Case studies on growth

Maintaining current revenue and growing business — these are contractors top two priorities for the next six months, according to *Landscape Management* research. In addition to providing expert advice on how to grow now, *Landscape Management* talked to 12 contractors with 2010 growth success stories to unlock the details on how they did it so you could steal an idea or two from their playbooks. Here are their stories. » » »

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Competitive pricing

Working with customers on their biggest pain point — price — brings renewed growth for Cagwin & Dorward. BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

IN 2009, NOVATO, Calif.-based Cagwin & Dorward was down around 14% in lost revenue.

Like so many other companies, they were hit hard by the economy, and experienced lost accounts and lots of scaling back. Since then, the company has rebounded greatly and is currently looking at a little more than 4% growth for 2010.

What that difficult year has allowed the company to do, says Steve Glennon, vice president and COO, is to become more competitive on pricing. "We were a little slow to react to the economic situation," he says. "We've never typically been a company with a reputation of being a low-price leader. In fact, we have a reputation of being on the higher side. However, we do provide a lot of value with that price. But in this economy we're finding people are no longer looking for the 'Mercedes Benz' level of service anymore. They want good work, but price has become critical. So we've gotten a lot more competitive."

This solution was born out of one of the company's biggest challenges — losing customers solely on price. "We were getting termination letters in which they told us we'd done an outstanding job for a decade or more, but they were hiring someone who charged much less," Glennon says. "It's difficult to lose a contract when we were doing a good job — they just couldn't afford us anymore. So we're working closer with our customers on pricing now."

GROWTH PROFILE

Cagwin & Dorward

Novato, CA

2010 Growth: 4%

The Cagwin & Dorward management team.

In addition to scaling back pricing, the company, whose two biggest areas are maintenance (61.5%) and installation (23.2%), has also put more emphasis on what they call "customer centricity." "It's about staying connected to the customer," Glennon says. "Customer retention is probably one of the most important elements of our business and we put a lot of emphasis on it. One of the things we implemented last year was going out to our top 25 customers and just talking with them. Asking how the economy is affecting their business and letting them know that we understand."

Of the company's growing areas, tree care (which accounts for about 8.8% of overall services) has been strong with about 25% growth over last year's numbers. Glennon says that's one area where customers are willing to spend their dollars — particularly when it comes to safety and liability issues — so he's put some more focus there. "We are making more of an effort to address safety issues and hazards with our clients," he says. "When you bring those types of things to the client's attention, they're willing to spend the money."

The company has also put an emphasis on water conservation education, which is a growing need for Northern California, an area that's dealt with many drought issues. "We pulled a lot of new contracts simply based on the premise that we felt confident we could reduce their water consumption and their overall cost," Glennon says.

The combination of several key strategies — namely competitive pricing, customer centricity, and a focus on growth areas like water conservation — has helped grow Cagwin & Dorward in 2010. "We knew when we were budgeting that this would be another tough year," says Glennon, who originally put growth around 6%. "We felt if we could have a conservative goal and grow despite the economy that we'd be happy with that success." LM

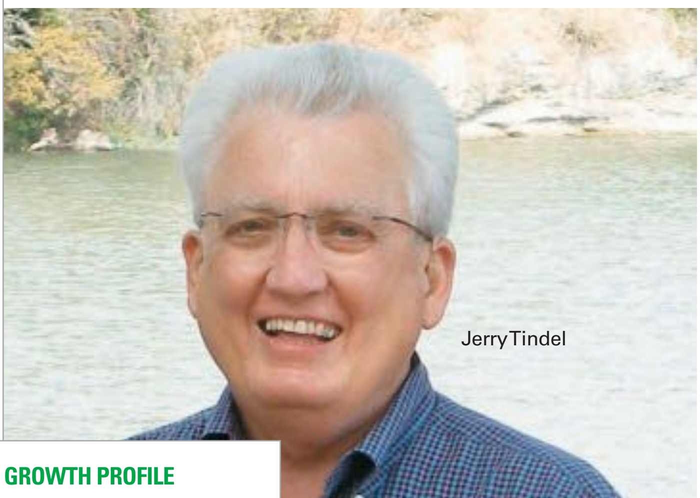
GETZ *is a freelance writer with experience covering the lawn care and landscape industry.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Wisdom from water

Drought plus more service solutions equals growth for Cutting Edge.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**



Jerry Tindel

GROWTH PROFILE

Cutting Edge Lawn Care

Austin, TX

2010 Growth: 10%

THIS YEAR Cutting Edge Lawn Care based in Austin, TX is on track for 10% growth in revenue. In fact, over the last three years they've managed to increase by 10% each year, despite the weak economy. Jerry Tindel, business manager, says the fact that Austin did not experience as difficult economic problems as other U.S. cities is certainly one factor in their success.

However, there's more to it than that, as Austin wasn't without its own problems — including a drought. "A drought is probably the next worst thing that could happen to a lawn mowing company," Tindel says. "It lasted 68 days with temperatures more than 100 degrees. We had four summer months with a total of only 2 inches of rainfall. That's really bad."

