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Welcome to the club

You're a part of an elite group of top revenue-generating green industry
companies, and that means we want to know your business tips and tricks!

If you have an interesting growth strategy that's helped your company land
a spot on the 2025 LM150 list, we want to hear about it! Contact Editor-in-Chief
Scott Hollister (shollister@northcoastmedia.net)
and Editorial Director Seth Jones (sjones@northcoastmedia.net)
for a chance to be included
in an upcoming LM150 magazine feature!

LM CONNECT

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HEADQUARTERS

1360 East 9th St., 10th Floor
Cleveland, OH 44114

EDITORIAL STAFF

Editorial Director **Seth Jones**

785/542-2627 | sjones@northcoastmedia.net

Editor-in-Chief **Scott Hollister**

785/424-0932 | shollister@northcoastmedia.net

Associate Editor **Nathan Mader**

216/675-6012 | nmader@northcoastmedia.net

Art Director **Tracie Martinez**

216/280-6127 | tmartinez@northcoastmedia.net

Creative Director **Courtney Townsend**

216/363-7931 | ctownsend@northcoastmedia.net

Jr. Graphic Designer **Amelia Joliat**

216/706-3780 | ajoliat@northcoastmedia.net

Senior Digital Media Manager **Danielle Pesta**

216/363-7928 | dpesta@northcoastmedia.net

Digital Media Specialist **Payton Szymczak**

216/363-6009 | pszymczak@northcoastmedia.net

ADVERTISING STAFF

Group Director **Bill Roddy**

216/706-3758 | broddy@northcoastmedia.net

Brand Manager **Craig MacGregor**

216/706-3787 | cmacgregor@northcoastmedia.net

Account Executive **Nader Hassen**

216/363-7932 | nhassen@northcoastmedia.net

Custom Media Sales Director **Tod McCloskey**

216/363-7921 | tmccloskey@northcoastmedia.net

BUSINESS STAFF

Operations Manager **Petra Turko**

216/706-3768 | pturko@northcoastmedia.net

Events Manager **Allison Blong**

216/363-7936 | ablong@northcoastmedia.net

Manager, Production Services **Karen Lenzen**

216/978-3144 | klenzen@northcoastmedia.net

Senior Audience Development Manager

Antoinette Sanchez-Perkins

216/706-3750 | asanchez-perkins@northcoastmedia.net

Audience Marketing Manager **Hillary Blaser**

216/440-0411 | hblaser@northcoastmedia.net

MARKETING/MAGAZINE SERVICES

Reprints & Permissions **Wright's Reprints**

northcoastmedia@wrightsmedia.com

List Rental **Brahm Schenkman,**

The Information Refinery, Inc

800/529-9020 | bschenkman@inforefinery.com

Subscriber, Customer Service

847/513-6030 | landscapemanagement@omeda.com

For current single copy or back issues



CORPORATE OFFICERS

President & CEO **Kevin Stoltman**

216/706-3740 | kstoltman@northcoastmedia.net

VP, Finance & Operations **Steve Galperin**

216/706-3705 | sgalperin@northcoastmedia.net

VP, Marketing **Michelle Mitchell**

216/363-7922 | mmitchell@northcoastmedia.net

VP, Content **Marty Whitford**

216/706-3766 | mwhitford@northcoastmedia.net

Editorial Director **Seth Jones**

785/542-2627 | sjones@northcoastmedia.net

Editorial Director **Kevin Yanik**

216/706-3724 | kyanik@northcoastmedia.net

SETH JONES
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Contact Jones at 785-542-2627,
sjones@northcoastmedia.net or
via Twitter @sethajones.



You could go to McDonald's...

Well, hello there! It's been a while since I've written this page. I hope you knew that your pal Seth hadn't left the magazine — a review of any of the recent *LM* Gallery pages surely was proof of this. But, in terms of this intro column, it's good to be back.

We interrupt our usual programming for a good reason. As I tippy-tap away at the keyboard, *LM* Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister is swinging out of his shoes somewhere on the back nine of a beautiful golf course in Park City, Utah, playing in the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute's annual Louisville Golf Classic.

That's a tournament I try not to miss ... I had an especially memorable round in that tournament when it traveled to the Bahia Beach Golf Course in San Juan, Puerto Rico. But this year, with so much travel stacked up early in my summer, I asked Hollister to take the trek.

I'm glad I did. Even though I love playing golf and calling it work, this allowed me to catch up with the real work back in the office, including writing this page. Writing a monthly column for *LM* is one of the things I miss the most about my previous role, but I still have plenty of fun each issue. For example, the always-fun *LM* Gallery (page 9), which displays all the people and places we see between issues. I also always enjoy sitting down with a star of the industry and profiling them in my regular department, Five Questions. For this issue, I chatted with

“M&A is a hot-button topic. I feel like, whenever it comes up, strong opinions usually follow.”

Noe Loarca of Avanza Landscaping and Maintenance (page 46).

And while I like to have fun at my work (and I hope it shows in the magazine), this issue is all about business. It's our first-ever Mergers and Acquisitions Guide, which I'm sure will become an annual tradition.

For this month's cover story, we called in Mike Zawacki, the former editor of *Inside Business Magazine* and *Snow Magazine*, to dive in deep on the topic. Mike has won several awards for our magazine, including a “best in show” Gardner Award from the Turf and Ornamental Communicator's Association for an article he wrote for us last year, “Electrifying the landscape industry.” Mike's article, which focuses on five myths of the M&A world, begins on page 14.

M&A is a hot-button topic. I feel like whenever it comes up, strong opinions usually follow. I remember asking

someone who had recently sold their business, “When did you first start thinking about selling your business?” Their reply was, “The same day I started it.” And then I've had many people tell me that they loathe private equity in the industry and hope to never sell their business. They hope the business stays in the family for generations to come.

I know of a company that started locking their front door because private equity representatives were literally barging in uninvited, claiming they had a scheduled appointment with the owner.

Wherever you stand on the M&A topic, one thing is clear: It's changing the industry. It's making companies work harder to stand out from their competition.

It's a trend Loarca talked to me about in our Five Questions Q&A. He said his customers have higher expectations than they did before. And he's glad they do, because he sets his company apart from others by striving to be a luxury service provider.

“Across the board, landscaping companies are finding ways to improve,” Loarca told me. “I tell people, you can go to McDonald's, or you can go to Ruth's Chris. They both serve beef, but you get two very different products and two very different levels of service.”

I think Noe's right. However you take your steak, I hope your customers appreciate your sizzle. 



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MORE ONLINE

See more great advice and complete answers from our Editorial Advisory Board in the online version of this feature at LandscapeManagement.net.

What key characteristics do you look for when trying to identify future company leaders?

"I look for people with a growth mindset and personal agency — those who take ownership of outcomes and believe they can make a difference and drive improvements in the world."



Landscape Professionals

Bryan Christiansen
Mariani Premier Group
Lake Bluff, Ill.

Troy Clogg
Troy Clogg Landscape Associates
Wixom, Mich.

Pam Dooley
Plants Creative Landscapes
Decatur, Ga.

Paul Fraynd
Sun Valley Landscaping
Omaha, Neb.

Mike Giese
Perfecturf Lawn care
Mt. Pleasant, Wisc.

Chris Joyce
Joyce Landscaping
Cape Cod, Mass.

Jerry McKay
McKay Landscape Lighting
Omaha, Neb.

Max Moreno
Everthrive Landscape
Riverside, Calif.

Bryan Stolz
Winterberry Landscape
& Garden Center
Southington, Conn.

Justin White
K&D Landscaping
Watsonville, Calif.

Industry Consultants

Tito Caceres
Bloom Talent Solutions
Coral Gables, Fla.

Marty Grunder
The Grow Group
Dayton, Ohio

Phil Harwood
Tamarisk Business Advisors
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Jeffrey Scott
Jeffrey Scott Consulting
New Orleans, La.



"The key characteristics we look for are strong communication/interpersonal skills and a growth mindset with a willingness to learn and adapt."

"(We're looking for) someone who is hungry. A hunger for change, for development and for success is a key characteristic in great future leaders. The other aspect is someone who shows up with consistency; leaders who are consistent in the long run can make a massive impact on the organization."



"We always look at the skills required for the next job, not the current one. Ambition and autonomy may not be necessary to be a great account manager, but they sure are essential in a sales manager. Nothing is worse than promoting a star performer only for them to fail at the next level."

"The two values all leaders need are teamwork — do they have the team's goals in mind before their own? — and a growth mindset — are they hungry to learn and able to admit and learn from mistakes without blaming others?"



"On our current team, we look for people who anticipate and take initiative. For prospective candidates, my favorite question is, 'Tell me about the biggest mistake you've made in your career and what you learned from it and how you overcame it?' Humility is critical to one's success."



OUR MISSION: Landscape Management shares a comprehensive mix of content designed to stimulate growth and take our readers to their next level.

LM GALLERY

Check out a few of the places where the **LM** team made its rounds recently

1 Excavator excellence *LM* Associate Editor Nathan Mader got to use one of Yanmar's excavators in the company's Y.O.U. Club equipment challenge. Thanks to a little help from Zac Evans, product manager, Mader completed the task of using the machine to pick up and drop basketballs into buckets.

2 Just peachy During Yanmar's Media Event in Acworth, Ga., Mader got to meet Anna Christine Sgro, the new Yanmar CE North America president.

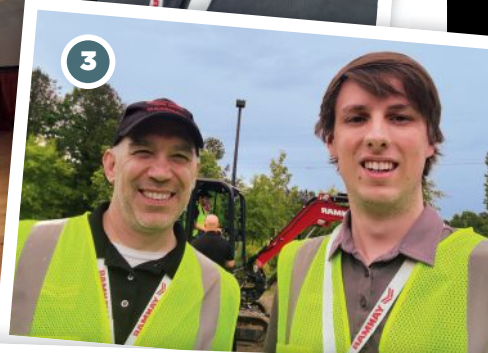
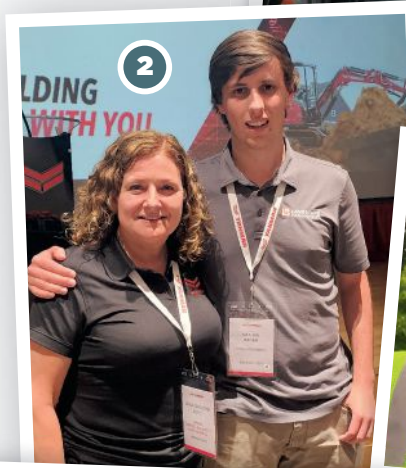
3 Field tested Frank Gangi, Yanmar product manager, gave Mader some tips on how to test drive some of the equipment showcased in the demo yard at Yanmar's EVO Center in Georgia.

4 Kansas City, here we come An ACE peer group, co-hosted by The Grow Group and McFarlin Stanford, made its way to High Prairie Outdoors, located in Mission, Kan. Owners Robyn and Bret Schmitz are on the far left with James Cali of McFarlin Stanford.

5 A beautiful day at the course *LM* Editorial Director Seth Jones (middle) caught up with Nufarm's Jamie Heydinger (left) and Beth Berry, Advanced Turf Solutions, at the 2025 U.S. Open at Oakmont Country Club.

6 Let it snow *LM*'s Nader Hassen (left) ran into loyal Friend of *LM* Mike McCarron with Image Works Landscaping in Fairfax, Va., during the annual Snow and Ice Management Association Symposium in Grand Rapids, Mich., in June.

7 The personal touch Hassen also paid a visit to Kawasaki's North American offices while in Grand Rapids to connect with Tiffany Young, the company's senior marketing manager.



Yanmar spotlights EVO Center, new products

Media event shows off company's training and events center, in addition to a host of new compact equipment offerings

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Nestled in the cozy city of Acworth, Ga., just under an hour drive from Atlanta, is Yanmar's EVO Center — a training and event space that also doubles as a tractor dealership.

Here, the LM team and other industry media were invited to an exclusive tour and compact equipment media day earlier this month to explore the company's brand identity, latest compact equipment offerings and even demo the newest machines.

The day started with a tour of the more than 50,000-square-foot facility, which opened in 2017. The site comes with multiple training rooms and class spaces, a product showroom, a nearly 4-acre demo yard and more.

And the site served as a great place to showcase and test Yanmar's new compact equipment — the highlight

of the event. Some of the new compact machines showcased were the ViO80 mini excavator, the C30R tracked carrier, the V7 wheel loader, the TL100VS compact track loader (CTL) and more.

And speaking of equipment, an interesting part of the event saw attendees get the chance to drive and test out the equipment as part of Yanmar's Y.O.U. Club challenge — a new initiative for North America designed to recognize and engage the operators and owners at the heart of the compact equipment industry.

The Y.O.U. Club has two main components: a digital platform for connection and collaboration and on-site operator challenges at Yanmar dealer events and other industry trade shows.

"We are preparing, now, lots of content so that when people connect (in the Y.O.U. Club), there's already things that they can read, that they can connect to — some games, some quizzes," says Elsie De Nys, Yanmar Compact Equipment global director of brands and corporate social responsibility. "But we're also going to rely on the operators to give us ideas on content. For example, one of the articles that we're preparing is how to prepare yourself in warm weather when you're operating a machine, and I'm sure that many operators have very good tips around that. We would like them to get involved to help us create the content as well."



The ViO80 excavator is just one of the many compact machines Yanmar is emphasizing with its recent growth.

