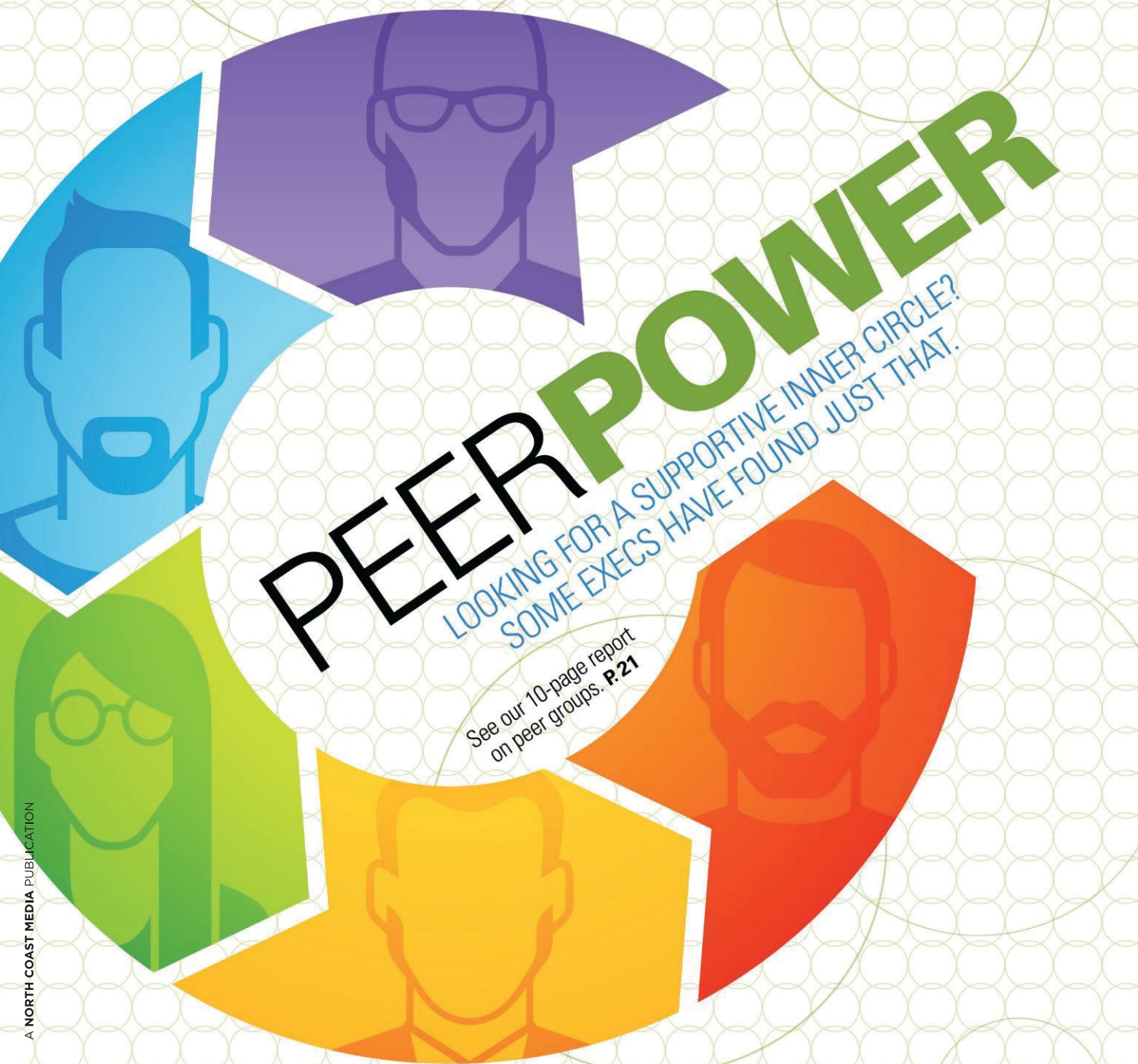


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FROM THE LM BLOG

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FD2B Talk Radio Insight of the Night

As part of a new partnership between *Landscape Management* and FD2B Talk Radio, we post an "Insight of the Night" every Thursday from the previous night's radio show. FD2B Talk Radio is a Green Industry radio show that broadcasts live every Wednesday at 7 p.m. Eastern. Its host and founder is *LM* columnist Jody Shilan, who's also the editor and founder of *FromDesign2Build.com*. Here are a few gems from the show.

» One way to retain employees is by providing them education and training. Some owners and managers fear that helping their employees better themselves and develop valuable skills is expensive—and there's no

guarantee that employees won't leave. That's true, but consider the alternative: Not educating or training employees and having them stay.

—*Jack Ferrell, Green Industry recruiter, Florasearch, Sanford, Fla.*

» Instead of doing a landscape design presentation in person as most contractors do, consider scheduling an appointment with the homeowners using GoToMeeting and conducting an online presentation to review the drawings. Not only does this save travel time, but you can "meet" with both the husband and wife even if they're at two different locations. Another big benefit is scheduling meetings during regular business hours and not at night or on the weekends.

—*Brad Groff, co-owner of River Valley Landscape and Pools, Wrightsville, Pa.*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI EDITOR

Contact Marisa at 216/706-3764 or via email at mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net.

Let this be the year...

... the terms “fiscal cliff,” “mini cliffs” and “debt ceiling” are eliminated from our vernacular thanks to sensible solutions in Congress that include spending cuts and not merely raising taxes on job creators. And let’s hope it happens even before this magazine hits your desk.

... the winter *makes* rather than *breaks* the year for professionals on the “white” side of the Green Industry. C’mon, Old Man Winter. Please deliver enough snow to keep crews working until spring.

... no workers die or are injured on the job due to preventable safety infractions like a lack of training or personal protective equipment or poorly maintained vehicles and equipment.

... more firms decide to up the ante with companywide charitable acts or contributions, which could motivate others to “pay it forward.” (Need inspiration? See page 10 to learn about the impressive impact Harrisburg, Pa.-based Utopian Landscapes is having.)

...of comprehensive immigration reform. Congress is expected to take up the topic early this year, but *taking it up* isn’t enough. There must be a solution. As the American Nursery & Landscape Association’s Craig Regelbrugge said in a blog post last month, “Fixes to America’s broken immigration system must include future worker programs that actually

function, as well as solutions for current, experienced immigrant workers in the industry. Stronger enforcement will be part of the package, so the reforms have to work.”

... state and local officials consider all stakeholders—and science—before haphazardly implementing noise ordinances, irrigation restrictions, fertilizer regulations or other rules that could hamper business owners. (If you’re experiencing these challenges, see how Florida professionals have dealt with fertilizer ordinances on page 34.)

... the Grass Roots exhibit at the U.S. National Arboretum gets built, putting a positive, research-based face on the turf industry.

...students—and their parents—see the Green Industry as a legitimate career path with many educational choices to pursue.

... we quit having to modify so many statements we make with the phrase “in this economy” and the impacts of The Great Recession—joblessness, a depressed housing market and others—no longer plague our P&Ls.

... you meet the goals you’ve laid out for yourself and your company, whether they’re in your long-range plan, scrawled on a cocktail napkin or tucked away in your mind.

Here’s to a great 2013!

Landscape Management

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NEWS+VIEWS

GREEN INDUSTRY EVENTS, TRENDS AND TIPS

For even more Lawn Care Forum coverage, see page 34 for five lessons you can learn from Florida's fertilizer restriction climate.

Face to face



Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care's Tom Lynch meets with Direct Solutions representatives at the Lawn Care Forum.

Landscape Management's inaugural Lawn Care Forum provided attendees with excellent networking and educational opportunities. **BY MARISA PALMIERI**

There's a first time for everything, and in December *Landscape Management* debuted a new concept in the Green Industry: the Lawn Care Forum.

This invite-only event takes a three-pronged approach to delivering value for both attendees and sponsors: networking, education and one-on-one supplier meetings.

So, was this first-of-its-kind meeting a success? Take it from attendee Matt Owens, vice president of landscape operations for Potomac Garden Center in Urbana, Md.

"There was a relaxed atmosphere throughout the entire three-day event that allowed me to create and strengthen relationships with the sponsors and other leaders in the industry from around the country," Owens said. "I encourage others to attend this event in the future to experience the same benefits I gained."

The schedule slated golf and a formal dinner on day one. On day two, one-on-one sponsor meetings were interspersed with meals and speakers, followed by a casual barbecue dinner. The event wrapped up with a half day of speakers and sponsor meetings on day three.

RISE-ing above

Karen Reardon from Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) keynoted the opening night dinner, addressing "Lawn Care Regulations: Emerging Threats & Issues."

Public opinion research RISE has conducted shows that antipesticide activists' messages are not necessarily reflective of registered voters' opinions or those of the public as a whole, Reardon said, noting the activists often have the loudest voices in their communities.

At the same time, RISE's conversations with policymakers reveal that the industry doesn't interact with them unless they have something to gripe about, so there's a need to be proactive, Reardon said.

She detailed RISE's move to form a nationwide "grassroots network" five years ago to bring together profession-

continued on page 8



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Teeing off at the Lawn Care Forum: LM's Pat Roberts, Swingle's Tom Lynch, Potomac Garden Center's Matt Owens and LM's Craig MacGregor.



continued from page 6

als on the ground to provide support and a voice for the industry in places where pesticides and fertilizers are under attack.

"We're still seeing a lot of local bans. We need another voice to be in the conversation," she said, referring to the need for industry representation to combat activists' claims. RISE's grassroots network has engaged 5,000 people so far, with an aggressive goal to add another 5,000 per year.

What's coming down the pike? A perennial hot spot on the map is New England, where it's easy for ideas and laws to "go back and forth across state lines, good or bad." In some states, "pre-emption will be on the table," she said, referring to state legislation that pre-empts local governments from enacting stricter fertilizer restrictions. She also said to look for attacks on nitrogen to rise. Phosphorous has been the nutrient on the chopping block for the past few years, but many states are not meeting their Clean Water Act regulations and may look to restrict phosphorous inputs. Even though lawn care is estimated to be plus or minus 1 percent



RISE's
Karen
Reardon

of the impact on nonpoint source pollution, it's perceived by lawmakers to be low-hanging fruit and a better option than spending thousands of dollars to treat waterways.

Rather than be defensive in the face of state and local regulations, Reardon encouraged lawn care professionals to "show up in a powerful way" to talk about positive messages, such as their impacts in the community and integrated pest management.

"The conversation with lawmakers should be much more like one you'd have with a customer or prospect—you want to sell them on your perspective," she said.

