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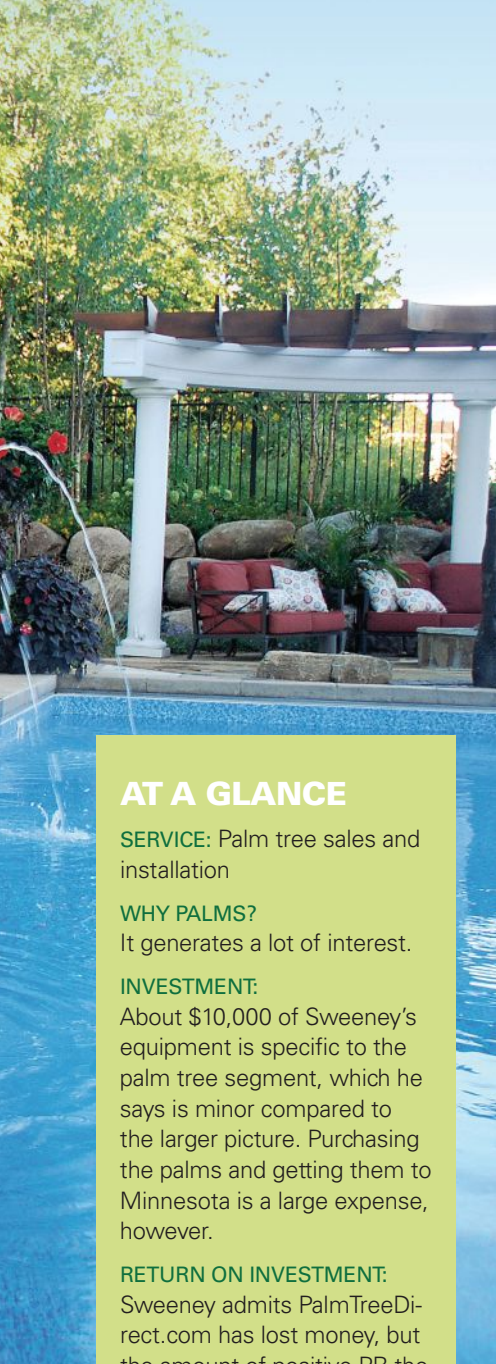
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AT A GLANCE

SERVICE: Palm tree sales and installation

WHY PALMS?

It generates a lot of interest.

INVESTMENT:

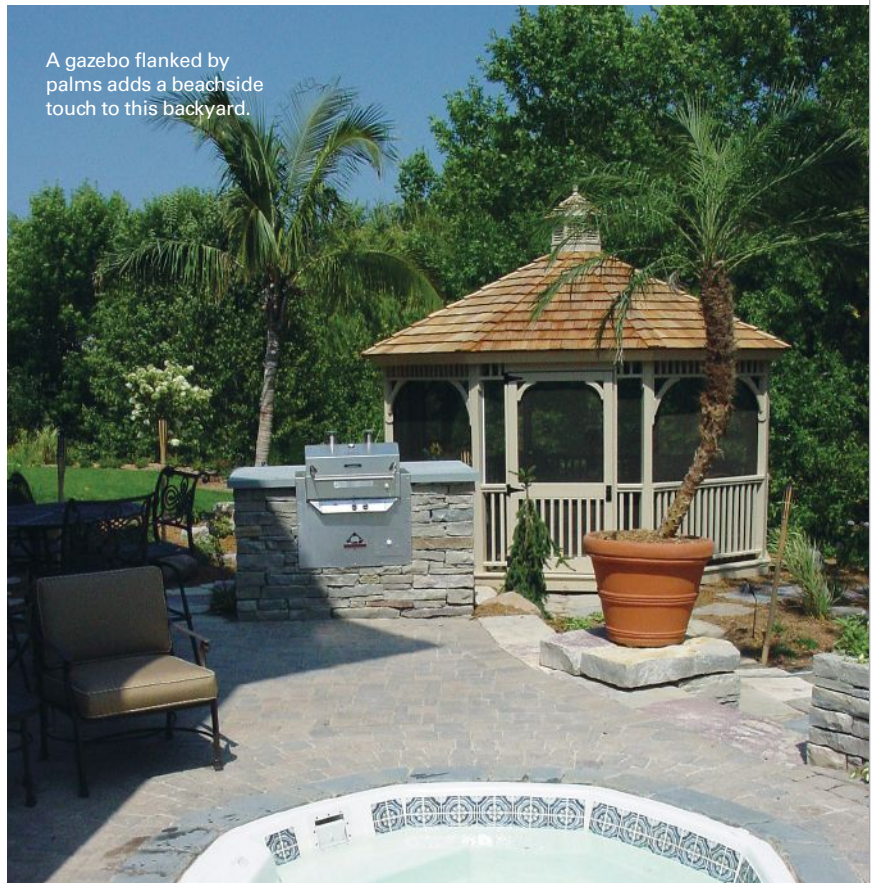
About \$10,000 of Sweeney's equipment is specific to the palm tree segment, which he says is minor compared to the larger picture. Purchasing the palms and getting them to Minnesota is a large expense, however.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT:

