

Green Space

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BY JASON STAHL

(Editor's note: Green Space is a new feature that provides a candid profile of an irrigation contractor. By reading it, you will learn about the contractor's personality and view on industry issues. Hopefully, you will also relate to the challenges he/she faces in everyday work situations. Look for it to appear in future issues of LM.)

Why did you start ALIRT (Association of Landscape Irrigation Repair Technicians)?

I felt like the associations that were currently in existence didn't focus enough on issues that concern irrigation repair technicians — they were built around the manufacturer-distributor-installer group. As a group, I felt like we could gain a little bit of clout and voice some of our concerns to manufacturers or distributors.

Why didn't you think irrigation repair technicians had the clout they deserved?

We didn't have any clout with distributors because all they ever see is a bunch of little ticket items. What they fail to see is the big ticket item. A repair technician will go in and buy a half dozen valves and 15 to 20 heads and one controller, and that doesn't seem like a lot of stuff. But we buy those quantities every day. In the summer, we might buy those sort of quantities two to three times a day.

How has response to ALIRT been so far?

I feel very encouraged at this point. Once we became affiliated with the Irrigation Association (IA), we gained some credibility. Since our second meeting at last year's IA show, we've had over 40 new members join. I get very good response in Texas, in part because I teach a course there called Diagnosing, Troubleshooting and



Repairing Lawn Sprinkler Systems. There are many more people interested than there are people who have paid membership dues, and I think the reason for that is because you have to become a member of the IA first.

How did you establish your customer base when you first started in this business?

I did all my marketing in a residential area. Most of my 1,000 customers are located in eight adjacent map pages in the phone book — they're places I can get to from my home office in six to eight minutes. In my first two years, I did a lot of door-to-door advertising, but I haven't done any marketing in five years. The only commercial accounts I have are nursing homes, which are considered residential, and churches. Some of my customers are doctors or dentists, and I'll take care of their homes and office buildings.

What is the most common problem you come across involving irrigation systems?

Wiring problems. The toughest problems are related to poor underground splices in the wiring or poor quality, old wiring used in the original installation. In Texas, many installers use thermostat wire, which isn't rated for direct burial. Over time, it deteriorates and loses its continuity. Sometimes I'll come across a wire that was taped together after having been cut by someone who planted a tree. Eventually, that wire will lose its continuity, too.

You have to be a detective of sorts to be a good irrigation repair technician, don't you?

Yes, because we walk onto properties we've never seen before and are asked to troubleshoot systems with no print to work with. At most, all we have is a little information from the customer. You have to learn how to filter information from the customer, because they will always try to tell you what they think is wrong. You have to decide how much of what they're telling you is fact, and how much is coming from their own personal opinion. You can't go off in one direction just because someone said so. You have to use systemic procedures.

You can be trained to learn how to do that, but a lot of it comes from experience and making mistakes.

Wouldn't it be more profitable to become an irrigation installer?

Yes, but it's so competitive and so price driven that I really don't foresee myself ever getting into it. Installers and repair technicians need to do a better job of educating consumers on the long-term cost of maintenance. A system that is easily maintained will cost more, but I can't tell you how many times I've had somebody spend as much to repair a system as they did to have it installed. If it had been done right in the first place, I wouldn't have had to repair it.

Do you think it's easier to install an irrigation system or repair it?

Well, it takes a heck of a lot more labor to install one than repair one. But you can have less technical knowledge of irrigation systems and still have a successful installation business. I know for a fact that there are installers in Texas who have no idea how a control valve works, but they know how to put the common wire on one side of the solenoid and the hot wire on the other. That's all they need to know because they don't service these systems.

What is one of the most common gripes you hear among repair technicians?

The crowding of the piping around control valves. We often find that the installer, in order to dig the smallest valve pit as possible, crowded the piping around the control valve. I've even found piping on top of the control valve, which means you have to cut the piping out of the way to do any service. That's like putting an engine in a car and welding the hood shut.

Vitals

Years in business: 8
2000 gross revenue: \$90,000
Projected growth for 2001: Not available
Number of employees: 1 full-time
Business mix: 99% residential
Market area: Arlington / Ft. Worth, TX

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What is the one part you fix the most?

Solenoid control valves. I'm a big advocate of rebuilding control valves in the ground rather than cutting them out and replacing them. However, it's often difficult to rebuild because of the way the installer packed it in. Still, a rebuild might take you an hour and a half, whereas replacing the valve could take 4 ½ to 5 hours. If you're charging an hourly rate, you're talking five to six times the cost.

What advice would you give to installers to minimize future problems with systems?

Use good wire, and use wire splice materials that are fit for direct burial. Also, leave enough pipe between fittings when you install valves so if a valve needs to be cut out and replaced, it can be done easily.

Why don't they do these things in the first place?

They don't really think about it because they don't intend on coming back. They're thinking, "If I have to put a piece of pipe here, I'm going to have to excavate more, which means the job will take longer. I have a price on this job, and I don't have time to dig a bigger hole." They had to underbid somebody to get the job instead of selling a better quality job. They think the only way to make money is to do it cheaper and faster than the next guy. Because they don't have a service department, they don't realize that if they keep this customer and do a good job, they'll be the one coming back to service it and make money off this customer for years to come.

What do you dislike the most about your job?

When I first started, I had to do a lot of explaining to customers about the proce-

dures I undertook. I felt that it was important that I did that, but it wore me out. Now, I have literature that explains to customers what is the most common problem with systems, why we can't give them a set price up front, etc. Good communication skills are a must, because a customer is going to ask what you're doing. An invoice that says, "Fixed sprinkler system: \$533," just won't cut it.

What do you like the most about your job?

I like working outdoors. I also like being a problem solver. I like being a hero, too. In Texas, when it can get up to 108 degrees in the summer, you're the main man when someone has a broken irrigation system and an elaborate landscape that won't survive without water.

What kinds of rewards do heroes like you get?

People are so thankful, they give you pats on the back and iced tea. One time, someone brought me a big shade umbrella from their pool that I could work under. The things that mean the most to me, however, are letters and notes from customers. Over the years, I've developed many personal relationships with customers. Some of them leave just their first name on the answering machine — they don't even leave their address or phone number. They'll just tell me that the garage door opener will be in the barbecue pit, and leave the bill on the controller.

Have you ever considered going into landscaping?

Yes, especially since I'm so environmentally conscious and am a big proponent of water conservation. Personally, I would gravitate toward the organic approach of

landscape management. I would never use chemical pesticides or fertilizers. What really worries me is the runoff of these chemicals that gets into our ground water. Sure, they filter it, but there would still be parts per million of no telling what all in our water. And all these diseases that have come out that they can't explain. Who's to say they're not caused by what's in our water?

It sounds like water is a pretty big deal with you.

Well, something about water is magical to me, whether it's coming out of the sky or in a swimming pool or whatever. To me, there's nothing like the smell of fresh water hitting parched earth — it makes me high.

What do you see for water in the future as it gets scarcer and scarcer?

People need to start stressing water conservation now, not just how to put irrigation in cheaper than the next guy. Irrigation installers need to learn how to sell the conservation and long-term maintenance aspect of an irrigation system. They can't just concern themselves with new construction. They need to start thinking about retrofitting existing systems to save water and working with trade associations to implement incentives for people to install efficient, conservative systems with, for example, rain sensors. Otherwise, landscape irrigation is going to be curtailed to the point where none of us can make a living. If we don't conserve water, we're going to be the first people who get cut off from it. If we can't irrigate the landscapes that landscape contractors put in, they're going to be out of business, too. **LM**