Content is king

Chris Heiler, founder of Green Industry inbound marketing firm Landscape



Landscape
Leadership's
Chris Heiler

Leadership, spoke on the second day, waking up attendees with questions about their websites during his talk, "How to Use Inbound Marketing to Convert Website Traffic into Qualified Leads and Customers."

Seventy-five percent to 90 percent of people visiting your website are not ready to buy—they're in fact-finding mode, Heiler said, adding most companies don't know how to turn a visitor in fact-finding mode into a qualified lead. Most sites appeal to the 10 percent to 25 percent of people who are ready to buy right now by providing a phone number and a form for a free estimate or consultation.

"They're ignoring everyone else who's researching," he said. So, how do you turn those in the middle of the buying process into a lead? It starts with relevant content, Heiler said, such as informative blog posts or downloadable guides, like a regional lawn care calendar or a tip sheet for watering during a drought. Providing such informative content positions your company as an expert in the field and keeps you top of mind when they get closer to the buying stage, he said.

"Content is the meat of your cheeseburger," he said, noting that search is the bun and social media is the cheese. "To have a really good cheeseburger, you need to have all three."

LAWN CARE FORUM > BY THE NUMBERS

1 The Lawn Care Forum is the industry's *only* event that pairs one-on-one supplier meetings with networking and educational offerings.

28 Number of attendees, comprising leading lawn care operators from around the country.

30 minutes Length of prearranged one-on-one meetings between suppliers and attendees.

3 Number of impressive industry speakers: RISE's Director of Communications Karen Reardon; Chris Heiler, president of Landscape Leadership, an inbound marketing firm; and Don Rainey, statewide coordinator for the Florida-Friendly Landscaping Program's Green Industry Best Management Practices.

1 ft. 1 in. Winning "closest to the pin" score during the golf tournament, made by William Iddings, co-owner of Advantage Green Lawn & Pest Solutions, Summerfield, Fla.

5 Sponsors for this year's event: Dow AgroSciences, Direct Solutions, FMC, PermaGreen and Lebanon Turf

WANT TO ATTEND NEXT YEAR?

To be put on the list of potential attendees for next year's Lawn Care Forum, contact LM Editor Marisa Palmieri at mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net, and we'll notify you when it's time to apply.

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A ripple effect

One neighbor's goodwill has led to much greater giving. BY CASEY PAYTON

In 2009, a new client asked Utopian Landscapes in Harrisburg, Pa., to put together a holiday lighting proposal for a struggling neighbor's home. That act of goodwill created a ripple effect that led to the creation of a grant program serving many others in need. Today that sentiment has spread even farther.

"When he asked us to put together some prices for his neighbor, we figured he'd do a small \$200 or \$300

job," says Utopian President Nikos Floros Phelps. "But he came back and said, 'Do all of it,' which worked out to almost \$2,000. We realized that if our client could do something so generous, as a business we owed it to our community to find ways that we could give back."

Today, the Donald Phelps Christmas Grant, named after Phelps' late grandfather, allows members of the community to nominate deserving individuals for complimentary holiday lighting.

Of the families the grant has served since its inception, one story in particular stands out: that of a woman who suffers from multiple sclerosis and her daughter, both of whom were attacked by a stray dog. Due to complications from the attack, the woman's hospital expenses were astronomical. The family was nominated for and received the holiday lighting grant. When Phelps delivered the good news, the woman felt there were others who were more deserving.

"She is always giving back to others," says Phelps. "In fact, when another client of mine found out about her story, he



During PLANET's Day of Service in 2011, Utopian helped build an outdoor classroom at a Harrisburg, Pa., school.

gave me an enormous jar of change and bills—something he called his 'Christmas jar.' ... But when the woman received the money—which might have been \$1,000—she donated half of that to a local food bank because she felt that there were people who were in even greater need than her."

It's stories like these that have inspired Phelps to create other giving opportunities. The Yanniss Floros Landscaping Grant, named for Phelps' late uncle, donates landscape maintenance services to a family in need, and the Dina Tourli Grant, named for Phelps' late, civic-minded aunt, is a huge community-based project done every few years.

Phelps and his crew also participate in Christmas Decor's Decorated Family Program, donating holiday lighting for families of deployed service members.

Phelps says that when he first started the charity work he wondered whether his

crew members would be on board. "We weren't sure how they would respond to it," he recalls. "But it was obvious they embraced the idea as much as we did."

"It's a great feeling you get when you can help someone who is struggling in life," says Utopian landscape foreman Ryan Danner. "To be able to see a smile on their face when they are going through hardships is phenomenal. It has given me a great sense of pride in myself and the company to be able to help those in need."

Phelps says he's already seen some of the positive effects of the goodwill he's spread—which all started from one neighbor wanting to help a fellow neighbor. He hopes that even more people will be inspired. "Could you imagine how much could get done in a community if every company did just one volunteer effort?" muses Phelps. "We think that would be pretty amazing." LMI

AT A GLANCE

Company: Utopian Landscapes

Headquarters: Harrisburg, Pa.

President: Nikos Phelps

SELECT PROJECT LISTING:

▶ **Utopian Grant Program**—three grants provide landscape services to those in need

▶ **Decorated Family Program**—as a franchisee of Christmas Decor, provides holiday decorating for the families of deployed service members

▶ **ABC's Extreme Makeover: Home Edition**—served as co-lead for the Etters, Pa., project in 2011

▶ **PLANET Day of Service**—conducts an annual, one-day cleanup or installation for a school, park or family

▶ **PLANET Renewal & Remembrance**—participates in Arlington National Cemetery service project

Landscape Management is the media sponsor of the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) Community Stewardship Award. We'll feature each of the program's six winners January through June. For more information, visit landcarenetwork.org/awards/communityaward.

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THE GROUNDS GUYS

A fresh start

When Brad and Rachel Bell stopped at a trade show booth to snag a free bag at the GIE+EXPO in 2010, they never could have imagined that in less than a year they'd be franchise owners. But one thing led to another, and their chance introduction to The Grounds Guys landscape maintenance franchise system got the wheels turning for the Bells, who at the time owned Brad's Lawn Service in Owensboro, Ky.

The couple describes their previous business as challenging and overwhelming at times. Their greatest roadblock to growing their business, which was doing about \$200,000 in annual revenue, was hiring and retaining employees. In fact, Brad Bell's headaches were such that he was considering reverting to a one-truck operation and working in the field again.

Not long after wandering into The Grounds Guys trade show booth, the Bells made a day-and-a-half trip to Waco, Texas, to visit the corporate headquarters of The Dwyer Group, The Grounds Guys' parent company.

"We learned about the systems and what they were bringing to the table to take our business to the next level," Rachel Bell says. By spring of 2011, the Bells were officially The Grounds Guys of Owensboro, Ky.

Before encountering The Grounds Guys, the couple had never considered buying a franchise.

"I looked at a few after we started speaking with The Grounds Guys, but what really sold me on them was the culture," Brad Bell says. "The Grounds Guys has really developed our culture to what we want it to be. We want to have a positive impact on our community and the entire country, really."

Today, The Grounds Guys of Owensboro, Ky., has grown 30 percent in two years, and is looking at hitting \$350,000 in revenue in 2013.

"I really feel like we started over," Brad Bell says.

Systems are the secret

For Brad Bell, the prospect of being a company with \$1 million or \$2 million in annual revenue is now within reach. Could he have gotten there before joining The Grounds Guys system?

"Never," he says, and then he rethinks his answer. "Maybe, but if I did make it to \$1 million, I would never be making a profit."

Now, Brad Bell "knows his numbers," such as how much he needs to make per man hour to be profitable. And he has monthly sales goals he's accountable for.

"If you implement the systems, there's unlimited growth potential," he

SOCIAL SUPPORT

"One thing that really turned us on was all the support," says Rachel Bell, co-owner of The Grounds Guys of Owensboro, Ky. "The Grounds Guys has more than 100 franchisees. There are 100 people we can ask for help with the blink of an eye if we're doing a big quote or if we're unsure about anything."

The Grounds Guys franchisees nationwide communicate with each other and the home office daily via Chatter, a social network within Salesforce, the customer relationship management software service the franchise uses.

Not only do the Bells get ahead by asking their peers questions, they gain by sharing their knowledge, too.

"It's fun to help other people," Rachel Bell says. "We have strengths where the others have weaknesses, and it's great to share that knowledge and pay it forward."

Brad Bell likes the friendly competition drummed up on Chatter. He's motivated by the project pictures other franchisees post and when they share their successes, like landing a big job.

says. "I could see myself running a \$1 million company."

Brad Bell says he didn't have a system for hiring before becoming a The Grounds Guys franchisee, and now he has an effective six-step hiring process.

"Now, I've gotten myself out of the field, and I'm training my employees," he says. "I'm able to find someone who truly wants a career and not just a paycheck."

Though the Bells still put in long hours, they're happier with their quality of life.

"Brad's hired a great group of guys this year, and they're one of the reasons we're so successful," Rachel Bell says. "His attitude at the end of the day is so much better because it's much easier to deal with the guys on the crew—they're better employees."

It's allowed them more freedom, too. "If we want to go for a day trip or to The Dwyer Group's national conference for three or four days, we have that freedom because of the systems in place and the crews in place," Rachel Bell says.

Brad Bell adds, "We would never have been able to do that with Brad's Lawn Service. It would have fallen apart."



Brad and Rachel Bell, pictured here with their twin daughters, still work hard since converting their business to a The Grounds Guys franchise, but they say their quality of life has improved thanks to the company's systems.

PHOTO: THE GROUNDS GUYS

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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@wilson-oyler.com.

The power of peer groups

Are peer groups for you? They're not for everyone, but business owners should consider them. At a recent peer group meeting, an outside speaker remarked that not all industries are willing to share best practices among companies. The fact that contractors from different regional markets in the landscape industry can freely share confidential information and commit to transparency and best practices is unique and powerful.

Openness can be a strategic advantage if the member companies of a peer group are serious about improving their organizations. The power comes from not only discussing financials but also sharing and exploring internal struggles and problems.

In good peer group formats, individual owners act as an outside board of directors to each other. Opportunities for formal and informal exchanges extend from the business to personal and social interests. The members share ideas, connect through shared interest and commit to helping each other by participating in all policy decisions that impact growth. This places a responsibility on the owners to take ownership, not only in their own businesses, but also in the other member companies' success. Owners are able to challenge each other to get out of their comfort zones—not always an easy task.