So how did a company that does all lawn maintenance for 90% residential clients grow its business during a drought? "By making the biggest change in our business policy since we have been in business," says Tindel, adding they actually implemented the new policy in 2007, during the first really bad drought they experienced and that it has continued to help the company grow through the most recent drought. "We decided to only accept new clients who have a sprinkler system, want weekly lawn services and would accept one of our annual service plans. That was a huge change, which resulted in us turning down five out of six prospect calls we received. Even though we turned down 86% of our calls for quotes, we grew 21.6% that year. The reason: Those new clients brought in almost three times the sales as the ones we formerly added."

Previously, Tindel says, four out of five customers were biweeklies who were not on contract. "In a drought year, we would mow them between 11 and 15 times," he says. "But for our new weekly contract clients, we mowed 43 times a year, which results in about three times the sales volume when you add in the mulch and other services they buy because they want a prettier lawn."

How did Cutting Edge Lawn Care secure such top-notch clients? With top-notch service and aggressive marketing, Tindel says. The company puts money into advertising in good times and in bad. "We always advertise," he stresses, "because good advertising works."

The company also doesn't miss an opportunity to market itself. It uses its trailers as billboards that advertise and promote the company in new areas. And Tindel knows how much appearance counts in this industry. Employees are professionally dressed and equipment is in good shape. "Too many lawn guys are in their old pickups and ragged clothes," says Tindel.

While Austin wasn't as hard hit as the rest of the nation, not everyone went unaffected, and Cutting Edge decided to help prospective clients who were experiencing harder times by modifying their annual service plan proposal to offer two different levels of service. "Our standard service has always been to quote the total cost of 43 service visits per year and include eight free ones so we visit our clients' properties 52 weeks a year," Tindel explains. "We changed the name of that to our 'Premium Service' plan and then offered a 'Minimum Service' plan, which includes only 37 service visits."

About half of new customers signed on for the Minimum Service plan — evidence it was a smart and much-needed addition to their offerings that likely helped them secure new clientele. Tindel hopes he can move these clients into a Premium Service plan when times get better for everyone. LM

GETZ *is a freelancer with experience covering landscaping.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Master planners

Considerable growth leads to expansion into new markets for DLC Resources.

BY **JOHN WALSH**

DLC Resources is spreading its wings like an eagle soaring over deserts in the Southwest as it continues to grow. Jumping from $16.86 million in annual revenue in 2007 to $21.98 million in 2008 and $22 million in 2009, the company recently expanded out of its headquarters into Tucson and Las Vegas.

With a niche of managing large master-planned communities, DLC is using its proprietary GPS software, water management system, environmental policies and talented employees to differentiate from competitors and boost business.

It seems to be working.

Keep track of it

The proprietary software using GPS technology, which was implemented five years ago, measures and tracks properties' assets — such as trees, playgrounds, mail kiosks, water meters and irrigation components — that require maintenance. DLC employees can do this via handheld PDA devices.

Using the software, DLC plots all assets on aerial photographs and, in the case of trees and other assets, can put a value (dollar amount) on each. The company keeps track of everything it prunes and stores the information electronically, allowing the company to look back five years to help it plan for future maintenance needs.

The software also helps DLC and the communities it serves regarding liability. "If a particular tree fails, causing damage resulting in a claim, we can demonstrate there's a plan in place to minimize a negligence argument," says Jeff Penney, CEO and co-founder of DLC Resources.

The most obvious edge DLC has over its competitors is the use of this GPS technology, says Don Schlander, head of business development.

"No one else does it like this," he says.

GROWTH PROFILE

DLC Resources

Phoenix, AZ

2010 Growth: 0% with 10% to 15% expected as a result of expansion into new markets

DLC Resources management team.

Every drop counts

Aside from the GPS software, DLC is using water management to set itself apart from its competition.

"The goal is to provide only enough water to the turf and plants to remain healthy but no more," Penney says.

The comprehensive water management program, which was implemented eight years ago, tracks all water meters (50 to 200) monthly per community, including previous years' water use. A water budget is implemented based on acreage and vegetation type. That budget and actual usage is compared to an association's budget.

"Our people who program the clocks know how much it costs to run a cycle ($500 to $4,000 per cycle), which is all the watering needed on a property for one night," Penney says. "We can save significant dollars per cycle because we're looking at water reports and weather conditions. We analyze the local conditions and work continually to balance the systems. We arm our people in the field with resources and knowledge, and then they're held accountable for the budget."

DLC's water management program saved Desert Mountain 30% on its water bill the first year it maintained the property. Penney says 15% to 30% is the norm for water savings for its clients. Another example: Johnson Ranch saved $50,000 on water the first year DLC maintained the property.

continued on page 106

continued from page 104

It's easy being green

Another way DLC tries to make a difference is via the environment. It recycles all the green waste that's generated on a property — 90% of all material removed from a site is green waste and processed in the company's yard with a horizontal grinder. Then it's hauled to a third-party recycler that makes low-grade paper and mulch. An average of 25 tons of processed green waste a day is hauled away from the DLC yard. Even though DLC pays for that waste to be hauled away, it saves about $10 a ton by not taking the waste in multiple loads to a transfer site or landfill facility. The other 10% of the waste is trash, which is nongreen. The company recycles half of that (cans, bottles, etc.).

Additionally, all managerial and supervisory employees drive Honda Accords, CRVs and Toyota Priuses instead of pickup trucks SUVs. Another environmental initiative: all two-cycle equipment (trimmers, chain saws, edgers, etc.) is sold annually, and the company buys new equipment, which has improved emissions.

