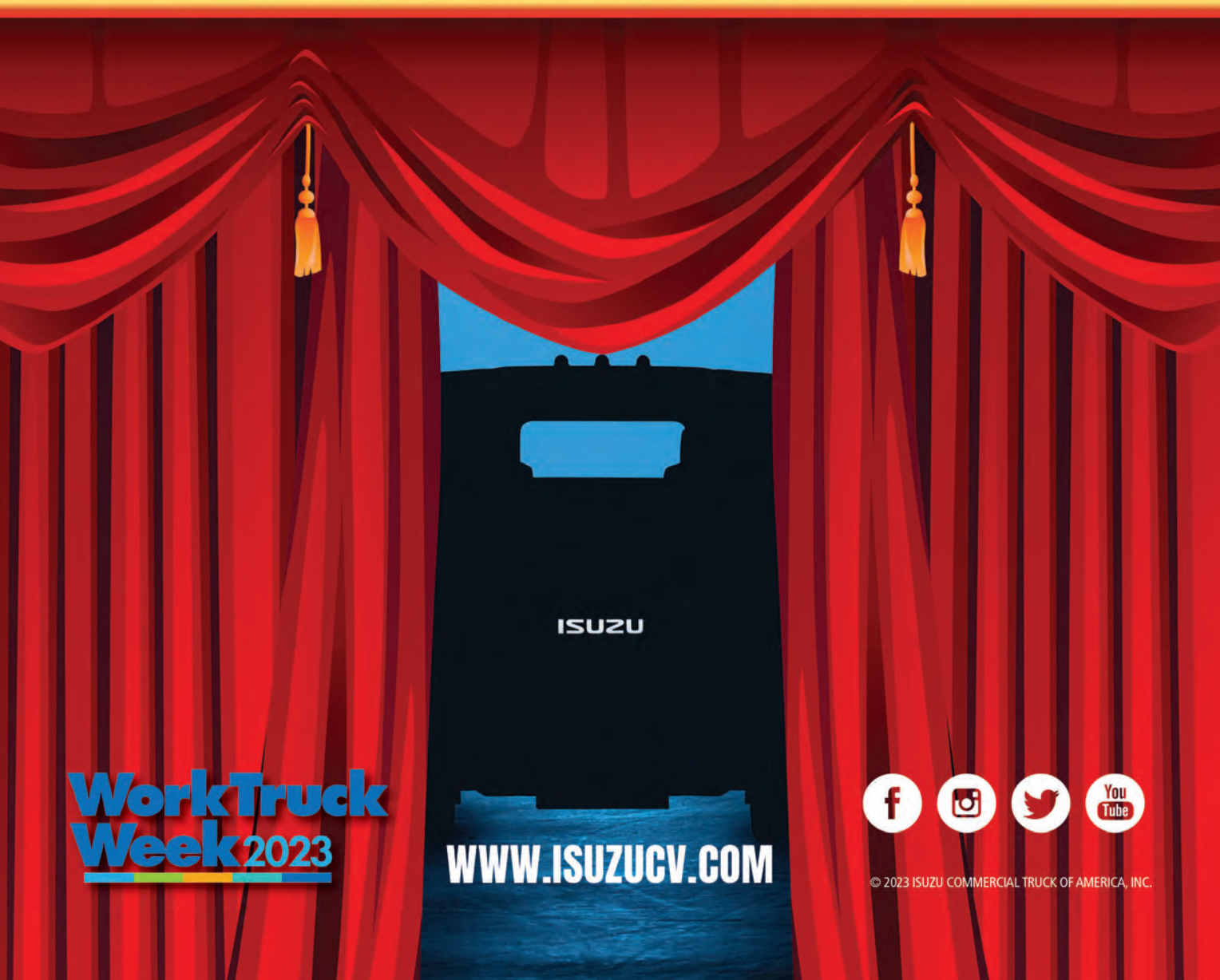
"One of the bigger advances has been the availability of connected controllers, and the ease of connectivity and use," he continues. "Another emerging trend, particularly in large systems, has been the integration of irrigation controllers directly into building, campus or city-wide automation systems."

