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THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author is the owner-manager of Kehoe & Co. Contact him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

Price smart to win, keep business

Price competitiveness is a function of cost control and revenue generation. Cost control is a function of personal productivity (revenue per employee must increase). Revenue generation is a function of price and pressure (labor rate/price per hour must decrease, and we must be more aggressive in our sales closing efforts). Both strategies must be employed simultaneously.

Price reductions can be achieved to win and retain work; this is an essential element of the revenue-generation strategy.

Using Table 1, we start at the bottom with several givens: our current average wage rate (\$11.67, including taxes) and the net profit dollars (\$100,000) we need to earn.

Next, we budget just to maintain general and administrative (G&A) cost at current levels (\$300,000, which includes overhead for staff, who will be required to do more) while we make some

room for slight increases in indirect cost necessary for expanded sales at reduced pricing (\$170,000, which includes some increases for additional equipment to do the work).

We next incorporate market/customer feedback that is telling us that at 55% gross margin, we are “too expensive” (relative to competitor prices), and further we know that we are losing work and winning business at rates insufficient to cover the losses.

This is where industry benchmarks and trial-and-error budgeting are useful. If we are consistently 20% too high in our bids on an “apple-to-apple” basis, the gross margin must be reset to achieve this differential in labor rate/price.

Using a 48% gross margin projection achieves the 20% differential and reflects the trend in current benchmark gross margins in maintenance.

The real price to pay

As a result of using Table 1’s pricing strategy, we would sell labor at \$25 per hour instead of \$30 per hour — 20% less. In exchange for this “pricing concession” to the market, the company would have to generate an additional \$187,500 in revenues without increasing overhead staffing.

Labor staffing will, of course, increase by the difference between Last year’s 30,000 hours and This year’s 42,750 hours.

Keep in mind this analysis provides a static example only. Real-world pricing is much more dynamic.

In the real world, you should end up pricing some jobs at the current \$30 per hour because you know you can get that price. But it’s also essential to know that you can price at lower/more competitive rates in select situations when you need to retain business or win new work — and still make your bottom line. All this requires is:

- › knowledge of the math;
- › cost control; and
- › the steely nerves of a true sales professional.

TABLE 1: PROFIT & LOSS STATEMENT

	Last year	This year
Revenues	\$1,000,000	\$1,187,500
Labor	\$350,000	\$498,750
Material	\$100,000	\$118,750
Direct cost	\$450,000	\$617,500
Gross profit	\$550,000	\$570,000
Indirect cost	\$150,000	\$170,000
G&A cost	\$300,000	\$300,000
Net profit	\$100,000	\$100,000
Labor hours	30,000	42,750
Average wage rate	\$11.67	\$11.67
Labor rate/price	\$30	\$25



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Cultivate

YOUR WEED COSTS

Remember the label is the law.

Minimize pricey labor with an economical herbicide plan

BY DR. KATHIE KALMOWITZ

LAWN CARE OPERATORS challenged with managing weeds in ornamental beds can save money and satisfy customers by using an integrated weed management program that includes herbicides and mulch. While hand-weeding always will be important to weed management, an integrated herbicide program can minimize labor greatly.

Proper herbicide applications can provide weed control for two months or longer, creating consistently clean landscapes. Mulch gives beds an additional layer of weed prevention.

However, developing a herbicide program can be challenging because of ornamental selection, placement within a landscape bed, the presence and growth of weeds, and germination expectations. Advance consideration of which chemical and mulch techniques are compatible with a landscape can cut traditional hand-weeding labor costs in half.

Before selecting an herbicide program, determine whether an herbicide can be used safely with the area's mixture of woody ornamentals and herbaceous bedding plants. Determine whether weeds can be managed more easily before germination using a preemergent herbicide or whether weed control can be handled effectively using a postemergent herbicide. Some landscapes may need both.

Generally, woody ornamentals are more tolerant of broad-spectrum herbicides, so there's a greater number of preemergent and postemergent herbicide options available for use on these plants. Only a few herbicides are labeled for use on sensitive herbaceous species, particularly annual flowers, so applicators should know about the safety of the product they intend to use.