The most common issues holding companies back are challenges around people and performance. All companies have people who are not

right for the jobs they're in. These are the toughest problems for owners to deal with because owners are mostly loyal to their employees, even to the extent they overlook performance issues in favor of loyalty. This is where the other owners as a group are able to assess the issues objectively and help owners realize that a change needs to be made.

Some groups invite key staff to share best practices by job function. For example, salespeople from member companies may meet to discuss marketing and sales. This activity generates empowerment and a willingness to accept and implement ideas owners bring back from the peer group sessions.

There are other types of peer groups that can benefit owners. Most cities have tech or general business groups made up of local owners or CEOs from different industries. These groups match executives from the same market with executives in non-competing companies. Some owners belong to both an industry peer group and an executive group.

Without a confidential peer group or some type of support, owners can be isolated. They are left alone to struggle and have no one to share their thoughts with. Many owners find that having the chance to bounce ideas off of each other is one of the biggest benefits to peer groups.

Peer groups can lose effectiveness if there's not a level of accountability associated with membership. Peer groups that facilitate require each company to make commitments and next steps to improve. They then have to report on those commitments at the next meeting.

Collaborating on problems affecting not only the member companies, but the entire industry, is another huge benefit. Brainstorming solutions to these issues can be a competitive advantage to the member companies.

The best part? Great friendships formed from the connections established and the access and support members gain extends beyond the peer group meetings, especially if the group includes some outside activities from time to time.

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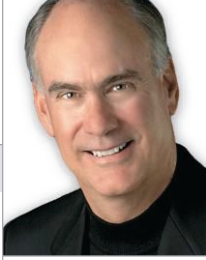


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THE BENCHMARK

FRANK ROSS

The author is owner-manager of 3PG Consulting. Reach him at frank@3PGConsulting.com.

Why are we in business?

Those of you who've joined me in seminars over the years are familiar with my asking that question. If we polled our readership, I'll bet we'd have various answers to it, stretching from producing sales, to providing jobs, serving the customer base, giving back to the community, etc. While all of those reasons are commendable, let's be clear. We're in business for two reasons: profit and fun.

Profit is our lifeblood—it provides us the cash flow we require to meet payrolls, pay our bills and invest in expansion. *Fun* is the fire in the belly, the passion that drives us. And if we're making money, chances are we're having a lot of fun. If we're not, business can be a real bummer.

This is the time of the year that we all prepare our budgets. You do prepare a budget, don't you? Because *Inc.* magazine says that only about 15 percent of us small businesses actually prepare a budget. No one doubts a budget's value, *Inc.* says. It's just that most business owners don't know where to start.

My advice? Start with what's most important—profit—specifically net profit, and work up from there. Here are five steps to get you started:

1 Determine the amount of net profit you need to make.

2 Budget each overhead account using the "zero-based" concept of budgeting. The combination of net profit and overhead equals the amount of gross margin you must generate if you're to be successful in meeting your cash-flow requirements and cover your overhead.

3 Determine your capacity. What do we sell in the service world? Labor mostly. So, prepare a labor budget that will help you determine the number of hours you have available to sell next year.

4 Determine your backlog. This is the amount of work you've already sold for next year. How much gross margin does this generate? This margin will offset the amount of margin determined in steps one and two.

5 What are your 2013 sales goals? We know how much margin we have left to sell, so ask yourself how much revenue is required to cover that margin.

Let's discuss step No. 1: How much net profit do we need to make? Obviously, we want to make as much of it as we can, but the question is, "How much must I make to cover my cash flow demands?" We can calculate that from our balance sheet and the result will be our new break-even point.

First, make a list of all of the debt you intend to retire in the coming year. Add up only the principle payments, as interest is an expense found on the income statement.

Second, make a list of capital purchases you plan to make in the coming year, such as trucks and equipment. Then, itemize the cash payments you'll be making throughout the year (down payments and principle payments).

Third, anticipate the amount of cash you'll need to support your revenue growth. Here we will use a financial statistic that says in the service industry, it takes about 10 cents to support a dollar of revenue. So, if we plan to grow \$500,000, we'll need to raise net profits 10 percent of that growth, or \$50,000, to maintain the adequate cash flow to meet payrolls and pay our vendors while we wait to collect our billings.

Our fourth cash need is the bonuses/dividends we'll disburse if we generate the net profit we've budgeted. This is our way of saying thank you to the hard work our team accomplished in reaching a goal.

And, lastly, Uncle Sam. Calculate the amount of tax you'll incur by reaching your net profit goal. (Your accountant can help here.)

Add the five values together, subtract next year's anticipated depreciation—as this is a non-cash expense item on our income statement—and the result is the amount of net profit we *must* make to support our company in the coming year. Not "want to make" or "should make," but *must* make if we're to meet all of our obligations in the coming 12 months.

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COMMON DANDELION

Taraxacum officinale

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This perennial overwinters as a small rosette of leaves. Seedlings grow from a taproot, and begin to emerge in early spring when soil temperatures reach 50 degrees F.
- ▶ Solitary, bright yellow blossoms grow on the end of leafless, hollow stalks that emit a white milky sap when broken.
- ▶ It produces a puffball seedhead shortly after mowing, and seeds are easily dispersed by wind.
- ▶ Dandelions prefer moist conditions and soils but thrive in weak, thin turf.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ For early-season control of weeds that overwintered, apply a labeled, postemergent herbicide to turf early in the spring when temperatures are still cool.
- ▶ Properly mow, water and fertilize lawns to encourage healthy growth and minimize thin turf.
- ▶ Florasulam can be applied when the first fertilizer and liquid preemergent applications of the season are made.



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RED CLOVER

Trifolium pratense

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This cool-season, perennial legume grows from a fibrous root system and is found across the U.S.
- ▶ Stiff, hairy stems root at the nodes, causing this weed to grow erect.
- ▶ Each leaf consists of three elliptical leaflets, with a light green or white V-shaped watermark.
- ▶ Round pink to purple flower heads, made up of many small flowers, grow on flower stalks.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ As with any turfgrass weed, proper cultural maintenance of the lawn will greatly reduce the prevalence and presence of this weed. Properly mow, fertilize and water lawns to encourage healthy turf.
- ▶ When red clover is actively growing, apply a postemergent, systemic herbicide that will move from the treated foliage throughout the plant and into the extensive root system to completely control this weed—roots and all.

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Webinar #1:

Thursday, February 7 @ 11 am ET

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- Get clarity on your ideal prospects, and what they are really buying
- Gain control of the sales process, and waste less of your time
- Shift the conversation away from price only
- Separate yourself from the low-ballers
- Earn higher margins through a targeted process
- Close sales more easily and quickly with specific techniques
- Improve profitability by avoiding the "head trash" that affects salespeople

Webinar #2:

Wednesday, February 13 @ 11 am ET

Hiring, Building and Managing a Sales Force

- Learn recruiting and hiring practices to ensure a better hire
- Find a compensation systems that works
- Manage a sales funnel — what is it, how do you manage it
- Keep salespeople efficient and productive
- Understand the different sales roles: hunter, farmer and cook
- Create accountability (beyond commissions) to ensure results
- Transition clients away from the owner
- Avoid the pitfalls of bad hires and bad promotions
- Learn about tools that help you hire and manage your salespeople
- Find the "magic number" of salespeople to have — learn what that is
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- Gain surefire cross-selling tips and techniques
- Turn problems into sales opportunities
- Plant seeds to grow future sales
- Be efficient with your time
- Empower foremen and project managers to sell

About the Speaker

JEFFREY SCOTT is author of *The Referral Advantage* and *The Leader's Edge*. At age 34, he grew his maintain/design/build firm into a very successful \$10 million enterprise. He now consults with others on how to achieve similar success. He facilitates landscape peer groups for owners who want to transform and grow their business. His peer group members achieved 27% profit growth in their first year. To learn more visit www.GetTheLeadersEdge.com.

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A group effort
Owners of large and small Green Industry businesses alike can benefit from the companionship and perspective of fellow operators.

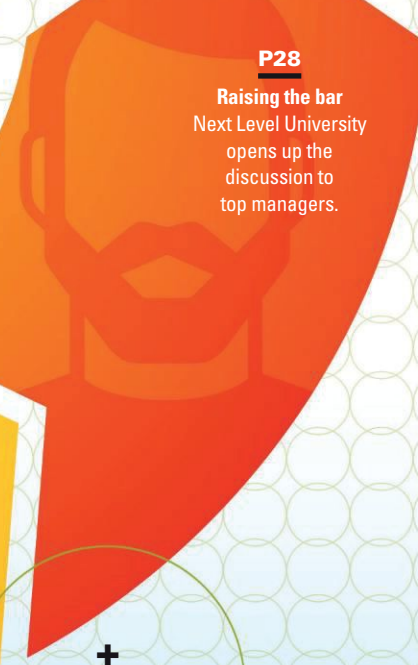


SPECIAL REPORT

PEER POWER

P28

Raising the bar
Next Level University opens up the discussion to top managers.



P25

Peer group confidential
Two facilitators give us the inside story about peer group dynamics.



+
See Bruce Wilson's column on page 14 for more peer group wisdom.

LONELY AT THE TOP? It's not uncommon for CEOs and business owners to desire interaction in their roles. That's where peer groups come in. Though they've been around for decades, experts like Harvard Business School's Bill George say peer groups are more pertinent now than ever, thanks to today's increasingly complex business environment and younger leaders' comfort and familiarity with seeking advice from their peers. If you're interested in tapping an inner circle, whether it's through a Green Industry-specific or general business peer group, read our 10-page report for advice and ideas to get started.

A GROUP EFFORT

Owners of large and small Green Industry businesses alike can benefit from the professional companionship and outside perspective of fellow company operators.

BY HEATHER TAYLOR

Even though Jim McCutcheon operates a successful commercial landscape maintenance operation, he still doesn't believe he has all the answers when it comes to running a business.

McCutcheon, CEO of the \$15 million company HighGrove Partners in Atlanta, attributes at least some of his success to his interaction with fellow Green Industry business owners from other parts of the country who can relate to the issues he faces in his business.

"The help and advice of my peer group over these eight years that we've been together has been completely and utterly invaluable in everything I've done," McCutcheon says.

Green Industry business owners, whether they're seasoned veterans or just starting out, can benefit from a sounding board in the form of those who have been in their shoes. This was the message at a Green Industry Conference (GIC) panel

in October that featured McCutcheon and other business owners who are members of different types of peer groups.

PEER GROUP ANATOMY

There are different types, sizes and approaches to peer groups. They can be made up of leaders of a few similar-sized companies or they can comprise heads of companies of different sizes that all share similar goals. Several types of groups were represented on the panel.

