



want their homes at least to be nice. If people are spending more time at home, they're spending more time in their yards. That translates over to the professional market."

Campanella has seen the same thing at Lawn Dawg.

"It's still doom and gloom on all the radio and TV (programs)," Campanella says. "It seems people are starting to free up the cash a little bit for services like ours that aren't really a necessity.

"Talking to customers, the response I get is, 'the lawn's going to grow, and if it's not fed, it's going to die. If I do it myself, it will cost about the same as having you do it. If I'm going to put in a patio, a deck, a new brick walkway, a new landscape bed, now you're into thousands of dollars. That's what we'll cut back on, but having the lawn fertilized. It just has to be done. Somebody has to do it.'"

And that seems to be showing up in his numbers. From 2009 to 2010 Lawn Dawg's revenue was up about 12%; this year Campanella expects a 20% bump.

"That was our plan of attack to grow the business. The original plan was (to grow) 17-18%," Campanella says. "It's a little bit better than what we expected, but we were gunning for some growth this year anyway. It was really based on last year's positive trend. The previous year we were flat."

VERY LITTLE **LEGISLATION** THAT IS INTRODUCED IS **BASED ON HARD SCIENCE** AT ALL.

— JIM CAMPANELLA, PRESIDENT



Flat might be the new reality for some markets, but lawn care isn't one of them.

"The bright spot that we're hearing, the optimism is very high right now," Bell says. "The assumption is the worst is behind us in our market. The expectation is that things will get better." **LM**

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THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kkehoe@questex.com.

The new normal

Have you asked yourself, “Why am I attending another seminar titled ‘Adapting to the New Normal?’” The very idea implies we accept a future of lower expectations.

I will never be involved in another, without first identifying for the audience the reasons for the “new normal.” Our failure to discuss real causes suggests a bovine acceptance of things — that this is the way things must be for small businesses, and we can do little but cope with it. In fact, we should be talking about more than simply adapting — we should be discussing how to change the circumstances that have created and continue to perpetuate our sad economic situation.

I recently attended a conference where several clearheaded professionals (not the-world-is-ending types) made the case that we are in for an extended run of high unemployment and lower consumer expectations and spending. In other words, things are not fundamentally or materially improving, despite what the stock market is doing. The case is compelling — and if we are paying attention to our own income statements, it is all too obvious. Every industry benchmark, which I have been keeping for the past 20 years, clearly bears this out.

As Table 1 shows, the real problem with lower prices and higher costs is the impact on return on assets. A three-person crew simply earns less revenue and profit than it did three years ago but still needs the same equipment, which is now more expensive and harder to finance. It is becoming increasingly clear that the “new normal” is slow death for many undercapitalized companies.

The causes themselves are also clear: Burdensome government intervention in the economy in the form of shifting tax policy, regulatory statutes and deficit spending is perpetuating an environment where small businesses continue to underperform in terms of growth, profit and return on investment. Look no further than the impact H-2B policy and the healthcare reform issue have on the industry. Regardless of your political persuasion, these are the facts. We cannot ignore them and put our heads in the sand.

According to the clearheaded investors at the conference, the days of a robust U.S. economy producing a rising tide that floats all boats are over. The game we played for the last several decades has been fundamentally turned on its head, given the current and ongoing political circumstances. Without changing these circumstances, we should expect this environment will produce more losers than winners, especially in the small business arena.

Certainly, we must address the short term and take steps to win, but we do have choices in the longer term. We can accept a long-term economy where it’s every man for himself, or we in this very vital segment of the economy (Sub Chapter S small business) can find our voice and actively work — as a coherent group — to change the circumstances instead of merely adapting to them. We can continue to treat the symptoms of low pricing, wage cuts, aging equipment, scarce capital and labor shortages, or we can choose to address the causes.

The stakes are high, and I would be remiss were I to merely address solutions to symptoms without addressing the causes. And so would we all.

TABLE 1: RETURN ON ASSET COMPARISON

Item / Name	Calculation	2005	2011
A / Revenue		\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000
B / Profit		\$120,000	\$70,000
C / Profit percentage	B/A	12%	7%
D / Balance sheet assets		\$250,000	\$325,000
E / Asset turns	A/D	4.00	3.08
F / Return on assets	B/D	48%	22%

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Jeff Hostetler
NFL Quarterback mows his
40-acre estate with a Ventrac.

