

THE WORK

1 | An engineering feat. The Greener by Design team constructed a free-standing, 25-ft. clear span pergola for privacy from above. The long crosspiece had to be carried through the home in pieces, assembled to look seamless, and reinforced with steel so it wouldn't bow or break.

2 | The plan. This installation successfully met the client's principal concern, which was to add privacy from surrounding properties and provide a serene, yet dramatic sanctuary in a noisy, densely populated urban neighborhood.

3 | Good bones. This "before" image, taken from the fifth-floor roof, shows that the garden had multi-level interest and pleasing proportions in a 25x25-ft. — but neither exactly square nor symmetrical — space.

4 | Look Ma, no clutter. A discreet hinged panel in the bottom right corner of the wood trellis provides an elegant solution for hiding irrigation and lighting controls.

5 | Geometric effect. Mondo grass planted between permeable paver squares transitions from the steps to the seating area. Long, clean lines of the pergola cast shadows that echo the blue stone below.

6 | Garden, variety. The small upstairs patio became an extension of the lower garden. A tall planter with Pennisetum (fountain grass) and a stand of bamboo complement the owner's South African statues, while a small pond with a statue centerpiece quietly burbles in the rear left corner.

Offering residential and commercial services, including Greenroofs, New Rochelle, NY-based Greener by Design has more than 30 years of experience in serving the New York City market. Its all-organic, sustainable approach to the residential market in particular is noise-free, family-friendly and upholds the values of its clients and its team. This particular project garnered a 41st Annual Environmental Improvement Grand Award from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). For more information, visit GreenerDesigns.com.





PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

Shilan is editor of FromDesign2Build.com. Contact him at 201/783-2844 or jshilan@gmail.com.

Never give a client a ballpark number

Q We provide our clients with landscape master plans and charge a design fee for our drawings. Our problem is that a lot of times we scare them off and lose the work and the relationship when we give them a price for the entire project. Is there something we should be doing differently?

—Bob Pedatella, Kodiak Landscape, Haskell, NJ

A Absolutely! This is a very common problem and one that can easily be rectified by just slightly modifying your design/sales process to make this happen.

Let's walk through the traditional scenario.

You meet with prospects and do a walk through of their property. You've made a list of the things they would like to include in their design and developed what we refer to as a "program." After showing them a sample plan from another project and photos from your portfolio they agree that creating a master plan of their property makes the most sense, and they give you a deposit for the design fee.

With property survey in hand, you create a base map, complete a site analysis of the property and develop a solid concept plan. You have a second meeting with your clients to review the design. So far, so good. As you present the ideas and concepts, based on their program and your site analysis, the prospects begin to envision what the project will look like.

After your 30-60 minute presentation to the clients, the inevitable question comes up. "So what's this going to cost us?" As you squirm and hedge, your clients sense you are becoming uncomfortable and suggests, "Just give us a ballpark. Don't worry, we won't hold you to it."

I have three words to say about that: "Yes, they will." If you don't know it yet, any number discussed with clients is immediately locked into both short-term and long-term memory. What's worse is, they will "hold" you to that number. I guarantee it.

So here's what you must do to avoid this trap.

I call it the 5 D's to a successful sale (design the dream counts as two)

- › **Develop** the program
- › **Determine** the priority
- › **Discuss** the budget
- › **Design** the Dream

Now many of you are thinking that what I have just described is exactly what you do now. I can tell you, openly and honestly, that you don't. Your process might be similar, but there are some nuances that make this process work much better than yours.

Let's walk through our scenario again, but this time using the 5 D's.

Walk the property and *develop the program* as previously outlined and make sure you get a design fee deposit. But before you leave the table and begin your site analysis, make sure you *determine the priority* and *discuss the budget* of the project. In other words, you need to ask, "What are we doing first and how much do you want to spend?"

This allows you to still "*design the dream*" and get them excited about the possibilities. However, instead of getting tripped up and being forced to throw out a ballpark number for the entire master plan, you should only create a proposal for the work that is their first priority and within their predetermined budget. It's a subtle difference, but a brilliant one.

So the next time your clients say, "Wow, we love everything, what's it going to cost?" You can calmly and comfortably reply, "I'm really not sure, but here is a proposal for phase 1 that fits your budget perfectly. Why don't we start with this?" Not only will you sell and upsell more, the time that you spend on estimating will be cut in half, if not more.

Profiting from Design is a quarterly column from award winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the President of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.



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EXTEND YOUR BUSINESS » BY CASEY PAYTON

Cleaning up in business

One landscaper finds that being resourceful and never turning down an opportunity has been the key to continued success.