Sweeney admits PalmTreeDirect.com has lost money, but the amount of positive PR the service has generated, combined with business it's driven to his primary company, far outweighs the expense.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE?

Transporting and handling the palms is never simple, and the season is really short. "We decided that we wanted them big for the true wow factor," he says. "The majority of them are in the 15- to 25-ft. range. The logistics of handling that kind of tree aren't simple."



A gazebo flanked by palms adds a beachside touch to this backyard.

continued from page 48

that, it has been able to stand alone and be specific to its target market."

Initially, Sweeney pursued a rental market by trying to rent out the palm trees for events. But he soon realized that there were opportunities for repeat customers from his landscape clientele.

"It turned out that people who would get a palm tree put in their backyard wanted to do it on a regular basis," Sweeney says. "We bring the trees out around Mother's Day, and normally come out to cut them down sometime in November."

Adding the palm tree service didn't require any major investment. The same staff and equipment used to do everyday landscaping could also handle the palm tree installations.

"We have very little palm tree-specific equipment," he says.

Getting the palms into Minnesota is costly, however, and Sweeney admits that there's no big money to be made

with a palm tree segment. In fact, he admits he's lost money providing that service.

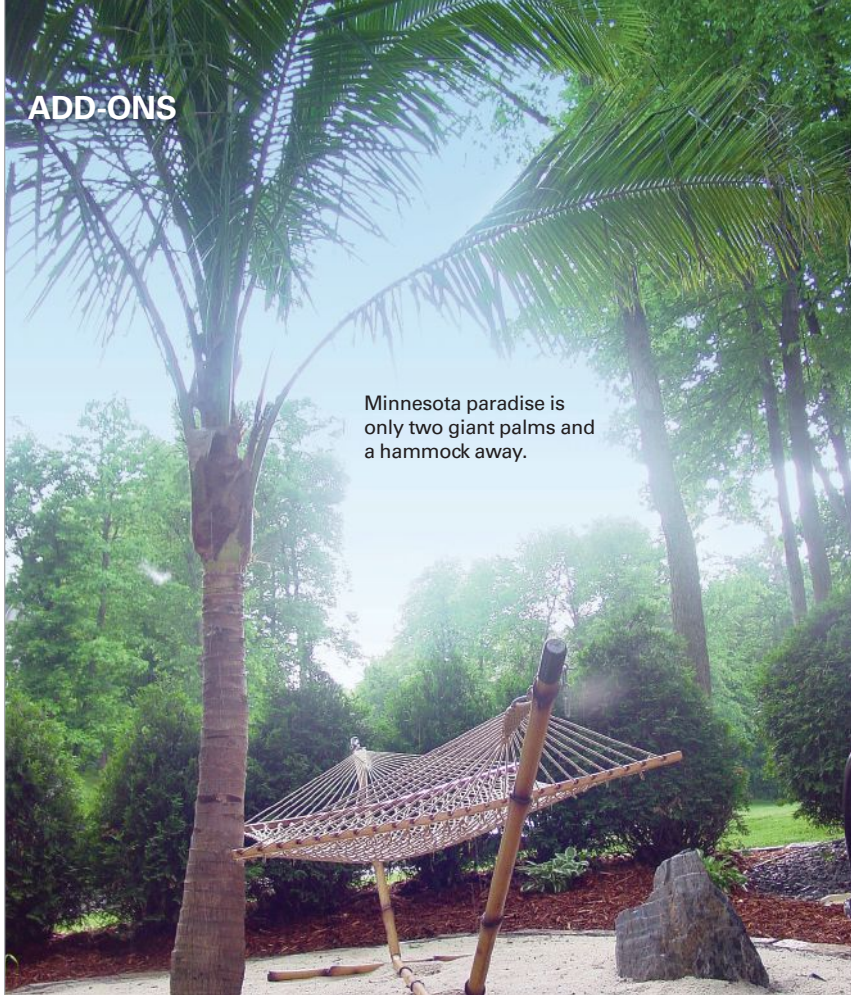
So why does he continue to offer it? Sweeney says it brings value in other ways. For one, he says he personally enjoys working with palm trees. But more importantly, it keeps some of his top customers happy. Plus, Sweeney says, this service has brought his company extra exposure.

