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Circle No. 118 on Reader Inquiry Card

OPENING THE BOOKS

This landscaping company found that sharing everything with employees was the key to greater success and motivation

BY DON DALE

Since starting their dad-and-sons landscape installation business in 1976, the Bratt family has become a diverse business with its fingers in a lot of landscape-related pies.

But the thing that turned Bratt, Inc., Pleasant Grove, UT, into one of the most dynamic landscape companies in the West was the discovery of a business philosophy and management program that led to employee profit participation, effective in-house communication, incisive company organization and enviable morale.

Show 'em everything

"The divisions all run off this program we incorporated last November," says General Manager Jon Bratt (pronounced Brott). The program is about having an "open book policy" that brings employees into the decision-making process at all levels.

"A team can't know if it's winning or losing unless it can look at the scoreboard," says Perry Bratt, company president and specialist in business development and estimating. Perry and Jon run the company with their father, Ross, the founder and vice president in charge of quality control. The Bratts are equal partners, however, and titles are simply for job clarity and divi-



Ross Bratt, center, and sons Perry, left, and Jon, right, expect their company, Bratt, Inc., Pleasant Grove, UT, to gross over \$13 million in 2001.

sion of responsibilities.

The Bratts derived their philosophy from two of their favorite books, "The Great Game of Business" by Jack Stack, which gave them a model for their business plan, and "First Things First" by popular family advisor and motivator Stephen R. Covey. The system they created involves employees in decision-making and rewards them with a share of the resulting profits. Managers of the company's four divisions are empowered to run those divisions as if each was the owner of his own company, and all employees are shown every detail of the company's operations.

This makes employees feel like partners in the team, and they eagerly take on this new knowledge because they know they can take home a piece of the pie in the company's profit-sharing scheme.

"If we make a 10% profit or more in any given quarter we share 20% of the net profit on a quarterly basis," Jon says. The reward is split up on a sliding scale based on how long an employee has been with the company and how high he has risen in responsibility. Up to six points can be earned for years served, and there are six levels of employment. For example, a division manager with six or more years em-

Ross Bratt started the company 25 years ago as a part-time adjunct to his teaching job. It's now doing \$2.5-million projects.

ployment would earn 12 points on the system, while a new employee would earn two points after one year of service.

Incentives work

The Bratts say the profit-sharing part of the system has resulted in increased productivity and profits because employees recognize that every decision they make, every job they perform, affects the bottom line — and their bonus.

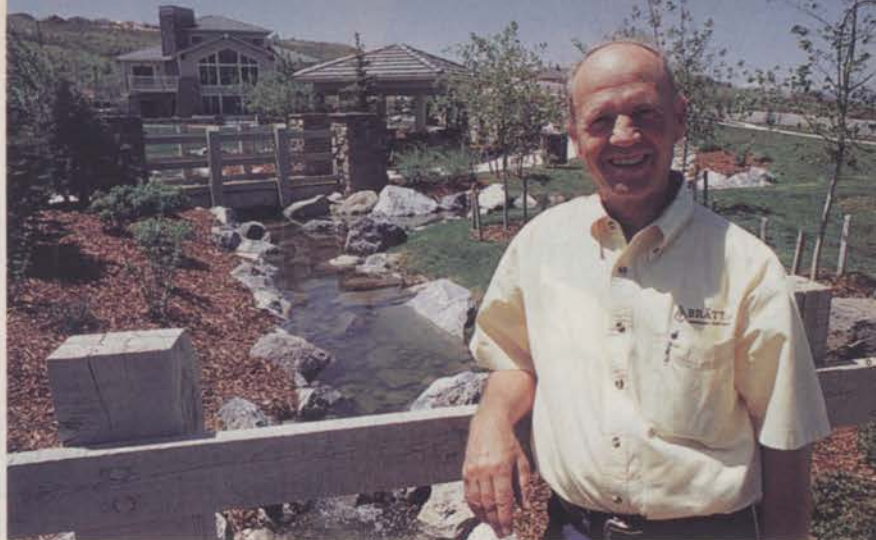
A crew that cuts work time on a job is often treated to pizza delivered to the job site the next day, or free movie tickets or restaurant coupons. Perry gave an example of how this can have a positive effect on a job, and the company's bottom line. One division was erecting a 42,000-sq. ft. rock wall on a large landscaping job last winter. "At first they were putting in 150 square feet a day," Perry says, "but when the division manager pointed out how that wasn't going to make a profit, and offered extra incentives, the pace increased until the wall was going up at 420 feet per day."

