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Landscaping Management



From left: Shaun
Kanary, Rob Palmer
and Keith Gutierrez

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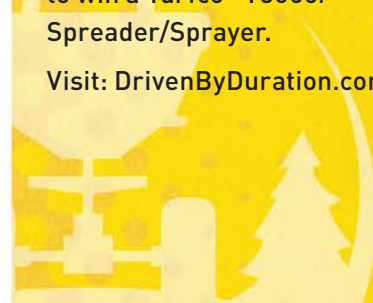
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OUR MISSION: *Landscape Management* — the leading information resource for lawn care, landscape maintenance, design/build and irrigation professionals — empowers Green Industry professionals to learn and grow from their peers and our exclusive business intelligence. Serving as the industry conscience, we not only report on but also help shape news, views, trends and solutions.



EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI EDITOR

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A tip from the tech world

Have you heard of a hack day? How about a hackathon or hackfest? These are different names for the same thing: an event where computer programmers collaborate intensively on software development projects for as short as a day or as long as week.

Sometimes there's a specific goal, like finding new uses for a single company's application programming interface, as is the case with Yahoo's Open Hack Day, a public event held since 2006. Or sometimes it's for a cause, like Random Hacks of Kindness, a joint effort between Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, NASA and the World Bank, where tech professionals volunteer to create solutions for disaster management and crisis response situations.

But sometimes hack days are held solely to drive company innovation. Facebook and Google are examples of organizations that hold internal hack days to foster idea generation and software development. In fact, Facebook's trademark "Like" button was born from a hackathon, according to *Wired*, which also describes these events as a "group brainstorm and software-coding party."

What's my point for Green Industry professionals? All organizations have pain points they'd like help solving and any company may

benefit from a new "big idea," whether it's a way to increase revenue, improve customer service or cut costs through efficiency. The answers may lie within your staff, but employees need the encouragement and time to pursue innovation, outside of their day-to-day duties. Many owners and managers believe their "open-door" policies ensure new ideas will roll in as employees have them. But all employees don't know all of your challenges. And many of them, due to their roles in the company or for cultural reasons, may not feel comfortable sharing them. For example, due to a culture with a deeply rooted respect for authority, Hispanic employees may not voluntarily offer feedback for fear of "challenging" their superiors, according to Sonia Diaz with the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance. (See "How to prepare Latinos for leadership" in our October issue.)

So why not host a hack day? If you're familiar with "lean management," consider a hack day to be a shorter, less structured version of a kaizen event. It's like taking a page from Zuckerberg, not Demming. (If you don't speak "lean," companies use kaizen events to analyze and remove waste from a given process to pursue continuous improvement over time.)

Many of you will offer education over the winter or early-spring training. Why not clear the schedule and set aside time for your employees to brainstorm and problem solve? Buy some pizza or subs, give your employees a challenge or two to tackle, split them up into groups and give them a deadline. Then, each group could present its solution to a panel of judges, which could offer a reward for the best idea.

Maybe you won't implement anything from your first hackathon, but the creativity and viability of some ideas might surprise you. And you could improve morale and empower your people in the process.

Employees need the **encouragement and time to pursue innovation**, outside of their day-to-day duties.

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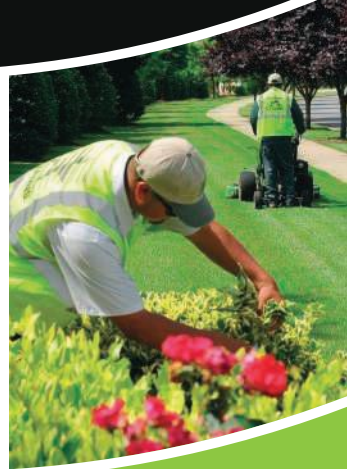
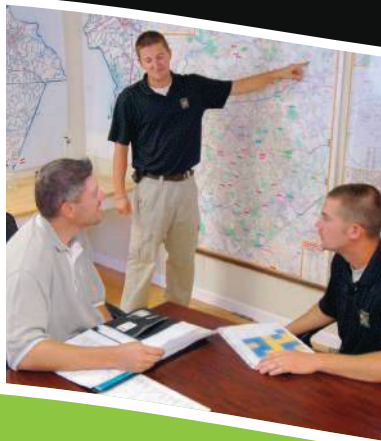
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Turfgrass exhibit takes root in D.C.

A U.S. National Arboretum project is set to promote positive messages about turf. BY **MARISA PALMIERI** EDITOR

The U.S. National Arboretum's (USNA) plan for an interactive outdoor exhibit called Grass Roots is great news

for the Green Industry, says Kevin Morris, president of the National Turfgrass Federation (NTF). The four-year initiative is slated to include a 3/4-acre exhibit plus workshops to inform the public about the importance of turf and turf research. Organizers hope to break ground early next year.

Grass Roots was spearheaded by the USNA's Director Colien Hefferan, Morris says, adding the NTF is collaborating on the effort. Current plans include 15 educational stations, including the history of lawns, fertilizer, irrigation, green roofs, sports fields and lawn games and golf.

"It's unique because the exhibit is at a federal government facility and they're going to talk about what turf does and its benefits to society," Morris says, noting the USNA gets about a half million visitors per year, including Congress members. "This is a federal agency that's going to be making positive statements about the turf industry. That's pretty significant. We haven't had that kind of exposure."

The USNA is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service. Located on 446 acres in Washington, D.C., its goal is to serve the public need for scien-

tific research, education, and gardens that conserve and showcase plants to enhance the environment.



LM: How's the design coming?

Kevin Morris (KM): The Arboretum is in the design stages. They have a design firm offering their services for free, a new firm out of Maryland called Rain Underground. It's quite a nice gift.

They have some preliminary designs and drawings worked out. Besides that, the

Arboretum has to work on the messaging: What to deliver and how to deliver it. The idea is this will be a fun, interactive exhibit to attract and inform people who don't know much about the turf industry.

LM: How about fundraising?

KM: The Arboretum is donating about \$80,000, so they need to raise the other \$400,000 or so to meet the proposed

\$480,000 budget. That's where they are right now, trying to raise the money. The plan is to try to have a grand opening in October of 2013. To do that they'd need to break ground in the spring. That's why they have a January deadline to make sure they have enough funds to get going, at least two-thirds or three-fourths of the total.

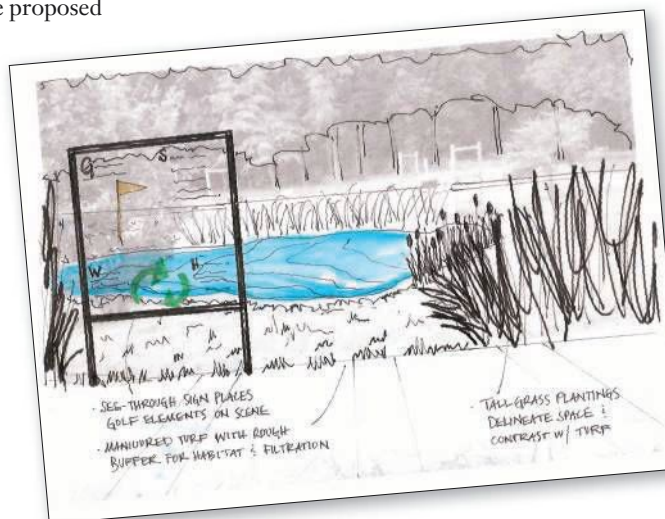
They have some pledges from the industry of about \$65,000 or \$70,000 from nonprofit organizations. We're working with some of the bigger suppliers and equipment companies, but we haven't gotten anything firm yet. Still, we're confident it's going to happen.

LM: Tell us about the messaging.

KM: Their intention is to showcase the science USDA is conducting now and what's been done in the past. The exhibit is going to stand on the science. The Crop Science Society of America, where the turfgrass scientists have a home, has agreed to review statements made and certify that they're scientifically valid. We've got a lot of science on our side and if something's not backed up, they won't use it.