PHOTO COURTESY OF RACHIO

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Controllers that are Wi-Fi connected can be a game changer for landscape professionals and their clients. Porrazzo explains the evolution at Rain Bird, which essentially began with an add-on module in 2016 that provided Internet connectivity to its existing line of controllers. That way, irrigation professionals could literally plug and play. "We added a thumb-drive looking component that take a few seconds to install and set up in a mobile app," he says.

Then in 2021 came Bluetooth connectivity. (Again, connectivity is the key.) Basically, this was Gen II and meant the plug-in included new features that made linking the system to the app and monitoring easier.

"Many contractors prefer a web platform where they can manage many controllers at one time, make batch edits and send permissions for crews," Porrazzo explains. "There is software that makes it very fast to program so you can save an irrigation schedule and use it over and over. You can say, 'Copy this program into this new controller,' and it programs in less than 90 seconds."

Ease and speed are crucial for contractors and customers.

At Rachio, the company followed consumers during their use of smart controllers to see what features they embraced. "We wanted to learn how they use the product," says Chris Klein, co-founder and chief product officer. "If you think about it, a lot of this is about usability and simplifying the system.

"We want to make sure the system connects with Wi-Fi when you get it out of the box and you are not going through a multi-contact situation with customer support, resetting routers and stations to get the controller to work," Klein adds.

Because let's face it, we're impatient people. And that applies not just to property owners and managers, but professionals who realize setup time is non-billable hours. Realizing ROI is crucial. Rachio conducted a study with Redwood City, Calif., and Stanford University in partnership with local utilities. "They took it upon themselves to do a multi-year study with Rachio controllers to verify, without us, that these smart systems would do what they said they are supposed to do," Klein says. "With that efficacy data, we have proof that they do save water."

As for what "smart" means, another compelling component is leveraging data, Klein notes. "In the irrigation space, smart scheduling is more than skipping when it rains — it's shifting when seasons change and watering based on soil moisture that can be driven from weather stations and not necessarily soil sensors," he says.

Data will help "productize" smart controllers.

"You can find out how much water you are using, how that changes every year and every month, and even on a daily basis to




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show if there are leaks, high flows or low flows," Klein says. "Data coming from the controller can tell us if we have a slow burn on a valve."

For a professional who is managing hundreds or thousands of controllers from a single platform, diagnosis is significantly less time consuming. And it does not necessarily require a site visit. "We get data in different ways, whether form the water service that can help us out or from soil moisture sensors," Klein says.

SELLING POINTS. More than ever, consumers are requesting smart systems. "Homeowners are influencing what products go on the wall," Porrazzo says.

Though in plenty of instances, clients might not realize that the same smart-home type technology can be implemented outdoors in the landscape. So, there is some education — including explanation related to cost. "Smarter systems generally are slightly more expensive than simple timers, but the payback in water savings, remote management, plant health and alarm monitoring easily justify a premium controller price," Shoup says.

Rachio sells directly to consumers and professionals, and Klein says the price point has actually decreased. "Inflation is top of mind and we have held or lowered our prices over the years, and that is something we continue to look at: How can we continue to add value?" he says.

Peace of mind is also a selling point. "Just knowing the product is on the property and will detect rain falling gives people confidence because in many markets across the country and outside of the country, you can get fined if a system is running while it is raining or if the temperature drops below a certain level," Porrazzo says.

For professionals, smart controllers allow them to service customers efficiently. "They can at least do some high-level troubleshooting remotely," Goe says. "So, 15 years ago if a homeowner called and said, 'My system isn't turning on,' or, 'My system won't turn off and the water is still running,' you had two choices. You could get in the truck and drive out to the property, or you could talk the customer through the process of finding the right button on the controller, which isn't a great experience on either side of the equation."

Now, professionals can remotely turn off a system to prevent water waste or identify if there is a leak. Then a service call can follow.

