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Know your strengths before you bid

In Part I of a series, the author stresses the importance of realizing which jobs your company can and can't handle.

by Sylvia Hollman Fee

■ In project bidding, never take on more than you can handle.

Licensing, regulation and liability can be a bad trip. Knowing and assigning roles and responsibilities can expedite the job. Determining what, when, where, why and how is your first task, even before determining whether or not your firm should bid the job.

Fig. 1 depicts the typical assignment of roles on a commercial project. However, the extent of direct communication with owners, designers and general contractors varies considerably on each project. It's not uncommon for an owner to prefer one party—usually the designer or general contractor—to manage all the subcontractors. This means that even though the landscaper works from the plans and specifications of the designer, there may be no formal contact between the two. Another source of confusion may be the titles. Similar titles may even be held by different parties, or one party has the combined title; for example: owner/general contractor or designer/landscape contractor.

The responsibilities shown in Fig. 1 may also shift. But however complex the management, the landscaper should have a clear agreement with the party with whom they will be contracted. Knowing the roles and responsibilities listed in Fig. 1 will smooth the way when you are on the job. You can easily pinpoint who does what by picking up the phone, or asking a few fact-finding questions at the next meeting.

Bidding suggestions—For the purposes of bidding, keep these tips in mind:

1) Not all work is suited for all companies. The experienced landscaper should only seek the jobs best suited to the firm's present capabilities and short-term goals.

The purpose of marketing is to obtain business. The purpose of estimating is to obtain accurate operating costs in order for that business to remain profitable.

2) Every bid you make is a marketing venture for your firm. And every marketing venture needs to be cost-effective, appropriate, and targeted. When it comes to bidding and proposing new work, are you targeting your goals, or are you scattering your shot in the hopes of hitting something out there? Stop wasting ammunition, select your market and focus your fire power.

3) A list can help you determine prospective markets. Write down the names of the persons in your firm, including yourself. Under each person jot down four unique capabilities. Next, list the markets you are presently serving. With the information you gain from evaluating your firm's capabilities, you can make your own decision to bid or not to bid a particular project.

An example—To illustrate why it's not advisable to bid a job just to get a job, here's an example of a firm that overshot and lost:

The excavator on a recent project my company ran decided to include the landscape work in his next (and last) bid. The



Sylvia Hollman Fee

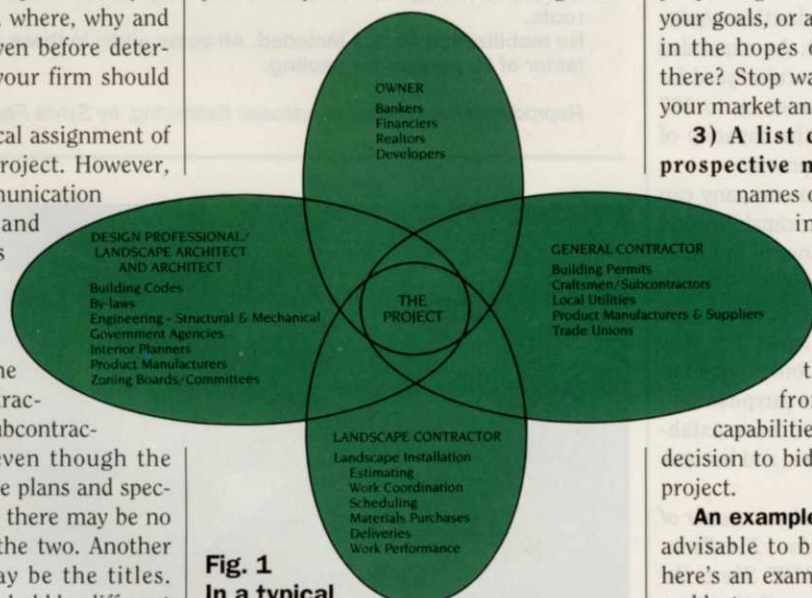


Fig. 1
In a typical commercial landscape project: their interactions and responsibilities

Reproduced from Means Landscape Estimating, by Sylvia Fee, R.S. Means Co., Inc. 1-800-334-3509.

excavator won the bid but "lost his shirt." His heavy equipment was unsuitable and not cost effective for handling landscape materials. He lacked knowledge of his costs for the specified plant materials, and was not familiar with the most efficient sequence of work. The cost advantage of his equipment went right out the door, as access to planting areas was constrained by finish paving and other details.