When Burt DeMarche, president of The LaurelRock Co. in Wilton, Conn., joined a peer group, his company was at about \$3 million in revenue (it's now at \$5 million), and the biggest company in the group brought in about \$18 million. The peer group has since disbanded, as some of the members moved to different types of groups.

"I've heard others say they'd like to be in a group with just smaller businesses — maybe like the \$3 million to \$5 million range—and try to keep it really tight, and there probably are

benefits to that too," he says.

McCutcheon's group consists of six members, representing different types of landscape companies. The group started out looking to add companies that were similar in size and business mix but changed its mind, instead focusing on companies with similar values.

Mark Schlossberg's group is different from the other panelists' groups because it's made up of people from different industries. Schlossberg, president of Baltimore-based ProLawnPlus, belongs to a group of 16 business leaders that includes a mix of business-to-business and business-to-consumer companies. The group includes another landscape company (not a competitor), an HVAC contractor and several government contractors.

"I'm in small-business group for businesses between \$1.5 and \$5 million. Most of us have the same types of issues. I highly recommend it," he says.

Schlossberg's group is facilitated by a company called Vistage. It's larger than the other panelists' groups, which

each have five to seven members. And while the other panelists' groups generally include members from across the country, Schlossberg's group members operate in the same region.

A LITTLE PERSPECTIVE

Having fresh sets of eyes from outside of the company can help business owners realize things they didn't see before.

For example, Schlossberg recalled previously being in a peer group with Phil Fogarty, the panel's moderator and currently a master franchisor for the Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York Weed Man franchises. As the members pored over finances and made profit-and-loss suggestions, they noticed that Fogarty's profit margin in the grub treatment category seemed unusually low. They learned he gave away a lot of product for free, including grub treatments. The cost of materials was expensive, so the promotion hurt his bottom line. The group was able to help him realize this wasn't the best business practice.

Another benefit Fogarty points out is touring other members' facilities, which is common in Green Industry peer groups. "It's a very eye-opening thing to have people walk through your facility and have people point out things that you walk by every day and you don't see," he says.

The group also can open members' eyes to personnel issues. It's amazing how it can take peers to make someone realize something that's happening in front

of them all the time, DeMarche says. "Sometimes it points out the obvious, but it's so important to do that."

WHERE, WHEN, HOW

McCutcheon's group meets three times a year: in February, June or July, and November. The location rotates; each member takes a turn hosting it at his facility. The members usually fly in on a Tuesday, meet all day on Wednesday and attend a big dinner together Wednesday night. Typically, the host company is responsible for the dinner bill.

Each member gets one and a half hours to present to the group any problems they have. All the financials and reports are provided to every group member before they arrive at the meeting, so when they get together they're not just rattling off sales numbers.

The host company gets additional time—a total of about three hours—to review concerns. The sessions include a broad range of topics, but it's imperative that each member comes prepared with plenty to discuss.

McCutcheon's group recently began doing a fun outing on the final day, Thursday, to get to know each other better. Activities have included fly-fishing and hot air balloon rides.

DeMarche's group also scheduled three meetings a year, planning one of them at GIC to save on travel expenses because the members already would be together in the same place. The group

would arrive at the GIC location a day and a half early to conduct its meeting.

DeMarche recommends hiring a facilitator to lead the group rather than trying to self-manage the meetings, which is what his former group did.

"We'd start focusing on one company whose issues were more important, then you get halfway through the day and realize you haven't gotten any further than that one company," he says. "I think we all learned from that, but it's a balancing act. The facilitator helps you with that balancing act."

Schlossberg's group meetings are slightly different. Their meetings are monthly and include a coach and business consultant. One member will host the meeting and provide lunch, though it's often at a venue away from the members' places of business.

Members take turns giving presentations displaying financials, and the group processes an issue. It doesn't matter that the members are from different industries; they can relate to each other's problems, Schlossberg says.

"It's things like human resources issues, personnel, sales vs. operations, interaction between those personnel, sales commissions and safety issues," he says. "We all have the same issues."

Group members also get a monthly one-on-one with a consultant who is also available as needed between meetings.

One aspect of peer groups that turns some business leaders off is the fact that



A Green Industry Conference panel in October focused on peer groups. From left: Burt DeMarche, Bruce Wilson and Mark Schlossberg.

members have to be willing to fully disclose the company's finances. It can be reassuring, however, that the other members of the peer groups aren't competitors and that most groups require members to sign a confidentiality agreement so company secrets don't leave the group.

There's also the matter of work and responsibility to think about before joining a peer group.

"I assure you, the last thing you're going to do is show up at a meeting saying, 'Gee, guys, I was too busy. I didn't have the time to get to that. I'll talk about it next time.' That's not a real pleasant thing to do. We've all got a responsibility to each other," McCutcheon says.

Fogarty agrees. "It's not for the faint of heart," he says. "All of that work and accountability is what drives the benefit that you're going to get out of this."

"So if you think it's the kind of thing you can just do off on the side and not have any responsibility for it, it's prob-

ably not for you, at least not yet," Fogarty says. "Maybe it's something you'll be ready for at another time."

LOOK IN THE MIRROR

On the other hand, companies who think it's not for them because their business is already successful only need to look at the panelists to see that's not true, Fogarty says.

"These people run really well-thought-of companies," he says of the panelists. "Anybody who doesn't think they have problems just needs to look in the mirror a bit harder."

McCutcheon says belonging to this type of group has paid off multiple times.

"That consistency of being there and having those people there that know and understand your business will help you when you're truly in need." **LMM**

Taylor is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

Peer group partnership

Bruce Wilson, managing partner at the Wilson-Oyler Group and a *Landscape Management* columnist, and the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) are teaming up to help the association's members form peer groups.

PLANET is taking applications from CEOs and company owners who want to become part of a group. Details are not yet set in stone, but there likely will be three types of groups, based on company sizes. The Wilson-Oyler Group will facilitate the groups.

PLANET says the program will begin this year. Executives who are interested in learning more about the peer group program may contact Joan Haller at joanhaller@landcarenetwork.org or call 703-736-9666.



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PEER GROUP CONFIDENTIAL

Two facilitators give us the inside story about peer group dynamics.

BY MARISA PALMIERI



Green Industry consultants **Bruce Wilson** and **Jeffrey Scott** each have been involved with peer groups for more than a decade. We tapped their expertise to learn some do's and don'ts when it comes to peer group involvement.

What would you say is the No. 1 benefit of being in a Green Industry peer group?

BW: The members are with people that have the exact same types of issues. Everybody struggles with the same ones. The bigger issues larger companies struggle with revolve around people. What they like about it is, as they start to work together longer, the level of trust goes up. They really value the advice they get. Sometimes it's hard to hear, but you know it's the truth.

JS: Everybody gets something different out of the group. They all join for different reasons. Some join because they're lonely. From an executive point of view, they have no one to talk to. Others join for different reasons, but each has their own way they need help. They all get similar value.

Do people ever drop out? If so, why?

BW: Yes, it happens and the reason varies. If it's not going to work out, it's usually because of time and effort. Another reason some drop out is they sell their businesses.

JS: I've had a few dropouts; usually they're too small and it's not the right point in their business life. Some get into it and realize they don't enjoy the group dynamic, and they didn't realize that until they joined.

What's the ideal number of companies for a Green Industry peer group?

BW: I think below five is not enough. Seven is the max. We try to stay at six.

JS: When I was in a [non-industry specific] peer group, it had 14 people in it. Many people think smaller is

better, and it starts off being better, but it ends up being worse. It should be large enough so, over time, you get refreshing ideas. I'd put that number up around nine or 10.

Should all members have about the same level of revenue or is it OK to have a range?

BW: You have to have a range. It's more about what's the owner's leadership and business acumen than the size of the business. There are some smaller companies that act like big companies and vice versa. It's hard because I think most owners think, "I want to be with someone bigger than me because I want to be bigger." Or if you're the big guy, "What am I going to learn from the small guy?" If that's your attitude, it will be very hard to get into the group.

JS: They should be within similar ranges. It depends a little on the business, but under \$1 million, \$1 million to \$5 million and larger are good ranges.

Should all companies be involved in the same service segment and have the same customer mix or is it OK to have diversity?

BW: Actually, it works both ways. For instance, I have one group called Higher Ground. When they formed they had two California companies and four com-

panies in the snow belt. They felt the two California companies were so different because they didn't have H-2B issues and didn't have the issue of rebuilding their workforce from ground zero every spring, so they felt they should all be snow and maintenance companies. The California companies left the group, and that has worked really well for them.

But another group, Next Level, is really diverse. They're all different, but they're all good businessmen and share the same values with respect to how they treat employees and customers.

JS: Diversity is very important in the group. I look for unique personalities that have nothing to do with what business they're in, people that are open to sharing and learning. Some groups are very diverse and some are very focused. Both work equally well. The problem with a focused group is people's businesses change all the time in the landscape industry. People get in and out of niches all the time.

What's the sweet spot for the right number of meetings per year?

BW: Two to three in person. Four is too much. It's just not enough time between the meetings to really get anything done. It's really helpful to have regular calls between the meetings, even if only for an hour to stay in touch.

JS: I do a mix. I have two in person and four more by phone. But we do more than that if somebody needs help. We have a concept called the Tiger Team, and a few members will get together ad hoc to help a person work through an issue.

Should the peer group just include owners or should it include other company executives, as well?

BW: We sometimes do both where we have owners and their executives for one day and just the executives for the other day. (For more on involving other staff members, see page 28.)

JS: It depends. My experience is many people love coming where it's just the owner because we get down to the underlying issues that affect the business to make more money and be more successful. If everyone brought their No. 2 and No. 3 person, it would be more of an operational discussion, and that's not what it's meant for. There are exceptions where some groups say, go ahead and bring an employee. But most say, "I'm going to use this just for me because it's really powerful."

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You've got options

Green Industry peer groups provide members with a bevy of benefits, but there are alternatives. Here are a few options for professionals looking for different levels of support.

Trade associations

For a minimal amount of money (usually a few hundred dollars or less per year), you can join a trade association. But joining isn't enough. Get involved, serve on committees, attend functions and see how associations can serve as ad hoc peer groups.

Pro: Inexpensive / *Con:* No accountability

Franchises

For some franchise owners, buying into the system is as much about the network of other operators you gain access to as it is about the name on the truck and the support from corporate.

