

Make winter "pay"

Xmas decorating during the off-season is becoming an attractive add-on service for many lawn/landscape pros.

By JAMIE PETERS

Many landscapers equate the Christmas season with sparse work opportunities and employee layoffs. However, Christmas Decor, Inc., which installs homes with outdoor Christmas lights and decorations, is providing many businesses with the opportunity for a winter add-on service.

Christmas Decor, Inc., founded in September 1996 by Blake Smith and Jim Ketchum, in Lubbock, TX, has expanded from a fledgling, regional business to 140 franchises throughout 40 states, within 20 months.

"In another year or so we feel like we'll be in position in all major cities across the United States," says Blake Smith, co-

founder and president. "For the first time ever, companies will be able to have Christmas decorations at all branches provided by one company."

The company sets its franchise prices according to the size of the market.

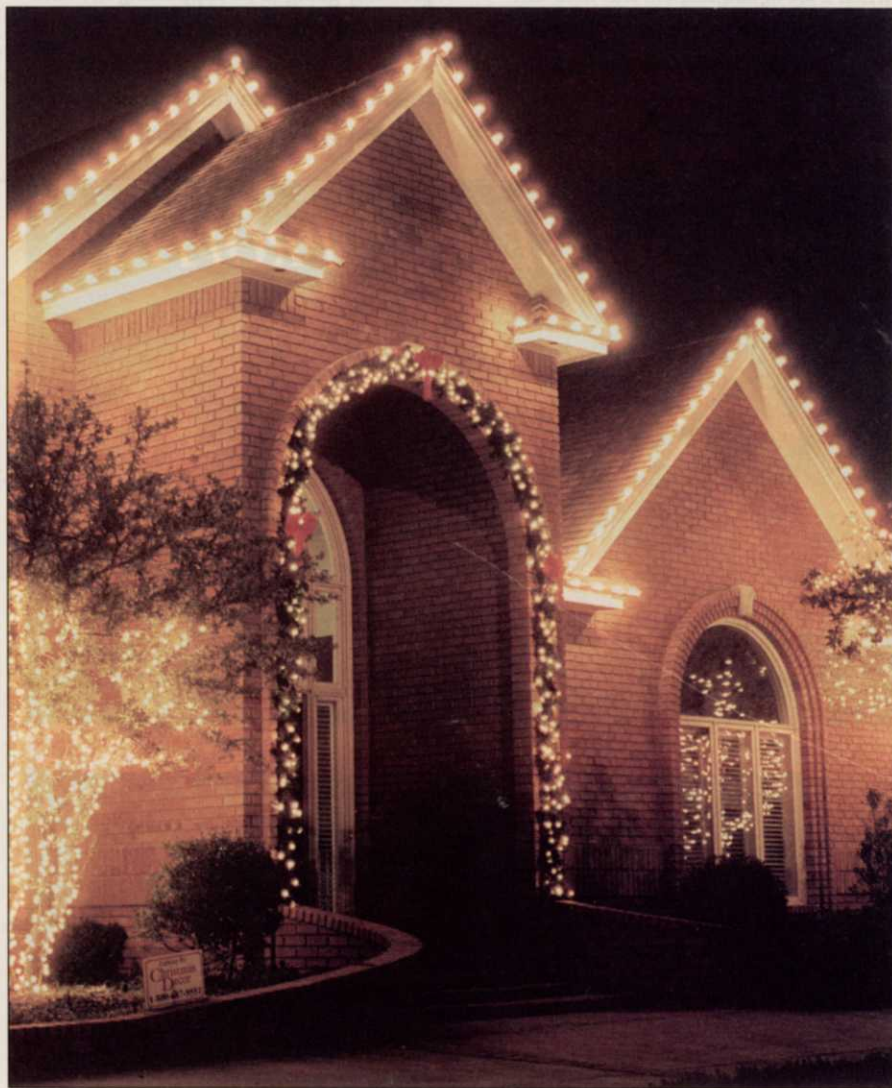
"This fits the little guys as well as the big guys," says



Blake Smith promotes Xmas decorating as a service.

Smith.

As of August, the franchiser charges a base fee of \$15,900 for a city market,



which includes a minimum of 100,000 persons; and \$9,500 for a suburban market, which contains a minimum of 40,000 persons. Royalties are based on gross sales as follows: first year, 2 percent; second year 3.25 percent; third and subsequent years 4.5 percent.