The excavator's decision to bid was based only on desire for work, and had no basis in the firm's capabilities.

Target your work—Successful companies target only the work they are best equipped to perform, because those are jobs where their greatest profit can be made. Not all jobs should be bid by every landscape contractor. Before spending a lot of time performing a takeoff and estimating job items, take a look at the situation surrounding the job. Be objective. Consider all the negative factors involved.

Remember, not all types of work in the same town are profitable. And identical work in different towns is not always manageable.

Mature companies have a routine that helps them target potential work. Their selection process is based on their own particular capability and capacity. The capacity of a landscape company is more than just the purchasing power assessed by its insurers and banks and clients. Many other factors such as available labor, trucks, equipment and tools have a major effect on productivity and costs.

Table 1 illustrates the dramatic impact of choosing the most productive equipment to own, hire or rent. An expanded listing suggests the cost per cubic yard for equipment and for labor varies up to 107 percent depending up on the capacity of the excavating/hauling equipment.

From self-examination, a company can define for itself its particular capability and capacity. It draws upon a store of information from hands-on experience.

As Joe Dallorso, owner of Botanical Artisans, Pepperell, Mass., says: "I'm very specialized. I know I've got only one audience, and that's partly on purpose and partly accidental. Once you have established your groove, stay there, and become the best at that."

—*Sylvia Hollman Fee is owner of Sylvia Fee & Associates, Inc., Needham, MA 02192; (617) 449-0167. She is the author of Means Landscape Estimating.*

NEXT MONTH: Project Take-Offs

Table 1

EXPANDED SYSTEM LISTING

EXCAVATE COMMON EARTH	\$ Cost Per Cubic Yard		
	Equipment	Labor	Total
1/2 cu.yd. backhoe; two 6-cu. yd dump trucks; 1 MRT	2.70	2.92	5.62
Three, 6-cu.yd. dump trucks; 3-mile round trip	5.15	4.64	9.79
Two, 12-cu.yd. dump trucks; 4-mile round trip	3.35	3.67	8.02
3/4-cu.yd. backhoes; three cu.yd. dump trucks; 1-mile round trip	2.61	2.33	4.94
Five, 6-cu. yd. dump trucks; 3-mile round trip	4.95	4.15	9.10
Two, 12-cu. yd. dump trucks; 2-mile round trip	3.39	2.65	6.04
Two, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 3-mile round trip	3.45	2.16	5.61
Two 20-cu. yd. dump trailers; 4-mile round trip	3.51	2.30	5.81
1-1/2 cu.yd. backhoe; eight, 6 cu.yd. dump trucks; 3-mile round trip	4.80	3.54	8.34
Four, 12-cu.yd. dump trucks; 2-mile round trip	3.05	2.09	5.14
Six, 12-cu. yd. dump trucks; 4-mile round trip	3.95	2.56	6.51
Three, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 2-mile round trip	2.97	1.61	4.58
Two, 20-cu. yd. dump trailers; 1-mile round trip	2.30	1.31	3.61
Three, 20-cu. yd. dump trailers; 3-mile round trip	3.03	1.65	4.68
2-1/2 cu. yd. backhoe; six, 12-cu. yd. dump trucks; 1-mile round trip	2.41	1.48	3.89
Eight, 12-cu. yd. dump trucks; 3-mile round trip	3.30	1.98	5.28
Four, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 1-mile round trip	2.41	1.18	3.59
Six, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 3-mile round trip	3.22	1.61	4.83
Six, 20-cu. yd. dump trailers; 4-mile round trip	3.15	1.60	4.75
3-1/2 cu. yd. backhoe; six, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 1-mile round trip	2.86	1.16	4.02
Ten, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 4-mile round trip	3.98	1.66	5.64
Eight, 20-cu. yd. dump trailers; 3-mile round trip	3.29	1.38	4.67
1/2 cu. yd. shovel; four, 6-cu. yd. dump trucks; 2-mile round trip	3.93	3.18	7.11
Two, 12-cu. yd. dump trucks; 1-mile round trip	2.54	2.02	4.56
Four, 12-cu. yd. dump trucks; 4-mile round trip	3.86	2.64	6.50
Two, 16-cu. yd. dump trailers; 2-mile round trip	2.87	1.87	4.74
Two, 20-cu. yd. dump trailers, 4-mile round trip	3.30	2.18	5.48

