

BRANCHING OUT

Property manager takes on outside landscaping to increase efficiency

By JENNIFER GUAY

Mike Fredette took a short growing season, the landscape maintenance division of a property management firm, and his family background in landscaping and built them into a contracting business in Albany, NY.

Fredette's organization is still part of J.T. Burns Management Corp. of Albany, serving both the properties managed by Burns and outside customers with three full-time and 12 seasonal employees. He manages more than 12 apart-

ment complexes for Burns.

Fredette attended Cobleskill Agricultural and Industrial College in

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New York, worked three years for his father's landscaping business, and then joined Burns in 1973.

Fredette claims a big part of his

job is working with people and advising them on landscape programs. "One has to appeal to the pride of owners and tenants of property," he maintains. "Our customers spend considerable money on landscaping without the time or knowledge to understand the processes involved."

Because landscaping and lawn care are highly seasonal and competitive, Fredette spends long days on the job during the busy

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Fredette uses extra touches to appeal to the pride of owners and tenants.

season. It also means he must pay close attention to cash flow.

"During the months of April and May, cash outflow is far greater than income," Fredette pointed out. He stresses his organization is in the service business and not the credit business. "This is really a matter of customer education. Our customers have come to accept our billing procedures. We bill net 30 days for work done," Fredette says. "On small jobs the customer can pay half down and the remainder when the job is completed. On large jobs, the customer pays a third of the total at the beginning, a third when the job is half finished, and the final third when the work is complete."

Fredette dryly remarks, "The landscape manager has to wear many hats; that of a horticulturist, a salesman, an employer, a public relations person, and a credit manager."

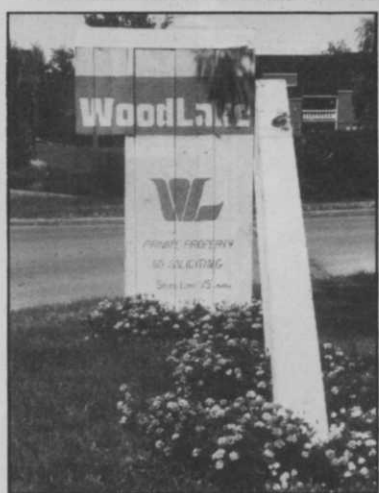
Fredette has found a good policy is to listen closely to the property owner before laying out a program. After the initial discussion, it is then possible to make suggested changes without alienating the customer.

Color photography has become an important visual aid to Fredette. "I can shoot existing projects as examples for potential customers. Photography has proven to be a great selling tool."

The landscape manager is a horticulturist, a salesman, an employer, a public relations person, and a credit manager.

Another operational procedure Fredette has found to be valuable: "Always level with the customer when figuring the cost of a job. That includes all the job, not just bits and pieces."

If the customer is aware he is being treated honestly and fairly, he becomes a potential referral for new business. Fredette estimates that approximately 10 percent of his business has come from referrals. He wants to increase that percentage.



Woodlake is one of 12 apartment complexes managed by Fredette for J.T. Burns Management Corp.

Advertising in the Yellow Pages as well as in the classified section of the local newspaper are two other avenues this landscape supervisor has found to be effective in getting business.

Another point relating to customer satisfaction—and it has become a "must" with Fredette, buy plants hardy to the area. His usual procedure is to buy from a reliable wholesaler in the Albany area who buys the plants/shrubs/trees from growers in New Hampshire, Vermont and Connecticut.

Winter work, such as snow removal and carpentry, is being developed to keep more employees on the payroll. Key workers are asked to sign an agreement of confidentiality.

Fredette is very picky about equipment as well. "We sharpen and balance mower blades every day. This attention to mowing equipment means a neater, more cleanly groomed lawn which attracts attention and business," says Fredette. He uses Scotts fertilizers with minor elements for both turf and trees.

Fredette's crew operates with one 18,000-lbs. stake truck, a low-boy trailer, two pick-ups, two Grasshopper mowers (52 and 61-inch) and other various equip-

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ment. He makes an effort to get full utilization out of all equipment. "Idle equipment becomes expensive equipment over a period of time."

All accounts are on computer. Before final billing Fredette inspects completed worksites. A follow-up process is done to clear the books.

Burns Management Corp. provides the computers and billing personnel. The ability to use Burns' staff and equipment not only provides increased efficiency for Burns but enables Fredette to increase income by branching out.

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