

DESIGN/BUILD

IRRIGATION

MAINTENANCE

LAWN CARE

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# MARKETWATCH

SERVICE SEGMENT SNAPSHOTS



*Aerial photos snapped by a drone help one Michigan landscape firm communicate its best work.*

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# Up in the air

A Michigan landscape company uses drones to capture aerial images of large-scale projects.

By EMILY SCHAPPACHER

It was a conundrum that long plagued Tom VerHage, owner of Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Katerberg VerHage Landscaping: How can we get complete, quality photographs of our large-scale projects? The helicopters the company used in the past were cost prohibitive, so VerHage was on the lookout for a cheaper, convenient way to photograph his company's largest projects like university campuses, parks, stadiums and some residences. About three years ago, VerHage finally found an efficient and affordable way to get the shots he wanted with a new-age device called an unmanned aerial system (UAS)—aka a drone.

"We always felt we couldn't do our larger projects justice with just on-the-ground shots," VerHage says. "We used a helicopter in the past and it was very expensive. It didn't make sense. The drones are a great way to do it. It works wonderfully."

Katerberg VerHage works with a company called Hovercams, also based in Grand Rapids, to take low-altitude aerial images of the \$8.4-million company's largest projects using a remote-controlled UAS. With this device, Hovercams is able to provide photos of projects from up to 200 feet in the air. The technology also allows the drone to zoom in on specific details from above, such as a water feature, pool or patio.



Most recently, Katerberg VerHage built rock walls on three sides of the artificial turf football field at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Allendale, Mich., as well as the stadium on the school's practice fields. The drone captured the finished project with high-resolution images of the entire field.

Katerberg VerHage used drone photography to capture its project at GVSU.

"The photos give us a great view from 100 to 200 feet in the air or right down into specific target areas," VerHage says. "The higher you go, you get a view of the whole project."

VerHage says his company uses the aerial shots mostly as a marketing tool for its 90-percent commercial clientele. But because the company does not pass along a fee to clients for the photos, he says it's selective over which projects are worthy of the Hovercams treatment. Costs range from \$150 to \$200 for 10 to 15 photos per session, VerHage says.

Hovercams' remote-controlled drone can photograph projects from up to 200 feet in the air.





“The money goes a long way in getting these pictures taken,” he says. “It gives you a good bang for your dollar.”  
 VerHage adds clients seem to enjoy the imagery, too, and many of them end up framing and displaying the photos throughout their buildings.

“Customers are very impressed with the service,” VerHage says. “It works really well for them and they like to keep the photos as part of their history.”

Another benefit to the drone photography service, VerHage says, is capturing the images is simple. A Katerberg VerHage project manager meets a representative from the photography firm at the project site. After explaining the types of shots and details they are looking for, the rep—who VerHage says has an “architect’s eye”—operates the drone while taking the photos. The whole process takes less than an hour. Sometimes a project requires two sessions if Katerberg VerHage wants before-and-after shots.

*Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.*

## The Ticker: DESIGN/BUILD

**EP Henry** resumes its HeroScaping program in 2014 and broke ground on a new project in Doylestown, Pa.: The Bucks County Global War on Terror Memorial. Since formalizing in 2012, the HeroScaping program has donated more than \$325,000 toward military-related projects and organizations.

**Proven Winners** added the Kentucky’s Governor’s Mansion as a Signature Garden location, making it the sixth locale to join the list. Garden designer **John Carloftis** is heading the grounds renovation.



With April being **National Landscape Architecture Month (NLAM)**, the **American Society of Landscape Architects** encourages professionals to take to the theme “Career Discovery” by increasing awareness and exposure to the landscape architecture profession. Visit [buff.ly/1k0nT2S](http://buff.ly/1k0nT2S) for a listing of celebratory events in accordance with NLAM.