The excavation of common earth system balances the productivity of the excavating equipment to the hauling equipment. It is assumed that the hauling equipment will encounter light traffic and will move up no considerable grades on the haul route.

No mobilization cost is included. All costs given in these systems include a swell factor of 25 percent for hauling.

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You've got a lot of jobs ahead, including that big office park.

Your first cup of coffee hasn't started working yet. Fortunately, your new Honda mower starts easier. And all



the controls are right in front of you, so you can ease into the morning without any hassle.



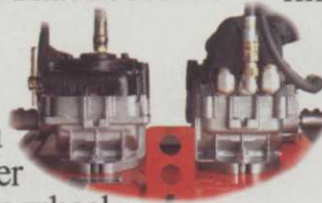
You've finished the first job ahead of schedule. Maybe it's



Before you move on, you stop to admire your handiwork.



that powerful Honda 13 horsepower OHV engine. Plus, those slopes aren't tiring you out. That's because the twin hydraulic pump system lets you control power to each drive wheel independently. You simply balance the power with two levers and the mower tracks straight, even on slopes. You do more work with less fatigue.



After lunch (a novelty you could get used to) you stop by your Honda dealer for some supplies.



You haven't needed oil in a while, so you grab a little just in case. The dealer then reminds you about Honda's

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and looks well manicured. And that can make you look pretty good to your customers.



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Oil Alert™ which will sound a buzzer before the oil falls below a safe level. And,

he introduces you to some of their trained service people. It's nice to know they're available to help. But with a Honda, you probably won't need them very often.



remove the retaining pins to adjust the cutting height without any special tools. And aren't you glad Honda offers a choice of 36" or 48" cutting width?



All your work is finished, and the truck's loaded. You could actually squeeze in an extra job.



You noticed Honda's larger drive wheels when you had to navigate around a bird bath and squeeze between two boxwoods. Honda's zero-turn radius makes it easy to maneuver in tight spots. And



But that's up to you. Because while this new Honda is a better way to get to work, it also makes it easier to leave on time.



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The office park. They like their grass trimmed a little higher. Instead of taking your mower back to the shop to adjust it, you simply



if you have to release the controls, Honda's interlock system offers you the safety and peace of mind you've come to expect from Honda.

ces a better way o work.

Before buying string trimmers, consider these different features

■ Since their inception less than two decades ago, string trimmers have become a labor-saving device and a staple in the professional landscape manager's equipment arsenal.

They can be used for trimming grass around walks, buildings and plantings; for areas too steep or rocky for a mower; or for attacking high weeds. Some models can be converted to edgers, cultivators, blowers, vacuums and even snowthrowers.

With so many different sizes and shapes on the market now, the conscientious prospective buyer should consider numerous factors before making a purchase.



The Maruyama BC320H: 12.5 lbs., with four- and eight-tooth blades.

Professional models (as opposed to consumer models) generally use gasoline engines. However, if you're going to be using them for extremely lightweight trimming, you might investigate the electric and battery-pack models, which are somewhat less expensive (but also less powerful).

Some other considerations:

1) Curved or straight shaft? Though the curved shafts are generally easier to use, straight shafts generally offer fewer maintenance problems with the driveshaft and are a bit safer, since the cutting head is farther from the operator.

Curved shaft trimmers use a flexible driveshaft to carry the engine's power to the head while straight shafts use a rigid drive that is generally more power-efficient.

2) Rotary or reciprocating head? Rotary heads, which usually incorporate either one or two nylon filament lines, make complete 360-degree revolutions. Reciprocating heads, on the other hand, move back and forth in the two- to three-inch range.

