



Labor flux, insurance issues loom

If your workforce is fluid, and you're suffocating under oppressive insurance rates, one thing else is certain: you're not alone.

Robert Maronde, current president of the American Landscape Contractors Association (ALCA), predicts that stabilizing the workforce and managing insurance costs are "the top issues of the 1990s."

Maronde believes the labor pool is shrinking; what remains is ever-changing.

Maronde's term as ALCA president gives him a front-row seat at all landscape-related developments, and an opportunity to pass along what he's learned as president of Exotic Plant Rentals, South Elgin, Ill.

Maronde offers three solutions to stabilize the workforce and attract more people to landscaping:

- Higher wages;
- Fluid work hours;
- Innovative benefits, such as day-care subsidies for part-time workers not eligible for group health insurance.

"The prevailing wage rate across the United States is on par with McDonald's and Burger King," says Maronde. "Nobody can live on minimum wage."

Other landscapers in-the-know agree that to be competitive, wages must begin at \$7 to \$10 an hour.

Admittedly, landscaping is not a nine-to-five job. And then there's weekend work. Maronde thinks that to make the work more attractive, companies implement flex time, so workers avoid the hassle morning and evening rush hours. Alternating Saturday work might also help, and would take some schedule juggling, especially at companies with multiple offices.

To suppress volcanic insurance rates, Maronde says worker education programs must be widespread: in offices, greenhouses, warehouses, and in the field.

"We have to do more in-depth training," Maronde insists. "Workmen's compensation payments are going off the chart because of stupid accidents. The supervisor, manager, or company owner has not taken the time to review the proper way to handle machinery, equipment and hand tools."

Worker safety has long been a concern of ALCA. Its "Safety and Awareness" program contains everything a company needs to make its workers more aware of proper safety measures. It includes lessons in first aid, pesticide application and safe driving. "And it's economical," says Maronde. "All you need is a small TV and a VCR. Sit them down and show them." Regular safety reviews are a mandate at Exotic Plant Rentals.

When did you last review your customer base? Can you accurately describe your typical customer?

"A company owner must do a review (of his market) twice a year," insists Maronde. "Look at population growth or trends that influence your direct market. Otherwise, you won't be in business two to three years down the road."

Landscapers must pay attention to what may be a shifting market niche, as today, customer profiles are less defined.

"Marketing is a concept, an evaluation, an adjustment to trends that are happening within your grasp," explains, Maronde, who believes advertising is necessary to stay afloat. "If you sit there and don't advertise for a year," he says, "two years from now, nobody knows about you. You're a well kept secret. And you know what happens to a well-kept secret."

Top-flight landscapers perform quality work, but the public needs to know.

"You can win a ton of awards," says Maronde, "but that doesn't mean anything unless you utilize it and market your services. It's great to have all those plaques, but it's also great to have all those plaques in all the newspapers."

Marketing on this level is simple. It's done with an occasional press release to the business and garden sections of local papers. "And you don't have to be a large company to be able to afford it," insists Maronde. "There are a lot of marketing companies that would love to be able to spend four hours a week on your business, and put you three years ahead of yourself."

If you think your company has an image problem, look at the way your workers dress and the condition of the fleet.

Trucks must be bright and clean, insists Maronde. "They don't have to be new, just rust-free. And uniforms can't look like they were first worn in 1965." And: no jeans, no tennis shoes.

Maronde believes that landscape contractors are just as important to a job project as a building contractor; the mutual importance needs to be stressed. "Landscape contractors are not just the last guy to come in," he says. "We're part and parcel of the contracting trade."

Failure to comply with water and pesticide regulations could well put some companies out of business during the next few years. Stringent controls will continue, and the losers will be those who don't follow regulations and don't educate employees.

Maronde promises that the negligent companies will not be able to pass muster on facility inspections, and will fail when it comes to meeting insurance requirements. Quoth Maronde: "You must invest in yourself."

The emotionalism of the environmental movement will continue, albeit in waves. "The idea is to be able to ride through the storm and capitalize on it," advises Maronde. "Come up with a new or better product. Come up with a different way of handling the situation to make your customers better aware."

Landscape contracting and lawn maintenance is now a test of stewardship.

"If we can conserve water," suggests Maronde, "we cut down on water pollution. If we can filter the air, we can cut down on air pollution. There are ways to be pro-active. You can be part of the emotionalism, or part of the solution."

—Terry McIver □



Bob Maronde:
Emphasize worker safety and marketing.