The exhibit won't be just throwing a bunch of grass down and labeling it. It's got to be interesting, visually and content-wise, to attract people. It's going to be there for four years and it isn't just about the physical exhibit. It's a whole initiative of programs and demonstrations that feed off the exhibit.

The USNA is in the design phase, evaluating sketches and concepts, like the one at right, from the design firm.



PHOTOS: KEVIN MORRIS (LEFT), U.S. NATIONAL ARBORETUM



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THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

The salesman's pre-call routine

The top salespeople in the grounds maintenance segment of the industry sell more than \$1 million in new annualized contract revenue every year.

The industry's top account managers in the same segment manage more than \$2 million in business with a mix that might include \$1.4 million in contracts and \$600,000 in additional upsells.

How do they do it? First, they are confident, asking good questions and listening. Second, they focus on achieving their key performance indicators monthly (number of leads worked, number and dollar volume of proposals delivered and number and dollar volume of contracts closed). Third, they are very good time managers, wasting little time on low probability leads and proposals. Fourth, they are always prepared for the sales call.

It is axiomatic to say that sales success is based on numbers. If you have enough leads, it should produce enough proposals to achieve the sales goal. But this is only true if it can be done within the time available. Time is the salesman's scarcest resource. Salespeople who manage it poorly always will come up short of their goals.

Therefore, it makes all the sense in the world to train your sales staff to make the most of the time they invest with a prospect or customer. To do this, let's start with the idea that every sales call is a decision-making call. In other words, the salesman must expect the customer to make a decision that either 1.) closes the sale (*really good*), 2.) declines the

sale (*not fun but still good because no more time needs to be expended in the chase*), or 3.) advances the sale with a specific next step (*like a presentation with a decision maker or a final submission of best offer*).

Making the most of every call is a matter of preparation. The best preparation should follow a predictable pattern. Let's call it the salesman's pre-call routine. Before any call the salesman should answer the following:

- 1 What's my objective here today?** Is it to get a decision (yes or no) or an advance?
- 2 What's my agenda to achieve this?** Set up expectations for the call, review needs and wants, handle objections, negotiate price/scope and ask for a decision.
- 3 What are their potential objections to doing business with me?** These could be price, cost, changing a vendor, necessity, schedule and/or capability. What are my responses?
- 4 What are my negotiating positions?** Will you provide a discount if it's the only option? What's your position on value engineering, scope change, value pitch, term (multiyear deals) and concessions on future proposals?
- 5 What's my close?** This should be a summary and request, such as: "It sounds like we have covered everything, and we agreed at the start of the meeting that we wanted to make a decision today. How do you want to proceed?"

The best salespeople don't wing it. They are prepared. This allows them to control the sales call with confidence and make the most of their own and the customer's time. I recommend that all sales managers develop pre-meeting routines with their staff and watch their peoples' confidence and performance increase.

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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@wilson-oyler.com.

Making tough calls

“The hardest thing to learn in life is which bridge to cross and which to burn.”

Owners and managers have to be willing to do things others are unwilling to do. Leaders routinely face moral dilemmas that impact the company's future.

They put themselves on the line when confronted with high-stakes decisions involving customers, employees and company values, along with tough calls affecting finance, growth or other challenges that demand risk.

One example of having to make a tough call might be about the tenured employee who's been with you from day one, but now doesn't fit. The employee, for example, may not be adapting to new formats or technologies that have changed task processes. What should you do and how do you handle it?

Another example is a customer threatening to cancel a contract if you change account managers when you know you need to make the switch. Or what if a client has received another bid (too low for you to make money on), and you're given a choice to match the price or lose the job? How about deciding between keeping and firing your best sales person even though he or she is toxic to morale?

Some issues require an immediate action; others are less time-sensitive or fraught with emotion—these are the ones that do the most damage to a company. In the case of a long-term employee who's no longer able to do his job but is being given what's perceived as special treatment, the longer the deci-

sion lingers, the more it undermines team harmony.

Tough calls are not made without personal cost: You may get criticized, it may cost you relationships and you may be unpopular. But if you're a leader or want to become one, tough calls are part of your job.

Take charge of the emotions that accompany important choices and structure your decisions around facts and key issues. Seek counsel and perspective from your inner circle, trusted advisors or peer group to get options. To make the process a little easier, make your decisions based on principles and values you believe in.

Some guiding principles might be:

- › All employees will be treated honestly and fairly and be given regular feedback about their performance as team members.
- › We can't make a profit on business that we don't have, but all business we do have must be on a path to profitability.
- › We must listen to our customers but do what's best for our business and customer base as a whole. We cannot be everything to everybody.
- › We need to be aware of our competition but not copy them. We need to take what we admire and improve on it. We need to determine our own direction and let our customers guide us.
- › We will treat our customer's money as if it were our own.

There is no right way to make the right decision, but once you commit to the path, do not waffle. Take action, learn from the experience, take responsibility for the outcomes, ignore criticism if it gets in the way of your principles and move on.

Being decisive will define your leadership; if you do it well, it will take your leadership to a higher level. Be guided by values and be conscious of them when making a tough call. Think about the difficult decisions you've had to make in the past and how guiding principles could have made the process easier. It will help you develop the best practices you need to make the best possible decision the next time you need to make it.

Take charge of the emotions that accompany important choices and structure your decisions around facts and key issues.

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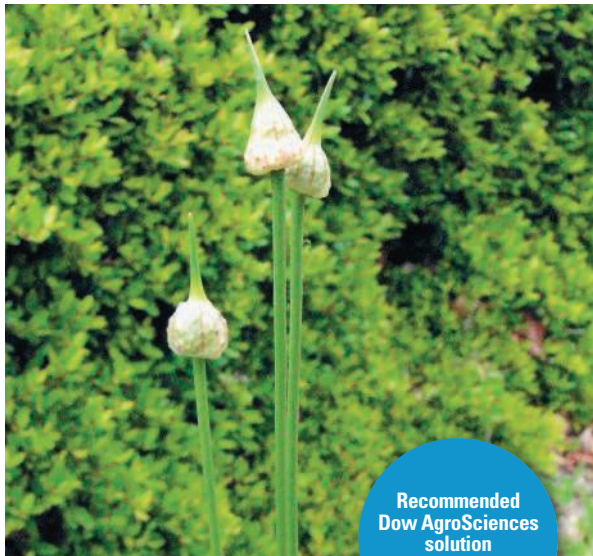
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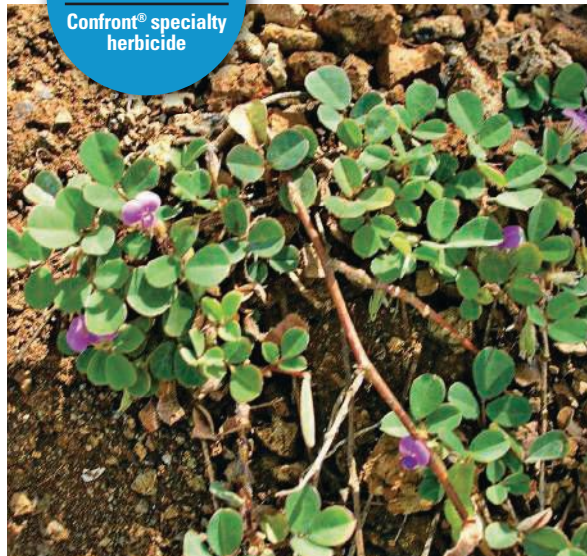
Allium vineale

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This perennial grows from bulblets that emit a strong garlic or onion smell when crushed.
- ▶ Its seedlings resemble those of a grass but have hollow, round leaves that grow from a bulb.
- ▶ The only stems that occur are flowering stems—slender, solid, waxy and unbranched.
- ▶ Small, greenish-white flowers grow from the tops of the flowering stems.
- ▶ Smaller bulblets and fibrous roots may form at the base of the bulbs.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Wild garlic is difficult to eradicate because several bulblets will sprout and grow at different times from the same plant. In actively growing turf areas, sequential applications of two- or three-way herbicides containing 2,4-D applied in the winter and very early spring will provide control. Additional treatments the following year may be needed.
- ▶ In completely dormant bermudagrass or in non-crop areas, a glyphosate product can provide control when applied twice in the winter months.



