

“There is something about receiving a homemade meal that feels good,” says Native Land Design President **Stan Johnson**. “There’s a certain satisfaction gleaned from preparing and serving those you appreciate.”

The people helming Native Land Design appreciate their team members as well as their customers. After all, the company’s executive team cooks for them, serving up everything from brisket to jambalaya.

Johnson has worked in the industry for four decades. He stops to talk to *LM* about his observations of the field today.



Stan Johnson,
president, Native
Land Design

TOP TRENDS

› **Smart irrigation technology.** In Texas, water is as valuable as gold. We are seeing our large HOA/professional sites moving toward an ability to put out as much water as they can during the restrictions imposed by local municipalities.

It is imperative the systems function as perfectly as possible. The capabilities these new systems bring not only benefit the client but also the contractor. Our ability to manage the site from afar, diagnosing problems and making modifications eliminate wasted trips to the site.

› **Drought-loving landscapes.** Many clients ask us to modify landscapes that were installed when water and weather were plentiful. We have been charged with addressing the deficiencies of the plants on these sites and introducing plant material that will perform in the “new normal.” This includes native and desert plant material. It also means introducing plant material into new areas.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Low bidders.** We are still seeing low-bidding companies coming in and promising results on a shoestring budget. While we have done a great job with our current stable of clients to produce and add value, it is difficult, especially in these tough economic times, to fault a customer for making a change and trying someone else out.

› **Water restrictions/price of water.** Through legislative and economic restrictions, municipalities and customers alike have put severe limitations on our ability to apply the proper amount of water. Our ability to apply the proper amount of water is key to providing a top-notch product for our customers. Recent weather reports are showing that Texas is staged to be in extreme drought conditions for the next eight years.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Native Land Design

Headquarters: Cedar Park, TX

Employees: 49 full-time, 165 part-time

2010 revenue: \$8.7 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: Do what you say, say what you do. Unlike a construction company, you will interact with your customers weekly for long periods of time, hopefully years. This dynamic creates a very special relationship, one that has to be built on trust. In many ways you are the key to their success and prosperity. Like any relationship you need to ensure that the lines of communication are open and flowing. Silence is never golden with a customer.

› **Price of fuel.** Our costs continue to rise with no end in sight. Unfortunately, much of our fleet is incapable of being retrofitted to take advantage of natural gas and propane advances. As we invest in new equipment and trucks, we are investigating the viability of the new platforms and how we can integrate them into our fleet.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Old-fashioned customer service.** Face-to-face communication is still the preferred form of communication. Our customers are busy, but in most cases the landscape is the single most important asset in their ability to sell/rent space.

Our ability to meet with customers and address concerns in person puts us far ahead of more technologically savvy competitors. Our ability to determine whether or not we are meeting a customer’s needs can only be addressed by evaluating them in a one-on-one setting. Simply providing services equal to or even exceeding contract scope won’t keep the business.

› **Long-term thinking.** Many contractors are short-sighted. With a long-term outlook on our pricing/service model, we can gain loyal customers who will ride the good and bad times with us. Short-term profits should never be the solution. We are here to provide services for decades, not contract periods. What can we do for a particular customer today that will result in new business 3-4 years down the line? What can we do to maintain a relationship now, and build our long-term trust?

› **Water management.** Much of what landscape contractors have done traditionally is to monitor and repair systems. With new smart systems coming on line we are being forced to be educated on their complexities and how they operate. This requires a specific skill set that not all can handle. This allows for a level of professionalism to be portrayed that goes above and beyond what many think of when they think of landscapers.