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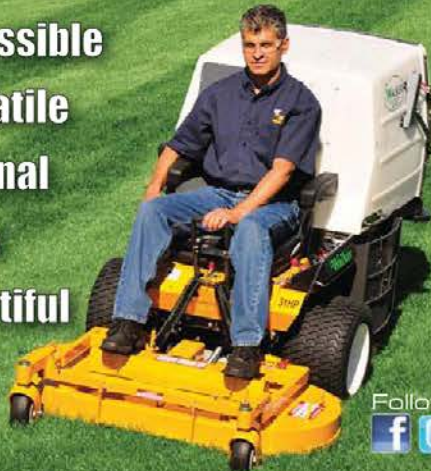


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# MAILBOX



## Solutions for stress

Once again, you wrote a great editorial on stress and overload ("Detach — It's Refreshing Every Time" in the February 2011 issue of *Landscape Management*). We are all stressed from time to time.

I have another solution to stress reduction that wasn't talked about and that looks at the solution to the problem that causes the stress. Problems without solutions are one of the big stress issues. I realize this sounds simple and few solutions are simple. Here is what I mean: I have watched a very successful businessman in Kansas City work his business for 25 years. I know him well because 30 years ago, we worked together in the restaurant business. He is the most focused individual I have ever met.

Let's call this

individual Bill. When Bill encounters a problem, he does not rest until he comes up with a solution. He has no fear of failure in his quest to find the solution. In the process of finding the solution, he decides if the solution is economically feasible. If part of the analysis is that it is too expensive, he abandons the project. This does not occur though until a lot of energy and intensity has been put forth.

Where am I going with this? Some major stress issues in this industry are staffing, managing money, marketing, and the agronomics of what we do. Solutions are available for each of these issues. The solution to almost every problem I encounter causes me to change in some way. As I watch others in our industry struggle, I find that they are often unwilling to change.

I have watched the trade magazines change over the years. I still like reading a hard copy. My favorite articles are still when you feature companies and give a thorough background on them. That is

one of the main ways I learn. Keep up the good work.

— **Larry Ryan**, president, *Ryan Lawn & Tree*, Kansas City, MO

## Pricing pressure

I just finished reading your article "Sizing Up The Challenge" by industry consultant Kevin Kehoe in *Landscape Management* magazine (September 2010). I was struck by how similar my company is to the example you gave and how aligned my goals are to increasing my enterprise value with your example.

I agree that the old way of doing business is dead! We have never seen so much price pressure in 20 years of business!

— **Thomas M Wood, CLP**, *Wood Landscape Services*, Hilliard, OH



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# The search for something *more*

**R**ecently, my husband purchased a jacket from [Moosejaw.com](http://Moosejaw.com), an online extension of a chain of stores based in Detroit. He stumbled upon the site because it was listed as an approved vendor for The North Face apparel brand and price-matched other vendors.

What made him want to buy from this site was a “Mystery Gift” promotion they advertised. If you spent a certain amount, they sent you some surprise freebies customers were raving about.

His customer service experience from the moment he hit the “confirm your order” button, was extremely positive. It started with his order confirmation e-mail: “Way to go. You’ve won the best e-mail receipt we’ve sent out all day. We recommend either printing this receipt and framing it in your foyer or using it as a screensaver.”

Then his order arrived on time with a note: “If you are reading this note, you should be super happy. First, you received your order, reading is fun and getting something in the mail (even if you bought it yourself) has got to make the day better.”

Then, there was the mystery gift: more than \$100 worth of free merchandise in his specific size — Moosejaw-branded t-shirts, a sweatshirt, a flashlight and a keychain. It was a complete treat (and free advertising for the company). They even encourage customers to send in photos of themselves wearing the gear and promote those on their website.

The experience was so much fun we are still talking about it almost a month later. Revisiting their website, I came across their mission statement: “At Moosejaw, we want to make shopping as much fun as backpacking the Chilkoot trail, climbing in Yosemite, mountaineering in the Himalayas or playing red rover with the neighbors ...” Their current promotion tells customers for every one item they purchase their staff will dedicate one hour of their time to putting art back in Detroit schools.

The company takes a common, everyday experience like buying a jacket or shoes and turns it into

something fun customers can feel good about.

The company inspires emotions. And emotions cause reactions, points out Jim Kukral, a business marketing consultant. Reactions create word-of-mouth, and this brings revenue.

