

# MONEY

# MAKERS

Companies that grew in 2011 did it the old-fashioned way — through strategic moves, better marketing and a return to basics.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

## NO 39 **CHRISTY WEBBER LANDSCAPES**

2011 GROWTH

**27%**

The team at Christy Webber Landscapes, Chicago, IL, had a good year last year. The company's revenue rose from \$20.4 million in 2010 to \$26 million in 2011, a jump of 27%. And the company has its construction division to thank.

"It was pretty astounding to us, the growth in our construction division," says company president Christy Webber.

Webber Landscapes capitalized on the fact that other companies slated to do construction projects just didn't have the cash flow to purchase materials. In the end, that reality landed Webber Landscapes more municipal work than it anticipated at the start of the season.

"There've been a lot of companies where guys are saying, 'Doing construction is just not worth it,'" Webber says. "I ask myself that question every day. The margins — we might do a million-dollar job and come out with a profit of \$25,000. It's just stupid. I think a lot of guys are like, 'Screw it. It's not worth it.'"

Webber Landscapes started 2011 with a very low projected revenue for its construction division, yet by season's end the division had generated nearly \$7 million.

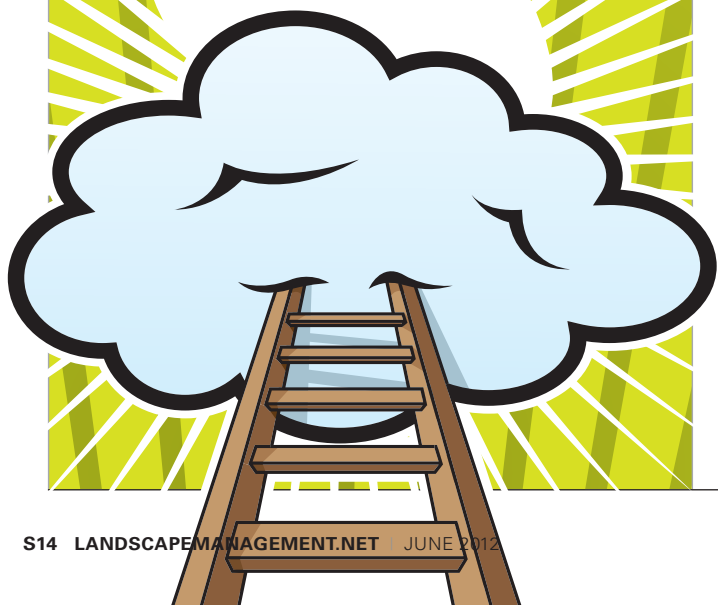
In 2011, the company also focused more on managing jobs well, which helped, and it hired construction staff instead of landscapers to manage jobs.

"To bring someone in who knew the lingo, knew the processes, things the landscaping industry has struggled with, it made a difference," says Webber. "It's a different game now." **LM**



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**CHRISTY WEBBER**, president, Webber Landscapes, on the typically low margins in construction work.



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### NO 57 RYAN LAWN & TREE

2011 GROWTH

15.6%

Ryan Lawn & Tree, Overland Park, KS, has grown little by little nearly every year in recent memory, even in abysmal 2008, says company president Larry Ryan.

In 2012, Ryan Lawn & Tree has a lofty goal: to hit \$100 million by 2030. It plans to meet that goal through organic growth and acquisitions. And, says Ryan, the company's right on target.

About five years ago, the company began studying clean water issues. And in 2011, Ryan Lawn & Tree grew by 15.6%, due largely to its merger with a Springfield, MO-based irrigation company.

The merger generated for Ryan Lawn & Tree about \$500,000. Whether that's also responsible for Ryan Lawn & Tree's share price rising is anybody's guess, but the company was reaffirmed by the fact that from 2010 to 2011 its share price rose from \$5.68 to \$6.48.

And the growth continues in 2012. So far this year, two companies have sold their irrigation customers to Ryan Lawn & Tree, which also acquired the companies' irrigation staffs. The new employees complemented Ryan's current staff in work ethic and attitude, which is exactly what the company seeks in its mergers.

"To have anybody merge with us, we want similar attitudes," Ryan explains. "We look for people who are committed to quality and are priced accordingly. Customers have to feel that you care, and if your front-line worker doesn't convey that, it will make a difference in the way customers feel."

Ryan says he wouldn't want to buy a \$10 million company; the work culture would be too slow to adapt. That's why Ryan Lawn & Tree focuses on acquiring smaller companies and growing incrementally.

Mergers and acquisitions have given Ryan Lawn & Tree an advantage, because becoming larger has reduced the company's overhead per customer.

In 2012, it plans to grow its work force by 20 employees and is eyeing more companies with which to merge. "But we're in no hurry on it," Ryan says. "We want to first make sure it's the right fit." **LM**



### NO 62 RELIABLE PROPERTY SERVICES

2011 GROWTH

50%

Expansion is one way to grow, and St. Paul, MN-based Reliable Property Services did its share of that in 2011. In fact, its expansion caused it to grow by 50%.

Reliable opened two new branches in 2011, one in Des Moines, IA and another in Milwaukee, WI. The expansion is part of Reliable's five-year plan to establish a presence in new markets. Next up are Omaha, NE and Illinois, says Reliable Property Services VP of Operations Tom Hougnon.

