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MOWER TECH



← Dixie Chopper plans to bring back EFI technology.

continued from page 40 will introduce the first flex-fuel, EFI engine. Over the next two years, Kohler plans to convert its entire Command PRO air-cooled and Aegis liquid-cooled engines to EFI.

This past year, Walker shipped 26% of its mowers with EFI, up from 22% in 2005 — and that share is growing. “About 80% of our machines are Kohler,” Cromley says.

The additional cost of EFI on a 26-hp unit is about \$700 to \$800, including matching up the other electronics on the mower. However, the annual fuel savings of a 26-hp EFI versus a 23-hp carbureted engine is about \$1,000, so the payback period on initial investment is one season of mowing.

Dixie Chopper used to offer a Kohler-EFI engine, but stopped selling it. “We will go back to it,” says Rick Judy, marketing manager for Dixie. “Down the road, it will become more popular.”

The firm’s current model offers an

ergonomic boost thanks to dial on the seat that allows operators to adjust for their weights. “More spring gives a better ride,” Judy says.

ZTRs and ergonomics

Out-front zero-turn radius (ZTR) mowers are making waves, too.

“Zero-turn maneuverability makes mowing far more effective because the mowing deck never has to leave uncut grass,” says Patsy Penner, marketing coordinator with Moundridge, KS-based Grasshopper. Penner says the combination of ZTR maneuverability with the reach of the front-mounted deck lets landscapers trim while mowing, reach into and under spaces quickly and efficiently, and mow areas that could otherwise only be reached with a walk-behind mower. While this is not new, it’s gaining wider attention as mowing operations try to increase efficiencies.

Grasshopper has developed and will soon introduce a new 72-in. DuraMax featuring

its PowerFold deck-lifting and electric cutting-height adjustment technology.

The new Snapper PRO S800x is another ZTR that offers new, ergonomic features landscapers appreciate. The S800x is an out-front ZTR with an electric deck lift that takes the effort out of adjusting cutting height. The electronics take care of height adjustments from 1.5 in. to 5 in. When it’s time to do routine blade maintenance, the electric lift angles the deck up to make the job easier. The twin 6-gal. fuel tanks are equipped with an extra-large filler neck.

Landscapers want to protect their investment, too. One place to look is at the unit’s warranty. Dixie Chopper has extended its warranty to three-year, bumper-to-bumper coverage on all units. The only exclusions are for Dixie’s Kohler and Yanmar engines. **LM**

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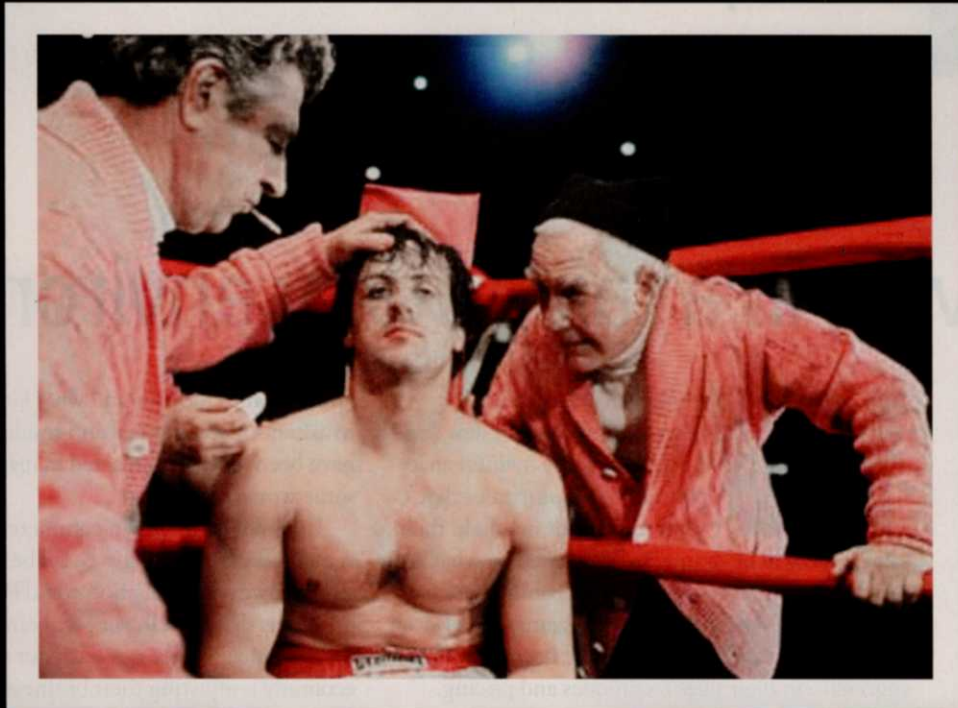
Jeffrey Scott grew his maintenance/landscape design-build/lawn and tree care business from \$5 million to \$10 million in annual revenues in part by raising retention to 98%, growing professional referral sales from \$50,000 to \$2 million, and boosting division margins 15%. Founder and president of Trumbull, CT-based Landscape Success Systems, Jeffrey Scott is author of the recent hit book “The Referral Advantage: How to Increase Sales & Grow Your Business By Referral”. Jeffrey is an expert in helping build brands, captivate clients and grow businesses profitably. He has developed systems and processes to boost your top and bottom line.