In the age of so many free marketing tools (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), what can you do to showcase your talents and create emotion in your customers so they tell more people about you? What can you do to take yourself a little less seriously but still provide content and education? “Everybody knows a lot about something,” Kukral says. “The problem many have is they devalue that knowledge.”

The outdoor spaces you create and maintain are meant to be lived in and enjoyed. Showcase your work, professionalism and personality via videos or blogs. Share customer experiences in their well-manicured spaces or recently completed installations.

If the idea of original writing and video scare you, Kukral says “don’t let your ego get in the way of promoting your business and making money.” No one is perfect and the amateur video will show customers you are real. “Videos that are too professional today make people feel like they are watching an advertisement,” he explains. To prove my point, I tried it, too. Check out *Landscape Management’s* YouTube page at [YouTube.com/LandscapeMgmt](http://YouTube.com/LandscapeMgmt) and blog at [LandscapeManagement.blogspot.com](http://LandscapeManagement.blogspot.com). Everything we’ve done on there is free education and only took our time and imagination.

Being a 13-year landscape industry veteran, I have collected a lot of knowledge that doesn’t always make it into *Landscape Management’s* pages. That’s why 27-year industry veteran Ron Hall started the LM blog in 2005. Responding to encouragement from him, I also started my own editor’s blog at [MyBigGreenPen.com](http://MyBigGreenPen.com). This is the knowledge we have we can bring to you. It’s not always easy writing extra copy or turning a typical interview into a video, but it’s important, and it’s what we can do to bring *more* to our readers.

How can you bring *more* to your customers?



## PRIMAL *appeal*



for their own outdoor rooms. According to the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), outdoor living areas are still quite desirable, though homeowners are getting a bit more selective about what they plan to include. For many, fire and water features still top the list.

So what's behind the popularity of the fire and water feature as one design? Perhaps we can attribute it to human nature, says Jim Lapides of ASLA. "I really think the appeal is a primal one," he says.



Fire dances on pool water and along its edge at Cleveland's Great Big Home & Garden Expo.

"While we don't rely on water features for drinking or fire pits for warmth and protection, I think there is a deep comfort they provide that's an essential part of human nature.

Combining fire and water acts as a perfect example of 'two plus two equals five.' You have the juxtaposition of fire and water in one place, plus the prehistoric appeal of those two elements."

Barry Morton, president and CEO of Ohio-based Morton's Landscape Development Co., the company responsible for the landscaping around the

*continued on page 8*

Fire and water give outdoor living spaces an edge.

BY CASEY PAYTON

**A**t Cleveland's Great Big Home & Garden Expo, held in February, the model home's fire and water feature was a big hit. The combination of two elements that seem like they couldn't possibly go *together* is intriguing. And even if not incorporated as one feature, they are both elements that homeowners are requesting





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and water elements aren't incorporated as one big feature, individually they're both quite popular for outdoor living areas. In fact, the ASLA's 2011 "Residential Trends Survey" found that fire pits and fireplaces were at the top of the trend list. Around 94% of respondents rated fire pits and fireplaces as "somewhat" or "very popular" for 2011. Decorative water elements such as ornamental pools, splash pools, waterfalls, grottos, water runnels or bubblers got about 85%.

"It's soothing to sit on your deck or patio and hear the sound of water," says Morton. "That's just a relaxing and soothing

sound people like to hear. At this year's home show we did some booth space and took a simple 6-ft. round tub with a 3-ft. granite boulder and drilled a hole through it. We ran a pipe through and let some water bubble up. It just had that nice sound, and people 'oohed and ahhed' and made quite a big deal over it, even though it was very simplistic. You can definitely do a simple water feature that's cost-effective and still get a great response."

Fire also seems to always draw a crowd. Everyone gravitates toward a fire pit or fireplace. So incorporating both will really enhance the outdoor space. "Personally I think the more innovative and creative designs visually combine fire and water, even if those specific features are physically separated," says Lapides. "It creates a powerful effect without necessarily calling too much attention to this very juxtaposed idea of fire and water."

Given their appeal to human nature, fire and water are likely to stay put on homeowners' radar. **LM**

*Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscape-related topics.*

*continued from page 6*

Great Big Home Show's model home, says they did a fire and water element at last year's home show and recognized then that it was a crowd pleaser. "The fire and water together visually wows people," says Morton. "It may seem complex, but it doesn't have to be. It's just a gas line that bubbles out of the water and can be lit with fire."

Morton says it's certainly something other landscapers might consider offering and it's easier to install than they may realize. "The biggest challenge is making sure you run the gas lines properly, and I definitely recommend using a certified plumber," he advises. "You also want to make sure you have the proper shut-offs. It's definitely something that clients respond to and a popular feature."