"Controllers can be adjusted and report alarms directly to a smartphone, reducing the number of site visits," Shoup says. "These services also create a value-added benefit that can billed as part of a maintenance agreement by professionals."

The evolution of battery technology also makes wireless controllers and components more practical, Porrazzo notes. "A lot of our wireless products can go up

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to six years or more with everyday use on the same battery and that makes it easier for customers," he says, adding that after some consumer research, professionals are divided on how they feel about the call to replace a battery.

"Some want it to last longer so they can move on to the next job, and others like to replace the battery because it's a service call and they can upsell it, so it gives them a reason to go back on a property. It depends on the business model," Porrazzo adds.

ON THE HORIZON. What's next in smart irrigation technology? "People want everything in their yard to be wireless, and they want more and different kinds of sensors," Shoup says. "These are trending topics."

Goe says technology continues to advance — and there are wireless flow sensors and above-ground connected devices. "But the technology is at a point where anything that is subterranean for Wi-Fi isn't there yet," he says.

Does everything have to be Wi-Fi enabled to be "smart" and connected? Not exactly. "There is no reason why all of these devices can't 'speak' to possibly a common receiver and that receiver is talking to Wi-Fi or the cloud," Goe says. "So instead of building Wi-Fi into every device, you can





have an integrated system that talks back to the cloud. But in terms of the sensors and controllers or whatever else in the landscape and how those components 'speak' to the receiver, maybe it's Wi-Fi, maybe radio, maybe a good, old-fashioned wire."

When Porrazzo first dug deep into the connected world at Rain Bird in 2016, "everyone wanted to be wireless and in the cloud," he says. "I'm really curious to see if there is a move back to on-site, on-device monitoring and that is something we have seen in the last couple of years. For example, we assumed our wireless sensor business would slow as Wi-Fi technology got better, but that's not the case. Water districts and public agencies almost double down on physical technologies like rain sensors, soil sensors and flow sensors."

Why during a move toward everything connected is there also a shift toward "grounding" tech to a location? "We were hearing from customers that they needed rain sensors on the property because it could be raining at their house but sunny across the street," Porrazzo says, relaying feedback from the field. "Those are things that Internet-connected weather can't get, and it doesn't matter how accurate the service is. It will never be as accurate as on-site sensors."

Goe adds, "I'm excited for systems to get even smarter and more intuitive. For example, take the Nest thermostat in my home. It learned my patterns so when I get up in the morning, it kicks on to 72 degrees, and when everyone leaves the house, it ratchets it down to 68. Our irrigation systems will become smarter in that sense. They will become more intuitive." Also on the horizon: sensors with predictive capabilities. Goe illustrates how. "Say the sodium levels in the soil jumped up 15% in the last 16 days. The system says, 'You should do this.' Then the system can ping a contractor with suggestions, tools or products they can present to their customers to maintain the health of the landscape. That's where we are going."

Goe compares this to Amazon offering suggestions after you search for a purchase. "Did you think about this? Did you see that? We might start to see tools like that from an irrigation perspective," he says.

Overall, the existing and emerging technology will go through a survival of the fittest evolution. "We're seeing competing technologies like the old days of BlueRay vs. HD and VHS vs. Beta Max, and we are waiting to see which technologies are going to win," Porrazzo compares.

And at the end of the day, customers want their irrigation products to be "faster, smarter, smaller, better," Porrazzo says of consumers and professionals. "Overall, people expect more of their systems." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland, Ohio.

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The industry just saw an influx of new products on the market.

A NUMBER OF COMPANIES across the industry released new products at the Equip Expo, formerly known as GIE+EXPO, in October. Battery-powered equipment was a popular trend, but a number of gas-powered items also hit the market. For all of the new releases, visit **lawnandlandscape.com** and search Equip.

CATERPILLAR

Caterpillar introduced two new Mini Hydraulic Excavator (MHE) Ease of Use technologies – Indicate and E-Fence – for the Cat 306 CR, 308 CR and 309 CR Next Generation Mini Hydraulic Excavators.