"The crew actually came to us," Jon says. "They were challenging the bosses, asking for incentives in return for productivity increases." The end result was not only a solid profit on a \$610,000 job but the ability and confidence to bid those kinds of jobs lower in the future.

Workers know the score

The Bratts say that a laborer who once would have watched a tractor run over a shovel now rushes to save that shovel because his bonus will decrease if the company has to buy a new one. Now nobody in the company wants to re-do a job, because that is a huge drain on profits.

Awareness of incentives has become so acute that an employee who lags behind becomes a pariah on the job to conscientious workmates. "They'll go to the supervisor and say he's not doing his job," Jon says. Also, since employees share in extra profits from all divisions, they'll keep a close eye on other divisions to make sure nobody is dragging down their bonuses.



Intra-company communication is essential for this type of operation, and the Bratts have set up an efficient framework by writing manuals and procedures and holding weekly meetings with employees.

Every week, each division holds a "huddle" of about 20 minutes to hand out financial reports, cover training and safety issues and reinforce the company philosophy. Owners and business managers also hold a weekly meeting over lunch, going over a printed agenda in order to examine current issues and circumvent problems.

Growth in division

Ross Bratt started the company 25 years ago as a part-time adjunct to his teaching job. He brought Jon and Perry in to help, and after they graduated from college, they stayed with the business. The first job they completed earned them about 50 cents per hour. Today, the company grosses about \$9 million and has a 7,000-sq. ft. office.

That kind of growth has happened because of the way the Bratts organized the company. Separating it into four divisions — installation, maintenance, water features and excavation — fit their plan to increase diversity. The Bratts remember, however, the backbone of their business.

"We do a lot of design and build," Perry says, and the architects, softscapers and construction workers in the installation division still do the majority of the company's business. Lately, jobs have been in the \$1.5 million range, with

COMPANY PROFILE

Name: Bratt, Inc.

Owners: Ross, Jon and Perry Bratt

2000 gross revenue: \$9.3 million

Expected 2001 gross revenue: \$13.3 to 14.3 million

Employees: 60 full-time, 125 part-time

Services: Design/build, snow removal, landscape maintenance, water features, landscape installation



Jon Bratt and his team keep taking on bigger and bigger projects.

one being around \$2.6 million.

Bratt, Inc. wants to do as many aspects of a job as possible, and then pick up the maintenance contract. They are now starting a concrete division. "We have a general contractor's license and an engineering license, so we can do nearly everything we want

in the state of Utah," Perry says.

Water features have become a company trademark. The Bratts started installing them 15 years ago, but admit they struggled with them until their knowledge and company size increased.

"We also decided to get some employees who knew

what they were doing," says Perry, who believes water features are a future trend in commercial and residential construction. Half of their water projects are backyard fountain or waterfalls, as well as "theming" with artificial rocks and other manufactured items.

The excavation division grew out of a desire to maintain control of a job right from the beginning, and salvage topsoil and rocks from jobs and use them on other

sites. Topsoil has become a high-cost commodity in the area, and a truckload of large rocks removed from one job can bring in \$600 from a homeowner.

Recruit the best

Bratt, Inc. has gone to great lengths to recruit employees who are good at what they do. Dudley Cronin, head of its excavation unit, was recruited from the southeast because of his reputation. Also, Bratt, Inc. merged with two local land-

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Circle 119

scape maintenance companies recently in an effort to gain more experienced employees, as well as equipment and existing contracts.

happy company. **LM**

— The author is a frequent contributor to

Landscape Management based in Hollywood, CA.

Be curious

One aspect of the Bratts' success is their curiosity about other companies' successes and the ability to learn from them. Three years ago, in an effort to upgrade their company, they began calling and visiting other landscapers with good reputations in other parts of the country.

"We were very frustrated that, year-in and year-out, we were only making 3% to 6% net profit," Jon says. So they began talking to vendors, asking which companies were excelling in various aspects of landscaping.

Since then, they have visited companies from California to Maryland, from Oregon to Arizona, shadowing them and inquiring about their inner workings. Those companies were happy to give advice, since the Bratts were outside their markets, and allowed them access to everything from bidding to equipment shops.

"It was a real eye-opener," Ross says, noting that they have implemented many of the ideas they found and still call these companies occasionally to ask for advice. He believes there is no recipe like success, and the company is returning the favor in Utah. Three years ago, it sponsored a seminar, and 42 companies attended talks on estimating and related topics.

