

Selling safety

A Virginia-based company profits from safety and damage control services.



Jon Zalewski,
Professional
Grounds' business
development
manager

SAFETY SELLS. THAT'S why the crews at Professional Grounds in Lorton, Va., pay extra attention on their property walkthroughs. Though they may be there simply to access the turf and shrubs, pointing out hazards such as a hanging limb or a failing retaining wall can drive additional profit while impressing the client with the company's attention to detail.

"We're all about being as proactive as possible," says Professional Grounds Business Development Manager Jon Zalewski. "No matter why we're there, any time we're walking a property we're looking for hazardous trees, broken limbs or anything else that could be a potential liability to our client." Professional Grounds typically performs work for homeowners associations and commercial properties concerned about staying up to code. Contractors who work primarily on residential properties could take the same preventive approach, Zalewski says. "Paying attention to potential hazards is a win-win for everyone," he says.

Professional Grounds workers are known to point out potential problems even on nonclient properties when they notice them. "While we're not licensed to inspect playground structures, if we see a playground that hasn't put fresh chips down in years we'll bring it to the proper person's attention," Zalewski says. "If the kids are playing on the dirt and fall, that's a liability because the playground isn't up to code. It's not about scare tactics—it's just bringing an important issue to their attention and letting them know it needs to be taken care of, whether they use us or not."

When Professional Grounds workers bring these concerns to light, it often *does* result in new business from the effort. In fact, fixing safety hazards has become a profitable add-on service for Professional Grounds, which also offers storm damage control and emergency response services.

"All of our clients have our personal emails and cell phone numbers so that if there is an emergency situation, they can reach someone right away," Zalewski

explains. "After a bad thunderstorm we may be out on a Saturday or Sunday removing fallen trees. How quickly you respond to a situation like that is what sets you apart, and it all starts with answering your phone."

A quick response in an emergency situation not only generates extra revenue, he says, "It also sets you up as a sort of hero in the clients' eyes."

FAIRNESS RULES

Zalewski points out that pricing jobs fairly is an important part of emergency response and damage control. While it would be easy to take advantage of the customer and inflate prices in his or her time of need, he says that's no way to build client relationships. "Charging the customer a fair price for an emergency gets you more work in the long run," Zalewski says.

An emergency response service for Professional Grounds may even include last-minute landscape repair after an accident. "We've had situations such as a vehicle crashing into an entryway monument or running over a bunch of bushes," he says, explaining his team may be called in to clean up the area quickly to make it look presentable again.

"Some of our commercial clients can't afford to have that down time, so we handle those jobs immediately," Zalewski says. "They might have a potential leasing tenant coming in—or another reason why they need the area fixed up fast."

With its fast response time and focus on safety, Professional Grounds has come to be known for its emergency services and damage prevention alike. "It's really as simple as proposing work based on need," Zalewski says. "A lot of times the clients don't even realize they had the need. They appreciate that you brought something important to their attention, and it's often work that sells itself."

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Professional Grounds

HEADQUARTERS: Lorton, Va.

SERVICES: Hazard prevention, damage control and emergency response have become an everyday part of business for the company.

BEST TIP FOR SELLING SAFETY: "Answer your phone," says Jon Zalewski, the company's business development manager. "Frankly, response time is what sells that kind of job."

HOW IT WORKS: "It's company policy that employees are available during bad weather events or other natural disaster types of situations," says Zalewski. "We then prioritize the jobs based on their severity. If it's a tree on a house or a car—or in danger of falling—that takes priority over a tree in a field."