

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**