Each franchise attends a two-day seminar at company headquarters in Lubbock, Texas (regional training is available); receives training manuals and videos; Christmas Decor uniforms; personalized business forms and marketing aids; unlimited tele-

Many landscape customers appreciate a service that beautifies their homes for Xmas.

phone support; \$2,000-\$4,000 of lighting, decorating and installation products. Christmas Decor will also finance a portion of the franchise fee.

But how do you know if Christmas Decor is for you?

The consensus of landscape and lawn services claim the franchise investment is beneficial to their year-round businesses in a number of ways.

Mike Smith, owner of Smitty's Lawn Service in Athens, AL, invested in a Christmas Decor franchise so he could hire more year-round employees for his lawn service.

"There is a time, during the off season, when a lot of landscapers and their employees are starving for work," says Smith. "I got into Christmas Decor originally to solve this problem, and it enabled me to hire more employees for my landscaping

business. Once I got into the franchise, and could see the opportunity, I concentrated more of my effort towards our Christmas decorating than my landscaping. In other words," he laughs, "My Christmas Decor is probably going to be supporting my landscaping. It's pretty amazing."

Smith, who is approaching the second season with his franchise, says his major first-year problem was finding the man-

power to handle the customer demand.

"Once we got started it took off on its own," he says.

Smith plans to increase last year's part-time crew of four to two full-time crews of three for this holiday season.

Cary Wortham, President of Berkeley Landscape, Inc. in Conroe, TX, says that he would have had to lay off 10 employees, nearly 50 percent of his crew, if it had not been for his Christmas Decor franchise.

"I just redirect them into Christmas Decor. And it keeps them in year-round employment, and I don't go through the training basics every year," says Wortham. "It's a great profit center, but more importantly, it's an opportunity for me to keep quality employees year round. I don't have to terminate. I don't have to lay off. The lawn maintenance industry is so seasonal. In fact, we originally got into Christmas Decor for that purpose--as strictly an opportunity for our guys to stay income producing."

"The only disadvantage that I can see is that all your business comes at once," says Kevin York, one of the original franchise owners. "There's no way you can meet the demands for the business once you get the fire stoked. It will run you down."

York, who joined Christmas Decor, Inc. as vice-president and treasurer last March, plans to add more crew members to his franchise this year to keep up with customer demand.

"It's been great," he says. "It's exceeded our expectations in almost every way."

York hopes to broaden his franchise's scope to include year-round work such as weddings and other special events.

Rick Place, owner of Lavish Lawn Care in Golden Valley, MN, picked up 15 new lawn accounts last year because of his Christmas Decor franchise.

"You get to advertise for people in the fall when nobody else is advertising," says Place. "They get to see your Christmas lights go up, and they're like, 'Hey, wow! they make a house look really nice!' So you already have this positive experience with them. So it really did help with the spring

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"I can't think of a better add-on business for those of you who need an easy, profitable operation to keep your employees busy in your off season...get in as early in the year as possible." Steve C. Glover, L&L Landscape Services, Inc., Sunnyvale, CA

"Christmas Decor provides a wealth of knowledge for a nominal fee. I can't say enough good things about this franchise opportunity that enables you to make big off-season profits." Dave Dolak, Renaissance Grounds, Inc., Vienna, VA

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marketing. I even had to turn some stuff down."

Because Place's crew frequently works in a sub-zero climate during the holiday season, they had to adapt some of the equipment to the adverse weather conditions.

"We had to play around with some different ways on how to put them [the lights] up because we have to work on ladders instead of working roof lines," he says. "So we did kind of have to revamp. We had to come up with a couple different tricks on how to put them up to adapt to our climate."

One of the necessary changes was warming up the light clips, so they wouldn't become brittle and snap in the cold climate.

Place says that whenever he called the company owners for advice and direction on any challenges he encountered, they



Besides putting the decorations up for customers, landscape crews will stay busy in January taking them down again.

were inevitably willing and helpful.

"They were really good about giving information out," he says.

In addition to installing the lights, franchises also extend year-round work and increase profits by taking down the lights for the customer in January.

"The take down part is a profit center," says Blake Smith. "It's chargeable. When

they mature the business, they get a pretty good bit of business in late October, all of November and December, and most of January. Now you've kept people employed all the way into mid-January. Then you almost need that three to four weeks to refurbish your equipment, your trucks and your trailers; and you get to do it with some money in your pockets."

Many have found Christmas Decor to be a worthy business venture because of its multiple bene-

fits, which include: increased profits and year-round work; the opportunity to keep quality employees year round; and generating new clients for your landscaping/lawn service.

If you think a Christmas Decor franchise may be right service add on for your company, call 1-800-687-9551 for more information. □

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