

To download a Liquid Assets case study and a sample of the irrigation audit letter Turftenders sends to commercial clients, visit the Web Extras section of LandscapeManagement.net

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approximately 200 commercial clients. Turftenders conducts the audit to map the irrigation system to pinpoint design flaws and identify leaks or broken heads.

The company begins the audit process by turning on every zone and then observing the system in operation to identify performance problems. The technicians look for obvious signs of malfunction, including sunken sprinkler heads, misaligned spray patterns (identified by brown spots in certain areas) and misting or fogging, which can be a sign of overpressure.

From there, Turftenders conducts performance testing to calculate the precipitation rate, so the company can determine uniformity of the application. The process helps Turftenders technicians know how long the system should operate. Measuring the precipitation rate is less sophisticated than it may sound. Turftenders conducts the process by placing red plastic cups along a mapped-out grid system in the landscape. After allowing the system to run for several minutes, a technician measures how much water was collected in the cups. Using this data, the company

can determine how much water per hour each area is receiving, Erwin says.

Turftenders enters the data, including usage information from the client's water bills, into a spreadsheet provided by Rain Bird. The spreadsheet calculates savings and the payback time frame. With the audit complete, Turftenders follows up with a report detailing a plan to potentially save water at the property. The letter includes estimates of potential gallons and money saved if the customer follows through with the suggested actions. Some of the recommendations may include retrofits, capping off certain heads or eliminating zones, as well as ensuring the controller is properly scheduled.

THE RESULTS

One housing development already has realized significant savings from the program. The housing community encompasses 71 homes on 11.5 acres, including nearly 74,000 square feet of fescue turf. After the first full year in 2011, the Turftenders' client realized a decline in landscape water consumption of 638,792 gallons from the previous

year and a water cost savings of \$5,950.

Turftenders installed new pressure-regulating heads to improve water distribution and eliminate misting.

The company also cut the total number of heads from more than 1,000 to 880. Turftenders expects the client to recover its initial capital investment in three-and-a-half years and save more than \$71,000 over the system's lifespan.

So far, Turftenders has achieved some success with the audit program, including a client who agreed to a \$20,000 retrofit. Typical projects in the current economic climate have been a few thousand dollars, Erwin says. He's optimistic that as water prices continue to rise, more customers will recognize the value of irrigation audits.

"It's something that differentiates us from our competition, and everybody wants to save some money, Erwin says. "It's also good for the environment. Here in North Carolina water rates are going up, and these irrigation systems are too valuable to these properties to just abandon them."

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

DESIGN/BUILD

One-stop shop

A Florida outdoor living co-op presents opportunities and challenges.

By JONATHAN KATZ

Some homeowners envision their backyard as a secluded paradise with a pool, patio and fire pit. Others seek a Zen experience with koi ponds and water gardens. Yet sometimes these dream

backyards are beyond the capabilities of a single landscape designer or company.

In November, a group of businesses opened a showroom in Ellenton, Fla., less than 20 miles north of Sarasota, as a type of one-stop shop for outdoor living. The four companies that make up the co-op called Backyards N More joined together to create synergies that would lead to better landscape designs and more referral-based business.

Backyards N More includes a landscape design/build company, a pest control and lawn care firm, a pool and spa installer and a heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) firm. The building is owned by Backyards N More founder Philip Yetzer, who's the president and CEO of the pool and spa

installation firm Drips 'n' Puddles. The partnership has increased revenue by approximately 20 percent to 40 percent for Prime Environmental Landscaping (PEL), says owner and founder Chris Lockhart. PEL is a design/build contractor that partnered with Drips 'n' Puddles last spring to form the co-op.

PEL already has benefited from job leads generated by Drips 'n' Puddles. In some cases, the partnership has reduced installation times for PEL, resulting in more satisfied customers, Lockhart says. Before joining Backyards N More, PEL often faced design, timing and budget challenges because the company didn't have the opportunity to coordinate with the pool contractor.

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“When we can sit down with the client from the get-go and have an overall idea of the design and not just pieces of it as it comes,” Lockhart says, “the whole project is much easier to tie together, construction is smoother and the design goals are easier to achieve by pre-planning.”

The collaboration with Drips ‘n’ Puddles has cut the amount of time it takes to complete some projects, Lockhart says. In addition, when the Backyards N More affiliates refer business to each other, they receive a commission for the referral, Lockhart says. He eventually expects to generate 60 percent to 70 percent of his sales through Backyards N More.

PEL’s involvement with Backyards N More began about eight years ago after a client introduced Lockhart to Yetzer. Yetzer was seeking a landscape designer to help him establish a full outdoor design operation, Lockhart recalls. After Yetzer reviewed Lockhart’s work with PEL, the two discussed creating a one-stop shop that could handle multiple backyard needs.

PEL and Drips ‘n’ Puddles together invested approximately \$100,000 into the Backyards N More showroom, which Lockhart characterizes as a type of village setting with sidewalks and meandering paver walkways. Some of

the features include a pondless waterfall near the showroom entrance and outdoor fireplaces and kitchens. Eventually, Yetzer added a pest control and lawn care company and HVAC firm to round out Backyards N More’s offerings.

The showroom provides the co-op companies with marketing opportunities they may have missed, Lockhart says.

“There are a lot more elements to the outdoor landscape than just plants,” Lockhart explains. “It’s stone, wood, water, topography, sound—all kinds of things other than just plant material, and it’s helping us get all those other services out there and get our name out there as clients are coming in to see one of the other businesses.”

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Being associated with multiple businesses has its advantages, but companies considering similar ventures should exercise caution, Lockhart says. Make sure potential partners have solid reputations, Lockhart says.

“It can be a good thing to have your name behind another company, and it can be a bad thing if they’re not doing their job,” Lockhart says. “As long as you’re partnering with a company that’s equal or better than you are, then you can’t go wrong.”

Backyards N More, a co-op of several different outdoor-related service businesses, operates a showroom featuring aspects of all its members’ offerings.

PEL only associates itself with Backyards N More partner Drips ‘n’ Puddles, Lockhart says. The other companies are primarily building renters Yetzer brought on board as a source of rental income, according to Lockhart. That presents another potential drawback that companies interested in a co-op should consider, Lockhart says.

“Another challenge is making sure you’re not too associated with those companies that you don’t really know about,” Lockhart says.

For instance, organic landscaping is a major part of PEL’s offerings. The lawn care company in Backyards N More provides chemical pest treatments, Lockhart explains. That could send a confusing message to clients if they begin associating PEL with a chemical-treatment provider, Lockhart says.

“You don’t always agree with every idea that the other contractors have,” he explains. “When that happens, you have to make sure you can separate yourself and keep your company identity unique. That’s really the challenge.”

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.