

Feasting on feedback

Greenscapes in Naples, FL, goes to great lengths to 'talk' to its clients and its employees. Then it 'listens' to what they say so that it can give them what they want.

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

Your company delivers excellent landscape services at a competitive price. But do your clients know that? You think your employees are well trained and efficient. But how do you know for sure?

You really can't answer either of these questions until you develop channels of communication that generate "useful" feedback.

Greenscapes, a 36-year-old landscape services firm in Naples, FL, has procedures to encourage feedback on all fronts. President Steven Pruchansky likens the process

to radar on an aircraft. It guides his company toward its goals as it corrects—from day to day even—the company's service delivery.

Greenscapes seeks feedback from within the company, from supervisors, team captains and employees; externally too, particularly from customers. Pruchansky and Linda Nelson, vice president of operations, (her mother, Ethel Rae Nelson founded the company, then known as Rae's Sod, in 1961) are convinced their focus on feedback aids Greenscapes' continued profitable growth.

Competition? You bet!

And, growth, particularly sustained growth, is no mean accomplishment in a tough market like Naples which already has plenty of solid competitors without the startups and part-timers. There are about 4,500 licensed lawn care companies on Florida's southern Gulf Coast. There may be another 2,000 or more unlicensed operators performing lawn or landscape care for hire.

"It's like a joke around here that every time it rains, one or two more companies spring up," says Linda Nelson.

"It's a very easy entry with little capital. If you have a pickup and a lawn mower, you're in business," adds Pruchansky.

Most newcomers, however, wither as the sun gets hotter, the days longer and the turfgrass and ornaments erupt in a riot of growth in spring and early summer. Landscape services here, in spite of Naples' south Florida location, are seasonal just as they are elsewhere. Just more intense.

The combination of Steve's administrative skills (he bought the company in 1992) and Linda Nelson's energy and knowledge of the local conditions have re-energized Greenscapes. While it continues to offer sod installation (it's primary business for decades), it now also provides full-service landscape management including irrigation and exterior chemical applica-



tions. It initiated tree pruning and trimming in 1996.

"We want everything on the landscape under our care," says Pruchansky. Having one company provide all landscape services is attractive to many customers, but an equally big reason for the "do all" approach is quality control.

"We provide customers with a guarantee that if anything dies while it's under our care, we'll replace it for free," he explains. "If somebody else is doing the fertilization or pest control and the grass is turning yellow, the applicator might point to the irrigation guy. Everybody is blaming somebody else. We don't want that. We want total responsibility."

The greatest demand for Greenscapes' services comes from homeowner associations. But acquiring them as clients isn't as simple as knocking on a door and asking for the business. Associations, by Florida state law, have to put property maintenance out to bid. Steve says his company approaches each bid with "sophisticated" job costing.

"We really don't have an aggressive sales presence," he adds. "We've relied mostly on referrals. We feel that if we do a superior job and present a quality image, people will want to have us on their properties."

"We're looking for controlled growth for a superior-quality product. We've had enough referrals that we haven't had to hit the phones."

Reliable workers a big plus

A reliable and seasoned Hispanic labor force plays a big part in Greenscapes' continued growth. Mexican workers have been a common sight in the south Florida labor market for decades, working in its resort hotels, on its construction crews, in its vegetable fields. Steve says he has great admiration for the stamina and dedication of Greenscapes' Mexican workers.

"They work very hard and they have been loyal to the company," he says. "Now, some of them are starting to buy houses here, and we're thrilled."

While Steve is the administrator, Linda concentrates on operations. She says on-

going communication is vital to operations, particularly since she speaks little Spanish. She leaves that up to her bilingual supervisors and team captains. Most have worked side-by-side with her for 10 years or more.

Linda's always on the go

First thing each Monday morning Linda meets with the team captains. "The meeting is crucial for the week. It reintroduces everybody to what we're going to be doing that week," she says. Team captains and Linda review job site reports. "Then we dis-



cuss the best ways to manage each job in the time we've allocated for it. We have to have feedback so we know how much time we need for each job on each property."

Linda also meets regularly with the entire staff of each division—sod, management, irrigation, spraying, tree—to discuss "time and job management." She also sits down each week with the company's two fulltime mechanics to discuss equipment and assess its productivity.

These meetings (not to mention regular on-going employee training meetings) seem to keep everybody working in the right direction, says Linda. Even so, Greenscapes still relies on "quality control inspectors" to conduct regular on-site property inspections.

"This feedback goes right back to the crews," says Pruchansky. "It gives us a check other than a field person. It gives us another eye. Our quality control people



Team captain Amador Martinez, above, and skilled workers, allow Linda Nelson, left, to keep homeowners' associations in Naples, FL, proud of their colorful landscapes.

are not production people. We want our production people to concentrate on performing the tasks they're assigned."

While internal communication keeps all employees aware of their roles, Greenscapes' interaction with clients is even more pro-active. Greenscapes regularly sends newsletters to every property owner in every association that it manages. It also provides clients with a schedule of the work it will be performing the next month. But, it's the face-to-face interaction that Linda says she enjoys.

She goes to each client site and confers with landscape managers, or members of landscape committees regularly, most of them once a week. She walks the property with them. They talk.

"We point out areas of concern and what needs to be addressed. They tell us what they want. We keep a strong line of communication with board members," she says. It also gives Linda an opportunity to suggest landscape extras and changes that will delight property owners.

"Sometimes you have to suggest changes to a property because people get tired of the same plants and the same schedule year after year," says Linda. "We never want them to get bored with us." **LM**