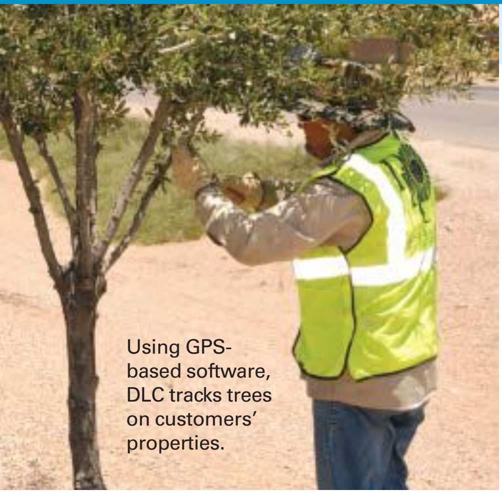
Growth spurt

All aspects of DLC's operation adds up to growth — the company has been averaging 10% to 15% annually from its conception until '04 when it had two years of back-to-back 25% growth. It grew 30% from '07 to '08. And employee growth has been proportional to revenue growth. This growth is due mainly to the expansion of Phoenix, Penney says. Rapid growth has slowed in the tough economy — 2009 was a flat year, and Penney predicts 2010 to be flat.

DLC, which is 100% maintenance focused on master-planned communities (about 30 of them), has only one municipal project, which represents 5% of its business. That project is for the city of Phoenix and entails maintenance of the landscape buffer along the residential side of sound walls next to freeways throughout the city.

"We don't want to grow the municipal or commercial business," Penney says. "Large HOA (homeowners' association) is our market, and if

PHOTOS COURTESY: DLC RESOURCES



Using GPS-based software, DLC tracks trees on customers' properties.

we continue to focus on that, we'll have continued success because we provide services other companies don't."

Most companies in Phoenix combine maintenance and construction, Schlander says. As the economy slowed, companies with a sizable construction business were hurt worse than those with a smaller construction business.

When comparing the Phoenix market to Las Vegas, Schlander says the quantity of target properties in Vegas are similar to those in Phoenix, and the competition in Vegas is similar to Phoenix, he says, citing three national companies (ValleyCrest, TruGreen, Groundskeeper) and one local company (Par 3 Landscape & Maintenance) competing for business in Sin City. The Vegas market, however, is smaller than Phoenix. It's metro population is 2 million compared to Phoenix's 4.5 million.

While trying to earn new business in Vegas and Tucson, Schlander says 90% of the sale is the presentation, the company's credibility and the work.

The economy is DLC's main growth obstacle, not new development. Second to the economy is cost pressure because there is more competition.

"We have one-third of the Phoenix market, and we can capture another third," Penney says. "We've opened offices in Tucson and Las Vegas, but it will take a year or two to get a foothold in these cities. Once that happens, we expect 10% to 15% annual growth."

Penney is looking to find managers in those two cities and says he'll take key players in Phoenix that desire the challenge and relocate them there. He'll oversee both offices but not the day-to-day operations.

To date, DLC has garnered four contracts in Tucson but none in Vegas yet. The revenue goal is to generate $2 million through targeting master-planned communities. As Schlander says: "We need better name recognition in those markets." LM

WALSH *is a freelancer with experience covering the lawn care and landscape industry.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Maintenance is where it's at

GROWTH PROFILE
Earthworks
Lillian, TX
2010 Growth: 20%

Shifting focus toward maintenance over construction brought growth to Earthworks.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

WHEN THINGS STARTED going downhill with the economy, Earthworks, a Lillian, TX-based company, decided to be proactive. "You can't fight the environment," says Chris Lee, president. "You have to look at how you can turn what most people see as a negative into something positive."

Lee says the more he looked at the situation his company was in, the more opportunity he began to see. He realized it was a chance to grow the maintenance end of his business. "Normally we wouldn't have the resources to grow our maintenance base," he says. "But suddenly we had that opportunity."

At the time, the business was doing about 60% maintenance work and 30% installation/rehab. But when the economy turned, a lot of the extras, outside of maintenance, were starting to dry up. There was no new construction in the area. So Lee made the transition to growing the maintenance division in place of installations. Today, he's closer to 70% maintenance and 20% installation/rehab. As people have started spending more this year, that maintenance base began increasing dramatically. Lee believes he's in a great place. "We're set up to not only maintain our business through the recession, but to explode once it's over," he says. At press time, the company was tracking for a little more than 20% growth. "We're on target for bringing in $12.7 million if everything continues as planned," Lee adds. "That's actually a little ahead of where we thought we'd be."

Chris Lee

Besides the ability to adapt by growing the maintenance side, the company was also successful this year because it embraced its clients and their situation. "They were in financial difficulty and their budgets were tighter," he says of his all-commercial clientele. "While some landscape companies got resentful and mad that their clients were bidding work, we tried to empathize with our clients' situation. We got out there and talked to them about how we could help them through these tough times so they weren't taking our jobs to bid. We started looking at ways we could re-negotiate contracts with clients who were really struggling. We embraced their situation and said 'Let's work together.'"