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# Hands-on approach

A Texas irrigation company makes water conservation its top priority. *By EMILY SCHAPPACHER*

**T**he drought that hit Texas in 2006 was a wake-up call for Patty Sipe, co-owner of Heads Up Sprinkler Co. in Plano.

It was time to look at some aspects of her irrigation business differently. That drought and the ones that have ensued almost every year since have been catalysts for the company to rethink everything through the lens of conservationists and teachers versus a mere service provider, says Sipe.

“It was at that point we started to recognize water waste a lot more preva-

lently,” Sipe says. “We have always been water conscious, but the 2006 drought and the ones that have followed really helped raise the public awareness with respect to water.”

The \$500,000 company, co-owned by Caryn Walz who founded it 18 years ago, primarily services residential clients, offering irrigation system repair and long-term care services. It also provides irrigation system auditing services for commercial properties—a service it introduced in response to tightened water-use restrictions. Sipe expects this service to

expand in the coming years. That growth isn’t necessarily the goal for Heads Up Sprinkler, though, Sipe says. The goal is to save as much water as possible while educating clients about why it’s so critical.

“There are 7,000 licensed irrigation techs in North Texas—many of them are just trying to make a dollar and don’t care about water conservation,” she says. “For us, it’s not about making money, it’s about saving water.”

And save water it has. In 2012, Heads Up Sprinkler won the City of Plano’s Environmental Star of Excellence award for saving an estimated 1.2 million gallons of water that year by repairing broken or inefficient irrigation systems and teaching homeowners how to properly manage them. The company continues to save hundreds of thousands of gallons of water each year by providing leak repairs, hydrozoning



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and station retrofits, improving head layouts, using performance-enhancing nozzles and utilizing drip irrigation “like there’s no tomorrow.”

### EDUCATION IS THE KEY

Sipe says the most important piece of the puzzle is educating the homeowner. Each Heads Up Sprinkler technician is trained to spend as much time with each client as necessary, explaining the issues, listening and answering questions. This method builds trust between the company and the client and helps clients make a connection between the irrigation system controller, or “that thing in their garage,” and their water

Above: Heads Up Sprinkler Co. co-owners Patty Sipe (left) and Caryn Walz focus on saving water for clients. Right: Drip irrigation is one way they do so.



bill, Sipe says. Once clients see that wasted water equals wasted dollars, they begin to pay more attention.

“We are the connection point between the automatic sprinkler system and the water bill,” Sipe says. “When you are the connection, you are more than an irrigation company. You are an information base that can help customers.”

Customers typically understand or have the “aha moment” when they see their water bill go from, say, \$300 to \$125, Sipe says.



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“Whether I spend an hour or an hour-and-a-half with a customer, it’s all billable, so I don’t have to race from one customer to the next,” Sipe says. “The customer always wants more knowledge. We take the time we need to take with each one.”