GREG SMITH, PRESIDENT of B.L.B. Contractors, is a jack of all trades. The Philadelphia area-based contractor has always been resourceful about finding new ways to generate income. As a result, he says, he has never been short of work. Smith refers to himself as a “one-stop-shop” for his clients. He says they appreciate that he can meet almost any of their maintenance needs.

Smith actually started out in the janitorial business, working as the operations manager for one of the largest companies in the Philadelphia area. But when that company was bought out and Smith lost his job, he had to be creative. Eventually he began building his own janitorial business. It wasn't long before he overheard one of his commercial clients talking about hiring a landscape company to handle outside maintenance, including snow removal.

“I stepped up and told them I could do it,” he says. “Of course I hadn't done that kind of work before but I got the equipment I needed and started building up jobs. My niche was telling people that I could handle maintenance indoors or out. I was already on the property so it made sense to do it all. Clients appreciated only having to make one call for all of their maintenance needs. From there, the business grew.”

While Smith's business started out as 85% janitorial and 15% landscaping, today it's completely the opposite. Smith mostly does landscape work, incorporating the janitorial work as an add-on service to supplement his income in bad weather or when landscaping work is slow.

“Doing that extra janitorial work allows for a steady paycheck every month and makes up for down time because of bad weather or lack of snow,” says Smith. “The idea is to always keep the income flowing. Sometimes that does mean being creative.”

Greg Smith



But that's how Smith's brain works. For example, if he takes on a tree removal project, he's already thinking about how he can sell the acquired wood as firewood.

“The fact is that there are always ways to make money or to be busy with work — even in tough times,” says Smith. “My father used to say that you shouldn't complain about not having enough money — you should spend that time finding ways to make it, even if you have to flip burgers. There's always something you can do.”

This past summer, when the weather was brutally hot in the Northeast and Smith's landscape business was sluggish, he picked up some extra work by doing blacktop for a client.

That patchwork job was a success. As a result, Smith was encouraged enough to later bid on a parking lot project. He says he enjoys being in the field and learning new skills. And if he gets asked about work he can't do, he still finds a solution for the client.

“If it's not something I know how to do, I sub it out if I can,” he admits. “The idea is to never say ‘No.’ If a client comes to me with a need and I can't do it myself, I'll find the right person for the job and serve as the project manager. It keeps the client happy and keeps some extra money in your pocket.”

Smith admits that in his 30 years of doing business independently he's always had to work hard. He's not a sit-behind-a-desk kind of boss. But he loves what he does. And in today's world, he's grateful for staying busy and having steady work.

“A lot of businesses are diversifying now with the state of the economy,” he says, “but I've always tried to sell myself as a one-stop-shop. I work hard, but it pays off.”

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: B.L.B. Contractors

HEADQUARTERS:
North Wales, PA

YEAR FOUNDED: 1981

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 4 full-time and 3 part-time janitorial

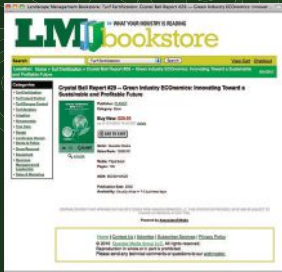
SERVICE: 70% landscape; 15% snow; 15% janitorial

CLIENTELE: 60% commercial; 40% residential

What does your future hold?

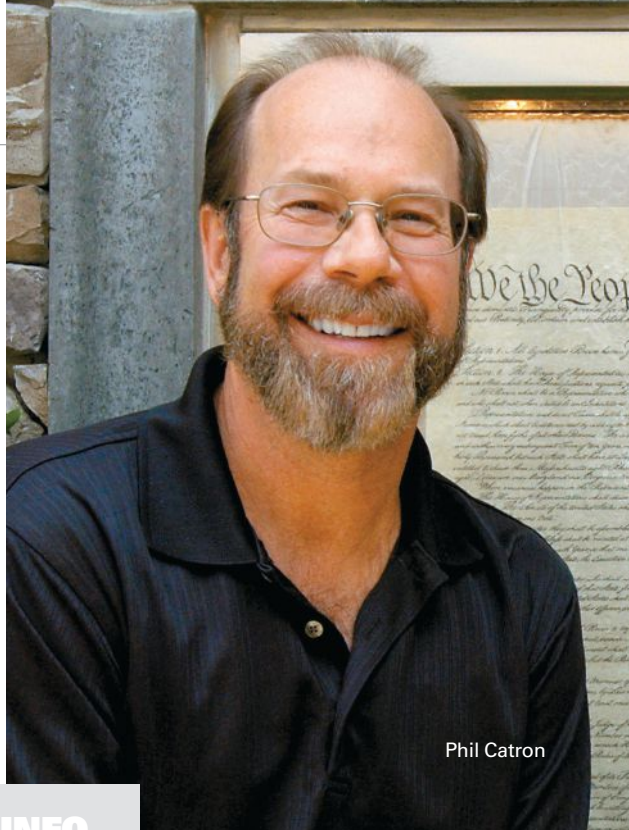
Take a peek inside *The Professional Landcare Network's Crystal Ball Reports* to uncover your potential business future. Whether it's the economics of the Green Industry or the future of sustainability, you can find what you need to know in these pages. These publications are available for sale in the *LM* bookstore — <http://shop.landscapemanagement.net>.