NFL Champion Discovers Slope Mower



NFL Quarterback, Jeff Hostetler, knows what it takes to be a winner. Hostetler played fifteen years in the league, winning Super Bowl XXV with the Giants. “Being in the NFL, you’re at the top of the line in that profession

and to get there you had to do a lot of work,” says Hostetler. “You have to be **tough, durable** and all of those things I can relate to Ventrac. It is well made, it is **sturdy** and it **performs**. I’m **totally impressed with Ventrac.**”

Hostetler lives outside Morgantown, WV on a 40-acre horse farm. “If you’ve been to West Virginia you realize there is no flat land. So we have a lot of hillsides and challenging areas to cut and mow. I was looking for something that was going to be more **manageable on hillsides** and **safer** than the current tractor that I was using.” That is when Hostetler discovered Ventrac. “You’re sitting low and it has such a great base that there are areas you get in and you hardly even know that you are on a hillside.”




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Patrick Nibler along with partner Paul Bizon started out in 1978 pursuing lawn care customers in the Portland market right before ChemLawn came to the area. Over the years, the pair has added services to accommodate the customer base. Tree and shrub care began in the early '80s; residential maintenance and landscape construction/erosion control in the early '90s and commercial maintenance in the late '90s. *LM* talked with Nibler to see how the company has evolved and where it's going.

How has the business changed in the past few years?

In 2007, we added an interior maintenance unit in Portland. The Portland area was our initial starting point for new services, then we exported them to our branches in Seattle, Eugene and Central California.

The goal and the challenge is to be a resource for almost any landscape service that a residential or commercial customer — some are both — may need.

Where does lawn care fit into your company's services these days?

Lawn care is still a big part of what we do, but as a percentage of our business, it has been eclipsed by the growth of some of our other services — particularly, residential and commercial maintenance.

You've devoted a lot of your personal time to industry associations, especially the former Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA, now part of the Professional Landcare

Network, or PLANET), where you were a longtime board member. What did you learn from the experience?

Any time that you get a chance to meet other people in related businesses, you have a real opportunity to learn from their experiences. Everyone in this industry seems to be willing to share information about their own operations and programs, and that can be a big help. An added bonus is the friends that you make along the way.

Prograss stresses its local ownership, its Pacific Northwest roots, and its commitment to "common sense" sustainability. How does all of that fit together? Our approach has always been to choose materials and methods that provide consistent results for our customers, and utilize low-impact materials. We look for options in application that permit spot spraying vs. broadcast application, or injection vs. spraying the entire canopy.

Integrated pest management (IPM) is the main focus of our ongoing in-house training. We favor biological

and botanical categorized materials for our tree and shrub program, and organic fertilizers blended with conventional fertilizers can benefit the soils in our lawn care programs.

When we looked at Prograss.com, we were amazed by the depth of the company's community service. How does the company find the time and the money to contribute so much?

Community service efforts are a small part of our marketing program, but whether it is a donation to a charity auction or a lawn makeover for an Iraq veteran, we feel that these help with our brand in the local area.

Can you share any industry trends you see developing in the Pacific Northwest?

One positive trend that I see in this economy is an opportunity to talk to more people about careers in landscape services. More talent is out there that will consider moving to another company, or young workers are looking at the industry as an option for employment.

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY: Prograss Landscape Care & Design

WEBSITE: Prograss.com

FOUNDED: 1978

HEADQUARTERS: Wilsonville, OR

TITLE: Patrick Nibler, Operations Manager

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 33

SERVICE AREA: Portland, OR, and Vancouver, WA, metro areas, and communities along the I-5 corridor from Seattle to Northern California

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Longtime member of PLCAA and PLANET, served on PLCAA Board of Directors, Northwest Turfgrass Association Board of Directors

NUMBER OF LOCATIONS: 6

EMPLOYEES: 170 in season

SERVICES: Residential and commercial lawn and landscape maintenance; landscape installation; pruning and plant replacement; irrigation services; home pest control; interior/urban landscaping; athletic field maintenance; erosion control; and environmental services

