

Squeeze more out of your time

Learn how top landscape professionals organize their lawn maintenance crews into masters of efficiency and profit

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

The Green Industry could easily offer the most solid proof that time is money. Competition is so heavy that some jobs, like mowing, must be done as efficiently as possible to make a profit.

Lawn maintenance needs to be systemized in order to ensure efficiency. There are some components of a system that many landscape companies use; other more unique components are only suitable for a few companies. One thing's for sure, though: you can't be successful if you don't have a system. These landscape professionals have been successful for many years and, not surprisingly, developed their own systems from which you can learn.

Company name: Wheat's Landscaping
Owners: Warren and Darin Wheat
Location: Tucson, AZ
2000 gross revenues: \$2 million
Employees: 50
Business mix: 100% commercial
No employee wants to be called into Warren Wheat's office for consistently exceeding the number of hours allowed to complete lawn maintenance on a property, but it's not just because he's a former NFL offensive tackle. It's because, as Wheat puts it, "no one wants to be in the hot seat." And junior supervisors know they will be in that "hot seat" if they don't finish jobs on time because Wheat has established a set of hours for each of his 78 properties. Each month,



Warren Wheat

ILLUSTRATION: © GRAHAM FRENCH / MASTERFILE

Crews can save time by knowing exactly what needs to be done at a property before arriving there.

(PHOTO COURTESY
WHEAT'S LANDSCAPING



he gets a report on how each crew is performing relative to those hours.

"We send out a memo to junior supervisors that tells them these jobs aren't where they need to be and they have 'x' amount of time to improve," Wheat says. "If nothing changes, we meet."

Wheat's average crew of four people maintain the same properties over and over so they can develop a routine and consistently reduce the amount of time it takes to complete the job. Part of that is becoming familiar with the property so the crew knows what they're going to do and how they're going to do it before arrival. A supervisor at each property helps figure out ways to de-

crease time and improve quality.

Each crew performs all tasks related to maintenance, but it wasn't always that way. "At one time, we had a mowing crew," Wheat says, "but it didn't save us any time at all. In fact, it created more man-hours because, for each job, we'd send trimmers in, then mowers. Why make two trips? The only thing you're saving on is equipment."

Wheat is aware of how much time is wasted traveling back to the shop for a forgotten piece of equipment, so he came up with the idea of assigning equipment to each crew and storing it in a chain-link cage. Each day, the crews know to load everything in the cage onto the trailer — if the cage isn't empty when they pull away, they know

they don't have everything.

Also, each of Wheat's trailers is custom made. There's a specific place for all pieces of equipment, with riding mowers in the back since mowing is the last thing done on each property.

Wheat cautions not to assume that starting work on properties farthest from the shop, then working your way back is the most economical route. "Sometimes when heavy traffic makes for slow going, we'll start at the closest properties," Wheat said. Throw in customers' requests to have the service done at a certain time of day and you end up with a genuine puzzle that each landscape manager has to best figure out how to handle

for his or her own company.

Company name: Blanchard Landscape

Owners: Fred Redmann, Jim Blanchard

Location: Holland, OH

2000 gross revenues: Over \$3 million

Employees: 60-70

Business mix: 50% commercial, 50% residential

"The only way you can make money mowing is to have a tight route with no downtime," says Fred Redmann. And while he may be stating the obvious, it's worth hearing again if it reminds us to establish an efficient system.

One thing Redmann's crews do to reduce downtime is carry a

LM'S BENCHMARKS: STANDARDS FOR THE LANDSCAPE AND LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

One-day response calms customer complaints

One indicator that your maintenance system needs an overhaul is a sudden increase in customer complaints. New complaints mean your service system is breaking down.

So how do you balance your need for speed, efficiency and profits with your customers' seemingly endless need for personal attention, time on site and those little "extras?" Our Best Practices Panel had several ideas for serving the customer while staying with a system that works. While their ideas varied, they all recommended quick and careful response to customer complaints — meaning response within one day.