Along with that, many of Lee's clients were doing things like sprinkler repairs or flower beds in-house to try and cut some costs. "We decided that instead of being mad, we'd look at it as the 'new game,'" he explains. "It's the way things are now. So we decided if they were going to do it in-house, we could help them do it right. We viewed it as another opportunity to solidify our base by creating good will. So we offered no-charge irrigation classes where we actually taught them what to do and bought them lunch. Ironically, the more education we gave, the more our clients realized it wasn't so simple — there's a lot of complexity to irrigation systems, and they wanted beautiful and colorful beds. So we actually found we got a lot of jobs back that way."

Lee says he really believes the recession has ultimately made his business better. "We're truly a better company today than we were at the end of 2008 because it was easy to make money then," he says. "Now you really have to have a focus and a plan. The situation has forced us to adapt and it's pushed us to get better. We will be a better company for the future because of what we've been through today." LM

GETZ *is a freelancer with experience covering landscaping.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Whiplash recovery

Having an owner who works *on* the business vs. *in* it and increasing marketing took Grant & Power Landscaping from its worst year in business to stable growth. BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

GRANT & POWER Landscaping has been through some major whiplash, but has come out better on the other side of things.

In 2008, the company had its best year by far. In 2009, it had its worst. "That catches you off guard," says Jan-Gerrit Bouwman, RLA, MLA, ASLA, senior landscape architect and partner of the West Chicago, IL-based company. Now, for 2010, things have stabilized and the company is even tracking 5% to 10% growth over last year. With the economy still somewhat shaky, they're thrilled with that success.

GROWTH PROFILE

Grant & Power Landscaping

West Chicago, IL

2010 Growth: 5% to 10%

Jan-Gerrit Bouwman

This year, all departments grew over 2009 and estate maintenance is currently ahead of where it was in 2008 — the company's best year. Grant & Power has also seen huge growth in snow removal, due not only to a large snow fall, but to an increase in new customers as well as a 90%-plus retention rate.

One reason for this year's growth, says Bouwman, is clients are loosening their grip on their purse strings. The company has a customer breakdown of 60% residential/ 40% commercial. "In 2009, customers were angry, anxious and not spending at all," he says. "In 2010, people are more relaxed, more secure and more value-conscious again. We are known for high quality and excellent service. Customers know we will be around, even with a bad economy, and that is now paying off."

But Bouwman says a lot of factors went into their success this year, including the fact that with three partners, the company operates as a "triangle." "That's one of the strongest structures," he says. "Each partner works on their own areas of strength. Also, the owner works *on* the business — not so much *in* it. That makes a big difference."

Owner Gene Grant Jr. manages the company from his home office more than 2,000 mi. away.

The company also increased marketing efforts in 2009 and 2010 to try and keep their name out there, even when times were rough. "We do a lot of branding and want to convey ourselves as being the experts," says Bouwman, adding that in 2009 the company spent 2.4 times what it spent on marketing in 2008, shifting away from Yellow Pages advertising toward Internet pay-per-click advertising via the company's own website. "We try to be No. 1 in quality and service — not necessarily the biggest company out there."

Grant & Power Landscaping is also heavily promoting sustainability, forming a "Green Team" of several employees who meet and discuss ways to continue improving. The company offers native plants, rain barrels and rain gardens, permeable pavers and organic lawn care fertilization as greener options for customers. The company also reduces, reuses and recycles 95% of its green waste and started e-invoicing this January.

One of the hardest areas the company has had to overcome was the need for layoffs when things got really rough in 2009. They needed to lay off 20% last summer and Bouwman says it was important that the company do it as fairly as possible, while showing employees they really did care about them. The employees were obviously upset but understood the company had no other options. When things improved this year, all but one employee was hired back.

In the end, Bouwman says, it's those employees who have made the biggest difference in growth. He says it's the people behind the company that keep it strong. And to show their appreciation, employees were given an increase this year. "Our employees all push in the same direction and are truly caring when it comes to the company," he says. "And they are unbelievably hard working. Without them, we are nothing." LM

GETZ *is a freelance writer with experience covering the lawn care and landscape industry.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Sharpening the saw

An in-depth self-examination led to better business at Lawn Doctor.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

Scott Frith, vice president — marketing and franchise development for Lawn Doctor, headquartered in Holmdel, NJ, believes the economic situation actually strengthened the company. "It caused us to take a really close look at our business, our team and our processes to look at what opportunities are out there," he says. "Stephen Covey calls it 'sharpening the saw,' so you can cut better, and that's just what we've done. We conducted an in-depth self-examination that's led to ways we can build a better business." At press time, sales were approaching 15% growth over last year.

How they grew involved a variety of contributing factors, including the formation of committees focused on specific functional areas in the business, bringing franchisees to the table so their voices could be heard. "They help us drive our strategies," Frith says. "We want to keep them involved in decisions."

Implementing more technology was also a key growth factor that allowed the company to drive more marketing and some service and sales efficiencies. "Having more efficient systems is important," Frith says. "For instance, having GPS routing and mobile technologies enables us to check in on jobs easier and sync up with software in the office."

And like many other companies, Frith also says the economic situation has made customer retention more important than ever. As a result, the company has really focused on providing better customer service. "We've always put the customer at the center, but I do think when you're growing at a certain rate you're always looking for the next customer. You don't forget the existing customer, but maybe you don't do everything you really should to retain them and create that referral base. So we've really started focusing our efforts on what we need to do to deliver on the service expectations of all of our customers."

