

Lawn & Landscape

NOVEMBER 2023

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DARKEST
BEFORE

the dawn

After her husband, Clayton, suffered a heart attack, Tiffany Graham stepped in to run the company and together have made **Sundance Landscape Maintenance** stronger than ever.



STATE OF THE
SNOW LABOR
MARKET
PG. 23

TRUCK
TRENDS
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AUTONOMOUS
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STILL NEED
TO RENEW?



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**STATE OF THE
SNOW LABOR
MARKET**

23



Brian Horn
Editor, Lawn & Landscape

“As owners and leaders of your company, you need to remember it can’t be all work 24/7. Your company’s health is important, but not so important that you sacrifice your own health.”

Better here than gone

When we last talked to Clayton Graham in August of 2020, he was on the brink of taking over his father’s company, Sundance Landscape Maintenance in Arizona.

He was looking forward to putting his stamp on the company, growing it to heights it has never been.

Well, as you will find out starting on page 16, that’s still the case, but not the way Graham originally thought.

After taking on too much responsibility, he had a health scare and a wake-up call. As owners and leaders of your company, you need to remember it can’t be all work 24/7. Your company’s health is important, but not so important that you sacrifice your own health. You’re no help to your employees if you are permanently unavailable to guide the ship.

In more than 10 years of talking to successful landscape business owners, one main ingredient of success I hear a lot is delegation. They detail how their business went to the next level and they became a better leader when they figured out what they should be focused on, but more im-

portantly, the responsibilities they could rely on others to handle.

One way I’ve heard to better delegate is to make a list of everything you do at your business. Then, start to rank those from most to least important. Work from the bottom on what you can pass off to someone else and think about who would be good to complete that task. If you aren’t certain who would be a good fit, discuss the options with your managers or with a few people whose opinions you value.

Another approach may be to figure out what you are good at and areas where you struggle. Focus on your strengths and delegate your weaknesses. You may be an ace at selling jobs and connecting with customers, but a mess when it comes to organization or watching the numbers. I’ve also heard from a number of leaders about the value of hiring an assistant and how that freed them to focus on the important stuff.

Remember, just because you are at the top of the org chart doesn’t mean you have to be heavily involved in every spot on that chart...because it could kill you.

— *Brian Horn*



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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.

HONEST DAY'S PAY

→ **IT'S BUDGET TIME.** Time to analyze in the present what did and did not work in the past, for the purpose of developing a strategy for the next 12 months in the future. In my system, budgeting isn't really just about future costs; rather, it's more about understanding your team not only in the field but also in the office. The primary question that surfaces is, "Are you creating a high-performance team that requires minimal supervision?" Unfortunately, too many entrepreneurs are in the process of creating just the opposite — a team that requires an inordinate amount of supervision. It's more like adult day care rather than a high-performance production machine.

BUDGETING 101. The first question that I address as I look into the future is, "How many full-time equivalent (FTE) field employees will work in each division?" This includes crew leaders and laborers, as managers are usually budgeted for in general and administrative (G&A) overhead. The next question that I ask is, "How much annual revenue will each FTE crew member generate?" If you think you can keep a three-man installation crew busy for the year with each crew member producing \$175,000 in revenue, your projected revenue is \$525,000 or 3.0 x \$175,000. (See my MS Excel budget sample at bit.ly/llextra). I do this for all divisions.

This is the most difficult part of budgeting because you not only need to understand your team's productivity, but you also need to attempt to *crystal ball* the market place and the economy for the foreseeable future.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE (2024). When I create a strategic plan (and budget) for a company, I address a section titled, "Assumptions about the future." In it, I identify key factors that I think will remain constant throughout the upcoming year. The only such assumption that I feel comfortable making regarding 2024 is that it will be one of the most chaotic and unpredictable years in recent memory. *Unprecedented* is the word that constantly surfaces as I discuss the political, economic, geo-political, social, legal and cultural issues of the day with friends, clients and business associates. And who knows what the 2024 presidential election will be like? Who will be the candidates?

Going into the fall of 2023, the mid-range residential installation market is experiencing a significant downturn. Gregory Maroun, president of Stecks Nursery and Landscaping in Southern Connecticut, has seen his high-end design/build market all but collapse. Greg Wrenn's company Past The Gate, a residential landscape design/build firm in the San Francisco East Bay region, is experiencing a serious downturn. Eric Wewerka, president of Wewerka Construction Management in the Northern Virginia market, has seen his residential landscape design/build and bid-build business slow down. Fred Anderson, president of Anderson Landscape Construction, a high-end landscape bid-build company near Boston, says his market has softened significantly in the last six months.

While the ultra-high-end landscape markets in such areas as Aspen and Vail, Co.; Jackson Hole, Wyo.; Lake Tahoe, Ca.; Lake Winnepesaukee, N.H. haven't experienced such a hit, the same could currently be said of many of the markets in the U.S. Heartland. These markets appear strong for the moment but they appear to be softening.

SOLIDIFY YOUR BUDGET'S FOUNDATION.

Successful entrepreneurs build teams, create systems, network like crazy, diversify and understand the role of a CEO. The residential installation market is usually the first to suffer in a downturn. This includes Christmas decorations. The commercial installation market follows this pattern about a year later. It's the repetitive services like lawn mowing, maintenance and fertilization; weed control, pest control, irrigation service and tree service that provides dependable cash flow.

During the 2008/2009 recession, the residential installation market dropped about 50%. It wasn't until 2010 that the commercial installation market took such a dive. Holiday lighting fell by about 40%. However, revenues from the services named above remained fairly steady.

CONCLUSION.

Your team is the foundation of your company. I build a budget around that team. The company in our sample budget plans to employ a three-man install crew, 3 x 2-man maintenance crews, one irrigation service technician and one lawn care technician on a full-time basis in 2024. Projected revenue is just under \$1.4 million. The management team needs to focus on keeping these 11 people busy and billable throughout 2024.

Preparing your budget from the ground up and building it around your team helps you to analyze and understand your team more thoroughly and its capabilities more consistently. It also provides you with crucial benchmarks and key performance indicators (KPIs) that assist you and your team in monitoring its success throughout the year. Next time, we'll fill in other key elements in our 2024 budget. **L&L**

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

DIG HERE

→ **FINDING FIRST MOVER** advantage is like a treasure hunt. Being the first to uncover hidden insights or delivering something customers actually want is indispensable. Every year, the amount of information increases exponentially and the sheer volume and speed at which data comes in makes it almost impossible leverage its potential. By 2030, it's estimated that more than 30 billion devices will be connected to the internet, but on average, less than half of an organization's data is actively used in making decisions — less than 1% is used at all.

As business owners, we long ago committed to robust software programs for tracking job cost and overhead, labor hours, crew efficiency and other categories, including equipment. But today, CEOs tell me that there is just too much data for them to handle and no one ever seems to really study it. I think there are three reasons for this: Lack of strategy; lack of time and resources; and traditional systems that are ill-equipped to interpret it. Worse, when data comes in — like financial reporting on or ahead of budget or prior year's reporting or insights on customer buying patterns — it is set aside, replaced by day-to-day urgencies instead of using it to improve performance.

When I was building ValleyCrest's landscape maintenance division in the 90s, we were early adapters of information technology. We produced exception reports we called "Dig Here," which alerted us to things like job costs with no or abnormally low billing, or the reverse. It was a great feature but underutilized. There never seemed to be enough time.

I did think about other things we should analyze, such as job costs versus bid estimates to improve our bidding processes. We only did this when we were low bid and thought we might have under-bid the job. The result was that we always studied the job and made it profitable. I often thought we should do this with all our jobs. Again, we did not do it because we had no time.

Occasionally when a branch wanted to buy some new equipment, I made them read hour meters on large mowers for a month to see how much they were being used. Usually this revealed that we had plenty of equipment, if we utilized it more efficiently.

Business owners usually have good instincts as to why things happen. This is particularly true about the impact of activities and operations at headquarters or the main branch. As companies expand, the stakes are higher. Intuition gets less reliable with more branches and more growth and it becomes more difficult to make decisions by instinct alone.

For perspective, consider Michael Lewis' bestselling book, "Moneyball: The Art of Wining an Unfair Game," which was essentially about the importance of using predictive analytics to develop a highly successful team despite having little to no budget. In the real-life example, using data literally changed the game, leading to 95 wins per season, four division titles and five playoff appearances.

