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BY BETH GERACI

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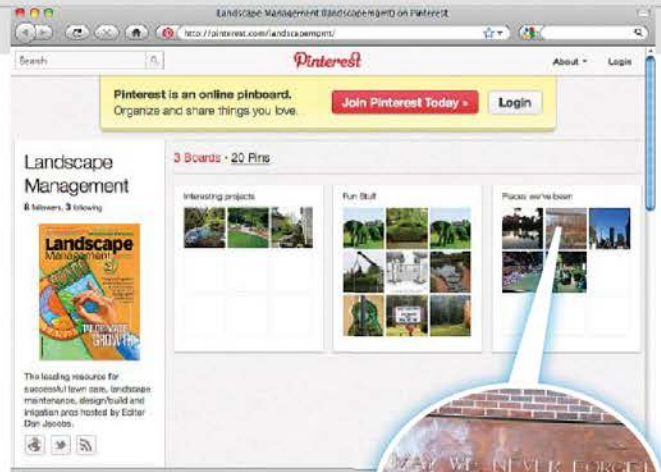


THE LM DAILY

DID YOU CATCH THE LATEST FROM THE BLOG?

» My little dictionary says the word "change" means: to make or become different, to replace with another. And for "improve" it says: to enhance or increase in value or quality, to grow and become better. I won't look up "fade away" because we aren't going there.... but companies can and do fade away if needed change or improvement doesn't happen.

Visit landscapemanagement.blogspot.com/ to get the latest from the *LM* staff and from a few top Green Industry contractors.



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Meet the LM Team



DAN JACOBS
Editor-in-Chief

Jacobs is a veteran of the Green Industry and an award-winning journalist. During his 20-year career, he has written for a variety of newspapers and magazines. He is a past president of the Press Club of Cleveland and a graduate of the University of Cincinnati and John Carroll University. He joined *Landscape Management* in 2006 as Managing Editor and was promoted to Editor-in-Chief in April 2011.



BETH GERACI
Senior Editor

Geraci has worked as a professional journalist for more than 15 years, including six years as a writer for the Chicago Tribune. A graduate of Allegheny College and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Geraci is an award-winning reporter who has expertise in both print and online media.



MARTY WHITFORD
Editorial Director

Whitford is an award-winning journalist and editorial leader at Questex Media. He has served Questex's Green Group for four years, including two years at the helm of *LM*. He steered *LM*'s reader-driven print and website redesigns that helped the brand win a record number of awards from the Turf & Ornamental Communicators Association (TOCA). Whitford brings 18 years of experience in business-to-business integrated media.

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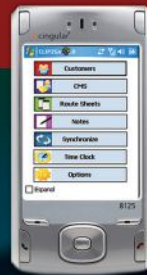
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What I learned at the gym

Life's lessons come in the strangest of places. Some of you might remember what I learned playing softball (tinyurl.com/6tj7sct). Here are a few lessons I picked up at the health club.

1 Some people don't follow the rules. The gym is filled with all sorts of exercise equipment and weight machines designed to induce sweating. Signs posted around the facility remind members to wipe down the equipment as a courtesy to the next user. Most people abide by the rules, but I've seen too many folks either give the machine a cursory swipe with their sweaty towel or simply walk away, completely disregarding the rules. Just explaining the rules isn't enough. Some of your employees are going to look for ways to cut corners.

2 Some people make up their own rules. The pool has limited space, which often requires swimmers to share lanes. Longtime participants develop routines and rituals they don't like disturbed. Sometimes those traditions are bad habits no one has bothered to correct. Your longtime crewmembers might have their own bad habits. Rule enforcement must come from higher up.

3 Groups take coordination. My wife convinced me to take a group class (until recently, I was the only guy). The class is 60 minutes of pure torture. I'm convinced our instructor spends her week thinking up new ways to inflict pain. But she does keep the class flowing. And meeting the needs of 20 people at 20 different skill levels requires talent.

4 Changing the size of a group also changes the group dynamic. As I mentioned, sometimes each lane in the pool is filled with two, three or even four swimmers. When there are two, each can swim at his or her own pace and on their own side of the lane. Add a third person and to make it work, swimmers must travel in a circular pattern. It's not a

huge change, but it's key to success. Add a new person to any group and it changes the way that group interacts. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it is something you need to know.

5 Encouragement helps. Starting an exercise regimen is easy — I've done it dozens of times. The first week is easy and then something comes up. I miss a day and then another and another. So much for that plan. My latest attempt has lasted a year in large part because my wife has been encouraging and pushing me. Everyone has a bad day; regular encouragement and support are keys to ensuring your employees follow the plan. Marci is there when I need her to keep me on track. Who does that for your employees?

6 Change it up. My usual routine includes the elliptical machine followed by weights. But doing the same thing every day gets boring. Sometimes I'll use the treadmill or take a dip in the pool. There's comfort and value (efficiency and productivity) in having a familiar mode of operation. Employees become experts and are able to do their jobs that much better, but if it's needed, employees should have an opportunity to switch gears.

7 It's important to show up. I can't say I've made it to the gym every day in the past year, but I've averaged 4-5 days a week. And the results are apparent. My weight has dropped considerably and all those numbers doctors like to check have improved. Clients and employees appreciate consistency.

8 It's important to treat yourself. As dedicated as I am to getting my health back on track (see December 2011's column: tinyurl.com/6wggq9cn), never treating myself to something sweet (sugar-free, of course) would make the process exponentially more difficult. No matter what the business climate is, remember to have some fun. Your employees work hard for you. Reward them now and then.

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PROGRESS

Battling Old Man Winter

At the time that *Landscape Management* launched, so did the automobile age and with that, suburban growth. In the '60s, the proliferation of new shopping centers, office parks and industrial centers created the need for private snow removal equipment and services to clear parking lots and walkways for customers and employees.

Many landscapers, like Ontario-based Clintar Landscape Management and Milwaukee-based Kujawa Enterprises, seized the opportunity by providing snow and ice removal services as early as the late '60s, proliferating into the new century.

"We got into the snow and ice removal business because we wanted to make sure our summer guys would stick around all year and have a reliable source of income to eat year-round," says Bob Wilton, president of Clintar.

The explosion of companies moving snow and ice has created a huge market for versatile and customized equipment and spurred technology to develop more specialized functions.

"When we first started snow and ice removal, all we really had was straight blade plows attached to our trucks," says Chris Kujawa, owner of Kujawa Enterprises. Wilton remembers the early days when to get the correct angle on his plows, he would hop out of his truck, navigate through the 'clunky' levers and put the pin in different positions manually.

Over the last several decades, snow and ice removal equipment has become quite diverse with stronger, more reliable and user-friendly plows. "Making up the current contractor's arsenal are blades auto-adjustable and versatile

Changes in technology have made snow and ice removal easier, but weather unpredictability still requires contractors to remain flexible.

enough to fit on just about any vehicle, including ATVs, quad 4-wheelers, compact tractors, farm tractors, front end loaders and backhoes," says Patrick Dietz, manager of product development for Western Snowplows. In recent years, he adds, the growth in "winged technology" is one of the key innovations in snow and ice removal for his contractor customers, increasing the width of snow plow blades as well as minimizing snow spill off.

As snow removal efforts progressed with the addition of sanding and salting, protests by environmentalists, highway engineers and rust-clad motorists grew.

Sand and salt are far from the magic bullet in ice removal, according to Kujawa. "We have to lay off the salt, especially with new pavement," he says. "Pre-treating with chemical de-icers might help in cost-cutting, but it's still all about how well you physically remove that ice and snow."

Weather reporting is the biggest advancement in technology in the industry, according to Wilton. Space technology entered the snow and ice removal effort as early as 1959, when the first satellite launched. "The reporting, forecasting, and accuracy of weather has made planning and executing more efficient," says Wilton. "Computers, Internet, websites and weather stations made it easy for us to be ahead of the storm."



Suburban sprawl created a need for private snow and ice services.

But, Kujawa points out, weather remains unpredictable, especially when your customers'

properties sit on or near a large body of water or mountain range.

Smart phones and GPS systems have been valuable replacements for the old two-way radios and "roll of the dimes" played by the drivers when locating pay-phones to contact their offices at the end of every job. "These communication technologies have not only made our lives' easier, but our customers are more accessible in case of emergencies and dealing with other issues," says Wilton.

When the Snow and Ice Management Association (SIMA) formed in 1996, many in the industry observed that effort as the most important in establishing legitimacy for the industry.

The constant Kujawa says is the importance of having quality contractors available to customers. "By quality, I mean experienced employees, proper employment of high-tech equipment, understanding weather predictions and consistent, quality performance," he says. "Everything else is secondary."

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The giving trees of the 9/11 Memorial

A cold rain fell on the 9/11 Memorial the morning of Feb. 25. Then a thick fog rolled in, engulfing the New York City skyline in a sea of gray.

The dreary weather was a fitting backdrop as visitors perused the names of more than 2,700 people who perished in New York on September 11, 2001. Some of them took pictures. Others outlined the engraved letters gently with their fingers.

Through it all, the memorial's gushing waterfalls silenced the hushed conversations of visitors, leaving a resounding quiet upon the site, even as the city roared with life beyond its walls.

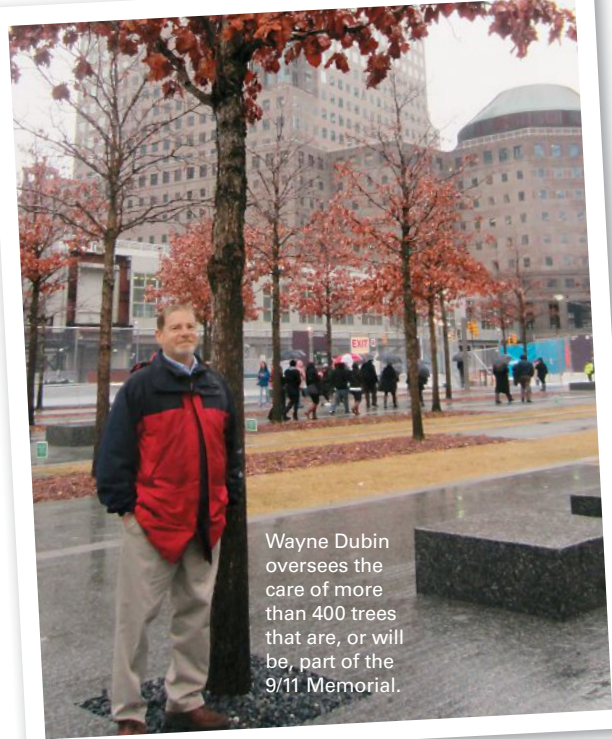
It felt strange to be at the memorial, to feel so vividly the space of 10 years that have passed since that tragic day. It's just one of many sentiments that collide at the memorial. Look at its two, acre-wide basins and you'll feel the weight of knowing that the World Trade Center once stood there. That's when you realize how truly enormous those buildings were. That's when you feel, down to your core, how much life was lost that day.

You sense it even before you lay eyes on the more than 2,700 names carved in stone on the site.

As a visitor, I was hardly immune to the memorial's significance. But I wasn't there to pay my respects. I was there for a different reason: to write about the role of the memorial's landscape — specifically its trees.

With me was my host, Wayne Dubin, vice president and division manager for Bartlett Tree Experts. Dubin oversees the care of the memorial's roughly 225 swamp white oak trees. And more than 200 swamp white oaks under his tutelage in New Jersey will join them at the site by the time memorial construction is complete.