From our bookshelf to yours.



**Landscape
Management**

In 2012, NaturaLawn of America will celebrate its 25th anniversary. The company opened its first office in Damascus, MD in 1987, moving its corporate headquarters to Frederick, MD two years later. NaturaLawn has grown exponentially since then, and now it operates more than 60 offices in 24 states. Company President **Philip Catron** discusses with *LM* the opportunities and challenges NaturaLawn is facing today.



Phil Catron

TOP TRENDS

› **Environmental awareness.** The industry will continue to look for ways to not only reduce any potential negative environmental impact from our work, but also create and discover new methods for doing “old” techniques. While continued state regulations will potentially impact our industry, those businesses that make operational decisions as to how to work with the regulations as opposed to trying to combat them will end up being better off.

› **More targeted marketing efforts.** As a matter of economic survival, smaller and mid-sized businesses desiring to not only survive but also grow, will become more focused in their strategic marketing efforts. They will cease trying to be a one-stop shop for consumers.

This will give them a stronger financial position and foundation from which to move into the future. There will also be many opportunities for smaller businesses that want to conduct joint ventures with or completely merge with mid-sized companies, offering smaller businesses a chance to grow.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **Attracting the right employees.** The industry in general continues to face issues in finding or attracting personnel who really want to learn about what we all do and grow with a company. There is a need for community colleges and vocational schools to recruit and train students, implement Green Industry-related programs and arrange internships with businesses. All of those things will help educate and train future generations for opportunities our industry can offer them.

INSIDE INFO

Company: NaturaLawn

Headquarters: Frederick, MD

Employees: 275

2010 revenue: \$37,750,000

Key to being a maintenance leader: For any business to lead, it must first take care of its people. When a company truly cares for and ensures that its employees' needs are being met or exceeded, then the employees will in turn treat the customers in an equitable fashion. The customers will then take care of the company by buying their products and services. When this happens, the company will automatically become a leader.

While many books have been written about leadership and what it takes to be a leader, perhaps the most succinct instructions I have ever heard on this subject were from listening to a presentation by General Norman Schwarzkopf, one of the most brilliant army officers our military has been blessed with. His response to a very similar question on leadership was simply, “Make a decision and do the right thing.” That’s pretty hard to beat, and if the advice is followed, I don’t think one can go wrong.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Growing demand for our work.** Even though the economy is not growing in many sectors, there is currently more demand and interest for what we do than ever before. Expansion opportunities are only limited by two things: not having enough qualified personnel and being limited in financial resources. We are fortunate in that our ongoing operations are able to provide internal funding for growth. We also have several outside financial sources available to us should we need to draw on reserves.

› **Our employee ownership program.** To help us address the need for qualified personnel, several years ago we instituted an employee ownership program where every person in our organization is given an opportunity to own their own NaturaLawn of America business. The program gives employees financial credit toward ownership over a four-year vesting period. After three years, employees can exercise their option in ownership and receive a 75% credit. Or if they choose to wait an additional year, they get 100% of the option.

During the vesting time period, we conduct an ongoing management training program with those employees who have expressed an interest in ownership or who management has identified as having the characteristics we are looking for. The training program covers all aspects of the NaturaLawn of America business. It is an intense program utilizing not only classroom instruction but also in-field experience and mentoring with upper management.

Meet the LM Team



Dan Jacobs

Editor-in-Chief

Jacobs is a veteran of the Green Industry and an award-winning journalist. During his 20-year career, he has written for a variety of newspapers and magazines. He is a past president of the Press Club of Cleveland and a graduate of the University of Cincinnati and John Carroll University. He joined *Landscape Management* in 2006 as Managing Editor and was promoted to Editor-in-Chief in April 2011.