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THREEFLOWER DWARF BEGGARWEED

Desmodium triflorum

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This perennial has leaves with three small, heart-shaped leaflets.
- ▶ It propagates through seeds and stolons. The prostrate hairy stems root at nodes.
- ▶ It flowers in warm months. Flowers are blue or purplish pink.
- ▶ Its close relative, creeping beggarweed (*Desmodium canuum*), has leaves with three leaflets that vary in size and are elliptic, pointed at the tip and rounded at base. *Canuum* also has hairy stems ascending to erect. Flow-

ers are pink to rose color. It can propagate through seed, stolons or broken taproot.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ To minimize the establishment and spread of both *Desmodium* species, maintain a lush lawn with proper mow height, fertility and water management.
- ▶ Repeat applications—either pre- or post-bloom—of a product containing triclopyr and clopyralid are recommended.

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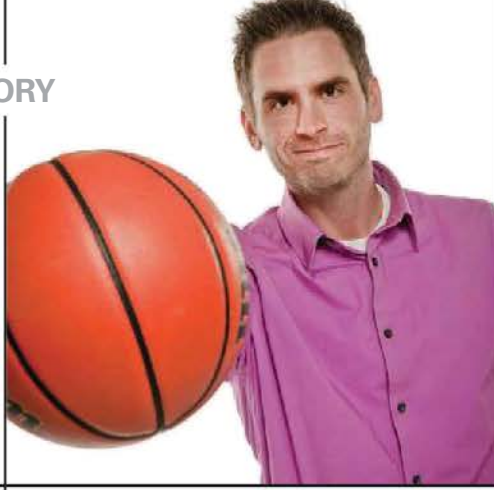
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→ GAME CH



The Weed Pro inbound marketing team takes a break from strategy to have fun with the roundball. From left: consultant Keith Gutierrez, Director of Marketing Shaun Canary and President and CEO Rob Palmer.

INBOUND MARKETING HAS TRANSFORMED THE WAY WEED PRO DOES BUSINESS.

STORY BY MARISA PALMIERI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
LAURA WATILO BLAKE

ANGER

IF

2012 WERE A BASKETBALL SEASON for Weed Pro, it would have been a rebuilding year. But not a typical rebuilding year—when

losing is the norm and the team's pinning its hopes on landing a star in next year's draft. It would be more like an L.A. Lakers rebuilding year, says Weed Pro's Director of Marketing Shaun Canary with a laugh, just weeks after the NBA team fired Coach Mike Brown a mere five games into the 2012 season.

His point? Weed Pro—driven by President and CEO Rob Palmer's plan for growth and ambitious goal to earn 75 percent of the company's business through referrals—didn't have time to lose. Starting late last year, the company made a fast break toward a new strategy: inbound marketing.

The results have been a game changer for the \$3 million-plus lawn care company with three locations

in Ohio—but not in the way Palmer anticipated. "It's transformed my business," Palmer says. "It's about so much more than just marketing."

Implementing inbound marketing—the concept of winning customers' attention and drawing them to your website with useful, educational content—has prompted Weed Pro to rethink its mission, processes and people, too. Though change has been challenging at times, inbound marketing is a long-term game plan the company's leaders believe will pay off. In fact, after just 10 months Weed Pro more than doubled its website traffic, more than tripled the number of requests for program estimates and more than tripled its program sales (see chart on page 16).

IN THE KNOW

To understand how inbound marketing has changed Weed Pro, you first have to understand what it is. The term was reportedly coined by Brian Halligan,

the co-founder and CEO of HubSpot, an Internet marketing software company of which Weed Pro's now a customer.

Inbound marketing is analogous to "permission marketing," a term popularized by the Seth Godin book of the same name. These concepts contrast with so-called "interruption marketing," which refers to telemarketing, direct mail and other traditional forms of advertising that try to steal prospects' attention.

"People are tired of having messages pushed out at them," says Keith Gutierrez, CEO of Westlake, Ohio-based Structure Marketing, a consultant Weed Pro recruited last March to help put the full court press on its inbound marketing plans. "Inbound is really the way you'd prefer to be marketed to. You want to talk to your friends and family and do research on someone's website with the information provided on your own time."

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Inbound marketing entails creating content to attract website traffic, converting website visitors to leads, turning leads into customers and retaining those customers by providing great service.

The tactics include search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, blogging, social media and pay-per-click advertising (PPC). (See page 19 for more details on the inbound marketing process.) Weed Pro uses HubSpot software to manage all of these functions. Could a company execute the individual components without such software? Yes, Canary says, but the key for Weed Pro is its ability to track leads.

INTROSPECTION

It's also important to understand what inbound marketing is not, Palmer says. "It's not like when you do your direct mail campaign and then sit around



WEED PRO: INBOUNDED RESULTS

	2011	2012 (through Nov. 1)	% change
Website visits	9,951	25,973	+161%
Program estimate requests	166	537	+223%
No. of program sales	76	321	+322%
Program sales revenue	\$22,724	\$74,006	+226%

Note: Program is defined as a lawn care program with at least six applications during the season.

and wait six or seven months to see the results," he says. "It's an ongoing process. It's not hard; it's just a discipline."

Although Palmer says inbound marketing *tactics* aren't hard, that doesn't mean the process hasn't been difficult.

Once Canary and Gutierrez started executing inbound marketing techniques and launching individual campaigns, they realized there were some deeper changes that needed to be made in the

business, and they sat Palmer down behind closed doors to clue him in.

At its core, inbound marketing aims to make business communication more effective—and to deliver a better customer experience, Gutierrez says.

"That goes deeper than marketing and sales," he says. "Everyone in the organization needs to be involved—from the support staff to the technicians

continued on page 18

» WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section of LandscapeManagement.net to see the results of two Weed Pro inbound marketing campaigns (a summer up-sell opportunity and fall aerations).

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continued from page 16

to the management. We're trying to educate customers that they get more by working with Weed Pro. We need to make sure that's true."

As Canary says, "It's one thing to change your online marketing and talk about how you're different. But if you don't analyze from within and make sure every employee is engaged to deliver the experience you're promoting, then you're just lying."

That discussion piqued Palmer to revamp his mission statement and company values, taking cues from successful businesses like Zappos.com, whose CEO Tony Hsieh is known for saying he runs a customer service organization that happens to sell shoes.

"Lawn care is our service, but customer service is our product," Palmer says. "The question was, do we all believe that? I had to make some decisions on personnel to make sure

“LAWN CARE IS OUR SERVICE, BUT CUSTOMER SERVICE IS OUR PRODUCT ... I HAD TO MAKE SOME DECISIONS ON PERSONNEL TO MAKE SURE WE'RE NOT JUST TALKING THE TALK, BUT WE'RE WALKING THE WALK.” —ROB PALMER

we're not just talking the talk, but we're walking the walk."

Ultimately, he let go of three employees, one each in the sales, office and production departments. Each of those areas needed improvement for the company to meet its goals and live up to its new marketing strategy, Palmer says.

Another way Weed Pro's delivering on its message is training lawn technicians to better communicate with cus-



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tomers. "We're asking the tech to slow down," he says. "Talk to the customer before you do the lawn and talk to them again afterward, so they understand you're the expert and you're the one who can give them recommendations. We want to build credibility and trust. It's as much about retaining current customers as it is about bringing in new customers."

Delivering on what you've sold ultimately brings in new customers through referrals, Canary says. That's important because a referral is the least expensive method of acquiring a new client and it produces the best lifetime value. Weed Pro currently gets about 20 percent of its business from this method, but its goal is to hit 75 percent.

"We have a six-year lifespan on a referral client vs. about four-and-a-half years on all the others combined," Canary says. "If we can grow referrals, it makes a big difference."

Weed Pro is also developing a more robust agronomic training program and customer service/lawn tech cross-training initiative. And next season,

continued on page 21

HOW INBOUND MARKETING WORKS FOR WEED PRO

In inbound marketing, the sales process is all about the funnel.

