

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.