Pro: Extensive support beyond peer access / *Con:* Commitment and expense

Business systems providers

Rather than investing in a franchise, using a consultant or buying software, an alternative in the Green Industry is an organization like LandOpt, which offers companies the opportunity to license a business operating system that incorporates components of technology, processes, systems and professional development—plus access to the group's other licensees as a support network.

Pro: Extensive support beyond peer access / *Con:* Commitment and expense

Non-industry-specific peer groups

Peer advisory groups like Vistage, Inner Circle and The Alternative Board match up executives from local or regional non-competing businesses to help each other meet difficult goals and plan for the future. They often meet one day a month and may cost more than \$10,000 a year.

Pro: Guidance and accountability; online options / *Con:* Expense

Can peer groups that are member-driven and don't use a consultant/facilitator work?

BW: I would say it's better to have a facilitator, but it's probably not impossible not to have one. Those things do exist. I don't think the cost for a facilitator is what defines whether or not they have one. When you split it by six companies, it's not very much. The cost is more getting together, the airfare, etc.

Actually, I have a group called G2. The members were meeting by themselves. I think they determined it became too social and they needed a facilitator, so they came to me and made it a formal group again.

JS: Of course it could work, and you should be doing that anyway to some extent. The question is, do you get enough value out of it. What tends to happen is the group has a short lifespan. **LM**

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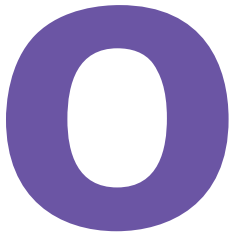
RAISING THE BAR

With its annual Next Level University, the Next Level peer group opens up the discussion to its managers, challenging them to grow and learn from their counterparts.

BY BETH GERACI



College faculty and managers from six landscaping companies discuss online notes they compiled for Next Level University.



On a cool autumn day in downtown Chicago, nearly 100 landscape professionals and college faculty

gather at the city's newest trendy hotel, the Public Chicago.

The night before, the group traveled to the Windy City suburbs for a homemade Italian dinner and a round of bocce ball. Now, they're ready to get down to business—the business of Next Level University.

The annual two-day summit, now in its third year, brings together members of the Next Level peer group and their top-level managers. They're there to brainstorm, exchange constructive criticism, establish goals for 2013 and ultimately, learn from each other.

The Next Level peer group comprises executives from Heads Up Landscape Contractors, Albuquerque, N.M.; HighGrove Partners, Atlanta; Lambert Landscape Co., Dallas; Mariani Landscape, Lake Bluff, Ill.; Pacific Landscape Management, Hillsboro, Ore.; and Stay Green Inc., Santa Clarita, Calif. They have convened several times a year for the last eight years, problem solving and holding each other accountable.

The University is unique in that the companies' owners invite certain staff members, along with horticulture faculty from around the country, to participate.

"Inviting the other staff just kind of evolved as the owners started thinking, 'What do we do to make it better?'" says industry consultant Bruce Wilson of the Wilson-Oyler Group, who assembled and facilitates the Next Level peer group. "Opening it up to people with other positions in the organization is good, because it means training is reaching deeper levels of the organization."

What's most important, says Stay Green President and CEO Chris Angelo, "is that they're amongst their peers, people who aren't in their organization.

Getting schooled

The faculty component of Next Level University makes it unique, says industry consultant Bruce Wilson, of the Wilson-Oyler Group. When the six-company peer group called Next Level first assembled eight years ago, he explains, only its members HighGrove Partners and Mariani Landscape recruited at colleges. Now, all six companies recruit, sharing booth space at Student Career Days every year.

Having faculty present at Next Level University helps horticulture professors see firsthand the professionalism of landscaping businesses, giving them a clear picture of what lessons they need to be teaching their students if their students are to be hired by reputable landscaping companies.

Next Level peers, on the other hand, hear what issues universities are grappling with and learn how both sides can better work together.

At November's University, faculty and owners gathered in a discussion circle and opined about everything from motivation and listening to customers to the perception of the industry among parents and the decline of horticulture programs.

Wilson, for his part, pledged to make a new push for college recruiting in his other peer groups and challenged the Next Level owners to think less about what they already know and more about what's possible if they push the boundaries.

The discussion became energized when Phil Allen, Ph.D., a landscape management professor at Brigham Young University, brought up the fact that parents he speaks with have a misperception that the industry is unprofessional.

"It's like, has the term 'landscaper' become so loaded?" he asked.

"We love it," replied Mariani Landscape CEO Frank Mariani.

"But not everybody does," Allen asserted. "And especially parents. They hear that word 'landscaper' and even 'landscape architect' in our region and they still think you cut grass. And you do, and that's not the point. It's just that, that's a hurdle for you."

"But I think the companies represented here, they're looked upon as real businesses in their communities, no doubt about it," Mariani replied. "And I think we should celebrate that, because we've worked hard to create that image."

So they're hearing things that validate what they're doing. And they're also gaining new insights and perspectives on how to deal with their daily challenges."

The common discourse is something they likely wouldn't experience at major industry events, where they might end up sitting with someone who works in a different sector of the industry.

BUILDING BLOCKS

As attendees from the six companies divide into small groups to exchange ideas about best practices, it's clear they're a close-knit group.

"What I'm happy to see is that we're starting to build relationships now, which is the goal of these events, so that

you push each other and challenge each other," Frank Mariani, CEO of Mariani Landscape, told those assembled. "Quite frankly, we're only going to be better if we challenge each other."

That challenge is crucial if the event is to be worthwhile, especially considering the financial investment each company makes in the University is substantial. On average, each company spends \$1,000 per employee to attend.

Given that financial stake, Pacific Landscape Management President Bob Grover tells the group, "Let's each take something that we learned here and apply it to our organization in a way that will pay for our time to come here."

Ideally, Grover adds, everybody will

leave knowing they shared a great idea and got one in return.

“Attending the University seems like a reward to our people. It energizes them,” says Gary Mallory, CEO and owner of Heads Up Landscape Contractors. “Some of my employees have said it impresses them that the company focuses on its people. The biggest thing

is the excitement and enthusiasm it’s built up among our employees.”

This year, Heads Up doubled the amount of employees it invited to the University, from nine to 18. And if the company had endless money, Mallory says he would bring as many as 30.

“It’s hard to put a price on the benefits of educating and motivating



Next Level business owners and faculty from select colleges enjoy a farewell Italian dinner in Chicago.

employees,” he says. “If we get one great idea and execute it, it makes the University costs worthwhile.”

At this point, Heads Up walks away from the University with far more ideas than that—five or six on average. The company is about to implement one of those ideas—performing exit interviews with customers when they walk away.

OPENNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

To be part of the Next Level peer group, one must be able to take the criticism along with the praise. Says Grover, “You have to be in the right place in your business life and your personal life to say, ‘I’m not perfect’ and be willing to take a closer look at your plan.”

Mariani says the contrasts that emerge in the discussions can be as valuable as the similarities.

“Some of the best moments are when you hear something where you would say, ‘I would not necessarily do that,’” he tells the group. Advice you don’t like that differentiates one company from another can be just as worthwhile, he says.

For Mallory, Next Level is the most important thing he does all year.

“These are knowledgeable business-people who hold you accountable, and it makes you hold yourself more accountable, too,” he says. “When someone asks you, ‘Why didn’t you do what you said you were going to do last time?’ it’s pretty powerful.”

The bottom line, says Grover, is “it’s nice to have other business folks in similar companies give us feedback, challenging us on whether that’s a good decision or a bad decision. Sometimes, you’re just too close to the issue.” **LM**

PHOTO: BETH GERACI

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MARKET WATCH

IRRIGATION

Locking out backflow device theft

With backflow device theft on the rise, protecting this equipment keeps customers happy and has a positive social impact.

By JONATHAN KATZ

In the summer of 2009, a Memorial Landscaping and Irrigation technician received a call from a client stating that a backflow preventer had been stolen and that somebody needed to install a new device immediately, recalls Chad Touchet, CEO of the Houston-based company. The customer asked the technician not only to replace the stolen device but to install a cage around it to prevent future theft.

The technician installed the new device but had to measure the backflow preventer and order a cage to fit around the unit, since no adjustable cages were available at the time. Between the time the technician installed the new device and ordered the security cage, thieves struck the property again and stole the newly installed backflow preventer, Touchet says.

The incident prompted Touchet to form another company in 2011 called Backflow Armor that manufactures adjustable security cages for backflow devices. Security cages, along with other preventive measures, can alleviate the headaches associated with backflow device theft for both contractors and their clients.

With the cost of scrap metal, particularly brass, rising in his area, Touchet has become accustomed to receiving such frantic phone calls from clients. He first noticed the problem in the early 1990s, but in recent years he's seen a steady increase in the number of incidents. In 2000, Memorial fielded maybe two calls a month related to backflow device theft. Now the company receives anywhere from 12 to 15 calls per month, Touchet says.

Backflow device theft is a problem contractors are dealing with nationwide. In fact, in September California Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law a bill specifically aimed at curbing irrigation-related metals theft. Thieves targeting backflow devices are netting between \$15 and \$70 per device, depend-



Security cages protect clients' irrigation backflow devices from thieves, who steal the equipment to sell it as scrap metal.



ing on the size. Reduced pressure zone backflow preventers used in environments where chemical contamination is possible, such as hospitals, typically yield the highest dollar amount because of their size, Touchet says.

While theft is the most prevalent problem associated with backflow device tampering, the potential for a more sinister problem exists, he says. Irrigation systems could be bioterrorism targets. So protecting a backflow device could have a societal impact that's much greater than saving customers money.

"When you have someone stealing things like this and selling it, it's not people who are employed and working," Touchet says. "These are people who are using the money to buy drugs and things the average person would never dream of doing. So if we could stop this from happening, we could stop a lot of other things going on in society."

continued on page 32

PG 31

IRRIGATION How to prevent backflow device theft

PG 32

MAINTENANCE Flexible equipment financing options

PG 34

LAWN/TREE CARE Learning from Florida's fertilizer restrictions

PG 36

DESIGN/BUILD Landscape lighting design considerations

continued from page 31

On average, the problem costs customers \$1,100 to replace each stolen backflow device, Touchet says. Thefts often occur on Friday or Saturday evening, so by the time a client realizes the device is missing as much as 100,000 gallons of water could be lost.

“So they want us out there right away,” he says. “If you’re a contractor, you need to stop whatever you’re doing and take care of the problem for your client, so everything else is put on the back burner until you get this situation resolved.”

Upfront communication with customers is one of the keys to preventing future thefts, Touchet says. He recommends contractors include information with their invoices that describes the current problem and potential solutions, including the installation of cages. These words of caution can prevent testy exchanges with customers if thefts occur.

