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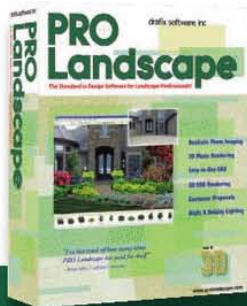
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## THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

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

# Mid-sized battle pricing pressures

It's hard to make money these days, but it's particularly challenging for mid-sized companies — those in the \$1 million to \$5 million annual revenue range. Aggressive pricing by players large and small is squeezing the middle, where overhead usually is a larger percentage of revenue.

Addressing this pricing/overhead problem is a matter of survival for some. For the rest, it's at least a matter of reassessing their business plans. Survival and success for the rest of this year and next for mid-sized companies requires focus, tenacity and no small amount of courage to implement changes.

How tough is it? This year, commercial maintenance contract retention has declined from typical 90% rates to 80% and lower in many markets. In the past few weeks alone, I've witnessed commercial maintenance jobs going for half of last year's prices. And in the residential design-build segment, mid-sized jobs — once everyone's bread-and-butter — have disappeared, leaving a few large jobs and several small ones. This has caused budget shortfalls of up to 25% in revenue.

As demand dries up and supply increases, prices drop. Commercial customers seem willing to "try anyone" who can provide a low price — triggering surprise cancellation notices that upset cash flow. Residential customers are seeking multiple bids and negotiating everything, lengthening sales cycles and reducing margins.

To survive, landscape companies must play defense and offense equally aggressively. While cost cutting is key, it's often only a short-term fix.

Besides, most companies already are lean in staffing, which is the primary overhead cost.

### Defend your livelihood

Get in front of your commercial maintenance customers to understand their budget pressures and propose contract adjustments in services and frequency of delivery to address price concerns. Then pick your battles where you need to rebid to retain the work.

You might need to "buy" some jobs just to keep them. And you will need to let some go to save your margins.

On the residential side, accelerate your design and closing processes to tighten selling cycles. Too many jobs are lost when customers have time to entertain multiple bids. Focus sales staff on making price concessions early in the process to get signatures and deposits.

### Score big in the mid-market

In commercial maintenance, go after mid-size jobs. Few are effectively and consistently calling on this part of the market — and it's large.

Leave the large jobs to the low bidders for now. Ramp up your sales staff's new-appointment activity. Double your estimating capacity by using part-time and production staff for measurement and data input.

Go after the middle of the residential market as well.

Mid-market homeowners are easy to find by ZIP code. Use monthly direct mail and flyer campaigns with coupons and specific offers for maintenance projects for fall and winter, promoting value purchasing instead of pleasure purchasing. Examples include lawn renovations, drainage fixes, tree removal and irrigation improvements.

In an economy like this, when the customer owns the power to drive pricing, winning new sales while retaining key business is important — not only financially, but also for morale.

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In commercial maintenance, **go after mid-sized jobs**. Few are effectively and consistently calling on this part of the market — and **it's large**.



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Tupelo, home to 36,000 people in northeast, MS, is best known as the birthplace of Elvis Aaron Presley (1935-1977). But it's also home to lawn care pro **Harry Collins** who, decked out in colorful costume, also entertained audiences for years while serving as the auctioneer to raise funds during annual Green Industry Conferences. Today, Collins and his talented team are "peacocking" — proudly showing off their work and hot pink rides.

**How long have you been in the lawn care business, and how did you get started?**

I have been in the lawn care business since 1989, when I went to work with my partner, Pete Poland, who has been in the landscaping business since 1982. I started as a construction manager and shortly after started our lawn maintenance division.

**Describe the state of the economy in and around Tupelo, MS.**

Our economy has suffered like most of the rest of the country; however, we simply refuse to let it affect us. We are the premier landscape design, installation and maintenance provider in our area, and we continue to strive to do high-quality work at competitive prices.

**Has the construction of the Toyota manufacturing plant (the car maker's 11th in the United States) had any effect on your local economy?**

The Toyota plant is under construction and estimated to open in 2011. We have been doing work for several

suppliers who already are opening offices and look forward to the growth opportunities offered by Toyota. We feel Toyota will want a top-notch facility and we will, without a doubt, be the company to provide that level of service.

**What steps have you taken to keep your company busy and profitable during this economic downturn?**

We took a hard look at budgeting, jobs, employees and processes, then tightened our bootstraps and kept doing what we have always done: "Focus on doing high-quality work and keeping our customers happy." We feel the rest will take care of itself.

**What do you think customers appreciate most about your company? After serving this area for more than 20 years, our customers know they**

can count on us. We are a full-service company with landscape architects, landscape contractors, turfgrass professionals, highly skilled employees and a certified arborist. Our people are trained well and have the knowledge to provide better services, which always boils down to higher-quality results. In the long run, our customers always win.

**Your company uses pink service vehicles. Tell us what you feel that does for your company.** Our customers know who we are, and everyone knows the guys in the pink trucks do the best job. We get a lot of jokes and attention from our trucks, especially when we are out of town. Without a doubt, pink trucks help people identify us, but it's our 20 years of hard work that makes them count on us.