As the one overseeing the care of the memorial's trees, Dubin feels a great responsibility for them.



Wayne Dubin oversees the care of more than 400 trees that are, or will be, part of the 9/11 Memorial.

They are, after all, his livelihood. He notices every detail about them. Pointing to a missing chunk of bark on one of the trees, he observed it didn't fall away naturally. "I'm not happy to see that," he said.

It was the voice of a man who has more than 20 years of experience in tree care. A man who takes ownership of, and great pride in, his work.

Dubin knows how important the memorial is. It's why he cares so much that the trees remain healthy and beautiful. Yet he knows darn well that people don't go there to see the trees.

Even so, the trees' role in the memorial's landscape is important. Without their shade, summertime visitors strolling the memorial's black stone would bake beneath the blazing sun.

Dubin's ardor is an important reminder that much more goes into maintaining the 9/11 Memorial than meets the eye. There are, after all, scores of people behind it. It's a collaborative effort built upon a thoughtful, creative vision and hours and hours of hard work.


It's work that makes it just a little bit easier to carve, quite literally into our memories, those who made the ultimate sacrifice on 9/11.

Read more about the memorial's trees and the people behind the 9/11 Memorial in our April cover story.



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Through their work with the *Sustainable Sites Initiative*, landscape contractors are supporting – and capitalizing on – Mother Nature.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

THE SUSTAINABLE Sites Initiative (SITES) Pilot Program has a certain obstacle course-like excitement to it. It's like the Amazing Race of the landscape world, without the race.

At a time when the landscape industry is increasingly turning to sustainable practices and LEED-certified buildings, the SITES Pilot Program is shedding new light on the importance of practicing ecological responsibility outside — on property.

The two-year pilot program launched in June 2010 and will end this June. Ultimately, it will lead to a new certification in the industry, one that will give the same panache to sustainable properties that LEED certification does to green buildings.

And for landscape maintenance contractors, SITES certification means much more than preserving the health of the ecosystem. It also can save you money, inspire your workers to be more resourceful, and strengthen your marketing power.

How it works

At its core, SITES strives to inspire landscape professionals to be environmentally conscious, challenging them to use ecologically sound materials and methods that ultimately enable land to be more self-sustainable.

Spearheading the project are the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, the American Society of Landscape Architects and the U.S. Botanic Garden.

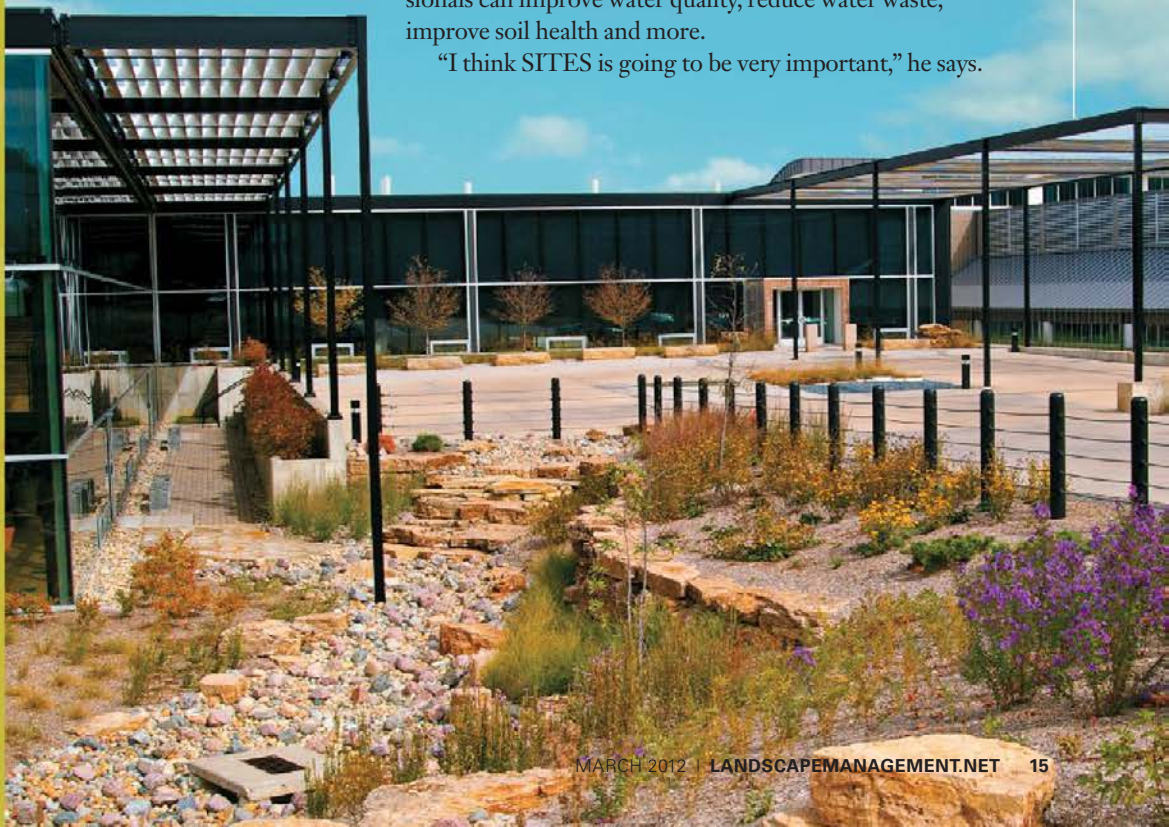
“Through the landscape decisions you make, you can bring back good things, like cleaner water, or sequestering carbon in the ground,” says the wildlife center’s executive director, Susan Rieff.

Stephen Cook recognizes that, too. A division account manager for Brickman Group, Cook sits on the SITES Materials Subcommittee, as well as the Sustainable Sites technical advisory group of the U.S. Green Building Council.

By improving the way ecosystems function, he says, landscape professionals can improve water quality, reduce water waste, improve soil health and more.

“I think SITES is going to be very important,” he says.

The Novus Campus is one of the three SITES pilot projects that have been awarded certification. The prominent area near the facility entrance had previously presented a problem for storm-water flow and drainage. Site enhancements created a rocky outcropping with native plantings and a combination of techniques for slowing runoff and improving water quality. The area has become home to native animals and insects.





As part of his SITES pilot project, Stephen Cook and his design team created this vegetated swale at Marriott headquarters to slow surface runoff and improve water quality.

“We expect a lot of obstacles during the pilot project and embrace them because it will help the system become more robust in the end.”

— STEPHEN COOK

It’s “riding on the momentum from the LEED rating system.... Really, to neglect the environment now will cost us greatly in the future.”

And, reducing a property’s environmental problems goes hand in hand with SITES’ second major goal — reducing costs.

“If you plant things that require lots of chemicals, lots of water, there are costs in that,” Rieff explains. “There are ways you can design the landscape that can contribute to saving money and preserving the environment.”

So whether it’s reducing the amount of drinking water used to irrigate, or transporting materials from sources near the work site to minimize fuel use, the SITES Pilot Program awards credits to participating teams who practice such methods successfully.

For a project to get stamped with certification, it must earn at least 100 credits on a 250-point scale.

It took a panel of experts in soils, hydrology, vegetation, human health and other areas more than four years to establish standards for SITES certification.

Through their efforts, they created national guidelines and performance benchmarks for sustainable land maintenance, construction and design practices.

The pilot program measures how effective those guidelines and benchmarks are once they’re put into practice.

“I do think there’s great importance for our industry,” DeSantis Landscapes President Dean DeSantis says of SITES. “It focuses on the areas where we can affect change. They’re creating essentially a guideline for landscape contractors, and if you’re not paying attention to that out here, you’re missing a lot of business opportunity.”

To be certified, the program requires projects to meet 15 prerequisites covering everything from site selection and allowed materials to soil restoration and sustainable construction practices (see sidebar, page 19).

More than 150 pilot projects across the country are in progress or have been completed. They were selected from among more than 300 applications based on size, project type and location. The process is so competitive that to date only three projects have received certification, on Jan. 25.

Volunteers who make it happen

Propelling the projects are teams of professionals who volunteer their time, purchase their own materials, and if necessary, train their own crews.

DeSantis says the company’s previ-

ous work on several LEED projects prompted its interest in the SITES Pilot Program.

Whereas LEED focuses on the walls of a structure in, SITES focuses on property outside those walls, says DeSantis, whose project was a residence in Portland, OR.

“The owners said, ‘I don’t want to use any chemicals. I want this to be the greenest thing on the planet,’” DeSantis recalls. The project also entailed reuse of everything on the property.

Those things made the project a challenge for the DeSantis team — albeit a welcome one.

The DeSantis crew performed riparian enhancement on a creek on the property to promote fish health and converted a 7,500-square-foot weed field to a native and adaptive

continued on page 18

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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S

COVER STORY

continued from page 16
plant garden. Before the garden was created, the field was sheet mulched to improve soil quality and water holding capacity.

Sheet mulching was new to the DeSantis team. It involved covering the entire backyard with cardboard. The cardboard attracts worms, which break down the cardboard over time. The team then topped the cardboard with six inches of straw and 12 inches of compost, which, like the cardboard, break down over time and create richer soil.

Ultimately, DeSantis says, “we revitalized and re-energized the natural ecosystem on the property.”

Ron Foil, president of RG Foil Landscapes Inc. in Santa Barbara, CA, also volunteered on a residential project. His work involved rain water harvesting, installing a green roof, native landscaping, and constructing four different types of irrigation systems. Foil



For this certified pilot project at the University of Texas, Arlington, a brownfield site was redesigned, turning a past drainage problem into an amenity.

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also installed a live roof on the property, which he first had to get certified for.

The property was small — only one-third of an acre. That posed the biggest challenge.

“How you handle odd spaces, there’s a certain method to doing that,” says Foil. “It was more time consuming than a typical project. The green roof

is probably 25 feet off the ground, so just getting the materials up there was an ordeal.... Everything takes longer than usual.”

The narrowness of the driveway also made things difficult. “It was a little tiny site with a tiny one-lane drive,” Foil says. “It was difficult to transport the

continued on page 21

15 PREREQUISITES FOR SITES CERTIFICATION

1. Limit development of soils designated as prime farmland, unique farmland and farmland of statewide importance
2. Protect floodplain functions
3. Preserve wetlands
4. Preserve threatened or endangered species and their habitats
5. Conduct a pre-design site assessment and explore opportunities for site sustainability
6. Use an integrated site development process
7. Reduce potable water use for landscape irrigation by 50% from established baseline
8. Control and manage known invasive plants found on site
9. Use appropriate, non-invasive plants
10. Create a soil management plan
11. Eliminate the use of wood from threatened tree species
12. Control and retain construction pollutants
13. Restore soils disturbed during construction
14. Plan for sustainable site maintenance
15. Provide for storage and collection of recyclables

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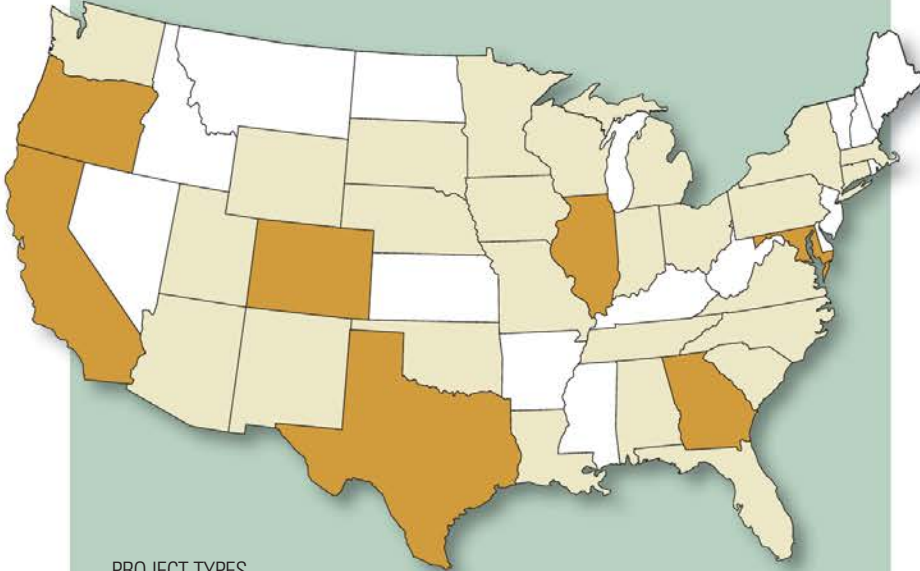
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LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR INVOLVEMENT

(BY STATE)

Landscape maintenance contractors have contributed to projects in **seven** of the 33 states (and D.C.) that are home to SITES pilot projects.