Whether or not you hire your own data analyst will be different for every company. My rules of thumb are these:

- Are you in the \$10-\$15 million and above range and reached a point where you have enough data to generate high-quality insights and patterns?
- Are your existing assessment tools and resources no longer accurately monitoring your company's health?
- Are your employees saying, "This is great information but what should I do with it?"

Even if you don't realize it, you probably already have more than enough reasons to implement a data management strategy. If a full-time analyst isn't in the budget, consider hiring a specialist or third-party solution who can extract the full value from all the data at your disposal and guide you on how to protect your insights and privacy. **L&L**

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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.

MAKE A PLAN TO PLAN

→ **WHAT IS A BUSINESS PLAN?** A business plan is a document that defines your company's objectives and how it plans to achieve its goals. The plan serves as a written road map or playbook to help guide your organization to achieve the goals you have established.

This road map or playbook may cover several key areas that need focus including marketing, sales, financials, people, customers, operations, competitors, best practices/SOPS, KPIs and current trends, to name just a few possibilities.

HOW TO PLAN/SUGGESTED STEPS. Here are some simple tips to prepare for and conduct a planning session.

Surveys, fact finding, lessons learned. Preparation is needed before you start planning. We suggest you gather as much information beforehand as possible. Here is a list of items to consider:

- Employee and customer surveys
- Financial reports
- Sales reports and results
- Lessons learned, both good and not so good
- Hold one-on-one sessions with key employees to get their input

Deciding who attends. This can be a sensitive area and you need to be careful and considerate. Sometimes it's hard to invite some and not others to this process. Be sure to send the invite at least a couple of weeks ahead of time so they can plan on being there and coming prepared.

When to hold planning meetings. Generally, the planning meeting should be held a couple of months before the start of a new fiscal year. For most companies, this is from October to Dec. 15. At this time of year you have enough info to use from the current year and you'll have your new plan completed, reviewed and adopted prior to the start of the next fiscal year. The plan will bring "fresh legs" and positive energy for a great start to the new year.

Have an agenda. Make an agenda with expectations spelled out and if the participants need to prepare anything for the planning session. Be sure to start on time and end on time. If there are problems, issues or missed opportunities that need to be resolved, spend 10% of the time talking about the problem and 90% deciding on the solution and action steps to remedy or move forward.

Where should the meeting be held? If possible, we suggest these be held "off campus" vs. your place of business. We usually like to hold them at a quiet location, maybe even at one of your client's facilities like a hotel, a quiet back room of a restaurant or the HOA clubhouse.

How long should the planning session be? Meetings vary depending on the size and complexity of your company and where it is heading. At the minimum, this will require a four-hour or half-day session. For larger, more complex companies, this can take as long as two days.

Facilitate or not to facilitate? If this is new for your organization, having a meeting facilitator is a good idea. If you feel confident in your experience with meeting facilitation skills, then go for it.

Take action. Be prepared to determine what areas your business needs to work on. Examples include your vision and mission statement, marketing and sales, customers, people, financials, SWOT analysis, etc. Decide on the top three areas to focus on along with up to five simple fix-it items. Keep it simple and specific.

Build for the future. Build your plan for a three-year horizon to strive toward, then build your plan from year one working each year to the three-year mark.

Assign key initiatives. Assign champions and co-champions to the key areas of focus and give them the needed resources to get these key areas implemented and measured.

Follow up. Pick one to three key areas that will have the most positive impact on the organization and assign champions to these areas. Identify time frames to accomplish and define how you will measure/use key performance indicators to show the results of your efforts. Review your progress monthly at the minimum and don't wait until next year's planning session to review.

Build and review your road map/playbook. Do not file your plan or store it in a drawer. Monitor your performance to see if you are making progress toward your objectives. Your plan will assist you in identifying what is working and what isn't so adjustments can be made.

Revisit your strategy, and develop and update it as you gain knowledge and experience about your market, your people, your customers and the competition.

If you follow these tips, you should be in a good position to start building your plan. **L&L**

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ASK THE EXPERT

by Shiva Dhawan, CEO, Co-founder, Attentive.ai

Q + A

Attentive Accelerate: Because Tech Should Be Simple

The Industry Needs Truly End-to-end Business Management Software, a.k.a. Attentive Accelerate

AT ATTENTIVE.AI, WE RECOGNIZE THAT every landscaping business is different, with its own unique needs and ways of working. This philosophy underpins Attentive Accelerate. We developed this platform as a holistic, one-stop solution to accommodate every aspect of your landscaping business. And **tech should be simple, adaptable, and, above all, responsive to your specific needs.** We know the pains of disjointed systems, the hassles of inconsistent data in CRM, the woes of double data entry, and, honestly, it's time we move past these challenges. For instance, it's a real problem when current platforms can serve, say, the maintenance department but struggle with the construction side of things. This fragmented approach just isn't sustainable.

With Accelerate, we offer **the ONLY end-to-end landscape business management software in the market.** It provides a seamless experience that ensures no department is left in the lurch and everyone's needs are comprehensively met—allowing your teams to focus on what they do best.

1 What has the journey from takeoff software to Attentive Accelerate been like?

We started with a simple goal. We saw that inaccurate and time-consuming manual measurements plagued businesses and wanted to change that. That's how Automeasure was born, and we were elated to see it become the go-to solution for 500+ field services companies to drive revenue. But, as we interacted with our users, we realized — why stop at takeoffs? And that led us to develop Attentive Accelerate. From fine-tuning sales workflows to smoothing out production planning and timesheets and ensuring seamless integration of various business processes, Accelerate is designed to be your all-encompassing partner. The transformation from Automeasure to Accelerate is not just about expanding our offerings; it's about shaping the future of landscaping business management, ensuring you have eyes on every aspect of your business and every challenge is addressed with precision and care.

2 What sets Attentive Accelerate apart from its competitors?

Accelerate is born from a real understanding of what's missing in today's business management tools for landscapers. For instance, I'd like to talk about an aspect of Accel-

erate that the team is extremely proud of.

The issue of **overtime cost control** is a universal challenge. It's a critical component in maintaining operational efficiency. Here, controlling it begins with measuring it. Now, our scheduling board provides real-time visibility of a crew's available hours on a daily and weekly basis, preventing overscheduling. If overscheduling does happen, immediate warnings are issued. This feature enables businesses to pinpoint which operation managers are incurring overtime, allowing for timely and informed decisions.

Besides, our platform is easy to navigate, reducing training time and facilitating seamless management of maintenance and construction divisions. It's about real-time analytics that drives immediate action.

This commitment to make business management truly straightforward and adaptive differentiates Attentive Accelerate from the rest.

3 What does the roadmap ahead look like for Attentive Accelerate?

Looking ahead, we're excited to branch out and bring solutions to other fields like snow management. The future is all about empowering field services businesses to work smarter, not harder.

4 What do you consider the biggest problem that Accelerate is solving?

Absolutely; the biggest pain point we are addressing with Accelerate is the fragmentation and discontinuity in business processes in the landscaping industry. We're offering a comprehensive, all-in-one platform that streamlines everything from the initial measuring phase to generating the final invoices.

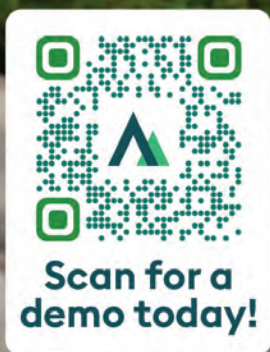
Existing software and manual approaches like using Excel sheets have been somewhat useful. Still, they result in a disjointed workflow where sales data don't naturally sync with production planning, leading to complexities.

With Accelerate, we enable a seamless and error-free flow of information from sales to operations. It eliminates manual, time-consuming tasks and ensures a coherent operational workflow, allowing businesses to focus on what truly matters: delivering high-quality services and impressing your customers.



One word that describes
Attentive Accelerate

SIMPLE



Because **tech should be simple**

The truly end-to-end Landscaping
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Pam Dooley

Owner,
Plants Creative Landscapes

Pam Dooley is a member of the Advisory Board of the National Association of Landscape Professionals Women in Landscape Network (powered by Envu) which provides a forum for industry professionals to support each other's professional growth. The Network is free to all industry professionals.



I RECENTLY HAD the opportunity to lead a session at Elevate, NALP's annual conference, on a subject that I am passionate about: growing soft skills within our teams. Questions that came up during the presentation, as well as conversations after, confirmed that this is a top-of-mind topic for many leaders right now. In addition to looking for the best resources for job skill training, forward-thinking business owners are also looking for opportunities to support and grow soft skills within his or her management teams.