## AT A GLANCE

**COMPANY:** Landscape Services, Inc.'s Total Lawn Care, Tupelo, MS

**FOUNDED:** 1982

**PRINCIPALS:** Pete Poland, Harry Collins, Chris Winders

**NUMBER OF LOCATIONS:** 1

**EMPLOYEES:** 25

**SERVICES OFFERED:** Landscape design, installation and maintenance

**HOBBIES:** "I love old tractors."

**FAMILY:** Wife Kay and three children: Patrick, Amelia (a certified arborist) and Tatum ("hardest-working part-time employee")

**WEBSITE:** PinkTrucks.com

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## BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author is a partner with the Wilson-Oyler Group consultancy. Visit [www.wilson-oyler.com](http://www.wilson-oyler.com).

# Accountability builds productivity

**M**any landscape contractors go to conferences, read books and hire consultants, seeking the “silver bullet” that will make them instantly successful.

Many use the knowledge they acquire to develop great operational and administrative procedures, training programs, comprehensive safety programs, etc. But all too often, disappointment and frustration follow when they are unable to obtain the results they want.

I have seen a lot of companies invest loads of money trying to achieve results through trendy management processes like “Management by Objectives,” “Total Quality Management” and “Lean,” and all too often they do not achieve the financial and organizational improvements the business owners expected.

Many do a lot of things correctly: They invest in developing extensive short- and long-term plans annually. They make follow-up lists and charts.

They pledge — and attempt — to stay disciplined and on track. Unfortunately for many, if not most, the wheels fall off their initiatives before they demonstrate sustained improvement.

Why does this happen? I think there’s one common, primary reason: *accountability* — or more specifically, the lack of organizational accountability.

### Chain of command

The most-common reason for failure to hold people accountable is “chain of command” discipline — the ability to ensure everyone knows their roles and jobs to be done.

In an organization where there is accountability, a crew leader who allows an employee to work unsafely will face disciplinary actions at least as severe as those faced by the offending employee. If the safety oversight continues to happen, the crew leader’s supervisor also will face disciplinary action.

Too often, leniency is granted to tenured employees. Some, for example, are not sufficiently computer literate. It affects their performance, yet many organizations look the other way.

Truth be told, many organizations mold job descriptions to meet tenured employees’ skill levels, rather than mold the employees to meet their organizational needs. What’s the message here? Simple: We don’t hold our people accountable to perform their jobs.

While a lack of eye protection or computer training might seem like minor infractions, dig deeper and you’ll find they are symptomatic of a lack of overall accountability — and productivity. Once a company creates and enforces detailed policies and procedures, weaves pivotal responsibilities into each job description and disciplines to ensure compliance, good things start to happen and the organization starts to grow toward its potential.

Remember: Accountability must start at the top and permeate all levels. Equally important, there can be no “sacred cows.”

## 7 STEPS TO BETTER ACCOUNTABILITY

1. Develop a comprehensive business plan that clearly identifies the direction and objectives of your organization.
2. Create a comprehensive organizational policy with a well-defined organizational chart, detailed job descriptions and an embedded progressive discipline policy.
3. Implement a wage and salary policy that is based on skills and responsibilities.
4. Link incentive plans to the success of the business plan, detailing the pivotal duties and success attributes of each job description.
5. Perform an objective, non tenured-biased assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of all key personnel, as they relate both to their current roles in the company and their future potential roles.
6. Once completed, build a skill set improvement plan for each employee, including a development timeline.
7. Last but not least, implement a process for the systematic purging, reassignments, eliminations and replacement of pivotal employees. This also must include a recruiting strategy that ensures the building of an absolutely accountable team.

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## FIGHT plant disease

**PLANNING, PROPER IRRIGATION KEY TO CONTROLLING DISEASES IN THE LANDSCAPE.** BY BRIAN ALBRIGHT

**N**OTHING MARS the appearance of an otherwise attractive landscape like yellow, brown or wilted plants. Fungal and bacterial diseases can lay waste to ornamentals and perennial gardens if left uncontrolled, leaving plants deformed, stunted, defoliated or worse.

With proper planning and plant care, though, many common diseases can be effectively treated or avoided altogether.

This year, the eastern half of the U.S. has experienced unseasonably cool and wet summer weather, leading to an increase in fungal infections in many landscapes and gardens.

"We are seeing more bacterial problems than we normally do, as well as foliar leaf spots and blights on perennials," says Sharon Douglas, head of the Department of Plant Pathology and Ecology at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station.

"The weather has exaggerated the diseases appearing this year," adds Margery Daughtrey, senior extension associate at Cornell's Depart-

ment of Plant Pathology. "These diseases are always around, but are much more obvious when you have this kind of rainy weather."

That's why it is important to be able to identify and treat the most common problems, and care for plants in a way that's unlikely to contribute to future infections.

### Common disease types

The most common problems in the landscape are typically foliar leaf spots or blights. Leaf spot can be caused by both fungi and bacteria, and result in dark blotches or spots on foliage of perennials like irises, phloxes or hellebores.