PROJECT TYPES

25% park / 20% institutional/educational / 15% commercial / 3% residential
8% transportation corridor/streetscape / 8% garden/arboretum
6% government complex / 4% mixed-use / 1% industrial

continued from page 19

materials up the driveway. The logistics was mostly the problem more than any of the work was.”

Yet those obstacles made the project all the more enjoyable for Foil. “Everything was different from the ordinary,” he says. “That was fun because it’s not something you do on a regular basis.”

As for Cook, his pilot project at Marriott headquarters in Bethesda, MD aimed to improve soil health and reduce use of drinking water for irrigation, among other things.

Going into the pilot project “I hoped we could achieve certification but knew it would be difficult,” says Cook, whose project did not meet SITES stormwater quantity and quality measures.

“We expect a lot of obstacles during the pilot project and embrace them because it will help the system become more robust in the end,” he says.



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Cook felt his Marriott project was a valuable learning tool that will provide helpful data for SITES certification going forward.

“I feel like we’re learning...and will apply this knowledge and understanding of the rating system to our projects in the future,” he says. “We hope our customers see we are not only serving our contractual obligations, but our obligations as caretakers of the ecosystem.”

Getting a SITES project certified is no easy task. In addition to having to pay for their own materials, assemble their own crews and meet the 15 prerequisites, volunteers also are required to document their work in detail. If they don’t, volunteers have to go back and cover their tracks.

But “if you weren’t going to make it, you wouldn’t just get a negative in the

continued on page 24



PROJECT PROGRESSION

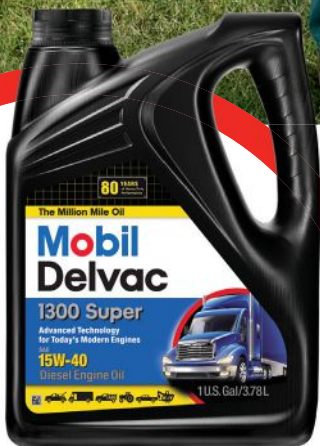
The DeSantis Landscapes team was charged with turning this 7,500-square-foot weed field into a native and adaptive plant garden.

1. The team sheet mulched the weed field as a means of improving soil quality and water holding capacity.
2. The project also entailed tearing down this garage.
3. The team then used the garage foundation as part of the native plant garden. To the right of the garden runs a stream, which the DeSantis team did riparian enhancement on to ensure the health of fish.
4. The garden is beautified by colorful rocks and stones, and a pathway through the property highlights improved soil quality.

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continued from page 22

mail,” says Holly Shimizu, executive director of the U.S. Botanic Garden. “We would let you know early on so you don’t have to go through all that effort and then get rejected.”

Certified or not, Rieff says, “by doing the pilot projects they are helping us revise the system down the road.”

That’s because participants share with the SITES staff their feedback about obstacles they encounter along the way. That feedback will be used to adjust the final SITES certification requirements when they are officially released in spring-summer 2013.

The value of SITES in marketing

DeSantis sees his company’s SITES experience as a valuable marketing tool, “definitely.” It doesn’t advertise it on its business cards, but staff members mention it in client meetings.

“We’ve got more like white paper type of things we’ll slide across the table and say, ‘Here’s an example of a site where we swapped out all the irrigation nozzles, here’s what their payback was.’ We show the numbers. When it really comes down to it, people are concerned with how much it costs and what’s the return on the investment.”

Cook says he does not advertise his sustainable activities as much as he should. But when customers ask about his sustain-



The cascading water at the Novus Campus passes below a pedestrian footbridge and into aquatic habitat. The cascade helps improve water quality through circulation and filtration and provides an aesthetically pleasing amenity for employees and visitors.

able efforts, he is quick to tell of his SITES involvement.

“Our participation in the project has proven very beneficial,” he says. “It gives us an edge when we’re competing.”

Phil Loughman, president of L.I.D. Landscapes in Boulder, CO, was looking forward to retrofitting a residence in the area as part of the pilot program, largely so he could

trumpet his involvement in the program in his marketing. But due to the tanking economy, the property’s owners decided to hold off on the project.

“We thought it was good business,” Loughman says. “This sort of thing is right up Boulder’s alley.... We’re a bit disappointed that the project didn’t go further.”

What’s next

When the pilot program ends in June, SITES subcommittees will assess credit achievement history and participants’ comments, all of which will be used to revise the SITES final version.

Ultimately, feedback from teams working on the pilot projects will be used to create an official reference guide for professionals interested in sustainable land practices.

The U.S. Green Building Council, a stakeholder in the initiative, also plans to incorporate the SITES guidelines and benchmarks into the LEED Green Building Rating System.

When the pilot program ends, says Nancy Sommerville, chief executive officer of ASLA, the SITES staff will adjust the rating system based on insights gleaned from the pilot program. Then there’ll be another public comment period (already there have been two) before a final version is published and open enrollment begins.

“We think we’re offering up some good practices and performance benchmarks,” Rieff says. “We hope people will want to step up to the plate and use them.” **LMM**

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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@questex.com.

Get them to ask one question

It's not the product or service you are selling that matters to a prospect. It's what ails them and what you can do about it that matters. If you are selling quality, capability, service and professionalism, you are selling exactly the same thing that everyone else is selling. When this is the case, the only clear point of differentiation for the prospect is price. And if you are not consistently the lowest price vendor you will more often than not fail to win the sale.

I tell salespeople I work with to change the approach. It's not about what you have (landscape services) and how good they may be, it's about what they need and whether they believe you are the answer to their problems. Therefore save the sales pitch. This is especially true when you consider the process of trying to win work with a property manager when you are only one of many bidders.

The first thing to realize in this circumstance is that their key concern is not with the "goodness or rightness" of proper landscape. Their key concern is keeping their job. They cannot afford to make the wrong decision. The second thing to realize is that the way they keep their job is by keeping their customers happy (whether it is homeowners in an HOA or tenants in a commercial property) and by managing their costs. Lastly, it is important to realize that most of these decision-making people believe that they are underpaid, overworked and under loved and that you potentially only add to and complicate their already busy lives. So excuse

them if they are not bowled over by the "fact" that you have a great water management program.

Taking all this into consideration I suggest a better differentiation strategy — one not based on your product but one based on your selling process. If you want to improve your close rates, you have to look, sound and be different and get them engaged in solving their problems (i.e. reducing tenant dissatisfaction and managing a landscape budget). If you fail at this you will look and sound like everyone else.

Let's start with the obvious. You already know their problems in general, so the challenge is to connect their problems in a very specific way to your services as the potential solution. Doing this requires confidence, some moxie and expertise. The application of these practices is directed at one very specific outcome. You want them to ask you a question. When they do this, they are now engaged with you in creating a solution to what ails them. The way to get them to ask you a question is to sow seeds of doubt.

In many instances property managers are vague about the origin, accuracy and "goodness" of the specs for their properties. They are however, certain about one thing, and that is that everyone has to bid to them. Unless, of course, someone suggests that the specs may not be the best way to keep tenants happy and manage costs. For example, you can sow the seeds of doubt as follows: *"Mr. Property Manager, the problem very often with property specs is that they are old and designed for a very different landscape than you now have. The result is you could be spending more money than you need to in the wrong places increasing costs and the odds that your tenants won't be happy because the problems they see are very often baked into the old services spec."*

Once this is said, it is time to be silent and wait for them to think about this. If they ask you a question like, "Really? How does that work?" you are now in the sales process. If they don't, then your chances of making the sale go down dramatically. At the very least, you won't sound like every other salesman. And that's your goal — be different and get them to ask you one question.

The way they keep their job is by **keeping customers happy** and **by managing their costs.**

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Michael Bellantoni has seen a lot in the 59 years he's worked in landscaping (49 owning his own company). And he's reminded of his start daily. "On the wall in front of me is a frame with three invoices," he says. "I had a client who was my father's. After my father passed away, they asked if I would take over their property. She was cleaning the attic and found some old bills." There's one dated 1964. Bellantoni shares how his business and the industry have changed during the nearly six decades he's been in it.

How did you get involved in the business? I actually worked for my father who was a landscape gardener in White Plains. I mowed lawns and I cleaned leaves, back when there was no power equipment. Everything was done by hand. Back then we burned leaves in driveways. When I left high school, I went into the Navy.

How did you get back into the business? My dad got sick and asked me if I would help him. I worked with him for a year until he got better. After the year, I realized two things. I didn't want to work indoors and I certainly didn't want to work for my father. He was a tough guy to work for. With that, I started my own business. There were about 12 accounts that I achieved for him in the year that I worked with him. I took those accounts. He didn't give me any blessings whatsoever. He said, 'you're going to fail.'

But you didn't fail? I went back to school and completed an accounting major and continued studying in the horticultural

field. After the first year, I got 20 more accounts. And the next year I got 20 more accounts. I was growing in leaps and bounds.

How has your business evolved? As I grew, my purpose was to offer everything to the client. I would take care of your lawn, your trees, your driveway. We do blacktopping. We got into all the new materials. I always wanted to provide our client with everything. It's been successful. Most of our clientele we give full service.

How would you describe your market? Our marketplace here is strong. This area of the country White Plains, NY — it is the third most expensive city to live in in the United States. I probably have \$4 million in real estate to run my little company. What I could do with that money somewhere in the Midwest would be phenomenal. We took a hit in 2007 and 2008 when the market dropped out, but we've bounced back this year.

What is your customer base like? We have an upscale

clientele. We're not your mow and blow guys. We like to pick our clients; we like to give them exceptional service and handle all of their needs from flower planting to grounds maintenance to doing their masonry, irrigation, lighting. That's working well for us. Eighty-seven percent of phone calls for new business are referrals.

What have you seen in your nearly five decades as a business owner? Years ago it was a handshake and a nod. You did a job and you got paid. If there were issues you worked them out. Doing business today is completely different. We have to write proposals. We need to get written authorizations. We need sign-off sheets on completion because we want to get paid. Today, there are great clients out there, but every once in a while you run across a few that intentionally want to give you a tough time on getting paid for your services.

I love coming to work and I love interacting with clients. I love helping people with their problems. I get the greatest satisfaction out of



AT A GLANCE

TITLE: President and CEO

COMPANY: Michael Bellantoni Inc.