"It's very difficult to compete if you don't change," he notes.

But the family still believes that having a core philosophy, one that is compassionate and motivational toward employees, will be what takes them to the next level. And there's nothing like working in a

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Circle 120

Property at a glance

Location: Chicago, IL**Staff:** Resurrection Medical Center
Grounds Department**Category:** Hospital or institution**Total budget:** \$295,500**Year site built:** 1953**Acres of turf:** 9.7**Acres of woody ornamentals:** .63**Acres of display beds:** .52**Total paved area:** 19.5 acres**Total man-hours/week:** 240

Maintenance challenges

- ▶ Working with ongoing construction
- ▶ Yearly salt damage
- ▶ Safety of public on grounds

Project checklist

(Completed in last two years):

- ▶ Installation of ornamental bed – front entrance
- ▶ Conversion of ground cover islands to stone
- ▶ Implementation of formal snow removal plan

On the job

- ▶ 6 full-time staff, 0 seasonal employees, 1 licensed pesticide applicator

Resurrection Medical Center

**A 2000 Honor Award Winner of the
Professional Grounds Management
Society for Hospital or Institution**

Being a hospital, there's no doubt Resurrection Medical Center is one busy place. But its six-person in-house grounds crew is just as busy, maintaining all building entry areas, disposing of refuse, cleaning paved surfaces and even replacing light bulbs in outdoor fixtures.

It's a good thing, then, that care of the Medical Center's 600-plus trees is contracted to an outside company. Landscape maintenance, including fertilization of lawns and beds, spring installation of over 12,000 annuals, and snow removal is all handled by the in-house crew. Hand weeding is necessary because weed spraying is next to impossible around the many ornamental plants.

Special attention is given to the hospital's two large interior courtyards because they're both highly visible. St. Joseph Courtyard is surrounded by the main hospital building and can be viewed from all interior windows, while the Professional Building Courtyard can

be viewed by patients waiting for their doctors. Planter pots filled with bonica roses and ageratum hide inground electrical boxes.

The grounds crew makes sure to meticulously mow the main courtyard because of all the people that visit it.



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Patients can view the beautiful landscaping of the courtyard from the office windows in the Professional Building. (Inset) Those participating in monthly barbecues on the cafe patio can also enjoy the sights.



Bring profits in from the cold



BY VICKY POULSEN

▲ PHOTO COURTESY: WALKER MANUFACTURING, INC.

BY VICKY POULSEN / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**These companies
have learned how
to plan and stay
productive all year
long**

Successful snow and ice operations don't just happen. It takes a tremendous amount of planning, marketing and the right equipment and supplies. If done correctly, snow and ice removal can outdo your other profit centers in gross revenue.

In fact, for operations like the Allin Companies in Erie, PA, gross profits in 2001 are expected to double thanks to increased growth in snow revenues. We asked company president John Allin how his company does it, and here is what he and two other contractors had to say about running a successful snow and ice removal operation:

LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name: Christopher M. Aldarelli

Title: President

Company: Aldo 1 Landscaping & Lawn Service, Inc.

Location: Ocean, NJ

2000 revenue: \$12.1 million

Business mix: 20% lawn maintenance; 20% landscaping, irrigation and paver work; 52% complete site development; 8% snow removal. Provides full services for both residential and commercial clients. Around 80% of snow removal accounts are commercial, with 20% residential.

Employees: 150 (including three full-time mechanics on site)

Company profile: "I began my business in 1988 doing lawn maintenance and landscaping work. Over the years, I expanded

to provide trimming of shrubbery, concrete work, pavers, irrigation, machinery work, complete site development, snow removal as well as continued maintenance and landscaping."

Equipment arsenal: "The machinery and equipment we use for snow removal ranges from snow shovels to backhoes and front-end loaders. We use our pick-up trucks as well as our Tandem trucks."

Purchasing decisions: "We own all our equipment and don't need to rent for snow services. We don't subcontract any of this work because we have all the equipment and labor needed."

Planning/pricing: "We usually begin planning at the beginning of September. We price this service at a per-storm charge. A good storm accumulates at least four inches of snowfall. Any percentage over, we charge them more due to the wear and tear of the equipment and length of time it takes to remove the snow."

Get it in writing: "We provide all our commercial properties with current contracts for the season. Customers also contact our office around this time if they are pricing contractors. A well-written contract is important, especially with snow removal services."

Ice control: "The only product we purchase is the ice melter and/or salt (potassium chloride)."

MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

Name: John Allin

Title: President

Company: Allin Companies

Location: Erie, PA

2000 revenue: \$6.55 million

Business mix: Installation landscape contracts are 70% commercial, 30% residential. Landscape maintenance is 95% commercial. Snow management services are 98% commercial.

Employees: 70-plus people at peak

Company profile: Founded in 1978 as a snow removal business and beginning landscape work in 1982, Allin Companies has grown into a full-service landscape contracting and snow management business. Of its \$6.55 million revenue in 2000, \$4.73 million came from snow/ice management and snow removal services. Allin Companies does residential design/build, general construction (prevailing rate), maintenance and snow removal. The company's revenue is expected to reach \$12.5

million in 2001 due to an increased growth in snow revenues. Usually run two- or three-man crews.

Equipment arsenal: "We actually only own seven plow trucks, two loaders, 100 snow pushers, five salt trucks and six skid steers. We have five sidewalk crews in winter; the rest are subcontractors. This past winter we utilized 4,300 'units' (any equipment used in snow removal) and had over 2,000 sites in 12 states. This season we will run 5,500-plus units on 3,000 sites in 17 states. We have two full-time mechanics in our Erie operation."

Purchasing decisions: "We look for dealer support and backup as well as backup from the manufacturer. With our size, we have relationships with manufacturer and rely on their dealer network to assist our subcontractors in keeping them operable."

Planning/pricing: "We currently have six individuals working 'snow' year round."



We never stop planning. Selling and signing up new business takes place from January to December. Our work is priced 'per push' or 'per season' for the most part. We have only a few customers who demand hourly rate pricing. They are usually "national" accounts with large sites. We shy away from hourly rate structures because they normally generate the lowest margins."

Get it in writing: "The difference between a well-written and structured contract and a poor one can mean the difference between going broke or making a profit. Liability exposure needs to be dealt with closely so that all parties share in the exposure, or so that the contractor is assuming liability exposure for only what they are responsible for maintaining. Some exposure is inevitable. Even with a poor contract, proper record keeping can be key to success. Even with a well structured contract, poor recordkeeping will destroy any good contract document's language."

Ice control: "All ice control products work. However, they must be used as they are designed. Most are used improperly due to ignorance on the contractor's part, and even on the supplier's part at times. Rock salt works everywhere, but only under the right conditions. The alternative deicing products also work everywhere, but also only under the right conditions."

SMALL CONTRACTOR

Name(s): John Wernis & Sam LaGrasso

Title: Owners

Company: United Lawnscape, Inc.

Location: Shelby Twp., MI

2000 revenue: \$4 million

Business mix: 35 percent residential/65 percent commercial in the lawn division/100 percent commercial in snow division

Employees: 95 people

Company profile: "United Lawncare came into existence in November 1977 when two companies, Excel Lawn and Sam's Lawn Care merged. Currently, the company offers numerous services in landscaping, lawn maintenance and snow removal. Each division is an integral part of the success of our company. Landscaping and lawn maintenance each produce 40% of our revenues, while snow removal accounts for 20%."

Equipment arsenal: They have 31 snow plows in various makes and models, snow throwers, dump truck tailgate salt spreaders and CaC12 spreaders.

Purchasing decisions: "Whether it be plows, trucks or snow blowers, we look for a proven track record — positive performance in the field, durability, versatility, maintenance requirements and specifically with plows, the ease of removal and mounting. When purchasing products, specifically ice melter, we take into consideration contents (percentage breakdown), safeness for vegetation and concrete, effectiveness, price and packaging."

Planning/pricing: "We begin preparing for the snow season around July 4th each year

by submitting bids. In October and November, we evaluate our systems from the previous year, make improvements, develop zones, assign zone managers and start forming crews. Of the services we offer, the only part we subcontract is plowing. We have 30 of our own trucks on the road and about 20 subcontractors with their own trucks and plows. When pricing



John Wernis (left) and Sam LaGrasso, owners of United Lawnscape Inc.

our services, we take into account our operating costs per man hour. We prepare our contracts including a set number of labor hours per season. Any additional services required are billed accordingly as they occur."

Get it in writing: "A well-written contract protects you against unnecessary legal suits, misinterpretations of services to be rendered and costs per service. Also, our contracts, having equal monthly installment payments, provide us with consistent income to cover our overhead expenses during the winter months."

Ice control: "We've had the best results with Professional Ice Melter in our area. It performs well in our climate and is priced affordably."