

ACUTABOVE

GREEN INDUSTRY MAINTENANCE LEADERS » BY DAN JACOBS

Taking the high road is easier because it's always less traveled. That's a lesson **Donna Vignocchi**, president and CEO of Wauconda, IL-based **ILT Vignocchi**, learned from father Harry, who started the company 40 years ago. It's one of the lessons she uses to run her maintenance company.

TOP TRENDS

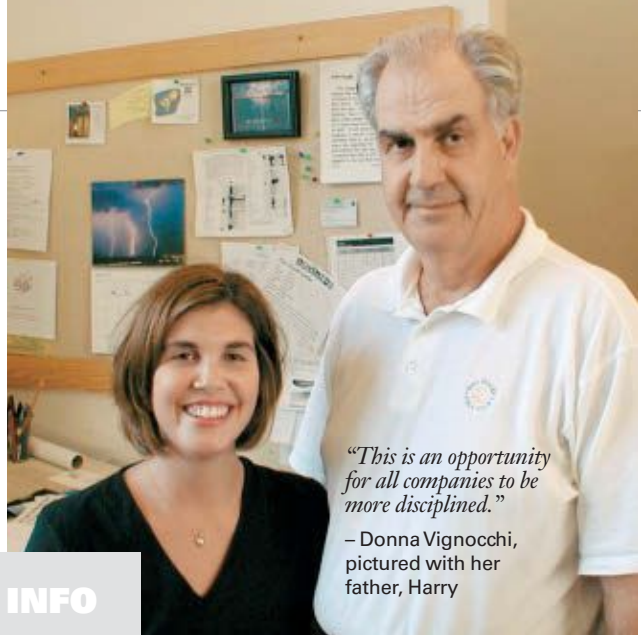
» **Price pressure.** The biggest trend right now has been the downward motion of price. I believe, that in our market, landscape maintenance is becoming much more of a commodity than a service. People are less concerned with quality than they have been, and that's simply because of the reality of the economy.

» **Going green.** There are very few ways to differentiate yourself when you do landscape maintenance. One way to do it is to be really cheap. The other approach is to provide a quality service. In our market, in Chicago, customers won't tolerate poor customer service, unless you're on the inexpensive side. Companies such as ours are driving this green sentiment at the forefront of their consumer messaging to differentiate themselves. It's a movement pervasive among all industries. Everybody is advertising "green." It's a trend, but it's also the biggest opportunity moving into 2010.

TOP OBSTACLES

» **Recession woes.** We must figure out how to compete; how to retain customers when everything is seemingly about price. How do we continue to exist and be profitable when we have to compete in this type of market? We have to continue to cut our costs and reevaluate things such as benefits. ILT always has been a benefits-rich company. Those are things we have to look at. This recession isn't something we're going to see end in the near future. We're looking at three to five years.

» **Tight lending.** Lending institutions are unwilling to lend. They're all out saying they weren't one of those banks that had to take the money and "we're still lending." Your ability to fund growth or



"This is an opportunity for all companies to be more disciplined."

– Donna Vignocchi, pictured with her father, Harry

INSIDE INFO

Company: ILT Vignocchi

Headquarters: Wauconda, IL

Year established: 1969

Employees: 20 full-time and 130 seasonal employees

LM Top 150 rank: 130

Key to being a maintenance leader: Never buy the second truck. I'm not kidding. That's my biggest piece of advice. Having more than 50 vehicles with umpteen number of safety incidents a year ... I don't necessarily believe volume has anything to do with being a leader. Being a leader means not being afraid to stand up for what you believe in. The people we employ are passionate about horticulture. We're supposed to be stewards of everything that grows. That's what a leader is.

buy new equipment for replacement programs, and now pay cash out of pocket, is almost impossible. It's a crisis. I think of companies such as ours that have been in business for 40 years that are sound, and I'm so frightened for those companies that aren't. It's scary. That's one of the biggest obstacles for small businesses right now.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

» **Work the hurt.** Our vendors have less business, just like we do. It could be less volume; it could be lower prices. Because of that, they're offering us substantial discounts we've been able to take advantage of. It's a significant opportunity for companies that can take advantage of it.

» **Topgrading.** There's an enormous opportunity to pick up talented people. I don't think that's something our industry could say three years ago. There were very few good people out there looking for work. Now, there are a lot of

talented, qualified people looking for work. It's a good time to consider topgrading personnel. If you're looking to expand into other markets, now is a great time to staff up.

» **Spend wisely.** This is an opportunity for all companies to be more disciplined. That's a very good thing. We've learned many lessons throughout the past two years that have been invaluable to me as a leader and valuable to our staff as a team. You tend to view things a bit more conservatively.

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