1. VISITORS

At the top of the inbound marketing funnel, potential customers arrive at your website by way of blog posts, pay per click advertising, social media and other tactics. Weed Pro attracts site visitors with search engine-optimized blog posts, Google Adwords, Facebook interaction and YouTube videos (visit youtube.com/user/weedprollc to check out the videos).

3. SALES-ACCEPTED LEADS

Prospects who access additional materials, such as specific product- or service-related information, are considered sales-accepted leads, which means they may be ready to hear from you directly.

» WEB EXTRA

To learn more about inbound marketing, whether you're a novice or an expert, visit consultant Keith Gutierrez's inbound marketing "required reading" list in the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

2. MARKETING-QUALIFIED LEADS

Website traffic isn't the only goal. The goal is to generate leads and move customers "down the funnel" to convert those leads into sales. So, once potential customers are on your site, a call to action prompts them to visit a specific landing page, which includes a form to gather contact information in exchange for an offer (think: whitepapers, how-to guides or webinars). Weed Pro offers include a Cleveland area lawn care calendar and a summer drought watering guide. Prospects who download educational information in exchange for their email addresses are considered marketing-qualified leads. They're prime candidates for sending further, relevant information via email, but they're not ready for a phone call.

4. CUSTOMERS

Ideally, the prospects at the bottom of the funnel are familiar with your company by now—thanks to the "lead-nurturing" process—and they're converted to customers.

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APP-ORTUNITY

The number of mobile users across various platforms and devices is staggering, says Rob Palmer, president and CEO of Weed Pro.

Consider this: In 2012, the U.S. saw a 55 percent increase in smartphone subscriptions to make for 98 million smartphone subscribers, according to comScore. That's nearly 42 percent of all U.S. mobile users. On top of that, 64 percent of mobile phone time is spent on apps, Nielsen reports.

So when Palmer's techy marketing director, Shaun Canary, came to him with the idea to launch a Weed Pro mobile app, he agreed it was the right move.

"It's a bridge to the future for me," Palmer says. "If businesses don't understand customer demographics, they will lose—they're already losing," he says.

The Weed Pro app, which has been available since Oct. 1 in the Apple App Store and the Android Market (now part of Google Play), was first developed by Canary himself in July, but he worked with Cleveland-based 529 App Solutions to revamp it in August. He underestimated how difficult it would be to place the app in Apple's App Store. Working with a mobile app developer eased that process and also gives him access to a user-friendly content management system (CMS) that allows him to easily change and update the app's features without redesigning the entire application. Canary says the company spent \$700 to develop the app, not including his time. Weed Pro pays \$50 per month for access to the CMS.

The free app includes a lawn ID guide that helps users identify common weeds and pests, a feed of the firm's YouTube videos and interactive features, like the ability to take a photo of a weed in your lawn and send it to Weed Pro for identification.

Since the app had only been available for about six weeks as of press time, it was too early to measure success. Canary says, "This, like our other informative guides, was made for visitors of our website to consume, use and share. We'll track the amount of downloads we receive, and how many of those prospects we were able to nurture into customers."

continued from page 18

Palmer's committed to hosting a weekly, companywide meeting to discuss field conditions and challenges, so everyone has a unified message.

IN VS. OUT

Speaking of costs, Palmer keeps a close eye on customer acquisition costs, and that's part of the reason he's sold on inbound marketing. Marketing experts say it's 60 percent cheaper to acquire a customer with inbound tactics vs. traditional marketing. (Consider that it costs Weed Pro \$90 to \$200 to reel in a customer through direct mail.)

But that doesn't mean Palmer's abandoning direct mail, despite his frustration that even the best direct mail pieces end up in the trash bin, unlike well-done blog posts that will

appear in web searches year after year.

Weed Pro will spend about \$50,000 on outbound marketing, including direct mail, in 2013—which is equal to what the company will spend on inbound marketing. For 2012, the spend ratio was 60/40 outbound to inbound. Canary emphasizes that the direct mail campaigns will drive customers to the web more so than in the past.

Now that the Weed Pro inbound marketing team's in place and the rebuilding year is behind him, Palmer looks forward to 2013. "What it comes down to is we're all spreading fertilizer and we're all spraying weeds," he says. He goes on to quote author Simon Sinek, who says, "People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it."

"With our inbound content, we hope we're answering the 'why' and providing people some value upfront," he says. **LMI**



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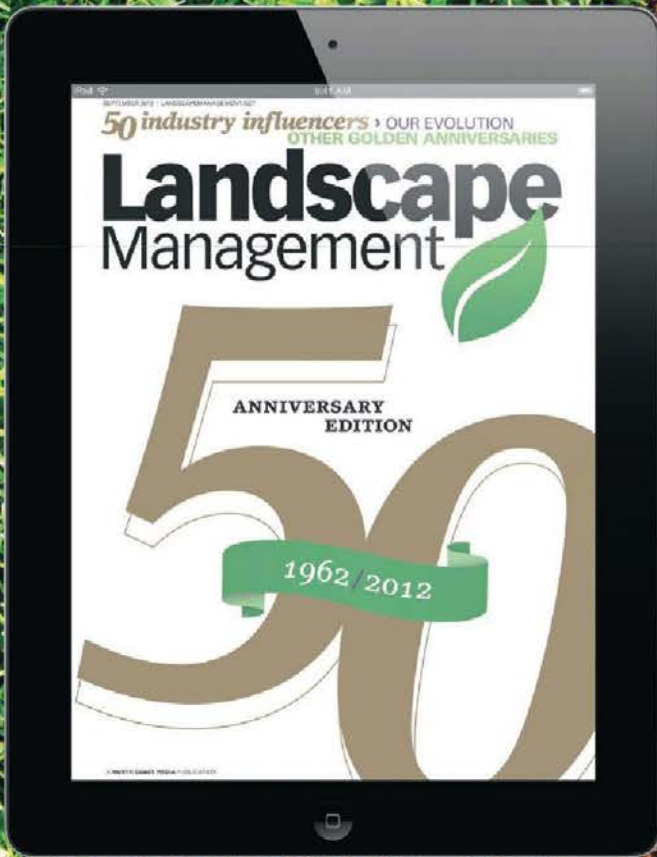
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MARKET WATCH

DESIGN/BUILD

Learning from Lambert's

Less than a week before Thanksgiving, dozens of design/build business owners converged on Dallas for a tour of Lambert Landscape Co. and three of its projects, as part of the Professional Landcare Network's DBI Symposium.

They made the trip to see how one of the country's most renowned residential design/build firms operates—and to get inspiration for their own projects, albeit on a much smaller scale.

The day started with a tour of Lambert headquarters, where attendees saw everything from the company's production room and tree division to its design and construction divisions.

The tour showed the design/build professionals much more than the responsibilities of Lambert staff. It also highlighted just how organized and

The Dallas company shows design/build professionals from around the country how to do it right.

By BETH GERACI

efficient Lambert operations are, a coup achieved after years of trial and error.

In the production room, Lambert Director of Garden Services Jodi Joseph explained a system designed to limit miscommunication and increase accountability. She pointed out the board where crew assignments are posted every day; the high-

tech scanning system used to clock the company's crew members in and out; and the ways in which crew members are acknowledged for practicing safety on the job.

Also of interest was the design room, where Tom Nugent, design studio lead, and garden designer Jonathan Swanson explained the design process and the at times deep involvement of Lambert customers in their own projects.

Lambert President and Director of Design Paul Fields said design is at the heart of the company and its 1919 origins. "It's in everything we do and touch," he said. "Our focus today is on high-level garden design and on fulfilling customers' dreams."

Attendees definitely got a taste of that as they toured the day's featured projects: three residential gardens in an exclusive neighborhood north of Dallas.

These aren't the sort of gardens where you can pour the watering can over the daisies and call it a day. These are extravagant gardens, in expansive yards, outside multimillion-dollar homes. And all are designed in the European style Lambert's has made its

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The DBI Symposium attendees pose at one of the tour's featured properties (left). Above: A Lambert-designed greenhouse showcases colorful lemon trees.

