

TAKE AWAY

Peer group members serve as an informal board of directors.

A good facilitator keeps people on track.

It's important to narrow the focus of the issue that needs to be addressed.

With a little help from my

A peer group forces Green Industry business owners to take a hard look at their operations and own up to tough decisions.

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS /
MANAGING EDITOR

Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends ... Mm, I get by with a little help from my friends ... Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends

WHO KNEW 42 years ago The Beatles were delivering some solid business advice in their classic “With a Little Help From My Friends.” OK, so maybe the second line of the chorus doesn’t quite fit, but we’re going to assume they meant higher profits.

Business advice takes all forms — rock songs, books, family, friends, customers, strangers, professional associations, trade magazines and consultants, to name a few — and they all offer varying degrees of credibility. Of all these, few extend the intimacy of the peer group.

“Anybody who is interested in having their business grow should be a part of something like this,” says John Rennels, owner of A Plus Lawn and Landscape, Lawrenceburg, KY. “The information is invaluable. As a business owner, whom do you bounce your ideas off? I’m constantly looking for areas where I can pick up information. It might be on a service offering, on financials or on customer service. This is an opportunity where you can share people’s successes and failures and learn from those, and maybe save yourself some heartache and financial loss.”

Rennels isn’t alone. More Green Industry professionals are joining peer review groups, sharing more openly and honestly their issues and shortcomings, which often leads their sales

and margins to new highs — with a little help from their friends.

There are a number of approaches to the peer group process. This article explores one.

Rennels has spent a little more than a year as part of a peer group run by consultant, author and business owner Jeffrey Scott. Having spent years in Europe and the United States both running and participating in groups, Scott now runs a consulting operation facilitating peer groups. And he’s written a book on the subject, “The Leader’s Edge,” which at press time was on its way to the printer.

“You learn good stuff,” Scott says about the peer group process.

“The core process is the opposite of how (a group) of guys getting together without a facilitator might work. What they do is just bat around ideas. We try not to do that. We try to have somebody there to put a specific problem on the table to discuss.”

Why it works

Scott assembles his peer groups from business owners around the country.

Members of Scott’s peer groups must open their

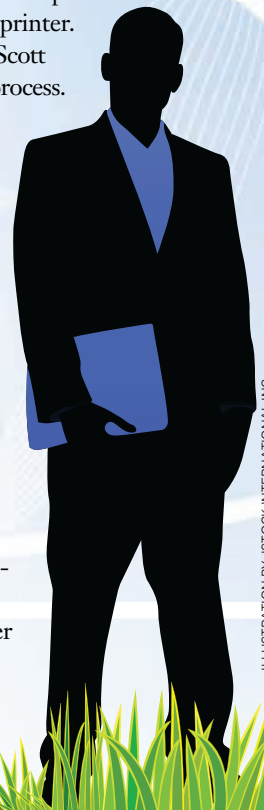


ILLUSTRATION BY: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

friends

books and operations to other participants, so having non-competing group members is essential.

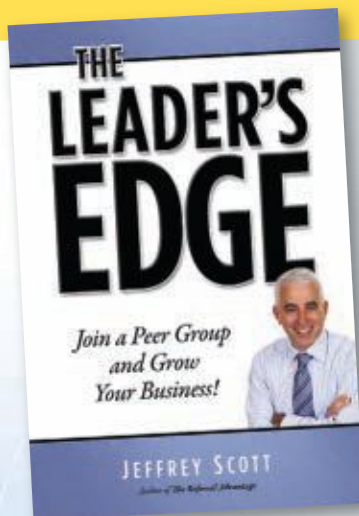
“The more you share with the group, the more the group is going to help you,” Scott says. “You’d better be comfortable sharing everything, really.”

Matt Kulp, owner of Showcase Group, New Holland, PA, agrees.

“These guys basically became my Board of Advisors,” Kulp says. “I finally realized I’m not the only one in the Green Industry dealing with these same issues. It is about meeting with others confronted with the same issues. We are all able to learn from each other.”

Learning from unbiased peers is one thing that makes the process valuable, Rennels says.

“If you were to ask your employees or your



HE WROTE THE BOOK ON IT

Jeffrey Scott's latest book, "**The Leader's Edge: Join a Peer Group and Grow Your Business,**" is due out this month. In it, Scott discusses how the peer group process can help Green Industry business owners grow their operations.

"What got you here, will not get you to the next level in your business," Scott tells members of the green industry peer groups he leads. You can't grow by simply by doing things the same old way.

