

Scoring with ice rinks

BEING BASED IN Blasdell, N.Y., Mike Pace could have relied on snow plowing to make up for lost revenue in the off-season. But the owner and president of Pace Landscaping & Ice Rinks chose to veer from the usual to build backyard ice rinks instead. As a former hockey player, it was the perfect fit for Pace's winter business.

Of course, being on the ice versus actually making the ice are two very different things, Pace says. Therefore he spent an entire year just researching the process and what would be involved before launching the service in 2010.

"We're the only ones in the area doing this so, there was no business model or price points to follow," Pace says.

He turned to his hockey friends and anyone he knew who had owned or built a backyard rink to figure what they liked about it and, more importantly, what they didn't like.

"Almost everyone told me it was fun to build," Pace says. "But what nobody liked was maintaining it or having to take it down in March. Plus, nobody liked storing the materials for next winter. It was an eyesore behind the shed."

Having pinpointed the need, Pace built his business around the "do-it-all" concept. His company takes care of everything—providing the professional materials, installing the rink, maintaining it, taking it down and even storing it until next season.

The company installed more than 70 rinks this winter and signed contracts to maintain about 40 rinks. Pace charges a package price based on rink size for installation, take down and storage. Rink maintenance is a separate contract, which is priced per visit. Ice rink install add-on options include lighting, nets behind the goals, curved corners and bumper caps.

GETTING IT DONE

This winter kept employees on their toes. Pace averaged about six one- to three-man installation crews, plus two two- to three-man maintenance crews, eliminating any winter downtime.

As landscape work begins slowing in late summer and early fall, Pace starts pushing ice rink sales. Installation typically



Pace Landscaping & Ice Rinks built its service on the do-it-all model. It installs, maintains, takes down and stores rinks for clients.



begins in November and crews are maintaining the rinks all winter long. In March, rinks are disassembled before grass comes out of dormancy, and landscape work picks up again.

Because Pace Landscaping focuses largely on design/build, it was already set up for this service in terms of construction equipment and vehicles for ice rink installations. As for maintenance, Pace invested in a portable ice rink resurfacer, which he turned to his brother to design.

"(It) uses one of our own landscape trailers to carry 450 gallons of water, which we convert to hot water instantly and flood the rink to smooth it out," Pace says. "We typically do that twice a week."

"The only thing we had to do was build a storage facility for the material," Pace says, referring to the ice rinks the company stores for clients during the off-season. "Otherwise, we were pretty well set up. You couldn't pull this off with a pick-up and a trailer. It requires decent sized trucks to haul boards and brackets, plus steady crews."

Pace adds the service fit well into his region's niche. It's a huge hockey town and many families have children who play the sport. Plus, it's cold enough to have ice.

"This definitely isn't a service you could just start anywhere," Pace says. "But I think my story is a testament to the fact that any business that doesn't produce 12 months of revenue needs to think outside of the box because there are things out there you can do. For us, the hockey knowledge and background, the nature of our business and the equipment we already had made building rinks a perfect fit. In many ways it felt like the moon and stars all aligned perfectly but we also worked extremely hard to get where we are."

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

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Pace Landscaping & Ice Rinks

LOCATION: Blasdell, N.Y.

SERVICE: Ice rink construction, maintenance and storage

WHY: Mike Pace, owner and president, was looking for a unique winter revenue stream

BIGGEST CHALLENGE: The weather. "It's our refrigeration system," Pace says. "We've had years where we built rinks and the owners barely got to use them because they became big swimming pools."

BEST TIP: "Think outside of the box for ongoing revenue streams," Pace says. "Everyone here does snow plowing and it could have been easy to fall into that same pattern, but by thinking outside of the box we found something unique and really filled a need."