- PG 23 **DESIGN/BUILD** Tour recap from Dallas-based Lambert's
- PG 26 **IRRIGATION** WaterSense updates plus two state issues to note
- PG 28 **MAINTENANCE** Sod installation do's and don'ts
- PG 30 **LAWN/TREE CARE** Green Lawn Fertilizing's training day tips



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signature. Sights on the tour included statues from Italy and France, an old apple press, a huge olive jar, and other imported and elaborate garden complements. There were luxurious swimming pools, outdoor fireplaces, trellises, detailed stone work, even a greenhouse full of lemon trees.

“We treat the garden as someone would treat the interior of the home,” Fields explained to the group. In Lambert’s work, the outdoor areas become an extension of the home’s interior—equally as livable as the home itself. “Lambert’s strives to design the garden to the highest possible level,” Fields said. “I’m really passionate about details. If I had my druthers I would sit at a table and do nothing but details. That’s what’s important.”

And that means obtaining materials to match the quality of the work. As much as Fields spoke of importing

things from Italy for clients (including a \$300,000 statue), he emphasized that the company strives to be as authentic and use as many indigenous materials as possible. That means it incorporates Texas limestone into many of its projects, not just because it’s local, but also because it wears well, adding to the antique feel of many Lambert landscapes.

The day ended with a slide show of award-winning Lambert projects, which seemed to awe some small business owners in attendance. But they weren’t there to compete; they were there to be inspired, and they were.

Fields shared much valuable advice



Above: Lambert’s President and Director of Design Paul Fields. Left: The statue shows Lambert’s knack for using European-style materials.

with his audience throughout the day, and in his closing presentation, he left his audience with one more helpful tip. Creating a garden for a client “is more than pushing plants,” he said. “Take it to the next step.”

PHOTOS: BETH GERACI

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IRRIGATION

In the know: Irrigation Show 2012

Contractors should take note of potential WaterSense program changes, state affairs updates and innovative new products.

By MARISA PALMIERI

At the 2012 Irrigation Show and Education Conference in Orlando last month, more than 4,200 contractors, distributors and suppliers convened to learn about best practices and new products. For landscape and irrigation contractors, there are a few government affairs updates to note, reports John Farner, government affairs director for the Irrigation Association (IA), and Chad Forcey, IA's state affairs director.

PROPOSED WATERSENSE CHANGES

In October, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a notice of intent to revamp its WaterSense program specifications for irrigation certification programs. Currently, irrigation professionals can apply to become individual WaterSense partners when they're certified through a WaterSense-labeled certification program, such as the IA's certification program.

WaterSense is considering removing the individual partnership designation and expanding the partnership benefits to all professionals certified by WaterSense-labeled pro-

grams. Along with that change, the term "WaterSense irrigation partner" and its logo would be phased out; professionals would instead promote themselves as "certified by a WaterSense-labeled program" and use an "Ask About" WaterSense promotional label, according to presentation by Amber Lefstead, a WaterSense representative.

Why the changes? One of the main drivers was the need to improve the coverage of partners for other WaterSense programs. For example, the WaterSense for New Homes program requires irrigation systems be designed, installed and audited by WaterSense irrigation partners. Even though the program currently has more than 1,300 partners nationwide, it can be difficult to meet the New Homes program's demand, considering there are 20 states with 10 or fewer partners.

After gathering stakeholder feedback, WaterSense will draft a document for public comment in spring 2013. Implementation of the new structure is expected in 2014.

STATE AFFAIRS

This year there have been several waves made regarding irrigation professionals' "scope of practice," Farner says.

Illinois is facing the expiration of its irrigation contractor licensing law. If the law is allowed to expire, all irrigation contractors in the state will have to become licensed plumbers, which poses many costs and challenges for members. The IA is committed to preventing this from happening, Forcey says, and the association is working with irrigation professionals in Illinois to have the licensing law renewed through the general assembly.

In Oregon, the state landscape architect board earlier this year said irrigation design could be performed only by licensed landscape architects. In April the IA sent a letter to the board, requesting clarification of the scope of practice rules related to irrigation design under the state's landscape architect law. The board responded in August, indicating it was backing away from its position, and noting that irrigation design could continue to be practiced by irrigation designers.



INNOVATION HONORED

The Irrigation Association named the winners of the 2012 New Product Contest at the annual Irrigation Show and Education Conference in Orlando on Nov. 5. The awards highlight exhibitor entries based on a wide range of criteria, including innovative and/or changed-for-the-better qualities, increased irrigation efficiency, ease of use, cost benefits, time savings and design quality.

Turf/Landscape Category

Winner: The Toro Co. Precision Soil Sensor

Honorable Mention: ETwater SmartWorks Rain Bird 50-Pin Replacement Panel

People's Choice Winner: LASCO Fittings Push Fittings

Specialty Category

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MAINTENANCE

Don't double up on sod

Turfgrass sod experts agree: Installing sod on an existing lawn will create more work in the end.

By JIM NOVAK

The Internet can be a tremendous tool, especially when it comes to seeking helpful information. Unfortunately, misinformation is abundant.

Consider this "advice" one website's contributing writer offered.

"Professional landscapers often apply sod directly over grass. The sod compresses the grass and limits its exposure to sunlight and water. This quickly kills the already existing grass, in much the same way that a brick left on a lawn kills the grass beneath it. When the grass dies,

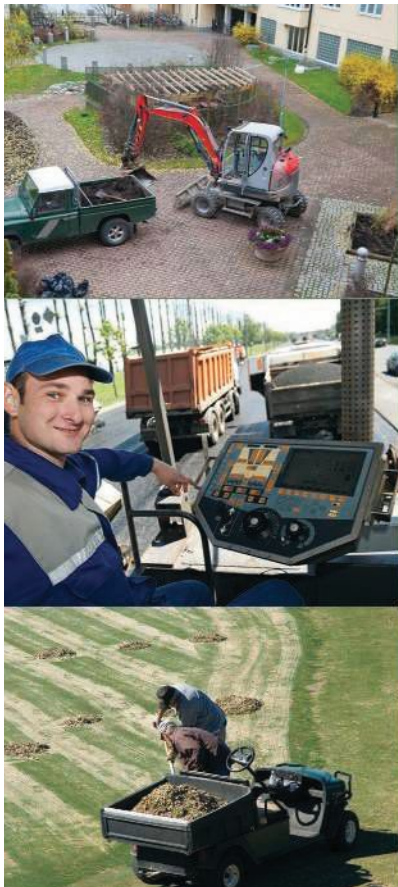
it gives off nutrients that actually benefit the new sod above it. The main nutrient that the dead grass layer provides is nitrogen. Applying sod directly over grass is advantageous because it requires less work. The lawn does not need to be treated with herbicide. Also, you do not need to till your yard."

Landscape contractors, take note: Turfgrass producers agree laying sod over an existing lawn isn't acceptable.

"Not a good idea," says Bob Weerts of Blue Valley Sod Farm in Winnebago, *continued on page 30*



PHOTOS: JIM NOVAK



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continued from page 28

Minn., who recently dealt firsthand with a landscape consultant who had just completed an inspection for one of his customers, a national restaurant chain. The problem? A dying new lawn. The reason? The contractor laid new turfgrass sod over the existing turf weeks earlier. The new grass never rooted.

“This is not a practice that I have ever heard of working,” says Mike Blair of Green Velvet Sod Farms in Bellbrook, Ohio. In addition to the new sod’s roots drying out and dying, the decomposing turf could develop an acid or slim, causing further problems, he says.

Warren Bell of Biogress Sod Farm in Sandy, Utah, concurs it’s not wise. “The surface of the old lawn has a lot of organic matter and likely will not match the soil profile of the sod being installed,” he says. “Water will never move through the profile efficiently.”

So, if a client or employee suggests you lay new sod directly on top of an existing lawn, don’t do it.

Novak is public relations manager for Turfgrass Producers International.