Though rotary heads are more versatile, reciprocating heads maintain a clean cut but are safer to use because flying debris is minimized. Reciprocating heads can also get quite close to obstacles without doing damage.

Curved shaft string trimmers—like Husqvarna's 26RLC—are said to be easier to use, but less power efficient.



3) Balance and maneuverability? On some models, the engine is placed at the back end of the unit; on others, it is down at the head. In either case, balance is the key to efficient user operation.

The best way to determine whether the unit meets your needs is to actually visit a dealer and get "the feel" of the instrument.

Remember, too, when you're testing the unit that considerably more physical stress is placed on the user who has to trim for hours on end.

4) Engine vibration? Some models feature anti-vibration systems that include rubber mounts to block engine vibrations from the handles. This should be one of your prime considerations, if you're going to have people working long hours with the tools.

5) Engine power? Cubic centimeter engine displacement and horsepower should be considered. If the instrument is to be used for light weed trimming around home and office landscapes, you'll not need as powerful a unit. If, however, the operator will be trimming tall, heavy weeds, you'll want more power.

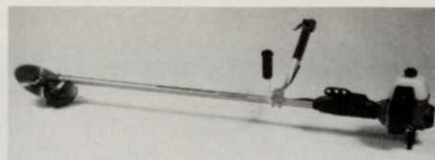
The Homelite HBC-30: 13 lbs., with tri-arc blades.

6) String advance? Most manufacturers make manual feeds, bump-feed heads and automatic heads. On the manual feed models, the unit must be turned off to feed string out. Bump-feed heads feature an under-carriage button that feeds string out by bumping it on the ground. (Be careful: according to consumer reports, some units need just a light tap, others a much firmer bump. Test and buy the unit that meets your needs.)

7) Options? Most units will come with options and interchangeable parts that include safety equipment (like goggles), different style handles, shoulder harnesses and cutting edges (saw blades, machete blades and tri-arc blades are those listed in the accompanying chart). Check with your dealer.

—Jerry Roche

Robin's NB-411 weighs 16 lbs., has a quick-release harness.