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BEST PRACTICES

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The author is a partner with the Wilson-Oyler Group consultancy. Visit www.wilson-oyler.com.

Thriving in a take-away environment

With the decline in new construction comes a new reality for landscape maintenance contractors. Companies that want to grow or maintain their sales levels will be dramatically affected by what is rapidly becoming a take-away environment.

Companies will have more pressure than ever on their accounts as other contractors become more aggressive in their sales techniques and pricing. With few new projects to bid on, most contractors will resort to going after other contractors' work.

In this increasingly competitive environment, companies need comprehensive strategies to maintain profitable growth. The most important part of these strategies is to identify signs that your properties might be at risk.

Staying close to your customers and always doing a great job is the best strategy, but during tough times it's also important to pay more attention to your clients' businesses.

This will involve some training of your account managers and customer relationship managers to

know what to look for and what kinds of questions to ask. Both commercial and residential real estate have been severely impacted in many markets, some worse than others.

Look for vacancies in commercial and retail centers. Bankruptcy sales could be an indicator that a homeowners' association could have budgetary problems thanks to lower fees being collected. As for individual businesses, ask your clients how the economy is affecting their business.

It warrants making a matrix of your client types and what sensitivities they might have to the recession so you can systematically evaluate their vulnerability. They will have sales people from other companies calling on them. Will they listen? You should be looking in advance of just what work might be vulnerable to accepting low bids, and who might ask you to cut your bids.

A proactive approach might help you build more trust and loyalty with clients — if you feel their pain and go to them first with a value-engineered temporary reduction of scope to help them get through the tough times.


Opportunity knocks

When prospecting for new clients, you often will be calling on your competitors' properties. Here you should be looking for sites being maintained by competitors that price similarly to you and deliver the same quality of work. No sense chasing properties being maintained by "low ballers" — unless you want to go low yourself.

You need to minimize costs because you will have to bid tighter than you want to get work. In this economy, you might have to cut some prices just to keep work. Unless you cut your costs, the price cuts you make will come off your top and bottom lines.

Remember, with each challenge there are new opportunities. Smart, proactive contractors always come out of tough times stronger than their competitors. Be one of them.

Staying close to your customers and always doing a great job is the best strategy, but during tough times it's also important to pay more attention to your clients' businesses.

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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S

PROFITABILITY & SUSTAINABILITY

WHAT A DIFFERENCE a few decades makes in the technology world.

Remember the original Sony Walkman? When launched in 1979, the portable audio cassette player, equipped with headphones, was small and light enough to clip on to your belt. The Walkman defined state-of-the-art audio. Fast forward to 2009. Compare the original Sony Walkman to the tremendous audio and video storage and playing capacity, portability and pricing of today's MP3 players such as the iPod.