SOD-LAYING TIPS

Here are a few pointers from Linda Bradley of Turf Mountain Sod in Hendersonville, N.C.

- ▶ **All sod must make soil to root contact.** Existing turf must be extremely sparse or topped with soil before laying the new sod. Roots won’t penetrate hard ground; till or loosen the top 2 in. to 3 in. of soil.
- ▶ **Grade is important.** There cannot be any water-holding spots, and water never should flow toward the building or home.
- ▶ **Weeds can grow through the new sod,** so it’s important to eradicate them before installation.



Jimmy Torres, Green Lawn’s service manager, reviews all customer information, including lawn flags that technicians leave at a customer’s home.

Training day

Quarterly educational “rodeos” keep the team at Green Lawn Fertilizing on the same page.

By MARISA PALMIERI

You can’t grow if you’re not investing in your employees, says Matt Jesson, president and owner of Green Lawn Fertilizing in West Chester, Pa. When you learn he’s focused on growing his firm 15 percent to 20 percent a year, you understand why he holds a quarterly cross-training program for all of the company’s 65 employees.

“It gives everyone a better understanding of how their jobs affect the growth of the company and how they’re a part of a great company,” Jesson says. This year is the first full year he’s held the training sessions, dubbed “rodeos,” on a quarterly basis. They used to be conducted twice a year. The reason for the increase is to keep up with the natural changes that happen in the business every 60 to 90 days.

ON THE SAME PAGE

On a typical rodeo day, the company operates from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m. After that, Green Lawn provides lunch, followed by three hours of education. Jesson kicks off with a presentation about the status of the business and key objectives, and he addresses questions and concerns. Next, employees rotate through stations, learning about various parts of the business, such as customer

service, operations, sales and the firm’s new pest control division. The executive team and department managers speak at each station. The idea is to give employees a taste of the processes and procedures of each area and what challenges it’s facing. For example, the sales station might cover what the sales team is currently selling and why; customer service could address what type of service calls it’s been receiving.

TEAM BUILDING

The training program also builds relationships among coworkers.

“This is a good chance for our office reps to spend more time with the sales team and the technicians,” Jesson says.

At the fall rodeo, to keep employees engaged, each department leader had 10 gift cards to hand out to employees who stood out during training.

Cross-training employees doesn’t have to be costly or complicated, Jesson says, noting he hosts the sessions in the firm’s on-site training room to keep costs down. Still, it is an investment. Paid three-hour training for 65 employees equates to nearly 200 hours.

Regardless, it will remain a priority for fast-growing Green Lawn Fertilizing. As Jesson says, “Training is the most important thing.” **LM**



Retainers vs. design fees

Q Can you explain the concept of using a retainer agreement instead of a design fee to get a commitment from the client toward both the design and the installation?

—Dylan Mickelson, Bright Lights Landscaping and Outdoor Lighting, Las Vegas, Nev.

A I just got back from PLANET's Green Industry Conference in Louisville, Ky., where I was a speaker, as well as a facilitator at the Breakfast with Champions. As always, one of the hottest topics was how to attract high-end clients. Inevitably, this discussion leads to one of our industry's biggest pain points—design fees and how to charge for them.

Naturally, everybody says they charge design fees but their competition designs for free, putting them at a disadvantage. Companies say that because their competitors are giving away free drawings, they follow suit, not wanting to lose the work. My typical response is, "Oh, now I understand. You charge design fees, but nobody pays them!" It makes me laugh, but my audience provides me with a room full of angry stares.

I firmly believe designs and design fees are a necessary part of the design/build process. Not just for the sale, but for the proper installation and profitability of the project. However, like everything, there is more than one way to skin a cat.

Before I get into the retainer fee concept, I want to make sure we're on the same page. Although we'd all like to make a profit on design fees, most of us use it to sell the job. If we can break even on our cost for the drawing, that's a bonus. The reality is most of you use designs as a loss leader. If you sell the job, it was worth the time and investment and everybody is happy. If you don't sell it, the designer will blame the estimator and the estimator will blame the designer. In turn, they both blame the owner, claiming his prices are too high. The owner blames everyone,

because, well, he's the owner.

Retainers are essentially deposits given to a professional by his or her client to begin a process. In the legal profession a retainer is often given to an attorney to begin the paperwork necessary to start a lawsuit. In reality, two parties are agreeing to work together toward a goal. Neither knows how long the process will take or how costly it may become. They just know they want to work together and get the ball rolling. Sounds pretty nice, doesn't it?

What I want you to do is similar in concept but not so ill defined.

First, treat design/build as design/build, not as design and build. Design/build is one process. Design and build are two processes. Most of us do the latter. We try to charge a design fee (step 1) and then try to sell the installation (step 2). Wouldn't you rather get a deposit toward the design/build and not one and then the other?

Enter the retainer agreement. By bundling the design and the installation together as one process, you're essentially presenting the client with a turnkey process: a design/build project. The design influences the build and the build influences the design, and they are both influenced by the budget and material selections. With such a "fuzzy" or "dynamic" process, why wouldn't a customer just want to work with one person or one company?

Actually, many of them do want to work this way and they understand why it's beneficial. They just need to give you a retainer to get the design/build process started. That way you get your design fee and job deposit at one time and you do it in an hour.

Now, when you go back to the office with a retainer, you and the estimator high five and fist bump each other like you just won the World Series. The owner is happy because he has a check, even though he has no idea what's going on because, well, he's the owner.

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.

PROJECT PORTFOLIO

A SCRAPBOOK OF DESIGN/BUILD OVERHAULS

Living wall turns

THE MISSION

Create a “living room of intimate space.”

The Winter Garden is a 22,000-sq.-ft. contemplative and restful gallery-type space in a modern and minimalist style combining art, sculpture, water and lots of plants—including a 1,950-sq.-ft. living wall. Rennie Gotell, general manager of Greenery Office Interiors, characterizes the Winter Garden, located in a commercial office building in Calgary, as a “relationship project.”

“We got the job because we knew the right person to help us,” he says. Additionally, the company survived the project’s many delays and difficult installation because of good vendor and contractor relationships.

The project, which took about two years to complete, did not get off to a promising start: “The day 20,000 plants left Florida, we received a call delaying the project for three months,” Gotell recalls. Because the building itself was under construction during the project, three months slid into five months.

Once the company got the green light to bring in the plants, a new problem arose: “It was a logistical nightmare transporting all of this material to the second floor of this brand-new building under construction, with tenants moving in and every trade under the sun present,” Gotell says. There was the added challenge of keeping the contractor, architect and building owner on the same page throughout the project.

Gotell confirms that all the obstacles were definitely worth the result. He notes that it’s a popular place for people to get together to eat lunch, hold an informal meeting or just relax next to the “Zen-like” green wall.

“It makes an incredible statement,” he concludes. “The design of the wall was inspired by an aerial photograph of local agricultural land. The stainless sculptures were designed to look like sheaves of wheat, and they honor historical city leaders. In fact, the Winter Garden was chosen as the first of many locations in the city for its ‘Field of Fame.’”



PHOTOS: GREENERY OFFICE INTERIORS LTD.

heads

4



3



5



THE WORK

1 | Bamboo? Shoot. Custom boxes had to be fabricated to adjust to the oversized planters, but because bamboo does not like to have “wet feet,” the team chose not to subirrigate. To add to the challenges, these planters had to be resealed by the contractor.

2 | By the numbers. More than 200 lirope were installed as underplanting for the black bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*); 30,000 lbs. of black polished river rock were added for topdressing.

3 | By the numbers, part two. From street level, the 200 *Sanseveria* are standing upright, and the 200 *Pilea* are cascading down.

4 | Space anchor. The 1,950-sq.-ft. living wall houses more than 20,000 plants with more than 20 varieties in two sections that reach 22 ft. in height and 100 ft. in width. It has computerized drip irrigation and a fertilizer injector system.

5 | Sky pilots. To install the living wall, 24-ft. scaffolding was built and a sky lift was included in the proposal. Greenery Office Interiors now has four employees certified to use this piece of equipment. There have been irrigation challenges, so the sky lift is essential for maintenance purposes.