Reliable's focus in Des Moines and Milwaukee is on building relationships with residents, Hougnon says. "It's good to be the new guy in town in a lot of ways," he adds.



*"They want to make sure they're partnering with a company that's locally based. And we want to make sure we have a viable presence in the community."*

**TOM HOUGNON**, VP of Operations, Reliable Property Services, on the importance of establishing a local presence when expanding into new cities

"You're a new face," and that causes residents to be curious about a business's offerings, Hougnon explains.

To establish goodwill with residents, when Reliable set up its Des Moines and Milwaukee branches it was careful to hire locally and buy locally.

"We'll buy trucks and trailers from Des Moines and Milwaukee dealers," Hougnon says. "You want to make sure you're established and your presence is there with local people. It's critical to make the customers realize you're not just an office with one guy doing all the work."

When Reliable branches out into new markets, residents often ask whether the company will hire locals. "They want to make sure they're partnering with a company that's locally based," Hougnon says. "And we want to make sure we have a viable presence in the community."

Reliable has a Des Moines staff of four full-timers and about 50 to 75 seasonal workers. And now, Hougnon says, Reliable is seeing double-digit growth in both Des Moines and Milwaukee, touching between 30% and 35% more customers. Reliable also sees single-digit growth in Minneapolis, where it opened a satellite office in 2011.

The company plans to keep expanding in 2012. "Our goal over the next five or eight years is to be the leading provider in the Midwest," says Hougnon. **LM**



## NO 129 KUJAWA ENTERPRISES INC.

2011 GROWTH  
**25.6%**

Over in Oak Creek, WI, Kujawa Enterprises Inc. (KEI) did some profiting of its own in 2011. Company Executive Vice President, Sales and Marketing

Chris Kujawa attributes the growth to KEI's reenergized effort to increase sales.

"We ramped that up a little bit," Kujawa says. "A lot of it has to do with discipline and staying on top of certain things you do well. Do one thing at a time and do it well and on to the next."

Increasing sales, for KEI, meant increasing its marketing and visibility.

"Really, it was just a rededication to getting out there and doing things the old-fashioned way," Kujawa says. "There's no magic bullet out there. It's dedication, persistence. You just get out there and tell your story.

"Get in front of people," he continues. "Exposure is great, but exposure is not a connection. A lot of it's knocking on people's doors, trade association events, organizing social events. Be the catalyst...you know, sponsor things."

Companies are utilizing social media more, and it's a valuable tool, Kujawa says. But it's no personal connection. So over 2011 KEI made getting more face time with clients and prospects a priority.

"You can mail a proposal. That's great," Kujawa says. "It's not the same as presenting one. Now you've got an opportunity to get five minutes with the guy that maybe the next guy didn't have."

From KEI's marketing initiatives in 2011, Kujawa was reminded once again of just how far basic principles go in business, basics such as being personable, reliable, consistent and empathetic.

"You go from just being a grass cutter to being a flexible, creative, dependable grass cutter and now you've set yourself apart," he says. **LM**

*"You can mail a proposal. That's great. It's not the same as presenting one."*

**CHRIS KUJAWA**, Executive Vice President, Sales and Marketing, Kujawa Enterprises Inc., on the importance of face time with clients



SavATree has inspired its sales team (shown here) through its new health and wellness program.

## NO 14 SAVATREE

2011 GROWTH  
**22.7%**

Bedford Hills, NY-based SavATree turned to marketing and networking to grow in 2011.

"This year was really an organic-driven growth year," says Luann O'Brien, SavATree's vice president of marketing and sales development.

"Reaching out to people and really being present in the community has always been part of our culture, but I think customers are becoming more tuned in to the community involvement of companies.

"Rather than it being strictly a fact-based decision that customers are making," O'Brien continues, "it's more emotion-based. People look at trees and shrubs often as extended members of their family, and customers also look to do work with companies that are good corporate citizens."

So SavATree zeroed in even more in 2011 on its physical presence in the community—ensuring its trucks were seen in the neighborhood; rubbing elbows with people at fundraisers; and participating in community service projects.

In 2011, SavATree also enhanced its website. "Anything involving web presence is really mission critical," O'Brien says. "Everybody's looking online to see who's in their area. You have to be online and also be local."

And by using compete.com, SavATree tracks its online traffic and assesses how it sizes up against its competitors. Based on recent compete.com data, SavATree has nearly 30% more online traffic now than it did last year at this time, O'Brien says.

Among SavATree's most important drivers of growth in 2011 was the fact that it energized and motivated its sales team through the health and wellness initiative it launched last fall.

"Our sales team members have been encouraged to get healthy and fit as a way of increasing their performance, and it is working," says O'Brien. "I'm getting emails on a regular basis that our sales team has embraced a healthier way of life."

SavATree's program gives points for weight loss, quitting smoking, lowering blood pressure and more. SavATree's sales conference in February culminated in a team building event at Blue Streak sports facility in Stamford, CT in which employees had fitness breaks.

The initiative "has made a huge difference for us as a company," O'Brien says. **LM**