PERSONAL HIGHLIGHTS/HOBBIES: Golf

FAMILY: Wife, Cheryl, of 33 years, sons Blake, 27, and Andrew, 23



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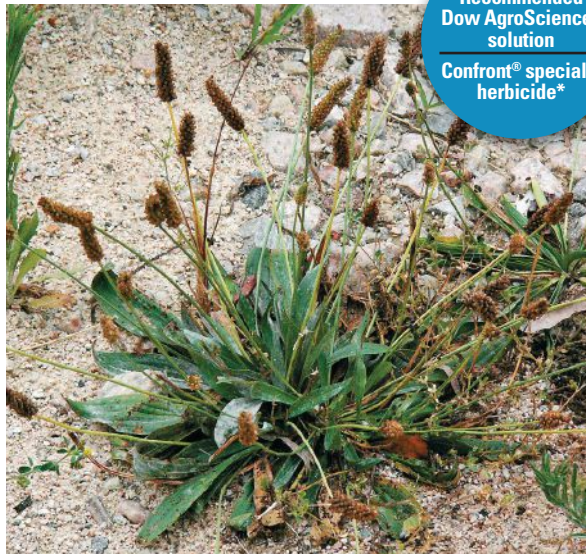
Geranium carolinianum

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This winter annual or biennial is often called crane's bill because of the shape of the fruit.
- ▶ Leaves are deeply dissected and divided into five to nine toothed segments.
- ▶ As it matures, the basal rosette experiences stem elongation and branching.
- ▶ The densely hairy stems are erect, usually pink to red in color.
- ▶ Whitish-pink to purple flowers help differentiate this weed from smaller geranium species.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Fall applications are recommended. Hand-pull any existing geraniums.
- ▶ Apply a pre-emergent broadleaf herbicide labeled for use on your ornamental beds. Products containing isoxaben are effective, and are labeled for ornamental plant tolerance on more than 630 ornamental species.



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BUCKHORN PLANTAIN

Plantago lanceolata

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This perennial turf-grass weed is commonly found in maintained turf, agricultural land and other disturbed sites.
- ▶ Leaves are football-shaped and spiral around a short stem, clustering around the base of the plant.
- ▶ It has narrower leaves and shorter flower stalks than broadleaf plantain (*Plantago major*).
- ▶ Flower heads consist of leafless, slender spikes of inconspicuous flowers clustered densely along

the upright flowering head. Open flowers have protruding white stamens.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ In spring or fall, apply a post-emergent broadleaf herbicide with good translocation properties to thoroughly control the root system of this plant. Two- and three-way auxinic herbicide products provide thorough control.
- ▶ Properly fertilize, mow and water to maintain lush turf growth and minimize the potential for buckhorn plantain to establish itself.

* Confront is not for sale or use in Nassau and Suffolk counties, New York.

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GUIDE

TAKE *note*

One expert advises how to avoid being found liable in slip-and-fall lawsuits.

BY BETH GERACI

Limit your exposure to liability by putting everything in writing.

JOHAN A. ALLIN, CSP, flipped through his slides at the 14th Annual Snow & Ice Symposium and looked intently at his audience of national snow and ice contractors.

"It's all about the money," he emphasized.

The expert witness and professional consultant in snow and ice litigation was talking about the motivation behind slip-and-fall lawsuits — and how contractors can avoid them.

A snow and ice lawsuit is prompted as much by greed as by sidewalk imperfections, on-site errors and bad judgment, Allin says. He added that if a lawsuit is filed against them, contractors are doomed to lose if they haven't systematically and painstakingly documented their work.

In fact, documenting adequately is the single most important step a snow and ice contractor can take to protect him or herself from liability, Allin says, because it helps in "proving you did what you were contracted to do."

"Keeping records that are customary and consistent is key," he says. "Documenting is not a one-time event. It's an every-time event."

What's more, Allin advises keeping records on file for at least seven years. Document your training programs, he says. Take photographs. And most importantly, have a formal plan and execute it.

The list of what contractors should document is exhaustive: work per-

continued on page 31



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