

# LEVELLING THOSE LOWBALLERS

In the Northeastern U.S., a 12-week season means that normal problems with lowballers are compressed and magnified. Successful landscapers still compete, though.

by Terry McIver, managing editor

**"L**ittle things mean a lot."  
"The whole nine yards."  
"Bang for the buck."

You hear those expressions a lot when you visit Levinsky's Landscaping in Colchester, Vt.

Peter, Jonathan and Mark Levinsky, ages 40, 35 and 32, respectively, combine their individual drive and business sense to power a 12-man company that sells landscaping, mowing, chemical application, and snow plowing services. They're dedication and work ethic is plain to see, which explains why they're still a success after eight years in business.

But success doesn't come easy, because of two factors they find most challenging: a relatively short season, and price-cutting competitors.

The eastern United States is a challenging area for anyone in the lawn care or landscape business. A hundred miles can chop two or three weeks off the season, so time is a great motivator. You can't sit still. You need men who feel the same way you do about success.

"We figure we have 12 weeks, from Memorial Day to Labor Day," Peter Levinsky, estimates. "If we don't have a run of good weather between May and July 4th, it's an awfully short season."

## People who work for nothing

Remember Mr. Haney, the nasal-voiced huckster on "Green Acres"? He had a business for every day of the week, advertised on a window shade on the side of his wheezing old pick-up. The Levinskys, and other reputable landscaping/lawn care companies in the Colchester area, often have to contend with that kind of competition. One "landscaper" they have seen posts a chalkboard on the side of his truck. One

day he's a landscaper, the next day he's a painter. The only difference is that Mr. Haney was a price gouger; these guys are undercutters extraordinaire.

The glut of lowball contractors thus compounds the hassles in the race to make money during a 12-week season, and the Levinskys can relate endless stories about the constant assault to the image of the professional landscaper.



The Levinsky brothers (from left, Jon, Mark and Peter) believe that, in time, most lowballers will leave the green industry because of financial failure.

There's the story of the lowballer who beat them out of a mowing contract for a chain of McDonald's restaurants. One evening at 9 p.m., Peter spotted the crew at one of the restaurants, cutting grass in a driving rainstorm.

What's in question is not a person's right to a decent living. The trouble is, "instant landscapers" apparently don't know the first thing about professionalism, and don't want to learn.

## Poor quality shows up later

Though the Levinskys do well, they have a hard time convincing customers or prospects that less is not always better when it comes to price. Poor quality work is always an intangible before the fact.

Then there are the annual battles with condominium managers who

will award contracts to the lowest bidder, regardless of quality, reputation, or whether or not the company carries workmen's compensation.

"The important thing for condominium boards to remember," says Peter, "is that when you're dealing with a landscaper, make long range plans, monthly or seasonal. And don't shop strictly for price." The brothers lost one condominium bid because the manager "wanted to see if the lowballer could handle the job."

"Then," Peter recalls, "condo managers look back in their books and say, 'we were billed for all this work that was never done. The Levinskys say they can do it the right way.' Why didn't they call us two or three years ago?"

Peter says some condominium directors prefer winter cut hemlock mulch, with its bright red color. That red color is most vibrant in March, but the directors won't sign contracts until April. "People on the boards procrastinate. They don't realize that you've got to be on top of this."

Jon asks: "Why should we go out and buy 100 yards of winter cut hemlock for \$1250, dump it in their lot, and then see them sign with someone else because they're 10 cents cheaper? Then we have to remove it."

Lowball competition has succeeded in moving the company away from residential cutting. They simply can't compete on volume with the nickel and dime outfits. They maintain their commercial landscaping and condominium maintenance clientele, which includes grasscutting at IBM's corporate headquarters. Other competition, though fair-and-square, is simply too well-established to compete against. "We're competing with people who have nurseries, and have paid for them a thousand times over," says Peter. So



the plan is to lay low.

"During (recession)," says Peter, "instead of experimenting, and expanding into areas that compete with established businesses, we're better off identifying what our particular niche or niches are, and developing them to the highest degree."

### Getting together

It's time to talk. "We feel that a real failing in our profession up here is that we don't get together as a group in the off-season," says Peter, who would like to see more discussion among competitors. "A little talk could go a long way. Sit down and discuss pricing. I think people should bare their souls a little bit. If somebody is sitting there who is (pricing) so ridiculously low, some of us should be able to ask: how do you come up with your prices? What's your goal? Where do you want to take your business?"

