

inside the owner's head

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Your computer: a vital tool

It's often heard in this business, and it always amazes knowledgeable operators. A landscape or lawn care company owner says he's never had a budget, or doesn't know what his costs are. Chances are his business isn't computerized or, if it is, he doesn't understand what it should do for him.

Bob Maffei of Maffei Landscape, Marston Mills, MA, is a smart owner, but even he admits he's traveled a long road with his computer systems and it's taught him a thing or two along the way.

"If you're just starting things or only have one or two machines, you're in luck," Maffei says. "Do all you can to research your software and your vendor. Changes are not so easy to implement as you travel further down the road."

Maffei describes his initial hardware choices as "just plain poor." He relied too much on information he received from local computer dealers.

Tips for starting a computer system right

- ▶ Research software
- ▶ Research vendor
- ▶ Learn how to use it well
- ▶ Know your business
- ▶ Be prepared to upgrade in future
- ▶ Have a plan to back up important data

"Think big," Maffei advises. "Find a top-notch dealer and run away...far away from the mom and pop or 'I do computers at night' guys."



Bill Gerhardt says computer training is priority number one.

more," he says. "We're always struggling with getting everyone up to speed."

A vital tool

Computers are a vital tool in all industries today and landscaping is no exception, although some people still want to believe they can do without them.

"When I started my business 20 years ago I never thought or pictured myself using the computer this much," says Bruno Pillari of Pillari Brothers, Howell, NJ. "My advice to the new entrepreneur is to learn to use it proficiently."

Pillari says you'll also be able to maximize the benefit your computer system offers by knowing your business. "Think about the ways you'll be using the computer," he says. "Think about everything — financial information, tracking and accountability, communication, scheduling. Then do your homework. They're all part of the company."

Bill Gerhardt of GreenScapes Landscape Architects and Contractors says he'd do things differently too if he was starting over.

"I would spend more time on training our managers on using the software



Bob Maffei tells new computer owners to do their homework.



Back up your server or you'll be sorry, says Heather Schuster.

Be ready for change

As important as it is to start off on the right foot with computer systems, it's equally important to make necessary changes as your company grows and changes.

"When starting fresh with a computer system, think of the process as ever-changing," advises Heather Schuster of Terra-Firma Landscape, Muskego, WI. "Budget every year for upgrades in software, hardware and 'userware' (education). Don't freak out like I do that computers have built-in obsolescence — you'll only make yourself nuts."

Schuster makes a good point that the more you rely on computers, the more vulnerable you are to data loss. That's why she has what she calls "triple redundancy." "Our server has a mirrored hard drive, and we back up the server to two different tape backups every night. We also have a battery power protector that shuts down the server in case of an extended power outage."

— Information provided by the Owners' Network, www.owners1.com, a program of JP Horizons.