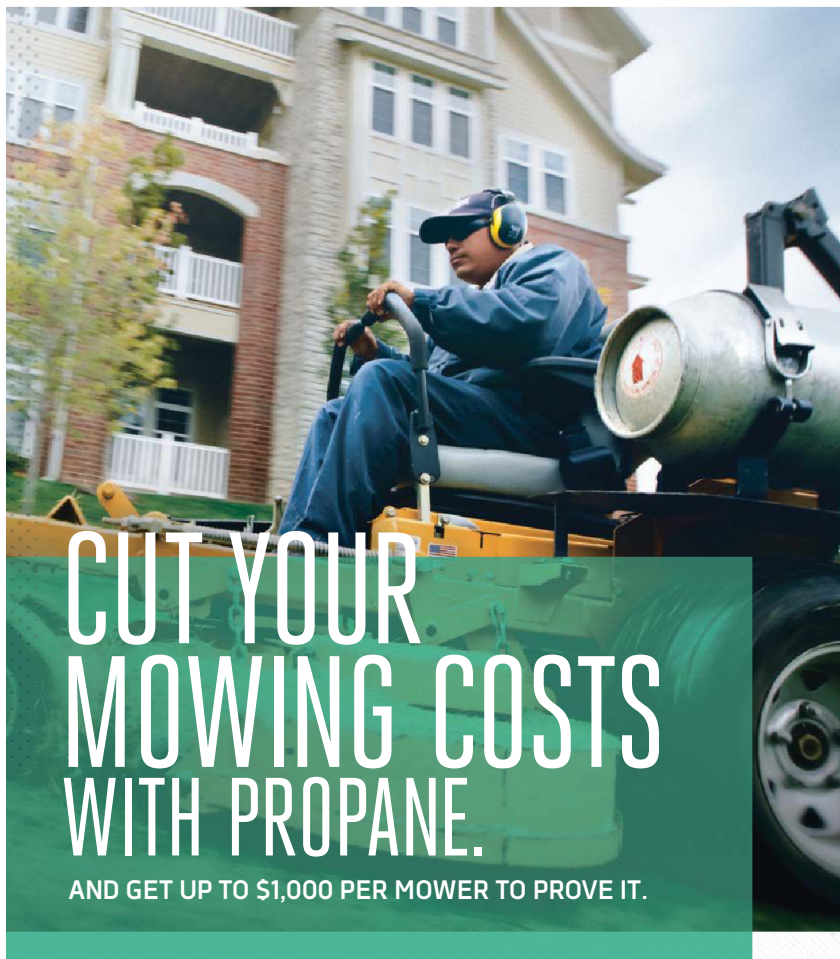
With that, Sipe recognizes water conservation is a long-standing issue in Texas, which is why she says, now more than ever, it’s important to spread the knowledge. Alongside its hands-on approach to repairing irriga-

tion systems and educating clients, Heads Up Sprinkler continues to educate people about water conservation on a larger scale.

For instance, as a member of the Water Efficiency Network of North Texas, Sipe voluntarily teaches water management techniques to homeowners as well as heads of city water management programs—many of whom are required to meet 10-percent conservation goals annually throughout their regions.

“The future of Heads Up Sprinkler is going to include giving a lot more of our time back to the community, teaching more classes and helping the water users of the world use less,” Sipe says. “But the focus of what we do has never changed. We work with the homeowners, we fix what’s broken and we educate.”

*Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.*



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## The Ticker:

### IRRIGATION



**HydroPoint Data Systems** received the Best Savings Impact vendor award from the **Irving Co.** for its positive influence on the company’s water savings, primarily through the use of its WeaterTRAK Pro smart controllers.

**Ewing** promoted **Warren Gorowitz** to vice president of sustainability. Gorowitz will head the company’s outreach programs as well as evolve its sustainable product mix.



Warren Gorowitz



# More than mowing grass

Relationship building: The driving force behind Michael Lancaster's success as a businessman in the Green Industry. *By JON KATZ*



coworker Beau Bohannon, who was a regional vice president at Nanak's.

Michael Lancaster (seated) and Beau Bohannon (far left) emphasize career paths at Florida Landscape Consultants.

Lancaster handles most of the marketing and financial facets of FLC, while Bohannon is responsible for the operations. The company provides landscape maintenance, tree care, irrigation, design and outdoor lighting services for commercial clients. The duo relied on its experience and reputation to build FLC's client base.

**"E**verybody can mow grass," says Michael Lancaster, president of Florida Landscape Consultants (FLC). That's why he stresses the importance of building relationships.

Lancaster, 54, has worked as a sales representative, business owner and consultant for nearly 30 years in the Green Industry. During that time, he's seen how relationship building—with other business associates and with customers—can affect success.

To that end, Lancaster attributes FLC's fast-track growth to the bonds he's formed with customers and colleagues. The Tampa, Fla.-based company is on pace to generate \$4 million in 2014 and \$10 million by 2017. He started the company in 2012.

### ROAD TO SUCCESS

Lancaster entered the landscaping and lawn care business in the 1980s. He was

working as a district sales representative for General Foods Corp. when a friend asked him if he'd like a sales position at ChemLawn's commercial business unit in Tampa.

