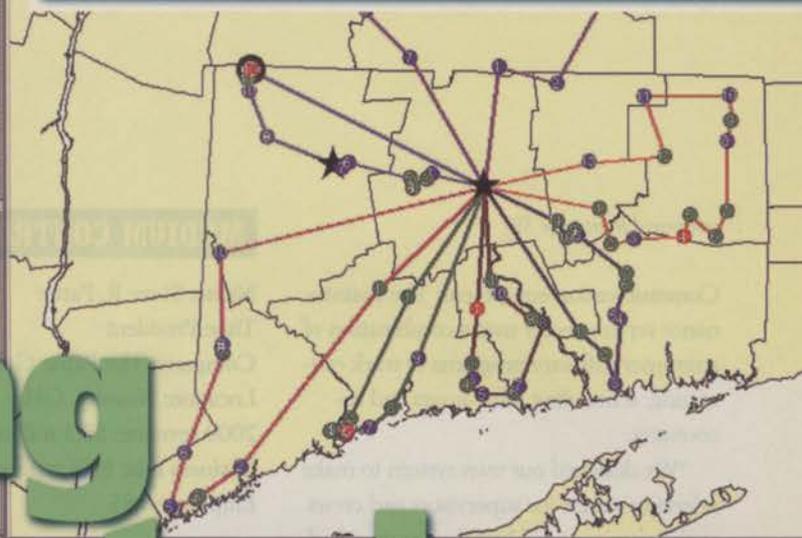


TOOLS OF THE TRADE: COMMUNICATIONS



Staying connected

BY VICKY POULSEN

Landscape professionals are looking for communication and scheduling tools that are easy-to-use, reliable and capable of keeping them in constant contact with their crews. Today's high tech communication devices make constant communication a reality.

A foreman can be at any site and still have a "virtual office." He or she can look up addresses and phone numbers, track jobs and organize the day — all without ever returning to the home office.

With so many communication packages to choose from, contractors today are looking at simplified products that can be customized to fit their communication needs and will give them more bang for their buck.

That explains the popularity behind the Nextel phone. A cell phone and two-way radio all in one, it eliminates the need for a pager because it allows the user to receive text paging.

But a reliable communication and scheduling system doesn't have to be one with lots of bells and whistles, as we discovered when we interviewed these contractors.

LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name(s): Andy Mill, production manager, and Russell Hoff, maintenance division manager

Company: Mill Brothers Landscape & Nursery, Inc.

Location: Ft. Collins, CO
2000 revenue: \$6.2 million

Business mix: Mostly commercial
Employees: 85

Company profile: Founded in 1980, the company offers landscape, irrigation and maintenance services. Of these three divisions, landscape takes the lion's share of its service offerings at 50%, with irrigation at 30% and maintenance at 20%. Landscape services require four-man crews, while maintenance operates with crews of three.

continued on page 60

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Three contractors tell how the latest technology keeps their crews in touch and in the loop

Vertex Standard:VX
Portable series of high performance radios



continued from page 59

Communication equipment: The maintenance service sector uses a combination of computer software programs to track estimating, scheduling, man-hours and accounting.

"We designed our own system to make reference sheets for supervisors and crews so they can see weekly if they're on schedule," says Hoff. For updating on a day-to-day basis, the company relies on its Nextel phones, which are distributed to 39 key employees.

Tool of choice: A giant scheduling board with Post-It notes and color-coded job tracking stickers works best for the landscaping side of the business. Mill has his board down to a science.

"When it rains, I can move those sticky notes faster than any computer," says Mill. Every crew has a color-coded line on the board, and each job is tracked from soil prep to completion.

Future purchasing decisions: "We're looking into an electronic time maintenance system which allows you to shuffle a magnetic card into a time-keeping device that is then downloaded into a software program that's good for tracking job costs for smaller functions," says Mill.

Russell says the company has also been looking at Palm devices to help them with routing. However, he admits that the language barrier with their Hispanic employees makes training them on software and hardware a challenge.

"I think a lot of these products have their place in the market," says Russell. "But nothing will replace good, common business sense."

MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

Name: Steve R. Pattie

Title: President

Company: The Pattie Group, Inc.

Location: Novelty, OH

2000 revenue: \$5.3 million

Business mix: 85% residential

Employees: 85

Company profile: The 35-year-old company, which provides 75% design/build and 24% maintenance services to a 85% residential/15% specialty commercial customer mix, also offers a three-year guarantee.

Communications equipment: "Cellular phones are our number one instant communications tool — 100% of our management staff, sales personnel, field production foremen and project managers have them. Around 30% of our technicians have their own phones, and we reimburse them for business calls. Everyone in the field has pagers which allow them to send numerical and text messages to the staff. We also have two-way radios, but they're becoming obsolete and will be phased out quickly."

Tool of choice: "All our tools have to be user-friendly, equipped with multi-task and state-of-the-art features, and perform at rapid speeds. Plus, they have to be integrated with our Internet and digital capabilities."

Future purchasing decisions: "Choosing the right communications tool is critical. We look at dependability, service life and service range for optimal connectivity. We're willing to spend more money on a better product. We just did an upgrade, but are always looking for better, state-of-the-art equipment without going overboard."

SMALL CONTRACTOR

Name: Rick Murray

Title: President

Company: Murray's Landscape Center

Location: Commerce Township, MI

2000 revenue: Over \$1 million in sales

from landscape and design/build and \$675,000 from its garden center

Business mix: Mostly residential

Employees: 15 employees in the landscape division

Company profile: Founded in 1980, this is really two companies in one: a retail nursery and a landscape design/build operation with full construction services including plantings, hardscapes and grading. "We do everything ourselves except for irrigation services." Of its \$1 million-plus revenue in 2000, \$300,000 came from snow removal.

Communication equipment: "Our primary radio is the Nextel. They are great because they allow you to talk one-to-one or as a group. This product is what I dreamed of before they had them on the market. The downside is that sometimes the reception is limited. The pagers are used during the winter months and then our guys turn them back in to us in April." Also, Murray uses a computer estimating program, scheduling board and calendar for job tracking.

Tool of choice: "The Nextels, because they do everything we need. It's cheaper than having separate radios."

Future purchasing decisions: "I haven't found anything out there that would increase our efficiency. The Nextel system is a simple system, and it works."

continued on page 62