Ease of Use Indicate helps operators to reach grade faster, while Ease of Use E-Fence constrains machine motion to within operator preset boundaries. These technologies are ideal for digging footings, drainage and septic systems, irrigation, electric utilities and applications near structures or obstacles operators need to avoid.

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With Indicate, the operator selects target depth and slope from the in-cab guidance system, and the monitor provides real-time feedback. The technology enables operators to reach grade faster without overcutting.

For more info: cat.com





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The 20-inch Optimus Mobile Charging Trailer can transport and charge 20-plus battery-powered tools, 36 handheld batteries and 3 full-size zero-turn mowers.

For more info: greenworkscommercial.com

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KRESS COMMERCIAL



Kress, a professional-grade battery equipment company, unveiled its inaugural line of commercial-grade outdoor power equipment.

The company also released the new Kress CyberSystem, which features both 4-amp hour and 11-amp hour battery packs with the ability to recharge each 60v battery to 100% in only eight minutes. Additionally, each 60v CyberPack battery is capable of producing up to twice the power output and lasting up to 10 times longer than standard lithium-ion batteries. Set for Q1 2023 availability, the new line-up of Kress commercial OPE — all of which is fully compatible with the 8-minute CyberSystem — includes:

- 60V 876cfm commercial backpack blower
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For more info kress.com

RC MOWERS

RC Mowers, a manufacturer of robotic mowers, launched its Autonomous Mowing Robot (AMR) line.

The autonomous line was designed and built by the RC Mowers robotics team, which is led by the experts who developed the U.S. military's weapons guidance systems and includes experts who worked to develop U.S. Department of Defense autonomous vehicles as well as leading experts in aviation safety.



The made-in-America autonomous mowing robot will be distributed through the company's established dealer network throughout the United States, Canada and Australia. The new AMR line joins RC Mowers' remote-operated robotic mower line.

For more info: rcmowersusa.com





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For more info: milwaukeetool.com





TORO

With increased battery pack versatility, operators can customize the power of the new Z Master 2000 Revolution based on mowing conditions.

The Z Master 2000 Revolution is built on Toro's commercial-grade Z Master 2000 Series frame and TURBO FORCE deck. The newest member of the Toro Z Master Revolution family offers the MyRIDE suspension system. Every Revolution machine is equipped with software in the controls that enables smooth operation.

The Revolution Series mowers are powered by Toro's HyperCell Power System. HyperCell is built to run cooler than other power systems, so it can last as long as the sunlight.

For more info: toro.com





STEEL GREEN



Steel Green introduced its largest sprayer yet, the SGXL, and two prototype machines. The prototypes include the SG36-EV spreader/sprayer and the SG54 high-volume sprayer.

The SGXL is a multifunction applicator with a 120-gallon spray capacity, which makes it ideal for lawn care pros who service commercial or large residential lawns.

The SGXL features a 35-horsepower Kawasaki engine, 100-foot hose reel, 2.5-gallon foam marker, LED light bar, hillside assist system and pressure control system. Its 12-mph transport speed and 27-GPM centrifugal pump save time in a profession where efficiency is everything.

The Steel Green team developed the SGXL to meet the need for a larger, more versatile machine for turfgrass professionals.

The SG54 high-volume sprayer has a 100-gallon spray tank for efficient liquid applications.

For more info: steelgreenmfg.com

STIHL



The STIHL 500 zero-turn mower series is equipped with commercial-grade Hydro-Gear ZT-3400 transaxles.

These mowers offer a top forward speed of 10 mph and reverse speed of 5 mph, and the four-wheel suspension system with mowing deck height compensation is designed to provide a comfortable ride and consistent cutting height.

With four models to choose from, users can maintain property with the customized options and performance of the STIHL 500 Series Independent front suspension with mower deck height compensation features two control arms that connect to shock absorbers, ensuring wheels remain perpendicular to the ground to improve stability.