Gray mold (*botrytis*) frequently appears on flowers, and is common on roses and geraniums. "Gray mold is very tough to control, especially when we have weather like this," says Steve Nameth, professor and associate chair of the Department of Plant Pathology at The Ohio State University.



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Bacterial leafspot on coralbell (*Heuchera*) can ruin the decorative foliage that make the plants popular.

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Mildews thrive in the type of cool, wet conditions that have been present most of this spring and summer. Powdery mildew can be found on a wide variety of plants, including phlox, lungworts and peony, and causes plants to develop white and gray blotches on leaves. Downey mildew, on the other hand, appears as a fuzzy white or gray growth on the undersurface of leaves, buds, flowers and stems. It's often more difficult to spot and to control, and can affect black-eyed susan, speedwell, bluets, dead nettle, roses, and other plants.

Leaf and stem rust, as the name implies, causes rust-colored spots on leaves, and can be seen on hollyhocks, asters, pansy, phlox, hibiscus, and daylily.

More serious diseases, such as root, stem and crown rots, will make plants to turn yellow and droop, and often stunt growth. Vascular wilts, caused by fungi and bacteria, block water within the vessels of the plant, causing serious growth impairment or death.

Ornamental shrubs and trees can also be afflicted by mildews, leaf spot and wilt, along with Anthracnose (which causes spotting on leaves and defoliation), heart rot (which decays trunks and limbs), cankers, leaf curl viruses on ornamental trees, and monilinia fungus (brown rot) on fruit trees.

### Proper planting can prevent infection

The best way to fight plant diseases is to avoid or minimize the risk of infection, starting with the initial planting.

"So much of prevention starts right at the beginning," Douglas says. "You have to select the right plant for the right site, and that can go a long way to help manage disease, regardless of the weather."

Plants should be placed in the correct soil and light conditions, and at the correct depth. Space plants far enough apart to promote air circulation, which can prevent many fungal infections.

Inspect purchased plants for any signs of disease, and try to install cultivars that have been bred to resist common pathogens.

Don't mulch too closely to stems or crowns, and keep plants properly fertilized. Also keep weeds out of the garden. "Not only are weeds competing for nutrients, but they also create an environment that tends to hold more moisture in," Nameth says.

By far the biggest contributor to many plant diseases is improper water management. While no one can control the weather during a rainy season, they can control the way they water plants under normal circumstances.

That means no overhead watering of plants in the evening, which leaves foliage wet for long periods and encourages the growth of many leaf spots, blights and mildews. "Irrigation should be done in the morning," Nameth says. "That's a hard one for people to follow, because it's nice and cool in the evening and people want to be outside. But if that foliage stays wet overnight, it's a disaster." He adds that over watering is another problem, and can encourage the development of root and stem rots.

Keep the garden clean, removing dead foliage at the end of the season and carefully disposing of any already infected plants or cuttings.

*continued on page 40*



Anthracnose on dogwood (top); Heterosporium leaf spot on iris (middle); downy mildew on Lamium (bottom) and powdery mildew on peony (left) are common diseases in landscape plantings.



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 FIGHT DISEASE

continued from page 38

"You should anticipate problems for the next season," Daughtrey says. "Any diseases you're seeing with higher impact this year will produce inoculum that will lead to more problems next season unless you are well protected. Find out what the proper timing is for treatment, and make sure you treat plants before you see a lot of infection."

**Rx for plant diseases**

Once a disease has set in, in most cases it is important to prune away the affected parts of the plant and properly discard the clippings to avoid spreading the infection.

Because many of the common diseases are caused by fungi, a broad-spectrum, copper-based fungicide can be used for many pathogens. However, applying them effectively in wet weather can be a challenge. Many chemical treatments are also designed as protectants, and have to be applied before the disease sets in.

"You have to be confident that if you apply a fungicide, it will stay on long enough to be effective," Nameth says, adding that chemicals should really be used as a last resort.

Perennials can generally tolerate many diseases, and when they do become infected (as is the case with rust or powdery mildew) the damage is often aesthetic — spots, or wilted or yellow leaves.

"In some cases, the disease will kind of pass and you have it every year anyhow," Nameth says. "There's no need to treat the plant. You get powdery mildew on lilacs, for example, but the flowers are usually gone by the time you see it." Other diseases, like vascular wilts, typically don't



**Monilia on a cherry tree (above) and septoria leaf spot on phlox (left) are fungal infections that can be treated.**




respond to chemical treatments.

For more serious ailments, like root rot, the soil has to be treated and the plants removed. Because many of these rots are plant specific, it is recommended to not replant the same species in an area where there has already been a disease outbreak.

Because the fungi that cause these diseases can live in the soil for some time, planting a disease-resistant cultivar may be the best option to replace damaged or dying plants that have been infected with a rot or a vascular wilt.

Douglas recommends keeping good records of what's going on in a landscape. "If you have a perennial garden, and you know you had septoria leaf spot on rudbeckia last year, you need to watch those plants for the first symptoms of recurrence and either spray or monitor them closely."

"Whenever we speak about diseases on plants, you have to remember that diseases are the exception, not the rule. By and large most plants are healthy," Douglas adds. "You have to have that disease triangle — a susceptible plant, the right environment and a pathogen." 



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