For Lawn Doctor, the economic situation has also created a unique opportunity Frith believes will bring future franchise growth — the fact that so many green industry vets are out of work but still love the industry. "There are a lot of quality green industry people out there who just don't see a light at the end of the tunnel in their state of unemployment," he says. "We believe a future trend for us will be hearing from people who've lost jobs in the Green Industry who come to a point where they need to make a move and want to do it on their own but still go with a brand they know and trust. We've had so much interest already."

As a result, the company now offers a green discount for industry vets. If applicants qualify as having Green Industry experience, they'll get $12,500 off of the initial startup fee. The company is also now financing half of the total investment for all new franchisees. "There are so many people out there who are responsible and hardworking, and did everything right; they just fell victim to the times," Frith says. "We believe in our brand and the people in this industry, so if they're joining our brand, we want to help them out." LM

GROWTH PROFILE
Lawn Doctor
Holmdel, N.J.
2010 Growth: 15%

Scott Frith

GETZ is a freelancer with experience covering the landscape industry.

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Making dad and

Steven Jomides is on track to turn a $15,000 starter loan from his dad into a $10 million-plus business by 2013 — the 25th anniversary of Lawns By Yorkshire.

BY **MARTY WHITFORD**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Steven Jomides never had the opportunity to fully repay the $15,000 his father loaned him in 1988 to found Lawns By Yorkshire.

"I made one or two small payments to Dad in '88, but later that year he died of lung cancer at age 56," shares Jomides, a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, as he fights back tears. "Mom died two years later, at 53, of brain cancer. I was orphaned at 27. I grew up in a hurry."

Today, the 48-year-old Jomides says he honors his parents daily by placing family first, while working hard to grow his dad's $15,000 loan into a $10 million-plus business by

Steven Jomides

GROWTH PROFILE
Lawns By Yorkshire
Westwood, NJ
2010 Growth:
10%-15%

mom proud

2013 — the 25th anniversary of the founding of Lawns By Yorkshire.

Seed of hope

Little did Jomides or his parents know then, but that $15,000 starter loan would represent the seed of hope for a 25-year-old only child about to lose both parents.

"Looking back, it's very fitting I named the business Lawns By Yorkshire," Jomides notes. "My parents absolutely loved, and for years bred, Yorkshire terriers. I'm not a small-dog guy, but it's never been just about me. This business is as much Dad's and Mom's as it is mine and my associates."

Jomides is a self-purported graduate of "The Green School of Hard Knocks."

"When I was 17, I made $3 per hour mowing lawns and picking weeds for a friend," Jomides reminisces. "I spent most of my daily earnings on breakfast and lunch. That was Lesson No. 1: Control expenditures now; rewards come later."

Three years later, Jomides received a reward: a 33% bump in pay when he went to work for another landscape contractor.

"I earned $4 per hour — but, again, it was very hard and humbling work," Jomides notes. "Tasked with transporting crushed blue landscape stone up a steep hill, I lasted only one week on that grueling job.

"But I learned another critical business lesson that week: The sizable gap between labor and material costs and project pricing — the 'net' — really caught my eye, and eventually my heart and my parents' faith," Jomides adds. "The seed to start my own landscape business was planted that week, with that job loss. Five years later, with help from Dad and Mom, I struck out on my own."

No small dog

After attending his father's funeral, Jomides returned to work that afternoon. And, for the most part, he hasn't looked back since.

"I only have two regrets: 1) That my parents never met my beautiful bride of 16 years, Andrea, and our children, Zac and Noa; and 2) That Dad and Mom never saw what became of their $15,000 — how their little Yorkshire has grown into a pretty big dog."

Lawns By Yorkshire has grown its annual revenue two hundredfold — from about $40,000 in sales in 1988 to a projected $8 million this year. The company's operations, meanwhile, have expanded from one small home office to its Westwood, NJ, headquarters plus three satellite locations.

The company's "Green Team" provides landscape and tree installation and maintenance; lawn, plant and shrub care; integrated pest management; design/build services; erosion control; and irrigation and storm water management solutions. The Green team accounts for half of the company's employee roster, yet typically generates about two-thirds of the business' annual sales.

Lawns By Yorkshire's "White Team" comprises about 250 associates providing snow and ice management services. With an arsenal of 40 trucks, 30 plows, 75 snowblowers, 15 salt spreaders and more than 40 skid steers with plow attachments, the White Team is tethered to headquarters and one

PHOTOS BY: FRED MILLER

another via smart phones, a system of controlled circuit TV cameras and GPS devices. "Technology helps us ensure safety and efficiency in even the most brutal of Northeast storms," Jomides adds.

Lawns By Yorkshire serves an array of clients — from homeowner associations, multi-family dwellings and senior-living facilities to hotels, restaurants and retail/shopping centers, to school and corporate campuses to municipalities and industrial complexes — throughout New Jersey and New York.

"How do we grow every year? We work our butts off to bring in and keep business," Jomides says. "Sometimes,

NOTHING BUT NETS

Jomides tipped off 2010 by forging a co-branding business development deal with the NBA's New Jersey Nets. The integrated marketing alliance includes:

› A "Greenest Fan" contest, in which Nets enthusiasts craft essays offering environmentally sound solutions to common problems, with winners awarded environmental prizes on Nets' "Green Nights." Jomides and the Nets have taken their green game on the road, educating grade-schoolers — tomorrow's leaders — on the importance of environmental stewardship and the ecological and health benefits of plants.