YEAR FOUNDED: 1963 (incorporated in 1983)

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 59

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), New York State Turf and Landscape Association (NYSTLA), International Facility Managers Association (IFMA) Westchester Business Council; Commanding Officer (Captain) in White Plains Auxiliary Police Department

EDUCATION: Graduated from HS. Went into the Navy. Two years at Westchester Community College. Has taken decades of continuing education classes.

HOBBIES: Golf, and sports in general

FAMILY: daughter Denise; sons Michael, Mark and Matthew; and married 48 years to Karen

WEBSITE: www.mblandscape.com

accomplishing things. I love coming up with a proposal and it solves the problem. I look forward to that, meeting the challenges. What knocks you down is the aggravation — the HR problems, the bill collection problems, employees not following our guidelines.



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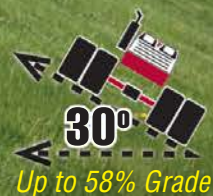
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We've all heard "The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer" — not to mention the fact that the middle class is cutting back on its discretionary spending at an accelerated pace.

A recent study conducted by the Deloitte Center for Financial Services on the rise of the affluent points out that the number of U.S. millionaire households is expected to reach 20.6 million by 2020, nearly doubling the amount existing today. This segment of the population still has money to spend, is the last group to be impacted by economic turmoil and is developing more and more concentrated money circles.

Just what does that mean for landscapers? It's rather obvious: Go after the affluent.

But, according to landscape consultant Jeffrey Scott, a Connecticut-based business coach for the landscaping industry, there's a catch. In order to do this successfully, he says, it's vital to gain a clear picture of who your unique affluent prospects are, how they think and how best to snag and hold onto them.

Know your audience

Affluent consumers find word-of-mouth and referrals from friends and colleagues extremely important when making buying decisions, according to a study by Entrepreneur magazine. As a group, they are very well informed and are often influenced by the reputation

Affluent customer referrals are worth pursuing, but be ready when they come in.

BY TOM CRAIN

of a product and its seller. Affluent consumers like to be acknowledged as special (smarter, more sophisticated and so on), and they respond well to the notion of exclusivity.

"The best place to get referrals is through professionals and tradespeople that service the affluent," says Scott. "It's important to understand that the affluent use a lot of different consultants. They use interior designers, estate planners, builders and realtors. So, for the affluent, you can get referred by those who service the affluent. You want to be at the tip of their tongue."

Scott also runs a peer program for landscape professionals and is the author of "The Referral Advantage" that includes how to generate more referrals from high-end clients. When he ran his family's landscaping and pool business, he grew referral sales from \$50,000 up to \$2 million, a 2,000% increase.

Scott attributes this remarkable growth to focusing on referrals from the affluent. When he owned his business, he zeroed in on real estate agents who sold high-end real estate. He conducted direct mail and email marketing campaigns to them. He joined the realtors associations being the only

landscaper in his area to do so. He took out advertisements in magazines that he knew real estate agents would read. He would also ask his already existing affluent clients to introduce him to their 'favorite' real estate agent.

Scott also took it one step further by actually helping real estate agents to close their home sales. "For example, if one of their homes had a swimming pool, my company would conduct a free inspection for them," he explains.



"I would do all these things," he says. "I call it 'marketing gravity' — you want your referrals to see you everywhere."



Affluent clients' projects often force landscaping professionals to stretch their skills.

Targeted contact

Scott Cahill, a member of Scott's landscaper peer group and owner and president of Botanical Decorators, Washington, D.C., believes it's important to conduct traditional marketing to the affluent, such as running full page spreads in glossy society magazines strictly for image purposes. His landscaping company caters to residential customers living in high-end residential properties. Although it serves fewer than 100 clients a year, several of Botanical Decorators' individual projects can bill out well over \$1 million each.

"I know these ads and other promotions won't necessarily result in any direct sales for us, but it helps create a reinforcing image," says Cahill. "We spent a lot of money on customized uniforms, painting graphics on our fleet vehicles and upgrading our logo and website. It's very important in the affluent market to create just the right visual impression consistently."

When shopping for services, affluent consumers do find price highly important, according to The American Express/Roper ASW Global Affluent Study (AE Roper). The affluent appreciate saving money. While most will pay extra for convenience and to get what they want, eight out of 10 told AE Roper they enjoy their purchases more

if they get a bargain. So, just because you are targeting the affluent doesn't mean you should raise your prices.

The right incentives

Just like anyone, the affluent, too, like a good deal. So you would think that incentive programs would be effective. "Not necessarily," according to Scott.



Installing new sod for an upcoming family reunion.

"They rarely respond to incentive programs, yet there are methods that can work. An incentive program alone is not going to motivate them to refer you."

Shayne Newman, CLP, CLT, founder and president of YardApes of New Milford, CT, agrees. YardApes has provided residential and commercial

Join Jeffrey Scott as he discusses how you can market your business to affluent clients in a pair of free webinars:

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landscaping for affluent clients for more than 20 years. "We thought the traditional approach offering incentives would work," says Newman. "We've tried different things such as offering coupons and \$50 credit vouchers in return for referrals. Our higher end clients don't seem to care about a referral fee."



Vinca plant and natural boulder installation.

Scott suggests collective discounts as a good tactic for the affluent such as offering a group discount to an estate cluster in a particular cul-de-sac. "It's not always an easy thing to do, though" explains Scott. "You need to ensure that all the estate owners get along and know each other and that's not always the case."

The affluent sometimes upset neighbors with disruptive remodeling or installation projects or they don't know their neighbors because they are holiday or occasional weekend visitors. "We found that the affluent homeowners in our area were strictly weekend people," says Newman. "Many of our clients are not full-time residents so

they don't have much interaction with their neighbors. It's very difficult to get them to refer their neighbors to us."

You should give something away. "A good idea is to have mixers where your clients bring their friends along," says Scott. "An educational seminar or a party with great food will encourage them." Cahill will provide free maintenance to some of his highest referring clients without giving it a second thought.



An outdoor kitchen acts as a retaining wall for a Koi pond. The stream and waterfall flow into the pond.

Another marketing gravity tactic is to immerse yourself into your affluent client's social circles. That doesn't necessarily mean you have to ante up big bucks to join their golf or yacht clubs — although Scott says that sure can't hurt. "Rather, you can volunteer for their favorite charities where they serve on boards, the private schools where their children attend and community events where they live," he says.

Delivering on expectations

The most important thing about getting referrals from the affluent, though, is to demonstrate that you are worth referring. You must be able to consistently meet their very high expectations. "Referrals are all about how the affluent do business," says Scott. "They will research carefully before they hire you. They will indeed check you out."

No one knows this better than



One affluent customer flew a design team to a hotel in Miami to show the company the structure he wanted his project to resemble.

Cahill. On his wedding day, he got a complaint call from a demanding client whose estate was undergoing a landscaping installation when a set of lights went out. The client was also a high-powered Washington lobbyist. Cahill went out to the job site to find that the lights went out due to an automatic timer deliberately set. "My customer's wife found out that it was my wedding day and not only screamed at her husband for allowing me to come that day, but also repeated the story to all her country club friends later that week resulting in an additional \$5 million of business for me that year," says Cahill. "If you are committed to doing whatever it takes 24/7 for affluent clients, referrals will come in."

Scott says you need to allay any fears that potential affluent clients may have by showing that you are organized.

You want to give off the aura of having plenty of staff and plenty of time. "Don't complain to your current affluent customers that you are too busy," says Scott. "Don't ever show up late. Don't hesitate when asked to perform a service. Make it look like what you do is effortless. Make them think that they are your top priority and you have limitless resources. When they ask you to do the work, never let on that you are overstretched."

"Sometimes the affluent don't want to refer you because they want to keep you all to themselves," says Scott. "If

they perceive you as having limited resources, they don't want to "stretch" your resources for fear that you won't have adequate time for them."

Newman agrees with Scott that a solid relationship with his affluent clients is really what matters. "It's the process and the whole relationship that gets the referral," he says. "Our affluent customers are really busy people. They don't want any problems. We try to be as invisible to them as possible. You have to make their experience with you seamless, including writing out a bill easy to read with no hidden fees and no fine print."

"If you are committed to doing whatever it takes 24/7 for affluent clients, referrals will come in." – SCOTT CAHILL

In the end, Scott explains, you have to be willing to hang in there. "It takes time," he says. "It's not instant gratification. It will take you a few years to get that type of representation in the affluent referral network." **\$\$**

The author is a freelance journalist with more than 20 years experience writing about the Green Industry. Contact him at tecrain@goinggreenguy.com.

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Win over the wealthy

Understanding the mindset of the prosperous can be the key to effectively serving the top-tier clients.

BY HEATHER TAYLOR

The recently made popular phrase “one-percenters” comes with the implication that the most affluent Americans and their lifestyles are worlds apart from most other Americans. Does the same philosophy apply to their service expectations?

While lawn care and landscaping clients with home values passing the million-dollar mark might have more zeroes at the end of their maintenance or construction contracts than those with more modest homes, does that make them a different breed of customer?

Even the contractors who serve the upper echelon say the champagne and caviar set wasn't insulated from the past few years' economic downturn, which makes it even more important to try to make efforts to cultivate business as much as possible.

Some lawn care and landscaping company principals have set their focus on satisfying what they say are higher expectations of their more high-end clients. Other contractors are of the mindset that the most effective way to serve the client base is to employ the same principles that would be put into

play when serving any other client. Either way, there are tune-ups that can help make sure customer service is fit for royalty.

Constant contact is key

Naturally, customers want to be kept in the loop about ongoing projects or upcoming maintenance. Some contractors take it a step further. This rings true even more for high-end clients who spend tens of thousands of dollars

on large projects or yearly contracts.

Glenn Bonick, founder of Bonick Landscaping in Dallas, TX, makes sure his crews keep the



Glenn Bonick
Bonick Landscaping

clients updated daily or weekly — either in person or via e-mail — when they're working on a big maintenance project.

“As long as we set expectations correctly, there's less of a chance for miscommunication,” he says. Green Acres Landscape & Design in Monroe, CT, keeps lines of communication open with its clients, even when

there are no upcoming appointments.

“(Wealthier clients) expect more communication and a higher level of attention,” says Craig Kopfmann, president of Green Acres. “They also expect to hear from you whether or not service is scheduled. They



Craig Kopfmann
Green Acres

like a phone call just to check in. We ask if they're happy with everything and if they have any additional needs.”

It's not just phone communications. Kopfmann hired a property care manager to make face-to-face interaction more frequent. The company targets some of the more well-to-do clients for monthly visits.

“We found that it's beneficial having someone who can stop by and knock on the door to check in and make sure all their needs are being met,” Kopfmann explains.

Green Acres also sends a periodic e-mail newsletter to keep clients informed and promote upsell items such as seasonal color.



Affluent customers know referrals are the highest compliment they can give a company.



Go to the source

Understanding the customer's background and mindset can go a long way toward ensuring their satisfaction. Wealthy customers in Jay Townsend's home turf of Charlottesville, VA, haven't necessarily been born into the opulent lifestyle, he says. Many of the higher-end clients in have made a comfortable living by being busy professionals.

"Affluent customers may have higher expectations, less time and expect a higher level of service; in fact, that is true," says Townsend, president of J.W. Townsend, adding, "Remember, our products and services are largely purchased out of disposable income. Our products are not a necessity."

The fact that this customer set has more disposable income than less wealthy clients seems to have an impact on what attracts them to a company. Contractors find it's less effective to advertise low prices than it is to showcase quality work.

