



## 10 best practices for a new reality

I have spent the better part of the first quarter in an airplane, traveling the country meeting with contractors. I'm happy to report there's good news out there: Prospects for recovery look better than they have in a long time.

Contractors I have talked to are increasingly upbeat. They have been able to maintain a positive, proactive attitude even during tough times.

So, how did they do it? They balanced cautious optimism with careful planning and embraced change. When they pushed their "reset buttons" two things happened: They ended up healthier and leaner in their revitalized state and their collective team spirit became stronger than ever.

In transitioning from downsizing to recovery, the following best practices will help *you* push the reset button and align your company with shifting expectations for the new economy:

**1 Refine estimating.** Invest time and energy in analyzing how you estimate. Revise production rates; develop comparative square footage rates and a more detailed process that will help you estimate with greater precision. Upgrade or invest in software programs that will make estimating more precise and efficient.

**2 Eliminate costs.** Take a hard look at overhead, and eliminate some costs both for salaries and other expenditures.

**3 Rethink traditional marketing.** Consider newer ways to market your business. Discover how to use social media as part of an integrated program to attract and engage quality customers. Is your message still fresh? Does it resonate?

**4 Reconsider what keeps you interested.** Join a peer group. Benchmark costs and margins and connect with other contractors from non-competing markets to share best practices. I facilitate four peer groups, and a fifth is being formed as I write this. This has been a powerful tool for owners to energize their companies and stay interested, relevant and connected.

**5 Invest in bench strength.** Hire interns and new graduates from horticulture and landscape architecture programs. Invest in recruiting strategic new hires. Develop next-generation leaders from within.

**6 Go green.** Incorporate sustainability into your service offerings. Water savings, resource conservation and irrigation management are good places to start. Some companies incorporate rainwater harvesting, bioswales, green walls, roof gardens, LEED certification, organic compost teas and other sustainable practices to become leaders in their markets. Consider investing in cleaner-burning fuels to power your fleet and field equipment, and learn the benefits that sustainability brings to your customers' bottom lines.

**7 Upgrade equipment.** Stand-on mowers, for example, are becoming an industry staple for mowing, replacing the walk-behind mower. They are faster, more maneuverable and have a smaller footprint in the trailer or on the truck bed.

**8 Manage cash flow.** Be more aware of your balance sheet. Manage cash better and use debt carefully.

**9 Outsource fleet maintenance.** Using a third party like Enterprise Fleet is an efficient way to do preventative maintenance; it lowers maintenance costs and makes shops easier to manage.

**10 Eliminate waste.** Become technologically proficient. Incorporate paperless technology for time tracking and eliminate paper timecards. This is more accurate and efficient. Invest in mobile technologies and practical, real-time applications that will enhance your productivity.

The Green Industry is resilient, and the people and companies in it have taken bold, courageous steps to forge ahead. The positive spirit, value system and work ethic that united us in difficult times will sustain us into the future.

I see many good companies in our industry poised for great growth in the not-too-distant future.