Ornamental hedges were replaced with drought-tolerant plants that require less maintenance but still have the desired visual impact.

Partners rather than

Why we should make peace with water agencies and what it will mean for our customers and our industry.

BY **RICHARD RESTUCCIA**

WATER SUPPLIERS, faced with increasing demand for treated water and seasonal or chronic shortages, employ a mixed bag of strategies to encourage or, more dramatically, force conservation by implementing outdoor irrigation bans. Short of that, they employ tiered water pricing, educational programs, water-efficient model homes, demonstration gardens, and financial incentives to encourage property owners to install and use water-efficient products, both inside of their homes and businesses and on their landscapes. Some also pay property owners to replace the turfgrass on their properties with synthetic turf or drought-tolerant native or adapted plant material.

Time to get with it

But water purveyors can't and shouldn't do all of the heavy lifting alone in terms of driving intelligent outdoor water use. It's time for us Green Industry contractors to step up to help property owners execute smart water management strategies. Who else is better positioned to use their knowledge of urban and suburban ecologies and employ the modern water-conserving technology that irrigation product suppliers now offer.

Strength in numbers

Because of our large numbers and our unique and specialized training and knowledge, those of us in the professional Green Industry are perfectly positioned to partner with water agencies, and to be in the forefront, promoting and implementing more efficient use of fresh water resources on the properties of our customers. We're the

PHOTOS COURTESY: VALLEYCREST

Nearly four dozen water features spread throughout the campus were either converted to landscape beds or were shut off completely.

adversaries

"boots on the ground," at least in comparison to water officials, when it comes to showing customers how to incorporate new technologies and sustainable practices. But to do this proactively, we must establish mutually beneficial relationships with the water agencies. After all, those of us in the professional Green Industry, and especially us contractors, share the same goal as water agencies – smarter and more efficient use of water on landscapes.

Think of these industry/agency collaborations in terms of having the choice of being considered as part of the problem in promoting water conservation, as is too often the case, or being recognized as a valuable partner. Obviously, the better option is the latter — to be recognized as part of the solution.

Because of our numbers and our presence in virtually every community in the U.S. and Canada, we're in daily contact with hundreds of thousands of property owners and property managers. These people constitute, for the most part, a receptive audience that trusts us and that we can educate regarding intelligent landscape water use. We have the ears of our customers. Many of us regularly communicate with our customers, and those of us who are managing very large properties often talk with owners or property managers once a week or sometimes even daily.

Also, too often we don't give ourselves enough credit for the hard-earned and specialized knowledge we bring to our customers' properties, especially if we made the effort to really learn and practice our craft. We know (or should know) each property's special characteristics, especially what's going on with turfgrass and other landscape plant material on each property. It's this knowledge and commitment that allows us to establish mutually beneficial relationships with our clients and be viewed as trusted partners.

Building relationships

Building this bond with customers is crucial to helping them make wiser and more financially sound water management decisions. Equally crucial, as mentioned previously in this article, is our relationship with purveyors who provide the water.

As we all know, actions taken by these agencies or other rule-making bodies affect the landscape business, often dramatically. During times of shortages, agencies often restrict or, in extreme situations, ban outdoor watering. This can have a devastating effect on our professional services, as evidenced by the historic three-year drought that dried up portions of Georgia and the Carolinas 2006-2009, and dramatically slowed sales of landscape plants and all landscape services.

But this relationship between water agencies and our industry doesn't have to be adversarial. It fact, it shouldn't be. Water agencies and local governments often enact policies that, seeking to conserve water, also offer landscape and irrigation professionals new opportunities to profitably serve their customers.

For example, when agencies offer rebates for retrofitting older irrigation systems with more water efficient products, this provides the opportunity to shorten the return-on-investment (ROI) for property owners for significant upgrades. These might include replacing older clocks with smart controllers, installing rotary nozzles and making turf conversions. A 24-month ROI, or less, almost guarantees approval for an upgrade. And chances

for providing these services remain good up to a 30-month ROI, but beyond that, not as likely.