The same "decades apart, worlds apart" comparison can be drawn between light-emitting diode (LED) landscape lighting technologies in the early 1990s and their far-more-evolved offspring now marketed by major lighting manufacturers.

Energy-efficient LED technologies help contractors sell landscape lighting and save customers money. BY **MARTY WHITFORD**

"LEDs have been around since the '60s, but it took three decades for the technology to enter the landscape market in a measurable way, and then another almost two decades for LEDs to evolve into the viable alternative they've become for many landscape applications," says Cruz Perez, vice president of marketing for Simi Valley, CA-based Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting.

"Landscape LEDs had a laundry list of issues needing correction in the early '90s — including light color/

temperature and pricing to name just a few — but that was then," Perez adds. "Now, LEDs are the technology of choice for many landscape lighting applications because they make sense from both a profitability and a sustainability standpoint."

Nick Trostle, owner of Columbus, OH-based Scenic Outdoor Lighting & Design, concurs.

"Landscape LEDs reduce related energy costs 75%, and the lights can out-



live their conventional incandescent and halogen counterparts by a factor of 10 or more — say 10 to 15 seasons versus one or two, Trostle adds.

Just as important, Trostle says landscape LEDs, on average, cost half what they did just three years ago. LED pricing has benefitted from economies of scale on both the purchasing side and the technology side.

Rising utility costs also have given quite a lift to landscape LEDs. “It’s not uncommon to receive a complete pay-back on LEDs in energy savings alone in the first year,” Trostle adds.

Equally enticing, LEDs’ temperatures usually range 4,000 to 4,200 Kelvins — 2,000 Kelvins or so fewer than a few years ago — meaning LEDs more closely match conventional lights in temperature and color.

“The days of designers, contractors and customers feeling blue about LEDs throwing blue light no longer need to be an issue with the right LED lights,” Perez says.

LEDs are quick start, solid state and vibration resistant.

Perez says 80% to 90% of a typical LED light’s energy is used to give off light versus many other lights which expend 80% to 90% of their energy through heat, not light — which not only is wasteful but can be a safety issue.

Perez says LEDs’ low maintenance/high safety features make them ideal for a number landscape lighting applications including, to name just a few: down lights from a tree; water features; anywhere children are drawn to and can access lights; step lights; and hotel interiorscapes.

Vista Professional Outdoor Lighting has a portfolio of more than 350 light lines, two-thirds of which are available with LED sources, Perez said.

Additional benefits of LEDs include, according to Perez and Trostle, simplified installation (more fixtures per cable reduces the complexity of installations and related wire and labor costs 50% or more) and the ability to meet



today’s increasingly popular green building requirements.

“Further driving the move to LEDs, there are efficient energy mandates in the Energy Independence & Security Act of 2007, and state legislation such as California’s Title 24,” Perez says.

“Suffice it to say, LED’s time has come — and it’s here to stay.”

Trostle seconds the notion.

“The world is going LED,” Trostle adds. “There are still too many contractors who say, ‘LEDs cost too much and are too blue,’ but my reply to them is, ‘Have you checked out LEDs recently? This isn’t 1990.’” LM

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A STUDY IN STONE AND WATER

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS MANAGING EDITOR

Reconstruction of the Ashley Priddy Memorial Fountain earns the ultimate compliment from an Italian visitor

“Bellissima.”

With a single word, the Italian visitor validated the seven months of time, effort and energy Lambert Landscape designers and crew poured into the planning and rebuilding the Ashley Priddy Memorial Fountain in Holland Park, TX.

The fountain is located in small plaza surrounded by roads on all sides. The visitor was driving by, leaned out his window and exclaimed “bellissima” to the crew. The word translates as “lovely” or “beautiful.”

“A lot of the architecture is very classical in that town,” says architect Paul Fields,

president and director of Lambert Landscape. “We wanted something that was not only classical and related to the town, but also really created a gateway — something that makes an image and a statement as a gateway to the city.”