"The Leader's Edge" shows owners and managers how to use Green Industry

peer groups to step back from what isn't working and leverage the insights and experience of a facilitated peer group to do things differently — and secure better results.

The book is for owners looking to transform their operations and who are willing to consider a new approach to honing their leadership skills and management and decision-making practices.

Scott uses Green Industry examples and case studies to show owners there are quicker, less-stressful ways to grow their businesses, without the headaches and stress. The book shows professionals how to use peer groups to develop the strategies needed to grow your business and make it more profitable.

Scott also is the author of *The Referral Advantage*. For more information on these books and the facilitated peer review group process, visit JeffreyScott.biz.



Peer groups offer business owners insight into their own operations.



"THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES... TO SAVE YOURSELF HEARTACHE AND... LOSS."

JOHN RENNELS, owner, A Plus Lawn and Landscape

friends any family business-type questions, you will get a slanted answer," he explains. "Unfortunately, a lot of times (employees) are going to tell you what you want to hear, and friends don't want to hurt your feelings. And friends don't necessarily come from a position of knowledge about what you're doing."

That's not the case with members of a peer group.

"It's invaluable information," Rennels says. "They're honest. They're going to tell you information whether you want to hear it or not."

The group meets formally four times a year either through a phone conference or a visit to one of the group member's offices.

During a conference call in April, Rennels mentioned he was working between 100 and 120 hours a week. Yet he took four hours out of one of those weeks to participate in the peer group — and that doesn't include the time he took to prepare for the discussions.

"People join because they think they're going to copy the other guy's good ideas," Scott says. "That's not what happens. What happens is, the other guys hold up a mirror and help you uncover your own opportunities you're not seeing within your business."

Size matters

It is important to have enough people in the group to keep the ideas flowing.

"A small group can feel more intimate initially, but also can run out of steam," Scott says. "At some point, (a small group) settles down into a way of working where the innovativeness can get tapped out."

Small groups also can suffer from what Scott calls "group think," when one strong personality dominates and the rest of the members adopt his opinions. That doesn't happen as easily in a larger group.

Scott likes double-digit sized groups.

"Ten or 12 are fine to have in a

continued on page 60

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"I REALIZED I'M **NOT THE ONLY ONE** IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY DEALING WITH THESE SAME ISSUES."

MATT KULP, owner, Showcase Group

continued from page 58

group," he says. "It sounds like a lot, but you actually get more value with nine guys looking at your problem versus three. It requires good facilitation. You need a guy who knows how to handle that size group. Short term, a small group feels better, but it's really not."

Over the years, during the natural course of life and business, a group's members might change.

"People come and go, and they do it because their lives change," Scott says.

It could be divorce, selling a business, a merger, a new partner, or any number of reasons. But changes to the group don't mean the group dissolves.

Exploring an issue

For each meeting, members of the group come prepared to discuss a single, narrowly focused issue and to explain the steps they took on the issues discussed during their most recent meeting.

At the April meeting, Scott begins with a reminder about the process: "We're just going to ask John questions. We're going to ask him single questions. We're not going to give him any advice up-front. We're going to help peel the onion to his issue."

For the next several minutes, Rennels explains details about the actions he took on the issues he raised at the past meeting. He talks about working more closely with his accountant, pushing 12-month contracts with commercial clients and a couple of other related issues. The others listen quietly.

When he finishes, Scott prods Rennels into the issue he needs help with today: "How to attract, qualify and retain an excellent, well-qualified landscape designer."

Rennels spends the next few minutes explaining what he's done so far. Rennels is on his seventh candidate, a landscape architect with an extensive background in high-end properties, who saw his busi-

continued on page 63

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THE SOCRATIC METHOD

Jeffrey Scott's Leader's Edge peer group process borrows heavily from the Socratic method — the process of instruction using guided questioning to lead the "student," or in this case, the business owner, to enlightenment.

Below is an abridged version of the peer group process facilitated by Scott earlier this year. John Rennels, owner of A Plus Lawn and Landscape, Lawrenceburg, KY, presented his issue to the group: How to attract, qualify and retain an excellent, well-qualified landscape designer. He currently contracts with a landscape architect on a project-by-project basis.

Instead of offering outright solutions, the following dialogue took place in the peer review group:

Rennels: We started as a maintenance company, and we're just now getting into design/build and

construction. A lot of the issues related to that — I don't know what I don't know.