"I'm partially to blame for not taking it to the next step and doing something about it. Now, during the '90s, I'm going to have to. Nobody wants to get together and say, 'this is what our rate should be.' A lot of companies will chase 1000 accounts for \$10 each, because it's impressive to say, 'I do 1000 accounts.'"

### Other ways to beat the competition

#### 1. If you plow, make it pay.

Snow plowing shouldn't come cheap. "The man in the truck is worth over \$100 an hour," Peter asserts. "There's liability, wear and tear on the truck, the driver, I may have to come back a second time and clean up something I missed. You don't go out and plow for \$10 or \$15."

Oil is changed on all trucks after every big plowing run. Peter says he wonders if people realize how many miles are put on a truck in reverse during snow plowing season. "Then there's the equipment and maintenance: sanders, cutting edges, hydraulics; changing the plows when it's 10 degrees below zero, and we have to bring torches out to loosen the fittings. Changing a flat in 18 inches of snow at 3 a.m."

Which is why landscapers are exasperated when people want work done for nothing. "We read *Condo* magazine," says Peter, "and a writer says to condominium boards, 'play one landscaping group against the other.' You can't be in this business and do the snowplowing for nothing."

#### 2. Be environmentally diplomatic.

Vermont has its share of rules and regulations on pesticide use, and is

## Bigger jobs can bump lowballers

Robby Mazza, president of All Seasons Landscaping, Colchester, Vt., also sees his share of price-cutting.

He recently put in a bid of \$6500 for a grounds facelift at a low-income housing project. He estimated the work would require five or six men and take five days to complete. The job went to a competitor for \$2500, which Mazza calls "totally impossible; it can't be done."

How does it happen, these shamelessly low bids? Mazza believes there are a number of factors: "People pay under the table, there's no workmen's compensation, no one pays liability insurance, there's no payroll tax. (Customers) don't ask for proof of insurance."

In business for five years, All Seasons' specialties include landscape design/build, snow plowing, material hauling, excavating and land clearing.

Mazza's background includes experience in earthmoving, which makes him feel right at home around the big equipment. His inventory includes two bucket loaders; a bulldozer; 16 trucks; a Bob-Cat skid-steer; turf aerators; a parking lot sweeper; International dump trucks; and John Deere, Toro, Ransomes and Gravely mowers.

Heavy work provides an extra advantage: more time to work. "You can work later in the fall," Mazza explains. "If you're ever going to have anything, you're going to have to be able to work year-round.

"In the winter time, there are too many guys who can buy a pick-up truck with a snow plow and do driveways for \$25. When you start moving up into the heavier work, the overhead (between companies doing the heavy work) is pretty much the same, so you don't see a lot of cutthroat stuff."

Mazza never burns bridges, and he never forgets how he started. "Sometimes, when we're doing the big work," he says, "I get calls for small jobs. But I remember when we had the one pick-up truck. That's what got us here."

All Seasons sells topsoil and mulch—two popular items—to walk-in customers. It's a great way to advertise.

—Terry McIver □



**Robby Mazza: Heavier jobs give a company more time to work.**

active in the environmental movement.

Knowing that an overly defensive posture can hurt a company's image, the Levinskys have a "live and let live" philosophy. "We're going to have to accommodate a certain percentage of the population," says Peter. "We're not going to win (environmentalists) over to our camp. Personally, I have no problem with them and I feel I can accommodate them. From a professional standpoint, we have to present an image that we appreciate where they are coming from. If somebody can show us a better way; if there is a safer way, less toxic, less harmful, more environmentally friendly, we're willing and capable of incorporating it into our business."

"We don't have a problem with the people who are against herbi-

cides and pesticides," adds Jonathan. "It's just that we're the ones that have to deal with the people when their lawns are full of crabgrass, chinch bugs and sod webworms. Then what are we supposed to say to (customers)?"

But the procrastination so characteristic of anything legislative can go only so far. Then, it's time to get to work, and negotiate later.

"A lot of the people on boards of condominium associations take an active interest, they will listen to the pros and cons (of pesticide use)," says Jon. "But as the lawns become more visibly effected, there is a clamor for action. They say, 'enough talk; let's continue the program until something better comes along. Until there is a more effective or safer way of doing things.'" **LM**