Significant cost savings

A good example of smart water conservation measures in a commercial office park environment is Cisco Systems in San Jose, CA, which over the past decade adopted a more ecologically friendly landscape program and at the same time reduced its landscape operating costs. Cisco, which provides networking equipment and network management for Internet applications, made the changes at the suggestion of ValleyCrest Landscape Maintenance, its landscape partner since 1998. Over the past decade, landscape costs at the expansive campus have declined significantly.

Cisco's landscape management plan focused on three components: horticultural improvements, reducing water consumption and sending less waste to landfills. The goal was to determine how much water was being consumed, what plants required the most water and other inputs, such as fertilizer. Ascertaining what resources were being used to sustain the current level of landscape showed what was being spent for water usage and maintenance costs and revealed some opportunities to improve.

A landscape program was developed that encompassed a plant density reduction plan, resulting in the removal of some plants that required significant amounts of water. Plants that required watering five days were replaced with shrubs requiring only two days of irrigation, representing a 60% decrease in the amount of water needed.

Water-conserving drip irrigation systems are being systematically installed and all 48 buildings on the campus were retrofitted with smart, weather-based controllers, which lower irrigation water usage on average 24% a year. In California alone, Cisco saves more than 81 million gallons of water from the company's water conservation efforts as reported in its 2007 Corporate Citizenship Report.

Additionally, multi-colored flowerbeds at Cisco's sprawling campus were converted to attractive swatches of low maintenance iceberg roses. Ornamental hedges were replaced with drought-tolerant shrubs that require less maintenance but still have the desired visual impact. Nearly four dozen water features spread throughout the campus were either converted to landscape beds or were shut off completely, saving considerable water and energy. The average water feature on the campus annually uses 87,350 gallons of water and consumes 24,528 Kilowatt hours of electricity. The savings from not running seven fountains add up to more than four million gallons of water each year.

Waste not, want not

Perhaps one of the largest challenges on a large office campus is green waste reduction. Bagging and dumping grass cuttings is labor intensive – to say nothing of the water needed to maintain a vivid green appearance and the fuel used to cut and transport it. Turf reduction programs in areas of Cisco's 98-acre campus helped to produce less green waste. And in the turf areas that remained untouched, use of specially designed equipment to mulch the grass clippings on-site resulted in reductions in water and fertilizer usage, which is good for the environment and the bottom line.

The strategic landscape program at Cisco serves as a model for integrating landscape services into a building's operating plan. When new initiatives are mandated by corporate decision-makers, when companies decide to 'go green,' or if the economy places pressures to operate an asset at its maximum potential, building owners and property managers need leaders in smart landscape management who are experienced in maximizing every dollar spent. It must be done in a way that makes sense for companies, it must be efficient, it must be collaborative, it must be simple, and smart water management requires participation by all.

Adopting a smart water management plan works. The proof is as simple as basic dollars-and-sense business accounting. Customers, like Cisco, are learning that ecologically sound landscape practices, and especially those that save significant amounts of irrigation water through increased efficiencies, offer aesthetic benefits to their properties and offer substantial cost savings — savings that will grow over time. LM

5 TIPS FOR WORKING WITH WATER AGENCIES

1. Call your local water agency to set an appointment to learn about all rebate programs available to contractors, owners and managers. You will be amazed at how much you can learn in an hour meeting.
2. Attend water management training provided by water agencies to show them you are interested in learning about what they are telling customers.
3. Invite the agency to do a water audit on jobs you are starting. This gives a third party the opportunity to provide unbiased advice on what is needed to improve a system. Customers will perceive less of a conflict of interest.
4. Let water agencies know you are available to provide training for their community outreach programs.
5. Take time to explain the challenges you encounter as a contractor promoting water management. If they understand the day-to-day management and challenges in promoting water savings, they can develop programs with higher impact.

RESTUCCIA *is Leader, Water Management Services, ValleyCrest Landscape Maintenance. He can be contacted at rrestuccia@valleycrest.com.*