› The installation of a Lawns By Yorkshire Putting Green just outside The Courtside Club at The Prudential Center where the Nets currently play — offering fans another opportunity to win prizes.

› Lawns By Yorkshire serving as the presenting sponsor of the Nets' "Metropolitan Madness Basketball Challenge," an annual five-on-five tournament in which associates from 64 major companies compete in March at PNY Center, the Nets' practice facility in East Rutherford, NJ.

› The landscape business also is the presenting sponsor of "Football Night,"

our industry forgets we need to keep our customers happy to keep them. Other times, we forget we need to keep selling to keep growing. We need to do both very well to survive and thrive in this business."

Giving back

Jomides says he feels a strong tug to give back to the Green Industry, which has given him, his family and his family of associates so much. That's why he shares his time and leadership talents with the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association (NJLCA) and the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET).

"Steven's dedication to the Green Industry, network of industry profes-

a gridiron-themed evening including a chance for fans to don football uniforms and have their photos taken with Nets Dancers, as well as to participate at halftime in an on-court football skills competition. The winner receives a sustainable landscape consultation and maintenance facelift compliments of Lawns By Yorkshire.

› A private suite located in The Platinum Lounge of The Prudential Center serves as a networking opportunity for Jomides, other Nets sponsors and premium floor-seat season ticketholders.

› Lawns By Yorkshire also receives in-arena signage, advertising space on www.njnets.com, and a radio ad and feature during each Nets' radio broadcast.

"Co-branding with a major sports brand like the Nets is the opportunity of a lifetime for us," Jomides says. "Because of these new, high-level marketing and networking opportunities, we've landed key projects such as maintaining the landscape surrounding the Nets' practice facility, as well as Vonage's existing and PNY's future headquarters — and we're just getting started." — *MW*

Steven Jomides (left) with Brett Yormark CEO of Nets Basketball and President and CEO Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment sionals and addictive enthusiasm has been a welcomed addition to NJLCA's Board of Directors," says NJLCA President Jody Shilan.

Jomides also is an active member of PLANET, helping to drive mem-

Jomides' management team (From left): Chris Hricik, Burke Hammonds, Jomides, Fidel Castro and Mark Boggio. Left, employee Noe Garcia.

bership in the national association as well as serving on its Executive Forum Committee.

"We have an excellent group of core managers at Lawns By Yorkshire, which affords me the peace of mind needed to leave base camp and give back more to our industry," Jomides notes. "We're about halfway up Mount Everest. As we close in on the summit, I'll turn over more to our talented management team and give back more to the industry."

After one of his rare looks in the rearview mirror, Jomides earlier this year decided to further honor his parents while giving back to the industry.

Jomides and Judy Guido, his chief marketing officer, are working closely with PLANET staff to establish an annual scholarship in the names of Jomides' parents, Morton and Sandra. The goal is to each year award one landscape/horticulture student $1,000 for his or her education as part of the planned $25,000 scholarship endowment.

"This annual PLANET scholarship honoring Dad and Mom will be around long after I'm gone," Jomides says, smiling. "I wasn't afforded the time to pay back my father during his short stay here, but I can repay Dad and Mom by paying it forward." LM

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Retain to gain

Focusing on existing customers brought organic growth to Native Land Design.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

BEN COLLINSWORTH, CEO of Native Land Design in Cedar Park, TX, says his key to success this year was simple — he didn't try to reinvent the wheel.

"While many others in our market and industry are trying to add revenue in a bad economy, we have tried to get better operationally in our business and give our current customers more attention and better customer service," Collinsworth says. "We want to spend our time trying to retain our current clients instead of hitting the streets trying to add a lot of new people to the mix."

Focusing primarily inward on existing clients has lead to organic growth for the company. In fact, despite the down economy, Native Land Design is looking at bringing in a little more than $9.2 million this year in revenue. Last year, they brought in $7.6 million. And for the past three years, Native Land Design has made the *Inc.* magazine list of the Fastest Growing Private Companies in America with 108.5% growth from 2005 to 2008.

In Cedar Park, TX, people are starting to spend money again, Collinsworth says, and that's allowed his company, which is driven by 90% commercial work, to grow without having to pick up a ton of new clientele. But Collinsworth did pick up a few big jobs this year, which also helped growth. The economy has actually created a unique situation in which Native Land Design has had the opportunity to get some work that was previously unavailable. "Jobs went up for bid that had been tied up with one landscape business for years," he explains. "There were companies out there that had their budgets cut and they had to shop around for a lower price. That has allowed a business like ours to secure projects that previously weren't even available for bid. So, in some ways, the economic situation has actually helped us."

Ben Collinsworth

While the economy allowed Collinsworth to get some new work, it also led to his biggest challenge to overcome. As a relatively young company, Native Land Design found it difficult to find the funds they needed from local bankers. Collinsworth overcame this by looking for the right lending opportunities out of state. "We actually had to look nationally," he says, "to make sure the funding was available to finance the equipment we needed for growth."

GROWTH PROFILE

Native Land Design

Cedar Park, TX

2010 Growth: 21%

Operationally, growth has also required more equipment and labor, Collinsworth points out. The latter is another area where the economic situation has actually helped. "Because the construction industry was so hard hit by the economy, there's some good talent that's readily available right now," he says.