He said yes and took a crash course on agronomy and horticulture. Despite having no experience in the Green Industry, Lancaster quickly became a top sales representative.

In 1991, he decided to start his own commercial landscape business. After five years, Nanak's Landscaping in Tampa purchased it, retaining Lancaster as an independent marketing consultant for nearly 16 years.

Lancaster witnessed firsthand the importance of customer relationships three years ago when ValleyCrest then acquired Nanak's. He was displeased with the direction the company was heading, so he left after about a year to form his own firm with longtime

## 3 KEYS TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

*Green Industry veteran Michael Lancaster offers his top tips for customer loyalty.*

**1 Be honest.** "I don't promise the moon if I can't deliver it. Don't promise clients a weed-free lawn (right away) if they have dead stuff everywhere because they didn't look after their irrigation system or didn't spray chemicals at the right time. Be honest with customers in assessing what their landscape is. I make sure I describe everything I learned during the property evaluation process. Have a good understanding of customer expectations, what you can accomplish based on existing conditions, what your capabilities are and how much it's going to cost."

**2 Be reliable.** "If we're supposed to be at a customer's property on Tuesday at 9 a.m., we're there every Tuesday at 9 unless there's a rain issue. And even then I still communicate with the customer to let them know when we will be there. Reliability, to me, is to be on time, on schedule all the time. We do that with high degree of success because that's how we operate. A lot of that has to do with planning/scheduling."

**3 Stay in touch.** "See the customer often. What I hear all the time from new prospects is that nobody ever comes to see

them to assess their satisfaction, evaluate their needs or check quality to ensure they're getting what you promised them. That's huge. I try to see all of my customers at least once a month. Account managers, department heads and lead men see our customers routinely. Our account managers, who will have no more than three crews, go to the properties each day the crew is there—every job, every day. It's one of the most important characteristics of our company that helps us retain customers and keep satisfaction high. One of my bosses once said, 'If you're not talking to your customers, I guarantee someone else is.'"



### REASON FOR CHANGE

Ultimately, it was a clash in management philosophies that led Lancaster to strike out on his own. He says ValleyCrest's leadership team redesigned labor budgets, changed account managers and split busi-

ness among various branches. That meant, without an explanation, many customers lost account managers who had worked with them for years. The company lost a lot of business, Lancaster says. That culmination inspired him to go back into business

for himself, bringing along Bohannon, who has many years of operations experience to complement his sales/marketing focus.

"Always work hard to surround yourself with good people," Lancaster says. "Every successful business has a good core group of folks who are like-minded."

Employee empowerment is important for any business that's planning for long-term success, he adds. Account managers must have administrative skills and take ownership of their properties, Lancaster says. He also believes in promoting internally.

"You want your people to understand they have a path to a career," Lancaster says. "Our turnover rate is very low because we invest a lot of time and effort into our employees, and they can sense that. We treat them like they have a career here, and they act like it's a career."

*Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*



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## The Ticker:

### MAINTENANCE

Aftermarket outdoor power equipment parts supplier **Rotary Corp.** joined the **National Hispanic Landscape Alliance** as a supporting member. "Rotary recognizes the growing impact of Hispanic Americans in the landscape industry and supports the efforts of NHLA," said Ed Nelson, president and CEO of Rotary.

**Lawn Army** expects to license 12 franchise locations in 2014, including one in Miami, pending as of press time. Established in 2011, Lawn Army is a brand of HomeTask, a multi-brand franchisor headquartered in Seattle. Lawn Army currently serves areas in Washington, South Carolina and California.





# Learning curve

New York lawn care operator creates long-term customers through education.

By EMILY SCHAPPACHER

**B**rian Marcus started his career as a biology teacher. So it's no surprise the owner of Morning Glory Lawncare & Design in Holbrook, N.Y., considers educating clients one of the most important parts of business, an approach that has helped the company expand from eight clients to nearly 150 in just three seasons—which also may account for its \$100,000 in annual revenue. It's all about providing information and establishing trust, Marcus says.

