

DESIGN/BUILD

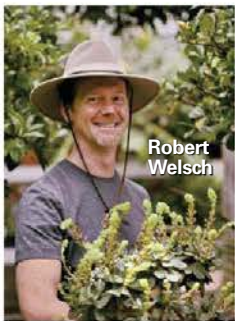
Finding *balance*

Instituting a few changes improved business—and quality of life—for one Green Industry owner.

By MARISA PALMIERI

In 2010, Robert Welsch was “dog tired and chasing every lead.” The year before, his landscape design/build firm, Westover Landscape Design in Tarrytown, N.Y., had lost money for the first time since opening its doors in 2004. Welsch felt like he was spinning his wheels and knew he needed to make some changes.

The first step was clarifying Westover’s position in its (high-end) market. The company, which declined to disclose its annual revenue, has a 98 percent residential client base just outside of New York City. Typical projects are \$25,000 and up. Welsch, with the help of Green Industry consultant Jeffrey Scott, was able to institute some changes that drastically improved his company’s net profit and average sale size, while decreasing the owner’s stress level and time spent on the business. Finding that balance was enlightening for Welsch, a former publishing executive for whom landscaping is a second career.



Robert Welsch

A few tweaks, including the ones detailed below, helped Westover and Welsch find balance and boost business.

1 Prequalifying leads. Before, Welsch was working about 80 hours a week during the season (April to June), and was meeting, in person, with most prospects, “chasing anything and everything.” Now, his business partner prequalifies all leads over the phone, explaining the company’s process and walking them through a questionnaire. That checklist includes questions covering budget and scope, whether the prospect ever has worked with a designer before and his or her address. “We look it up right away on Zillow.com to determine the neighborhood and size of the property,” he says. “If they just want a few shrubs moved, we’re not the right firm for them,” he says, explaining the company now refers those who aren’t a good fit elsewhere. “I don’t want to waste their time or my time, either.”

2 Setting parameters on prospect meetings. “Now we only do new client meetings on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and never more than three in a day,” Welsch says. “When those

slots are full, I don’t care who the client is, we’re putting them off.” The company now knows it can process only nine follow-ups and proposals per week with its current infrastructure, so setting a limit and choosing only prospects who seem like the right fit has helped eliminate chaos. “Before, I was doing meetings all week—probably 15 a week. I was doing proposals late at night and at 6 a.m. It was unsustainable,” he says.

3 Changing the subcontracting process. Westover used to handle masonry estimates and billing, even though it subcontracted out the work. “It was a tremendous amount of back and forth,” Welsch says. “Now, we’re agnostic. We have a variety of masons we work with, and we bring them on and introduce them to clients and we cut ourselves out as the middle man.” Doing so has freed up a lot of time for Welsch. “We have high standards in the quality of work we do and our clients love our subs,” he says. “If anyone doesn’t give Westover quality, they’re out.”

4 Adding bench strength. Previously, Welsch was the only one doing estimates. Since reorganizing, he’s added two landscape designers who also serve as project managers. They join him on sales calls, and after the fact they own the projects through their life cycles.

5 Adding recurring revenue. Westover used to be 100 percent design/build; today 5 percent of the firm’s business comes from a fine gardening service it created over the last two years. Adding this division was a way for the company to bring in a new revenue stream, take care of its current clients’ needs and nurture relationships with them that may lead to referrals.

Of all the changes, Welsch says not chasing every lead was the most difficult thing to get used to. “As a small business owner, you get very hungry and you always think it’s going to dry up,” he says. But today Welsch works about 60 hours a week during the season—a 25 percent drop from before. That’s not bad for a company that’s improved net profit 100 percent and increased its average sales size by 45 percent over the last two years.