While the company has made some pretty big strides in growth, Collinsworth says he's looking to be conservative in his plans for continued growth. In the past, the company grew too quickly — going from a $4 million business to a $10 million one in just two years — and that almost put them out of business. "We're anticipating 7% to 10% growth for next year and think that's a comfortable, conservative number," he says. "There are a lot of clients who cut back services, and we're hoping they'll start spending even more next year and add some of those services back. So we're looking at growing again without having to pick up a lot of new clients." LM

GETZ *is a freelancer with experience covering landscaping.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Hire slow, grow fast

People are the front-line of growth at Ryan Lawn & Tree.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

Larry Ryan

GROWTH PROFILE

Ryan Lawn & Tree

Overland, KS

2010 Growth: Between 10% and 14%

LARRY RYAN, PRESIDENT of Ryan Lawn & Tree in Overland, KS, believes the quality of his company's growth has come from the quality of the people he hires — and that's an area where the economy has actually helped his business. "A lot of the people who would normally go into the golf course industry are coming to us," he says. "That industry is overbuilt and currently depressed. We also get a lot of top quality people straight out of the local universities who are anxious for a job."

Ryan looks at 20 resumes for every one person he hires, and his focus on seeking out the best people is what has grown the company, despite these tough times. He's expecting between 10% and 14% growth.

Irrigation (which accounts for about 10% of services offered) has been one of the company's strongest growth areas considering the region is coming off of two very wet years where there was little demand. "A dry season will market our service," he says. "In 2011, we again expect irrigation to be one of our strongest growth areas." The company also does 55% turf work and 35% forestry, and services mostly (80%) residential customers.

In terms of marketing, Ryan says it's the top-notch employees that best market his company. Word-of-mouth is still the company's No. 1 way of corralling new business, and Ryan says having hard-working, uniformed employees out in the field everyday has also helped rope in new jobs. In addition, he also recently redesigned his website and is looking to generate more of a web presence for the business. "We've almost completely done away with the Yellow Pages," says Ryan. "We find them very limiting."

In addition to quality employees and a growing web presence, Ryan says his company's focus on the customer is probably what aided growth the most. The company is in regular communication with all of its customers. "It's important to have a staff that will take the initiative to call people — and not just the top people but all of the customers," he emphasizes. "We just had a scenario where someone cancelled our pruning services to go with someone that was $200 cheaper. The employee called them up and left a message thanking them for their business and just putting it out there how important pruning is and how critical it is that they are using a reputable company that will do it right. Within an hour the customer called back and said they'd rather have us do the job right than save a little money."

Ryan makes a special effort to really focus on the tough customers too, and that's ultimately helped with customer retention. In this economy every customer counts. "It's too easy to walk away from that really tough or nasty client, but hanging in longer teaches us to take better care of all our customers," he adds. "Our customer service is the number one reason we grew this year. We don't easily give up on any customer." LM

GETZ is a freelancer with experience covering landscaping.

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Signature solutions

Government work helped Signature Contracting Services grow 18%.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

MARSHA NEWBERRY, OWNER of Signature Contracting Services, LLC in Grand Prairie, TX, says she can't pinpoint just one reason why the company has been so successful this year. "It's the whole picture," she says. "There are a multitude of reasons."

The top two are diversification and customer loyalty. While she's heard other companies tell prospective clients they "don't do that type of work," Newberry says Signature doesn't like to say 'No' to future clients and have been diversified from the beginning in the type of services they offer their all-commercial base. That includes everything from mowing to erosion control and construction and street work. In terms of creating customer loyalty, she says it's simple — they build great customer relationships from day one. "We have really deep customer relationships," she says. "It's mostly because we make them feel comfortable from the start. We have a conference room here with couches and big televisions where we hold meetings. Our clients always feel welcome. And, of course, we follow through with great work performance."

GROWTH PROFILE

Signature Contracting Services

Grand Prairie, TX

2010 Growth: 18%

Marsha Newberry

This year, despite a down economy, Signature is projecting 18% growth. In some ways, Newberry says, the economic situation has actually helped her business, due to the type of work they do. In fact, while most landscape companies have no construction work going right now, that division has actually grown for Signature. "That's mostly because of the large contracts we work on, which the Federal government has put money out for," she explains, adding that Signature is a certified business. "We have certainly reaped the benefits on those types of jobs, and it's also the type of work where you know you're going to get paid since the government has laid the money out."

While they've had a great year, Newberry says it wasn't without challenges, and the economic situation did have some negative effect on the business in terms of cash flow. "Probably one of the largest challenges we face today is that the banking industry does not want to let go of money and that makes it difficult to get cash flow for big projects," she says. "We're a small company with many big projects, so that's a real issue for us."

As a result, Newberry says that she's really started watching the company's money a lot closer. "I will call clients before it gets to the 90-day period and discuss the payment with them," she says. "Staying on top of your accounts receivable in a down economy is highly important. People who used to pay right away will wait the whole 90 days now. Being on top of that has helped us continue to succeed. Nobody is going to watch your own money as closely as you do."