Bonick Landscaping places ads in local high-end publications with the purpose of branding and keeping the

company top-of-mind with customers and prospects. The ads aren't meant to present a call to action so much as they are designed to inspire clients and to promote the brand.

Ads and other forms of marketing aren't nearly as effective as word-of-mouth referrals, Bonick adds.

"Our customers know referrals are the greatest compliment they can give us and we appreciate them," he says. "We're never too busy for work."

Several companies also build brand awareness by participating in the same community and charity events as their clients or donating to their clients' causes.

It pays to be well connected

Becoming the preferred landscape or maintenance provider of the well-to-do can often mean going beyond the usual mowing and hardscaping jobs. Several firms have developed additional specialties or skills that help them stand out.

"Our reputation for doing quality work and being able to help solve the many permitting issues related to working along the water have helped us separate ourselves from the competition," says Michael Prokopchak, president of Annapolis, MD-based Walnut Hill Landscape Company.

If there's a task that's out of Green Acres' realm of services, Kopfmann

makes sure his crews are prepared with recommendations on service providers that can tackle the job, such as electricians, plumbers and firewood providers. It's not uncommon for clients to turn to them with such requests, he adds.

To help them and make informed recommendations, it's good to foster relationships with other local businesses.

It can also work the other way, when clients ask their builder, for example, for recommendations for a good landscape contractor.

Many contractors work to make sure they're the first company that's mentioned upon inquiry. "I throw a happy hour every year at



Jay Townsend
J.W. Townsend



Michael Prokopchak
Walnut Hill
Landscape Company



Personal attention and proper communication are key to keeping affluent customers happy.

Christmas for a custom builder, architecture firm and landscape architecture firm that provides us with the opportunity to work with their affluent clients,” Prokopchak says. “We work very well with these groups and they are always opening the doors to opportunities that may not exist without the personal relationship we have with them.”



cially the affluent, don’t want to spend time taking care of their gardens.”

A Green Acres company attribute that clients appreciate — although it can be a pain — is the willingness to take on a job at short notice.

“When the client is having an event, whether family is coming in or they’re hosting a charity event, if they have a request that’s over and above normal service, we bend over backwards for them — even if it’s only a 24-hour notice,” Kopfmann says. “It’s something we see pretty regularly when it comes to clients entertaining at their homes.

them respect, with the way our contractors handle themselves on the property and we also communicate with them — we show that we care about them and their project.”

But whether a client’s home is worth \$100,000 or \$1 million, it’s wise to be respectful all the same, Townsend says.

“We treat all customers this way, not just the affluent; remember that many customers are not born into affluence,” he says.

In fact, he adds, lower end clients could end up being more valuable to contractors than they realize.

“As long as we set expectations correctly, there’s less of a chance for miscommunication.” — GLENN BONNICK

The little things

Smaller details can have a huge impact when it comes to retaining upscale clients. To begin with, they seem to require help more so than other clients, Kopfmann says.

Walnut Hill offers additional help by proposing additional maintenance services after the landscaping is installed. The additional services answer the client’s need for help while keeping the company’s name on the tip of the clients’ tongues.

“I basically tell the client we will handle everything on the outside of their house so they can enjoy the spaces we have created without lifting a finger, Prokopchak explains. “This has been very beneficial to us as our clients, espe-

They expect you to get things done within a timeframe.”

The company has found success with other small gestures as well. Its monthly face-to-face communication program includes periodically delivering unique gifts to clients, such as tree saplings or vegetables from a local organic farm.

Respect the money

Contractors should remember to appreciate the chunk of disposable income that clients entrust to you, Bonick, says. This is especially true with larger projects.

“When people spend money with us, we have to respect the fact that they’re spending money,” he says. “We show



“We believe that every client is a source for the next client and that non-affluent customers can become affluent (i.e. even better future customers).” **\$\$**

The author is a freelance journalist with six years writing for the Green Industry. Contact her at hwoodtaylor@gmail.com.



Jeffrey Scott

In affluence we trust

Developing a trustworthy reputation is key to reaching the wealthy client market. It takes time, effort and a little ingenuity.

BY DAN JACOBS / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Affluent customers don't just live in mansions on large rolling estates. They live in communities all over the country, and they have money to spend.

"There are three kinds of affluent: The millionaire next door — the kind that have the money but you can't see it because they don't wear it," says author and Green Industry consultant Jeffrey Scott. "Then you have the more outwardly affluent. Then you have the ultra affluent who are making the really big, big bucks who live a lifestyle that you or I couldn't even fathom."

Most affluent customers have worked very hard and they want to work with the best. "They want to spoil themselves; they want to show off. They want to work with somebody who can give them the best quality."

Scott spend several years leading a landscaping business that served many affluent clients. He shares some of his secrets here.

LM: How does selling to the affluent community differ from others?

JEFFREY SCOTT: The affluent buy more on referral, on word of mouth. They get a lot of their referrals from their friends and their trusted resources. You've got to build trust in the community and among trusted resources — architects, interior designers, etc. — in order to be referred. The affluent have more to lose. They feel more vulnerable and tend to be more conservative, slow to make change.

You have to have a really good sales process. They're going to decide pretty quickly. How you handle that first phone

call, how you handle that first sales presentation. They're going to make their decisions very, very quickly if you're a company they're going to do business with. You have to have a well-organized process for helping them make decisions.

LM: What does that mean for the selling process?

JS: It happens slowly and happens over time doing business with clients that are more and more affluent. It's like climbing the staircase. You've got to prove yourself, get a little bit higher, prove yourself, get a little bit higher.

LM: Are there any tricks to getting into their purview?

JS: You don't have to be in their social circles, although it doesn't hurt, but you do want to have a presence. A lot of them are planners. If you're going to do marketing or direct mail, they're watching. It's one way they're calculating whether they're going to get involved with you. Getting involved in their charities and their community projects is a great way to build trust. If you can be seen doing work for one of the influencers in the inner circle, they'll introduce you to other people in that inner circle. You support it with other types of marketing.

LM: What about asking for referrals?

JS: It's going to happen by giving great service — servicing them 24/7 whenever they need you or want you. Either they're going to have people over to their house and they're going to say, 'Who did that;

who takes care of that' or they're going to feel like they owe you and you're a unique resource they want to share. If you have to nudge, then you're not doing something right. If you have to really ask for it, then you haven't done enough.

LM: What should you do when something goes wrong?

JS: You're always going to make mistakes in contracting. It's important as you're building your reputation to admit your mistakes quickly, embrace them and solve them. On one hand it can ruin your reputation. On the other hand if you can build a reputation as someone who admits their mistakes and fixes them quickly, then that can actually bolster your reputation.

LM: How do you make sure the rest of your team delivers all this?

JS: You have to hire the right guys. From the middle management — foreman and above — you have to hire people who like to learn. It takes teamwork to work for the affluent. There's always a new challenge where the team has to pull together to pull off something. You want to have employees that have that thirst for knowledge.

Then it takes a lot of internal reputation — training, teaching, talking about your philosophy over and over and over again. It's like a balloon that slowly loses air. You have to be constantly blowing air into that balloon. Constantly showing examples of what's good and examples of what's not good enough. It's an ongoing never-ending process. **\$\$**

Marketing to the affluent



Reaching the rich requires a consistent and trustworthy message.

BY CASEY PAYTON

The affluent are one of the few population groups that still has money to spend. However, that's not to say they haven't become more selective about what they spend it on. Landscape business owners who want to get ahead will need to learn the best ways to market to the affluent. Succeeding in this niche will not happen overnight.

If you want to reach the affluent, business coach and Green Industry consultant Jeffrey Scott, founder of The Leader's Edge (peer groups for landscape business owners), says to be prepared to have a five-year marketing plan. "You're not going to market yourself to the affluent and get them to hire you right away," says Scott. "You have to prove yourself. There are three key ways to do that — involvement in the community, building a reputation, and showing staying power."

Community involvement

Getting involved in the community will

help you get noticed by a lot of different groups, but Scott says it's particularly important for reaching the affluent. "The affluent are community-minded and therefore like to be affiliated with companies that are active in the community," he says. "The wealthy like to give back. Think of Bill Gates. It makes them feel good, they can afford to do it, and there's also social pressure to do so."

Scott says that when you choose your community projects, consider picking a school or an organization within the same town as the affluent you're trying to reach — this will produce positive PR for you. "Schools have a built-in PR network. A school is always sending flyers out to parents informing them of what is going on; their next flyer could be about you," says Scott. "You should also get involved with the key charities within the towns you're targeting, and donate your services to those charities in the form of auction items. Ask your affluent clients what boards they sit on, and get involved with those boards first. There's a lot of value there because you'll have an opportunity to meet potential clients and get introduced to the friends of your clientele. Start small and focus on the charities that your clients are heavily involved in."

Building a reputation

Community involvement of course plays into building a reputation but there are other ways to make sure you

are a company that the affluent will respect. One of these ways is your branding. The affluent population pays close attention to branding and signage, says Scott, so it is important to have a professionally designed, attractive logo, and truck signage that stands out yet in a classy way. Your employees' uniforms should match your branding — think UPS. This will support your marketing and reputation building.

Direct mail marketing will help you build a reputation but Scott says this has to be done over time and is not going to work after a one-time hit. "People think the affluent don't read their own mail but that's not true," says Scott. "If they're repeatedly getting mail from you, they will see it and pay attention to it. The affluent are all about results. I suggest using 'results words' in the body copy of your mailers, but use 'aspiration words' in the headlines, like 'Imagine' or 'Dream.' These are words that will capture the affluent clients' attention. Above all else, you have to use drop-dead gorgeous photos showing outdoor living spaces that are professionally stylized."

The affluent rely heavily on recommendations of their peers so once you get in with one affluent property it could be your "in" for the whole neighborhood. "It's true the affluent surf the Internet, but it is more for research. They're more interested in whom their rich neighbors are using so that they can keep up with the Joneses," says Scott.

Staying power

It's not enough to be "here and there" involved in the community, you have to have staying power, says Scott. "That's why gaining entrée with the affluent can't be done overnight — it takes at least five years to build a stable, trustworthy reputation," he adds. "The affluent are planners and once you've caught their attention they're going to watch you and your marketing communication, to see if you are trustworthy. This segment cares about protecting their family, home, and investments."

Scott says that landscape companies that want to reach this population need to work their way into the affluent social circles and show consistency in those circles. "You can't plan to join a board for a few months or do one community project — the affluent are looking for long-term commitments," says Scott. "You have to build the relationship and prove you are in it for the long haul without looking for quick payback."

What they're all about

In order to reach the affluent, it helps to know what drives them, and what services they find most important. For example, the affluent tend to travel a lot and often have multiple properties so they're looking for someone they can count on while they are out of town, says Scott.

"They want a company that they can call up and say 'It's freezing and I forgot to shut my water off — can you do it?'" Scott adds.

"You can't plan to join a board for a few months or do one community project — the affluent are looking for long-term commitments" — JEFFREY SCOTT

"They want someone they can trust inside their house, in their intimate surroundings, near their family and valuables. That's where building a strong reputation and staying power is critical to gaining access to this market.

Upselling is a "requirement" in marketing to the affluent — although that's certainly not what they'd call it, says Scott. To the affluent, it's about doing new projects and solving problems — even the ones they didn't know they had. "It's your job to present them with ideas that inspire them and to prevent or even reveal problems that you can fix," says Scott. "That's how you service the affluent. If you don't upsell to the affluent you can lose them. The idea is to create value by both taking work off their plate and giving them fun projects to be involved in."