Because bedding plant species vary as much in herbicide tolerance as they do in color, form and plant vigor, confirm plant safety by checking herbicide labels and conferring with local extension specialists and herbicide company representatives when developing a plan.

Identifying weed types or those likely to germinate in the landscape to determine which type of herbicide to apply. Any combination of broadleaf, grassy

and sedge weeds can be problematic.

Weeds compete for nutrients and water, but they can be related closely to many of the annual and perennial bedding plants, so choosing an herbicide that kills weeds — while being safe on desired plants — is more difficult.

Herbicide labels list weed types controlled by the active ingredients' modes of action or behaviors in the plant. Some herbicides are effective on broadleaf weeds but not on sedges, while others control two weed types but not all three. Therefore, proper weed identification is an important first step to ensure desired weed-control results.

Look for opportunities to use herbicide combinations, commonly in granular formulations, to increase the spectrum of control. When using a sprayable formulation, for example, check the label to see whether mixing multiple products to control a greater number of weeds with one application is recommended.

The most effective and economical weed control method is prevention. Preemergent herbicides



WEB EXTRA!

For information about preemergent strategies, postemergent herbicides and weed characteristics, visit www.landscapemanagement.net/weedcosts.

help prevent seeds from germinating but are not active on established weeds. They're commonly used to prevent annual grasses and broadleaf weeds.

Before you can prevent growth, you must eliminate weeds that have germinated. Hand-weeding or postemergent herbicide spot-spray treatments are recommended before making new or repeat preemergent applications.

Preemergent herbicides are available in granular and liquid formulations. Granular formulations tend to be less damaging when used on bedding plants. Uniform applications should be made when plant foliage is dry to prevent the herbicide from binding to foliage. The application should be timed before seeds germinate and where irrigation is available, or when rainfall is expected within a few days of the application. This is important because water must carry the herbicide into the soil where it creates a barrier to weed germination.

Once an application is made, control typically lasts two months. An herbicide's activity length in a specific region can be monitored efficiently when lawn care managers return to customers within a five- to eight-week cycle.

Once an herbicide program is put into action, it's important to manage weeds in nearby turf to prevent depositing weed seed and vegetative parts of weeds from moving into landscape

areas. Weed management in lawns and landscapes should work in concert to eliminate a customer's overall weed problem.

With awareness and experience, you'll become more familiar with the herbicide products available for weed

control and how to develop a plan. Use caution when applying herbicides and always read and follow chemical labels and manufacturer recommendations. LHM

KALMOWITZ is a market and technical specialist for BASF Professional Turf & Ornamentals.

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Implementing a proper weed management program can produce beautiful results.

PHOTOS COURTESY: BASF



The naked truth about marketing

A recent television advertisement for New Zealand Air features employees dressed only in body paint and smiles. The message is there's nothing hidden about the airline's fees. Fees are full frontal.

The ad campaign and accompanying safety message for passengers are done in good taste – at least in the fact there isn't anything you can see in the videos you don't already see on the beach or around a swimming pool. A pair of luggage handlers haul their, ahem, baggage into the belly of a plane. A flight attendant with strategically placed coffee cups pushes the drink cart down the aisle much to the surprise of unsuspecting passengers. A pair of pilots walking through the terminal catches the eyes of two women in the waiting area. The elder of the two leans over to her friend and says, "I do love a man in uniform." (www.youtube.com/watch?v=eID38pJX7iE)

The commercials are playful, and they've accomplished what they were designed to do – capture people's attention, hit a major pressure point and get them focused on, and interested in, a product. What do you do to keep your company's name on the minds of customers in your market?

In our jaded, seen-it-all society, it's often dif-

ficult to distract prospects away from their busy lives to focus on your message. A few famous examples come to mind of companies that have done it well. Apple's seminal Orwellian, Big Brother IBM-busting commercial only aired once, but remains one of the most memorable TV spots of all time. Wendy's "Where's the Beef" series spawned laughs and numerous jokes, but the message stuck with consumers.