“I think it lessens the sting because the contractor gets in front of the response,” Touchet says. “They’re more likely to say, ‘I know you told me and sent me a letter stating that this is happening, and I should have acted on it.’ At that point they’re more apologetic rather than saying, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’”

The installed price for backflow device cage is about \$800, Touchet says. Distributors list the product around \$549. He says contractors should seek cages with locks that are housed inside a steel box rather than those secured by a padlock and eye bolt. Eye bolts are weak and easy to cut, which does not provide good protection.

In addition to cages, strategic placement of the backflow devices themselves can reduce the likelihood of theft. Contractors should try to install the backflow preventer in shrubbery so the device is not visible from the street, Touchet says. Another potential protective measure is installing the device in a pump room so it’s not accessible from the outside.

“That’s the best way to protect it from everything,” Touchet says.

While an indoor installation may be the safest bet, it’s not always practical. Indoor installations often require copper or other more expensive materials, costing between \$1,000 and \$2,000 more to install than standard outdoor jobs.

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

Cash flow woes?

Flexible equipment payment options provide relief when money’s tight.

By MARISA PALMIERI

Cash flow concerns? Consider flexible payment options such as skip payments or seasonal payments, which are offered by several landscape equipment manufacturers. For Jerry Roberts, owner of Roberts Brothers Lawn Care & Landscaping in Sparta, Tenn., experience with flexible payment options in his cattle farming business led him down the road toward a skip-payment option for his landscape maintenance business. In farming, he manages cash flow by financing equipment with semi-annual and annual payment plans. “When the money comes in, that’s when you make your payment,” Roberts says.

The mower skip-payment option is similar. He purchased three John Deere Z960As in November 2011 with skip payments. His no-pay months are January, February and March, which are the slowest months in Tennessee, where mowing season typically runs March 1 to Dec. 1.

“The big thing is while those mowers are sitting in the shop not being used, I’m not making any payments on them,” Roberts says. The other nine months out of the year, the monthly payment is about \$100 higher, Roberts says.

That’s the idea, says Dan Gundacker, product marketing manager for John Deere Financial. “No matter what area of



Contractors should work with their dealers on flexible financing options.

the country you’re in, contractors’ expenses jump in certain months and the income doesn’t necessarily do the same,” he says.

In addition to skip payments, there’s a seasonal payment option, which offers up to six consecutive months of relief, lowering payments to 1 percent of the amount financed. Over the course of the year the interest and payment amounts are the same, but payments are arranged to match cash flow. “In Wisconsin, for example, there are six months where contractors don’t mow,” Gundacker says. “Just being able to skip payments for three months isn’t enough.”

Additionally, manufacturers may offer revolving lines of credit that can be used at dealers for parts and service, which can be beneficial just before the busy season.

“If you’re not mowing yet, and you’re not making money, your dealer could give you 60 or 90 days to pay, rather than paying with cash or credit card,” he says. “Very few contractors don’t have time periods where expenses are stressed.”

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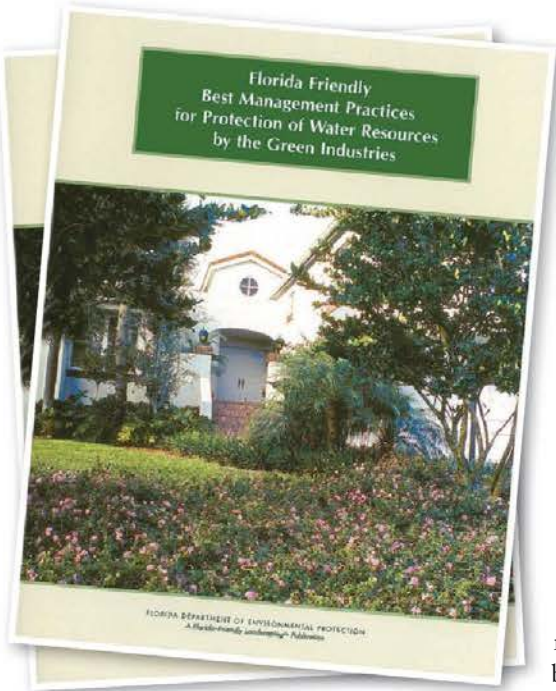
THE WRIGHT WAY TO MOW



LAWN/TREE CARE

Learning from Florida

Five tips for dealing with state and local fertilizer regulations. *By* MARISA PALMIERI



During the last few decades, Florida’s water quality has worsened due to a variety of factors like urbanization, development and population growth. According to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the state’s surface and ground waters have faced excessive nutrient loading due to nonpoint source pollution. This issue has turned Florida into a hotbed of fertilizer regulatory activities, says Don Rainey, the state coordinator for the Florida-Friendly Landscaping Green Industries Best Management Practices Program (GI-BMPs).

“It is far easier and less expensive to minimize the amount of nutrients that get into our waters than it is to treat stormwater and other nonpoint sources of pollution to remove nutrients,” Rainey says.

Rainey spoke at *Landscape Management’s* inaugural Lawn Care Forum, held early last month at Reunion Resort near Orlando (for more on this event, see page 6). His talk relayed to the national audience of lawn care operators the importance of taking a proactive stance toward working with officials and the public when fertilizer regulations pop up in other states.

In Florida, fertilizer rules vary widely by jurisdiction; they include restrictions on the use of fertilizers containing nitrogen and phosphorus during certain times of the year, requirements for non-fertilized buffer zones and mandates for education and certification. For landscape companies, the restrictions pose challenges, such as keeping up to date on the patchwork of rules and policies, meeting training requirements and more.

“It’s still too early to tell if fertilization ordinances have a direct effect on water quality,” Rainey says. “But local ordinances continue to pop up, and from what I gather, they’re going to continue.”

With that in mind, he offered the following tips for the lawn care industry to remember when it’s facing regulatory burdens.

1 The industry must be organized. In Florida, for example, when the public outcry over nutrient loading began pointing fingers at the landscape industry, an ad hoc group of professionals got together and said, “We’re

not going to be the problem.” They put together a manual (pictured) for Green Industry professionals to use voluntarily as a guideline to minimize nonpoint source pollution when establishing new landscapes and caring for existing ones.

2 Informed decisions must be based on science. On the local level, it’s easy for the loudest voices to draw the most attention, whether or not their claims are based on facts and research. That’s why when Florida Green Industry professionals partnered with state agencies and The University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to write their best practices manual, they based recommendations on common sense, science and research only.

3 A holistic educational approach is required. Education is a necessary component, and in Florida there is a three-pronged approach that reaches out to homeowners and builders/developers through the Florida-Friendly Landscaping, Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program and to Green Industry professionals through the GI-BMPs training program. Additionally, starting Jan. 1, 2014, Florida law will require all commercial fertilizer applicators to have limited commercial fertilizer applicator certificates that they’ll have to renew every four years.

4 Include measurable outcomes and impacts. It’s difficult for officials to measure improvements, Rainey says, noting it took decades of gradual water quality degradation to get to where it is today. Still, Rainey says, baselines are important to measure effectiveness. Otherwise, there’s no way to know whether restrictions are doing any good.

5 Include follow-up “sunset” provisions. Landscape professionals with a seat at the table on regulatory discussions should recommend that state and local officials revisit certain regulations several years down the road to refine or remove provisions based on new research.



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Night light

At PLANET's DBI Symposium, landscape lighting expert Jan Moyer tells design/build pros there's more to lighting the landscape than meets the eye. *By BETH GERACI*

Jan Moyer stood at the front of the room, asking for the lights to be turned off. "All the way off, please," she said when the lights dimmed.

There was a certain irony in her request. That's because Moyer was the featured speaker on landscape lighting at the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) DBI Symposium in Dallas in November.

Moyer is the founder of The Landscape Lighting Resource, Inc., a non-profit organization that disseminates and preserves information about landscape lighting. She came armed with ample advice for her audience, covering everything from effective wattage to adjusting to the day's evolving light.

Landscape lighting professionals must think a project all the way through before they get started, Moyer cautioned her audience of 50 design/build professionals from around the country. They must consider how the landscape will change through the seasons, throughout the day or even over the years.

"The view from a window changes from morning to night and season to season," she said. "Also, plants grow. So how will the plant's role change in the whole composition—how will it affect the landscape lighting in the future?"

Moyer also emphasized the importance of considering how the interior of the home relates to its exterior landscape, and how lights that are on indoors at night will impact the effects of landscape lighting outside.

WHEN IT COMES TO WATTAGE, LESS IS MORE

Just as homeowners and designers must consider how landscape lighting will be affected by these factors, they also must consider something equally as important—the homeowner's relationship with the neighbors and how the neighbors will react to the new lighting scheme.

Lighting professionals tempted to use high-wattage bulbs should think again, Moyer said, not only because high-wattage bulbs may upset people who live nearby, but also because "it doesn't take much wattage to have effective lighting. It really doesn't take much."

Moyer said she often uses MR16 20-watt

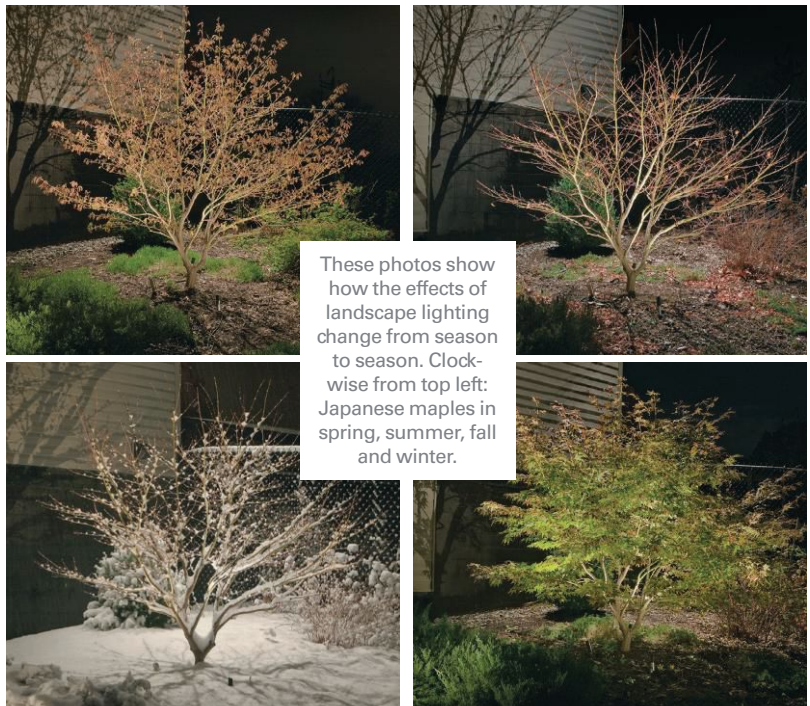
bulbs in her lighting displays, preferring to use more fixtures and lower wattage. In so doing, the landscape appears more natural.