The fountain was originally built in 1987 with a porous stone. A series of freeze and thaw cycles had severely damaged the fountain, and it was in need of constant repair. Fields chose Istrian stone to construct the fountain. The non-porous limestone makes up much of the building façades along Venice’s Grand Canal.

“It was used quite extensively back in the 16th and 17th centuries,” Fields explains. “It accepts carving really well and is durable.”

And it blends well with the nearby architecture.

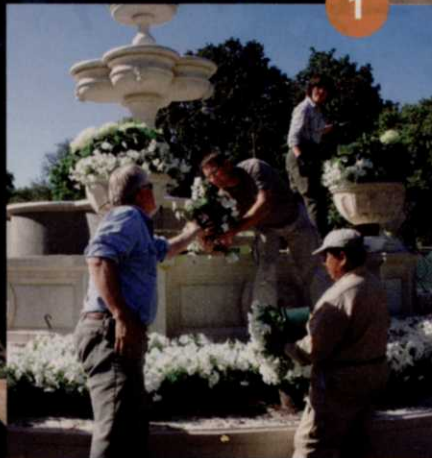
“There’s a lot of classical architecture that surrounds this site,” Fields says. “There’s an old Romanesque church that’s a landmark in the city that’s adjacent to the site. We wanted something that felt congruent to the city and the surrounding space.”

The beauty of the fountain was enhanced with plantings of white hydrangeas and petunias. An evergreen groundcover base provides year round color to the structure. Lambert Landscape also added architectural agaves to the large urns around the base of the fountain.

The fountain melds nicely with nearby buildings, but to accomplish that Lambert Landscape had to reach out to the Old Country and surmount language and time constraints. Fields sent drawings to Italy, where artisans carved the material and shipped it back to the states. The company had only three months to plan and four months to complete the project so it would be ready for an Easter dedication.

And unlike most private projects, the fountain was city-owned. Two families carried the brunt of the cost of the reconstruction. Fields had to please a committee of people.

Not only was the company able to complete the project on time, it earned a Grand Award from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) last year. **LM**



Main images. At night, the fountain beckons residents from city. Lighting was incorporated into the fountain's basin.

1. Workers install white hydrangeas and petunias enhance the Istrian stone work.
2. The lion's mask is a symbol of stateliness and power.
3. Classical urns broaden the base, offsetting the 40-ft. diameter of the structure and the 18-ft height of the central fountain.

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SMART CONTROLLERS, SMART CHOICE

New systems automate how much water is used where and when.

BY **RON HALL** EDITOR-AT-LARGE

IRRIGATION CONTROLLERS, OFTEN referred to as timers, are essentially clocks. Although the technology designed into the latest generation of controllers — so-called “smart controllers” — is sophisticated, their task remains humble: They tell valves on irrigation systems when to open to allow water to flow through pipes and to exit sprayheads, rotors or emitters.

Controllers, including smart controllers, are available in a range of prices and different levels of sophistication. Homeowners typically opt for relatively inexpensive, standard controllers they buy at retail garden centers and big box stores. In spite of their modest price, it's inaccurate to

describe these units as “dumb.” They dispense water efficiently, assuming that the remainder of the system is well designed, installed, is intelligently maintained and the clocks are adjusted to meet climatic conditions.

These are big assumptions. The biggest is the belief (hope?) that property owners regularly adjust timers to account for changes or seasonal differences in the weather. This is seldom the case.

Chris Spain, chairman of the board and chief strategy officer of Petaluma, CA-based HydroPoint Data Systems, offers this analogy to this “set-it-and-forget-it” syndrome: Envision that instead of a thermostat to control the heat in your home, you install a timer that turns on your furnace at the same time for the same period of time every day, every season. Wouldn't make much sense, would it?

Get smart

Introduced into the golf and sports field markets 20 years ago, smart controllers are now turning up on commercial and residential properties.