This doesn't mean that all problems can be fixed in one day, but our experts strongly recommended contacting the customer within 24 hours, with the goal to resolve most problems as quickly as possible. How quick is that? Some contractors recommend within 48 hours, 72 hours, seven days or, in certain cases,

scheduled as necessary. The one thing they agreed on was that 24 hours is the maximum time to call customers back and hear their complaints, no exceptions! You may be tired after a long day but this is more important. Here are their other suggestions:

- Make sure every employee who deals directly with customers is empowered (and trained) to listen to the complaint and take steps to address it. The attitude that "it's not my problem" should not exist in your organization.
- The best way to handle complaints is on the telephone or face-to-face. Hopefully, revisits and reworks can be done within a week.
- Handle all refunds within the existing fiscal year, if possible.
- Don't refund on seeding jobs. Rather, redo if necessary. Some experts say not to refund unless a job is done incorrectly.
- Set a meeting date on-site to review any rework extras or installations to guarantee 100% satisfaction.
- Schedule a follow-up call to gauge customers' satisfaction.

In the zone (maintenance, that is)

Zone maintenance works. If all your maintenance areas are grouped together into zones, you can assign the same workers to do similar tasks throughout the zone. For example, you may have customers who are in your spraying program, and one employee who does all the spraying. You may have mowing customers in your town and three neighboring towns. Assign one crew to each town or area so they don't have to spend a lot of time driving. When a crew leader is responsible for the same customer throughout the entire season, that person develops pride in the crew's performance. Also, the crew will become more efficient as the crew leader learns what has to be done and what can be skipped from one week to the next.

— Leonard Phillips,
landscape architect, Peabody, MA

backup for each piece of equipment on the trailer. "That way, if something breaks down, they can at least complete the job," he says. Crews try to take at least three mowers to each property, such as two large walk-behinds and a push mower for residential accounts. With an eye toward efficiency, however, Redmann has turned to mowers with velkies because many of the residential properties he cares for are large.

He knows that employees with more energy are more productive.

Like many other professionals, Redmann prefers that his employees stick to the same route week after week to familiarize themselves with their properties. But sometimes that strategy just doesn't work.

"Sometimes our schedules don't allow that, or sometimes someone doesn't show up, so

we try to give people exposure to different jobs," Redmann says.

While Redmann would like his crews to leave their equipment in the trailers so they won't have to haul anything out in the morning, the risk of theft is too great. As an alternative, he's considering purchasing all-cover trailers that he can lock.

Company name: Landmark Landscapes

Owners: Mark, Neil and John Thelen

Location: Norcross, GA

2000 gross revenues: \$3 million

Employees: 65-70

Business mix: 100% commercial

Even with a solid lawn maintenance system, inefficiency can still plague a crew if it doesn't have the right equipment. In Mark Thelen's case, he left belt-driven mowers behind in favor of hydrostatic walk-behinds and riders. "We did it to increase speed and production," The-

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11 great tips for an efficient lawn maintenance system

- Authorize a job time for each property
- Send same crews back to same properties
- Create a system that ensures all necessary equipment is brought to property
- Always bring a back-up for each piece of equipment
- Study traffic patterns before establishing a set route
- Train employees to do a variety of tasks
- Establish ideal crew size and stick to it
- Purposefully arrange equipment in trailer
- Perform maintenance tasks in most efficient order
- Set incentives for crews to reach job times
- Set up a "job board" so crews know job details beforehand

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len says. "We were really pushing the belt-driven mowers beyond what they could do on hills and in long, wet grass."

Thelen goes one step further than just using the right equipment, though — he adjusts his crews' maintenance schedules to maximize equipment. "The two crews with the 60-in. rid-

ers go to larger properties, and those crews with 44- and 48-in. riders go to properties I feel that equipment is more suited," Thelen says.

Crews number between five and six people, one of whom is a senior crew manager and another of whom is a junior crew manager. Instead of everybody moving on to different tasks when they're done with their

initial task, Thelen has organized the crews so that one person is responsible for mowing and edging, while someone else does detail work — pruning, spraying, weeding, etc.

He once experimented with mowing crews. Although he hasn't given up on the idea yet, he has put his own twist on it — combining them with regular crews on one truck to cut down on excessive travel.

Thelen believes the best protection against equipment breakdowns is putting new equipment in his workers' hands. To do that, he tracks when equipment was bought.

The only way a crew could arrive at a property without a piece of equipment is if it fell off the truck — all equipment stays in the truck overnight. Trucks are parked in 30-ft. wide covered hoop houses enclosed by a locked fence. Thelen already has a diesel tank on his property, but is contemplating adding an unleaded and mixed tank for added convenience. **LJM**



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