Dave Wright (president, Wright Landscape Services, Bloomingdale, Ontario, Canada): Are you looking for someone who is as strong as this person, or do you want somebody who can grow with your company and become a designer that fits your company?

Rennels: The projects we're going to be doing, at least starting off, are not going to be of the caliber of what he is capable of doing. So, no, I don't expect it to be someone as strong. I expect it to be someone strong enough to handle the size of projects and the kinds of projects that we're doing.

Craig Kopfmann (president, Green Acres Landscape & Design, Monroe, CT): John, do you have any design experience yourself?

Rennels: None. I couldn't draw myself out of a wet paper bag.

Matt Kulp (owner, Showcase Group, New Holland, PA): John, what current design/build revenue do you have?

Rennels: Probably less than \$15,000, \$20,000 — it's in its infancy, and that depends on what you consider "design/build/construction." The projects we're working on would safely fit into that.

Kulp: Let me rephrase that. How much revenue would you need for a designer?

Rennels: I'm not sure I'm following the question. Are you asking where you want it to go?

Kulp: How much revenue is currently there to feed a designer who would be on staff?

Rennels: I would say, "none," pretty much. I was planning on floating that person for a period. The nice thing, this current relationship, we've got the guys who can do the installs. I'm hoping to build that revenue using this current sub relationship to where I don't have to float this person when I bring him on.

Scott: Let me throw my question in: What's your 2009 projection?

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Rennels: I don't have one for design/build.

Scott: What's your guess?

Rennels: If we were able to hit \$50,000 in the first year with that, I would be tickled. That's purely a guess.

The above conversation took place in April. It turns out Rennels' guess was a pretty good one. He has continued the relationship with the landscape architect.

"He's not an employee of ours," Rennels says. "Thankfully, the relationship has gone very, very well. He is one of the premier architects in Lexington (the largest city close to Lawrenceburg)."

Rennels estimates the company has done about \$55,000 in design/build revenue year-to-date, "but for us, that's a big deal. We've got our feet wet; we've learned a lot. We've refined our process." — DJ

continued from page 60

ness dwindle with the economy.

After detailing the situation, each member of the group asks a question, without adding any advice. This has a dual purpose: It helps the business owner understand all aspects of the issue and starts him on the path to a solution.

"Sometimes, you realize the issue on the table is not the real issue," Scott says. "Sometimes, he's hiding it on purpose because he doesn't want to deal with it. He's happy when he finally shares it, but at the moment he doesn't really want to deal with it."

Peer groups can cover many issues from work-family balance to every business detail.

"Just having that soundboard there for getting ideas and listening to experiences is really beneficial," adds Kulp. "It's hard sometimes to get in an environment where you can really think things through and evaluate them unbiased when you're in your own company." LM

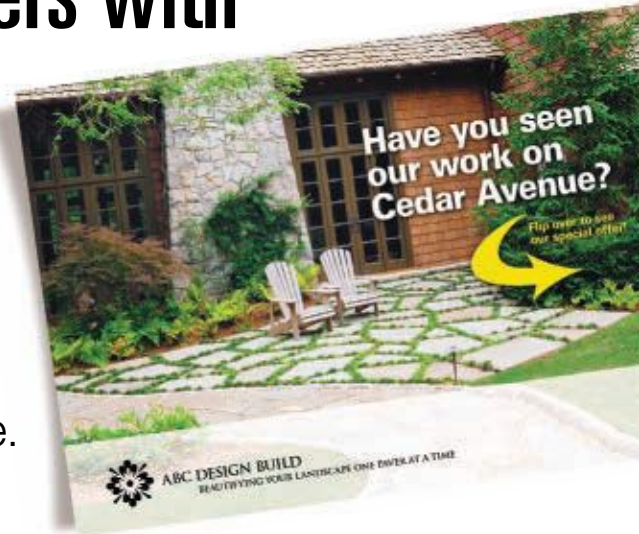


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Reach customers with low-tech, too

Direct mail can still be a viable way to connect with current and prospective accounts, even in the Internet age.

BY JOE SHOONER



TAKE AWAY

Target within your demographic and market for better response.

Use new technologies to customize your piece for each recipient.

Door hangers can be cheaper than mailed pieces, yet still effective.

DIRECT mail continues to be an effective method for Green Industry companies to reach prospective customers for several reasons:

1. People are accustomed to receiving buying opportunities through the mail;
2. The costs associated with using the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) are still a relative bargain; and most importantly...
3. Every prospect has a mailing address.