Of course not all memorable ads are on the boob tube. Clothing designer Calvin Klein and retailer Abercrombie & Fitch have made headlines with scantily clad models adorning billboards, print advertisements and catalogs.

We've written a lot about marketing throughout the years. There are many schools of thought and nearly as many methods to draw a tech-savvy audience into your world. And the Internet continues to expand our reach. (It also provides many more distractions.) Facebook, YouTube, flickr, digg, del.icio.us, Twitter, fark, stumbleupon — the list goes on. Reading a recent story about a national news Web site listed half a dozen ways to share the story and a link that offered 55 additional methods to disseminate the content to other users. Digital is the new word of mouth.

It's an age-old adage that sex sells. Some of the aforementioned citations prove that point. I'm not suggesting you strip down to your boxers for your next brochure (though if you do, you might earn a mention somewhere in our magazine). And you're not likely to see the editors of *Landscape Management* do so. We're trying to attract readers, not scare them away.

I'm wondering how far you're willing to go to turn the heads in your neighborhoods. What's the most outrageous or unusual way you've tried to reach new or existing clients? If you're willing to share your secrets, e-mail me your most effective and unusual marketing campaigns (along with images), and we'll give you due props here.

I'm wondering how far you're willing to go to **turn the heads in your neighborhoods**. What's the most outrageous or unusual way you've tried to reach new or existing clients?



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RTV500 — Starts quicker. Runs quieter. Stops smoother. This all-purpose utility vehicle packs a powerful 15.8 HP Kubota-built gasoline engine, yet is small enough to fit into the back of a long bed pickup.



B26 TLB



Z200 Series



RTV500

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Charlie King founded King GREEN in 1987 in the basement of his home with the help of his wife, Barbara, and his late father, Alfred King. Although the company's administrative headquarters are in Gainesville, GA, it depends on wherever King is at that day. His company offers a range of lawn care and structural pest control services.

How did you enter the lawn care business? I wandered into the lawn care business by accident. In 1978, I graduated from the University of Georgia and was working in a grocery chain as a management trainee. A friend of mine recently started in the lawn care industry and asked me to try it out. I wasn't even looking for a career, but I found one.

Give us an idea of your typical day. I don't have one, and that's what I like best about my business and lifestyle. I sprayed from dawn to dusk in the early years. Now, I may be meeting with customers or checking lawns. We recently started a pest control division, and I'm learning that science. It's like starting all over again. I also spend time training and working with employees.

North Georgia suffered through one of its worst droughts in 2007 and 2008. How did it and the resulting watering ban affect your company? The drought exposed every weakness and strength in our company. We coped by

communicating, educating and by listening to our customers. We manipulated programs and were able to get through the drought with a minimum of impact to our customer base. But between the drought and the weak economy, we got hit harder than we'd have liked.

Our response to the depressed economy has been to service the accounts harder than ever, be patient and listen to our customers. If a customer needs to skip a service, we don't make a big deal about it.

How's your season going so far? Business is flat. We have few new homeowners moving in, and people are watching what they spend. Homeowners, apartments, commercial properties — it doesn't matter because it's across the board. It started last fall because of economic conditions, and the drought didn't help.

As you look into the future, what do you see? The next five to 10 years will be an interesting time for our company. I'm 54, my vice president and partner, Greg Wagner, is close to 50, and we're preparing a new generation of people ready to assume the helm. My daughter Jennifer joined us this January, and she's excited about the future, as are the other younger employees who've been with us. We have a succession plan.

Tell us about kudzu control. Kudzu is a vine from Japan. It grows 6 in. a day, but a good broadleaf herbicide will kill it. If you have a 4-hour job, by the time you finish, you can see it dying.

Kudzu is an annual that dies off with a frost, but it comes back the next year and will swallow an acre of pine trees if you let it. We get calls to kill it on the back of properties, near apartments and places like that.