Beth Geraci

Senior Editor

Geraci has worked as a professional journalist for more than 15 years, including six years as a writer for the *Chicago Tribune*. A graduate of Allegheny College and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Geraci is an award-winning reporter who has expertise in both print and online media.



Marty Whitford

Editorial Director

Whitford is an award-winning journalist and editorial leader at Questex Media. He has served Questex's Green Group for four years, including two years at the helm of *LM*. He steered *LM*'s reader-driven print and Web site redesigns that helped the brand win a record number of awards from the Turf & Ornamental Communicators Association (TOCA). Whitford brings with him 18 years of experience in business-to-business integrated media.



Matt Lobe

Technical Editor

Lobe joins *LM*'s team as Web Editor/Marketing Coordinator. Lobe holds a bachelor of arts degree in journalism from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Prior to joining *LM*, Lobe served as a digital media editor with another Questex Media brand, *Nightclub & Bar (NCB)* magazine, producers of The NCB Show.

Ask anyone... *Landscape Management* is the **No. 1 resource** for business management content from one of the most experienced editorial teams in the industry! In fact, in 2011 *Landscape Management* celebrates its 50th year of publishing. With more than 50 years of editorial experience, there's no doubt the magazine that has supported Green Industry business professionals for 50 years will be around for 50 more!

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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Losing a key employee led the managers of this company to focus more on appreciating their people.



"It's all about opportunities to communicate, connect and to say 'thank you,'" Chris Davitt says.

COMPANY: Ruppert Landscape

HEADQUARTERS:
Laytonsville, MD

YEAR FOUNDED: 1976

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 650

2010 REVENUE: \$65,339,000

PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:
\$67,000,000

SERVICE BREAKDOWN:
49% landscape maintenance;
51% landscape construction

CLIENT BREAKDOWN:
100% commercial

I TOOK LOSING a key employee for Chris Davitt, president of Maryland-based

Ruppert Landscape, to realize his company needed to redefine itself as one that really cares about its employees. It was tough losing a valuable employee, and the situation was made worse because he took business with him. Davitt says that experience led to his company developing a much better appreciation for its people, and that's been a positive change.

This particular employee was managing the landscape management segment, which was a key growing division at the time. When the employee sat down for his annual pay review, he asked for more money and was turned down.

"Back then it wasn't really a formal process," recalls Davitt. "It wasn't an evaluation — it was more of a conversation. This employee argued for more pay and we argued for less, and we knew he wasn't happy but the meeting came to an end. We chalked it up as 'we're supposed to have these kinds of uncomfortable moments where we save cost and employees aren't always happy.' It was part of doing business."

But within a couple of weeks the employee left — and took about one-third of Ruppert's total projects

with him. Davitt says that got his attention, and he realized he needed to make some changes. He needed to make his employees' wants and needs heard and make his staff a higher priority. Today, Davitt says his people are his number one asset.

"Happy employees work harder and by making a real investment in your employees on a variety of levels...it strengthens their commitment to the organization and its values," Davitt says.

Davitt says he created a structure around the goal of trying to become a more employee-oriented company. With 15 branches on the East Coast, this structure helps ensure employees at all locations are feeling appreciated.

That has included the requirement that each branch host an employee barbecue or gathering for a meal at least three times a year. "These get-togethers are reminders to say 'thank you,'" Davitt says.

And instead of the informal pay review sessions the company used to hold, management now conducts regular evaluations.

"The employee gets evaluated as well as the manager," says Davitt. "And on top of that we have summer picnics and holiday parties. We have informal celebrations for winning jobs. And we

recognize everyone with birthday cards, and on the anniversary of their hire date (we) give them a commemorative coin/case with signatures and personal messages from all of the company's managers."

When people have landmark anniversaries at Ruppert, the company takes it one step further.

"Maybe it's management in a limo showing up on the job and picking up the employee," Davitt says. "Then we'll drive them around and do a walk-through history of the jobs they've performed throughout their time with the company, culminating with dinner at a restaurant with their spouse and children to celebrate."

Davitt says that as a large company it's easy to get busy, but he's now truly committed to being good to his people and focusing on being employee-oriented.

"We know from past experience that we might forget, so we have the structure in place to make sure we remember to do these things," he says. "It's all about opportunities to communicate, connect and to say 'thank you.' We think all this takes time, energy and money but it more than pays us back. I go back to the first mistake early in the going that frankly almost sunk the company. That experience really knocked some sense into us and helped us head in the right direction."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.