Start with a list

The single most important element of a direct mailing campaign is the list. It's very important to thoroughly research and target your mailing. Online list brokers such as AccuData allow registered users to run list counts based on geography and a host of demographic selections.

Before you begin running counts, though, define your ideal customer. Review your customer data, figure out the Zip codes where you have good market share already, and then define home value, income and age parameters for your average clients.

Be cautious in trying to target an area or demographic that you don't currently serve.

You will have much better results if you focus on the areas where you already work and the demographics that already buy from you.

A mailer that works

The mailing piece you send will have a significant impact on the cost and return on investment (ROI) for your campaign. Historically, sales letters have outperformed brochure and postcard mailings. However, because Green Industry services are inherently visual, they lend themselves to full-color photographic mailers.

The USPS continues to increase postage rates and tighten restrictions for folded pieces like brochures. Consequently, oversized postcards have gained in popularity. They are efficient to print and address, and still qualify for letter-rate postage.

Speaking of postage, research shows that recipients are more receptive to envelope mailers with a first-class stamp attached. Of course, this isn't always a practical option considering the extra cost and time needed compared to a presort mailing.

Your mailing piece needs to convince the reader to respond to you. Direct mail experts recommend that you make a compelling offer to motivate your prospects. When making an

offer, try to empathize with your prospects. What will get them to act? Is it cash, a percentage discount or additional free services? Unless a prospect has some idea what a project will likely cost, cash and percentage discounts don't carry much weight.

Consider their triggers and think about making offers that bundle your services together, like a year of tree/shrub fertilization following a landscape installation, or installation of some annual flowers with a maintenance contract. These are both offers that make your primary service look more valuable — and will keep customers thinking about you after their initial purchase is complete.

Don't make junk!

For as long as I can remember, I've been excited to see what comes in the mail. However, many consumers begrudge marketers for sending junk mail, making them less likely to

“CONSIDER THEIR TRIGGERS AND THINK ABOUT MAKING OFFERS THAT BUNDLE YOUR SERVICES TOGETHER, LIKE A YEAR OF TREE/SHRUB FERTILIZATION FOLLOWING A LANDSCAPE INSTALLATION.”

respond to your mailing piece. In fact, response rates for a single mailing to a new prospect list will average between just 0.5% and 1%.

One way to increase recipient interest is to include variable data in your mailing. Variable data printing (VDP) can be thought of as a full-color mail merge. Today's VDP programs make use of digital printing technology to marry data and design during the printing process. The result is a mailing piece that can be fully customized for each recipient on your mailing list. The potential uses for this are limited only by the data you have on hand.



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For example, say you have recently completed and photographed five installation projects. You generate a radius list to target the neighbors of each of these clients. You mail to a list of 500 homes, but change the photo and headline depending on which home is the one to which the recipient lives closest. Your headline may read "Have You Seen Our Work on Cedar Avenue?" or "Landscaping <Neighborhood>'s Finest Homes Since 1990" and feature the project nearest the recipient's address. This results in a piece with real stopping power.

To close the loop on this method, the use of a personalized URL (PURL) gives the recipient a personalized Web address to visit for more information. The PURL (joeshooner.yourlandscapeco.com, for instance) should lead to a landing page with a summary of the information the prospect will want to know before contacting you, as well as a form for responding.

Marketers making good use of PURL technology report a 33% to 100% increase in response rates. However, if there isn't any relevant information on the landing page, and you aren't saving the prospect time and energy, it will appear very gimmicky.

In summary...

The costs for any mailing project are going to fluctuate dramatically depending on the size of the list, the format of the piece, the postage rate you achieve, and the number of times you mail. The use of VDP and PURL technology will drive up your cost per piece, but ideally you will mail far fewer pieces to a highly targeted list, thus increasing your ROI. **LM**

The author is an account executive with Focal Point Communications in Cincinnati. Contact him at 800/525-6999 or joeshooner@growpro.com, or visit www.growpro.com.



