

DOING IT THE ENVIRONMENTAL WAY

Environmental Landscape Service's Charlie Racusin can't get bogged down in details. He's too busy keeping his Texas customers happy.

by Will Perry, managing editor

Somewhere in Charlie Racusin's office, in a Formica frame, there's a chart that tells you a lot about the man who works there. The chart is from a company that performs personality testing, and its colors represent a subject's strengths and weaknesses in the business environment.

Charlie's chart shows a lot of red, which means he's an aggressive, take-charge type of guy; a lot of blue, which means he's resourceful and analytical; and yellow, which means he's a good communicator, he's flexible. But as for green, well, that's not one of his bigger colors.

We're looking over his chart when Racusin says: "See my red, I'm a killer red. And I'm a killer blue. In other words, I'm a fast-paced guy. I'm not as mellow and relaxed as most people in our organization are. Green represents people who are good with de-

tails," adds Racusin. "I'm not a guy who likes to get involved in details. We hire people to do that."

So begins an interview where I'm supposed to uncover the details that make Racusin's Environmental Landscape Services one of Texas' most successful commercial landscape design and management firms. I found out early that I'm not going to be able to write about the types of trees Racusin prefers and why, or about his hiring practices, his equipment, or preferred chemical applications. I did however, find out what makes this company tick. Charlie Racusin and his hand-picked team.

Philosophically speaking

Racusin, 42, is a shining example of a guy who saw an opportunity in the great American marketplace, grabbed it, and profited handsomely. His business philosophy is somewhat simple: work hard,

place quality before quantity and treat your customers and employees with the utmost respect and consideration. Follow that formula, he believes, and success is sure to follow.

Charlie Racusin formed the company 17 years ago after a brief stint in the property management field. It was then that he saw the need for a high quality, professional organization to service the Lone Star state's booming commercial landscape market.

"Often in the past, what I found was that there were people who told you they were going to be there tomorrow—but they didn't show up, they didn't call, they didn't give any reason why they weren't there," recalls Racusin. "We brought to this area a business that would back up and deliver what it said it was going to. That's where we started and began to build—on that rather simple premise of doing what we said we were going to do."

The word that most often pops up when Racusin talks about his company is "quality." Quality work, quality employees: the two key elements in Environmental's success.

He believes in hiring good people and letting them know they're an integral part of the organization. That's done in a variety of ways. The first step is the personality review. For the past six years all of his company's potential employees undergo personality evaluation, the results of which affect Racusin's hiring decision. Since its institution, Racusin says the company has made better hiring decisions and reduced turnover.

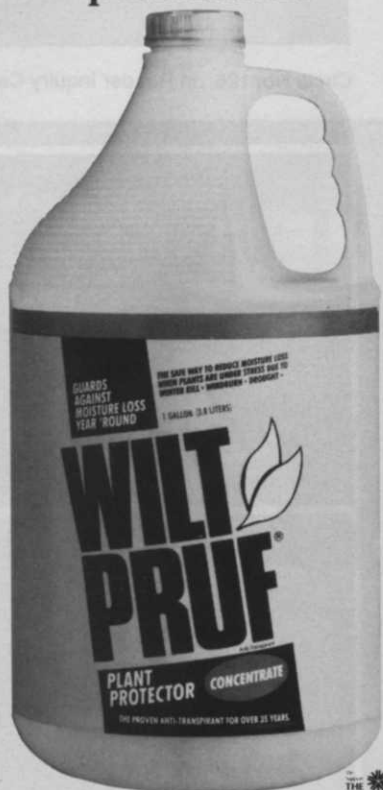
Dealing with people

"The reason this system is so valuable is that in building a business you're dependent on managing and developing a team of personnel. That team has to be cohesive, or you've got people fighting with each other. More importantly, from a managerial standpoint, if I'm dealing with you then I've got to know what you're all about," says Racusin.



"You can never be complacent," says Charlie Racusin, owner of Environmental Landscape Services. "I wake up every morning and hit the ground running."

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Racusin is proud of the fact that his employees tend to stay with his company for years- a phenomena not easily accomplished in the Southwest's competitive landscape market. Why do they stay? In terms of pay levels, Racusin says that, even though his company offers as much or more than anyone else in the industry, "I don't think compensation in terms of pay is the highest priority to an employee. I think," he continues, "the feeling, the environment that you create in your company among your personnel is the most important element to gaining the tenure you're seeking from these people."

Racusin does several things to create a comfortable work environment. There's the profit-sharing and pension trust plan, which grows annually as company profits are poured in. The program has allowed employees to sock away a very handsome nest egg since being hired.

In the hallway outside Racusin's office, just past the conference room with the 21 Texas Association of Landscape Contractors' and eight national awards on the wall, is the "Achievement Bell." Any of the office personnel can sound it off after doing something they're particularly proud of.

There's also the Foundation of Excellence Award, presented for the first time to two employees last year at an annual company-wide dinner. A granite tablet holding the winner's signature, handprints and the date is laid to rest outside the entrance to the company's Houston field office, where it will remain forever. Last year's winners were the subject of a 10-minute video that showed them at work and at home with the family. The soundtrack? Carly Simon's *Nobody Does It Better*, of course.

"Employees need to feel that they're appreciated and cared about just as much as your clients do," says Racusin, who strives to maintain a family atmosphere in his organization of 150 employees working in Houston and Austin. He does so by gathering the company employees together at family functions such as picnics, Christmas parties and awards banquets. "I think you'll find that if you do these things your employees will develop a sense of well-being and cohesiveness as a group."

In no hurry

Another point of pride with Racusin is the company's slow, yet steady growth pace. Most of Environmental's present customers have been with the company for years, and about 90 percent have come through referral. "We've never really tried to sell quan-

tity," says Racusin. "What we've always done is try to maintain a consistency in our quality of work. We grow gradually and monitor the amount of productivity people are capable of putting out. That ensures the fact that we can deliver what we say we're going to deliver. If you do that, then you will grow."

What is delivered to the people of Houston and Austin is exquisitely-managed properties. They see dependability, trust and a team of professionals willing to go the extra mile for them.

Perhaps this is demonstrated best when the area is battered by the numerous tropical storms and hurricanes that have called Houston home over the years. Take Alicia, 1983, modestly referred to by Racusin as a "significant storm," which tore the more significant roof off his Houston operations office.

"We still had to get to our clients," remembers Racusin, who dispatched a task force with extra chain saws, tree guides and staking materials. "We made it a point to get to these properties within a day or two after the roads were passable." His company's efforts paid off: crews saved hundreds of trees.

Since that time, all threatening storms are tracked by weatherband radio, says Racusin. Environmental customers have the home phone and beeper numbers of key personnel and are told that someone will be on their property as soon as roads are passable.

After the storm, an immediate inventory by Environmental's personnel is underway to determine where the company's services are needed most. They then attend to those properties in order of importance. No, the attention doesn't cost the customer more than their annual management fee.

Charlie Racusin is a businessman who has matured in step with the high-budget commercial landscaping market, which is why his marketing analysis, simple as it may be, is so intriguing:

"People know when you're doing good work. It's a commodity, it's there, people can see it. They can see how you and your personnel project themselves. We've grown gradually because we've never forced our growth. It's key in our opinion to be known for what we're all about: a company performing the highest quality work. To do that you have to have a fix on your quality. It only takes one black mark and you could be in trouble."

Obviously, black is not one of Charlie's stronger colors either. **LM**