

The total package

Adding an irrigation division made Hayden Landscaping a one-stop-shop.

Hayden Landscaping cross-trains all of its full-time employees on multiple services.



RICK HAYDEN WAS on the brink of losing jobs. His clientele wanted a one-stop shop that offered an irrigation package along with everything else he did for them (seeding, install and design).

Because he struggled to find good subcontractors offering the service, it came down to adding the division himself or losing the work. Hayden, second-generation owner of Hayden Landscaping in Greenup, IL, knew expanding was his best option. That was in the 1980s, and it's remained a profitable division ever since, comprising approximately 40% of the company's annual revenue.

Back then Hayden was doing a lot more commercial work. Today, about 65% of his jobs are residential as the need for residential irrigation work has grown. Regardless of going commercial or residential, his biggest piece of advice to other contractors looking to enter the field is to get educated. "Whether it's through your local supplier or the Irrigation Association, there's a lot to learn, so it's important to find a good source of information," he says. "This is not something you can just jump into."

TRAINING TECHS

Hayden says the biggest obstacle he's had to overcome is finding other qualified irrigation techs to work with. "When you grow big enough where you can't do it all yourself, finding qualified help can become a problem," he says. "You can't just go on the street and find someone. There's a lot of education and training involved."

Hayden has overcome that challenge by being diligent in good hiring and also cross-training all of his full-time employees. "Now if one of them is off, each employee can handle almost any other job, at least temporarily," he says.

Irrigation can be a tough field to break into if there's steep competition, but Hayden says in his area, even today, there are few competitors. What has been another challenge, though, and may be keeping competition at bay, is the red tape involved in this field. There are a lot of rules and regulations to adhere to, so keeping up with the latest information is critical.

BUILDING UP

When Hayden first added the division, he had a large existing base of customers who were already requesting the service to tap into. As a result, without much marketing effort, he was able to secure a lot of work. And since he lives in a small community, word-of-mouth spread fast. Hayden says even today he gets a lot of jobs through referrals.

In terms of initial output, Hayden says the diagnostic tools to trace wires, locate valves and do repairs are a necessary investment. "Any type of diagnostic tool is money well spent," he says. "Other tools like a plow could be rented, and most contractors probably already have the standard tools they'll need."

In addition, it's helpful to carry a fairly extensive inventory at all times so "you can pull into a job and get it done on the spot," says Hayden. Making multiple trips to a job is money lost, so a well-stocked inventory should also be viewed as an investment.

Today, Hayden says he can't picture the company without its irrigation division. It's become a solid part of his business. But, most importantly, it's helped him retain clients by fulfilling their needs.

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY NAME: Hayden Landscaping

HEADQUARTERS: Greenup, IL

WHY IRRIGATION? Existing clients had irrigation needs and wanted a one-stop shop experience.

INITIAL INVESTMENT: About \$15,000 for tools and inventory, but something to haul tools and inventory is also required: a vehicle and possibly also a trailer.

INVESTMENT RECOUP TIME: A couple of years (longer if including vehicle and trailer expenses).

WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT? Customers spend a lot of money to make their yard look nice, and irrigation helps them get that full benefit. Plus, a lot of towns now require it.