Providing opportunities to learn and grow soft skills in no way diminishes the importance of providing opportunities to grow job skills. We need our construction crew leaders to know how to build retaining walls, just as we need our maintenance account managers to be able to identify plants and lawn types. However, way too often, new hires and even high performers who are promoted into new positions requiring people management, struggle with the skills needed to effectively navigate conflict resolution, lack the confidence in decision-making and often struggle with how to set healthy boundaries with co-workers

WOMEN IN LANDSCAPING is a column brought to you in partnership with the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

and customers. Success requires a different set of skills — human skills — that have often taken a backseat to job skill training. I would argue that “people first” companies understand the need for soft skills and job skills to be co-pilots.

Deloitte predicts that millennials will represent 75% of the workforce by 2025. This new generation requires much more from his or her workplace than a paycheck to remain engaged and loyal. In addition to aligning personal values with company values, and believing in the mission and purpose of the company, millennials want to know they are cared about as human beings, that his or her ideas will shape key company initiatives, and that they can trust co-workers and managers. Helping our managers grow emotional intelligence and other soft skills like active listening, stress management and communication, is critical to developing a people-first, collaborative and inclusive workplace, anchored by trust.

So, where to start with soft skill training? In addition to the vast resources available through online learning platforms such as Coursera, Udemy, LinkedIn Learning and Masterclass, as well as many books written on the subject (Social Intelligence by Daniel Goleman is a favorite). Here are two specific resources that I am a fan of:

- **It's the Manager, by Jim Clifton and Jim Harter.** One of many Gallup tools focused on strengths-based learning and application. The book includes 52 short chapters broken into five sections: Strategy, Culture, Employment Brand, Boss to Coach and The Future of Work.

- **Harvard's Management Mentor Program.** A collection of 42 online learning modules developed to help teams navigate the daily challenges of leading selves and leading others. It includes downloadable tools and templates, as well as a community forum for additional support and learning.

The ability of people to effectively navigate high pressure/high stakes situations relies directly on our ability to build stronger human skills. Doing so creates resilient teams who are better equipped to lead our companies into the future. **L&L**

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After her husband, Clayton, suffered a heart attack, Tiffany Graham stepped in to run his company and together have made Sundance Landscape Maintenance stronger than ever.

STORY BY BROOKE BILYJ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AZULA RAUN





DARKEST BEFORE *the dawn*

TWO WEEKS BEFORE BUYING HIS FATHER'S LANDSCAPE COMPANY last year, Clayton Graham suffered a serious heart attack that put him out of work for nearly a month. “We think a lot of it had to do with stress,” he says. “Leading up to it, there was a lot of burnout, and things were just hectic.”

Buying out a family business can understandably be stressful, even if the transition has been decades in the making. Clayton had worked alongside his dad since age 10, and he was only 25 when he became president of Sundance Landscape Maintenance in 2013, after his father's cancer diagnosis. Clayton was only 33 when, just before closing on the business, he awoke abruptly from a nap one day with chest pain.

At the insistence of his wife, Tiffany, they headed to the hospital — knowing that Clayton's father, Mark, had suffered a heart attack at age 40. After a medevac flight and emergency catheterization, further tests revealed that Clayton's heart attack was not a symptom of cardiomyopathy, which he'd struggled with previously, or even clogged arteries. It was just a reaction to the pressure of buying the business, which had about \$3.8 million in revenue at that time with 80 employees and 18 crews. Clayton had been handling sales and marketing, account management, and field operations, and even though he was seeing a nutritionist and exercising regularly, the strain of this juggling act caught up with him.

“That was motivation to really get things under control,” says Tiffany, who had to step in for Clayton while he recovered. “We were going in so many different directions preparing to buy the company. We had to make some changes so this wouldn't happen again.”

TRANSITIONING INTO OWNERSHIP. Although Clayton often toyed with the idea of taking over Sundance, buying the company was initially Tiffany's idea. She started getting involved in the business around 2020, leading up to the couple's wedding in February 2021. As she observed how Sundance processed invoices, collected payments and ran other backend functions, she recognized opportunities for improvement.

“Everything was so old school,” she says. “They were growing so fast that they didn't have the time to investigate how to really utilize all the tools they had. We were spending a lot of money on salaries for people to do jobs that software could easily do. We took a step back to evaluate every part of the business, because you can't grow in a healthy way if you don't have the processes and procedures in place.”

◀ Tiffany and Clayton Graham took over Sundance, which had 80 employees at the time of the sale.

With 15 years of property management experience (including some properties that Sundance maintained), Tiffany began suggesting changes to modernize and digitize the operation. Along the way, Mark started dropping subtle hints about passing the business down to the next generation.

Finally, one day in the summer of 2021, the newlyweds were enjoying a motorcycle ride when Tiffany proposed buying Sundance. Together, the couple broached the conversation with Mark, launching a year of negotiations to finalize the deal on June 30, 2022. "He was relieved, knowing that the company could stay within the family," Tiffany says. "We wanted him to enjoy his retirement while we took the business places it's never been."

BUILDING TRUST. Although Clayton's initial transition into the role of president was unexpectedly abrupt, he had been preparing for years by working alongside his father, both in the field and in the office. But when Tiffany filled in for Clayton after his heart attack, she had to work even harder to build credibility.

"I could see what it looked like from the outside: his new wife coming in to take over the business," says Tiffany, who became

executive vice president. "I didn't want to come in too heavy-handed or tell anyone what to do. I'm sure they were leery, but knowing the purchase agreement was going through, they knew there needed to be a change."

After Clayton's heart attack, Tiffany sat down with the team and said, "I don't want you guys bothering him or texting him. You need to support me until we know what his recovery will look like." Instead of giving orders, she asked a lot of questions about how they were doing their jobs and how she could make things easier for them. "I built their trust by being there every day, asking their ideas and opinions, and listening to them," she says.

While most of the team was receptive to the change, a few employees resisted. That's when the Grahams realized that the people who had grown Sundance through the first generation might not necessarily be the best fit for the next phase.

CUTTING UNPROFITABLE CLIENTS. After his heart attack, Clayton realized that he had to remove unnecessary stress — which meant parting ways with people who demanded too much energy. "We started with the clients that were adding unneeded stress," he says. "We decided we're only going to work with people that we want to work with."

His decision to downsize wasn't arbitrary. He began running the numbers on every account to consider the costs, labor and time involvement that each client required. Looking at the math made it obvious that certain accounts simply weren't as profitable as others. "It wasn't worth the headache that went along with it," he says — and it certainly wasn't worth another heart attack, either.

Some clients were constantly calling Sundance to complain about invoices, dragging account managers into HOA board meetings and demanding extra

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services without additional compensation. Once they identified these troublesome accounts, Clayton and Tiffany tried troubleshooting. They explained to these clients that, because the ownership had shifted, the scope of work had to be adjusted as well.

“We weren’t just saying, ‘We’re firing you.’ It was more like, ‘Can we figure this out? How can we make this better?’” Tiffany says. “The ones that weren’t willing to help us make it better, we agreed that we need to move on and gave a 30-day cancellation notice. We never left any property on a bad note because we wanted to keep our good reputation.”

For example, some accounts hadn’t received price increases from Sundance in several years — prompting an adjustment either in crew size, hours or rate. One HOA in particular had a crew on-site five days a week, but after running the numbers and realizing they were losing money, Clayton explained that they had to cut back to two



days a week at that price. After seeking bids from other landscape providers, the property decided to continue its partnership with Sundance at the insistence of the homeowners who’d always been pleased with their work.

DOWNSIZING THE STAFF. Getting rid of several large accounts presented an opportunity to cut back on extra labor. The

Grahams approached these cuts objectively by looking at factors like attendance, performance and attitude.

“We considered who fit into our culture. If you don’t fit in or you’re going to cause issues with other employees, we’re not going to have that,” Clayton says. “Our employees would rather be shorthanded than have a guy who doesn’t get along with them.”

That meant letting go of a few key manag-

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ers who fought against the changes. But the loyal top performers secured their spots in Sundance’s future and received opportunities to advance.

