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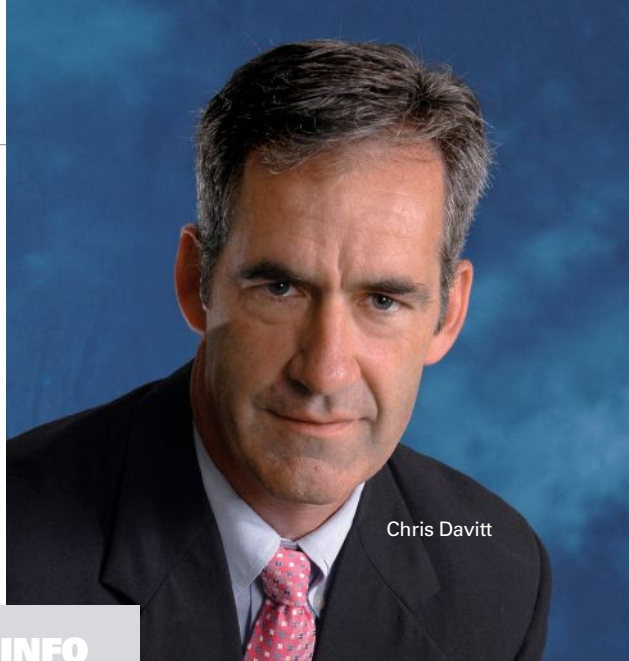
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Chris Davitt

Ruppert Landscape has come a long way since 1971, when Craig Ruppert launched the company in his garage. Ruppert Landscape president **Chris Davitt** has been active in the company since its nascence, when, as an 11-year-old, he helped Ruppert with the business on nights and weekends. Needless to say, Davitt has seen his share of changes at Ruppert and in the industry over the years. Today, he stops to talk to *LM* about what's shaping the maintenance business now.

TOP TRENDS

› **Sustainable landscape management.** It's got us all thinking about an area we didn't think about. We have to figure out ways to use fewer resources while keeping the image of the properties high. It's a new twist and a new challenge for the industry. On the sustainability side, we try to use fewer labor hours, to find a way to do the job more efficiently. We focus on making the best use of our resources.

› **Improved debris management.** If you can figure out what needs to be done and how to do it most efficiently, then the energy savings will come. Debris is expensive to move, and simple things like using mulching blades to avoid hauling away grass clippings leads to savings. Very often you can't dispose of debris on site. If the customer has a wooded area, you can use the leaves to mulch the wood line. Then you have a cleaner looking forest with less undergrowth. You're saving money, but you're also preventing pollution and saving energy.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Tighter margins.** In a tough market like this, we're competing with tighter margins. We have to keep finding ways to meet our customers' needs and do it more cost effectively. Obviously if a customer's willing to spend more, it's a lot easier to make the job shine. If they want to reduce their budget, it makes it more of a challenge. Price, it appears, is the driving factor, but really value is the driving factor. Margin doesn't have to be reduced to provide good value. We need to be more innovative, we need to listen carefully to our customer's needs and by doing so, we can deliver on those needs by changing the project's scope. If there's innovation in equipment or in plant material, we need to

INSIDE INFO

Company: Ruppert Landscape

Headquarters: Laytonsville, MD

Employees: 600

2010 revenue: \$65 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: Ruppert attempts to create a company that inspires its people. A motivated, empowered field force is where the rubber meets the road. We strive to motivate our workforce in many different ways. This can be hard to do because of the many things that managers have on their plates, including selling work, keeping track of costs, managing vendors, etc.

With all we have to do, a manager is not always going to remember to smile, say thank you or ask an employee how they're feeling. That's why we do what we can to acknowledge them in a structured way, whether it be through birthday cards, barbecues, or award ceremonies.

Ruppert's best resources are its people. They're the ones who are going to figure out how to give our customers what they're looking for. We want them to look at each property and take ownership of it, to care about the property they're on. We're constantly taking the temperature of our employees to see how we're doing in the management of them. That's completely necessary if we are going to be a company that holds the bar high.

know about it, especially if that means producing more for less money.

