

MARKET WATCH

IRRIGATION

Harvesting savings

A California company focuses on “smart” landscaping and irrigation to reduce clients’ water use. *By JONATHAN KATZ*

Steven Schinhofen speaks with the business acumen of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur. His company, Harvest Landscape Enterprises, is actually located about 400 miles down the coast in Anaheim, Calif., and the business is a far cry from the high-tech world of microprocessors.

Still, the 34-year-old business-school graduate says his maintenance and design firm is beating traditional “mow-and-blow” competitors by applying a science-based approach to landscaping. This includes a focus on water conservation through sustainable landscape practices.

It’s much more than a feel-good marketing ploy. The president of Harvest says sustainability is key to profitability. “It’s not just the right thing to do, but it’s also the smart thing,” Schinhofen says. “By being more efficient with the water, we actually haul less green waste and make more money.”

The “green waste” typically occurs when companies overwater and overfertilize their properties, which eventually require more maintenance and labor, he says. Harvest offers customers a program called SmartScape that focuses on creating a landscape requiring less water and thrives in the Southern California climate.

BREAKING WITH TRADITION

Schinhofen has landscaping in his blood. His grandfather started a landscape company in 1963, and 20 years later his father opened his own landscaping business. Schinhofen began working summers for his father after graduating high school in 1997. By 2003, he decided to add a third landscaping business to the family portfolio. He established Harvest using the business knowledge he gained in college and the real-world experience he achieved working for his father. But he didn’t want

to do things the old-fashioned way.

Early on, a local water district asked Harvest to test a smart irrigation controller on one of the company’s properties. Schinhofen liked how the controller worked, so he contacted the manufacturer to provide training on the system. He also hired a bilingual irrigation expert to educate his staff on how to be more resource efficient.

He noticed drought conditions in California created customer demand for these controllers and sustainable landscapes as water prices increased. Property owners were installing their own smart controllers, but many landscape contractors weren’t willing to help their customers reduce water consumption. That’s where Harvest stepped in.

The company also became involved with a nonprofit environmental group called Orange County Coastkeeper, which focuses on protecting the region’s waterways. Harvest helped establish Coastkeeper’s sustainable demonstration garden, which enhanced the company’s reputation as an expert in sustainable landscapes.

WATER-SAVING CASE STUDY

Managing irrigation volume is only part of the water-conservation equation. Landscape design plays a significant role as well. While many companies and customers may suggest replacing shrubs with native plants as a way to reduce water usage, Schinhofen says that alone is typically not effective. All



Steven Schinhofen



To reduce clients’ water use, Harvest Landscape Enterprises uses a “science-based” approach to landscaping.

native plants aren't visually appealing and the return on investment can take up to 20 years. As an additional measure he advocates replacing turf, where appropriate.

An example of where turf reduction made sense is a beach community in Dana Point, Calif., called Niguel Shores of Dana Point. It had been using the same landscape contractor for the past 35 years to maintain the 95-acre property. When Schinhofen arrived he noticed the property was "grossly overwatered." To fix this problem and others like it, Harvest begins with an assessment process that considers the square footage of the landscape along with other factors, such as the percentage of turf, flower beds, slope and evapotranspiration rates. He puts those variables into a formula to determine how much water the property is wasting. The company then maps the irrigation system to identify flaws.

Harvest replaced more than 100,000 square feet of turf at Niguel Shores with

drought-tolerant shrubs and replaced a irrigation systems with drip irrigation to save water and prevent runoff. The community expects to save \$17,000 a year with the improvements. Schinhofen helped the community earn rebates from the local water department to subsidize the project. The project should pay for itself within seven years, Schinhofen adds.

"We are already using less water, making faster progress on the implementation of the master landscape project and at a sharply reduced cost verses initial projections, says Steve Stewart, a Niguel Shores Community Association board member. "Also, we are seeing higher homeowner satisfaction with the current condition of our landscape."

For Harvest, the payoff has been an increasing share of the local landscape market. Schinhofen eventually purchased both his father's company and the business his grandfather founded. Harvest now



has five branches throughout Southern California and more than 400 employees. The focus on sustainability also has made the business more resilient.

"The peak of us doing all this conservation work was also when the market crashed, which impacted our profits, but we probably weren't impacted as much as our competitors and were able to survive the economic downturn," Schinhofen says.

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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