For the most part, they take humans out of the day-to-day landscape irrigation picture by using weather information and/or sensors to manage watering times and frequencies — how much water is dispersed where and when. As environmental conditions vary, they increase or decrease irrigation, by measuring factors such as precipitation, humidity, wind, solar radiation and soil moisture.

Smart controllers have come to the attention of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and water

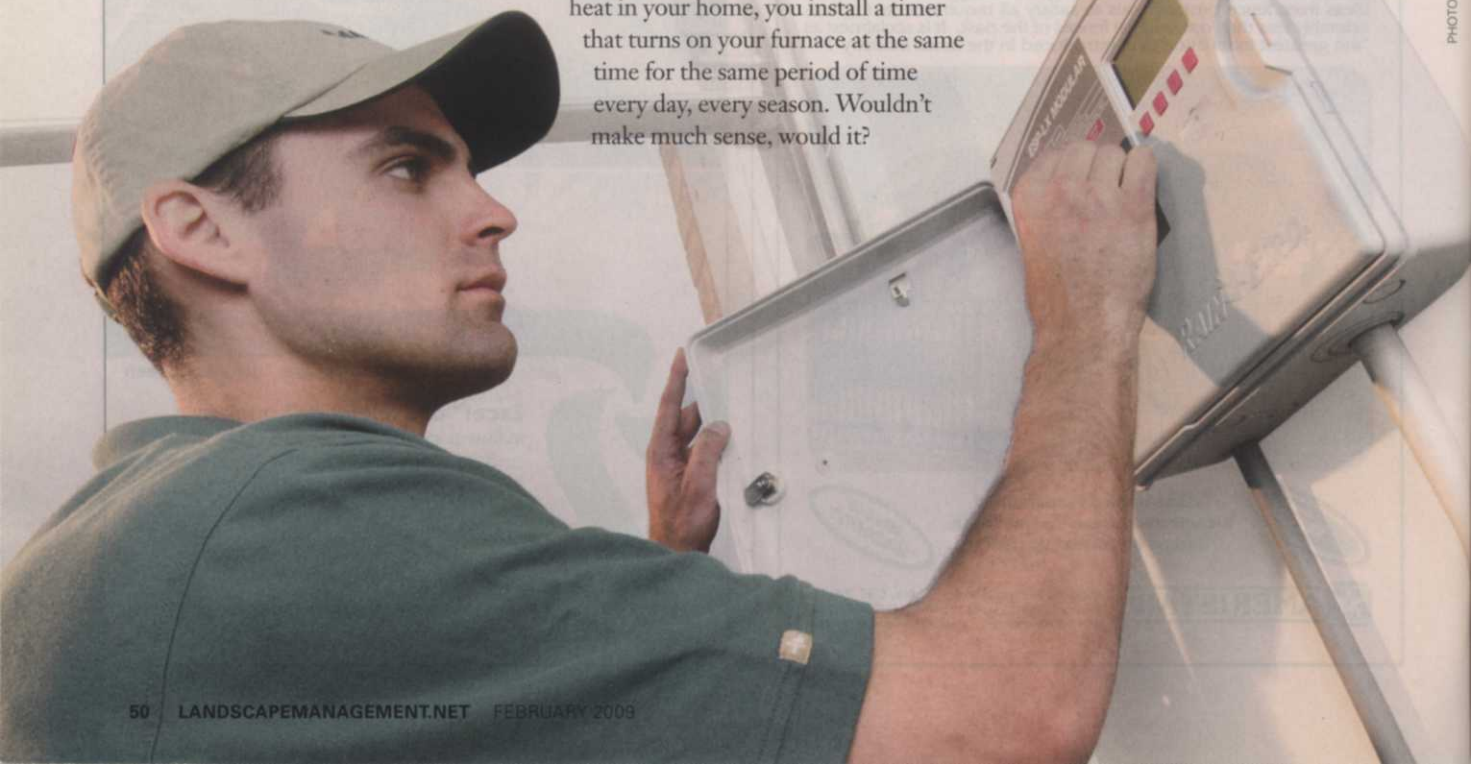


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