› **Assuming we need to lower margins.** Our customers are talking about price more than ever, but people can sell based on relationships—and they can sell value, which is not always price. The company has to remind the business developers of that, because they're always hearing "price." When customers are saying "price," they usually mean value. To the extent they are talking price, that price doesn't have to come out of margin. With some creative thinking, it can perhaps come out of the scope of the project.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **A talented industry workforce to choose from.** Finding industry talent is usually very difficult. But in a down economy, we have the opportunity to find top performers who are looking for work. We need to be aware of who's out there on the street, who's available. And if they can be put to use in our company, this is the time to make the investment in them.

› **Improving your fundamentals.** When customers are very focused on lower pricing, it may appear that they're making our job harder. But in reality, they're forcing us to ask the question "how can we incrementally improve costs?" We need to improve in small steps—whether it's trying to figure out how to save travel time, or picking up debris at the same time we're mowing. We need to start thinking about how to save minutes and how to save pennies, and over time that adds up to hours and dollars. By embracing the demands of the market and refining our critical thinking skills, we will not only be helping ourselves in the short term, we'll be helping ourselves overcome challenges that arise for years to come.



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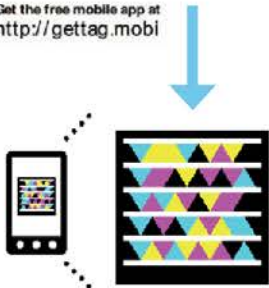
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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Though it's been in the family for decades, getting out of the nursery business was the right decision for Stephen Hillenmeyer.



Stephen Hillenmeyer

COMPANY: Stephen Hillenmeyer Landscape Services (and Weed Man franchise)

PRESIDENT: Stephen Hillenmeyer

HEADQUARTERS: Lexington, KY

SERVICE MIX: 20% landscape design/installation; 30% commercial maintenance; 30% equine maintenance; 20% Weed Man lawn care franchise

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 60 full-time; 160 in peak season

2010 REVENUE: \$8 million

STEPHEN HILLENMEYER SAYS getting out of the nursery business and focusing his energy on lawn care was the right move. Though it meant a huge shift in the company's business model, the president of Stephen Hillenmeyer Landscape Services says the decision was easy.

Hillenmeyer acquired a Weed Man franchise in 2004, and he's shifted the entire business to focus largely on maintenance. Given the downturn in the economy, he says it was a wise move.

Hillenmeyer's decision was gutsy considering his family, through five generations, operated one of the oldest and most respected nursery operations in the country.

One owner, tighter focus

Over the years, Hillenmeyer had been in business with his two brothers (he's the youngest of nine siblings, including six sisters). But in time he bought them out. Today, it's just him running the show.

Hillenmeyer says the change allowed him to focus not only on what he's good at, but what made the most business sense — maintenance.

"It's important to look at the best business strategy for today, not what the strategy was 10

or 20 years ago," he says. "Things have changed dramatically. We'd been in the retail business and had a growing nursery, but from a business standpoint, I strongly felt it made more sense to look for more reoccurring revenue.

"I found that came from the maintenance side of the business. So that was the impetus for this big change — moving more toward maintenance and using landscape design as a complement to that."

More specialized now

"Even when the economy is bad, we're finding people still want to have their grass mowed and taken care of," says Hillenmeyer. "But those new installation jobs have come to a screeching halt. While we used to do a lot of larger projects, our entire focus has changed, and that's allowed us to withstand the downturn in the market."

Hillenmeyer says he's learned being leaner and specialized can be better than being big but unfocused.

"It's hard to be good at multiple things," he says. "If you decide you're going to not only do landscape maintenance but also irrigation, lighting, patios, decks, and more, you may find that you've become so diluted in expertise that you aren't truly an expert at all."

Focus on competencies

"I'm not saying to put all your eggs in one basket — some diversification is important. But reducing services to really concentrate on a core business is a smart move."

Hillenmeyer says he was able to make these changes without decreasing overall revenue.

"We decreased the amount of services we offered," he says. "Therefore in some cases we did less revenue. However, because we were more efficient we actually became more profitable."

"If you're doing so many things you might not be able to carefully watch what you're doing. Different segments of the market have different margins. A 40% margin in one market might be great but 40% in another could be a disaster. Now that we're in fewer markets we're able to focus on excelling in them."

Hillenmeyer says focus and having a plan is vital to success today.

"You can't stop marketing or advertising to your customers. You still have to maintain your game plan."

"Of course, if you're trying to be all things to all people, that's going to be hard. In really focusing your business you have less to concentrate on and are more able to react to what the market's like and continue to succeed — even when times are tough."

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



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