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BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

Offering a cultural bridge

Jennifer Thomas is an independent contractor just like many of you, except she's probably a lot better looking. Okay, so I'm not being politically correct. Give me a break.

She just happens to be an attractive young lady with a warm, outgoing personality and some special skills that the landscape industry desperately needs right now — namely she communicates as easily in Spanish as she does in English, and she's knowledgeable about Latino culture.

We met her about four years ago just after she started her business, known as Spanish Training Services, headquartered in Evanston, IL, which offers language and cross-cultural training services. She works almost exclusively with Green Industry operations — landscape companies, nurseries, golf courses and lawn care firms among others.

At the time of our first meeting, this seemed like an unusual career choice for such a bright, young person, and we probably didn't do a good job of hiding our skepticism. After all, how much demand could there be for these types of services?

Beyond that, we couldn't imagine she could teach a U.S.-born field foreman enough Spanish or a Hispanic worker enough English to do much good on a customer's landscape. Not in a one- or two-day training session, anyway.

After all, we took years of classroom Spanish and, as far as we can remember, never did learn the Spanish words for mower or shovel or — now that I think about it — not many other words, either. Besides being language impaired, we admit to having formed an opinion without appreciating the value of the services that Jennifer Thomas offers to lawn and landscape companies.

She is among a tiny group of specialized contractors that provides practical training on how to most effectively incorporate Spanish-speaking employees into U.S. Green Industry organizations. The goal is to provide company management and the laborers themselves simple language and cultural bridges to reduce misunderstandings and increase production efficiency.

Regardless of how you feel about the growing number of foreign-born, Spanish-speaking workers in the United States or, specifically, about the federal H2B program that allows them to work in our country seasonally, Hispanic workers have become the labor backbone of the Green Industry. And it looks like they'll continue in that role for some time.

Ms. Thomas, and the few others like her, can help us make the best of that situation. You can reach her at: Spanish Training Services, 719 Emerson St., Evanston, IL 60201. 800/491-0391.

Contact Ron Hall at 440/891-2636 or e-mail at rhall@advanstar.com



Jennifer Thomas teaches more than the words "rapido, rapido" in her cross-cultural sessions.

Hispanic workers have become the labor backbone of the Green Industry. It looks like they'll continue in that role.





The key to making continuing education successful is making its goal clear and always making it fun.

Education: We keep at it

Off season, in season, middle of the season. How do you keep up with the changing face of the industry? How do you keep your employees motivated, trained and feeling a part of the industry as a whole? One way is through continuing education.

Continuing education helps bind people together. It is a chance for employees, managers and owners to be productive while breaking the course of a normal business day. In-house sessions or road trips help reinforce what employees already know and teach what is new.

We use continuing education through trade magazines like this one, company training programs and external seminars and programs taught by experts in a variety of fields. What do you do? Do you make it available to everyone in your organization? What about industry association alerts and updates? Are you sharing the latest information from your local vendor or what you learned about a promising new wall stone material to replace something you've always used?

Start small, think big

It doesn't have to be a major project. In fact, continuing education starts at the small scale-level. It starts with making resources available — magazines left on conference tables for employees to browse while in the office, or copies of articles displayed for your employees to see. I read a lot of material, and much of it I wouldn't necessarily introduce to my staff. However, when I see pertinent and timely information, I simply make copies for them. People respond well to that because it keeps them abreast of what is happening. They also know I think it is important for them to be included and up-to-date on information.

The key to successful continuing education is finding the type of resources that apply to your operation — from planting and designing to team management to customer service to accounting practices. If you listed all of your organization's skills, you would be surprised at how many different tasks your organization engages in and how many people work in those areas. Make those areas focal points for increased training to maximize and improve your operations.

Work your organization

One of the important benefits of belonging to a professional organization is exposure to continuing education. Many Green Industry organizations have continuing education programs. Get on a mailing list to find out more about them.

Your customers and their businesses probably belong to different organizations, and some of their seminars may cover a particular subject that you want to learn. For instance, we searched for a training session on paperwork management. We wanted a resource that would help streamline an effective change to satisfy our objectives and manage the administration more effectively. I asked a customer in the telecommunications field, thinking that they might get different types of advertisements than those sent to us. Many of the seminars promoted to his company crossed subjects we found most useful. Not many Green Industry professionals were at those meetings, but maximizing profit, eliminating red tape and increasing employee efficiency certainly isn't exclusive to our field.