Strengthening dealer relationships and inclusion in the company was a major point of reiteration throughout the event, with calls for dealer feedback and participation at events and through initiatives like the Y.O.U. Club and Dealer Demo Days (coming this fall).

"Construction equipment business is really a relationship business and a people business. So, we need to keep it with the dealers as well and with our customers," De Nys says. "That's why, from now on, we'll really in our marketing mix have a good balance between attending trade shows — where we will have that one-to-one contact with customers, dealers and press as well, but not in the same way and as captive as we can have it at the dealer demo events or demo events organized by us. So, we will do more of that."

And as Yanmar CE continues to be more involved in the industry for its dealers and customers, the media event presentations reiterated a commitment to growing for its North American customers. Yanmar CE revealed that North American markets made up about 25 percent of its business, up from 11 percent in 2016. Yanmar predicts that number to be at 38 percent in 2029, meaning they're focusing heavily on healthy, sustainable growth in the continent. **LM**



Product management director Peter Ovrebø showcased the new TL100VS CTL in Georgia.

Aspire's Tipton to step down as CEO

Mark Tipton, the founder and CEO of Aspire Software, who helped guide the company from its infancy to its place today as a leader in the landscape industry, is stepping down from the company.

In a statement, the company said Tipton would depart the company at the end of September and that Eli Zevin, a longtime leader within ServiceTitan, Aspire's parent company, would step into the role of general manager.

The statement read, "Mark Tipton recently stepped down as Aspire's CEO and will be leaving Aspire at the end of September 2025. Eli Zevin, a longtime ServiceTitan leader, is now leading Aspire as its general manager. For nearly a decade, Eli has supported contractors across various trades and business sizes at ServiceTitan.

"Over the coming months, Mark and Eli will be working closely to ensure a smooth transition in leadership. Aspire and the success of its customers are a top priority for ServiceTitan, and the company is committed to the continued innovation of the Aspire platform, while supporting the businesses and contractors who rely on it every day."

Tipton formed Aspire with the late Kevin Kehoe a little more than 10 years ago and collectively helped turn the company into one of the landscape industry's largest providers of business management software. In June 2021, Aspire was acquired by ServiceTitan, a leading provider of software for commercial and residential trade companies. 



Mark Tipton

EQUIP EXPO TO DEBUT SMALL-BATCH BOURBON



Equip Exposition, the international landscape, outdoor living and equipment exposition, is set to debut its first-ever small batch bourbon, Equip Reserve 42: Backyard Blend, at this year's show, Oct. 21-24 at the Kentucky Exposition Center. This exclusive blend has already earned a Silver Medal from the American Distilling Institute.

The bourbon's name was chosen through a contest and submitted by Sam Meagher, owner of Sam I Am Outdoor Services. Meagher came up with the name Backyard Blend while drawing inspiration with his wife, Mary McGowan Meagher.

"We're very excited about our new bourbon blend, which is crafted by a Kentucky distiller. It celebrates our host state's legendary bourbon heritage, and it's very fitting that the name for it was submitted by one of our attendees," says Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, which owns and manages Equip Exposition.

Only 232 bottles will be available, with attendees invited to sample the bourbon at the Louisville Tourism booth on Wednesday, Oct. 22, from 3-5 p.m.

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

TURF MASTERS BRANDS ACQUIRES BROTHERS PEST CONTROL IN FLORIDA

Turf Masters Brands, a provider of recurring residential lawn care services, has acquired Brothers Pest Control, a provider of lawn care, tree care and pest control services based in Land 'O Lakes, Fla.

With the addition of Brothers Pest Control, along with two other recent acquisitions in Georgia — Calhoun Turf and Georgia Turf, both located in Calhoun, Ga. — Turf Masters Brands now operates 40 locations across 12 states and employs more than 1,100 team members. Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

BEARY LANDSCAPING MAKES KEY MIDWEST ACQUISITIONS

Beary Landscaping, a portfolio company of Silver Oak Services Partners, acquired Seasonal Solutions and certain commercial landscaping assets from Suburban Landscaping. These strategic acquisitions are designed to strengthen Beary's position as a provider of recurring, commercial landscaping solutions throughout the Midwest. Beary has now completed three acquisitions since its partnership with Silver Oak in December 2023.

Seasonal Solutions, founded in 1997 and headquartered in Overland Park, Kan., is a provider of commercial landscape management and snow removal services across western Kansas. As part of the acquisition, Beary will retain Seasonal's existing staff and brand.

Beary also acquired certain commercial landscaping assets from Suburban Landscaping, a long-standing provider of landscaping services in northwest Indiana.

FAIRWAY ACQUIRES SIMPLY GREEN

Fairway, a provider of exterior residential services including lawn care, pest control, horticultural services and irrigation maintenance and repair, is expanding into new markets with the latest addition of Simply Green in Atlanta to its brand portfolio.

Simply Green, established in 2004 by Don Smith, is recognized for its commitment to plant health, utilizing plant growth regulators (PGRs) for optimal results and beautiful lawns. The company's commitment to prioritizing customers aligns seamlessly with Fairway's focus on service excellence and is reflected in their client loyalty, according to Fairway.



Restoring hope

The industry comes together for one of their own

STORY COURTESY OF BEN RICHARDSON/LOVING

On an ordinary afternoon in late February, tragedy struck the Dangerfield family. While Ben Dangerfield, a harvest operator at LOVING and NextDaySod.com, was hard at work in the fields, his home in Cameron, S.C., was consumed by a devastating fire. By the time the flames were extinguished, all was lost. In an instant, a place that once offered safety and comfort was reduced to ash.

For Dangerfield, who at the time was the sole provider for his household, the loss was not only heartbreaking, it was overwhelming. His disabled grandmother and uncle both relied heavily on their home and Ben's support. With nowhere to turn and no immediate resources, the situation was dire.

But in the face of tragedy, something remarkable happened.

Within hours of learning about the fire, the LOVING team took action. A GoFundMe campaign was launched to help Dangerfield and his family with urgent needs like food, clothing, medication, temporary housing and more. The goal was \$10,000, but what happened next was nothing short of inspiring.

AN INDUSTRY THAT SHOWS UP

The response from our industry was immediate and heartfelt. Individuals and companies, many who had never met Dangerfield, stepped in to help. Donations poured in from across the country. In just a matter of days, the goal was not only met, but exceeded. The final total raised: \$13,316.

"This is what our industry is all about," says Mike Haynes, founder and CEO of LOVING. "We talk a lot about service, about community — but it's moments like these that reveal our true



After a fire ravaged Ben Dangerfield's home, the industry came together to surpass the donation goal set by LOVING.



character. The fact that so many people came together to support Ben reminds me why we do what we do."

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Thanks to this support, Dangerfield and his family were able to secure temporary housing, purchase necessities and begin the slow process of recovery. Today, Dangerfield is back at work with LOVING's farming division in South Carolina, operating harvesters and helping deliver fresh sod to customers across the Southeast. His family is settling into more stable housing, and the road ahead, though still challenging, is no longer as uncertain.

"Ben is one of the hardest-working people I know," said Jarrett Looper, VP of farming at LOVING. "He shows up every day, puts in the work and never complains. When we heard what happened, it wasn't even a question — we knew we had to help. And I'm proud that so many others felt the same way."

For Dangerfield, the experience has been humbling.

"It's hard to put into words," he says.

"We lost everything. But then, people we didn't even know stepped in to help us. My family and I will never forget that. We're so grateful."

THE SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY

At LOVING, the word "team" goes beyond job titles — it's a commitment to each other. And that spirit is reflected across the industry.

"When you work in landscaping and farming, you learn quickly that success depends on people — on trust, grit and generosity," says Ben Richardson, director of brand and marketing at LOVING. "This moment reminded us all of that. It's a story of hope, of unity and of what happens when we look out for one another."

As Dangerfield continues rebuilding, his story stands as a powerful reminder: Even in our hardest moments, we are never alone. And sometimes, the greatest harvest comes not from the soil, but from the hearts of those who show up when it matters most. 



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DEMYSTIFYING M&A

With the landscape and lawn care M&A market booming, our experts debunk the top five myths business owners face when selling. Learn key insights to ensure a successful and profitable outcome

BY MIKE ZAWACKI | CONTRIBUTOR

Landscape and lawn care owners, it's a great time to sell your business.

Mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity continues to be robust within the green industry. Despite economic uncertainties, this strong appetite for M&A is driven by several key factors, says Jeff Harkness, founder and CEO of 3PG Advisors. They include sustained high demand for residential services businesses, the green industry's relative resilience to broader economic fluctuations and private equity firms actively raising and deploying capital within the sector.

"You turn on the news and feel like things are slowing in the broad universe of mergers and acquisitions," says Harkness, whose firm provides strategic guidance to the facility services sector, encompassing landscaping, turf and tree care, pest control, nursery operations and snow and ice management. "But in the niche lawn and landscape industry, we're not seeing any of that. We've never been busier."

And while other hot industry sectors have experienced "bubbles" and subsequent bursts, Harkness remains bullish.

"I don't see a bubble," he says. "I think that there's enough capital out there and there are enough people who are aware of the opportunity that exists in growing and scaling a business in the landscape and lawn care industries."

Selling a business in today's market, particularly within the landscape and lawn care industry, has become increasingly intricate, requiring careful consideration of its nuances throughout the sales process. M&A experts and experienced landscape and lawn care pros — those who've navigated these waters as both sellers and buyers — offer five essential insights to prepare for a sale.

Continued on page 16



Continued from page 14

Myth No. 1

SUCCESSION PLANNING IS A LATE-STAGE CONSIDERATION

A common misconception about succession planning — specifically, an owner selling to an internal or external interest — is that it's a decision reserved for the late stages of their professional life. Nothing could be further from the truth.

According to Harkness, succession planning and the prospect of selling the business should be an integral part of an owner's annual strategic discussions, not merely a consideration for retirement or the event of unforeseen circumstances, such as illness.



JEFF HARKNESS

Growth and exit strategies are inextricably linked with succession planning and must be woven into the company's strategic blueprint, Harkness says. He believes this ongoing dialogue should involve the entire leadership team, recognizing that succession is not a distant goal for one's 60s, but a continuous process.

"It must be part of the ongoing dialogue with your leadership team," he says. "It must be part of your annual planning strategy because it offers you a path."

For Gro-Masters' Lynn Tootle, his succession plan had always been clear: Upon his previous partner's departure, he would acquire their shares and continue the business. This deeply ingrained strategy had long guided his vision for the Savannah, Ga.-based lawn care company's future. Tootle had even hoped that his children — a son in college and two daughters in high school — might eventually find interest in the business. However, a lack of familial interest removed a key reason for Tootle to postpone a sale indefinitely.

The concept of selling Gro-Masters to a private equity firm was initially far from Tootle's mind. He acknowledges he didn't fully grasp the intricacies of such a transaction. Private equity deals were relatively new to the "spray world," although they were more established in commercial maintenance.

The idea only materialized when competitive offers, presented by his business broker, began to escalate. At this point, with concrete figures on the table, the possibility of a private equity acquisition truly entered Tootle's considerations, dramatically altering his previously held succession plans.

"We got our business broker involved and had him shop out opportunities if we were to go the direction of private equity investment," Tootle says. "It became very evident that with the dollars that (private equity buyers) were talking about, it made no sense to do anything other than sell."

In late January, LawnPRO Partners, a private equity platform specializing in residential lawn care treatment, tree, shrub, and pest control services, successfully acquired Gro-Masters in an acquisition backed by HCI Equity Partners. Tootle remains president.



LYNN TOOTLE

The Gro-Masters deal, like many in today's market, reflects a broader evolution in the motivations of small-business owners. Harkness says that while owners in their 60s and 70s still consider selling for retirement or succession, a growing number of owners in their 30s and 40s are now seeking to sell or bring in partners. This emerging model, he explains, is about strategically partnering and leveraging capital to scale, rather than simply exiting the business.

This trend centers on a desire to achieve significant growth without the limitations of a one-customer-at-a-time approach, explains Harkness. He notes this "buy-and-build" strategy involves seeking external capital, which can encompass various forms of debt or equity.

"Now what we have are owners in their 30s and 40s who are scaling quicker. They're seeing an opportunity to have multiple pay days or liquidity events and still own and drive the business," he says. "The difference is, they're not using their own checkbook. They're working with a partner that has unlimited capital and resources without personal liability."

"It's not about selling your business," Harkness adds. "It's about scaling up and executing a different growth strategy with partners and capital resources that 10 to 15 years ago just weren't thought about in the industry."

Myth No. 2

YOU'RE READY TO SELL

According to M&A insiders, a commonly held belief among most owners is that they're prepared to sell their business. But this often proves wrong.

Many business owners, including those in the green industry, often approach selling their companies impulsively, typically seeking buyers only after achieving a desired EBITDA (or earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization). This key financial metric directly reflects a company's profitability and operational performance. Think of it as a snapshot of raw earning power, vital for valuation, comparison, negotiation and forecasting.

Problems arise when a business hits its EBITDA target, but the owner hasn't conducted any of the foundational preparatory work to sell, says Jay Jung, the principal and founder of Embarc Advisors based in West Hollywood, Calif. His firm provides high-level financial expertise to small and midsize companies. Notably, Embarc Advisors

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counts The Grounds Group, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based commercial property maintenance firm, among its clients.

A successful business sale demands considerable lead time — typically six to 24 months or longer — to optimize the operation for an exit, Jung says. He equates it to prepping a house for sale.

