



BEST PRACTICES

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Just getting started?

Whether you're starting up or starting over, becoming a landscape entrepreneur can be a rewarding enterprise. The industry has a low cost of entry, and a business is often inexpensive to start and operate.

Classic examples of successful landscape businesses beginning in a garage or an apartment abound. Some have evolved from the owner's part-time landscape or grounds work during high school or college. Others spring naturally from a passion for gardening or landscape design.

Like any business, the secret to developing a successful landscape operation is simple: Never jump into it without any thought or planning.

Here are 10 practical insights to help you get your landscape business off to a smooth start and keep it strong for the long haul:

1 Start with a business plan. A business plan will help you determine the legal structure of your business, establish the framework for key financial decisions and identify the licensing and permits necessary to run your company. The planning process is essential to define your direction, give thought to your customer profile and your market mix, frame your value proposition and establish goals and a corresponding timeline for growth.

2 Create a budget. Manage your cash flow and understand the actual capital you'll need to support your business and equipment purchases, and develop and maintain a chart of accounts similar to the chart of accounts template used by the Green Industry. This will let you track costs and margins by business type and benchmark yourself against the industry.

3 Get your day-to-day operating and technology systems in place. Your company won't have the infrastructure to support growth without great systems and processes.

4 Join your state contractors association and the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Professional trade associations are well

worth the investment for business assistance and training, networking, certification opportunities and continuing education. They also offer valuable advice and practical information about pricing.

5 Market your company. Become savvy in public relations and the use of social media for marketing on a tight budget. Having a communications strategy is a must to own your message and keep it strong. If you're new to the market, getting the word out is essential.

6 Grow organically. There's a temptation to bid low to build up volume. It's OK to do a little of this, but too much will hurt your margins. It's much better to grow organically, price competitively, stand up for your personalized service and "wow" your customers. It's possible to do small acquisitions and buy business, but costs to do so are high.

7 Leverage your skills and the capabilities of others. If you are a great operations guy, find a sales partner. If you are an energetic business developer, balance your entrepreneurial style with a strong administrator. Match up early with someone you trust who will challenge your thinking and then capitalize on your capabilities together.

8 Understand your core competency and don't work outside your expertise. If your company or team doesn't have the ability to perform specific technical work, consider a great subcontractor to partner with.

9 Remember you're in the service business. Your reputation depends on the quality of your work as much as on how you deliver it. Be professional at all times. Invest in a good website, return calls and be a proactive solutions provider. You're in business to make someone else's home or business look and be better.

10 Commit to continuous learning. Not only will continuous learning and improvements have a positive impact on the professional growth of your company by driving revenue and profits, it will play a vital role in establishing a more empowered workforce over time as your company grows.

» WEB EXTRA

To download a sample Green Industry chart of accounts, visit LandscapeManagement.net and click on Web Extras.