Keep your feelings in check

If you decide to go after this population segment, it's important to keep your personal feelings in check. Scott says it's not uncommon for the average landscape professional to have some issues with the affluent. He calls it a "comfort gap" and says that some of it has to do with money.

"We may have a subconscious mixed attitude towards money — and towards those who have it," says Scott. "It's important to recognize your own attitudes and values and make sure that your staff and your company are taught to respect the affluent as hard working, successful, deserving people. Affluent people can act snobby, and you have to be willing to see yourself as a servant that is helping make their dreams come true."

But that's not to say that you can't have confidence in yourself. In fact, that's a necessity. You need to find the right blend between making yourself available and helpful to the affluent and showing that you are an expert at what you do. "The right attitude is important," says Scott. "You need to think of yourself as a unique problem solver and a specialist in what you do. You have knowledge that your clients don't have and that other vendors don't have. That's how you become a unique resource to the affluent." **\$\$**

The author is a freelance journalist with six years experience covering landscaping. Contact her at djacobs@questex.com.

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The 6 pillars of a strong foundation

It's no small undertaking to create a lasting organization. Companies that withstand tumultuous times, survive changing conditions and continue to grow have one thing in common — a strong foundation.

To endure requires a foundation of six absolutes. Once in place, you have a core you can protect, a base for success and the power to bind your organization together for the long haul.

1 Solid financial base. Do you have a good understanding of managing both the balance sheet and profit-and-loss statement? Companies struggle when they've limited options. They're limited because they lack a strong balance sheet and adequate cash, carry too much debt and, with tighter credit markets, find themselves stuck. One or two bad receivables, and it's hard to catch up.

Mismanagement culprits sneak up when you least expect them. Are owners taking too much off the top to live on? Are margins unrealistic? A strong balance sheet with a high level of liquidity enables your company to be more competitive, simplify your forecasting, improve your ratios and give you the freedom to be more flexible.

2 Good business mix. Do you have a good diversification plan? Companies with income balanced between recurring revenue (landscape maintenance and lawn care services) and cyclical revenue (design and bid-build construction), have done well. Companies heavily dependent on construction revenue alone could not cover their overhead with reduced workload and lower margins.

In the early part of the recession, companies tried to bid with lower margins to cover overhead and keep good employees. Because this recession has been so prolonged, short-term solutions failed. A diversified business mix will strategically position your organization for lasting results and, in a seasonal industry in particular, ensure a regular revenue stream throughout the year.

3 Commitment to learning. Old strategies not working? Continuous improvement requires a commitment to learning. Learning organizations are nimble and regularly refresh their attitudes and practices to stay competitive. They have an ability to adapt, change and transform themselves in response to shifting market preferences.

Early in the recession, the companies in which people at all levels were thinking critically and engaged in their work did well. They responded by lowering costs and reducing margins to maintain their accounts and compete for new ones.

4 Decisive management. Do you fund losses during a weak revenue period to avoid making a tough decision? Effective leadership is not afraid to act decisively and quickly. Companies with decisive management teams survived the depressed business climate by adjusting prices immediately and making the overhead cuts quickly. They committed to a path, took action, then planned their next move.

5 People development. Do you decide to hire the person with experience, or the one with the best attitude that fits your company's culture? Companies that succeed do so because they benefit from HR policies that support investment in talent and training, develop a more committed work force and are committed to quality in hiring. They invest in the best, give them resources to succeed and reward them when they do succeed.

6 Customer focus. Do you have a strong service culture that builds loyal relationships? Companies are only as good as their customer base. Without customers, any business will cease to exist. The best companies have the ability to see the big picture and distinguish patterns and trends in customers' expectations. They had enough trust and communication in the relationship to understand their customers' shifting preferences — and to engineer solutions and services accordingly.

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LARGE CRABGRASS

Digitaria sanguinalis

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This light green, bunch-type grass features seed-head spikelets in two to nine finger-like branches along the stalk.
- ▶ The summer annual germinates when soil temperatures reach a consistent 55°F.
- ▶ Leaves are rolled in the bud, and the collar is broad with long hairs.
- ▶ Its tall, membranous ligule has jagged edges and no auricles.
- ▶ It grows under close mowing, and prefers open areas with thin turfgrass.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ When soil temperatures reach 55°F in the spring, apply a pre-emergence crabgrass herbicide. If you have missed the pre-emergent timing, you can apply an herbicide labeled for post-emergent control.
- ▶ Look for the active ingredient dithiopyr, which provides season-long pre- and early post-emergence control of crabgrass. There are several liquid, granular or fertilizer granule options.
- ▶ Consult the appropriate product label for recommended rates for your area, as well as for re-seeding and overseeding.

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TROPICAL SIGNALGRASS

Urochloa subquadrifera

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ Commonly mistaken for bull paspalum or crabgrass, this blanket-like grass has relatively long spikelets, 3.5mm to 4mm. Crabgrass spikelets are narrower and not more than 3mm long.
- ▶ It roots from the nodes and has more papery leaves, compared with the soft leaves of crabgrass.
- ▶ The seedhead consists of modified racemes that emerge at right angles to the stem, spaced much like the signal flags used on ships.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Once established in turf situations, this grassy weed is extremely difficult to control. Few, if any post-emergent herbicides are effective in selectively removing this species in warm-season turf, where it is commonly found.
- ▶ Several pre-emergent herbicides, such as dithiopyr, prodiamine, oryzalin, benefin + oryzalin or benefin + trifluralin, have demonstrated good to excellent pre-emergent control of this species.

* State restrictions on the sale and use of Dimension specialty herbicide products apply.

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YOUR GUIDE TO PRODUCT RESEARCH

MAINTENANCE: STORAGE OPTIONS

Power Tray Products

The Power Tray organizes, transports and stores handheld power equipment safely and securely. Equipment is secured via multiple points of contact. The light-weight aluminum equipment tray, which mounts to walls or posts, trucks and trailers, is designed to fit Echo, Stihl and comparable brands. The corrosion-resistant tray features an antitheft locking option, and allows for customization of equipment space. PowerTrayProducts.com



Knaack LLC

Now available for both full-sized vans and minivans, the newly redesigned Weather Guard Quick Clamp Ladder Rack offers enhanced durability while making it safer and easier for one person to load, transport and unload ladders and other oversized items. Ladder hooks on the front end of the side rails have been extended and angled outward for easier loading in tight places, while adjustable sway braces provide easy ladder change out. WeatherGuard.com

DeMore's Innovative Design Inc.

The Aerial Tool Bin for aerial platforms, scissors and boom lifts is designed to keep hand tools and supplies organized and within a worker's reach. The portable, triangular-shaped organizer attaches to square or rounded 90° corners of platform railings, where it is secured with two OSHA-compliant locking bolts. Constructed from reinforced, non-conductive, UV-protected orange polypropylene, the Aerial Tool Bin is designed to provide a clutter-free working area by keeping tools and parts off the floor and at waist height. AerialToolBin.com



continued on page 48

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MAINTENANCE: WATER EQUIPMENT

Broyhill

The 15- and 25-gal. new tank design of Broyhill's Spot Sprayers offers a quick in and out from your vehicle. They feature molded-in handles and a special 12-volt Shurflo pump with 15-ft. hose and spray wand, which mounts on the tank side. They arrive boxed for UPS shipments.

Broyhill.com



Briggs & Stratton

Four pressure washer accessories — a quick-connect turbo nozzle, second-story nozzle kit, rotating surface cleaner and roto-scrub wide nozzle — are designed to help users finish intensive cleaning projects faster and with less effort. The turbo nozzle (pictured) provides a powerful pinpoint jet of water for intense cleaning — 40% faster cleaning than standard spray nozzles. With an easy connection to the quick-connect wand, it's recommended for cleaning brick, concrete and vinyl surfaces, and can be used with pressure washers up to 3,700 PSI. The kit, which eliminates the need for ladders when cleaning hard-to-reach areas, contains two nozzles: The pink jet soap nozzle extends the reach of soap, and the blue jet flush nozzle washes dirt and debris away. BriggsAndStratton.com

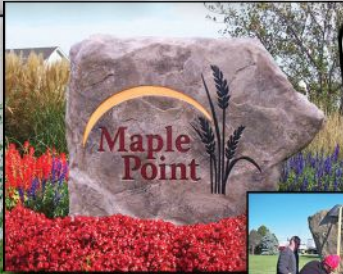
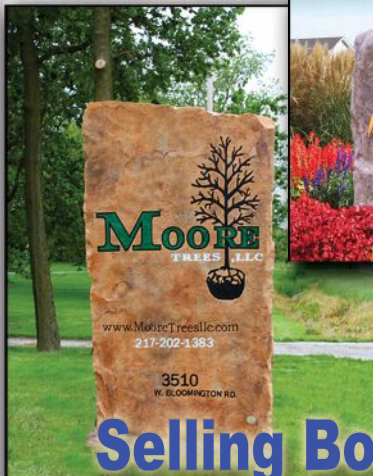


Underhill International

Featuring robust, "firefighter quality" construction, new UltraMax variable flow hose-end nozzles are designed for hand-watering sports fields, parks, playgrounds and other public areas, for infield conditioning and irrigating dry, patchy turf. The nozzles, available in four models, are also practical for stadium and playground wash-downs and equipment cleanup. The ergonomically designed pistol grip or firefighter grip has sturdy ball valves and push-pull on/off control handles. All models have 0.75- or 1-in. inlets. Leak-proof and virtually indestructible, UltraMax nozzles are constructed from aircraft aluminum, stainless steel and Thermoplastic rubber (TPR). Underhill.us

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Marketing to the Affluent

Free Webinar Series



Become known as the "go to" company with the affluent

March 15th, Thursday – 1:30 EST, 12:30 CST

Affluent homeowners have the income to hire you, if you know how to win them over. Jeffrey Scott, who built his company into a \$10 million enterprise by serving the wealthy, will fast-forward your learning curve so you can sell more and sell faster to this profitable customer segment. In this first of three webinars, learn what you "must" do in order to become the "go to" company with the affluent, so that they think of you first and refer you to their friends. You will learn the one mistake you must avoid at all costs when marketing to the affluent.

Sell and build trust with the affluent

April 5th, Thursday – 1:30 EST, 12:30 CST

With the wealth gap widening, you must learn how to capture the affluent segment, if you want a profitable residential business. You need to learn how to gain their trust because the affluent are extremely busy. In this second webinar, learn how to establish and build trust during the sales process, and learn how to price and bundle your services so you maximize sales, margins and client satisfaction. You will learn the one thing the affluent want more than anything else.



Train your staff to work with and wow the affluent homeowner

April 26th, Thursday – 1:30 EST, 12:30 CST

Once you have sold the affluent, maintaining their confidence is critical in order to gain referrals and more sales. In this webinar you will learn how to train your staff so they are able to impress your affluent clients and put their best foot forward. Learn how to teach them to represent your company and how to give the affluent what they most want – undeniable 5-Star Service. You will also learn the biggest psychological roadblock your employees have when it comes to servicing the affluent and how to remove it.

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Jeffrey Scott

JEFFREY SCOTT is author of "The Referral Advantage" and "The Leader's Edge." At age 34, he took over and grew his design-build-maintain firm into a \$10 million enterprise focused on the affluent market place--selling and maintaining pools, landscapes and multi-million dollar environments. He now consults with others on how to do the same. He also facilitates peer groups for landscape business owners who want to transform and grow their business. To learn more visit www.GetTheLeadersEdge.com.