“If I’ve had this home for 50 years before I sell it, then I might want to redo the kitchen, clean up the bathroom, fix any foundational issues and repaint. Then, toward the end, I would stage it, maybe do some landscaping and then sell it,” Jung says. “And that’s how you maximize the bang for the buck. But a lot of business owners don’t do that.”

According to Jung, rushing to market means sellers often leave low-hanging fruit — untapped value — on the table. Therefore, strategic preparation is critical for a successful M&A outcome, a process for which the private equity industry has largely defined the playbook.

“If private equity wants to sell or exit an investment in two years’ time, then they’ll start doing things differently,” he says. “They’re going to maximize EBITDA. They’re going to maximize the metrics the buyer is going to look for. They’re going to start trimming some of that fat, and they’re going to really run the business to maximize the deal value. And that can take some time.”

At Gro-Masters, Tootle says he would have approached the sale process differently if given the chance by proactively cleaning up the company’s financials and aggressively optimizing EBITDA. He firmly believes that such meticulous preparation, which could have involved different decisions regarding cash flow management or specific financial entries, would have significantly enhanced Gro-Masters’ valuation.

“Clean your books up, because your value is going to be based on your EBITDA,” Tootle says. “And if your books don’t show it, and you can’t produce the appropriate paperwork to prove it, then that doesn’t count. When you’re talking about multiplication factors of whatever X-times EBITDA, every dollar that falls to your bottom line pays you that many more dollars. So, really have a mindset to build your books.”

Myth No. 3

THE BOTTOM LINE IS THE BOTTOM LINE

While income statements, balance sheets, debt-to-equity ratios and working capital all play important roles in any successful M&A deal, sellers must also factor in significant intangibles.



**BRYAN
CHRISTIANSEN**

In recent years, Lake Bluff, Ill.-based Mariani Premier Group has actively participated in the M&A market, completing 30-plus acquisitions. CEO Bryan Christiansen notes that Mariani consistently targets businesses with strong fundamentals, such as revenue growth, healthy margins and an established, balanced portfolio. Beyond financials, Mariani also seeks companies with strong leadership and a professional ethos for high-end, quality work.

“Most importantly, we ensure that partner companies are aligned with our guiding principles of taking care of our customers, respecting and empowering our employee base and are dedicated to continued learning and improvement,” Christiansen says. “We’re building the ultimate peer group that shares a commitment to excellence through idea generation, collaboration and sharing of best practices. Cultural fit is paramount to Mariani’s success.”

Acquisitions are a unique and individualized process, says Kurt Bland, CEO of Bland Landscaping. His fast-rising Apex, N.C.-based commercial landscape company is backed by Comvest Private Equity. He stresses that during due diligence, buyers will place a company’s culture and team dynamics under their microscopes.

Dealmaking, according to Bland, is a complex blend of science and art, demanding that numerous boxes must be checked during due diligence. While economics and mathematics are crucial, the art often lies in identifying the right people, ensuring cultural fit and a commitment to seeing processes and procedures through to completion.

“The owner has to be willing to open up,” he says. “If they refuse to share information, financial results, customer lists, employee census ...

you just can’t get through due diligence without that information. A prudent buyer is not going to invest in something that they haven’t been able to perform their due diligence.”

Most buyers recognize the inherent value of a target company’s intangibles, even as they introduce a standardized, best-in-class operational mindset to the acquired business.

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While economics and mathematics are crucial, the art often lies in identifying the right people, ensuring cultural fit and a commitment to seeing processes and procedures through to completion.

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"We've learned that when you force companies to completely assimilate, they lose what made them successful in the first place," Christiansen says. "We look for strong teams where people genuinely care about the work and each other."

Myth No. 4 YOU KNOW YOUR TRUE WORTH

According to M&A experts, small business owners often underestimate or incorrectly calculate their company's true financial value and worth. This typically occurs because they either lack objectivity or simply don't possess the systematic know-how required for accurate valuation.

Initial business valuations often fall into one of two common traps. Owners sometimes develop an unrealistic valuation — one that exceeds what the market will genuinely bear — driven by their deep emotional connection and significant personal investment in the business. Conversely, a business can be undervalued if its total financial metrics are incomplete, overlooked or incorrectly calculated, leading to a missed opportunity for the seller.

Bland attributes much of this to what he calls the "deep-pockets fallacy," the mistaken belief that private equity-backed firms will overpay for businesses due to their seemingly endless access to capital. While it is true that private equity firms command significant financial resources, Bland emphasizes that they operate strictly within economic realities.

Consequently, while it might seem appealing to maximize a business's perceived value, Bland stresses that its actual, sustainable worth is ultimately limited by what can be effectively managed and carried forward.

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"You cannot pay more for a business than what that business can create in cash flow to satisfy the repayment of the purchase price, whether it was purchased with borrowed money, saved money or retained earnings," he says. "The economics of it in a free market are such that you can't pay more for something than what that something can return on the investment that you've made."

EBITDA is a critical metric that frequently arises in M&A discussions. Its prominence is well-deserved, as it plays a pivotal role in both business valuation and the rigorous due diligence process. EBITDA enables potential buyers to accurately assess a target company's operational profitability and its capacity to generate cash flow, unburdened by the complexities of financing structures or varying accounting methodologies. When precisely calculated, EBITDA offers sellers and buyers a transparent view of a company's financial well-being, thereby facilitating more astute decision making throughout the transaction.

However, Jung believes most small businesses miscalculate their true EBITDA. Therefore, he suggests obtaining a Quality of Earnings (QoE) report, a detailed financial analy-

sis that reflects the reliability and sustainability of the company's reported earnings. Jung asserts that a QoE is often the highest return on investment a seller can make.

To best understand worth, Jung recommends taking a page out of private equity's playbook.

"Even though private equity does GAAP (generally accepted accounting principles) accounting, they have audited financials," he says. "Every time they sell a company, they will always do a seller's quality of earnings, because they want to maximize their EBITDA. So that's point No. 1: Sellers often don't do a quality of earnings, which means a lot of cases we've seen (where) they understate their EBITDA."

Additionally, Jung believes business owners have a skewed view of business valuation multiples, driven by industry reports suggesting, for example, a \$1 million business being valued at a six-times multiple, businesses with \$2 million to \$3 million in revenue quoted at an eight-times multiple or those exceeding \$3 million potentially commanding a ten-times multiple.

However, Jung says it's crucial to understand that these are merely general observations, and the actual multiples applied to a business's earnings, such as EBITDA, can vary significantly based on a multitude of factors.

"It's crucial to remember that the multiples frequently cited in the market for business valuations, particularly in M&A, represent averages or medians," he says. "This wide range is largely a function of successfully identifying the ideal buyer and then effectively communicating a compelling narrative about the business's value to that specific buyer."

Myth No. 5 YOU CAN DO IT ALONE

Many small business owners underestimate the intricate nature of an M&A transaction. While finding an interested buyer might seem like the primary challenge, in today's digital age, that's often the easiest part. The real value of an M&A professional lies in navigating the complexities that can significantly impact a seller's net proceeds. Experts agree that bringing in an adviser with extensive M&A experience is a strategic move that yields higher valuations, smoother transactions and reduced risk for the seller.

According to Harkness, many business owners believe they are capable of managing the M&A process themselves or they can lean on general advice from industry peers. This often leads them to underestimate the emotional and intricate nature of selling a business, causing them to overlook crucial facts and strategic considerations that lead to



JAY JUNG

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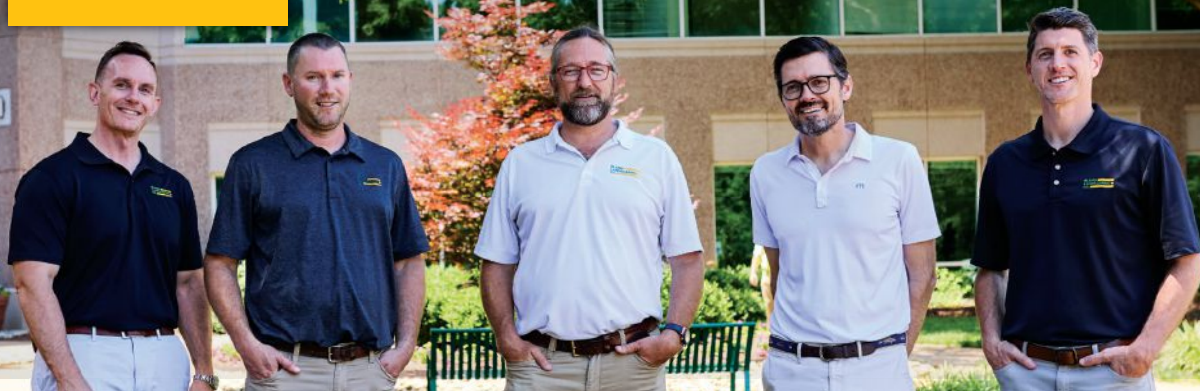
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money being left on the table, he says. That's why expert guidance is essential to uncover those vital facts and develop a sound strategy for the seller.

"Unfortunately, too many times owners think they can do it on their own, and that's a problem," Harkness says. "You don't learn about growth and succession and exit strategies in a one-hour discussion with a colleague over coffee."

Tootle says sellers must never undervalue a trustworthy business broker. He cites due diligence as a prime example, describing it as an exceptionally thorough process demanding detailed reports and financial figures. Tootle says navigating this intricate phase would have been considerably more challenging without a broker's expert guidance.

"This is not something that I would have ever attempted to do myself," he says. "I know how to grow grass. I do it every day. I'm not involved in M&A every day, but these guys are. So, every penny you spend for a good (adviser) is worth its weight in gold."

According to Harkness, the most valuable truth for sellers about the M&A process is that greatness never chases money, but money always chases greatness.

"Focus on building a great business, and the other stuff is going to take care of itself regardless of whether it's a strategic or private equity buyer," he says. "Sometimes, we get mesmerized by what's right, what's wrong and what's better. Great companies are always going to be marketable ... and there's not enough of them in the industry." 

Mike Zawacki is a Cleveland-based journalist and frequent contributor who has covered various aspects of the green, horticultural, sports turf and irrigation industries for the last 20 years.



Experts agree that bringing in an adviser with extensive M&A experience is a strategic move that yields higher valuations, smoother transactions and reduced risk for the seller.

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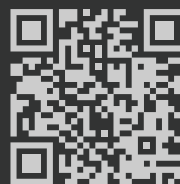


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CULTURE WARS

Determining what's fake and what's real when it comes to company culture is a key part of the value creation formula

BY JEFF HARKNESS | CONTRIBUTOR

Workplace culture isn't about making people feel good; its purpose is to drive winning behaviors. Kelvin Sampson, the head basketball coach at the University of Houston, may have said it best: "Many leaders avoid addressing conflict and confrontation. To build a positive culture and achieve success, it is necessary to address confrontation effectively. Passive aggressive leadership does not work."

This is the first in a series of three articles discussing the characteristics of highly marketable and valuable companies in the green industry — commonly referred to as "elite performers" or "best-in-class" companies. Each article will be from the viewpoint of an adviser, breaking down the mindset of an investor and contrasting it with the perspective of a green industry entrepreneur or operator. Looking at the fundamental drivers that lead to success from this angle is helpful, as private equity (PE) will continue to exist and grow, acquiring companies in specialized markets and increasing competitive opportunities.

When discussing factors that increase a company's value or contribute to its success, many entrepreneurs are likely to mention the importance of having a strong culture. Part one of our Elite Performance Series explores how leadership influences culture and how culture fosters value creation.

Setting the course

In business, value creation refers to the deliberate strategies and actions taken by a firm to increase the worth of a company during some investment period so it can then be sold at a profit. In the world of private equity, this is typically three to seven years. Here's what often happens during that time:

- **Operational improvements.** Firms often bring in operating partners or consultants to streamline processes, reduce costs and boost efficiency. This might include upgrading systems, optimizing supply chains or improving customer retention.

- **Revenue growth.** This could involve expanding into new markets, launching new products or refining pricing strategies. The goal is to grow the top line in a sustainable way.
- **Talent and leadership upgrades.** Many firms prioritize building a strong executive team. That might mean replacing or supporting the CEO, adding key roles or investing in leadership development.
- **Strategic mergers and acquisitions.** Bolt-on acquisitions can help a company scale faster, enter new markets or consolidate fragmented industries.
- **Financial engineering.** While less emphasized today, PE firms may still use leverage (debt) to amplify returns, though this approach is now often paired with operational improvements rather than being the sole lever.
- **Exit optimization.** The final step is positioning the company for a lucrative exit, via secondary buyout or strategic sale, by showcasing great leadership, improved metrics and a compelling growth story.

There are opinions that PE's emphasis on earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) negatively impacts business culture and quality. I do not share this perspective. Leadership vision and execution affect culture and performance, not capital investment. Our industry faces challenges related to superficial culture and performance issues, regardless of financial backing. Greatness attracts money, not the other way around, so let's focus on being great.

A truly strong business culture has to be built on authenticity, accountability, transparency and consistent alignment between stated values and actual practices. Elite performance in business refers to achieving the highest level of excellence, efficiency and impact within an organization. It goes beyond basic competence and involves a combination of strategic thinking, leadership, adaptability and relentless execution.

Faked out

In politics, we often hear the term “fake news.” Likewise, fake culture is sometimes present in the business world, even in the facility services niche. It refers to a company projecting an image of strong values, transparency or employee well-being while failing to genuinely uphold those principles. This surface-level attempt to appear progressive, elite or employee-friendly often lacks meaningful action behind the words.