Unfortunately, these cuts provoked rumors from previous employees and local competitors, who speculated that Sundance was going under. The Grahams reassured their remaining clients and staff that these changes were ultimately for the better, that the company would operate more efficiently as a result. In fact, the cuts enabled Sundance to reinvest in the people who stayed onboard. “We’re putting a lot more of the profit back into them, and they see that,” Tiffany says.

For example, they facilitated team-building activities like games, holiday parties, and lunches with their employees, along with regular performance reviews and incentive programs. They purchased new shirts, hats and safety vests for the crews, and repainted all the trailers bright orange to match the newly rebranded logo. Offloading old and underutilized equipment freed up the funds to buy new tools and equipment — including a new bucket

truck for tree trimming that eliminated the need to rent trucks or subcontract crews, which ultimately helped cut costs.

But the best thing they did to build buy-in from the team was engaging employees in the change. Clayton sat down with a couple of crew leaders to document the company’s standard operating procedures (SOPs) for each service, explaining how this would facilitate seamless training and enable crews to cover other properties in a pinch. Then, he asked the crew leaders to present these SOPs to the rest of the team. After that, he saw a “drastic turning point” in the team’s morale as they began to take ownership of the change.

“As an owner, sometimes your ego gets in the way, but there are a lot of people who work for you that can offer some very good ideas and super helpful ways to implement things,” he says. “If you use their ideas, not only does it make them feel valued, but it’s so much easier to get everybody on board.”

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AUTOMATING PROCESSES. After working in high-tech businesses, Tiffany identified opportunities to automate several manual tasks at Sundance.

Previously, for example, it took an entire day to run payroll manually from timesheets. Now, employees use an app the Grahams discovered at the Lawn & Landscape Technology Conference to clock in and out, request sick time and vacation —

enabling her to run payroll within five minutes.

Similarly, creating invoices used to be a multi-step process that required crew leaders to email photo attachments to the office along with a list of services performed at each property. Now, the crews use software to simply click buttons next to pre-written service descriptions and upload photos from their tablets, creating weekly reports and invoices within minutes.

Tiffany also revamped the accounting



Sundance reinvested in its employees with new gear and more team outings.

story continues on page 49

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INSIDE

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Staying steady, **PG. 28**



Jordan Smith

Liquid Technology Marketing Manager,
BOSS Snowplow

**“
AS WE MOVE
FORWARD, THE
SNOW AND ICE
INDUSTRY IS
POISED TO BECOME
A BEACON OF
ENVIRONMENTAL
RESPONSIBILITY
AND ECONOMIC
PRUDENCE.”**

LEADING THE CHARGE

The snow and ice removal industry is currently navigating a transformative phase, with a heightened focus on chloride and liability reduction for snow contractors as well as state and municipal snow organizations. The industry has seen a push toward the use of liquid deicing due to both regulatory and customer demand, a shift that could potentially reduce chloride pollution by a staggering 75%.

Liquid deicers are gaining favor due to their proactive nature, which is a stark contrast to the more reactive approach employed by using rock salt. This proactive approach is a significant factor in the industry's drive for liability reduction. The environmental implications are equally compelling. A mere teaspoon of salt can permanently pollute five gallons of fresh water, underscoring the urgency to protect our most vital resource.

The economic implications are also hard to ignore. With construction and infrastructure costs skyrocketing over the past four years, the need to safeguard these investments is more critical than ever. It's a sobering fact that each ton of salt, costing less than \$100, can inflict between \$800 and \$3,000 of long-term damage when applied to commercial properties, bridges, parking garages or roadways. This stark reality underscores the necessity of exploring salt and chloride reduction strategies to mitigate long-term costs.

Leading the charge in this industry-wide shift is BOSS Snowplow. BOSS is spearheading efforts to increase information, education and accessibility to top-tier equipment for applying liquids. This includes the full VSI by BOSS Snowplow product line and the Snowrator® and SR MAG. This initiative is not just about business growth; it's about the greater good of the industry and our planet, helping you RESTORE ORDER, sustainability and efficiency.

As we move forward, the snow and ice industry is poised to become a beacon of environmental responsibility and economic prudence. With the continued push for liquid deicing and the tireless efforts of companies like BOSS Snowplow, we are on the cusp of a more sustainable and responsible future.

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VSI
by BOSS SNOWFLOW

A frosty outlook on labor is slowly warming up for snow and ice management professionals.

Hiring new employees remains tricky after COVID-19. Still, it seems snow and ice management professionals aren't as far behind as they reported in previous State of the Market reports.

In fact, they're largely putting the finishing touches on winter prep: 60% of contractors are confident they'll be fully staffed by the first billable snow event, and roughly 73% of respondents are fully staffed or less than five hires away.

That's not to say finding those employees is easy. 60% of respondents still say the labor market is worse than it was after COVID-19. However, it's encouraging that the number of respondents say it's worse is falling: There were 68% last year and 80% two years ago.

—Jimmy Miller, associate editor, Lawn & Landscape

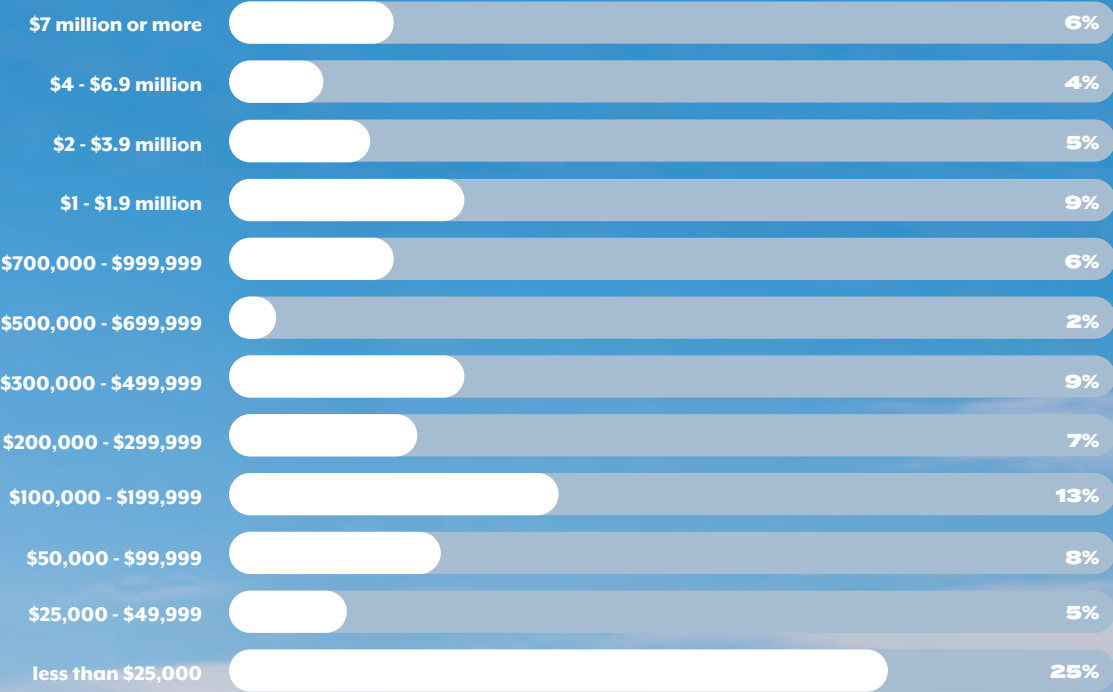


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*These results are from more than 100 respondents. Not all percentages add up to 100% due to rounding.

What was your Winter 2022-23 snow and ice revenue?



STAYING S

Finding labor has long been a challenge, but companies offering snow services are acting creatively to make it work.

By Jimmy Miller

BOB WAMBACH UNDERSTANDS WHY it's tough to find quality employees to work every winter.

Wambach, who works in sales and design at Proscapes in Madison, Wisconsin, couldn't make thousands of dollars on YouTube when he first entered the work force. He couldn't drive Uber or drop off food for DoorDash, either. When possible, employees could work from their own homes or cars, it's a hard sell to get them out at four in the morning shoveling snow.

"The kid who doesn't want to wash dishes or bartend now isn't lazy — he just has options," Wambach says. Plus, when the labor market is short on salaried positions, he says the problem is amplified. "If you can't find someone for a full-time job," Wambach says, "how are you going to find someone to work only when it snows?"

Still, snow events roll on as they always have, ensuring the need for good, qualified employees who can keep sidewalks salted and parking lots cleared. Wambach and other landscape contractors who offer snow and ice services every winter are tasked with finding employees. It's easier said than done.

