

# Know the issues

*Our industry, which has been historically weak in planning, is being challenged to become more strategically focused in order to be agents of change.*

By BRUCE K. WILSON, President, Environmental Care, Inc.

**T**o lead you must know where you're going. In this industry, like most others, competition is very keen. To stay ahead of the competition many companies develop complex plans which guide their futures.

Unfortunately, many of the key action steps are aimed at closing gaps that exist between where you think your company should be and where it really is. While this type of planning is often successful in determining goals, it is not visionary leadership planning that results in "strategic leap-frogging."

I believe that positioning your company for 21st century success is a three-step visioning process:

- 1) Define today's reality of the industry and where you are in relationship to it.
- 2) Define what trends and issues are evolving that will impact the future of this industry and again define where you are in relationship to them.
- 3) Predict those issues which may be less obvious—that haven't started to evolve—that will define the future.

Here are some of the changes taking place that I believe will impact our futures.

There is an ongoing concern for the environment. Environmental responsibility is changing the way landscape contractors do business. Customers and employees are both beginning to understand that reality. First, our customers are concerned that they do their part to be responsible citizens: to save our dwindling natural resources and create more environmentally

responsible landscapes. They are also concerned that the landscapes be maintained in environmentally responsible ways. So what I'm seeing are an increase in legitimate concerns about water consumption requirements vis a vis water efficient landscapes, waste disposal issues, grasscycling, management of green resources and

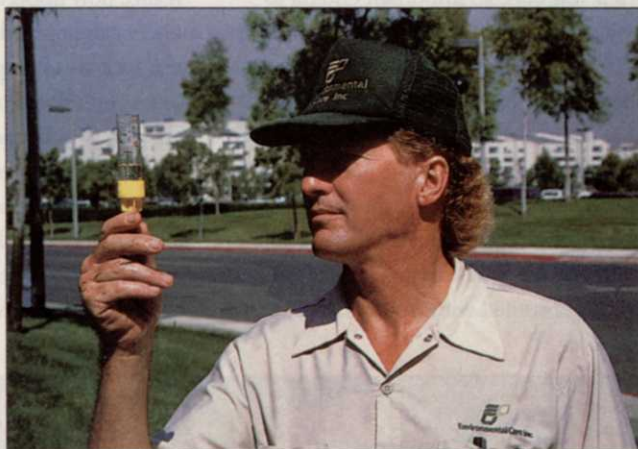
byproducts, and noise and pollution issues surrounding equipment. Much of this has been driven by government regulation in the past, but what I see happening is a more proactive movement ahead of regulation. This, it seems, is evolving as a good business issue. And one that will continue to shape the way we think about our work.

## **Safety, ergonomics**

On the employee side today's employee is much more educated and aware of 'healthy planet' environmental issues and expects their company to walk the talk. This has resulted in a movement by companies to be at the leading edge of change. There are new concerns for the employees' personal working environment. Production rates, reliability, cost and safety had previously driven equipment decisions, but now manufacturers are designing ergonomic features that affect the users' personal comfort and physical health.

## **Technology and communications**

Another evolving issue for our industry is evident in the growing use of technology between our customers and ourselves as contractors. It is clear that our customers will require compatible communication technology. Some customers now request e-mail correspondence and electronic



**Water quality will be a leading issue in the years ahead, especially as needs increase and supply evaporates.**

transactions such as direct deposit of payments. Technology has fundamentally altered the way we do business today.

Today's college graduates are often more knowledgeable about technology than the companies that hire them; they will be the generation that forces our industry to integrate computer technology into every element of the landscape business. The big challenge for the industry is converting the older employees to a technology-based business environment. It is one of our biggest training issues.

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Another obvious trend that will have a profound affect on this business is "national accounts" — regional and national buyers of services doing business with regional and national providers of services. This will result in larger landscape companies controlling a significantly larger share of the landscape market. This will also force organizations to grow and expand faster than they might otherwise want to, or be capable of. Financing this growth will become an industry problem.

The big picture here is that our industry, which has been historically weak in planning, is being challenged to become more strategically focused in order to be agents of change. Industry experience by itself was once an important criteria to being successful. But industry experience will prove to be of very little value in dealing with the high-speed culture changes that are evolving today. In this technology and information age, those individuals limited by experience alone, may never be able to close the critical technology gap.

If you are at all like me, it's easy to become consumed with "future issues" that

are derived from the more obvious indicators. This to me is the "Step 2" part of visioning. There are many more obvious things that will affect our businesses that I did not mention, but for most of us we prioritize around the most important things. Think back for a minute and try to imagine how if you had been able to forecast these changes and issues before they became obvious, what a position of leadership you could be in today. Instead of just closing the gap with your planning, you would be competitively way ahead.

#### **Vision in leadership**

It is only when I reflect on the past that I realize how important a role vision plays in understanding leadership. Vision, intuition and luck are all important to success. Vision to see, intuition to sense what is important, and being lucky enough to be right. Many times we are successful because we do something that turns out to be right but for a different reason than we envisioned.

What do you fear most in business? My biggest fear is that we will not be able to an-

ticipate change and shift gears fast enough. Change is happening at such a high speed today that "Step 3" visioning becomes the most important step. It also is the one that is easier to do if you think in general terms. And, if you vision regularly, you can continually apply new information which can either confirm or deny your thinking.

In a general way I think companies not in our industry circle today will become major players and competitors tomorrow. They may even come from outside this country. The outsourcing movement will go too far and insourcing will surface with a new face. The industry will find a way to automate more of the tasks that are done by labor, possibly with robotics. And don't underestimate the effect of genetically engineering the maintainable, sustainable landscape.

The challenge, of course, is taking action to assure success in a new business environment. Environmental Care is passionate about being in a position of industry leadership. Alignment at all levels around that basic value drives our employees to be thinking and visioning all the time. We are constantly challenging ourselves and each other to think about positioning for success. That could be even harder because you have to be right. And lucky.

*—The author is president of Environmental Care, Inc., Calabasas, Calif. A graduate in ornamental horticulture from Cornell University, Wilson joined ECI in 1971 and was named vice president and branch manager in 1977. He has served as president of ECI for 17 years.*



Below the surface of the finished landscape lie a series of issues that share company time; from safety, to regulations, to waste disposal to water-efficient design challenges.