Large fuel capacity provides fuel coverage for large jobs and features a large opening for easy fueling. Plus, the fuel gauge is visible from the operator seat to monitor fuel level. Roll Over Protection System (ROPS) features polyurethane blocks to prevent rattling while in motion and conveniently folds for easy storage and trailer transport between jobs.

The two-belt mower drive system provides less strain and flex on the belts, allowing the belts to run cooler. The USB-A ports allow the user to charge mobile devices with 3.15 amps of power while on the job.

For more info: stihlusa.com

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RAISE THE BAR
WITH JUSTIN WHITE
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RAISE THE BAR is a monthly column by Justin White, CEO of K&D Landscaping, written to help improve professionalism in the green industry.

KNOW YOUR LABOR HOUR VARIANCE

OVER THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, I have spent extensive time talking with landscape industry leaders, networking at conferences and attending educational events. I have discovered there is one metric that every highly profitable company tracks, and that's labor hour variance. Payroll, and direct production payroll, is the number one expense on most of our P&Ls, (with the exception of some subcontractor-heavy companies). Labor variance is critical; it's going to tell you how well you're doing or how poorly you're operating.

Before we jump in, let's make sure we are speaking the same language. "Labor variance" is the comparison of your actual hours against your estimated hours. For example, if you estimated 100 hours to complete a project and it took the team 90 hours to complete, then your variance would be 90% and that's very good. If the same job took the team 110 hours to complete your labor variance would be 110% and that would not be as good. Maintenance companies can track this metric by providing actual against estimated hours per property visit.

In late 2020, we were an average-profit company hovering between 3-5% net profit. As we turned over for 2021, we implemented our new software, (a huge feat of its own) and actually started tracking our labor hour variance. As the numbers came in, I was blown away, and not in a good way. Most of our jobs and crews were reporting between 120 to 130% of our estimated hours, meaning we were using 20-30% more hours and money than we had estimated. We always wondered why we were going over on schedule and falling behind, spending more on materials and not achieving our budgeted goals. That's when it all clicked.

As we collected more data and educated the team throughout 2021 on what labor variance meant, we decided to go all out in 2022. Every employee's bonus was based off labor variance, from entry level production all the way up to account managers and even senior leadership members. Believe it or not, our sales teams even had labor hour variance-related bonuses because it was so important that they got it right when estimating.

What happened next was unexpected and almost magical. As we continued to put awareness towards this top key performance indicator, our teams started to perform to goal. Our monthly numbers were coming in at 105%, 99%, 98%, 93% and we saw a major improvement from 2021 to 2022. We even had foremen and crew members calling in to let us know when they felt there was too many bodies on a jobsite, to which our project managers would gladly help relocate. In the past, their thinking was, "the more help, the better," but when their bonuses became tied-back hours, they didn't want extra team members on the jobsite who weren't going to be efficient.