"We get a lot of people who say they've been behind the wheel of a truck, and it's pretty easy to tell quickly they don't have the experience," says Scot Williams, the general manager at GLS Maintenance and Landscaping in Oak Ridge, North Carolina. "They want big dollars, but they don't have the experience we need as a professional company."

So, a tight labor market forces landscapers to act creatively to find diamonds in the rough ahead of this winter season. For some landscapers and snow contractors, it's a matter of looking inward and making the job as worth it as it can be. For others, it's best to look outside and subcontract the work.

How many hourly employees do you have for snow and ice services?

26%
25 or more

4%
20-24

9%
15-19

17%
10-14

16%
5-9

28%
Less than 5

TEADY



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOSS



TEACHING THE TALENT. Wambach doesn't necessarily lament the "good old days," but he does acknowledge things used to be easier. Recruitment wasn't so tricky. Wage-wise, employees could be brought in at \$20 an hour — now it's closer to \$30 or \$35. And his employees used to have more accommodating schedules, even offering to stay onboard from the winter season into the spring. Now, a good chunk of his employees have other jobs — snow work is just an add-on for them to make ends meet.

Even the storms seem to be different, as anecdotally, Wambach says the work used to be done well before the traffic seemed to pick up.

"I don't know if it's because I have a romantic view of historic storms," he says, "but now it seems like every storm seems to start at 6 a.m. right before rush hour."

Do you have an employee recruiting and retention strategy in place for your snow and ice management operations?

YES

38%

.....

NO

62%

Still, Wambach has managed to amass 60 employees for snow season behind a career ladder that shows specific steps on how to make more money. It doesn't take long for employees to build some momentum, either — the Labor 1, Labor 2 and Labor 3 steps could take about a month, and the employee earns \$1 more per hour for each step they climb.

Employees climb the ladder by completing video training on apps, filing the right paperwork and passing the exams on their phones. It's all about giving the employees more control over their earning power. Wambach says they're paying people 30% more than they were pre-COVID, but they're also stacking the jobsites with qualified labor.

"If you really apply yourself and want to do this as a career, you could become a fore-



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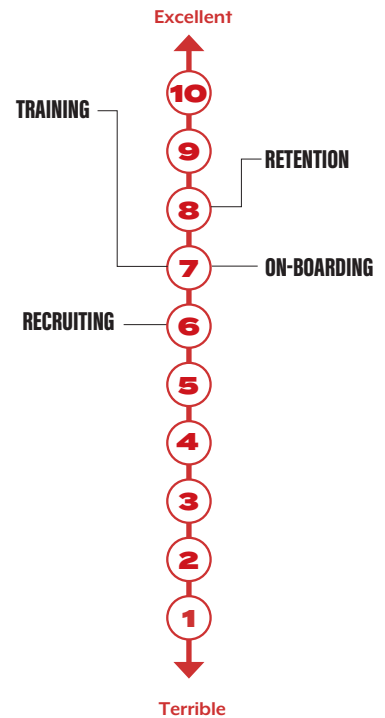
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**"I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S BECAUSE I HAVE A ROMANTIC VIEW OF HISTORIC STORMS,
RIGHT BEFORE RUSH HOUR."**

— **Bob Wambach**

Rank how well you do the following

(10 being excellent; 1 terrible)



man within a year," he says. "Nowadays, I don't care if I have three foremen on site. The job goes faster. It makes everything go smoothly if the customer's over the moon."

Of course, the training programs don't always need to be as formal. Venessa Anderson runs Alaska Premier Services, which does lawn care, maintenance and snow services in Anchorage. Every winter presents the daunting task of training new employees.

Anderson admits that's scary, and in an effort to find the best labor possible, she's raised her starting wage 16% this year and they're subcontracting out necessary work, so they meet necessary safety standards.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOSS



BUT NOW IT SEEMS LIKE EVERY STORM SEEMS TO START AT 6 A.M.

What is the average retention rate for hourly employees in your snow and ice management operation in the last 12 months?



Damage happens, and Anderson's trying to get ahead of that as much as possible. The worst is when they hit a garage door and bust it up, but it's also common to dig up lawns by accident or bust up bricks along a retaining wall.

But her husband and co-owner takes new employees out in the truck to coach them on the controls, angles and how hard they want to hit a pile. Anderson says it's about six to eight snow events before those employees have got a good handle on what they're doing.

"When they've demonstrated that knowledge, then they're sent out on their own," she says.

SUBBING FOR STARS. All four contractors interviewed for this story say they look outside their company to complete some work, including Cody Rindlisbacher, the owner of CPR Services in Utah. The company's motto is that they'll revive one property at a time, and with four employees including himself, they can only run two trucks during the winter — one does the snow plowing and another does shoveling and salting.

"Previously, it has been myself and my brother. We haven't had any other employees," Rindlisbacher says. "We've always needed employees, but with the labor market, we just haven't been able to find anybody or keep anybody around. This year

we started working with a temp agency."

The jury's still out on how much it'll affect CPR's bottom line, but Rindlisbacher says they previously passed up doing some work like walkways because they couldn't handle it with how much parking lot space they had to clear. They also could only offer winter services as an upsell to existing clients who work with them in the summer, but now, for the first time in eight years, they can sell it to brand new clients, too.

Back in North Carolina, Williams says their employee count jumps to 80 or 90 people once they factor in how many people are subbed in for the commercial snow season. "We have agreements with

STATE OF THE MARKET:
**SNOW
LABOR**

several companies for labor, so we pull from there,” he says. “It is quite hard to find good people.”

Williams just wants to avoid the headache of realizing an employee isn’t as qualified as they promised while they’re out in the field in the middle of a snow storm. “We’re in a crunch situation when it comes to snow,” he says. So, he always plants at least three experienced employees at each jobsite, ensuring someone can handle the most dangerous or costly parts of the job in a pinch. They’ll then task the other laborers with stand-on machines with brooms or baggers, as they can’t tear up asphalt doing that. “For the next event, we just won’t have that person,” Williams says.

Williams does think there’s been an overall mindset change since COVID-19, but he can’t put his finger on what’s made it possible for people who can no longer collect government checks to stay away from working.

“I’m not really sure what these people are doing. The money’s not there anymore,” Williams says, adding he doesn’t believe it’s just something happening in his region. “I think it’s everybody. I think it’s a lack of willing to work.”

Wambach may disagree with why there are less laborers, but he’s also had to sub out some work in some cases. He’s mindful to select subs that don’t require a change in management software. But while he prefers to find his own employees to handle the job, there are some zero tolerance accounts like hospitals and clinics that require particularly qualified labor.

And for her part, Anderson says they opened up divisions for subcontractors to apply for work, assigning routes to those with trucks and plows. This also helps cover her in the event an employee no-calls, no-shows. They’ve got about 20 employees this winter and three subcontractors.

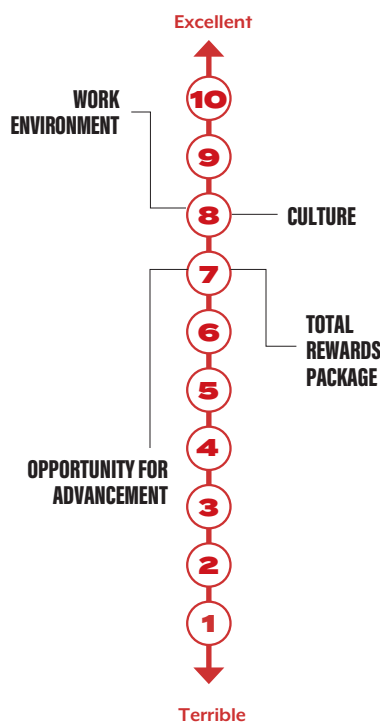
“If somebody quits or doesn’t show up, the route’s still getting done,” she says.

KEEPING THE BEST. Of course, it’s not always possible to sub out the work.



**Rate the following
about your organization**

(10 being excellent; 1 terrible)



Wambach says his recruiting strategy has remained intensive but hasn’t changed much, even as the effectiveness has dropped. They’re no longer using job apps because that’s where a majority of the laborers who would show up once and quit often came from.

Instead, the number one thing has been implementing the clear career ladder and,

of course, raising the wage. But there are other things companies can do to sell their positions to possible employees.

Wambach says a strong company culture has helped dramatically. He references a foreman who’s worked there for 23 years, and two more who have been there for 16 and 15 years apiece. He says his core group of foremen have a combined 100 years of experience between them.