"The palm tree business creates a lot of interest, which makes it valuable enough to continue doing it," he says. "The great PR it's gotten us has been well worth the cost. People are really interested in it."

In fact, that interest has generated business even through customers who didn't end up customers of PalmTreeDirect.com.

"A unique thing that's happened is that people see our ad about palm trees and call us up because the palm trees got their attention," says Sweeney.

ADD-ONS



Minnesota paradise is only two giant palms and a hammock away.

“While we come out to do a consultation and talk about the space the family wants to create, a lot of those people don’t actually end up going with a palm tree. But marketing the palm tree service to people has been valuable in showing them we’re creative and we think outside of the box — even if they don’t go with a palm tree.”

Sweeney says that in the end, it boils down to creating a space that’s interesting. By offering a palm tree service, his clients know he can add some original flavor to their landscape.

“Almost every single person can connect the image of a palm tree to this relaxing and wonderful oasis feeling,” he adds. “The sunlight coming through the palms and the movement of the palm fronds is so fantastic — it’s something that everyone enjoys.” **LM**

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

PHOTO COURTESY: MOM'S LANDSCAPING & DESIGN

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The advertisement features a blue and white color scheme. On the left, a white fiberglass sprayer tank is shown with a pump and nozzle assembly. A small dog is sitting next to it. Below this, a truck is shown with the sprayer tank mounted on its bed. On the right, a larger white fiberglass sprayer tank is shown with a pump and nozzle assembly. Below this, a truck is shown with the sprayer tank mounted on its bed. The Reddick Equipment Company logo is prominently displayed at the top and bottom.

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KEVIN KEHOE

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

Build a sales machine, Part II

I spend a great deal of time these days working with salespeople. This is as it should be, since the great challenge we face is increasing revenues in a declining market. This is no easy task.

In my last column, I talked about five elements of a sales machine: plan, price, person, methods and message. I focused on message. This month, I want to briefly focus on person.

It seems obvious, but do you have the right person in that position? Of course, producing sales can confirm this. But in the absence of results, are there characteristics you can look for? Based on my observations and research, successful salespeople possess the following characteristics:

1. They are persistent. They face obstacles that get in their way. They look for new solutions. They are tenacious. If your salespeople are rationalizing or providing excuses regularly, you may have the wrong people.

2. They are goal setters. They visualize their target, determine how they will achieve their goal, and take action on a *daily* basis. If your salespeople cannot communicate to you a weekly plan outlining number of leads, proposals, meetings and closes they plan to make, you may have the wrong people.

3. They ask quality questions. The best salesperson asks questions to determine the prospect's buying needs. They know that the most effective way to present their product is to uncover their customer's goals and concerns. If you are going on sales calls and not observing this behavior, you may have the wrong people.