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DESIGN BUILD: EARTH MOVERS



Atlas Copco

The Cobra Pro Drill/Breaker is a gas-powered tool that digs fencepost holes, cuts asphalt, drives tent stakes and even tamps ground. Designed for medium to heavy demolition of material such as concrete and asphalt, it meets the stricter requirements of exhaust emission set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for smaller non-road engines. The breaker delivers 44 ft.-lbs. of impact energy at its tool tip, which is said to be almost twice the impact energy of other gas-

driven breakers on the market. The drill/breaker is a self-contained tool and has no compressor or hoses. The hand tool features a redesigned and trimmed silencer with catalytic element and an improved heat shield. *AtlasCopco.us*



Little Beaver

The Hydraulic Earth Drill offers an efficient and dependable solution for multiple digging and drilling projects. By combining an 11-hp Honda overhead valve gas engine with the convenience of hydraulic drive, the unit is able to drill efficiently and effectively, even in the toughest soil conditions. Built to be both reliable and powerful, the drill has also been designed for easy transport and maneuverability. The HYD-PS11H has a 5-gal. reservoir capacity and is mounted on an easily maneuverable three-wheel chassis. The compact design allows access to areas unreachable by skid steer-mounted augers. Front and rear handles make loading and unloading fast and easy. *LittleBeaver.com*

General Equipment Co.

A 1.6-hp Subaru EH035 four-stroke gasoline engine supplies the power to the 240 hole digger and eliminates the need for premixed fuel and oil solutions. A Magura twist grip throttle controls the engine speed for optimal power output. Proper operating position is promoted by the exclusive Comfort-Zone handle design, which is intended to minimize the effects of kickback and fatigue. The 1-in.-diameter driveshaft connection accommodates the use of earth augers ranging from 2 to 8 in. in diameter. The standard digging depth is 30 in. *GeneralEquip.com*



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PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

Shilan is editor of FromDesign2Build.com. Contact him at 201/783-2844 or jshilan@gmail.com.

It's time to play "What's My Budget?"

Q How do you get homeowners to tell you what they want to spend on a project without being pushy?

— Amanda Bell, Landscape Designs by Amanda, Red Lion, PA

A One common problem for landscape designers and contractors is trying to find out what a client is budgeting for a particular project. Clients are hesitant to throw out a number, and contractors know that without a budget number, they are flying blind.

The perfect time to have this discussion is at your initial appointment — just after walking the site, discussing ideas, taking notes and reviewing their goals and objectives. This is where it's time to play everybody's least-favorite game: "What's My Budget?"

Although the concept of the game is quite simple, winning is extremely difficult. We ask our potential clients, in various direct and indirect ways, what they are looking to spend. Clients hedge, weave and bob, and do everything they can to protect or hide that information.

If we learn the "magic number," we win, and will most likely get the project. If not, we are destined to waste our time and not get any work.

Why won't they tell us what their budget is? There are two main reasons: fear and hope. Fear that we are going to raise our prices artificially because they told us what they want to spend. Hope in that we are going to propose something that is less than they want to spend, thus getting a deal.

So what do you do?

After you've walked the site and discussed the scope of the work, you should have some idea of the cost of the project. For example, let's say a particular

project is going to come in around \$25,000.

Here's how your conversation should go:

Contractor: *This sounds like a really great project. What would you say your budget is for this phase?*

Homeowner: *Well, we don't know what landscaping costs. Why don't you come up with something, and we'll tell you if it is what we want to spend?*

Contractor: *Let me give you some idea of price ranges. I've done projects similar to this from \$10,000 up to \$75,000, depending on the type of materials we used or the size of the plantings we install.*

Homeowner: *\$75,000? That's a lot of money! The most we want to spend is \$20,000.*

What you have just done is intentionally given the client a low and bare bones budget number, and also made him aware that things can get quite expensive. He never would have thought that this much money could be spent on a project like this, and he surely knows that \$10,000 probably won't go that far. Your prospect will quickly realize that if you were thinking \$75,000, and he was thinking \$15,000 or \$20,000, then this would be quite a mismatch and a waste of everyone's time.

A similar approach provides price ranges. When the prospect tells you, "We don't know what we want to spend," you say something like this:

"Depending on how much work you do, and what materials we choose, we've done similar projects for 10 to 20K, 20 to 30K, 30 to 50K or 50 to 75K. What is the range you are thinking of?"

Your clients will say, "I guess \$20,000 to \$30,000 is what we were thinking."

Quickly follow up with, "Would you say closer to \$20,000 or \$30,000?" They will respond with, "We were really thinking of \$25,000 but could go to \$30,000 if we had to."

The best part of all of this is that you will minimize the amount of time you waste developing designs and proposals, while dramatically increasing your chances of selling the job.

Profiting from Design is a quarterly column from award-winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the president of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in *Profiting From Design*, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.

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Spring trials

PREVIEW

Blushing Pink is one of three new SuperCal introductions from Sakata.

WHEN GLENN Goldsmith opened his greenhouse to show off his new varieties to customers in 1967, he could not have predicted it would start the ball rolling on what would become the California Spring Trials.

This year's trials will take place March 24-29 at 17 locations that include nearly 40 companies showing off the plants that will be available next year. Visitors who pre-register can make their way from Gilroy, CA (where the Goldsmith family began the trials and officially retired last year), all the way to Encinitas, CA, more than 400 miles to the south. Along the way, they can participate in roundtables, hear from expert speakers, learn from product demonstrations and, of course, see some amazing displays of new varieties.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE PLANT INDUSTRY'S MAIN EVENT.

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

What's new

For example, Syngenta Flowers, Inc., which purchased Goldsmith Seeds in 2008, will highlight its flowers, Syngenta Crop Protection products and Fafard soil mixes.

"We have a lot of new seed varieties being introduced this year, including seven all-new series," says Tracey Gorrell from Syngenta Flowers' Marketing Com-

munications department. "In our vegetative assortment, we're proud to launch three new colors in the market-leading Calliope geranium series as well as some unique novelty colors in our award-winning Lanai verbena series among our introductions for the 2012-2013 season."

Also in the northern region of the trials, Sakata will display new colors of its SunPatiens hybrid impatiens, three new SuperCal introductions, which combine petunia and calibrachoa traits, and new plant series at its Salinas, CA, trial location.

"We're coming out with Magic Carpet Yellow Mecardonia," says Jeanine Standard from Sakata's Media Relations department. "It has an upright habit, but is low to the ground so it's good for paths

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livescapes > SPRING TRIALS



Cosmic Orange is a new color in Ball FloraPlant's Patchwork series of impatiens.

or pavers.” The plant, which can be walked on, has petite upright blooms that come up from its foliage.

“Another thing I’ll be sharing is that we have a new Sundance portulaca series,” she says. “It has an upright habit and large flowers that stay open longer during the early evening. It’s extremely heat tolerant. There are six colors in that.”

In the seed area, Sakata is introducing the first “clear” Majestic Giants II pansy. The solid yellow pansy will not be mottled like other Majestic Giants II pansies. The company will also display a new line of snapdragons with five colors, as well as a new dianthus series.

Stops in the northern region also include displays from Danziger ‘Dan’ Flower Farm at Headstart Nursery’s stop; Pacific Plug & Liner, which includes the Israeli suppliers of Cohen, Hishtil, Jaldety, Isaacson Flowers and Schwartz Nursery; Golden State Bulb Growers; American Takii; and Speedling, Inc., which is hosting ABZ Seeds, Greenex USA, Inc., Hem Genetics, Plant Source International, Inc., Schoneveld Breeding, and Thompson & Morgan.

Ball gets artsy

In the central region, Ball Horticultural Co.’s stop in Santa Paula, CA, will feature

all of its breeding companies, as well as its retail brands and Daniels Plant Food. The company’s theme this year is “The Art of Plants.”

Ball will show off more than 295 new seed and vegetative varieties, as well as 18 new series.

Some of those new introductions include the Cool Wave pansy, which trails up to 30 in.; a new Everlast Garden Dianthus from Selecta North America, which is a Zone 4, cold-hardy plant that won’t die in heat; and three new colors of Patchwork Cosmic Orange Impatiens — Cosmic Orange, Burgundy and Pink Ice.

Ball will also display the new Pretty series of petunia. These seed-grown petunias have a better branching habit with improved airflow for less disease, according to the company.

Visitors to the PanAmerican Seed display can check out Angelonia Serenita, a new Serenita that is a more compact and controlled version of the company’s Serenita angelonia. It has high deer and rabbit

PHOTOS COURTESY: BALL HORTICULTURE (TOP); SYNGENTA FLOWERS (OPPOSITE LEFT); AND DARWIN PERENNIALS



Lavender is one of the new colors in Syngenta Flowers' Calliope geranium series.

Darwin Perennials' Double Scoop Cranberry Echinacea.



tolerance, as well as low-water needs, according to the company. PanAmerican will also feature Spring Matrix pansies.

Darwin Perennials is expanding its Sombrero series of Echinacea with a new Lemon Yellow color and the company's Double Scoop series of double coneflowers now includes a Cranberry color.

Beyond Ball's partners and brands, the central region includes Dümmer USA, Inc., which is showcasing the HGTV Home plant collection; Greenheart

Farms; Floranova; Skagit Gardens; Fides Oro, Inc. with Flamingo Holland; and GroLink Plant Co. with Westhoff, Athena Brazil, Florist Holland B.V., GroLink, GreenFuse Botanicals, Hort Couture and PlantHaven displays.

Trend spotting

The southern region includes stops at Proven Winners; Paul Ecke Ranch; and Plug Connection, which includes displays from Suntory Flowers, Benary, Cultivaris

and America In Bloom.

The trials have grown over the years to include more than just a show and tell of plant materials. Whether traveling to all of the regions, or focusing on a specific area, the Spring Trials provide a great opportunity for landscape professionals to keep on top of the latest trends in color, marketing, and design. **LMM**

Gooch is a freelance writer and editor based in Northeast Ohio.



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Berry nice

As a newly introduced companion to **Tesselaar Plants'** 'Strawberries and Cream' lacecap hydrangea, 'Blueberries and Cream' offers indigo-saturated blooms surrounding a milky white center. It can be planted outdoors in the garden in USDA Zones 7 and higher, from early summer on for a beautiful show the following year. In Zones 6 and lower, it still can thrive in wind-protected areas or when given extra care. Tesselaar.com

Get inspired

Bred for a wide range of weather conditions, 'Inspire' Pansies (*Viola wittrockiana* Pansy F1) from **Benary** are now available in 29 colors, in both clear and blotched faces. Six new colors were recently added to the series, including Blue Angel, Blue Velvet, Deep Blue with Blotch, Lemon with Red Blotch, Lilac with Blotch and Terracotta (pictured). In addition, the Inspire Peach Shades blend of pinks and yellow were improved upon. Benary.com



Party hearty

New *Cistus* 'Mickie' is **Terra Nova Nurseries'** stable variegated form of *Cistus hybridus*. It has a low, mounding habit that hugs the ground and creates a colorful, ever-green focal point. Hardy to USDA Zone 7, it hails from northern Washington State and has survived some brutal winters. White flowers punctuate the flashy foliage in May and June. TerraNovaNurseries.com

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Midnight sweet

Pan American Seed's new Vinca 'Jams 'N Jellies' Blackberry (*Catharanthus Rosea*) features a deep purple with a white eye. In some settings, this summer accent plant's flower petals appear almost black. This 2012 All-America Selections winner is easy to grow, with excellent tolerance to drought and heat, according to the company. Mature plants will reach 10 to 14 in. tall, with 2-in. flowers that are complemented by deep green, shiny leaves. Best in full sun, hardy to USDA Zone 9. PanAmSeed.com

Playing dress-up

Hardy in USDA Zones 7 to 9, **Monrovia's** 'Dolly's Dress' Fuchsia (*Fuchsia microphylla ssp. aprica* 'Dolly's Dress') features small-toothed leaves on upright twiggy stems that bear large, flared bright pink tubular flowers all summer long. Named after the vernacular name for this plant, Dolly Mixtures, and for the dress shape of the flowers, this moderate grower from the Dan Hinkley Collection will reach 5 ft. tall and wide. Monrovia.com







Royal beauty

New *Rosa* 'Princess Anne' from **David Austin Roses** flowers over a long period and in large clusters, the individual blooms opening in succession. There is a medium-strong Tea Rose fragrance. The petals are strong and not too long, and many are heart-shaped, resulting in a ruffled, water lily effect. The inner petals create an informal button eye center, revealing the backs of the petals, which are a warm shade of deep salmon pink. Over time, the petals gradually age to a shade of purple-lilac. Hardy in USDA Zones 6 to 9, its mature size is approximately 3x2 ft., making it ideal for borders, hedging and pots. DavidAustinRoses.com

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Catering to clients

A company finds container gardening to be full of possibilities.

