



## THE HALLMARK

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# A better option: more cowbell

**T**en years ago Will Ferrell and Christopher Walken hooked up in one of the funniest Saturday Night Live skits ever. Recall Walken urging Ferrell for “more cowbell” as he and other SNL musicians clanged away on the Blue Öyster Cult’s “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper.”

From time to time, when I feel my energy lagging from the goal at hand, I call up the skit to remind me to, you guessed it — add “more cowbell” to my efforts.

Stick with me here now, OK?

Jim Campanella, speaking to about 200 other owners and managers at the recent Lawn Care Summit, described a punishing business experience he suffered several years ago.

Campanella is president of the Lawn Dawg, a lawn care company that he and a partner founded in 1997 and grew into a respected regional company in New England. Charismatic and energetic, under Campanella’s direction Lawn Dawg literally took off, and many of us considered him a master marketer. And so he seemed when telemarketing was king; his company used to open a new branch annually during its first seven years. But when the do-not-call law banned telemarketing in 2004, he realized (and now frankly admits) he wasn’t a marketing whiz at all.

But, that didn’t turn out to be the biggest problem he faced; the biggest one was self-inflicted.

In 2005 he and his partner decided to diversify and launch mowing and maintenance services to complement their successful lawn care operation. Playing off of the popularity of their established brand they called these new services Little Dawgs. Let’s just say it didn’t turn out the way they had planned.

Campanella said within a year the Little Dawgs had resulted in almost \$500,000 in losses. Equally discouraging, and which it took a while to recognize, the effort to diversify into production-focused landscape maintenance was diminishing the company’s reputation for customer service. Sensing that Lawn Dawg was in a tailspin, he retreated from mowing and maintenance.

“We went back to our core business,” said Campanella. “We got back to the things we knew.” But before he could heal the company’s financial wounds he had one very important thing to do: recover the loyalty and faith of his employees.

“I met with all the employees and told them we messed up,” he said. “I asked them to stay with us.” They did. Now, refocused on customer service, Lawn Dawg rebuilt its customer retention rate to the pre-Little Dawg era. And in 2009, aided by an infusion of capital by Atlanta-based Brighton Partners LLC, the company opened two new branches, bought another company and announced its intention of growing its regional and, eventually, national footprint.

In Lawn Dawg’s case, the lure of diversifying, adding services and evolving into a “one-stop” service provider — too often touted as the surest way to landcare success — didn’t work.

Campanella discovered, as do many others, that, rather than getting involved with businesses you’re unfamiliar with, you’re better off strengthening the one you know — in other words, giving it “more cowbell.”

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