

Stockner's Nursery is a third-generation family business based in central Virginia. Launched in 1981, Stockner's designs, installs and maintains landscaping and hardscaping and provides grounds management. It recently branched out to a retail extension, Twigs Garden Center, to complement its residential design/build division. Company president **Gary Stockner** discusses this interdepartmental synergy, as well as effective client communications, rising fuel costs and other challenges.



Gary Stockner, far right, and his management team plan to provide customers with more specialized services.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Stockner's Nursery

Headquarters: Rockville, VA

Employees: 100

2011 Revenue: \$6.9 million

Key to being a maintenance leader:

Communication is key in differentiating us from the competition. Employing a philosophy of being proactive vs. reactive is how we communicate with our clients. For example, we provide a monthly newsletter to communicate key information about company events and our role in the community. Our monthly field reports are an opportunity to stay connected to our clients by providing feedback to them on how their properties are looking. Our customer service satisfaction surveys allow our clients to communicate to us about how we are doing. All of these communication tools tie our communication and performance initiatives together.

Our clients have come to rely on us to tell them what we should perform, not what they think we should perform. This proactive attitude has presented us with many opportunities in the grounds management market and positioned us to increase our market share substantially — now and for the foreseeable future.

TOP TRENDS

› **Go-Green initiating.** It's also known as "environmental responsibility" or "environmental stewardship." We are putting many resources into educating our clients on water-saving initiatives, best management horticultural practices and what we as a company are doing to recycle and reuse landscape waste by turning it into new byproducts. We maintain a strong commitment to corporate and environmental sustainability — not only for our clients' properties, but also for our own business practices.

› **Social media guru-ing.** Staying ahead of the curve in both the social media environment and technology is helping us to stay ahead of our competition in so many ways. This year, our attention will be focused on interacting with our existing client base and prospective clients via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and the other usual suspects in social networking sites. We are offering time-lapse photography on our YouTube installation videos, demonstrating in a fun and unique way what we do and how we do it.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Rising fuel costs.** With a fleet of more than 50 vehicles and an array of landscape and construction equipment, fuel is becoming one of our major cost items. We've had to absorb the increase to remain competitive. To better manage our fuel usage, we recently installed GPS units on all our company vehicles. This allows us to more closely monitor our fuel usage by determining how we can improve our drivers' performance and minimize drive times on all our maintenance routes.

› **Competition pressures.** Costs continue to rise as margins continue to slim. There will always be the "low-ballers" and the national and regional players with which to contend. We remain

competitive with comparable companies of our size and revenue by focusing on who we are and what we deliver. Although we all sit at the same table, pitching the same line, it's all about who delivers quality and service consistently at a fair market price while maintaining the strongest relationship.

TOP OPPORTUNITY

› **Specialization.** We are continuously looking at ways to create a market niche, to increase our opportunities and market presence. Our focus is on turning our global capabilities into specialized, niche brands under one corporate umbrella. We are branding each one of our service segments toward our targeted market.

Internally, we are looking at how each one of our service segments can support, and even grow the revenues and opportunities for each other. An example of this is how our residential design/build division interacts with our garden center/nursery. The design/build division is a "purchaser" of green goods from our nursery, which turns inventory and creates revenue for it; meanwhile, the nursery provides an avenue to market our design/build capabilities to prospective customers. To this end, we believe that this strategy and our core ideology of providing

exceptional customer service will continue to present us with opportunities for growth.

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