“Because of the whole teaching thing I never wanted to be that person who just tries to sell customers on, “This is what I’m doing,” Marcus says. “I really try to explain to each customer the details about the products I use and what’s in them, what they’re supposed to do and the results they’re supposed to produce.”

Morning Glory Lawncare & Design, a one-man operation, specializes in lawn care and landscape design, primarily serving residential clients (90 percent) earned through word-of-mouth referrals. All clients have Marcus’s personal cell phone number, which they’re encouraged to call if there’s a concern. And he often makes visits to inspect any problems for free.

“You’re doing the right thing for them and that’s what it really comes down to,” Marcus says. “I want my customers

“*The extra steps of being personable and sociable help my customers feel more secure in giving me money to take care of their properties.*”

—Brian Marcus



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for the next 50 years, and I want their kids and their grandkids, too.”

### PROBLEM/SOLUTION

A challenge Marcus came across time and again was a client's lawn looking unhealthy because of inappropriate watering. He found many homeowners don't know how to operate their irrigation systems and don't realize they need to adjust them to provide their lawns specific amounts of water based on the time of year and the weather patterns. He made it a goal to teach all of his clients how to adjust their sprinkler heads and to educate them about proper watering techniques.

To do so Marcus created custom magnets for less than \$150 that he's provided to each customer for the past three years. These magnets detail how much water a lawn needs based on the temperature and the time of year. The simple and inexpensive marketing tool is an opportunity to educate the homeowner in a



In response to customer confusion over watering techniques, Marcus created magnets outlining how to water based on weather and time.

way that benefits everyone: Marcus has fewer problems to deal with and his clients have better-looking lawns all year.

“It was shocking how many phone calls I got saying, ‘Thank you,’” Marcus said. “What wasn’t so shocking is that when I’d go back to my clients’ houses, most of their problems were fixed.”



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Marcus knows not every issue can be solved so easily, though. That's where his time and energy come into play. He makes it a point to drive by his customers' homes in between visits to look at their lawns and try to prevent any significant problems before they start. If a customer does call with a concern, Marcus is at their home within two days, preferably at a time when the client also will be there so they can discuss the problem in person and Marcus can answer questions.

Marcus also knows a client's lawn will only look as good as the product used on it. He opts for premium fertilizer, the same type he uses on his own lawn, and shares everything he knows about the product with his clients.

"Forming the bond of trust and honesty has helped expand the business, and the extra steps of being personable and sociable help my customers feel more secure in giving me money to take care of their properties," Marcus says. "Knowing your product and being able to communicate well with customers or possible customers is a big thing.

"It's actually just being a good person and an honest, actual human being—which is what you hope most people in the world are, but it's not always the case," he adds. "That is how I try to run my business." LM

*Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.*



## The Ticker: LAWN CARE

### APRIL is... National Lawn Care Month

With April marking the celebration of **National Lawn Care Month**, the **Professional Landcare Network (PLANET)** created resources for landscape professionals to share with customers, which are downloadable at [buff.ly/1jQH7w9](http://buff.ly/1jQH7w9).

In an interview with the *Memphis Business Journal*, **TruGreen** President David Alexander divulged the company's plans post spin-off from **ServiceMaster**, noting this year it will focus on improving internal operations; it intends to make acquisitions in 2015; and it plans to add 100 people to

its Memphis, Tenn., headquarters in the next two years.

Two lawn care companies unveiled they'll be tackling pests this season, with **Lawn Dawg** and **Noon Turf Care** forming new pest control and pest prevention divisions, respectively. Lawn Dawg's service, which is available in Maine, Massachusetts and Albany, N.Y., includes perimeter pest control and mosquito control. Noon Turf Care's division in Marlborough, Mass., offers insect and rodent control, termite treatments and bed bug control.

**Total Lawn Care (TLC)**, located in Indianapolis, won **Holganix's** Roots for You competition with its 13-inch turf root entry. As the victor, TLC received a \$500 cash prize and a \$500 donation made in its name to **PLANET**.

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