

THE BIG GIVE

Landscapers across the country lend communities their time and talents.

BY **NICOLE WISNIEWSKI** EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

SURE, DISCOUNTS and add-ons can get customers in the door. But a growing number of clients aren't basing their purchasing decisions solely on service and price anymore. A business' social consciousness and community involvement also can turn customer heads.

Every day, more companies are watching their employees sign up early when the list goes up for blood donors, join teams to build Habitat homes, donate food and money to Harvest for Hunger or spend time as a Big Brother or Big Sister.


According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 61 million Americans — 26% of the adult population — give approximately 8.1 billion hours and \$158 billion worth of volunteer service annually.

In terms of employer-sponsored volunteer programs, 81% of companies use them to support core business functions, and nearly 50% incorporate volunteer programs into overall business plans.

Green Industry businesses also are contributing to this growth. Compared to last year, 1,000 more landscape and lawn care professionals donated time and service to the Professional Landcare Network's second annual Day of Service on April 22 — the 40th annual Earth Day. This amounted to more than 3,000 people in 38 states and Canada.

Webster's defines community as a group of people with a common background or shared interests within a society, and ser-

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CALCP President
Andy Ferguson
helps rehabilitate
Riverside Cemetery.



MirrorScapes' employees helped revive Cross Mound Park while a pair of YardApes workers (inset) spread mulch at a newly installed playground.

DAY of SERVICE

FIELD REPORT #1:

Cross Mound Park
Tarlton, OH

13

FIELD REPORT #2:

Riverside Cemetary
Denver, CO

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FIELD REPORT #3:

Children's Playground
New Milford, CT

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vice as providing that community with something it needs. As a gathering place for family and friends, industry experts agree landscapes are at the hearts of these communities.

So as an item in a landscaper's marketing agenda, professionals recommend properly planned community service as a low-cost way to improve employee attitude and retention, enhance goodwill, drive revenue and soothe the soul.

Beefing up the bottom line

Research shows there is a direct correlation between active community outreach programs and increased revenue and customer loyalty for businesses that engage in helping their communities.

To measure return-on-investment from community service events, start by maximizing priceless advertising opportunities. Sending press releases before the event and choosing a highly visible or important town project can draw press. A front-page story in the daily local paper is invaluable ... and possible. It's happened to Shayne Newman, president of New Milford, CT-based YardApes two years in a row after his company's Day of Service projects (and as a result of other volunteer

Framed through a climbing wall, YardApes' crew install pavers.

efforts his company supports).

And what visibility like that brings is clear: Clients.

Last year, Greener By Design chose a Day of Service project located in a market CEO Richard Heller wanted to expand into. He picked up 22 clients in that new market, and 11 of them mentioned hearing about the company from his Day of Service project.

Adequate promotion of the work before and after the event helped boost these numbers. Heller videotaped his project last year, edited it down and put it up on YouTube and the company's Facebook fan page. Greener By Design typically picks up two to three new fans a week with fresh content, such as videos of employees at work to tips on growing herbs or trends in eco-art to updates on local speaking engagements or gardening classes.

In addition to proper promotion and planning, volunteering can directly influence sales through improved employee attitudes.



According to the study "Good Companies, Better Employees," some of the outcomes of effective employee volunteer programs include:

- Increased job satisfaction levels.
- Increased positive word of mouth among employees about their employer and an improved rating among employees for their employer as a place to work.
- Higher employee retention rates.
- Employees who participated in volunteer programs appeared to be more prone to pursue promotion and development activities in the months following the participation in the

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volunteer programs.

The *Harvard Business Review* did a study of the linkage between employee attitude, customer relations and sales at Sears and found improving employee attitude by five points resulted in a 1.3-point improvement in customer satisfaction, which produced a 0.5% revenue hike. For a company like Sears, this amounts to \$65 million annually.

Do unto others ...

Heller admits he was a pretty shy kid growing up.

“I was a social moron,” says the outgoing president of PLANET’s Day of Service Committee. “It has taken years of my wife telling me to go and network for me to be comfortable speaking in public. She encouraged me not to talk about my business too much, but rather to take baby steps and be comfortable with each one. You can’t



The world on their shoulders: Mirrorscapes’ crew removes debris.

go straight from being shy to being a motor mouth.”

What helped Heller get over the rough spots was having a passion for what he was doing, including the various customer service projects his company supports. “It’s easier to talk about something if you really care about what you’re doing and whom you’re doing it for,” he explains.

When choosing a volunteer effort, passion is the most important criteria.

“You have to be excited about what you’re doing and feel good about helping someone who has a need,” explains Newman, the incoming president of the PLANET Day of Service Committee. “If you are excited and have passion, everyone you interact with — whether it’s your employees or vendors or the media — will feed off of your excitement.”

And that’s where one community service effort sets itself apart from another. Making a positive impact and growing employee and customer loyalty are all key drivers of volunteer efforts. But many Green Industry professionals who have had success here say none of this is possible by faking it. The primary rule of thumb: Believe in your project. “It’s more than just trying to make a good impression for the sake of making a good impression,” Newman says. “It’s about simply doing good because it’s the right thing to do.” **LMI**

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