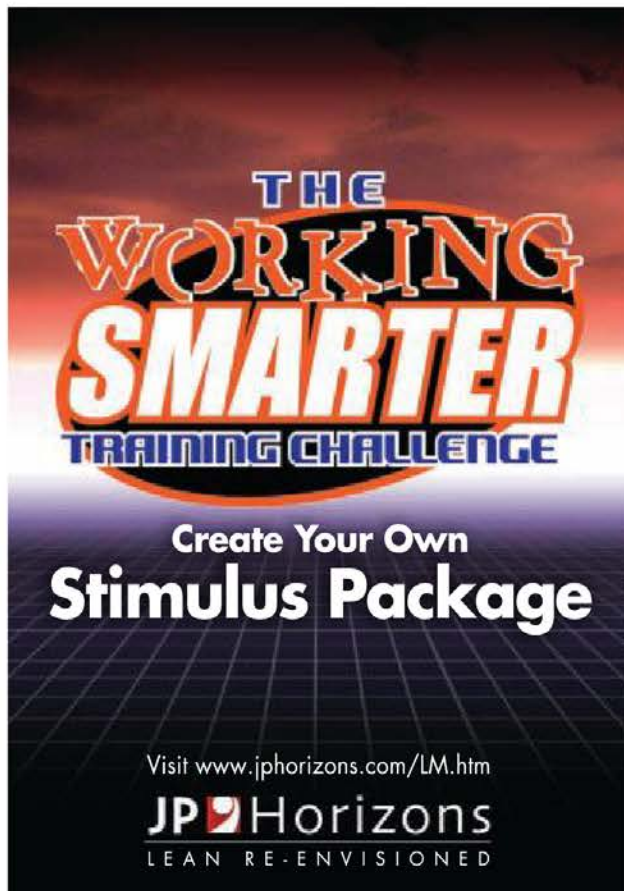
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TAKE AWAY

Gauge the effectiveness of your marketing message by the level of response you receive to different marketing initiatives.

Discounts alone won't give the results you're looking for.

To close the sale, explain benefits and value — and address the customer's specific concerns.

Nail the sale

Successfully selling lawn service requires the process be well thought out. Then, an appropriate strategy must be crafted and executed rigorously every day. **BY BILL HOOPES**

WHEW! WHAT a year it's been — challenging for all with many mixed outcomes. In fact, generalizing about results could be misleading.

Instead, I felt compelled to confirm my observations by talking to a group of successful, veteran landscape contractors, folks with records of accomplishment throughout the years. I was interested to learn how they performed during the '09 selling season.

After an admittedly random series of conversations, it was apparent results varied significantly, from modestly successful to awful. What made the difference? I learned there wasn't one lone identifiable success factor. Still, I can confirm that, in most cases, the sales process was extremely important.

During my 25 years as a Green Industry trainer and consultant, I've encountered only a few truly *great* marketing/sales companies. It's not that Green Industry operators are incapable of great selling; it's just that, as is often the case with technical- or production-oriented folks, selling isn't typically a core skill. It must be learned. In fact, I view selling as a process, a combination of lead-generation activities and personal follow-ups.

Begin with marketing

Did you go to market efficiently? There's no doubt gathering pros-

pect addresses, lawn sizes and phone numbers electronically is highly efficient. Did you take advantage of the latest techniques and tools?

According to my data, direct-mail response declined. For some, it declined significantly. Successful operators I contacted didn't depend on mail. They used multiple tactics to generate leads. Examples include energetic reselling of previous customers, neighborhood canvassing, block leading and driveway marketing.

Was your message effective? Did you change your focus significantly in response to the economy? If so, did it result in enough high quality leads? Some services reduced their emphasis on quality, promoting discounts alone. But while everyone wants a deal, discounting as a singular strategy didn't deliver the results most expected.

There's no best strategy for every lawn service. The way a company sells should reflect the company philosophy and deliver what the public has been led to expect. For some larger services focused on fast, lower-profit growth, discounting may be the only choice for maximizing sales. But no one should conclude that, bad economy or not, you must discount heavily to sell lawn service. This past spring, I observed a significantly different picture.

It's been my experience that, when price is the determining factor in making a sale, the first-year cancel rate for those discounted sales is higher. A competitor will come along, offer a lower price and take the customer. If a company has the ability to outsell the cancel rate, perhaps price off selling provides a sustainable

continued on page 70



continued from page 68

model. But for the majority of small to mid-sized services, lifetime value is key. Businesses with limited marketing budgets — and without the ability or inclination to conduct large sales campaigns — need to keep their customers.

Sales based on providing what the customer wants at a fair price versus simply cutting the price and pressuring the customer all season long for added revenue delivers lower cancellations and consistently higher lifetime values.

Making the sale

The main goal for landscape contractors in '09 was the same as any year: to maximize profitable sales. For companies with large, full-time sales teams, the spring sales goal is only the first phase of a year-long campaign. For smaller companies with only part-time salespeople, spring sales must provide the bulk of annual revenue. Regardless of who sells, leads must be tightly managed for a maximum close rate.