Go to the shows

Trade shows are an excellent way to familiarize yourself

with new techniques, equipment and information. Often, trade shows have seminar speakers that lecture throughout the day. Local colleges and the Internet are excellent resources for finding out about relevant information and business seminars as well.

Finally, if you've been a long-time member of a particular organization, perhaps you have seen some of the same classes or programs offered through the years and have continued to frequent these programs. Or, because you've seen or attended them before, your interest has waned. Are you attending less often than before? If you have seen similar programs over the years, it indicates that they are some of the most popular, fun and instructive programs offered.

Don't get stale

But why go if you've already gone?

Material varies from year to year, even for the same programs. What you may have heard three years ago may be different now. I have taken different employees in different years to the same seminar. I get to see some of the same faces that I haven't seen in several years and keep track of how people are doing.

People who share ideas make the experiences you have at seminars fun and new.

My staff appreciated learning about the new plants and it also let us speak to some growers about plants we'd like to see.

People who share ideas make each experience

new. There is always something to be gained by going to a program you've been to before or think you know everything about because you'll always find a new approach, make a new contact and rethink something you've done one way for years.

The key to making continuing education work is making its goal clear and making it fun.
— *The author is president of Natural Landscape Design and Maintenance, Inc., Keego Harbor, MI*

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let's hear it

YOUR OPINIONS, COMMENTS, & QUOTES

Answer to labor problem is not H2B but higher wages

Will there be a labor shortage in the 2000 growing season? According to the February 2000 edition of *Landscape Management*, the answer is yes.

What's the solution? Well, according to your magazine and many landscape contractors, it's increase the number of H2B visas. This will insure a cheap labor pool.

Will there be a labor shortage in the year 2004 (the year today's high school seniors will graduate with their bachelor degrees in hand)? Undoubtedly, yes. What high school senior (or high school senior's parents) is going to invest four years and thousands of dollars to pursue a horticulture or arboriculture degree only to graduate to an entry level job in the Green Industry that starts at \$8 to \$10 per hour?

The solution to the labor shortage in the Green Industry for the 21st century is two-fold. First of all, close up the cheap labor pipeline: issue less H2B visas and crack down on the illegal workers that most contractors snicker about, then look the other way. Second, treat landscape work as a skilled trade. Starting salaries for gardeners, landscapers and tree workers should begin in the \$16 to \$20 per hour range, the same range at which apprentice electricians or

plumbers begin. Then, perhaps, young American students will consider landscaping as a career.

Of course, this is just a dream of mine. I've been involved in the Green Industry since 1980 and I've seen too many talented people leave for greener pastures. Cheap labor provides too good a profit to the contractors.

Henry Ford said it best: "I pay my autoworkers enough money so they can buy my cars." Do contractors pay their employees enough so that they can purchase a home that will need landscape services? I think not.

Gary Grisko
City Forester

Greed killed employee loyalty

Your article on employee loyalty ("Is Loyalty Dead?" page 7, March 2000) was interesting, especially in this age of rampant liberalism. As I have said for years, employee loyalty went down the tubes as greed and the quest for market dominance and power increased. What caused this was the influx of young, greedy MBAs who were put into management positions not knowing the business, people or the industry. Their focus on the bottom line and their own bonuses fueled their greed. This greed has ruined many great companies and marketing organizations in



America today. When all decisions are solely based on raising stock prices, a company is bound to become ruined. Look around at the merger mania going on today as a few slick managers ruin the company but reap the rewards of kickbacks, parachutes and excessive bonuses while the employees suffer. When is enough going to be enough? How can the owners or stockholders expect any degree of loyalty when the employees are just mimicking the management?

I've seen many loyal people leave companies because they were not given their bonus or commissions. This makes employees mad, and they in turn don't care about the company. So often, owners forget who is making the company grow.

The loyalty level increases with company stability and ex-

perienced people. Before there is a return of loyalty in the workplace, there needs to be the return of ethics to our society. We need more articles such as yours, and I hope many companies take heed in what you conveyed.

Robert Kerr
Technical Sales Representative
Cleary Chemical Corporation

Likes "Ask the Expert" column

We like to read your "Ask the Expert" column. It's really wonderful. Do you know the average number of leaves a mature tree drops? We'd like to get some kind of a figure, if you have one. Keep up the good work!

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