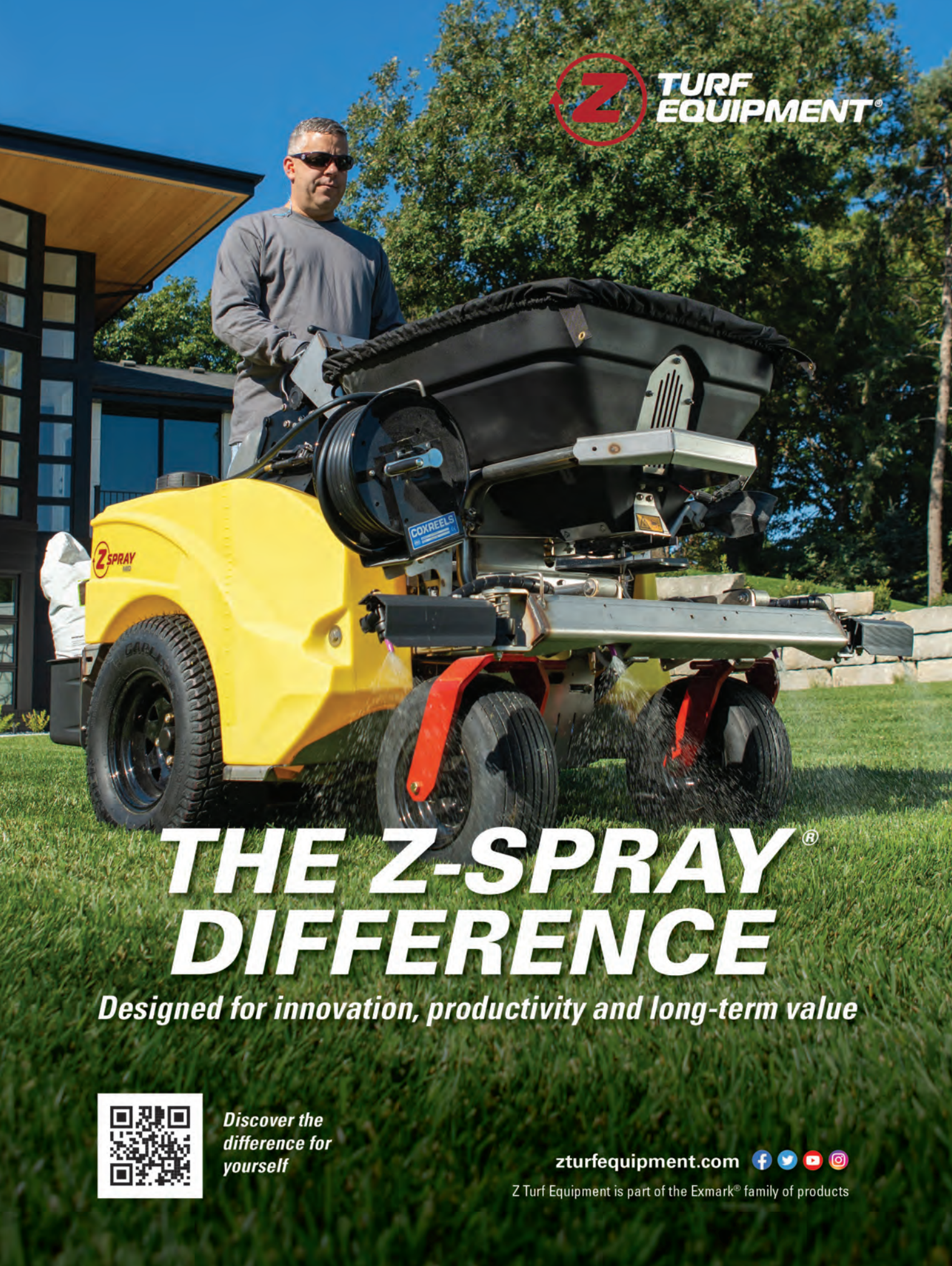
As we ventured through 2022, we kept score of our labor variance on a large board in our yard and communicated it to the entire team weekly and monthly during meetings, really rallying around this number. The amazing part is, as we started to get back within our goal for labor hours, our direct costs started to come in under budget and gross profit increased.

What's more, our overhead started to fall in line because we were completing more projects in less time and driving revenue with the same amount of trucks, equipment and people. When you're producing to what you estimated from a labor hour standpoint, everything else tends to follow suit, all the way down the P&L to the very end, the net profit.

From 2021 to 2022, we went from 40% gross profit, up to 50%. This type of performance was incredible. We also ended 2022 with the same number of employees as 2021 but increased our revenue by 24%. If those numbers don't get you excited about tracking this, then I don't know what will.

In 2023, we're doubling down on labor variance and once again making it our main focus. This year, our team is shooting for a company wide 95% or better. I want to encourage all of you to take labor management seriously. If you have a software that enables you to track this, make sure that your estimates are operating in this fashion and your jobs and crews are clocking in.

No matter how much work it is to get this process going, it is worth it for 10 points of gross profit. Plus, your team has a unified goal to rally around. If you don't have a landscape management software, regardless the size of your company, take this as your sign to make it a priority for 2023 so you can increase your gross margin by 10% in 2024. Good luck and go raise the bar! **L&L**


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