This project garnered a 41st Annual Environmental Improvement Grand Award from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). For more information, visit Greenery.ca. See the Web Extra section of LandscapeManagement.net for more photos of this installation. Based in Calgary, Greenery Office Interiors Ltd. proudly proclaims that it is “keen on green!” It began in 1977 as a one-woman operation, and has since blossomed into a “thriving business that prides itself on providing the best plants and maintenance service.”

Swept away

Parking lot sweeping can boost commercial maintenance work.



Bell's Landscape Services has two parking lot sweepers in its fleet.

WHEN WIXOM, MICH.-BASED Bell's Landscape Services started handling the maintenance work for shopping centers that also needed regular parking lot sweeping, it decided to look into offering the service itself. A hefty investment later, the company is doing regular sweeping jobs and has found it to be a successful add-on service.

Adding a parking lot sweeping service to the company's maintenance package was a good fit, says Mike Bell, director of sales. "A lot of my maintenance clients utilize the service as part of the overall package we sell," he says. "But we do get a lot of clean-up work where that's all we'll do. We even do some work for other landscape contractors who don't have the equipment to offer sweeping. We also do a lot of work for construction sites where they'll have us do a thorough clean-up right before turning things over to the land owner."

The company invested in a TYMCO sweeper, which is essentially a huge vacuum that goes directly over the surface of the pavement. Buying the equipment was no small investment—it can run anywhere from \$65,000 to \$150,000. But if the service is marketed well and packaged appropriately into maintenance jobs, Bell says it would be possible to see sales of \$120,000 to \$150,000 per year out of one piece of equipment. Bell's Landscape operates two machines.

It's important to know the sweeping business has many low-price competitors since the downturn in the economy, Bell says. "There are guys jumping into this and really driving the price down," he says. "The rates used to be easily \$75 to \$100 an hour for this service, but some of the low ballers who are owner/operators of one machine and do all the work themselves charge \$40 an hour with no overhead. You can't compete with that. So you have to be smart and know when to walk away."

Fortunately, many of Bell's clients favor the one-stop-shop maintenance services

his company offers. And many clients like being affiliated with a large, reputable company as opposed to a one-man operation.

The sweeper machines pick up everything from leaves to trash and debris. Bell says the No. 1 item swept up is cigarette butts.

"We keep the corners and curb lines clean, in addition to the overall surface of the parking lot," adds Bell. "Most of the debris does accumulate on the perimeters of the lot, so we pay special attention there. We blow off walkways, completely vac the lot, and do a broom cleaning on the curb lines. Most of the lots also have public receptacles, so we change those out as well."

Figuring out when to sweep can be challenging. The work needs to be done when the lots are clear, but because some townships have noise ordinances, the crew has to be mindful of timing. "We may have to get into the center at 9 p.m. and get the job done by 11 p.m. because of noise ordinances," Bell says. "From there we may go to a series of commercial sites and work all night long. We call it the 'hidden world' because most of our work takes place after hours."

Many of the jobs are set up on a regular schedule. "A busy shopping center may want the work done on a daily or every-other-day basis," says Bell. "But a commercial building may just want once-a-week or even once-a-month service. And then we get those special runs to clean up a construction site that might just be a one-time job."

Bell says the sweeping service is working out well for his company. "For us this is a sideline item—not our main source of income," he says. "But it's been a service that makes us better-rounded with our clients and has even gotten us some new jobs. It's definitely been a nice extra for us."

Casey Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

SERVICE SNAPSHOT

WHY PARKING LOT SWEEPING?

"We had some clients inquire into it and decided it was worth the investment," says Mike Bell, director of sales for Bell's Landscape Services. "We understood that with a large investment like this, you may not get it back immediately, but it's over a period of time. But we're definitely finding it to be a successful service."

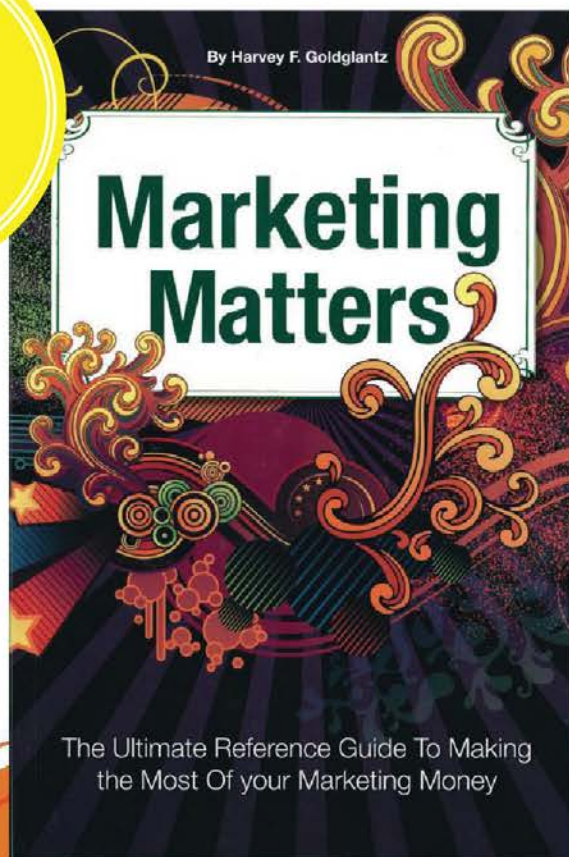
INVESTMENT? The equipment can run anywhere from \$65,000 to \$150,000, says Bell, and it isn't a long-lasting machine. When run at maximum capacity its lifespan is about eight years.

LEARNING CURVE? Bell's operators are trained by the sweeping machine manufacturer. "In about five to 10 days we can have an operator ready to function," he says.

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MOWERS & ACCESSORIES

Grasshopper

Grasshopper MaxTorque diesel mowers employ strong mowing power, precision cutting performance, a ride that takes out the bumps and jolts for sustained mowing speeds and the ability to save up to 900 gal. of fuel and nearly \$3,000 over 1,000 hours of use. Other features include Tier 4i emissions compliance and a full line of implements to boost year-round productivity. GrasshopperDiesel.com



Toro

Toro Z Master Professional 5000/6000 Series and GrandStand electronic fuel-injected (EFI) mowers use the latest in fuel management technology, reducing fuel consumption and emissions while increasing performance. They feature a Kohler engine with a closed-loop EFI system. This allows the engine to automatically adapt to load, weather, fuel and altitude changes. Easy starting in a wide range of altitudes and conditions, along with no-choke starting, helps operators get down to work quickly. A system of engine sensors monitors the engine while running, and indicator lights provide early warning of any potential issues before they actually occur. The mowers come standard with a 7-gauge steel TURBO FORCE deck in 52-, 60- and 72-in. cutting widths. The deck features a patented adjustable discharge baffle, a flexible rubber discharge chute, high-strength cutting blades, a bull-nose front bumper and tough spindle assemblies. Toro.com/professional



Gravely

Gravely has made improvements to its commercial X-Factor Deck. The seven-gauge deck, designed for lasting performance and durability, is standard on Gravely's zero-turn mowers. It features improved spindles, a new chute profile, an enlarged discharge opening and standard baffles. Upgrades to the X-Factor deck affect side-discharge decks on all Gravely Pro-Turn models, as well as the ZT HD. Gravely.com



Husqvarna

New for 2013 are the Husqvarna M-ZT series entry-level commercial zero-turn mowers. The new M-ZT features rugged fabricated decks with cast iron blade spindles, premium seats, commercial-duty 12cc integrated transmissions and high-horsepower engines. The new 810cc Endurance Commercial engines feature cyclonic air filtration to reduce service intervals and increase engine life. The new M-ZT will be available in 52- and 61-in. variants. Husqvarna.com

Snapper

Snapper Pro's new 2+2 Year limited warranty takes effect on all ride-on mowers, including all zero-turn series, S75x and S800x models, retailed after Sept. 1, 2012, and beginning with serial number 2015362300 and up. Snapper Pro ride-on mowers are covered for 48 months or 500 hours, whichever occurs first. During the first 24 months, the mower is covered for unlimited hours. Belts, tires, brake pads, hoses and battery and blades are covered for 90 days. SnapperPro.com



John Deere

Kicking off the new line of John Deere ZTraks is the B Series, which features the Z915B, a 23.3-hp model with the option of a 48-, 54- or 60-in.