ARE YOU GENERATING ENOUGH GOOD LEADS?

- ▶ Did your 2009 marketing message match the company philosophy and image? Was the marketing focus on quality and outstanding service, or did you attempt to switch to deal maker in response to anticipated sales resistance? Or did you make a significant change in emphasis this last season, possibly confusing prospects about what you stand for?
- ▶ Did you use modern, cutting-edge tactics to generate maximum leads from high-responding prospect groups? Marketing techniques are changing. What was effective 10 years ago is no longer making it happen. Are you current?
- ▶ Did your marketing strategy target new sales, upsell current customers, resell past customers and go after leads that never closed? Selling across the customer spectrum turned out to be meaningful last spring. — BH



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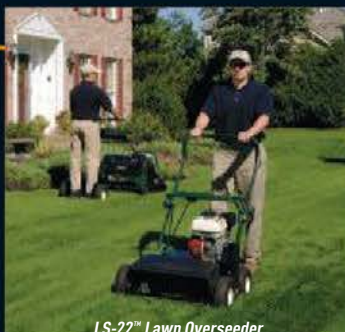
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In the spring of '09, landscape contractors used various sales strategies. Some pushed for an absolute maximum of new sales and used every trick in the book to close. Quoting one sales manager: "Once I have them on the phone, they don't get off until they're my customer." His meaning was clear: He'd do whatever it took to make the sale. But would the sale result in a profit, or would the pressured customer, succumbing to a great deal, cancel mid-season?

For a rep on the phone compensated only to close sales, it won't matter. If, however, a business depends on keeping customers for three, four or more seasons, the sales conversation is important.

The sales chain

I believe in and teach the sales chain, which is a metaphor for the process of acquiring and keeping customers. It consists of three important links, and continuity among these links is

imperative for success.

The first link represents **marketing**. The company message is communicated accurately and effectively. The second link represents the **selling process**. Leads are converted to sales in a tightly managed system using daily goals and recognition. The final link is **service delivery**. If the service meets customer expectations, referrals abound, marketing is successful and the cycle begins again.

Focusing on the second link, sales methodology can be condensed into two basic camps. I describe the first as making contact, creating or building interest, baiting the prospect and hooking the sale. Typically, it's done with a tightly canned, well-rehearsed pitch.

The second is a more consultative approach I teach in five basic steps.

1. Use a strong, clear opener, which lets the prospect know who's calling and why. It also establishes the prospect's interest level.

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2. Identify what each prospect wants. Notice I didn't say *needs*. We buy what we want. But to provide those wants, a sales professional needs to understand what they are by asking a couple probing questions.

3. Communicate value. We accomplish this

by explaining how our service benefits each customer. A benefit isn't something we do, but *why* we do what we do. This is important to the prospect.

4. Look for a buying signal. A tie-down confirms the prospect understands how we'll provide exactly what they want. If we're successful, we'll get that buying signal.

5. Close or confirm the sale. If you have followed the process, closing will be a snap.

When sales resistance rears its head, our people are taught to handle objections as questions that haven't been answered. In reality, they're not objections.

My process for removing resistance and making the sale involves three steps:

1. Ask "why do you feel that way?" It's important to understand the prospect's motives for resisting. And even if I'm sure I already know, having the prospect repeat his or her concern sets me up to remove it.

2. Create empathy. Let the prospect know you understand and you've felt the same way. Now, there's no barrier between prospective buyer and seller.

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CONVERT LEADS TO PROFITABLE SALES

- ▶ Who has the responsibility to sell in your organization? How are they trained?
- ▶ What's your sales message? Is there continuity between the marketing message and sales follow-up?
- ▶ Are your salespeople setting accurate and reasonable expectations?
- ▶ Are you converting leads to customers at the highest possible close rate?
- ▶ Are you selling what prospects want, or is the sales objective simply to get to "yes"? — BH

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3. Remove the concern with a targeted benefit that responds to it specifically. “Mr. Homeowner, think about this ...” — and provide the appropriate benefit.

Remember, many prospects will never buy, but it doesn't matter because there are plenty of potential buyers who will understand and appreciate a presentation that clearly communicates value.

Consultative selling is an effective strategy. I believe that for higher revenue sales, leading to a strong customer commitment, followed by fewer short-term cancels, it makes sound business sense for most operators.