And Lapides believes the trend will only continue to grow. "I think we'll see these designs being offered more frequently — especially among high-end clients," he says. "The interest is certainly growing. The question is how many will actually incorporate these designs in the current economic climate?"

The economy has definitely played a role in homeowners' scaling down their

“ PERSONALLY I THINK THE MORE INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE DESIGNS VISUALLY COMBINE FIRE AND WATER, EVEN IF THOSE SPECIFIC FEATURES ARE PHYSICALLY SEPARATED ”

— JIM LAPIDES, ASLA

outdoor living areas. But it seems many are still doing them — just not as elaborately. Instead of having all the bells and whistles, homeowners are picking and choosing what they want. Fortunately, the "wow factor" of combining fire and water can be achieved even with a simplistic design, says Morton. "It doesn't have to be a large feature," he continues. "It can be very simple and small and still get the impressive effect."

### Enhancing the outdoors

With more products on the market that combine fire and water into one feature, such as fire sitting in a fountain, it's definitely becoming easier for landscape designers to offer. But even if the fire





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# PROGRESS

## Enriching the soil

Taking care of what lies beneath can make contractors' work on clients' properties more effective.

In 50 years, some things just don't change; in fact, they become even more crucial to the job than they were before.

As you look over the typical landscape of one of your clients and see the turf, shrubs and perennials directly in front of you, glancing up toward the trees and taking in the hardscapes, water features and even irrigation systems that come to life in the early hours, there is something on this site that should be high on your priority list to ensure all the other property aesthetics thrive.

This magic bullet is none other than the soil. A client's landscape is more than the plant materials visible on the property. What lies beneath the plants can boost the effectiveness of all the work landscape contractors do every day.

A June 1966 issue of *Weeds, Trees & Turf* focused a feature story on "Improving Soils," and many of those tips are still relevant today. Especially concerning the growth of turf, a rich soil can produce a thriving plant that requires fewer inputs.

As Roylyn L. Voss, a specialist in soil management from the University of Hawaii, Honolulu, wrote then, "improvement of soils for turf depends on early anticipation of problems and diagnosis of a condition before it starts."

In lawn soil pH tests, one of the most common problems found is low pH, otherwise known as acidic soils. For instance, in more than 24,000 lawn soil samples analyzed by the Virginia Tech laboratory in 1987, more than 51%

tested less than 6.0 pH. (The optimum pH level for turf is in the 6.0 to 7.0 range, according to John Street with The Ohio State University Extension, Columbus, OH.) More importantly, 28% of the samples tested less than 5.5 pH, a level at which the growth of turf can be adversely affected. The primary cause of acidic soils is the leaching of base nutrients from the soil, which tends to occur more frequently in areas of heavy rainfall or on heavily-irrigated turf, Street points out.

As soil "nutrients become less available, the lawn's color, vigor and ability to resist (or recover from) heat, drought or traffic stress will be reduced," Street explains. "Applications of enough lime to raise the soil pH above 6.0 can increase the availability of these nutrients, thus making it easier to maintain the quality and vigor of the lawn."

When applying lime to clients' lawns, landscape professionals should make sure they follow soil analysis recommendations.

Most soil test reports will indicate the lime requirement in pounds of pure calcium carbonate per acre or per 1,000 square feet, Street says. "Since most liming products are not likely to be pure calcium carbonate, calculate how much product to apply to the lawn," he explains. "To do this, find the number on the bag label, which is called the calcium carbonate equivalent; it will be stated as a percentage.

Next find the liming requirement stated in the soil test report."

Using these two numbers, Street recommends the following calculation: Liming requirement (from soil test) calcium carbonate equivalent = amount of product divided by acre (or 1,000 square feet).

Lime can be applied at any time during the year, except for when the turf is wilted or frost-covered, Street points out. "The turf should be irrigated after application in order to wash any lime off of the turfgrass leaves," he adds.

"Lime should be applied only when soil testing indicates it is needed," Street emphasizes. "Yearly lime applications without making a soil test are strongly discouraged because alkaline or high pH conditions may develop."

Many landscape companies have bolstered their lawn care programs by incorporating soil analyses. While soil testing services themselves aren't likely to be large profit centers, they can help contractors acquire new customers who are impressed by a more scientific approach or retain current customers by taking the extra step necessary to keep their landscapes and lawns healthy.



Keeping soil rich can boost plant vigor and your company's reputation.



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