CONTAINER GARDENING HAS proven to be a successful add-on service for Christensen Landscape Services, LLC in Northford, CT. In fact, container gardening has brought to light some additional opportunities, such as container storage and seasonal plant displays, in which the company can continue to drive revenue in the off-season. With all of the service possibilities container gardening brings to the table, the company has classified it as an add-on

service for both the design/build and maintenance divisions. But to make it successful, it requires some personal customization for the client.

"It definitely takes a little bit of catering to each individual client, as everybody has different tastes," says Donna Christensen, co-owner and designer. "You can't just say you're going to do a certain container design for every client.


Everyone likes different pots, different flowers and different color schemes, so it's not a quick service."

Since she started offering the service, Christensen says that the possibilities it has presented have continued to grow. She can have her garden crews charge to maintain the container gardens for those clients who don't want to do it themselves. That would include cleaning up, cutting back and shaping the plantings, along with regular maintenance such as watering if they don't have a drip irrigation system in place.

Christensen has also found a niche in offering tropical designs for clients.

"We have done some interesting things, such as offering palm trees that we bring in for the client and help maintain," she says. "We have also done a variety of tropicals. We can then store those in our greenhouses in the off-season. When it's time, we'll get them set up again on the client's property."

She notes that the tropical service has



Christensen Landscape Services has benefited from selling containers, tropical plants and other add-ons.

been a year-round opportunity because she's able to bill for storage and maintenance in the off-season.

NEW SEASON, NEW DESIGNS

Each new season poses an opportunity to potentially sell a new container garden design, Christensen says.

"In the early spring, we may suggest pansies and tulips, and as the season goes along, we'll ask about switching them out for some annuals," she explains. "In the fall, we can do mums, cabbage, kale and grasses, and then in the winter it's evergreen and holly berries. We have a number of clients that want all four seasonal presentations, so it's a great source of steady income."

Christensen has even found a nice little upsell opportunity in the actual container itself. Some clients may already have their own pots, but she's found that some clients like her to order them.

"That's another great sell," she says. "I may find a really interesting pot and be able to sell it to the client along with the plantings and service."

Christensen has been able to market this service through presentation. Neighbors of clients see the beautifully designed pots and inquire about them. Christensen says she's also found a great opportunity through displaying her container presentations at a local inn. She provides the property with some container gardening, and in exchange the inn lets her put her company name on all the pots.

"The innkeeper has a holiday tour that goes through the inn, where guests look at all the decorating," says Christensen. "That's been a wonderful opportunity for us to get this service out there.... We provide them with beautifully decorated pots and they let us market ourselves. It's a win-win."

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

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Christensen Landscape Services LLC

HEADQUARTERS: Northford, CT

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 50

ADD-ON: Container gardening

WHY: It provides a variety of billable services that the crew can add while they're already on the property doing other tasks. It also keeps the company in regular touch with clients.

OVERALL SERVICE BREAKDOWN: 50/50 maintenance and design/build

CLIENTELE: 90% residential; 10% condominiums and commercial properties



Western Horticultural Services, Houston, TX, makes safety job No. 1. It has been recognized as a leader in the annual Safety Recognition Awards Program sponsored by the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) for maintaining a consistent accident-free and “no days lost” work record for its crews. “We stress safety every day,” says owner **John Catapano**. “We bring our crews together every month for breakfast exclusively to discuss safety issues and provide safety training. Creating a safe work environment shows our employees and clients that we care.”

Catapano offers tips about staffing, customer service and sustainability at his company:

TOP TRENDS

› **It's service, service and more service.** We have a corps of professional client service representatives whose exclusive responsibilities are to meet personally with our clients to develop a strong professional relationship removed from any operational duties. We realized the importance of this when I first started this practice. I dropped in on clients for friendly visits, asked the right questions, and then saw their accounts grow exponentially. Our goal is to make the client service reps become part of our clients' teams as well as a strong resource. I strongly believe that in the commercial arena we're in, people want to do business with those they like and feel like they could be part of their family.

› **Strengthened supplier relationships.** Our seasoned professional managers also understand the importance of forming a strong alliance with our supplier vendors. By creating loyalties with select vendors, we get preferential treatment, including special privileges and price breaks.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Owner turnover.** The downturned economy is still a big factor affecting our business. In the current commercial real estate environment, there has been quite a bit of change in ownership and management triggering re-bidding processes. We often see our current fees being cut in half when we participate. After cost analysis on a re-bid, we must re-work the relationship, dropping several services or just walking away. It's encouraging to see that over time, the new management company often comes back to us. They will match our past fees after realizing their new company can't deliver and/or cut in services severely affecting their property's value.

John Catapano



INSIDE INFO

Company: Western Horticultural Services L.P.

Headquarters: Jersey Village, near Houston

Employees: 120

2011 revenue: \$6.7 million

Owners: John and Ruth Catapano

Key to being a maintenance leader: Being a leader in landscaping or any other industry involves holding yourself out there as a professional, and along with that, maintaining a professional image. Everything we do at Western Horticultural Services, from the appearance of our work crews to the condition of our trucks to the customer service we deliver, all reflect on you as an owner; and having every employee understand that is essential.

› H-2B non-agricultural temporary worker

program. It fits well with our seasonality, but I don't know how much longer we can count on it being there. It also takes much time and energy for the application process. Since its inception, it has been politically charged. I would love to see the program continue, but it's on such shaky ground. Our long-term strategy is to wean ourselves off of it because we can't depend on it in the long run.

› **Fuel costs.** Even though our headquarters is technically in Houston proper, our service territory extends hundreds of miles. If you have to spread five crews consisting of two to three people each over that territory, it's not very cost-effective. We are setting up small satellite offices from north to south to keep costs down and reduce travel time so we can spend more time on property. We already have two in operation.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Sustainability.** With the push toward LEED-certified buildings and recent prolonged heat and drought affecting the entire State of Texas, the use of native plant material and smart irrigation systems has led to an interest in replacing established traditional landscapes.

› **These landscapes are being replaced with native plant materials that are drought and heat tolerant.** Older traditional irrigation systems are being revamped to the new smart irrigation systems emphasizing water saving abilities directly translating into saving dollars. These systems also improve the health of the landscape by zoning each plant type separately. When our clients share their water bills with us, we can demonstrate ROI sometimes within six months by conversion to smart irrigation systems.

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LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT (ISSN 0894-1254) is published monthly (12 issues per year) by Questex Media Group LLC, 306 W Michigan St, Suite 200, Duluth, MN 55802. **Subscription rates:** one year, \$35; two years \$76 in the United States & Possessions; \$87 for one year, \$127 for two years in Canada and Mexico; all other countries \$165 for one year, \$246 for two years. For airmail delivery, include an additional \$75 per order annually. Single copies (pre-paid only): \$3 in the United States; \$10 in Canada and Mexico; \$15 all other countries. Back issues, if available: \$16 in the U.S.; \$20 in Canada and Mexico; \$30 all other countries. Add \$6.50 per order for shipping and handling. **Periodicals postage paid** at Duluth, MN 55806 and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Please send address changes to *Landscape Management*, P.O. Box 1268, Skokie, IL 60076-8268. Canadian G.S.T. number: 840 033 278 R10001. Publications Mail Agreement Number 40017597. Printed in the U.S.A.



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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Denise Putnam found that she was losing cold callers by giving out her price on the phone. Now, she always meets the client first.



Giving estimates in person has helped Denise Putnam's business.

COMPANY: Hands to Work Hearts to God

HEADQUARTERS: Brighton, MI

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 3

CLIENTELE: 80% residential; 20% commercial

SERVICES: 10% installation; 10% refurbishing; 80% maintenance

DENISE PUTNAM, OWNER of Hands to Work Hearts to God in metropolitan Detroit, knows she lost potential business simply by the way she handled cold calls. So she changed her whole approach.

"Whenever I got a cold call, the first thing they always wanted to know was how much I charge per hour," says Putnam. "In the beginning, I made the mistake of telling them — and I learned the hard way that I lost most of those jobs. It was all because they were turned off by the price before I could even tell them more. I have learned to tell cold callers that I don't bid jobs that way."

Putnam says callers used to be taken aback when she told them what she charged. She says the tone of the conversation would immediately change. She realized she was losing jobs with this approach.

"They were taking what I charge hourly and multiplying it by the number of hours it would take *them* to do the work," says Putnam. "But I've been doing this a long time and am very efficient. I have all the right tools and know what I'm doing. So what could possibly take a homeowner eight hours to do might only take me two. But I wasn't even getting a chance to explain that."

Today, Putnam offers to come out and see the property free of charge and says she'll write up a quote after that free consultation. "People really appreciate this, because they're basically getting a service for free when all they called for was to get a price," she says. "I walk around the property and talk to the homeowners about their concerns. Even before I get hired, I try to give potential clients a little bit of free

BY NOT GIVING OUT PRICES OVER THE PHONE ANYMORE, I'M AT LEAST ABLE TO GET ON THE PROPERTY.

information, maybe telling them a plant isn't in the right place. This gives them a little bit of free service — and even if they don't hire me, it leaves them with a positive taste of what my business is like."

This new approach has changed her business, Putnam says.

"I used to not even be able to get my foot in the door," she explains. "Potential clients would close it before I could even go out and meet them. But by not giving out prices over the

phone anymore, I'm at least now able to get on the property — and I have a better chance at getting the job.

"It's better for me to see the project and know exactly what they need done, and it's better for the homeowners, because they're getting a little bit of service and information from me without paying anything," she adds. "Of course, I don't get every job, but I get a lot more than when I was giving out prices on the phone."

Once the consultation is complete, Putnam also advises putting together a written quote — with *everything* you're including on the quote, even if it seems minute.

"Write it all out," she urges. "Whatever you're doing — pruning, trimming, installations — put it all down. And be as specific as possible. If you're going to put in five shrubs, say that, and say what size. This way, the clients can never come back and say you didn't do what was agreed upon. It also helps the clients realize everything they're getting for their money. They might not realize all the work you were going to do, and now your price might seem more worth it. Even if it's a basic service, don't assume they'll know you're doing it. You should list everything so they see the value of what they're getting. I've found that this, too, has helped me get more jobs."

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

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