

Excellence:

the standard by which all else is measured



STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE: What Charlie says 'you'd better do...'

- Train your people, and then re-train them.
- Make sure that everybody's on the same page, that the messages are flowing through, and that the communication channels are open between all the personnel that work with you and the personnel that work with the client.
- Make sure everything is coordinated in a fluid manner or else you're going to have a lot of glitches—and glitches mean trouble.
- Be out there: follow up with your customer. Make sure you've done what you said you'd do. Make sure you've done it the very best and that no one can do it any better.

The cornerstone of Charlie Racusin's successful career is excellence. He wonders why more landscapers don't pick up on it.

by Jerry Roche
Editor-in-Chief

■ Charlie Racusin of Environmental Landscape Services in Houston, Texas, is not your typical landscaper by any stretch of the imagination. As a matter of fact, some of his cronies think he's "semi-nuts." But they respect him—and why not?

Environmental Landscape's sales were on a course to exceed \$7.5 million last fiscal year. Its key employees stick around a long time. And the company's work is equated with the excellence that Racusin demands.

"I've always believed that whatever I did, I wanted to do first class," Racusin philosophizes. "If you don't strive to be the best, then you may be delivering mediocrity, and anybody can do that. Why should customers continue to do business with you if you're like every other guy on the block?"

Back in 1972, when Racusin founded the company, he saw that niche.

"At that time, a lot of landscapers did not appear to conduct themselves as professionals in the business world. They might have been knowledgeable horticultural people, but they didn't communicate, they didn't follow up and they were unorganized. I saw an opportunity for a businessman to deliver honesty, integrity, consistency, communication and other 'buzz words' that business people relate to, especially in the service industries."

His company has selected only clients interested in projecting a positive image. Environmental Landscape allows—and even invites—customers to put their signature on the landscapes.

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Defining autonomy in the field

by Charlie Racusin
Environmental Landscape Services

■ I can't tell you exactly how many trucks we have—but it's a bunch.

I can't tell you exactly how many people we have on our payroll—but it's a bunch, probably a couple of hundred.

Even though—as CEO/President of Environmental Landscape Services—I have the final say, I don't focus on the details. I have excellent people to do that, people who support my philosophy and can deliver it.

I am, however, a member of our Landscape Action Board, which runs the business. I monitor on a consistent basis the efforts of our people, even though they are capable of handling their own duties. I'm even aware of which foremen are performing better than others. So I'm still keyed in to the quality management aspects of the business. We simply cannot afford to slip with the customer.

Other members of our Landscape Action Board are the company vice president (who wears a lot of different hats), along with directors of landscape construction, landscape management, quality control/safety/field training, irrigation and landscape architecture.

All my people are in another location, and all my administrative people are in yet another location, which might seem weird: you'd think that most business people would want everything under their watchful eye. But by having this setup, it allows my people to have autonomy and to make decisions without my direct involvement on every issue. It allows them to grow individually, and to function in a healthy manner.

It also allows me to step away from the day-to-day bombardment of landscape operations and to focus on strategic planning and marketing.

As any business, we occasionally lose a key person and given our philosophy of building people's intellectual and professional abilities, that's not bad; occasion-

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"We've been successful by delivering to clients who are more quality-conscious than price-conscious," says Racusin. "A lot of people don't want to pay for quality or don't understand it or don't know how to relate to it. The customers who consciously want to separate themselves from others—be they multi-family, office, institutional or hospitals—are the ones we've targeted."

A mindset—Enthusiasm and integrity come naturally to Racusin, an ebullient personality with a zest for living.

"Being in this business doesn't take rocket science," he notes. "It takes a commitment and a belief and the desire to be the best. When you have that framework in your mind, the rest of the pieces of the puzzle—the ways to achieve those results—come together. It sounds philosophical, but it's true. That commitment to excellence triggers the resourceful creativity in my mind."

Racusin also believes that the landscape business, unfortunately, has become a commodity. "Customers can get the service anywhere, so you'd better be able to deliver something better or you've got no extra sizzle on your steak."