Spotting fake culture in your organization requires looking beyond surface-level perks and polished messaging. Watch for these three indicators:

1 INCONSISTENT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

If your CEO or leadership team preaches values but fails to embody them, employees will notice the disconnect. Notable examples may be in your company’s safety protocols. For example:

- Leadership does not wear personal protective equipment (PPE) when in the yard.
- There is no dedicated safety leader who audits yards and jobs randomly.
- Morning vehicle rollout excludes inspection stops.
- The company refuses to invest in new trucks and equipment while the owner drives the new shiny truck.
- There is a lack of compensation incentives for safety practices.
- There aren’t dashcams in trucks.
- There is a lack of transparency and education regarding your experience modification rate.
- There are no employee onboarding or training processes.
- The facility, shop and yard are messy, muddy and cluttered with old, unused equipment.
- The owner actively engages on social media to discuss the strengths and successes of the business despite glaring noncompliance.

Inconsistent leadership behavior is like building a home on a bad foundation; it destabilizes teams, erodes credibility and quietly unravels even the most well-planned business models.

2 LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

Organizations that claim to value

openness but discourage honest feedback or criticism create a culture of distrust. Examples include:

- Leadership withholds information or appears opaque, leading to employees becoming skeptical.

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- The CEO does not hold meetings or town halls to get feedback from production staff about management and equipment needs.
- Compensation, bonuses and career growth are not regularly visible, disclosed or discussed.
- Employee surveys on work environment or recommendations are not conducted.
- There is no recognition on anniversaries, birthdays or for customer wins.
- Leadership asks for feedback but disregards negative responses or fails to act on them, which signals a lack of genuine commitment to improvement.

In addition to eroding trust, a lack of transparency in business culture can quietly sabotage performance, morale and long-term success.

3 LACK OF LEADERSHIP DELEGATION

When leaders hold on too tightly to control, the ripple effect can stifle growth and run off talent. Our industry has an excess of leaders attempting to be Superman. Examples of poor leadership delegation include:

- Bottlenecked decision-making leads to slow approvals, poor problem-solving and missed opportunities.
- Burnout at the top is real, which leads to stress, diminished performance and strategic myopia.
- A micromanaged environment is unsustainable in the long term.
- Leadership development is stunted, and leaders don't get a chance to grow regarding decision-making authority.

A culture report card

Effectively measuring company culture involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The following are established approaches:

- **Employee surveys.** Conducting anonymous surveys can provide insights into employee satisfaction, engagement and alignment with company values.
- **Exit interviews.** Departing employees can offer valuable and candid feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the company's culture.
- **Observational assessments.** Observing workplace interactions, leadership behaviors and communication styles can help identify cultural patterns.
- **Retention and turnover rates.** Analyzing turnover rates can reveal potential cultural issues, whereas strong retention rates typically suggest a positive working environment.
- **Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS).** Tracking this metric, which is a score measuring the likelihood

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of employees recommending their workplace to others, may improve recruiting and retention efforts.

- **Leadership alignment.** Evaluating whether leadership actions are consistent with the company's stated values is crucial.
- **Innovation and collaboration metrics.** Tracking the frequency of idea generation and cross-team collaboration can indicate the level of innovation and teamwork within the organization.
- **Customer feedback.** A robust internal culture often correlates with high customer satisfaction and positive brand reputation.

Getting it right

Passive-aggressive leadership is the silent killer of great culture and value

creation. It rarely shows up in obvious ways, but its impact can ripple through a business like a slow leak in a tire.

This leadership style doesn't necessarily come from malice; it can be rooted in conflict avoidance or a lack of self-awareness. Instead of giving clear feedback, leaders may express dissatisfaction subtly or through backchannels, leaving employees unsure of where they stand. When people feel they're walking on eggshells or that decisions are made emotionally rather than transparently, it frays the foundation of trust and cohesion.

Constant second-guessing and decoding hidden messages wear people down. Over time, that emotional drain affects performance and retention. Passive-aggressive leadership doesn't foster clarity or purpose. Ambiguity undermines motivation and consistency.

The green industry consists of hardworking, honest, brilliant and

Passive-aggressive leadership is the silent killer of great culture and value creation.

humble individuals. It has changed my arc for the better both personally and professionally, like many in our niche. As institutional capital and larger players grow, the private equity model faces criticism. Though it's not for everyone, it can lead to significant wealth and opportunities. Educate yourself, make bold hires and remember that culture mirrors its leaders, irrespective of funding. 📖

Jeff Harkness is the CEO of 3PG Advisors, an Alpharetta, Ga.-based firm that advises on the merger and acquisition process with a specialty in the landscape, turf care and tree care industries.

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FROM THE SOURCE

The truth about tree injection

Service providers turn to injection methods to treat trees targeted by invasive pests effectively, efficiently and with the bottom line in mind

BY KEVIN BREWER | CONTRIBUTOR

Invasive insects have become an increasingly pressing problem across North America in the 21st century. Global travel allows species to hitchhike from one continent to the next faster and more frequently. Once settled into their new homes, these insects find new food sources, wreaking havoc on trees without the evolutionary protections needed to coexist with their new neighbors.

One of the most well-known, widespread examples is emerald ash borer (EAB), which first appeared in Michigan in the early 2000s. This metallic green beetle lays its eggs in bark crevices; once hatched, the larvae then feed on vascular tissue. This disrupts the tree's ability to transport water and nutrients, causing death from the inside out if left untreated.

Since its accidental introduction from Asia in 2002, EAB infestations have killed more than 100 million ash trees across North America. Ashes are an especially popular choice for urban planting given their canopy size and ability to grow in almost any type of soil. With global temperatures rising, the large-scale loss of this tree species removes much-needed shade from cities and suburbs, areas where heat is reflected off buildings and sidewalks.

EAB is not a unique example. Invasive pests such as spotted lanternfly and Asian longhorned beetles are taking a devastating toll on different tree species across the country. Even native pests, such as the pine bark beetle, are expanding their range due to warming temperatures.

The “solution” to these infestations is commonly presented as binary — spray pesticides or lose thousands of trees. One issue with pesticide sprays is the lack of confinement to the target pest. Waterways, soils and non-host plants can be affected, in addition to key pollinators and other animal species that are critical to a balanced ecosystem. Topical sprays — those applied to the surface of the target plant or tree — are of limited utility, require large amounts of product and cannot guarantee precision. If you want to save trees, but you don't want to spray pesticides, what can you do to treat for invasive pests?

Tree injection has become a common method for arborists over the past two decades. The practice first became common in the 1970s. It involves the administration of treatment directly into the tree's vascular system, which then disperses the product through its trunk, branches and leaves. These

targeted, controlled injections have helped eradicate infestations and protect countless trees across the country.

Precise injections reduce the overall amount of solution needed compared to a topical spray. Given that the injectable formulations are less diluted, it eliminates the need for a large backpack or tank-mixing truck onsite. For those who believe tree injections take too much time, field tests have shown that applications on large trees can be completed in minutes. Additionally, multiple trees can be worked on at once for increased efficiency on large jobs.

And for those who believe that tree injection is prohibitively expensive, the practice is cost effective in the long run; each injection only requires a few milliliters of product and often provides two or three years of active control.

As for the impact on surrounding environments, product injected into trees remains confined to the wood and leaves. This reduces impacts on the surrounding soil, water and air, leaving off-target species unharmed. Pollinating insects interacting with treated trees face minimal risk, and they can be further protected by ensuring product is injected after the tree has finished flowering and producing pollen.

Across the green industry, tree injection is becoming a more common offering for plant health care professionals of all stripes. Tree injection can be “added on” to a number of business models without significant barriers to entry beyond initial equipment and formulation purchases, plus some training. In turn, a well-equipped and trained tree injection team opens the door for repeat business. 🌳



A QUICK TRIP Arborjet's Kevin Brewer demonstrates a tree injection treatment, which can be completed in minutes.

Kevin Brewer is the Northeast regional technical manager for Arborjet/Ecologel and a board-certified Master Arborist.

A sneak peek at new technologies

For Brandon Rushing, new equipment, products and meetings with suppliers were the main takeaways from the 2024 LM Growth Summit

BY LAUREN H. DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

Brandon Rushing, owner of Brandon Rushing Lawn and Garden Care in Lorton, Va., has been in the green industry for three decades. His favorite part? Transforming properties.

"Taking a yard that's not very good and turning it into a beautiful property is special," he says.

The lawn care products and equipment he uses play an important role in making that possible. Choosing the right tools also can help save on labor, make the team more efficient and provide a better outcome. As a result, it's important to him to stay up to date on new offerings that could help him improve his services. One way he does that is by attending one or two industry events each year.

He says they're also a good way to network with other business owners, hear new ideas, learn more about technologies and discuss challenges they all face. So, when he learned about the *Landscape Management* Growth Summit from a past attendee and the event's focus on lawn care products, Rushing says he was interested in learning more.

"He told me it was a good, informative event, and I'm glad I did it," Rushing says.

NEW EQUIPMENT DEMOS

Hosted at Reunion Resort in Orlando, Fla., the 2024 event welcomed 36 lawn care professionals for three days of networking with other owners, learning about lawn care products, educational sessions, equipment demos and

one-on-one meetings with leading supplier partners.

Rushing says he especially appreciated how the event highlighted lawn care products and equipment, and he plans to add some of the tools he saw to his services. One of them is Greene County Fertilizer Co.'s granular compost, which

Rushing says he's excited for since it can be used in a spreader.

"We want to see if it can be an additional item in our lineup or as a substitute for a more labor-intensive product," Rushing says.

He also demoed new equipment like Stinger Equipment's ride-on aerator, which he plans to trial this year on his properties. The aerator's maneuverability, variable speeds and efficiency were all standout features that he says would work well on the types of properties his company services, which are mainly small residential yards.

The thoroughness and level of detail shared by the product and equipment suppliers during the one-on-one meetings and sessions were a welcome surprise, he adds.

"Those meetings were pretty informative and exceeded my expectations," Rushing says. "The equipment demos were also really nice. Not only did I get to see the equipment, but I also got to demo it on turf."

"Those meetings were pretty informative and exceeded my expectations. The equipment demos were also really nice. Not only did I get to see the equipment, but I also got to demo it on turf."

BRANDON RUSHING



TIME TO CONNECT

During the LM Growth Summit, Rushing also met with other professionals from across the country, including one from his own market he hadn't met before and has stayed in touch with since.

He encourages other lawn care professionals to apply to attend the LM Growth Summit, which is the only industry event that pairs leading supplier partners with lawn care operators in a relaxed, professional setting. Whether they come for the products, like Rushing did, or to network with others in the industry, attendees will leave with tangible ways to improve their services, fleets and businesses.

"It's definitely worth checking out," Rushing says. "For the time spent, it was very worthwhile. The time of the year is pretty good because it's warm there, but most other markets are winding down. (Early December) was a nice time to have it." 

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.

IT'S AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE

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After the recent heat waves, gray leaf spot can terrorize lawns

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

With the recent heat waves that hit the eastern U.S. at the end of June, many have been worried about just staying cool and out of the sun. But for lawn care operators (LCOs) and turf pros, the dog days of summer also come with a slew of turf-related issues, too.

Drought, heat stress and fungal diseases can all sprout from the warm weather, but one of the most troublesome issues is gray leaf spot (GLS). This disease (*Pyricularia grisea*) is especially common in turfgrasses like perennial and annual ryegrass, tall fescue and St. Augustinegrass. Plus, warm, humid places such as the transition zone, mid-Atlantic regions and even the Midwest are particularly susceptible.

"We tend to see it when we hit the 160 degree (F) cumulative temperatures (day and night)," says Jay Wyrick, turf and ornamental agronomist at FineTurf in North Carolina. "It's already in the high 90s here ... then, when you get some rain or irrigate at the wrong

times of the day, you're going to start seeing problems."

One reason GLS is such an issue is due to how quickly it can destroy a lawn, Wyrick says. The fungus produces spores on infected leaves, which can spread through wind, rain, foot traffic or lawn equipment.

"It can absolutely decimate a yard in about two weeks in a tall fescue lawn. I mean, it can really, really coalesce quickly," he says.

SPOT IT FAST

While Wyrick says the disease can sometimes be confused with drought or "melting out" to the untrained eye, GLS should usually stand out pretty quickly.

The leaves will show circular or oval tan spots with dark brown borders, something Wyrick says can be compared to chicken pox. The spots can also become gray and fuzzy due to spore production in humid conditions.

Patches of affected turf often become noticeably thin from dead and decaying leaf blades if left untreated,

and due to the speed of GLS' spread, quick identification is critical.

FINDING NEW SOLUTIONS

For Wyrick, his GLS control consists of common fungicides such as thiophanate-methyl (T-meth) and azoxystrobin.

"That gives us a little better protection as a combo," he says, recommending a quick, proactive approach to applying fungicides when the disease starts appearing.

Another tip during prime GLS conditions is to stop mowing as much. Wyrick says the turf isn't growing as quickly during the hot summers, and the constant mowing can further move the spores around while also damaging the turf's tissue.

"I do see some issues with guys that mow on a weekly basis and get paid for weekly mowing — they can tend to cause a bigger problem with (spores) by moving them around," he says. "We try to tell people, when it gets to 90 degrees with tall fescues, not to mow every week."

