



Chris Davitt

Ruppert Landscape has come a long way since 1971, when Craig Ruppert launched the company in his garage. Ruppert Landscape president **Chris Davitt** has been active in the company since its nascence, when, as an 11-year-old, he helped Ruppert with the business on nights and weekends. Needless to say, Davitt has seen his share of changes at Ruppert and in the industry over the years. Today, he stops to talk to *LM* about what's shaping the maintenance business now.

TOP TRENDS

› **Sustainable landscape management.** It's got us all thinking about an area we didn't think about. We have to figure out ways to use fewer resources while keeping the image of the properties high. It's a new twist and a new challenge for the industry. On the sustainability side, we try to use fewer labor hours, to find a way to do the job more efficiently. We focus on making the best use of our resources.

› **Improved debris management.** If you can figure out what needs to be done and how to do it most efficiently, then the energy savings will come. Debris is expensive to move, and simple things like using mulching blades to avoid hauling away grass clippings leads to savings. Very often you can't dispose of debris on site. If the customer has a wooded area, you can use the leaves to mulch the wood line. Then you have a cleaner looking forest with less undergrowth. You're saving money, but you're also preventing pollution and saving energy.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Tighter margins.** In a tough market like this, we're competing with tighter margins. We have to keep finding ways to meet our customers' needs and do it more cost effectively. Obviously if a customer's willing to spend more, it's a lot easier to make the job shine. If they want to reduce their budget, it makes it more of a challenge. Price, it appears, is the driving factor, but really value is the driving factor. Margin doesn't have to be reduced to provide good value. We need to be more innovative, we need to listen carefully to our customer's needs and by doing so, we can deliver on those needs by changing the project's scope. If there's innovation in equipment or in plant material, we need to

INSIDE INFO

Company: Ruppert Landscape

Headquarters: Laytonsville, MD

Employees: 600

2010 revenue: \$65 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: Ruppert attempts to create a company that inspires its people. A motivated, empowered field force is where the rubber meets the road. We strive to motivate our workforce in many different ways. This can be hard to do because of the many things that managers have on their plates, including selling work, keeping track of costs, managing vendors, etc.

With all we have to do, a manager is not always going to remember to smile, say thank you or ask an employee how they're feeling. That's why we do what we can to acknowledge them in a structured way, whether it be through birthday cards, barbecues, or award ceremonies.

Ruppert's best resources are its people. They're the ones who are going to figure out how to give our customers what they're looking for. We want them to look at each property and take ownership of it, to care about the property they're on. We're constantly taking the temperature of our employees to see how we're doing in the management of them. That's completely necessary if we are going to be a company that holds the bar high.

know about it, especially if that means producing more for less money.

› **Assuming we need to lower margins.** Our customers are talking about price more than ever, but people can sell based on relationships—and they can sell value, which is not always price. The company has to remind the business developers of that, because they're always hearing "price." When customers are saying "price," they usually mean value. To the extent they are talking price, that price doesn't have to come out of margin. With some creative thinking, it can perhaps come out of the scope of the project.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **A talented industry workforce to choose from.** Finding industry talent is usually very difficult. But in a down economy, we have the opportunity to find top performers who are looking for work. We need to be aware of who's out there on the street, who's available. And if they can be put to use in our company, this is the time to make the investment in them.

› **Improving your fundamentals.** When customers are very focused on lower pricing, it may appear that they're making our job harder. But in reality, they're forcing us to ask the question "how can we incrementally improve costs?" We need to improve in small steps—whether it's trying to figure out how to save travel time, or picking up debris at the same time we're mowing. We need to start thinking about how to save minutes and how to save pennies, and over time that adds up to hours and dollars. By embracing the demands of the market and refining our critical thinking skills, we will not only be helping ourselves in the short term, we'll be helping ourselves overcome challenges that arise for years to come.