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY: King GREEN, Gainesville, GA

FOUNDED: 1987

PRINCIPAL: Charlie King, president

NUMBER OF LOCATIONS: 4

SERVICE AREA: Gainesville, Athens, Watkinsville and Atlanta, GA, and Charlotte, NC

EMPLOYEES: 70

SERVICES OFFERED: commercial, residential and sports turf care; tree and shrub service, specialty services (kudzu control, seeding, renovation, aeration); King GREEN IPM termite and pest control

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Metropolitan Atlanta Landscape and Turf Association founding member (president, 1997-1998), PLCAA board member, Georgia Turf-grass Association board member (2000-2005)

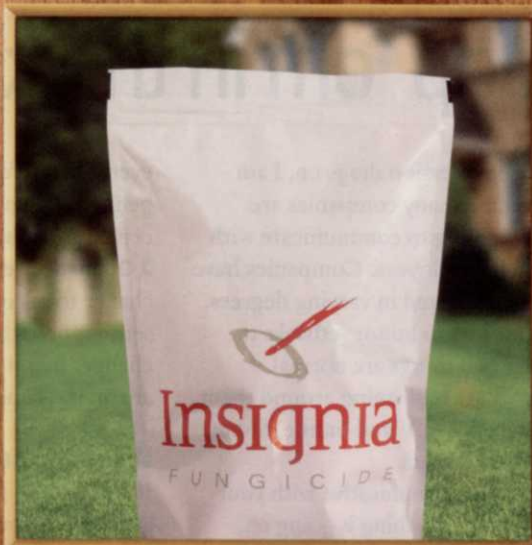
HOBBIES: fishing, camping and flying a small plane

FAMILY: wife Barbara and two daughters, Jennifer and Amber

WEBSITE: KingGREEN.com

BUSINESS IS FLAT. HOMEOWNERS, APARTMENTS, COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES – IT DOESN'T MATTER ..."

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH



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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

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

To grow, keep 'em in the know

As our recession drags on, I am finding many companies are struggling to communicate with their employees. Companies have been affected in varying degrees, from severe business loss to minor setbacks to some moving along as if things are normal.

Employees see what's happening around them, as well as the bad news on TV and online. Some even still read the newspapers.

In light of this, stay communicative with your employees. They know something is going on, and they want to know how it could (or will) affect them. Fear of the unknown can be very unsettling and disruptive to your work force, and can lead to deteriorating morale and productivity.

Communications should be:

- ▶ **Honest.** During times like these, you need the full trust and commitment of your work force. If layoffs are possible, warn them — but at the same time tell them what you're doing to avoid job cuts and how they can help stave off layoffs.
- ▶ **Consistent.** Do not go out and paint a rosy picture to keep everyone happy, then be put in the position of having to dribble out bad news. You will lose your credibility, and that leads to trouble. Avoid mixed messages: For instance, do not tell

everyone, "We need to cut back and watch our pennies," then do something that could be perceived as extravagant, such as buy a new car.

▶ **Open.** Seek employee input, and give them a chance to ask questions — whether it be in group settings or with their managers — as to how changes might affect them. Make sure all managers are on the same page with their messaging.

When the belt tightens ...

If you reach a point where you must cut back, here are some suggestions:

- ▶ **Be objective.** Look at your organizational chart — without names — and see which positions can be eliminated. If you look at it with names, emotions involving particular people will influence your willingness to keep or eliminate each position.
- ▶ **Promote from within.** Once you've trimmed your organizational chart, fill it with qualified people from your existing staff. Job qualifications are important because they will help prevent filling positions with favorites.
- ▶ **Cut deeply enough the first time.** There is nothing more painful or unsettling to your company than progressive cutbacks.
- ▶ **Keep your finger on the pulse of employee morale.** Employees will be watching and evaluating your decisions. Beware of favoritism and of protecting sacred cows, especially divisions that have been longtime "loss centers." This can lead to serious morale issues, as well as create a disgruntled faction within your company that could undermine what you're trying to do. It also chips away at the bottom line.
- ▶ **Keep a positive attitude.** Approach this process as an opportunity to get the right people in the right places to strengthen your company for the rebound. Build on the successful implementation of your plan and create a positive team dynamic. Constant, consistent communication is key. Keep people focused on a more positive future — not a depressing present, if that is the case.

Approach this process as an opportunity to **get the right people in the right places** to strengthen your company for the rebound.