Despite some cash flow challenges, Newberry feels fortunate to be one of the few companies that did grow this year. "We definitely feel lucky," she says. "And we'll continue to work hard for another good year." LM

GETZ *is a freelance writer with experience covering the lawn care and landscape industry.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Back to basics

Improving client connections helped Stay Green stay out of the red.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

OPERATING FROM THE garage of their home in the San Fernando Valley, Richard and Charlene Angelo launched Stay Green, Inc. in 1970 with a truck, a handful of residential customers and a vision.

Richard's sense of professionalism drove customer satisfaction, and the business grew quickly through referrals. Today, the company has more than 200 employees working in three divisions — landscape maintenance, plant health care and tree care.

In tough times, sticking to the basics of where one started really counts, says Chris Angelo, president of the Santa Clarita, CA-based business and son of Richard and Charlene. That's what's helped Stay Green grow the business despite a challenging economy. "It's why we got into the business in the first place — or, for me, why my father founded it — and that's to provide exceptional customer service," he says.

In trying times, Chris Angelo believes it's more important than ever to be connected to the client. "We do not lose sight of the clients and what they need," he says. "We achieve that with things like monthly walk-throughs and working with them to find solutions that will help them stick to their budgets. These include water retrofits, water efficiency savings or changing annual color beds to perennials."

These types of efforts, have kept client retention above 95% this year, despite the economy, Chris Angelo says. He's also been empathetic toward his clients who are struggling, and that effort has been appreciated. "We recognize most landlords who own commercial properties, whether office or retail, have conceded rent rates as much as 30%," he says of his all-commercial base. "That means we've had to be flexible enough to provide them with a price that fits their budget this year. That flexibility and willingness to work with them has allowed us to keep high retention rates."

GROWTH PROFILE
Stay Green
Santa Clarita, CA
2010 Growth: 5%

Stay Green focuses largely on landscape maintenance and grew that division by 9% this year, which Angelo sees as a great success during the recession.


Chris Angelo

Overall revenue is tracking to grow slightly, but any growth in this market is also a success.

In addition to a focus on customer relations, Angelo says growth was also achieved with smart planning. "The secret to success is aligning our estimating with our current productivity," he says. "That means working on productivity efficiencies in operations and building specifications that work for the different client market segments."

Of course, Angelo also recognizes he can't do any of this without good employees, and he's turned some of the focus on them as well. In fact, he says helping them through these difficult times has been one of his biggest challenges. "The most difficult thing is morale in today's economy," he says. "People we work side-by-side with are having financial challenges of their own, and it's tough to keep their spirits up in these darker days. We have employees who have spouses who lost jobs and no longer have a dual income. That's a reality for many."

Angelo says he has made a real effort to boost morale this year. "We are offering more company appreciation programs, including a picnic that will have around 400 or 500 people in attendance," he says. "We're doing what we can to keep our employees motivated." LM

GETZ *is a freelancer with experience covering landscaping.*

[CASE STUDIES ON GROWTH]

Persistence pays off

Urban Farmer found the work it wanted and chased it until it was theirs.

BY **LINDSEY GETZ**

The Urban Farmer management team.

GROWTH PROFILE

Urban Farmer

Thornton, CO

2010 Growth: 4.5%

GETTING TO THIS point was a lot of hard work, but Urban Farmer, a Thornton, CO-based full-service landscape, irrigation, reclamation and maintenance firm, is tracking 4.5% growth for the year. How did they do it? One word, says Sean Lynam, business development manager: "Persistence." "It came down to finding the work we wanted to chase and staying after it until we got it," he says. "When bidding, we were also persistent in finding the target number and making it happen."

Like so many other successful landscape firms, when times were good, Urban Farmer had a lot of jobs coming in. Sales didn't have to be too aggressive and could almost pick and choose the jobs they wanted. But in this economy, every job counts and Lynam says their persistence has paid off — though he admits, it was a lot of work to achieve that success. "We really chase down leads now," he continues. "In the past, there was so much more to bid that you didn't have to be as tenacious. That's certainly not the case today."

Once Urban Farmer gets a job, it makes every effort to keep it. "We've always been about customer service, but now more than ever, if our customers ask us to do something, we do it," Lynam says of the mostly commercial clientele they work with. "And we handle it when they need it — even if our bid table is busy we find the time to fit it in. Basically, whatever they need, they get."

This year, Urban Farmer's maintenance division is seeing the strongest growth. Though construction/installation is their larger division (60%), Lynam says maintenance (which accounts for 30%) is holding up better in the tough economic times. "Probably because all our property managers and other customers have to spend money that's allotted for maintenance or it doesn't come back next year in their budgets," he hypothesizes. "Though in this area, construction is at least holding steady."

One adaptation the company has undergone to deal with the economy is to bring more work in house that they typically would have subbed out. "We do a lot of our concrete in house now," Lynam says. "We do as much work in house as we can, though it doesn't always work that easily. There are times when you have nine projects going on and they all want to start the same day, so you're forced to sub out some work. But we make an effort to do it ourselves whenever we can."

Besides doing some more work in house, Lynam says the company didn't make any major changes this year. It didn't add any new marketing plans or map out a detailed growth strategy. Instead, the Urban Farmer team just focused on working as hard as ever. "In terms of a strategy or goal, it was really just to push as hard as we could and to really latch on and stay with our core group of customers," he says.

In the end, that persistence has certainly paid off. LM

GETZ *is a freelance writer with experience covering the lawn care and landscape industry.*