To help rely less on chemical control, Wyrick says he's started looking to improve his turf through GLS-resistant seeds, adding that many seed producers are starting to develop genetically improved grass varieties that can better withstand diseases.

"We know we can't out-pesticide insects and diseases, so we're trying to have better genetics in our turfgrass seed that we get for the fall," Wyrick says. "When we go to aerating and seeding, you have several turfgrass varieties now that are gray leaf spot resistant or have more resistance to gray leaf spot." 



FEELING GRAY
Watch for round spots of tan or gray when identifying GLS disease.

GETTY IMAGES: J.J. GOUIN / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS / GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM); DNY59 / E+ / BOSCHETTIPHOTOGRAPHY / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS (HEADER)

THE BIG ONE

Wall-to-wall excellence

BY NATHAN MADER
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION New York City, N.Y.

COMPANY John Mini Distinctive Landscapes

DETAILS In the nation's largest urban area, there's not many places to fit an award-winning landscape. So, if you've hit rock (or, in this case, concrete) bottom, the only place to go is up.

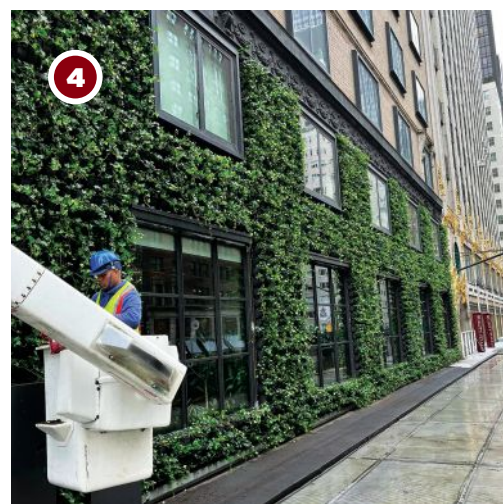
For seven years, John Mini has managed the more than 8,000 ivy plants that make up the living walls of this prestigious hotel. But, as expected, managing this green exterior has some unique challenges.

"(We) really appreciate the client's trust in our capabilities to service a wall of this importance and size and also the client's commitment to incorporating natural elements into all their signature properties," says Keith Behringer, director of business development.

He says tough NYC winters means replacing some plants every year, and accessing the wall is tricky. Maintenance is conducted on a lift truck, and due to the city's limited space and busy nature, crews arrive extra early to secure parking without impeding pedestrians or the hotel's operations.

Matt Wessol, director of outdoor, says a living wall like this has no normal routine, especially in the unpredictable climate. Maintenance is dictated by what the wall needs at any given moment, and he praises his team for being adaptable with this project.

John Mini won a gold award from the NALP's 2024 Awards of Excellence program for this project. 



Captions | 1. Behringer says it's inevitable that some plants won't survive the winter, but thanks to many years of managing the wall and diligent monitoring, they can accurately predict how much will need replacing. **2.** Some parts of the living wall are more susceptible to harsh winds or exhaust vents blowing out hot air, so Wessol says the irrigation system was broken into more zones to provide better control in certain areas. **3.** The property also has dining areas underneath, further emphasizing the blend and cohesion of nature and architecture. **4.** Most of the management is done through certified personnel using an electric lift and bucket truck. Safety barriers are used to direct pedestrian traffic around the work.

MAINTAIN YOUR EDGE

On the grind

Experts help find your perfect stump cutting tool

BY NATHAN MADER | LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

With so many attachment options becoming mainstays in the average landscape pro's arsenal of equipment, finding the ones that perfectly suit a jobsite's needs can be a real stumper.

Stump grinding/cutting especially can be tricky, as it's often a more niche job compared to moving materials, grading or digging. However, when the time comes to remove that giant slab of wood lodged in the ground, having the right tools on hand can save plenty of time, manpower and headaches.

CHOOSE YOUR STYLE

When it comes to skid-steer stump grinding, two popular types to choose from include the fixed and swinging styles. Clint Major, product development coordinator for the attachment manufacturer Loftness, says his company specializes in the fixed style.

"It's going to be more productive because you can just come into the stump, and you just drive the skid loader back and forth," he says. "You've got pretty good visibility when you're grinding on the stump. We do have

what we call the extended reach boom, so it puts that wheel farther out ahead of you."

The swinging style has a cutting wheel mounted on a pivoting arm or mechanism, allowing it to swing left and right independently of the skid steer. This type of attachment can be beneficial for accessing tight areas the skid-steer can't maneuver in.

Major says the type of jobsite being worked on is also a big factor for choosing an attachment. Fixed style requires the skid-steer to move more, meaning it

SAFETY FIRST
Stump grinding attachments use guards over the wheels and deflectors to prevent debris from flying everywhere.



PHOTO: LOFTNESS

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may not be the best option when working on a sensitive lawn.

"We're going to disturb the grass a little more than the swinging type," he says. "But, overall productivity, the rigid style is quicker."

Cost and simplicity can also come into play, as the swinging style options are often larger and more complex, meaning they can be more expensive and difficult to maintain.

A DEDICATED APPROACH

While attachments are more versatile and take up less room on a trailer, if stump cutting is a recurring task that needs some extra attention, a dedicated machine may be the right option.

"If you're going to tackle 30-inch oak stumps on a consistent basis, an attachment is probably not your best application or use of time for that," says Collin Schmidt, associate product manager

at Vermeer. "It can do it, and we're not going to say no to it, but if you're really analyzing your use of time, that's probably not your best use case."

And while a dedicated machine may require some extra upfront investment, there's still plenty of customization and equipment options that can help match the machine to the job. Schmidt says Vermeer offers both wheeled and tracked machines to better handle the jobsite terrain, and like attachments, there's a range of horsepower options available.

CHECK OUT YOUR CHOICE

Choosing between a dedicated machine and an attachment isn't always easy, and each side is seeing advancements that only increase their specialization and capabilities.

"The attachment market is continuing to get bigger and bigger — our mini

skid-steers and our ATXs keep advancing, and the hydraulic flow of those machines continues to advance, allowing us to get more applications inside of them," Schmidt says.

That's why both Schmidt and Major recommend getting expert advice and hands-on experience to find the best fit. Major, for example, says customers who are dedicated to getting a stump grinding attachment can work with a Loftness dealer to get some training and equipment demos.

"If a potential customer is seriously considering one of our attachments, we're happy to line up a demo or training whenever possible," Major says.

Similarly, for those interested in a stump cutting machine, Schmidt recommends finding the nearest dealer and working with them, and he says Vermeer dealers can do equipment demos to showcase their options. 



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Spiraling into grandeur

BY NATHAN MADER
LM ASSOCIATE EDITOR

LOCATION Elkhart Lake, Wis.

COMPANY Landmark Landscapes

DETAILS Joe Majerus, owner of Landmark Landscapes, says the two-and-a-half-year journey with this residential property started small, initially getting a call from the caretaker to just replace a few loose bricks in a walkway.

But after doing some research and exploring the property, Majerus saw the potential.

"I just said, 'Oh my God, we've got an ordinary house on an extraordinary lot, and we need to make this better,'" he says. "(The caretaker) got me in touch with the owner, and I laid out a grander vision for the property, and the owner just fell in love with it."

But even then, the initial plan was small, just updating the lakeside and remodeling the front entrance to the house. But, as the plan unfolded, new projects were continuously added.

Majerus says the house's front remodeling turned into a complete teardown and rebuild, the lakeside renovations led to a new retaining wall and infinity edge hot tub and, while they were at it, a new guest house was added to the property, but due to local ordinances, the lot had to be subdivided to make it a secondary primary residence.

And one key element bringing it all together was the idea of the golden ratio with the Fibonacci spiral: its main component being a locally sourced limestone centerpiece.

Landmark Landscapes won a gold award from the NALP's 2024 Awards of Excellence program for this project. 



Captions | 1. Majerus says he'd been playing with large scale concept lines and other geometric shapes on other projects, and he wanted to try out a Fibonacci spiral-inspired design. This project was the perfect opportunity. 2. The locally sourced limestone was used in more than just the Fibonacci spiral, as it featured in all the natural stone elements, including the house, car port, patio and more. 3. The lakeside was redone with native plants and a private boating dock. Majerus says all rainwater from the property is filtered through a wetland before entering the lake, preserving the natural ecosystem. 4. The goal of the project was to provide a serene lakeside retreat that could accommodate large family gatherings. Luxury features include elegant landscaping, an outdoor kitchen, a cozy fire pit area and more.



PHOTOS: SIRNA PRODUCTIONS AND PATRICK HUGHES

BUSINESS BOOSTERS

Brighten the bottom line

A look at techniques landscape contractors can implement to incorporate lighting as an add-on to design/build projects **BY SARAH WEBB | CONTRIBUTOR**

After investing in a stunning outdoor hardscape, it only makes sense for homeowners to want to enjoy it as much as possible — day or night.

That's one reason why adding lighting to a hardscape project is a bright idea.

Lighting also enhances the beauty, safety, usability and curb appeal of a home, says Shay Brummer, national sales manager, key accounts, at Coastal Source.

"It's often said that landscaping is even more beautiful at night than during the day, as lighting allows you to control what is seen in the darkness, rather than revealing everything at once as daylight does," Brummer says. "From a design standpoint, lighting helps unify entire landscapes while reinforcing the cohesiveness of the project."

Brummer, along with Todd Goers, director of sales at WAC Lighting, and Christina Arthur, marketing coordinator for FX Luminaire, share illuminating insights on how design/build professionals can upsell lighting.

SMART SELLING STRATEGIES

Design/build pros should discuss incorporating outdoor lighting during the planning stages of a project, Brummer says.

"Including outdoor lighting in the initial design and listing it as an optional line item in the proposal keeps the door open for future conversation and makes it easier for clients to see its value early on," Brummer says.

During the design phase, pros should ask clients how they plan to use the space, Goers says.

"If they intend to host guests for parties and similar events, having a

landscape lighting system adds to the mood, functionality and safety of such gatherings," he says.

To drive home the benefits of adding lighting, Brummer advises landscape pros to show clients samples of past lighting work or use visual aids like renderings, nighttime photography or demos.

Arthur says communicating the benefits of lighting to clients early on will support stronger buy-in during the design phase.

"This helps shift the conversation from cost to long-term value," Arthur says. "Landscape lighting offers an immediate transformation with minimal disruption. Clients can enjoy a stunning visual upgrade that adds long-term functionality."

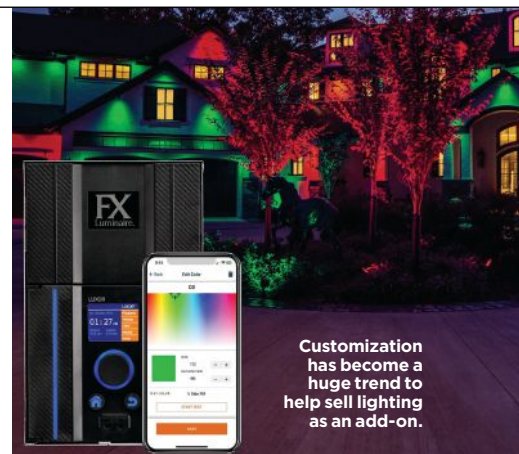
TOP TECHNIQUES

In order to sell lighting as an add-on, it's important to understand the various ways to incorporate it on-site.

Arthur recommends beginning with the basics, such as pathway lighting and safety lighting.

For homeowners interested in more advanced options, Goers suggests exploring the following techniques:

- **Uplighting trees** creates a dramatic and stunning effect as you enter a property.
- **Downlighting from trees** produces a soft moonlight effect that provides an inviting space to navigate a property in the evening.
- **Hardscape illumination** generates a soft and appealing glow to outline the boundaries of a property or enhance a seating area.
- **Wall wash illumination** captures a broad swath of light with soft and subtle coverage to help tie in the landscape scene by making the picture complete.



Customization has become a huge trend to help sell lighting as an add-on.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

According to Brummer, Goers and Arthur, homeowners have begun to gravitate toward the following lighting trends:

- **Red, green, blue, white (RGBW) customizable lighting** allows homeowners to customize their space and create dynamic, color-adjustable environments to highlight landscapes for holidays, events and everyday ambiance.
- **Minimalist, low-profile designs** favor clean lines and subtle detailing using fewer, smaller fixtures that blend seamlessly into their surroundings while delivering striking visual impact.
- **Dark-sky friendly fixtures** minimize light pollution and preserve the natural nighttime environment. Downward-directed, shielded fixtures are increasingly used to meet local regulations and environmental standards.
- **Smart controls** allow for seamless integration into a smart home system. Features include dimming, scene setting and mobile control.

Using techniques like these can add ambiance and dimension to an outdoor space.

"Professionals in landscape lighting view their projects as an art form," Goers says. "Whether you use your outdoor space in a regular fashion or not, landscape lighting done correctly brings out a home's allure after the sun sets." 

Sarah Webb is a freelance writer based in Cleveland and the former managing editor of *Landscape Management*.

WATER WORLD



Golden opportunity

An innovative water management plan at Citrus Commons in Southern California gave Goldenstate Landscapes a chance to show its stuff

BY SCOTT HOLLISTER | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It's not unusual for landscapers to develop at least some personal attachment to the properties that they help design, construct or maintain.

For Robert Olsen, the CEO of Goldenstate Landscapes in Camarillo, Calif., his connection to the new Citrus Commons project in nearby Sherman Oaks — on a site that served as the former headquarters of Sunkist — runs a little deeper than most.