What follows is a major industry problem. "So much mediocrity and so much competition have driven prices to rock-bottom. Many customers have intimidated some of the more unsophisticated contractors. Those companies are working at such low prices that it has stifled them from offering growth opportunities to their personnel and themselves."

Over the 24 years he's been in business, however, Racusin has seen the landscape industry grow and somewhat mature.

"Over a period of years," he says, "anyone who stays in business and has weathered the cycles has obviously become more aware, more intuitive, more intelligent, more creative at solving issues and problems. They've been able to make sure their service is better than it was the year before. Everyone has gotten better, and what used to be excellent is now normal practice."

By striving for excellence, Racusin believes, you can command a fair price for a fair day's work. With reasonable profit expectations, a landscaper can offer employees more opportunities for growth, intellectually, professionally and economically.

"Our people are paid better than our competition," Racusin observes. "But pay is not the total key. A person who has that drive for excellence wants to be associated with other people on the same page. We've

had people come to work for us for less money than they were making because they recognized the difference in the people and the working environment and the professionalism that we take to the marketplace. And they'd rather be here."

Bull-headed—Part of the landscape industry's current state of affairs is its inability to accept and implement new ideas.

"If you stand 10 landscapers in this room and I tell the other nine what I'm doing—even if it's the greatest idea in the world—I don't believe they will do it. Even if they think it's a great idea, they may not know how to do it, and it may not be in their realm of normal thinking.

"It's amazing that some people are so hard-headed that they're not receptive to new ideas and betterment. You've got to be open and receptive or you won't learn. And if you're not going to learn, you might as well quit."

Not so with the management and staff at Environmental. Designing and selling one program alone can take up to six months of research and brainstorming.

Environmental's owner may expand into other markets, but only cautiously and only if its caliber of service can be maintained. In the meantime:

"I'm happy with what we've achieved," Racusin concludes. "But yesterday's victory will not bring you a lot of gratification today. And what you were good at yesterday is just a steppingstone toward allowing you to have the knowledge to be better today."

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ally they want to go off on their own. However, we have very long—double-digit—tenure among most of our key people: five years to 22 years. One of the reasons why people stay is because they have the freedom and autonomy and to grow themselves without "Big Daddy" always looking over their shoulder.

My screening process, bundling up those people who coordinate the services, has been a key to our success. When you hire somebody who ends up not being the person you thought they'd be when they walked through the door, you've spent a lot of energy, time and money. You've gone backward instead of forward.

As for me, I bring enthusiasm and integrity to the company. I'm a visionary.

I don't call on every prospective customer, but if it's a significant situation (potential clients with multiple properties, multiple years, six-figure-type annual contracts), I'm part of the decision-making team. I always have a lot of support from my Landscape Action Board, because they're the arms and eyes and ears from the field and they have the answers. I'm just at the negotiating table to assist in finalizing the deal.

My idea is to build our organization in such a way that opportunities continue to exist for me and my employees to grow intellectually and economically.

Audubon for home lawns

■ The Professional Lawn Care Association of America and the Audubon Society of New York State have joined forces to promote the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System nationwide to the lawn and landscape industry.

The partnership allows lawn and landscape professionals to provide clients with a brochure entitled "A Sanctuary for Your Backyard." The brochure provides information about achieving a "wildlife friendly" backyard.

"By encouraging customers to participate, it reinforces their decision to maintain a healthy lawn while reaping its many environmental benefits," says Ann E. McClure of PLCAA.

To receive a free sample Backyard Sanctuary brochure and order form, con-

tact: PLCAA, 1000 Johnson Ferry Road, NE, Suite C-1356, Marietta, GA 30068.

In related news, PLCAA will offer mid-term and final exams for the national turfgrass certification program at its annual conference in Fort Worth, Texas, Nov. 12-16. More than 750 people have enrolled in the course. So far, 75 have earned the Certified Turfgrass Professional (CTP) designation.

A university representative will administer the certification exams to CTP candidates who have taken part or all of the course, and are ready to take mid-term and/or final exams. Exams will take place at the Fort Worth/Tarrant County Convention Center Tuesday, Nov. 14 from 4 to 7 p.m. Pre-registration for the exams is required.