4. They listen. Average salespeople will ask a question, then give the customer the answer, instead of waiting for their response. Great salespeople know that customers will tell them everything they need to know, if given the right opportunity. They ask questions, taking notes and summarizing the customers' comments. Again, if you are going on sales calls and not observing this behavior, you may have the wrong people.

5. They are passionate. They love the company and the product. You are not doing yourself or your customers any favors by representing something you can't get excited about. If your salespeople aren't excited about selling your product, you may have the wrong people.

6. They are enthusiastic. They are always in a positive mood and their enthusiasm is contagious. If your salespeople are consistently negative, don't mistake this for "realism." You may have the wrong people.

7. They take responsibility for their results. They know that their actions alone will determine their results, and they do what is necessary. If they consistently blame external barriers, you may have the wrong people.

8. They work hard. Most people want to be successful, but they aren't prepared to work hard to achieve it. Sales superstars don't wait for business to come to them; they go after it. They usually start earlier and stay later than everyone else. If your salespeople aren't putting in the hours (60-plus weekly) in this economy, you may have the wrong people.

9. They keep in touch with their clients. They send thank-you cards, make phone calls and schedule regular "keep in touch" meetings. They send articles of value to their customers and send an email newsletter. They look for new and creative ways to keep their name in their customers' minds. If your salespeople don't follow-up well, you may have the wrong people.

10. They show value. Successful salespeople recognize that price is a factor in every sale, but it is seldom the reason someone chooses a supplier. They know that a well-informed buyer will usually base decisions on the value presented by the salesperson. They know how to create this value with each customer they encounter.

Think about the people you have selling for you. Do they pass this test?



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“A strong leader is only as good as the people around him or her,” says **Tom Hougnon**, vice president of operations at Reliable Property Services. Hougnon shares with *LM* his thoughts on developing those employees, as well as what roles diversification, sustainability and shrinking margins play in today’s maintenance industry.



Tom Hougnon

TOP TRENDS

› **Sustainability.** While the economy and the difficult commercial real estate market have tempered the environmental movement in the last few years, sustainability is still a major force in our industry. As an industry leader in our regional area, Reliable will stay at the forefront by providing environmentally sound practices and processes, developing and implementing plans for LEED-certified customers and constantly staying on top of the latest trends and developments in sustainable landscape management.

› **Technology and communication tools.** The advent of smart phones, pad technologies, and GPS tracking has greatly enhanced our ability to improve the customer experience and communication, both internally and externally. We are now able to track hours, sub-contractors and job costing through cell phones. We are experimenting with various pad technologies to develop greater efficiencies for the field staff.

We are able to communicate directly from the field to our customers, sending proposals and photos and resolving issues in real-time.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Shrinking margins.** The commercial real estate market and the overall economy have created a very difficult situation for our industry. We are dealing with vacancies and minimal new construction. Also, there is less money available for site upgrades and enhancements. Our industry must make every effort to maximize its skills and techniques to maintain realistic industry margins.

It is imperative that any work is done efficiently and within budget. Job costing is critical to understanding the true value of the work. Bad work is bad work. It is critical to know the margin of each job and what margin is needed to be a profitable company. If a maintenance job is unprofitable, it may have to be eliminated from the portfolio.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Reliable Property Services

Headquarters: St. Paul, MN, with branches in Crystal, MN; Des Moines, IA; and Milwaukee, WI. Reliable plans to open another branch in St. Cloud, MN this fall.

Employees: 400

2010 revenue: \$13 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: As a company, Reliable strives to empower our team to focus on the customer experience and the profitability of the company. That must be the goal of any strong maintenance company.

Our goal is to hire the most capable people and provide them with internal and external training. Consequently, we can shape our team into a strong, cohesive workforce. That makes Reliable a great place for employees to work and grow. A strong, motivated workforce provides the resources and quality a maintenance leader needs to succeed in today’s difficult economic environment.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Professionalization of the bidding process.** As I stated, the commercial real estate market and the overall economy have created a very difficult situation for our industry. However, they have created new opportunities for professional companies like Reliable to thrive and grow. Bids are being scrutinized by customers more than ever, and we are dealing with more professional procurement personnel and processes. In many cases, our main contacts are no longer the final decision makers; hopefully they are still asked to recommend their preferred vendor.