But the industry is moving away from MR16 halogens to LEDs, Moyer said. "The landscape lighting industry is chaos right now because of this change to LED. Things are changing so fast, what was true last year is not true this year."

Moyer is about to complete the third edition of her "The Landscape Lighting Book." When she started the revision in 2009, she met with an LED manufacturer. She had a question for him—when will LED lighting finally settle down? "His answer was 10 to 20 years!" Moyer said. "And we're two years into it. So we're nowhere near settling down."

By "settling down", Moyer was referring to establishing uniform standards for LEDs. Right now, LEDs are not standardized. That's problematic, Moyer said, because for owners and designers, that means that there is no compatibility among bulbs from different manufacturers.

Nonetheless, LED is a big step up from halogen, Moyer said. "Will it be the end game? I have no idea. Will there something that's better than this? I just really don't know." **LM**



These photos show how the effects of landscape lighting change from season to season. Clockwise from top left: Japanese maples in spring, summer, fall and winter.

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LISTEN UP!

Potential hearing loss is a concern for you and your workers. Protect your team with a new, free training course.

BY **MARISA PALMIERI**

Hear this loud and clear: A 25-year-old Green Industry worker regularly exposed to occupational noise without hearing protection may have the hearing of a 50-year-old person who is not exposed.

After years of noise exposure, the inner ear nerves die and you slowly, permanently lose the ability to hear and understand speech. You hardly notice the difference until you have a 9-decibel (dB) loss. At a 25-dB loss it's difficult to understand speech. You also may develop tinnitus (constant ringing in your ears) and other health problems such as high blood pressure. In addition to health and quality of life concerns, hearing loss plagues society, companies and workers with disability payments and the costs to acquire and maintain hearing aids.

These findings and others are revealed in one of two new safety training resources from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), developed under a Susan Harwood grant from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Both courses, "How Do We Protect Our Ears?" and "How Do We Protect Our Bodies?" are free and available in English or Spanish to the entire industry. Each module takes two hours to complete and is designed to be presented by a supervisor with safety experience, by safety personnel or by professional trainers knowledgeable about the land care industry.

Visit landcarenetwork.org/riskmgmt/training.cfm to download the free training materials, including interactive flash training modules, an instructor guide, trainee worksheets, handouts, a game and posters.







Is workplace noise a concern for you?

In the landscape industry, workplace noise is almost always a concern, considering the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recommends that all worker exposures to noise should be controlled below a level equivalent to 85 dBA for eight hours. Much of the industry's equipment runs louder than that.

If you're unsure whether to be concerned, consider the following checklist. "Yes" to any of these questions may mean you have too much noise at work and/or already have some hearing damage.

- › Must raise voice to talk to someone 3 feet away.
- › Can't hear coins jingle in pocket at work.
- › Ringing or hollow sound in ears after work.

EAR PROTECTION OPTIONS: PROS & CONS		
TYPE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Roll down plugs 	Can be very comfortable Noise reduction rating (NRR) is readily available Disposable, no cleaning required	Most difficult to wear correctly Need clean hands to insert
Premolded plugs 	Easy to insert, come in different sizes Can be inserted with dirty hands Disposable or reusable	Good fit may be difficult Can be uncomfortable
Ear muffs 	Easiest to use Can attach to a hard hat Reusable	Can be uncomfortable May feel heavy/bulky
Banded ear caps 	Easy to put on/take off Can be inserted with dirty hands Reusable	Good fit may be difficult Band may squeeze your head Your voice may sound loud to you

- › Clients complain about job noise.
- › Trouble hearing well after work.
- › Tools have noise warnings.
- › After time away from work, noises seem louder.
- › Company has OSHA noise violations.
- › Workplace noise measured at 80-plus dB.

What can be done?

There are four options to reduce workers' risk of hearing damage.

- 1 Modify noise sources.** Use quieter equipment and ensure it's being properly cleaned and maintained.
- 2 Rotate work tasks.** Work less time with noisy equipment, alternating noisy and less noisy tasks through work planning and scheduling.
- 3 Increase distance from noise.** Move away from noisy equipment. Doubling your distance from the source cuts noise by a factor of four.

4 Use hearing protection. Properly select, fit and use hearing protection devices (HPDs), such as plugs or muffs. They can reduce noise exposure 7 dBA to 26 dBA.

How much does ear protection help?

Hearing protection devices block noise from entering the ear canal. Worn properly and regularly, ear protection can bring risk way down, offering noise reduction rates (NRRs) of 8 dB to 25 dB. (See the chart above for a comparison of hearing protection options.)

To select the best HPD, determine your noise exposure, then choose a protector based on the best NRR, comfort, ease of proper use and ease of communication. Remember, cotton, wax and headphones do not protect your ears. The best hearing protection is the one you wear. **LM**



PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

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

Everybody gets the same leads

Q I was at your workshop last week at the Green Expo in Atlantic City, N.J. (It was great, by the way). Can you explain what you mean when you say, “Everybody gets the same leads.”? One thing’s for sure, I definitely don’t get the same calls as some of the bigger companies.

—Helen Somerset, Pinelands Landscape and Construction, Voorhees, N.J.

A Anybody who’s listened to one of my webinars or attended a workshop or presentation knows I like to discuss two very important points. One point is based on something I read in the newspaper: “When surveyed after project completion, many homeowners say they would have spent more if their contractors had shown them more options.” The other point I discuss is everybody gets the same leads, regardless of company size, location or years in business.

Let’s take a look at this point so I can help you understand why it’s so important to you and your business, and why I always touch on it in my presentations.

Your question refers to my presentation slide that states, “Everybody gets the same leads. It’s what you do with those leads that determines whether you will get some work, no work or a significant design/build installation project.”

Every company gets good leads (new potential clients) and bad leads (people who are just going to waste your time). You may not think that it’s true, and nobody may tell you that it’s true, but I can tell you from experience that it’s true.

The big question is, why should it matter to you?

I’ll tell you why. It takes away the argument that you aren’t selling work because your company doesn’t get good leads. Your company does get good leads, just like bigger companies do. The only difference is the big companies know how to

convert those leads into sales—and you don’t.

Both you and your name brand competitors get calls that have little to no hope of being a viable project, but your competitors know how to “successfully eliminate” them on the initial phone call, while you unwittingly chase those clients around for weeks—spending 10 to 15 hours on their projects before you get the eventual “thanks, but no thanks” message on your voice mail.

When I worked as a freelance designer for many companies I would literally shake my head as I watched inexperienced landscape contractors ruin the presentation and the sale that I just teed up for them. Whether they frustrated the client with a poorly written or confusing contract or made one of a dozen other common mistakes, the results were the same: a perfectly good lead that had been converted into a permanent “no sale.”

After seeing so many ruined presentations, I realized what the potential pitfalls were and developed the concept that everyone gets the same leads but not everyone understands how to manage them properly. It wasn’t until I made a series of presentations to clients on behalf of the various contractors that I finally realized that lack of experience and proper systems take a perfectly good customer and wreck them for life.

Eventually I gave these contractors two options—either present the plan and proposal yourself or let me do it. The smarter ones got the hint when I came back with a signed contract and hefty deposit. The not-so-smart ones kept challenging the system and continued to blame the quality of their leads for their lack of sales and success.

So, Helen, you really are getting the same leads as some of the big boys, you’re just struggling with them.

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.

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DATE	SPECIAL GUEST	PROGRAM TOPIC
2/20	Jay Murray , Contractor <i>Landscape Safety Training</i>	Online Safety Training
2/27	Josh Ferguson , Attorney <i>Kent/McBride, PC.</i>	Legal, Contracts, Risk Management
3/6	Daniel Tal , Author/Designer <i>Ambit-3D</i>	Graphics, Sales, SketchUp
3/13	Joe Salemi , Vendor <i>DynaSCAPE</i>	Design Software, Marketing
3/20	Jeff Korhan , Consultant/Author <i>True Nature Inc.</i>	Social Media, Marketing
3/27	Rich Arlington , Consultant <i>Rich Arlington & Associates</i>	Business, Team Building

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ABOUT THE HOST

Jody Shilan is an award-winning landscape designer with more than 35 years of experience in the green industry. In addition to hosting FD2B Talk Radio and managing FromDesign2Build.com, Shilan is a regular presenter at industry events and writes the "Profiting from Design" column for *Landscape Management* magazine.

Shilan earned his Bachelor of Science in Landscape Architecture (BSLA) from Rutgers Cook College and his Master's Degree in Landscape Architecture (MLA) from the University of Massachusetts.

Shilan is a National Green Centre "Rock Star" and a Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) Trailblazer.



LISTENERS LOVE IT!

"I love listening to FD2B Talk Radio. I appreciate the candid yet light-hearted conversations he has with his guests. And the topics are relevant and on-point." —Chris Heiler, president & founder, *Landscape Leadership*

"Jody has brought a great variety of industry resources to a single media channel. I feel that the topics are relevant and the concise manner in which they are delivered saves me time. The format allows for feedback and questions, which I find helpful." —Michael McShane, president, *Plantique*

"FD2B Talk Radio is not only informative and insightful, but it's also entertaining. Each week I look forward to learning the next guest speaker and topic of discussion." —Amanda Bell, landscape designer, *Landscape Design by Amanda*

"I listen to FD2B Talk Radio to educate myself on the landscape design/build topics to better my business. Jody responds to all my questions promptly and with helpful hints you can't get anywhere else." —Kim Stratton, landscape designer, *Stratton Landscape Design*

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Let's roll

Bocce ball court construction drives revenue for a division of Brewer Landscape Construction.

WHAT GAME DOES Pro Football Hall-of-Fame coach John Madden play when enjoying his outdoor living area? Not *Madden NFL 13*. He plays bocce ball.

"John and Virginia have been great in helping to promote the game and our business," says David Brewer, president of Boccebrew Inc., a division of Brewer Landscape Construction, Novato, Calif. "We started including bocce court installations back in the early 1990s, and now it consumes most of our business."

Dubbed "Italian bowling" by some, bocce is played on rectangular outdoor courts measuring 12 feet by 60 feet. The surface is hard-packed by using clay soil and oyster shell with a topping of oyster shell flour, limestone or decomposed granite.

