



Industry growth evident at Scapes

*When you know how
to make money, it's
lots more fun. The
Scapes company is
having a blast.*

By TERRY McIVER /
Editor-in-chief

For this Scapes project,
the plan was to make the
design disappear within
the natural surroundings.

Eleven years ago Barry Schneider was an independent landscaper in Florida struggling to make ends meet. His desire was to move up in the landscaping world.

Opportunity knocked when a Scapes company manager hired Schneider to manage a landscape crew.

Schneider was hired to finish a landscaping project for a Trammel Crow office site. More work followed.

"I was excited about the kind of work Scapes was doing in Atlanta, like craning trees onto rooftop gardens, and doing landscaping for larger buildings, both of which I wasn't familiar with in Florida.

"I ran a couple jobs in Atlanta for a year and a half, and then a landscape architect we were working with in Atlanta told us he had some office work in Washington and would like to work with us there."

Schneider saw the Washington project through, and was inspired by the potential for more landscape contracting work in the bustling commonwealth.

"Things were booming; I saw an opportunity here. I sold some jobs and worked out of the basement of the house I had rented."

Steve Coffey, the founder of Scapes, also saw the area's growth potential, and was sold on the idea of a permanent branch office. In 1987, Scapes Virginia office was born. Sixty employees now work out of the Ashburn Branch.

Today, Schneider is a partner with industry stalwart Coffey, who founded Scapes 22 years ago in Atlanta. The company reports a combined annual revenue of \$8 million from commercial maintenance, residential design/build and snow removal (for commercial maintenance accounts). The company recently added waterscaping to its service offerings.

Profit can be fun

Schneider doesn't mind talking about the mistakes he made, because it's all in the past. And just maybe some other wide-eyed "landscape artist" will learn from his experience.

"When I owned my own business in Florida, I did not know my costs," says Schneider. "I joined Scapes and found that Steve Coffey was a master at knowing exactly what the overhead was, exactly how much each plant costs.

"It was something new to me. It's mind boggling that I did what I did for so long

getting into. Many people think their gross profit is their total profit. There's an entire other list of charges after that, and taxes.

"For a small guy working out of his home with a pickup truck, there's a chance that the gross profit is indeed what you're paying yourself, but you can't do the big jobs that way."

"Some people just have fun doing the work. I did. When I didn't know my costs, I was planting beautiful trees, doing beautiful landscaping, and I was very proud of my work. It felt good. But I had a problem with the checkbook. It was an ego thing to

do a nice job on a restaurant landscape. People will take on certain kinds of projects for low profit just so they can do it."

Will profitability ever become a standard within the landscape industry? Likely not, says Schneider, but the industry will grow in spite of the profitability problem.

"I think the few that know how to be profitable will always do it right and the few that don't, won't," says Schneider plainly.

Schneider believes education is a prerequisite if you really want to succeed in this business,

yet association membership is small when you consider the total number of companies in the country. When asked why he thinks that is so, Schneider thinks it again goes back to available cash.

"Those who don't know their costs don't have a lot of money," and therefore, can't afford memberships in Green Industry associations.

Serious about morale

The tenure of the Scapes field labor force is notable.

"Some of my foremen and laborers have been with me for six or seven years. It's the managers I find to be more of a challenge to keep for a longer time. I think



A Scapes equipment van displays the company's recent move into waterscaping.

without knowing any of that. I like plants, it was easy to do, I was successful at it and I did it. But I never had any money.

"At Scapes, the budget is king," says Schneider.

We track everything according to the individual job budget, including the hidden costs. It's hard to do. It takes a lot of time and it takes a lot of money to track it."

Faithful tracking of each and every hour devoted to a landscaping project is also a key part of the Scapes budget-conscious operation.

Schneider thinks young companies just starting out often fall into costing traps because they, "just don't know what they're

a manager gets to a certain point in his career and wants to go out on his own or wants a piece of the action, which is what Steve has done for me."

More career-minded people may be getting into the landscape business, but to keep them interested is something else all together.

To keep worker interest in the business strong, Schneider and Coffey want to do what they can to bring key employees in, "as partners in the success of the business."

"We've got the headquarters for America OnLine down the street, and I think there are more people interested in that environment [being indoors, working with computers]. "What we do is tough. It's long hours, it's hot, it's cold, it's wet, it's dry. The amount of time and effort it takes to be successful in this business is very demanding. Families suffer. It's something we all need to work on."

"To make it a 9- to 5-job would be extreme," says Schneider of the industry's tendency towards long days, "but we need to get to a 10-hour day."

Scapes employee incentive programs include a good profit sharing program, in which key employees, foremen and higher level workers share in a percentage of the company's profits.

But money is not the only motivator. The company knows how to relax, too.

"We try very hard to have fun," says Schneider. Leisure activities include Friday afternoon barbecues; company picnics; soccer games, and attendance at the recent Washington Capitals NHL playoff games.

"We try not to be too intense about what we're doing," explains Schneider.

Growth like never before

"The economy is incredible, and construction is booming," says Schneider as he describes the current business climate in the Virginia/D.C. area.

"I see office buildings going up everywhere. Those office buildings are going to

"For a small guy working out of his home and a pickup truck, there's a chance that gross profit is indeed what you pay yourself, but you can't do the big jobs that way."

become maintenance jobs. I see people buying huge residential homes with lots of landscaping and lots of turfgrass; the owners of those homes are going to want professional landscape management.

"Baby boomers are at the age when they're starting to have some money, and are spending it on landscaping and on interesting backyard environments."

The company's maintenance work includes mowing; edging; trimming; weeding; chemical and fertilizer applications, mulching and small tree pruning. Large tree pruning is subbed out.

It was three years ago that Scapes added waterscaping to capitalize on the trend, and to fill a niche.

"There's good profit in waterscaping," says Schneider. "There's a lot of fun to it, and it's not competitive, because a lot of people can't do it. It's something people might be afraid to try."

Schneider and Scapes never rest on their laurels. While successful, they nevertheless continue to take stock of how they're doing against the competition.

"I see other landscapers making money, doing something successfully, and it makes me think about what I'm doing, how I need to make more money, or need to have a nicer facility, have cleaner trucks, or put the guys in uniforms.

"If you were to look back 10 years ago,



Schneider: Don't take on landscaping work just for work's sake.

there were two or three companies that dressed their crews in uniforms. Now, 50 percent of the companies have uniformed crews. That's sort of an indication that there are smarter people in the business who are watching what's going on and who want to do what the successful businesses are doing."

It can happen to you

Barry Schneider's story is one of hard work and dedication, which ultimately led to success.

His industry growth from a crew foreman to a business partner has taken 11 years. And after helping to grow a successful business, Schneider wants to help other career-minded people he employs become successful, too.

Is the American dream still alive?

"Yes," says Schneider. "I do believe so." □