

John Watson, owner of Knoxville, TN-based Common Grounds Landscape Management, operates his business around a set of core values. He also promotes sustainable practices for the industry. Watson started his career in the professional landscaping industry through a high school internship and is now the president of the Tennessee Nursery & Landscape Association.

“As members of the original Green Industry, I believe it’s important for us to take the lead in finding alternative, environmentally friendly ways to manage our landscapes,” he says. Watson stops to share his views of the maintenance industry with *LM*.



John Watson (center), owner of Common Grounds Landscape Management, shows off his company’s Snapper Pro S200xtp propane-fueled mower to environmentally focused customers Randy Holloway (left) with Jones Lang LaSalle, and Mark Harvey with Cowperwood Co.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Common Grounds Landscape Management Inc.

Headquarters: Knoxville, TN

Employees: 37

Key to being a maintenance leader: My team and I operate under three core values: One, use your best judgment to do what is right and fair; two, commit yourself to excellence in everything you do and don’t accept anything less from others; and three, treat everyone as you would like to be treated. Even though the business has changed over the years, our core values have stayed the same.

TOP TRENDS

› **Propane-fueled mowers.** We started using propane-fueled mowers two years ago as participants in a study conducted by the University of Tennessee, which compared gasoline-fueled mowers with those fueled by propane. We were so impressed with the performance of the propane-fueled mowers that we converted half of our walk-behind fleet to propane-fueled models. These mowers help reduce costs, because propane costs less than gasoline for us — especially in the summer — and our on-site refueling station provides convenient refueling and virtually no fuel spillage.

› **Smartphones on the job.** We provided smartphones to our employees to help with everyday tasks and to help track our job costs. Our personnel clock in on their smartphones at the beginning of the day and clock into a specific job when they get to the property to start service. Everything is web-based, so we can check the progress of each job, what is finished and not finished, and can even post new jobs to the site.

› **Educated customers.** Google has changed the world as we know it. I have noticed our customers use Google to look up information about their plants and landscape, and they are looking for educated technicians who are just as knowledgeable. I tell my account managers not to hesitate to do a little on-site research with customers on their smartphones when questions arise. If this happens, I counsel the customer that they need to be sure they are using a reputable information source.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **Recovery from the economic downturn.** I think any obstacle is an opportunity to change and get better, which for us was how we ran our business before 2008. Things have to be important to customers before they spend their money, because in reality, your budget is their money. In light of that, we have transitioned to more customer-focused business practices. We need to remember that as the economy gets better, we need to keep whittling away at inefficiencies and creating lean management practices.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Environmental stewardship.** Our customers are really focused on finding sustainable ways to lower their carbon footprint. Common Grounds was green before it was popular to do so. We believe it’s important for the industry to find alternate ways to manage our landscapes.

› **Rewarding employees.** We developed an open-book bonus plan in 1990, which is based on our profit-and-loss statement from each month. The simple formula is sales less the cost centers on which team leaders can have a direct effect. We take this number and use a multiplier that is split between all the team leaders. During the economic downturn, this knowledge of all costs allowed our team to become very lean. With everyone working together, we were able to save all the full-time jobs — and actually increased team leaders’ bonuses.

The author is the director, Business Development & Marketing for the Propane Education & Research Council.