7-Iron II deck. The new M Series offers five different mower options (Z920M, Z925M EFI, Z925M Flex Fuel, Z930M and Z930M EFI) and horsepower ranging from 23.5 to 25.5 hp. It comes equipped with 48-, 54-, 60- or 72-in. 7-Iron PRO decks. The new R Series features five models (Z920R, Z930R, Z950R, Z960R and Z970R) with a range of 23.5 to 35 hp. It comes standard with the John Deere Comfort & Convenience package with ergonomic handgrips, power deck lift and grip-located control buttons. Similar to the M Series, the R Series is available with an isolation seat option or fully adjustable, suspension seat option. JohnDeere.com/MowPro



Hustler Turf Equipment

The new Super Z HD is designed with the Hyper-Drive Hydraulic System, VX4 deck technology and Kawasaki engines. New enhanced features include 26-in. tires, optional premium Grammer suspension seat and a ground speed of 16 mph. The Super Z HD is backed by a three- or five-year limited warranty, and a five-year/3,000 hour warranty on the Hyper-Drive System. HustlerTurf.com



Exmark

Exmark launched two new propane-powered mowers: the EFI Lazer Z S-Series zero-turn riding mower (pictured) and Turf Tracer S- and X-Series walk-behind mower. They will be available in spring 2013. The new Kohler EFI engines have improved the runtime and operating performance of its propane-fueled models. The increased fuel efficiency of the new engines allows up to 7.5 hours of operation on a single tank of fuel—enough for a typical full day of operation. The closed-loop EFI system optimizes engine settings in real time based on fuel, altitude and air quality measurements to maximize performance and efficiency, minimize emissions and completely eliminate carburetor-related hassles for the life of the engine. Exmark.com

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Billy Goat

The new Z Force Blower quickly attaches to any major zero-turn mower via a standard heavy-duty JRCO mounting bracket. With a 360-degree rotational discharge, air can be diverted in any direction with the tap of a foot on the magnetically mounted pedal—providing rapid leaf and grass cleanup. The pivoting throttle control provides easy entry and exit of the mower. The entire unit also pivots up and down on the rear quick-attach hitch, so the unit floats with terrain changes. BillyGoat.com



Ferris

Featuring Ferris' patented suspension system, the new IS 700Z zero-turn mower offers up to 5 ft. of cutting power. Its new patent-pending steering system features solid rods and sealed ball bearing pivots. Engine choices include a 28-gross hp Vanguard BIG BLOCK, 28-gross hp Briggs & Stratton Commercial Turf Series, 23.5-gross hp Kawasaki FS730V or 23-gross hp Kawasaki FS691V. The mower uses Hydro-Gear ZT-3400 transaxles for improved performance and less down time. Equipped with the iCD Cutting System with striping kit, the IS 700Z is available in 52- and 61-in. cutting widths. A foot-operated deck lift provides the operator with variable cutting heights from 1.5 in. to 5 in. FerrisIndustries.com

Ventrac

The new Ventrac 4500 tractor offers multiple engine options in the Briggs and Stratton, Kawasaki and Kubota models. There's also a propane engine option with the Kubota WG972-GL. When adding the optional propane kit, this Bi-Fuel Ready tractor offers gas and propane fuel operation for fuel savings and cleaner burning emissions, and can reduce carbon monoxide output up to 90 percent, according to the company. The tractor features an enclosed muffler for greater visibility and minimized exhaust exposure. Operators are kept informed of operational temperatures, oil pressure or low voltage levels with the enhanced instrumentation of the new 6-function warning gauge. Ventrac.com/4500



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Landscape Management is proud to be the media sponsor of the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) new Community Stewardship Award (landcarenetwork.org/awards/communityaward).

Starting next month and running through June, we'll feature one of the six winners in a new department of LM.

The second half of the year, we'd love to feature the volunteer projects of even more Green Industry firms. To be considered, please email a 250-word description of your company's ongoing volunteer efforts to mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net.



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MY BIGGEST MISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Rapid growth without a clear business plan has been a difficult road to navigate for one Florida company.



Michael Thackrey

COMPANY: FieldStone Landscape Services

HEADQUARTERS: Clearwater, Fla.

EMPLOYEES: 70 in season; 45 to 50 off season

CLIENTELE: 100% commercial

SERVICES: 65% maintenance; 20% installs/enhancements; 7% irrigation; 5% horticulture; 3% arbor care/tree care

2011 REVENUE: Just over \$2 million

2012 REVENUE: On track for \$3 million

FAST GROWTH SOUNDS more like a blessing than a curse, but the truth is, growing too quickly can sink a business.

That's why Michael Thackrey and his business partner, Chris Eastman, have strived to control their company's rapid growth. They don't want their expansion to ultimately hurt their business.

Thackrey says he's proud of how fast FieldStone Landscape Services has grown since its inception in 2007. Thackrey and Eastman say they launched the company with lots of hard work and clear communication. But there was one important thing missing—a detailed business plan.

When their revenue went from zero to \$3 million in less than six years, it was obvious their efforts were paying off—but they were unprepared.

"The truth is we're entrepreneurs and we're willing to jump head first into things because we know we'll work hard to get where we need to be," says Thackrey. "But we didn't have processes and procedures in place, and that started to hurt us as we grew. Simple things like a vision statement or a business plan were in our heads but not on paper. Our lack of preparation had created a bottleneck."

That bottleneck was the owners themselves. It was difficult for Eastman and Thackrey to delegate without clear procedures in place.

"We found that we had great managers and employees, but they were often in 'wait mode' if they couldn't reach us when we weren't in the office," Thackrey says. "We realized that we were the ones causing the bottleneck."

"WE DIDN'T HAVE PROCESSES IN PLACE, AND THAT STARTED TO HURT US AS WE GREW."

Luckily, they could "feel the problems coming," Thackrey says. And anticipating problems allowed them to take action before it was too late. They rented a business suite and went on a month-long sabbatical to focus solely on implementing processes and plans. When *Landscape Management* caught up with them, they were in the midst of their sabbatical and had high hopes for change.

They were reading up on business and consulting with mentors for guidance. "We've also brought our

managers here one at a time," Thackrey says. "We are rebuilding our entire structure with clear organization charts, a business plan and a concrete system. We're writing policies and procedural manuals. This is all stuff we didn't do in the beginning, but we're doing it now so that we can clear up that bottleneck we've created."

Thackrey says he and Eastman have not been afraid to ask for help—and that's how they've gained a number of mentors who've helped guide them. "We've approached some people that we really respect in the industry and asked them to lunch," says Thackrey. "We feel like these are the 'Big League' guys and we want to know how to be like them. In fact, one of our direct competitors owns a \$30 million company, and we asked him out to lunch and he was open to it."

After finishing their month-long sabbatical, Thackrey and Eastman plan to spend a month updating employees and educating them on some of the critical changes in the works.

"By Jan. 1 we are going to be a different company," says Thackrey. "All the great things that made FieldStone grow so rapidly will still be there, but we'll be operating better. Of course, we wish we had put these plans in place from the start—but we're doing it now, and we'll be better because of it."

Casey Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

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
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GUTS-GLORY



RAM

1)Class based on 250/2500 pickups. 2)See your dealer for a copy of the powertrain limited warranty. 3)See your dealer for official program rules. Must take delivery by December 31, 2012. 4)Maximum tax expense eligibility is \$139,000; consult your tax advisor for more details. 2012 model year shown. Properly secure all cargo. Cummins is a registered trademark of Cummins, Inc. Ram, HEMI, and RamBox are registered trademarks of Chrysler Group LLC.