Part of the sell to prospective employees is good work-life balance. Wambach has worked jobs before where if there’s a big snow event, those workers aren’t home for three days. Not at Proscapes: they’ve established a rotation where anyone who’s out there works in eight-hour rotations. “Nobody’s in a truck for 20 hours,” he says.

Plus, this carries over to the spring, too. They try to implement three-day weekends so folks can hang out with their friends and family outside work. And high-performing employees are awarded with quarterly recognition like attending a local baseball game on the company’s dime.

Wambach says this comes down to hiring the right people. He allows some “boomerangs,” where employees leave the company once but come back after realizing they’ve left for a quick buck. But he only allows them to come back one time — he won’t permit it a second time.

“We don’t hire everybody,” he says. “We’re not doing the whole thing where if you can breathe in a mirror and fog shows up, we put you in the door.” **L&L**

The author is associate editor at Lawn & Landscape magazine.




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Builderscape added three Ford F-150 Lightning pickup trucks to its fleet this year. Two more are on the way.

GET AMPED!

Three landscape company owners share initial impressions after purchasing their first electric vehicles. **By Gregg Wartgow**

There are some pretty clear pros and cons to driving an electric vehicle. In a landscaping operation, any potential net benefit largely comes down to what you're asking that vehicle to do and how you're capable of supporting it.

"It's more of an infrastructure issue than anything else," says Chad Reinhart, president and co-owner of Reinhart Landscaping & Snow with branches in Bloomington, Peoria and Champaign, Ill. "It's not like you can just pull over to get a little gas. Most of the charging stations we see in our area are Level 2 or even Level 1. Ideally, you want a Level 3 charger that will get you fully charged in about 45 minutes. We've found just one in the Bloomington-Normal area, none in Peoria and one in Champaign. Plus, it might already be in use when you pull in. That's why range anxiety is a real thing with a lot of people."

To ease some of his own range anxiety, Reinhart has begun driving an electric vehicle himself. He is gaining an understanding of how his pickup truck drives, holds a charge and recharges. "These things are no longer a fear factor for me," Reinhart says. "We're learning how to plan around some of the challenges to make this work."

DEVELOPING PROCESSES FOR EFFICIENT CHARGING. As part of his personal beta test, Reinhart has installed a Level 2 charger in his home garage. It is working well and recharges his truck overnight. The challenge, according to Reinhart, is finding a way to efficiently and cost-effectively scale across his sprawling company.

"Do you set up other managers with chargers at their homes? A charger is \$800 to \$1,000, and the installation can cost that much or more," Reinhart points out. "And what do

you do if that employee ends up leaving your company? Should you just install chargers at your facility and require managers to bring their trucks back there every night?"

Chris Matthews, president of Builderscape in Marysville, Ohio, has adopted both charging strategies. He has recently purchased three Ford F-150 Lightning pickup trucks with two more on order. Matthews and his project managers are using the trucks. Each truck user has been set up with a home charger and is reimbursed either quarterly or semiannually for the electricity used to charge their vehicle. Additionally, charging stations have been installed at Builderscape's facility.

"We recently moved into a new facility and actually designed it around the idea of charging electric vehicles," Matthews says. "There are some huge upfit costs you have to think about when looking to charge an entire fleet. It's one thing to charge a single vehicle at home on a 30-amp circuit; it's

another thing to charge five or six vehicles simultaneously on a 60-amp breaker."

Matthews and his team worked with an electrician to make sure the new facility could handle the electrical demands. "We needed to be capable of charging the vehicles we already had, plus have room for much more expansion," Matthews says.

As a general rule, Matthews says each vehicle should have its own charger. "DC fast-chargers cost a fortune," Matthews says. "Furthermore, if you DC-charge all the time, it's very hard on a battery. So, we went with a typical AC charger. The amperage is the big thing. We're running 40-amp chargers on 60-amp breakers. That will take a completely dead battery to completely full in about eight hours."

Builderscape's new facility was designed around the concept of charging electric vehicles.



One objective of Reinhart's personal beta test is determining if one charger per vehicle is actually necessary. That requires an analysis of battery range and miles driven per day. For instance, if a vehicle's range is 310 miles, but that vehicle only puts on 110 miles a day, it could be possible to charge it every other night. On the other hand, if the vehicle typically racks up 140-plus miles a day, it would be pretty risky to try squeezing out a second day before recharging.



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Reinhart has also found that recharging a battery to 75-85% is the most efficient approach. Doing so gives him the daily range he needs while helping save time and battery wear. "Charging that last 15-25% is harder on batteries," Reinhart says. "Plus, I've found that I can go from 0-85% in 30-45 minutes. That last 15% might take an hour.

These are the things I'm learning as we look to scale across our company at some point."

One other thing to think about is the impact towing will have on battery range.

UNDERSTANDING THE TOWING TRADE-OFF. Builderscape specializes in landscape construction and pool installation.

Matthews doesn't see his production vehicles going electric anytime soon due to the heavy loads they need to haul.

"If you try towing something like that, you're probably going to lose half your range," Matthews says. "If you're just working around town, 150 miles might be enough per day. But if you're traveling long

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What's motivating landscape companies *TO GO ELECTRIC?*

Marketability. Greenwise Organic Lawn Care has been using battery-powered lawn equipment for several years. Now that crews are using electric trucks, Owner Austin Hall says he can promote the fact that his maintenance crews are completely emission-free.

Lower fuel bill. Hall is confident that over the life of his electric trucks, the fuel-cost savings will more than offset the price premium for an electric truck. Chris Matthews of Builderscape is equally optimistic and has already been feeling the difference. "During peak season, I was typically spending up to \$850 per month per vehicle on fuel," Matthews says. "That has been reduced to a \$200 electric bill."

Lower maintenance costs. Matthews is also excited to see how much money he saves in truck maintenance. With an electric vehicle, there are no oil and filter changes. Brake pad life can be extended thanks to something known as regenerative braking. "There is basically no maintenance for the first 100,000 miles, aside from a tire rotation," Matthews says.

Stay ahead of the curve. Matthews couldn't wait to place his first electric truck order a couple of years ago. "We want to start figuring this stuff out now, rather than wait to have it shoved down our throats later on," Matthews says. Chad Reinhart of Reinhart Landscaping & Snow also wanted to get a cautious jumpstart, just as his company has done with battery-powered lawn equipment and robotic mowers. "Anytime we want to move in a new direction, we want proof of concept," Reinhart says.

distances, losing half of your range could become a problem.”

Matthews still sees opportunity to expand his use of electric trucks. One of the company’s larger diesel trucks would still deliver equipment and materials to a jobsite. But the crew workers themselves could throw their smaller tools in the bed of an electric pickup. “I see an electric truck being a far more efficient people-mover for us going forward,” Matthews says.

The lighter load of a lawn maintenance crew really opens up the possibility of going electric, especially if routes are tight.

Austin Hall, president and owner of Greenwise Organic Lawn Care in Skokie, Ill., received his first three electric vehicles earlier this year after placing his order a year prior.

The van hauls a tank sprayer, push spreader and some fertilizer. The trucks tow maintenance trailers with a walk-behind mower, stand-on mower and assortment of standard handheld equipment.

Greenwise serves the Chicagoland market and specializes in residential properties. Routes range from 10 to 50 miles long, which is well within the daily range of the E-Transit and Lightning.

In fact, Hall says maintenance crews often take advantage of the built-in electricity to charge batteries for their lawn equipment.

“A big consideration when switching to battery equipment is how to go about keeping the batteries charged,” Hall says. “Having a battery-electric truck helps. This is allowing us to reduce the number of backup batteries we need. These smaller equipment batteries draw so little power that we haven’t seen it move the needle when it comes to truck range.”

The two trucks and the van return to the Greenwise yard at the end of the day to recharge overnight. Hall says his fleet management platform connected him with a reputable EV installer to put three charging stations in.

Thus far, Hall says everything has been working well. “Our electric vehicles are quite fast and powerful,” Hall says. “It’s kind of funny, the pick-up can actually catch you off guard.”

Getting caught off-guard is something Hall, Matthews and Reinhart have all

sought to avoid by becoming early adopters of electric vehicles.

Starting slowly is giving them the chance to learn and adapt. It’s also giving technology a chance to further improve.