I'm more confident than ever before that we, as a home-services industry, will continue to succeed by offering measurable, visible value to America's property owners. While we may not be able to sell everyone, there will be enough homeowners who understand that investing a small portion of their discre-

SELLING THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

Several operators reported successful sales campaigns based on selling benefits, not discounting. In those cases, customer growth increased from 20% to 30%. How was it done? The “old-fashioned way” — quality and reliability were promoted in fliers, personal visits to evaluate lawns were made in quick response to inquiries, and phone follow-up selling focused on the benefits of service versus discounts alone. — BH

tionary income in their properties will repay them — and that's a message I look forward to sending. LM

The author is the owner of Grass Roots Training/ Consulting (www.trainandkeeppeople.com) and can be reached at 614/531-4000 or hoopes@columbus.rr.com. Read his blog at www.trainingchamp.wordpress.com.

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Realize your goals in the Working Smarter Cycle

If your people are happy and productive, your business will experience success. **BY JIM PALUCH**

TAKE AWAY

Industry innovation starts at the people level.

Earn employee buy-in by making them part of the planning process.

Success isn't defined by size or location, but rather the happiness of customers and employees.

I WAS HOPING for earthshaking, groundbreaking, industry-making innovation when I asked for input about your experiences during the past year. I pictured Dan Jacobs and the rest of the staff debating which new idea and industry leader would end up on the front cover of the magazine. I imagined stories about the company in Idaho that learned how to cut grass merely by driving by with a laser and not even needing to get out of the truck. I imagined the San Diego lawn care company that was able to make its five applications in a season in partnership with Google Earth, reducing their labor cost to almost zero and enabling its employees to aid the community by working at senior citizen centers throughout California ... for free!

Yes that's what I was hoping for, but what I received was the same ol' thing. And that's more than OK with me.

It's the same thing we've been hearing at JP Horizons for more than two decades: The most exciting changes happening in any company, regardless of size, location or industry, always come back to one important commonality, *the people*. The stories we heard the most about this past month were about people, and how they stepped up and became more interested and involved in their companies.

The best way to describe this process of improvement brought about by people can be

understood in the Working Smarter Cycle, which focuses on achieving a better quality of life. For a company, this may mean improved profitability. For an owner, it may mean a healthy balance sheet that allows the company to be purchased by the employees one day, thus creating opportunity for everyone. For the employee, it simply may mean being able to provide the current needs and future security for their deserving families.

The steps of the Working Smarter Cycle, starting in reverse order from quality of life, illustrate that happy customers come next. These are supported by efficient processes, which are made possible through a culture of trust in the company, which can only come from ... you guessed it ... people.

I become inspired when I read examples such as:

› The folks at Perm-O-Green Lawn Care, headquartered in Wichita Falls, TX, say, "This type of thinking and communicating is new to our team. It's great to watch everyone growing outside their comfort zones."

› Rochester, IN-based Sellers Landscaping, Lawn & Irrigation is challenging its team to look at how they can work smarter in their positions. The result is an incredible list of

MONTHLY CHALLENGE

Discuss the Working Smarter Cycle with your leaders, and discuss what might keep a company from helping to grow people.

continued on page 76

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Same Name. Same Game. *"We didn't invent the wheel and we didn't reinvent it either. Instead, we focused on creating a philosophy to live by: one to work by and one to create and design products by. We found our inspiration from our concern for the environment, and have continued to create lines of lawn and garden products that are not only innovative, but also dedicated to our philosophy of promoting environmentally responsible products.*

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— Larry DeWitt, founder & ceo

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WORKING SMARTER



"THE MOST EXCITING CHANGES HAPPENING IN ANY COMPANY, REGARDLESS OF SIZE, LOCATION OR INDUSTRY, ALWAYS COME BACK TO ONE IMPORTANT COMMONALITY, THE PEOPLE"

continued from page 74

ideas that — if everyone commits to accepting personal responsibility and follow-through — could save the company incredible amounts of money that would benefit everyone.

► At Skinners Nurseries' corporate offices in Jacksonville, FL, the barriers that often result from people being on different floors or departments have melted away. Meeting each week and looking for ideas to work smarter helps them communicate more openly and productively. This creates a willingness to support one another, which, in turn, helps everyone to better serve the customer.

If the aforementioned companies continue in the direction they've started and intentionally move through the Working Smarter Cycle patiently, they'll be serving the happy customers every company needs to provide the quality of life every individual in this country deserves. **LMI**

The author is president of JP Horizons Inc. Visit www.jp horizons.com.