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• Silverado • Eldorado •
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MANUFACTURER	MODEL	ENGINE	TRIM PATH	WEIGHT	SHAFT	ACCESSORIES	CIRCLE NO.
John Deere	21C	21.2 cc	16"	10.3 lbs.	curved	additional heads, blades	301
	21S	21.2 cc	17"	11.2 lbs.	straight	heads, blades, handlebar	
	25S	24.4 cc	17"	12.5 lbs.	straight	heads, blades, handlebar	
	30S	30.8 cc	17"	15.0 lbs.	straight	heads, blades, handlebar	
	38B	37.4 cc	15"	18.2 lbs.	straight	adjustable handlebars, additional heads, blades	
Echo	GT-1100	21.2 cc	16"	9.4 lbs.	curved		302
	GT-2400	23.6 cc	16"	10.3 lbs.	curved		
	SRM-1501	21.2 cc	17"	11.1 lbs.	straight		
	SRM-2400	23.6 cc	17"	12.1 lbs.	straight		
	SRM-2410	23.6 cc	17"	12.5 lbs.	straight	u-handle standard	
	SRM-2501	24.4 cc	17"	13.3 lbs.	straight		
	SRM-2510	24.4 cc	17"	13.7 lbs.	straight	u-handle standard	
	SRM-3000	30.8 cc	17"	15.8 lbs.	straight	right-hand grip design	
SRM-3800	37.4 cc	14"	18.1 lbs.	straight	u-handle standard		
Hoffco	WW88	85 cc	18"	38 lbs.	curved		303
	JP890A	30.5 cc	16"	21 lbs.	straight	handlebar kit	
	JP800B	26.5 cc	16"	21 lbs.	straight	handlebar kit	
Homelite	HBC-40	40 cc	20"	18 lbs.	straight	harness, tri-arc, machete, saw blade	304
	HBC-38	40 cc	18"	16 lbs.	straight	harness, tri-arc, machete blades	
	HBC-30	30 cc	18"	13 lbs.	straight	strap; saw, machete, tri-arc blades	
	HBC-18	30 cc	18"	13.5 lbs.	curved	tri-arc, machete, saw blades	
	ST-385BC	25 cc	17"	13 lbs.	straight	saw blade	
Husqvarna	26RLC	26 cc	16"	11.8 lbs.	curved		305
Landscape's Supply	18CC	18.4 cc	n/a	10 lbs.	flexible		306
	24.1CC	24.1 cc	n/a	13 lbs.	straight		
	33CC	33.3 cc	n/a	18 lbs.	straight	10-inch 80-point blade, bullhorn handle	
Lesco	LST2100	21.2 cc	17"	11.1 lbs.	straight		307
		23.6 cc	16"	12 lbs.	straight		
Maruyama	BC200C	19.8 cc	16"	9.7 lbs.	curved	manual head	308
	BC200	19.8 cc	17"	10.6 lbs.	straight	4-, 8-tooth blades	
	BC260	25.4 cc	17"	11.2 lbs.	straight	4-, 8-tooth blades	
	BC260H	25.4 cc	17"	12.1 lbs.	straight	4-, 8-tooth blades	
	BC260C	25.4 cc	17"	9.7 lbs.	curved	manual head	
	BC320	31.8 cc	17"	11.7 lbs.	straight	4-, 8-tooth blades	
	BC320H	31.8 cc	17"	12.5 lbs.	straight	4-, 8-tooth blades, manual head	
	BC402M	40.2 cc	17"	17.9 lbs.	straight	saw blade, full auto head, 4-, 8-tooth blade	
BC480M	48.0 cc	17"	17.9 lbs.	straight	saw blade, full auto head, 8-tooth blade		
RedMax	BT17	17.2 cc	n/a	9.5 lbs.	curved		309
	BT220	22.5 cc	n/a	8.8 lbs.	curved		
	BC220DL	22.5 cc	n/a	10.2 lbs.	straight		
	BC260DL	25.4 cc	n/a	13.3 lbs.	straight		
	BC340DL	33.6 cc	n/a	15.3 lbs.	straight		
	BC440DWM	41.5 cc	n/a	18.5 lbs.	straight		
	SGC220DL	22.5 cc	n/a	14.1 lbs.	straight	reciprocating head	
Robin	NBF171	16 cc	12"	9.6 lbs.	flexible		310
	NB211C	20.3 cc	15"	8.9 lbs.	straight	quick-release shoulder strap	
	NB231C	22.2 cc	16"	9.3 lbs.	straight		
	NB26	25.6 cc	16"	12.2 lbs.	straight	saw blade, handlebars, harness	
	NB351	34.4 cc	18"	15.9 lbs.	straight	saw blade, quick-release harness	
	NB411	40.2 cc	18"	16 lbs.	straight	saw blade, quick-release harness	
	NB50L	51.7 cc	18"	19 lbs.	straight	saw blade, quick-release harness	
Stihl	FS74	23.8 cc	n/a	12.0 lbs.	flexible	shoulder harness, goggles, 8 heads	311
	FS76	23.8 cc	n/a	11.7 lbs.	straight	shoulder harness, goggles, 11 heads	
	FS86AVE	25.4 cc	n/a	15.0 lbs.	straight	shoulder harness, goggles, 8 heads	
	FR106	34.4 cc	n/a	23.8 lbs.	str/flex	goggles, 9 heads	
	FS180	35.2 cc	n/a	15.7 lbs.	straight	shoulder harness, goggles, 6 heads	
WeedEater	XT20T	22 cc	15"	10.9 lbs.	curved		312
	XT50	30 cc	17"	11.8 lbs.	curved		
	XT85	30 cc	18"	14.8 lbs.	curved		
	XT100/125	30 cc	18"	13.4 lbs.	straight		
	GTI 15T	22 cc	15"	10.7 lbs.	curved		
	GTI 16	30 cc	17"	10.9 lbs.	curved		
	GTI 18	30 cc	18"	13 lbs.	curved		

Source: LM mail survey, Dec. 1991/Jan. 1992