The typical customer is becoming more professional in analyzing bids and developing specific requests for proposals. Companies must be prepared to develop professional proposals that differentiate themselves from the competition.

› **Growth in new markets and new products.**

Reliable has developed tools, processes and techniques that provide us with the ability to set up in a new market and develop a new branch. There is a need for professional, quality companies in many areas of the country. Our internal software, processes, resources and strategies have enabled us to grow outside our original market of the Twin Cities in Minnesota.

While we are consistently growing in the Twin Cities, we are able to organically develop a market and put our business model in place in new markets. Reliable has been fortunate to be able to hire excellent leaders in our new markets who have provided the customer experience Reliable strives to replicate in all our locations.

Reliable was a snow removal-only company until 2008, when we introduced year-round outdoor maintenance. While snow removal still is 75% of our total revenue, we now provide landscape maintenance and design services; enhancements; installation; irrigation; and parking lot maintenance. By diversifying, we have been able to generate revenue in the summer months, provide more services to our customers and create additional employment opportunities for Reliable’s team members.

VISA INCENTIVE CARDS



Jim Campanella, owner of Lawn Dawg Inc., spent 27 years in the landscape business before striking out on his own in 1997. He started with one office in New Hampshire, and now serves 17,000 customers from seven locations in the Northeast.

“It’s going well,” he says. “We’ve been very fortunate. We’re surrounded by good people.”

The company uses non-traditional lawn care treatments. All their fertilizers are custom-blended with organic biosolids and synthetic fertilizers to help improve the quality of the lawns over the long term, rather than just feed the grass.

Lawn Dawg is also community-minded. They participate in GreenCare for Troops, which cares for the lawns of service men and women who are deployed overseas — free of charge.

Since the beginning of 2011, Campanella has been experimenting with a non-traditional marketing program.

Non-traditional marketing builds loyalty among customers and employees.

BY JANET AIRD

“We’ve always had a referral program for our customers and an internal recognition program for our long-term employees,” he explains. This year, he’s been rewarding some of his customers for referrals with customized, prepaid Visa incentive cards from Incentive CardLab instead of gift certificates. He’s also giving the Visa cards to employees to reward them for their years of service. Other companies use the cards to build customer loyalty and reward employees for their attendance, sales milestones or other accomplishments, according to Incentive CardLabs.

“We’ve probably given out a few hundred

cards to customers,” Campanella says. The cards for a referral were prepaid with \$50 in the early spring, and \$25 later in the season. Employees receive \$20 cards on their first anniversary and an additional \$20 every year they’re with the company.

Gift certificates for customers have always been redeemable for Lawn Dawg’s landscaping services. But recipients of the prepaid cards can use them to buy anything, anywhere Visa debit cards are accepted — in restaurants, in stores and online.

“This adds more value for the customers,” he says.

For the company, the main advantage of the cards is the marketing opportunity. Lawn Dawg’s colors and logo are on its Visa card, so they’re displayed whenever customers use it. For customers who don’t use their own design, Incentive CardLab has a selection of templates, and the company also custom-designs cards. The cards are available in denominations from \$5 to \$2,500, and arrive in a personalized envelope — another marketing opportunity.

Campanella orders them online, from a few to a few dozen at a time. They take a few weeks to arrive. The recipients activate them.

At \$5.95 plus the prepaid amount, each card costs a little more than a gift certificate, Campanella says, but the value of a referral is much greater. He’ll decide whether the program is a success when he compares the number of referrals the company received in the first six months of this year with the number it received in the first six months of 2010.

“If it’s the lowest cost per sale, it’s still the best value for us,” he says.

For more information about Incentive CardLab, visit IncentiveCardLab.com.

The author is based in Altadena, CA.

PHOTOS COURTESY: INCENTIVE CARDLAB



Incentives like these gift cards build customer loyalty and create referral opportunities.



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