The construction can be as plain or as ornate as a client would like. Some courts are surrounded by 4-foot stone or brick walls; others feature outdoor lighting or trellises to reduce sunshine on the playing area. Thus, the design/build price can range from a few thousand dollars to tens of thousands of dollars.

Although a well-designed bocce court can add value and beauty to outdoor living areas, the real purpose is social, says Brewer. "Folks come over for a barbecue, have a glass of wine or a beer and the balls start rolling."

Maintenance, especially in spring and summer, keeps Brewer's crews busy. "We recommend resurfacing with oyster shell at least once a year," Brewer says. "The oyster shell can be purchased at most farm and garden supply stores. Depending upon the design, applications vary, but regular service costs between \$250 to \$600."

Brewer says that although many of his clients are professionals, "the beauty of the game, and of the simple construction, is that bocce fits almost any pocketbook."



Brewer Landscape Construction has a separate division, Boccebrew Inc., for its bocce court installation business.

Brewer came to bocce court construction by accident. "To be honest, I didn't know anything about bocce until my ex-wife asked me to build a court for her," he says. "My business grew from there, the more people saw it, the more people liked it."

Over the years, Brewer has come to specialize in bocce court construction. "It's really a central part of our business now," he says. "The margins are good, and just as with any other business, the more complex and detailed the build, the more room to increase the margins."

"The real task is to place the court in an area where it becomes aesthetically pleasing and blends seamlessly within the landscape," he says. "We think we do that better than anyone. After all, we've been at it a long time."

Like the build itself, Brewer says, bocce rules can be simple or inordinate. "There is a national and an international federation, with proper rules and sponsored tournaments and all that, but mostly, people keep it simple and have a good time with it," says Brewer. "It's a great lawn game and anyone can learn to play, so it's perfect for families looking to spend some quality time together."

Most of Brewer's business comes from referrals, but Brewer Landscape Construction also promotes its bocce service on its website and by involving itself in the local community. The nearby city of San Rafael has built 10 outdoor courts at a city park and also has two indoor courts. Brewer says, "The game is really growing in popularity."

Ingles is a freelance writer based in Columbus, Ohio.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Boccebrew Inc./ Brewer Landscape Construction

HEADQUARTERS: Novato, Calif.

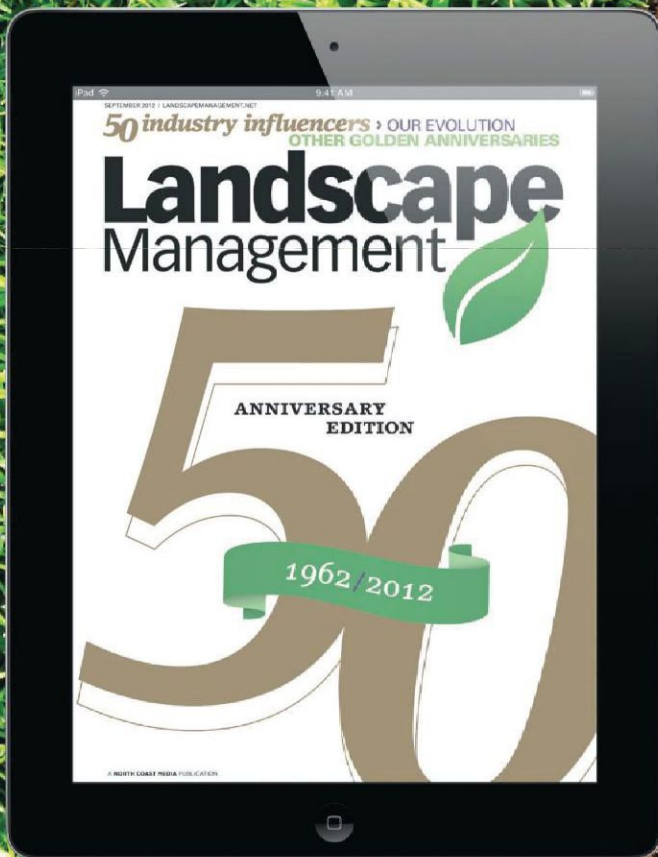
SERVICES: Landscape design and construction, specializing in bocce court design

CLIENTELE: 90% residential; 10% commercial

EMPLOYEES: Three full-time designers and 10 seasonal maintenance employees

WHY BOCCO COURT CONSTRUCTION? According to the World Bocce League (WBL), more than 2 million Americans play bocce regularly and 25 million have tried it at least once. The WBL is working to introduce the game to youth and disabled veterans, to help stimulate a greater following. Bocce is now played in the Special Olympics and the World Corporate Games.

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GrasshopperMower.com/sprayer



Northern Tool & Equipment

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TurfEx

Capable of spraying all liquid solutions, the new TL-80 and TL-80SS (stainless steel, pictured) electric-powered push sprayers feature 12-gal. polyethylene tanks. A front-mounted, adjustable-height boomless nozzle is capable of spraying between 48 in. and 72 in. wide. Each unit is equipped with a profes-

sional-duty, variable-tip spray wand on an 8-ft. hose. A switch toggles between nozzle and spray wand operation. Each unit can spray approximately 120 gal. per charge, and the battery charge time is 12 to 16 hours. *TurfExProducts.com*



L.T. Rich Products

The JR-36R is designed to be the first rackable zero-turn ride on sprayer. Featuring a 20-gal. spray tank and a 35.5-in.-wide rear wheel base, the unit includes a 4.0 GPM pump, FloodJet nozzles, and a three-nozzle boom for spray patterns that can vary from 4 ft. to 8 ft. wide. Constant bypass agitation makes spraying wettable powder permissible. A speedometer and pressure gauge assist operators with spray calibration. For hard-to-reach areas, the unit is equipped with a 25-ft. coil hose. *Z-Spray.com*



Buffalo Turbine

The 360-degree nozzle control allows Buffalo Turbine's Cyclone 8000 to complete large-scale jobs in a fraction of the time. Hurricane Force winds help the Cyclone 8000 to outperform the work of several traditional blowers, the company says, allowing employees to be allocated to other tasks. *BuffaloTurbine.com*

Reddick Equipment Co.

Reddick Equipment's lawn care skids are available as aluminum skid frames with poly tanks or as seamless fiberglass tanks with safety cross baffles, with capacity from 30 gal. to 500 gal. *Reddick.cc*



Agrium

Calculate your fertilizer cost savings with Agrium's Square Foot Advantage Calculator and qualify to win a Turfco T3000i Spreader/Sprayer. Begin by visiting the Driven By Duration website. An easy-to-use calculator will take you through the steps to compare

the total cost-in-use of what you're currently using to a single application of Spread it & Forget it. Either way, you'll be qualified to win a Turfco T3000i Spreader/Sprayer. The chance to win ends Jan. 31. *DrivenByDuration.com*

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ENGINES

Kohler Engines

The Command PRO EFI line of engines from Kohler Engines offers 34 and 38 horsepower models. This family of products now encompasses 16 different engines ranging from 19 to 38 horsepower. The Kohler closed-loop EFI engines include an oxygen sensor that analyzes the air/fuel mixture in the muffler. If the oxygen level strays from the ideal air/fuel mixture, the sensor triggers adjustments to the amount of fuel injected into the system. The carburetor-free design of the EFI line can lead to fuel savings compared to comparable carbureted engines, the manufacturer says.



KohlerEngines.com

Honda Engines

Honda Engines' new Best-In-Class series starts with the GCV160 engine. Regardless of engine series, each Best-In-Class engine model features lower weight, improved cooling, innovative design enhancements, more flexibility in use and the possibility of future personalization by end users. Honda engine models meet or exceed all EPA and CARB regulation requirements.

PowerEquipment.honda.com

Briggs & Stratton Commercial Power

Briggs & Stratton Commercial Power's Vanguard Vehicle Power Lineup includes engines in the 13- to 23-gross horsepower range. The lineup has been proven to meet the rigorous challenges of off-road utility vehicles on numerous well-established brands, including E-Z-GO, Club Car, Cushman, Bad Boy Buggies, Argo, Toro and John Deere. These engines include technology that reduces engine and oil temperatures by up to 30 degrees.

VanguardEngines.com

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Dina Dwyer-Owens

Chairwoman and CEO of The Dwyer Group, parent company to The Grounds Guys



Who's your mentor? Jesus Christ, first and foremost. My faith drives everything in my life. Also, my father, Don Dwyer, the founder of our company. I look to every relationship I have as a learning experience. Other people I constantly learn from are Mary Thompson, the president of Mr. Rooter. She'd say I'm her boss, but I learn more from her. And the same goes for Mike Bidwell, our president and COO. He's always teaching me things.

What advice do you have for other people who, like you, have filled their parents' shoes in business? Be you. Don't try to be them. We'll never live up to it. You've got to be you, and you can't be afraid to say what needs to be said, respectfully.

It's been a year since your appearance on "Undercover Boss." Would you do again? Yes. It was an incredible experience. Risky, but incredible.



Were there any unintended consequences of being on "Undercover Boss?" Two things come to mind. One is we knew there would be uncomfortable things to address. Having a franchisee not following the system on national TV ended up being one of greatest benefits. Now it's not just me and the team encouraging franchisees to follow our systems, it's the consumer saying, "This is what we expect from The Grounds Guys or Mr. Rooter." That's going to help them be better franchisees. The other big thing is I'm shocked to have so many viewers who have contacted me personally to tell me how much they enjoyed it and what they learned from it.

The Dwyer Group's Code of Values is close to your heart. Which one of the values is your favorite? I think more often about the ones I need the most improvement on. That would be listening. I have a tendency to think about what I want to say next and not give the person the full respect of my attention.

How does a small company implement its own set of values? It's almost *easier* when you're small. If you're the leader, you've got to be the one who's leading by example. If you're asking the team to do something you're not willing to do, they're not going to buy into it. If you haven't yet created a set of values, get your team involved. Or, if you'd like to use ours, that's great. We just ask that you give us credit if you put them in print.

Visit the Web Extras section of LandscapeManagement.net to view The Dwyer Group's Code of Values.

OFF THE CLOCK

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

I'm not reading anything right now, but I'm always listening to a spiritual or business book on summary. Right now it's a Les Brown program that's educational and motivational about managing change.

WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE FOR YOUR LAST MEAL? Turkey and dressing, because it reminds me of holidays and time with family and friends.

FAVORITE VACATION SPOT?

The Cayman Islands. That's where my father passed away, actually. It was his favorite spot, too. As a family, it's one place we can really relax. My next favorite is Deer Valley, Utah.

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