Take 9 steps to teach managers to think like owners

Training managers to make decisions like a business owner is easy, essential and can provide more benefits than you may think.

BY JONATHAN GOLDHILL

TAKE AWAY

With trained managers in place, owners can quit obsessing about their businesses in their personal lives.

Owners should focus on the big picture for their company's growth strategies; managers should be able to shoulder the day-to-day responsibilities.

Make sure you equip managers with the training, authority and resources to make such an arrangement work.



Design and shape your business so that it both serves you and works independently from you.

WHAT WOULD your business and life be like if you took a four-week-long, guilt-free vacation where you didn't check in with your office? What would it be like to return from vacation to find that everything operated smoothly without you?

While it may be difficult to believe, it's possible.

Your main goal as a landscape business owner should be to design and shape a business that serves you and works independently from you. You want a business that will run on autopilot and continue to generate revenue continuously despite your absence. When you take a vacation, you should be able to feel guilt-free about leaving your business in the hands of your managers. But to accomplish this, your managers must have an owner's mentality.

As a business owner, it's your responsibility to think about the big picture. You should be focused on your company's purpose, direction, strategy, structure, systems, people, goals and accountability processes. Meanwhile, your managers should be focused on the day-to-day result areas: planning, organizing, staffing, supervising, delegating, measuring and reporting.

How do you get managers to think and act like owners? From my observation during the past 25 years working with thousands of small businesses — including landscape contractors — owners and managers can become more effective leaders by following these nine steps:

1 Regularly face reality. Observe what is and isn't working in your business. Have the courage to change what needs to be changed, while developing the wisdom to know what's unchangeable.

continued on page 80

continued from page 78

2 Define and clarify your vision, goals and direction. Share your goals with your managers and take control the entire time, from execution through completion.

3 Manage your key resources. Manage your time, staff and money wisely. Effective stewardship of time, labor and capital enable you to leverage your most vital resources and grow faster than competitors.

4 Provide educational opportunities. Learn and implement strategic and systematic approaches in each of the functional areas of business (sales and marketing, for example), and share this information with others in the company. It's vital to share information with managers to facilitate better decision-making.

5 Implement systems. Well-run businesses have processes for everything. Accounting has a process, selling has a process, etc. Have managers learn and participate in installing these processes within the company.



6 Be a strong financial steward. Improve your understanding of your company's financial statements. Know your ratios — and those of your competitors. Increase the financial literacy of your managers, because they need to understand the key performance drivers in your business. Put an incentive program together so employees can share in the bottom line.

7 Hold individuals accountable. As Thomas Edison once said, "Vision without execution is hallucination." Likewise, having goals and making decisions without holding people accountable undermines management effectiveness. Provide frequent feedback to keep everyone on course and motivated to do better.

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8 Listen and ask for guidance. Receiving guidance from within and outside the company — and from within the industry — is crucial. Engage in learning from mentors to challenge yourself, and find new ways of thinking about your business.

9 Learn to delegate and enjoy life. Commit to giving up micromanagement by valuing and trusting your staff and delegating with authority and control because you've put systems in place and have the right managers running them.

A shift in focus

Implementing all of the above will likely make you change your way of thinking and develop a more focused approach to your role. Re-engineer your mindset. Many of you didn't start out with training in business ownership, leadership or management. You had a passion for and technical aptitude in landscaping. So, now you need to shift your activities to bring out your brilliance and the talents of your managers, too.

To escape the details and headaches of your business, you must make the great mental leap from that of employee to manager, and entrepreneur to business leader. You must acknowledge your technical bias, addiction to being busy and uneasiness with delegation. You must adopt the big-picture mindset of a chief executive and strategic manager — and be a chief executive in mind and spirit to get the results you seek.

If you don't start thinking like a chief executive, it'll be nearly impossible for you to start behaving strategically and working on your business in a proactive, purposeful manner. For many owners, jumping this wide chasm from manager to leader is tough and terrifying. However, you'll never escape a workaholic existence unless you stop being a detailed-oriented technician masquerading as an owner. Stop focusing on the technical work of the business, and focus on the entire business, such as your staff.

The choice is yours. Step up and be a leader. **LM**

The author coaches leaders of growing companies in the landscape industry. Learn more about his peer group coaching programs for owners and managers by calling 818/716-8826, emailing Jon@TheGrowthCoachLA.com or visiting TheGrowthCoachLA.com.



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