

'MAINTAINING' an edge

When the real estate market started falling, Boston's John Schumacher looked for an opportunity beyond landscape construction, and found it in maintenance.

A company will often find a profitable market niche by being in the right place at the right time or by simply reacting to a group of particular circumstances.

This was the case when John Schumacher, founder of Schumacher Landscaping in Boston, entered the maintenance market in response to New England's worst real estate recession a decade ago.

"When I founded Schumacher Landscaping 30 years ago, my vision was to provide landscape construction to new facilities and residences throughout the region," says Schumacher. "This plan was a success throughout the first twenty years of the

business. However, as the late eighties approached, all signs pointed to a recession and I knew I needed to do something to prepare for my company's financial survival." Schumacher's goal was to discover a way to bring in a new source of revenue before the real estate market collapsed.



John Schumacher: customer trust helped win maintenance accounts.

Since most of his business was based on new landscape construction, his solution was to open a division that would offer maintenance programs to his current and former clients. After all, he knew that even if all new construction stopped, the grass would still grow and need to be maintained.

Fast action

Schumacher didn't lose time implementing his plan. By 1987 he was soliciting former clients to sign on for maintenance programs. He also designed maintenance packages for new construction contracts. "We knew if people trusted us enough to handle their original landscaping, they would certainly trust us to maintain the grounds," says Schumacher.

"Having new contracts feed into maintenance contracts was just a natural. It was one-stop shopping." By soliciting clients with whom he had built a rapport and solid reputation, his maintenance service was an easy sell. The next step was to sell the service in volume.

Forming a division

To increase volume, Schumacher hired Gary Chase, a grounds maintenance specialist, to run the company's new division. Chase hired two estimators, a project manager and a salesman.

"One of the most important accomplishments at that time was to develop a system for management and marketing that operated like a well oiled machine," says Chase.

"The maintenance division was growing faster than we expected and we needed to ensure that the quality of our service wasn't being compromised as is often the case with growth," says Chase. By bringing four additional staff members into the division, Chase was able to increase sales and ensure a smooth operation. By 1992 the



Sam Depina, a seven-year foreman, works here in ornamental maintenance.

maintenance division accounted for 10 percent of the business.

'QC' in changing times

Schumacher Landscaping managed quality control by turning New England's harsh winters into training season for company employees.

From left, project manager Rich Wyman and Dave Schumacher, marketing director take a break at a job site.



Today, Schumacher's employees account for six percent of all Massachusetts Certified Landscape Professionals (MCLPs), a designation set up by the Associated Landscape Contractors of Massachusetts (ALCM). The organization holds rigorous training programs for plant identification, insects & diseases of ornamental plants, plant health care, soils, turfgrass management, safe use of pesticides, safety and first aid, design and more.

To improve employee retention, Schumacher not only provided competitive benefits packages and opportunities for employees to grow within the company, he provided those benefits year round to his seasonal employees.

"It was a risk that continues to pay off every year," says Schumacher. "Because I believe in my staff and respect their needs, quality has been controlled and improved each year due to low turnover and our highly experienced field. Today most of my employees have been with the company for an average of 10 years."

Still growing

By 1996 Schumacher and the rest of the region were well out of the recession, yet as the market for new landscape construction increased, Schumacher continued aggressively pursuing the maintenance market. Why? Because when Schumacher formalized his department with job costing and estimates, he discovered

that the profitability in maintenance was just as good if not better than new landscape construction. Today, Schumacher's maintenance division consists of 45 staff members and accounts for 20 percent of revenues. John's son, David Schumacher, manages sales for the maintenance division, and says that he and his father were even thinking about growing maintenance into a

separate company. However, the Schumachers decided that their success in maintenance was based on their solid reputation in new construction. The company plans to grow the maintenance division wherever possible, to 30 percent of company revenues by the year 2000. □



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