



Bill Bemus

Bemus Landscape president **Bill Bemus** founded the company nearly 40 years ago, in 1973. In 1982, his brother-in-law, Jon Parry, came on board. Together, says Bemus, “we made it go and grow.” Today, Bemus runs the family-owned business with his three sons and Parry, the company’s general manager. And he stops to share his views of the maintenance industry with *LM*.

## TOP TRENDS

› **“Eco-marketing” is not the panacea we hoped for.** The more things change, the more they stay the same. For all the talk about going green and being sustainable, it still gets down to price. For example, we process and recycle all of our generated green waste. It gives us a slight competitive advantage, but the positive effect on the environment is underappreciated by the client community. Our clients are focused on saving dollars. Be environmentally responsible for your children and grandchildren’s sake. It might not be that important to your customers.

› **The marginalization of the landscape profession.** We as an industry have not done a good job of marketing our profession to the general public. Imagine what life would be like, particularly here in Southern California without landscape contractors. We provide a vital, valuable and necessary service to the community. Having great gardens is part of being civilized. And it’s not just the aesthetics; last I checked oxygen is still produced by photosynthesis in green plants. Beautiful landscaping drives traffic to retailers. It sustains and improves commercial and residential property values. It improves the quality of all of our lives. Why is the landscape budget the first thing that people want to trim?

## TOP OBSTACLES

› **Irresponsible price cutting.** In this economy, the most important thing to remember is to begin every sentence with the phrase “in this economy.” It’s becoming a tired excuse for non-performance. This has always been an extremely competitive business. That being said, the frustrating thing now is to have projects go out for due diligence bids (no issues or complaints) and have our prices — which are competitive — undercut by large, top-notch firms who should know better. Irresponsible price cutting is driving the market down for all of us. Has everyone forgotten how good it feels to get a job when you are not the low bid?

› **Finding qualified entry-level employees at wages the market allows us to pay.** In addition to the current economic realities, our work is perceived as being low in value. In other countries, espe-

## INSIDE INFO

**Key to being a maintenance leader:** We don’t pretend to have the magic recipe, but we try hard to keep our clients happy, keep the quality up, and retain our people. Success in our business depends on executing the small details correctly day in and day out, so this is what we try to stay focused on.

The best business aphorism I ever learned was from one of my earliest (and current) customers, “If money will fix it, it’s not a problem.”

**Headquarters:** San Clemente, CA (with branches in Santa Ana, San Marcos and Perris, CA)

**Employees:** 370 full-time

cially in Europe, being a gardener is a rewarding career path. This is tied to the previous points regarding public perception of the industry as a whole and the downward pricing spiral caused by the scorched earth policy of some of the larger players. Our industry needs to get it together. The problem is at least partially one of perception. The national and state trade organizations should work together to change these perceptions and continue to bring landscape professionals together for dialogue.

› **Commoditization.** We’re unique, just like everybody else. Everybody does everything and everybody is getting better at it. It’s good for consumers that there are so many qualified contractors, but it is bad for contractors that there are so many qualified contractors. What

this means is that while the quality of our services is going up the price is going down.

## TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Basic, simple training that revolves around a vigorous quality assurance system.** We call it our Improve Quality (IQ) Program. Since the implementation of the program we have seen vast improvements in job quality, which many of our clients have commented on. It has helped us gain additional work as well as fight the commoditization referred to above. It is also tied to our bonus structures. Our answer to the aforementioned obstacles is to keep things really simple, work really hard on quality, and to never let a customer down.

› **Our Landscape Construction division.** There has been a recent uptick in this division. This is mostly the result of an internal decision to sell more installation work. We are not looking to be volume oriented, just to maintain a healthy balance between our different offerings. We have been happy with the margins we are seeing in our Tree Division. We don’t know if the overall demand for tree care has increased, but we have increased our focus on this service offering and have been able to increase the workload and keep the margins up.