"Yeah, that one is personal for me," Olsen admits. "I grew up on a citrus farm, and my family were growers for Sunkist. I grew up going to Sunkist packing houses and things like that."

"After I founded Goldenstate, I actually tried to get the maintenance work at the Sunkist headquarters when it was still there, largely for sentimental reasons. But I could never get the former property manager to give me the time of day."

But good things come to those who wait. When IMT Residential acquired the property and began to work on an innovative redevelopment that includes both residential and commercial elements, Olsen and Goldenstate landed

the job to construct and maintain many of the project's landscaped areas and the irrigation system.

So not only did the job give Olsen a chance to bring his green industry journey full circle, it also gave the team at Goldenstate the chance to prove that it could successfully manage, complete and maintain a major project, the largest the company had ever attempted.

"While there was nothing on this project that we hadn't done before, the scope was just so much bigger. It was the largest single contract the company has ever done. And from top to bottom, our team stepped up and delivered," Olsen says. "We're not one of the big, giant companies that usually get these kinds of projects. But I think we made a bit of a statement about what we could do and what we're capable of."

SUNSET AND SUNRISE

Sunkist's original headquarters building was constructed in 1970. Designed by Los Angeles architect group A.C. Martin and Associates, the building is a Southern California landmark and a

textbook example of brutalist architecture, featuring recessed windows and a reinforced concrete structure in an inverted pyramid style that resembled crates used to transport citrus (which was more by coincidence than design).

But notoriety doesn't always translate into modern functionality, and by 2014, the company was ready for a new home. In August of that year, it moved its headquarters to Valencia on the northern edge of Los Angeles. At about the same time, IMT Residential purchased the original building and surrounding property with designs on turning it into an 8 1/2-acre mixed-use showpiece.

It would take some time for those plans to become a reality as the developer, the city and citizens sparred over the details of the project. There were concerns about the fate of the Sunkist building — the plan was always to renovate it and keep it as office space at the centerpiece of the new development — the size and scope of both the residential and commercial build, the number of parking spaces allotted for the project and everything in between.

As those discussions continued, IMT made that long-awaited call to Olsen and Goldenstate, and the company began to provide regular maintenance work on the existing landscaping and irrigation. And when IMT finally got clearance in 2021 to start work on what by then had been dubbed Citrus Commons, Goldenstate was one of the first companies it brought in to work on the project.

“We had been working with IMT on other projects, in addition to doing the maintenance on this property,” Olsen says. “I had mentioned to them all along that we would really like to be a part of this project once they got the green light, so that was always the goal. It was exciting to get the opportunity to keep working there and be a part of transforming it into what it is today.”

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Goldenstate was one of several subcontractors that IMT brought on to contribute to various aspects of Citrus Commons. For the landscape design portion of the project, IMT turned to Border, an LA-based design firm led by Duane Border. The plans it developed included a redesign of an open-air atrium in the Sunkist building, original designs for the residential gardens and all green spaces in and around the new buildings, as well as landscape designs on the perimeter of the property.

Goldenstate worked hand-in-hand with Border to make sure the design’s vision became a reality. And from the very first pre-construction meeting, Olsen knew this would be a different project than any he and his company had been a part of before.

“It was a very hands-on process, more than any other we’d be involved in, but in a good way,” Olsen says. “All the plant material that we purchased had to be approved beforehand ... so we worked closely with Duane and his team to review all of that. There was a lot of physical tagging of trees at nurseries for quality control — just much more hands-on involvement than we were used to.

“That said, we knew all that going in. We knew what the internal system was going to look like, how we were going to communicate

Continued on page 42



1. A 24-inch-deep trench for the recycled water mainline was at the core of water management at Citrus Commons. **2.** Steel supports for a floating walkway that was utilized throughout the property. **3.** Catch basins and storm drains direct runoff to the storage tanks to be recycled as irrigation water. **4.** An irrigation controller from Hunter manages the entire system.

WATER WORLD

Continued from page 41

with everyone involved. It wasn't a surprise, and it ended up working out pretty well."

Citrus Commons was the first project that Border had worked on with Goldenstate, but any concerns that the size and scope of the work required would overwhelm Olsen and his team were eased at those very first meetings.

"There were plenty of special conditions with this project, from requirements that 75 percent of the landscaping had to be native to the irrigation and water management," Border says. "We wanted to be sure that whoever came on to the project could source the materials needed, install it all and maintain it. And

Robert and his team never flinched. It was a great partnership."

The landscaping side of Goldenstate's work involved primarily native plants, trees and shrubs, Olsen says.

"There are hundreds of trees on the site — sycamores, oaks, date palm trees," he explains. "The large majority of the plant and shrub materials that we used were native, and most of the trees are, too. Date palms aren't necessarily native, but they did fit in naturally with everything else that was in the plan."

But as interesting and unique as the landscaping work that took place above ground was, it's what's underground — the irrigation and water management tools that keep that landscaping thriving in the



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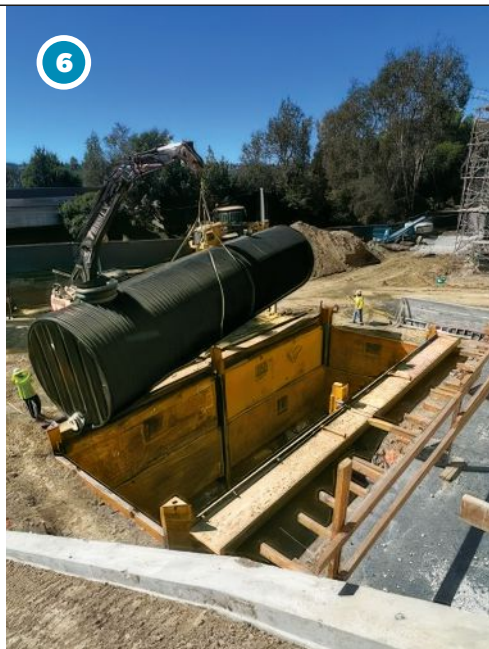
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5-7. A series of large underground storage tanks are the foundation for the irrigation system on the Citrus Commons project in Sherman Oaks, Calif. All runoff from the property is directed through the landscaping and into these tanks, where it is filtered and recycled for irrigation uses.

7

challenging climes of Southern California — that took Olsen and his Goldenstate teammates into a brave, new world.

MAKING WATER WORK

Innovative water management products and cutting-edge irrigation practices are nothing new to the teams at Goldenstate and Border. But in the Citrus Commons project, those techniques would be put to the test, thanks to the collision of the project's size and scope and because of California's specific regulations when it comes to water use.

As Border explains, "All of the irrigation design and calculations associated with it have to be done in conjunction with California AB 1881, which is essentially about maximum allowed water use. You have to design to those standards, to make plant selections based on that, everything. We knew this project would already be water conscious with all the native and indigenous plants, but it was still a huge consideration."

At Citrus Commons, what that resulted in was a recycled water plan anchored by a series of large underground storage tanks that collect runoff from the entire property. That water is then filtered and sent back to the landscaping through a system that relies almost exclusively on drip irrigation heads for final delivery.

The storage units sit below what is now the parking lot for a Trader Joe's that is a part of the project's commercial development. In the landscape design, most planting areas were strategically distributed to maximize their ability to absorb

Continued on page 44

PHOTOS: CATALINA PACIFIC UNDERGROUND



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WATER WORLD

Continued from page 43

runoff before that water reached the storage tanks. Water that makes its way to the tanks is then treated and recycled before the process starts all over again.

“Anything and everything that hits a hard surface — from the rooftops on the buildings all the way down to the driveways, the plazas, the walkways — makes its way either directly into the plantings or into the tanks for filtration and then distribution,” Border says.

And when Mother Nature doesn’t deliver enough rainfall, the system can be triggered to access city water to make up the difference. The hope, both Olsen and Border say, is that those instances are few and far between.

“Recycled water and drip irrigation ... are becoming almost common in California, so we’re used to working with both,” Olsen says. “But we’d never worked on anything this big before. The ability to scale up those concepts so that they made sense at something the size of Citrus Commons was pretty impressive.”

FANTASTIC FINISH

At each step along the way — from ongoing maintenance and plant selection to landscape installation and fine-tuning of the irrigation system — Olsen and his team viewed the Citrus Commons job as a chance to demonstrate their ability to manage any project, large or small.

Border considers that mission accomplished. “After our experience on this project, I told Robert that Goldenstate is now on our list. Any other commercial projects that come our way, they’ll be at the top of the list of recommendations we make to the developer, because they did an incredible job.”

Those words are music to Olsen’s ears. And it’s something he says he was able to fully appreciate during Citrus Commons’ official grand opening in June (even though work to renovate the interior of the Sunkist Building continues).

“I had a rare moment during the grand opening where I was able to take everything in and see what we’d accomplished,” Olsen says. “You’re always caught up in solving problems or trying to see what possible pitfalls might be coming while you’re working on the project that you don’t always step back and take pride in what’s been done, and I was able to do that for a little bit.

“I was just grateful that IMT gave us a shot, Duane gave us a shot, and we were able to show that, hey, we can do this kind of work.”



8. Medjool date palms line one of the entries to Citrus Commons. **9.** The date palms with diamond-cut trunks were delivered on the back of flatbed trailers. **10.** *Furcraea foetida* ‘mediopicta’ were one of the native plants used in the landscape design. **11.** A mural on the side of the Sunkist Building acknowledges the site’s long history.

FROM THE SOURCE

PEOPLE POWER
The human touch is key to making smart irrigation technology really work.



The human element

In irrigation, infrastructure and technology matter, but the people and processes behind the system ensure long-term performance and quality

BY MICHAEL PIPPEN, CID | CONTRIBUTOR

Much of the conversation around smart irrigation centers on technology — controllers, sensors and automation. But what truly sets a high-performing irrigation system apart isn't just its components; it's the people who build, install and maintain it with skill and intention.

Behind every system that runs reliably for years are professionals who understand that smart irrigation is only as good as the care and expertise invested during planning and execution. Training, certification and a commitment to quality are the real differentiators that quietly but powerfully shape the system's success.

RAISING THE BAR

Industry certifications are one way to know your system is in good hands. Two certifications from the Irrigation Association in particular are helping set the standard across the irrigation industry — the Certified Irrigation Contractor (CIC) and Certified Irrigation Auditor (CIA).

Certified Irrigation Contractors are trained to properly install, maintain and troubleshoot irrigation systems using best practices that align with environmental and performance goals. They're tested on electrical fundamentals, system hydraulics and even business practices, all to ensure systems are both functional and sustainable.

Certified Irrigation Auditors go a step further, using field data to evaluate system efficiency and make recommendations for improvement. Their role is essential in optimizing performance, reducing water waste and ensuring that landscapes receive precisely the amount

of water they need — no more, no less.

These credentials matter. They provide credibility, encourage consistency and elevate expectations across the industry. Most importantly, they ensure that systems are built and maintained with an eye toward long-term performance.

QUALITY ASSURANCE STARTS EARLY

In a high-performing irrigation system, quality control doesn't begin during the final inspection — it starts with design and continues through installation and beyond. Professionals who take quality seriously implement their own checks and balances along the way, from verifying materials on-site to testing connections before burial.

Systematic quality control steps might include:

- Verifying continuity and resistance in wiring before burial.
- Checking for consistent burial depth and protection from root systems.
- Testing system zones under full load to ensure consistent voltage and pressure.
- Documenting wiring paths and component placements for future reference.

These are not just technical steps — they're habits of a professional culture that prioritizes long-term reliability over short-term shortcuts.

EXPERIENCE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Design guidelines and spec sheets are valuable, but they don't replace field experience. Certified and experienced professionals bring a layer of foresight that reduces risk and raises system integrity.

They ask the right questions at the right time, such as:



- Will this connection survive repeated freeze/thaw cycles?
- Is this layout prone to damage from foot traffic or equipment?
- How easy will it be to troubleshoot this system a year from now?

Answers to those questions come not from manuals, but from having been called back to repair avoidable issues — and learning from them.

A HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH

As technology advances, the temptation is to assume that automation will do the hard work. But irrigation systems are only as smart as the people behind them. It's certified contractors who understand how to install wire without damage, protect it from the environment and ensure clean, durable connections. It's auditors who optimize runtimes and uncover inefficiencies invisible to the naked eye. Together, they form the foundation of a more efficient, resilient and sustainable irrigation future.

Irrigation systems may rely on technology, but their success depends on people. Certified professionals, thoughtful design and rigorous quality assurance are what transform a standard system into one that performs reliably for years. In an era of increasing water scarcity and higher performance expectations, it's not just about what you install — it's about who installs it and how well they do it. 

Michael Pippin, CID (Certified Irrigation Designer), is the director of sales for Paige Water & Outdoor based in Mountainside, N.J.

FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Noe Loarca

PRESIDENT

**AVANZA LANDSCAPING AND MAINTENANCE
ARLINGTON, VA.**

1 Tell me about Avanza Landscaping — how did you get into the business?

I've always loved grass. I always make the joke that only Snoop Dogg knows grass better than I do. I started working when I was 12. I'd ask my mom to take me to Home Depot so I could buy Scotts fertilizer. I think it's the soccer player in me — I was always looking at that soccer field. Then I had the opportunity to join someone in landscaping, and I fell in love with it, and it evolved from that. We started in September 2012. We're a luxury brand, a one-stop shop, even for commercial customers.