“We didn’t want to turn over our entire fleet right away,” Hall says. “There are already a lot of options available. We want

to watch how things continue to evolve over the next 18-24 months before taking our next steps. With something as new and different as this, you are bound to make some mistakes along the way. We just want to minimize the impact of those mistakes.” **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Wisconsin



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Plan your upcoming weed control strategies

Understanding some basics can help save you time and money. by **Todd Lowe, ENVU**

1 What are basic weed control strategies?

An integrated management program is recommended for all pests, including weeds. Maintaining a healthy, dense stand of turf or a thick layer of mulch in landscape beds is a cornerstone for weed control. Most plants propagate from seeds, and a dense turf cover shades the surface and outcompetes vulnerable seedlings. Mulch on landscape beds prevents weeds from germinating from the soil below. Another strategy is to remove weeds by hand, which can be effective when weed populations are low, especially in landscape beds. The final strategy is to use herbicides such as preemergence (PRE) and/or postemergence (POST) herbicides.

2 What is a PRE or POST herbicide?

A PRE herbicide is applied prior to weed seed germination. The term “preemergence” is somewhat misleading as the seedling must emerge from the seed to contact the herbicide. Most PRE herbicides are root active, so the seedling dies shortly after the root absorbs the herbicide. As a result, the seedling never emerges from the turf canopy or landscape bed. Effective PRE herbicides (such as Specticle® FLO and Specticle® G) have long soil residual and control a broad range of weeds. POST herbicides are those that are applied after the weed seed has germinated. Effective POST herbicides, such as Celsius® WG or Celsius® XTRA, are broad spectrum, safe on desirable turf and most efficacious when applied to young weeds.

3 When should I apply PRE herbicides?

PRE herbicides MUST be applied prior to weed seed germination; therefore, it is important to understand weed germination timing. Many winter annuals germinate in fall, while summer annuals germinate in late winter/early spring. Still other weeds, such as doveweed, foxtail and many sedges, germinate even later in the summer. We have a general idea when the most important weed seeds germinate, but exact timings can vary each year depending on the weather. A young weed seedling is difficult to see and can germinate many weeks before it becomes a visible eyesore. For example, *Poa annua* seeds begin germinating in early autumn when soil temperatures drop below 72° F but may not be visible for four to six (or more) weeks or until the desirable warm-season

turf goes dormant. In other situations, *Poa annua* plants may go undetected until seedhead emergence in regions where turf remains green.

4 Why are PRE/POST combinations beneficial?

It can be very difficult to apply PRE herbicides early enough to provide season-long control with just one application. Differing weather patterns from year to year along with long weed seed germination windows can make PRE timing difficult. Also, all lawn care operators should constantly safeguard against herbicide resistance. A PRE/POST combo, along with herbicide rotation, is a great way to reduce the likelihood of herbicide resistance.

5 What is herbicide resistance and why is it important?

When any active ingredient is applied regularly with no rotation of other chemistries, it increases the chances of developing resistance over time. Many lawn care companies use products they can afford yet also provide a decent level of pest control. Once they develop an effective strategy, they generally continue using those same products year after year. A consequence of this approach creates selection pressure, increasing the chances of herbicide-resistant weeds or insecticide-resistant insects.

Pest populations are quite diverse and may already have a percentage of the population, albeit small, that carries a resistance gene. When using the same product repeatedly, you essentially select a certain trait to become more dominant over time. Even if only 0.1% of the original weed population is resistant to a certain herbicide in year one, this percentage increases if the weed thrives and produces viable seeds. By year five, there may be a noticeable population that is no longer controlled by a given herbicide. It was originally felt that herbicide resistance was a concern in certain annual grasses, but we now see resistance with several common broadleaf weeds and sedges as well.

If herbicide rotation is implemented or if PRE/POST combinations are applied, the chances of herbicide resistance are greatly reduced. In addition to reducing herbicide resistance, some strategies such as PRE/POST combinations provide a broader level of weed control, especially when POST herbicides consist of multiple active ingredients.



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ROVING ROBOTS

As the technology advances, there are plenty of autonomous mowers hitting the landscape market.

ELECTRIC SHEEP'S THE RAM

The pitch: The Ram is a machine-learning powered robot mower that stripes and can reason about its environment on its own, determining what is grass and what is not — no boundary wires or pre-mapping needed.

- Enabled with Electric Sheep's AI-model called ESI, set the Ram down and start mowing in 30 seconds with no setup needed.
- No engineer is required on site, as the robots are shipped directly to the site and begin tasks alongside the landscape crew.



- Set it down, point and go, the robot will move around trees and adjust its mowing pattern to whatever boundaries encompass that turf area.

For more info: sheeprobotics.ai



FIREFLY AUTOMATIX — M100-AV AUTONOMOUS ELECTRIC MOWER

The pitch: The electric M100-AV is fully autonomous and mows 25 acres on a single charge, solving labor constraints and optimizing efficiencies for large-scale turf management.

- The autonomous M100-AV operates without onsite supervision, utilizing RTK/NTRIP GPS and intelligent path planning for maximum efficiency, a suite of LiDAR and smart cameras for active collision avoidance, and optimized frequency of clip for cut quality consistency.
- Powered by an advanced LiFePO4 lithium battery, the electric M100-AV eliminates fuel and emissions, reduces maintenance and quickly recharges in two hours.
- Built in the U.S., the M100-AV quietly mows a 100-inch width with five reel decks, SyncLift position-based lift technology to reduce the need for a cleanup pass, low-impact AWD traction, synchronized steering and RoloRocker design for stability at speeds up to 7 mph.

For more info: fireflyautomatix.com



ECHO ROBOTICS WISENAV

The pitch: Real-time kinematic (RTK) precision control of the mower and picker operation allows for pattern mowing and picking within schedulable virtual zones without traditional boundary wire.

- Allows for controlled pattern mowing and picking, increasing production area to 12 acres for TM-2050 and RP-1250 and six acres for TM-1050.
- Adjust zones and schedule from the web and phone portals for enhanced monitoring and control.
- 4G correction allows for effective RTK coverage area to include a 5-mile radius for multi robot control.

For more info: echorobotics.com

NEXMOW M1S

The pitch: Nexmow M1S robot mower is designed for mowing sports fields, turf farms and premium lawns.

- The M1S can mow between 0.75- 3.5-inch with twice the drive motor torque and cutting blades.

- Nexmow semi-autonomous bots operate using 4G cellular and real-time kinematic technologies to map and navigate.
- You can operate a swarm of one to 10 robots to maximize efficiency.

For more info: nexmow.com



GRAZE MOWER M1

The pitch: Graze's next-generation mower merges precision automation and silent electric power to redefine efficiency and safety with every blade turn.

- Boasting a 60-inch deck, this next-gen mower is capable of mowing 1.6 acres/hour with an 8-hour battery life.
- Experience safety and convenience with its 360-degree optical suite, avoiding obstacles and ensuring the well-being of those around.

The mower's Tweel airless tires not only promise durability across all terrains but also deliver a smoother, more even cut. Stay connected and in control with the app, allowing real-time monitoring and adjustments.



- The M1 is available for direct purchase and pre-order. Beyond the product, Graze offers warranties, training and a support team.

For more info: grazemowing.com

HUSQVARNA AUTOMOWER 550H EPOS

The pitch: Landscaping companies can focus on the details (hedge, edge, trim or blow off surfaces) while their customers enjoy precisely manicured grass — rain or shine, day and night.

- Husqvarna EPOS (Exact Positioning Operating System) satellite-based technology enables the mower to work within virtual boundaries.
- Map work areas, stay-out zones and designate cut patterns — right from the app — to ensure a consistent aesthetic.



- Cut up to 2.5 acres with a cutting height of up to 3.6 inches on all types of lawns as well as navigate narrow passages and manage slopes up to 45% (24°).
- New reference station repeaters are now available and give landscapers the ability to create service areas further from the main reference station as well as cover areas that might have obstructions like trees and sheds.

For more info: Husqvarna.com

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KRESS MISSION RTKN ROBOTIC MOWERS

The pitch: The Kress Robotic Mower with RTKn and Mowing Action Plan (MAP) Technology mows like you, without you.