2 What are your goals and dreams for the company in the next year, five years, 10 years?

My biggest goal is that nobody is in the same position that they are in now. My dream would come true if every single guy — say he's a field guy that's mowing and weed whacking — that in a year he's more focused on the commercial sector. I think of Melody, who happens to be my niece. She started answering the phone for me. Now she's our operations manager, literally running the crews, doing the scheduling, overseeing a lot of the invoices. And now she's handing some of this work off to Jasmine, who started as an assistant to me. Looking even further, in 10 years, I'd love it if my son was involved, maybe on a crew in the summertime.

3 What is your favorite tool to get the job done?

One of the key things for me is technology. We use technology to the extreme. We use LMN a lot. It's very robust. It helps us improve, especially with analytics, and to run reports. People make appointments with us through Calendly, we send them a calendar link, they go in and find an appointment that works for them and us. When people meet with us, they'll say, "You guys are really up to date with everything." If they love it and I love it, then why not?

4 Tell me about your family, and what do you all do for fun?

My family is extremely important to me. It's also one of my core beliefs of my company — no one is going to get any stick for anything that is family-related. If someone is going to be late because they have to drop off their kids, that's fine, that's normal. My wife, Nardy, and I have been married 15 years, and we have a 5-year-old. I think he's visited four different countries, and he's also been to Hawaii, Florida, New York, Boston, New Orleans. We're all about traveling, and we're all about being together.

5 Do you have a most memorable day at work?

I love what I do, I really do. I could go back to almost any day and say, "That was really critical for me." But there's probably two days ... it scares me that sometimes I remember things a little bit too much. One was when I showed up to Elevate, and I said to someone, "Hey, I met you three years ago. You were talking about this and that..." and he goes, "How do you remember that?" I'm like, "Is something wrong with me?" Another was when I had a customer call in and she said, "So I'm up on 40th Street..." and she gives me their address. I said, "I know exactly who you are. I met you when you had your daughter with you, she was about eight months old at the time." Well, that kid is in middle school by now. It throws me off that people are surprised by that, but I also think it gives people a good feeling that I actually remember them. 📍

BEST ADVICE

"I'm in a peer group. We had our first site visit here, and they told me, 'You've got your foot on the accelerator — don't take it off.' That was beneficial to hear other people think what we're doing is good. It's been a year since then. I look back and I think ... I don't even know what taking the foot off the accelerator looks like."



PHOTO: NOE LOARCA

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST #32

How Visterra Landscape Group stands out to attract and retain employees

BY LAUREN H. DOWDLE | CONTRIBUTOR

Headquartered in Rosemont, Ill., Visterra is a platform company with partners in 11 states. It provides a wide variety of services, including commercial landscape maintenance, construction, enhancements, irrigation, portering, fencing, snow and ice management, power sweeping and pressure washing services.

The company grew 49 percent from 2023 to 2024, which pushed it to No. 32 on the 2025 *LM150* list. It is expecting a 125-percent increase in EBITDA this year, according to Alan Handley, Visterra president and CEO.

PREDICTING PAIN POINTS

Having launched companies in other industries in the past, Handley and his core team looked at what was and wasn't working in the landscape industry to create a business that would meet clients' needs and better support employees.

"What makes us very different from our competitors is that we really embrace and want to push forward and celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit," Handley says.

The team discussed the pain points they'd faced in their previous businesses to figure out what they wanted to do differently with Visterra. That led them to purchase the tools and technology they would need before acquiring any partner companies.

With the help of Trinity Hunt Partners, they spent nearly \$10 million on enterprise resource planning software, camera systems, fleets and safety equipment. Next, they focused on finding the right companies to

bring under the Visterra umbrella.

The companies it acquires retain their business names and day-to-day operations, and Visterra provides them with support, including safety oversight, training, technology and insurance. Its partner companies also can cross-sell their services to Visterra's other geographic markets if those commercial customers have operations in those locations. There are currently eight partner companies.

Being able to take the services it provides in one location to another one of the partner companies has played a role in their growth, Handley says. For example, one of Visterra's acquisitions in Ohio offered large commercial street sweeping, so someone from that location trained teams in other states on how to perform and successfully sell that service.



Alan Handley

ALL ABOUT RETENTION

At the heart of Visterra's growth are the employees who make it possible. However, hiring enough field and office workers to keep up with the company's 12-percent organic growth across different regions has been a challenge, Handley says.

To combat the challenge, the company has increased wages and expanded the bonus-eligible pool of employees, training opportunities and career path options for all levels. Its field employees also receive an industry-leading 401(k) plan and free medical insurance.

Community outreach is another important aspect of connecting with prospective employees, and Visterra



Visterra Landscape Group climbed to No. 32 on the 2025 *LM150* list.

provides bonuses to its current team members who bring in new hires.

"We really have to spend a lot of time, energy and money to make sure we retain and develop all of our amazing teammates," Handley says. "It's really all about the people and their families."

A lot of companies claim to be servant-leadership organizations, but Handley says Visterra truly implements and believes in that model.

"If your organizational tension rests anywhere outside of field labor — like productivity, retention, recruitment and safety — it's very hard to grow your business," Handley says. "At Visterra, our field employees are the cornerstone of our operational excellence."

In 2024, Visterra's retention rate was 97 percent for office employees and 99 percent for their field labor.

"Our goal is to continue to build the most collaborative, people-first commercial landscaping enterprise across the United States," Handley says. 🍷

Dowdle is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Ala.



BY BRYAN CHRISTIANSEN

The author is the CEO of Mariani Premier Group, the largest premium residential landscape firm in the U.S. Reach him at BryanC@marianipremiergroup.com.

What M&A teams can learn from rowing

Growing up in Florida, I was a member of my high school's rowing team, rowing in both our eight- and four-seat shells. A great rowing team moves in perfect sync, generating incredible speed and power; an eight-seat shell can even tow a water skier (watch the MythBusters video on YouTube that proves it!).

Every seat in the boat has a specific role — steering, stroke, power — and without even one of them, the boat underperforms. Because everyone on the boat has a particular responsibility, teams that are well synchronized and row together win races.

Teams tackling a merger or acquisition can learn a lot from rowing. Successful M&A deals aren't just transactions; they can be transformational in nature. Proper M&A planning ensures everyone knows their exact responsibilities before, during and after the deal closes. Like rowing, success depends on clearly defined roles and synchronized effort, especially during post-close integration.

The sport of rowing is often referred to as the ultimate team sport. The team wins or loses together. No individual seat on the boat is more important than another. In mergers and acquisitions, success isn't judged by individual output alone, but by how well the entire team moves forward together.

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE TO DEFINE ROLES

In business, as in sport, you must understand what drives behavior to build teams that row in unison. Why do some teams click while others collapse under pressure? The Chris Argyris, Ph.D., framework of Espoused Theories and Theories in

Use explains that people often say one thing but do another, not out of dishonesty, but because internal values kick in under stress.

These values — avoiding losing, staying in control, preventing embarrassment, always appearing rational — form what is often called the Operating System of People. In M&A, newly formed teams bring together different cultures and expectations. If roles aren't clearly defined and trust isn't built early, people revert to self-protection. That can lead to turf wars, communication breakdowns and resistance to collaboration.

The solution? Define roles, define team success and communicate, communicate, communicate.

THE MINDSET SHIFT

When employees struggle to adjust to a change in an organization, you can't simply tell them to "do better." Leaders must lay a new cultural foundation that shifts people from their default "operating system" to a healthier mindset — we win together.

Here's the difference: In the operating system mindset, one considers how they can avoid losing, maintain control, avoid embarrassment and always appear rational. In a we-win-together mindset, the single mentality is that we only win together. Individuals know they may not have all the data, but it's OK to be wrong and, together, we are smarter.

This mindset shift is powerful because it builds trust. It gives people the freedom to ask questions, float half-formed ideas and make early mistakes before stakes are too high.

HOW TO ALIGN THE NEW TEAM

Of course, these ideas sound great in

theory. But how do you apply them?

- **Clarify roles early:** Don't just assign tasks; explain why they matter. Meet with employees individually to discuss their new role and its purpose. Communicate.
 - **Lead like a coxswain:** In rowing, the coxswain steers the boat, provides real-time feedback and encourages the team to power through when things get tough. As a leader, your job is the same: consistent, clear, positive reinforcement, especially under pressure. Communicate.
 - **Normalize learning:** Create a culture where it's OK to say "I don't know" or "I need help." Use one-on-ones and team meetings to encourage questions. Safety drives engagement. Communicate.
 - **Use data to stay grounded:** People want to appear rational. Let data be the team's common language. It minimizes ego and improves alignment. Communicate.
- And remember — everyone wants to win, but their default definitions of "winning" may differ. Work to align everyone's definition of winning. Communicate.

THE ROWING PAYOFF

In my experience, top-performing M&A teams aren't always the most decorated; they're the most aligned. They trust each other, know their roles and work together to achieve greatness. They communicate.

Take the time to define roles early. Appreciate each person's contribution. Give meaningful feedback. And above all, communicate with each other. Build a culture in which it's safe — and empowering — to row, no matter which seat on the boat you're in. 



BY JASON NEW

The author is a founding principal and executive coach for McFarlin Stanford.

How to make fall a blockbuster season

Q We always lose steam over the summer and get caught off guard by the fall. How can I prepare my team for a successful fall?

A Fall should be a gold mine for landscape businesses, but only if you start planning now. We've seen it over and over again: The companies that treat fall as an afterthought scramble to fill the schedule, while those that plan ahead finish the year with record revenue, renewed contracts and energized teams.

If you want to make fall your strongest season — not your most stressful one — here's how to position your team today for success.

START SELLING FALL SERVICES IN SUMMER

Waiting until the leaves change to promote fall services is one of the biggest mistakes we see. By then, it's too late. You're not just competing with other companies; you're battling the calendar and the weather.

Instead, anticipate your client's needs. Reach out to existing maintenance clients and even your past construction clients now with a tailored list of recommended services. These might include:

- Seasonal color changes
- Seasonal turf
- Mulching and pruning
- Clean-up packages
- Lighting upgrades
- Irrigation system shutdowns
- End-of-year enhancements
- Fall pumpkin displays

These services aren't just upsells. They're value-adds that protect the property and show your clients you're

thinking ahead. It also positions you as a true partner, not just a vendor.

MAKE A SEASONAL GAME PLAN

You can't drive fall revenue without a plan. A simple calendar will give your sales team structure and momentum. For contracted clients, when you include seasonal enhancement recommendations, including the monthly maintenance schedule of services, you look like a professional.

Here's an example:

- **August:** Promote fall enhancements (color, lighting, aeration).
- **September:** Launch fall clean-up campaigns.
- **October:** Push irrigation winterization and tree trimming.
- **November:** Offer bundled incentives for early 2026 contract renewals.

Even a basic plan like this keeps your team focused and ensures you don't miss seasonal opportunities. But you need to manage your expectations and make sure your team is truly working on these monthly plans.

ALIGN SALES AND OPERATIONS

Too many owners sell fall work without looping in operations. That's a recipe for dropped balls, overbooked crews and unhappy clients.

Start by reviewing what your field team needed last fall. What went well? Where were you stretched thin? If your enhancement crew couldn't keep up last year, do you need to cross-train or shift start times to gain capacity? Next, review your proposed fall services and make sure the team is trained now to deliver.

USE FALL WORK TO FUEL 2026 RENEWALS

Every fall project is an opportunity to secure next year's revenue.

Enhancement work in particular builds momentum — visually and relationally. If clients are enhancing their properties with you, it is a measure of their trust. Train your account managers to leverage that momentum by starting renewal conversations early. Ask questions like:

- What results have you seen from the work we did this fall?
- Would you be open to bundling similar services for next year?
- Have you thought about locking in now for 2026 to protect against price increases?

These conversations position you as a strategic partner and help your clients budget with confidence.

DON'T COAST INTO FALL — LEAD INTO IT

Fall doesn't have to be reactive. In fact, it shouldn't be. By treating it as a strategic season, not just a transition between summer and winter, you unlock serious revenue potential.

Here's your call to action: Set a fall planning meeting with your leadership team this week. Review your offerings, labor capacity and sales calendar. Assign owners for each initiative and start reaching out to clients now — before your competition does. Let's make fall your strongest season.

At McFarlin Stanford, we've helped hundreds of landscape businesses build cultures of trust that drive loyalty, performance and growth. If you're ready to level up how your team connects to the vision of your business, let's talk.

Do you have a question for a future *Ask McFarlin Stanford* column? Submit it to info@mcfarlinstanford.com. We're here to help you lead with purpose and grow with passion. 



BY JEFF KORHAN

The author is the owner of True Nature Marketing, a Naples, Fla.-based company helping entrepreneurs grow. Reach him at jeff@truenature.com.

Why personal brands matter for landscape leaders

When it comes to branding, we often hear that the product or service should speak for itself.

There is a wrinkle to that expression that is more relevant today, given the always-on and everywhere nature of media. When potential customers, employers and even buyers/investors evaluate your product and service offerings, they are rightfully interested in who stands behind them.

If they like your products and services, they are also asking:

- Who are these guys?
- Can they be trusted?
- What's their motivation?

At its core, a brand is a promise to perform, deliver to expectations and, hopefully, exceed them. That's a promise no brand can keep without the co-branding of trusted company owners and leaders.

High-profile CEOs like Warren Buffett and Nvidia's Jensen Huang can move markets by simply showing up. Companies with excellent track records behind them have

“We're in a new era of leadership now, one where being known, trusted and respected as a person matters at least as much as the company name.”

earned trust by successfully navigating the inevitable challenges that every company faces.

You may not consider yourself to be in the same league as these icons, but there is one quality they share that you can emulate — they show up. They are visible to their constituents and honest about what potentially lies ahead.

WHAT LANDSCAPE LEADERS CAN DO

You don't need to be a celebrity to have a valuable personal brand. However, you do need to be visible — in your industry, within your community, and on your team.

When potential customers, employees or even buyers or investors evaluate your company, they're not just analyzing performance metrics. They're looking for leadership. They want to know the people entrusted with keeping those brand promises.

There was a time when your brand was as strong as the name on the door. We're in a new era of leadership now, one where being known, trusted and respected as a person matters at least as much as the company name.

How can you build that presence? Here are a few suggestions that might help you polish your own personal brand.

Tell your story Why did you get into the business? What did you overcome? Every company has an origin story, and it often reflects the company's commitment to its customers. It's not necessary to have an epic story. More important is feeding the curiosity people have about their relationship with your company.

Document, don't create You may be thinking that you need to craft compelling content to get traction with social media. As marketing strategist Gary Vaynerchuk says, “Document. Don't create.”

Show others how you think, how you work and most of all, what you care about and why. Broken Arrow, Okla.-based Proactive Landscaping documents the involvement of its co-founders in all project estimates, construction oversight and long-term customer care. Owner and co-founder Craig Blonsky says, “It makes customers feel like more than a number.”

Use your voice A key brand distinction is the authentic voice of its leaders. It is practiced and perfected at every opportunity, including industry and community events, as well as in company media. That exposure presents a risk, but as Steve Jobs once said, “If mistakes are made, it means decisions are made, and that's good. Support customers and learn from those mistakes.”

The collective voice of customers is powerful, but your voice still matters.

If the day comes when you want to sell your company or step back while keeping a stake, you'll discover your brand adds tangible value to the equation. You cannot leave that to chance. 





BY TITO CACERES

The author is the managing director at Bloom Talent Solutions in Miami. He can be reached at tito@bloompartnerstalent.com.

Landscaping's great labor paradox

7:02 a.m., South Florida. Four ride-on mowers and four trucks sit idle while a branch manager reloads his inbox for an offer letter promised days ago.

We just closed another month with millions of people changing jobs, yet landscape job postings take weeks to fill — when companies get any applications at all. It's the oddest disconnect I've seen in 20 years — bustling demand, but empty crew trucks. How can a people-focused industry be starving for workers?

This isn't just a blip on the radar. While we're not seeing crisis-level staffing droughts like 2020 or during the Great Recession, hiring today in landscaping is at its slowest pace since the summers of 2015–2017, when the economy was still shaking off the recession rust. Compared to recent hiring booms, this summer's lull is significant. It's more than seasonal; it's a clear sign of a deeper issue.

It's not a labor shortage. It's a translation gap between generations, private equity and technology.

GENERATIONS OUT OF SYNC

Boomers are walking out the door with decades of field wisdom just as Gen Z digital natives walk in. The baton pass should be seamless, but instead, it keeps hitting the ground because neither side shares a playbook for success.

I've seen it firsthand. One client lost nearly half of a trusted route when a 30-year landscape manager retired. His younger replacement nailed the dashboards but skipped the 10-minute weekly swing by Mrs. Garcia's home after her husband died. That extra care secured the client's loyalty; now it's gone.

PRIVATE EQUITY'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Private equity continues to pour capital into the industry, bringing rigorous financial processes and efficiencies. Legacy operators bring something equally vital: client trust and craftsmanship. Standardize a route without understanding its backstory, and decades of goodwill can vanish overnight. Resist every change, and real improvements never happen.

The teams that thrive translate both ways, turning field production stories into margin metrics and financial realities into practical strategies.

TECHNOLOGY THAT CONNECTS, NOT DIVIDES

AI résumé screens promise lightning speed but often turbocharge ghosting. Firms that actually solve their hiring problems still automate scheduling, but then immediately pick up the phone and make a personal connection. A quick live call clears hiring bottlenecks far faster than yet another automated message.

Technology should smooth the path, not replace the human touch.

A 90-SECOND TRANSLATION CHECKLIST

Before you revamp routes or overhaul hiring systems, ask yourself:

- Who owns the customer handshake after the redesign?
- What field quirks keep schedules running smoothly — and are they documented?
- Which talent metric will your investors demand next quarter? Prepare that now.
- How will a new hire learn all of this in their first week? If there's no plan, there's no path.

“This isn't just a blip on the radar. ... It's more than seasonal. It's a clear sign of a deeper issue.”

Then, consider options of all shapes and sizes that can make your company an attractive option for job seekers and one that rewards existing employees. Things such as:

- Close your laptop and personally call 10 job candidates today.
- Have experienced employees record one quick video tip daily and share them team-wide.
- Test-drive a tech-based hybrid position of some sort, like a “digital field coordinator” that splits time between drones and turf checks.
- Clearly show finance partners how employee turnover, rework and better retention impact the company's bottom line.

CLOSING THE GAP

We're not in a hiring drought; we're in a selective stall. Capital, demand and eager talent are all there. What we lack is fluency between TikTok tutorials and hard-earned field experience.

Rehumanize your hiring funnel. Turn what's been learned the hard way into systems others can follow. Speak both languages fluently. Do that, and next summer those mowers won't sit idle; they'll be cutting fresh revenue with crews who know exactly why Mrs. Garcia matters, *and* how to fly a drone.

We do face a labor shortage, but the bigger bottleneck is a translation gap. Bridge generations, private equity and technology, and the crews will follow. 🛩



BY JEFFREY SCOTT

The author is owner of Jeffrey Scott Consulting, which helps landscape companies grow and maximize profits. Reach him at jeff@jeffreyscott.biz.

Finding the rare silver bullet

In the world of business, silver bullets are rare. Most growth is incremental, the product of years of disciplined execution. But if there is one strategy that consistently delivers outsized results, it's building a super leadership team.

A strong leadership team acts as a force multiplier. With the right people in the right seats, everything becomes easier — culture, accountability, strategy, execution. But the process of building that kind of team is often misunderstood or delayed, sometimes fatally.

There are four common leadership team building mistakes companies make that keep them from assembling a high-functioning leadership team.

1 Hiring too slowly, trying to time it out. Many leaders delay key hires, thinking they should “wait until the business is ready.” This is often driven by cash conservatism, but more often it's a sign of indecision or fear. The irony? The right leaders make the business ready. Growth follows leadership, not the other way around.

2 Need for control. Founders who struggle to delegate often find themselves stuck, bottlenecked by their own bandwidth. Great leadership teams thrive on autonomy, accountability and trust. If you're still the expert in every area, your company has already plateaued.

3 Putting up with employee misfits. Cultural and performance misfits kill momentum. Retaining these “culture killers” creates a drag on the whole team. Dead branches must be pruned, and weak branches need to be addressed.

4 “I need to get my house in order first.” Some owners wait to clean up parts of their business before making key leadership hires. But top talent will actually help fix these problems. Waiting for perfection before bringing in support just prolongs dysfunction.

HIRE THE BEST YOU CAN AFFORD ... AND THEN SOME

Staff your leadership team with the best people you can afford — and then stretch. Hire A-plus players, those who can grow with you and people who are smarter and more capable than you in their areas of expertise. Your ego may bristle, but your business will thrive.

A-plus players in a \$3 million business will cost more than you're used to, but they will help you become a \$10 million business faster and pay for themselves. The same goes when growing from \$10 million to \$20 million. They won't just do their jobs — they'll elevate them.

PRUNE AND REPLANT

Leadership team building isn't just about adding. It's about pruning and replanting. Evaluate your current team honestly.

- Who's aligned with the vision?
- Who has plateaued?
- Who needs coaching, and who needs replacing?

This step requires courage. But when you clear the underperformers, everyone will rally around you.

DEVELOP A VISION THAT STRETCHES

To grow a great team, you need to

cast a great vision. A powerful exercise that can help accomplish this goal is to build an organizational chart for a company twice your current size. What roles and departments would emerge? This forward-looking structure reveals leadership gaps and encourages bold actions.

From there, you can begin to backfill toward that future and hire or develop rising leaders to one day fill those seats.

THE PROS AND CONS OF RECRUITING FROM WITHIN

Promoting from within can be a powerful motivator for your team and a great way to reward loyalty and cultural alignment. But there are risks.

On the plus side, internal candidates know the culture, customers and workflows. But they may not have the outside experience or management skills needed for the next level. Loyalty doesn't always translate to leadership.

Remember there are few levers in business as powerful as a “super” leadership team. If you want to scale, create impact and build something that lasts, this is one silver bullet worth engaging. For help on this venture, reach out, and we can assess your leadership gap and next steps. 



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RESOURCES



[LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL]

An inspiring industry

This month's good news article was about the industry coming
together to help a fellow pro after a house fire. Let's keep that
momentum moving with more heartfelt industry anecdotes.

If you've got an inspirational story, a moment of helping

other or even just a feel-good moment, email Editor-in-Chief Scott Hollister (shollister@northcoastmedia.net) and Editorial Director Seth Jones (sjones@northcoastmedia.net)
for a chance to be featured an upcoming edition of LM!

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT (ISSN 0894-1254) is published monthly by North Coast Media LLC, 1360 East 9th Street, 10th Floor, Cleveland, OH 44114. Subscription rates: For US, Canada and Mexico, 1 year \$64.95 print and digital; two years \$99.95 print and digital. All other countries, 1 year print and digital \$174.95; two years \$259.95. For air-expedited service, include an additional \$75 per order annually. Single copies (prepaid only) \$10 plus postage and handling. For current single copy or back issues, call 847-513-6030. Periodicals postage paid at Cleveland OH 44101-9603 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address change to Landscape Management, PO Box 2090, Skokie, IL 60076. Printed in the U.S.A.



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BY MARTY GRUNDER

The author is the CEO of Grunder Landscaping Co. and The Grow Group, based in Dayton, Ohio. Reach him at marty@growgroupinc.com.



Three lessons in residential landscaping

In the early years of my landscaping company, I was always on the hunt for “the big one,” the job or the client that could *make* our year.

I wish I had learned earlier on that the big jobs and clients can also break your year. It’s happened to me, and I’m sure it’s happened to you too: You win a huge project, but you don’t make money on it because you missed details or underestimated the work required. In those instances, the “big one” ends up being a big loss.

Today, misses on big projects are fewer and farther between than they were in our early years, largely because of our systems and advice from other landscape professionals who were doing this successfully when we were still striking out.

I’m excited that we’ll get to tour McHale Landscape Design as part of this year’s Field Trip with the NALP so I can learn even more from a company that’s successfully tackling “big ones.” The McHale team has a long track record of success installing large and absolutely stunning residential landscapes in the Washington, D.C. metro area. Here are a few things I’m looking forward to learning from their team.

HOW THEY HANDLE THE INITIAL DESIGN

McHale holds many, many awards from NALP’s Awards of Excellence program for residential designs and installations. The company does spectacular work, and I’m always looking to it for design inspiration. The key to winning national awards is creativity in the design, and I’m

“McHale treats its operations team as a profit center and expects the team to deliver on quality, client satisfaction and profitability of the job.”

curious to know where the McHale team finds inspiration.

The McHale business model is built around the idea of “single-source design/build,” meaning the firm employs team members in trades that most companies sub out. This integrated model means it can maintain greater control over timelines and outcomes, and it also means it has on-the-ground expertise as well as seasoned design professionals available to guide clients through the process.

This is a different approach than we take at Grunder Landscaping Co., but I think the mindset is the same whether you use in-house talent or find reliable subcontractors: Only make promises to clients that you know you can keep.

HOW MCHALE TRAINS FOR QUALITY

I think there’s a lot I can learn from how McHale sets quality standards for each step of the installation. Quality is what it is known for. This step can be where plans go awry; you get so focused on quality that sometimes efficiency goes out the window. At least that’s a pitfall we’ve fallen into before. McHale treats its operations team as a profit center and expects the team to deliver on

quality, client satisfaction and profitability of the job.

The intersection of quality and profitability is one I discuss often. We need to spend our time on quality to the point that our clients value it; anything beyond that is a waste of our time and our clients’ money.

HOW MCHALE CONVERT CLIENTS TO MAINTENANCE

McHale does these great designs and installations, but 50 percent of its revenue comes from maintenance services. The company is doing something right when it comes to handing off projects to be maintained, and I’d love to learn the secrets.

This skill is something we’re constantly talking about at Grunder Landscaping Co. We must be intentional about the handoff to sell the maintenance contract, but we also need to be on our A-game and try to win as much maintenance as we can after installation.

The opportunity to learn from McHale Landscape Design is invaluable. The company’s success in large-scale projects, training for quality and converting clients to maintenance is a testament to their expertise and dedication. By observing and integrating their practices into our own, we can continue to refine our approach, deliver exceptional results and, ultimately, elevate the standards within our industry.

I hope to see you in the D.C. area this September. If you haven’t signed up yet, what are you waiting for? Visit www.growgroupinc.com/nalp-field-trip for more information.

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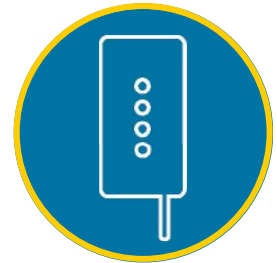
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