- With no boundary wire or on-site antenna installation required, Kress' new line of autonomous robot lawn mowers uses real-time kinematic (RTK) technology. It navigates large multi-zone turfgrass properties with centimeter-level accuracy.
- With five models to choose from and mowing ranges from three-quarters of an acre to nine acres, Kress robotic mowers fit almost any need. The entire line of Kress robotic mowers uses a Regenerative Brake System (RBS) which converts kinetic energy into stored power for increased battery life and longer runtimes and features an IPX5-rated washable underbody and an advanced Obstacle Avoidance System (OAS) designed to ensure accurate and worry-free mowing.
- The mower crosses driveways and walkways to mow multiple zones and continually learns the most efficient routes for better, quicker cuts. Kress Mission autonomous mowers are available at Kress dealers across North America.



For more info: kress.com

MEAN GREEN AUTONOMOUS VANQUISH

The pitch: Save on fuel and labor with all day runtime on the Vanquish — a commercial electric mower driven by Greenzie, an installable autonomous upfit.

- Precise operation via a directly integrated system with rugged on-board computer using AI for maneuverability and efficiency.
- LiDAR, GNSS and real-time kinematic sensors offer 360 degree, 100-foot range with inch level precision for obstacle detection in all lighting conditions.
- Dual functionality allows switching between manual mode to autonomous mode to add an efficient and productive worker to your crew.
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For more info: meangreenproducts.com

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RAYMO ELECTRIC MOWERS

The pitch: Revolutionize your facility's maintenance routine with Raymo electric mowers, known for their ability to mow down brush with ease, while also offering value with low operating costs, and the added versatility of remote-control operation for navigation on slopes and challenging terrain.

- Raymo remote controlled mowers, with their modular construction, feature the opportunity to switch between four unique mowing decks. They not only contribute to environmental protection through their emission-free operation but also offer the added benefits of being nearly maintenance-free and featuring a low-profile design for getting into compact spaces.
- Raymo electric mowers feature a battery swap system for uninterrupted mowing, a four-wheel-drive capability for tackling any terrain, zero-turn steering for precision maneuverability and an advanced Raylink telemetry system.
- Take advantage of the Sourcwell government procurement contract and individual state-based incentives designed to promote the adoption of environmentally friendly, cost-effective and sustainable electric-powered equipment.



For more info: raymousa.com

SCYTHE M.52 (2024 MODEL)

The pitch: Multiply what your crew can do with the next generation of Scythe's autonomous commercial mower.

- Mow all day with a 25% larger battery than the previous generation.
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- Create laser-straight stripes and a great cut quality enhanced by upgraded high precision deck motors.

For more info: GetScythe.com



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- Define a boundary quickly for a site without installing ground wires, charging stations or a real-time kinematic base station.
- Deploy a fleet of mowers to work as a team on larger lawns, aligning to crew time on site.
- Start jobs, receive alerts and monitor mowers through a mobile app. Restart a job with a new mower if needed.

For more info: SensoriRobotics.com



SUNSEEKER PLATFORM X

The pitch: The Sunseeker Platform X is an all-scenario robot redefining yard maintenance.

- Enjoy boundary wire-free operation and intelligent mapping for multi-zone setup, making installation and customization effortless.

- It offers real-time kinematic (RTK), visual simultaneous localization and mapping (V SLAM) and artificial intelligent sense system (AISS).
- The mowers also have advanced obstacle avoidance, and all-wheel drive, the Platform X works on complex terrains, slopes up to 35 degrees and rugged landscapes.

For more info: sunseekertools.com

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software to calculate project costs in more detail, so the price of each service includes all of the labor, plants, fuel surcharges, and other materials. “The estimates now are way more detailed,” she says. “We’re telling them everything that’s included in the price, and we’re also breaking out parts and materials, which we didn’t do before. By being able to see every single thing that we’re spending and charging, we can adjust the price to make sure we’re actually making money.”

When Tiffany first stepped into the business, she and Clayton were handling constant questions from clients about estimates and bills, but these automated processes have curbed that. “Now, it’s pretty low stress,” says Clayton, who has delegated most of the account management and field operations so he can focus on sales and marketing. “It’s given me a chance to get more

into the numbers, so I’m more focused on profitability. I’ve been able to really dig into that and understand what’s making money, what’s losing money, what’s breaking even, and what our costs are so I can make adjustments.”

POSITIONED FOR GROWTH. Clayton expects Sundance to end 2023 with \$2.8 million in revenue, 40 employees, and 11 crews. Although the revenue is down from last year, profits have multiplied from about 2% margins when they bought the business to 15% now.

“These changes have allowed us to be more productive,” Tiffany says. “Automating the business has made it possible for us to grow without having a lot of growing pains.”

Sundance, which previously focused exclusively on landscape maintenance for HOA properties, recently brought on 13 commercial properties, mostly in the

Scottsdale area. “With all these systems in place, we’re able to easily take on 13 properties without having to add any employees,” Tiffany says, although the company is ramping up to hire several more people, including a sales and marketing manager.

While the company is based in Queen Creek, southeast of Phoenix, this recent influx in Scottsdale, about an hour away, unlocks new growth potential. “We’re being strategic with projects we’re bidding in that area,” Clayton says, “so it’s a possibility (that we may) open a second location in the northern part of town.”

Taking a step back to reevaluate the business and implement efficient processes positioned Sundance for future growth. “I know it’s really hard, especially for smaller businesses,” Clayton says, “but pulling back and working on the business instead of working in the business is huge.” **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.



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RAISE THE BAR

WITH JUSTIN WHITE
CEO OF K&D LANDSCAPING

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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.

PRICING FOR PROFIT: A LANDSCAPE FOR SUCCESS

→ LANDSCAPERS AND PROFESSIONALS in the green industry excel at delivering top-notch services. Yet, one crucial aspect often overlooked is how much to charge for these services. Our landscape company, K&D, was once in the same boat. We had a solid reputation for quality work but we didn't truly understand our numbers. As a result, we consistently undervalued and undercharged for our services.

That all changed in 2020 when we introduced new software and welcomed a talented consultant onto our team. With this new pricing strategy, K&D's profits have soared. We've witnessed a steady increase in both gross and net profits every year since. In 2020, our gross profit margin stood at 42%, and we're on track for 53% in 2023. Pricing has played a significant role in our profit growth as we step into 2024 with record profits and revenues.

Pricing is a sensitive topic with far-reaching implications. It affects your sales close rate, customer retention, overall profitability and more. To take the emotion out of price adjustments, I prefer a data-driven approach. This method entails examining the raw numbers and crafting a new pricing strategy based on the figures necessary to meet your 2024 profit goals. It can be uncomfortable, but the numbers don't lie. Viewing the results objectively helps you identify the necessary percentage increases. I'd love to share the full recipe for obtaining these data-driven results, but there isn't enough room in this column. Luckily, our industry offers numerous resources to help you determine your data-driven pricing for the upcoming year.

Once you've grasped the numbers, it's time to engage in a conversation with your leadership team or coach about the "artistic" side of price increases. My golden rule here is that prices can only go up during this phase: "We never decrease them unless a major market correction, recession, or black swan event occurs." Various factors come into play during this discussion: backlog, market strength, client decision criteria, and employee pay — particularly in relation to the local cost of living. Once the artistic discussion is complete, it's time for the next crucial step: rollout.

The rollout is paramount because it ensures that the "why" behind the "what" is clear and that your team aligns with the decision. You need to construct a narrative or elevator pitch explaining why the pricing is increasing by a certain amount. Customers should understand that it's not an arbitrary number; it's a result of your company's current financial health and projections. Your internal team should be aware that these price increases enable raises, cost recovery and maintain your strong competitive position in

the market. During the height of the pandemic, the media told our story, but as inflation eases, it's vital that you convey a cohesive and robust approach to your decision.

Let's address a common objection to price increases: "We'll lose customers if we raise prices." My response is simple. When you need eye surgery, do you choose your surgeon solely based on price, or do you look for the best doctor in the market with the best reputation, regardless of the cost? We may not be performing eye surgery, but we're providing a service, and most customers don't base their decision solely on price. If you can effectively communicate your value during the sales process, your pricing shouldn't hold you back from attracting the right customer base. You might lose some clients, but did you really want them in the first place? Or would you prefer a clientele that values quality and excellence?

I hope this article has inspired you to review your pricing and gather your team for an internal review of where you need to be in 2024 to meet your profit targets. If you find yourself with more money than expected, consider giving your employees a raise. They'll appreciate it, and it's sure to enhance the client experience. Here's to a successful season of increases! **L&L**



RAISING PRICES ISN'T ALWAYS EASY, but doing so with an effective strategy can lessen concerns and increase profits.





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