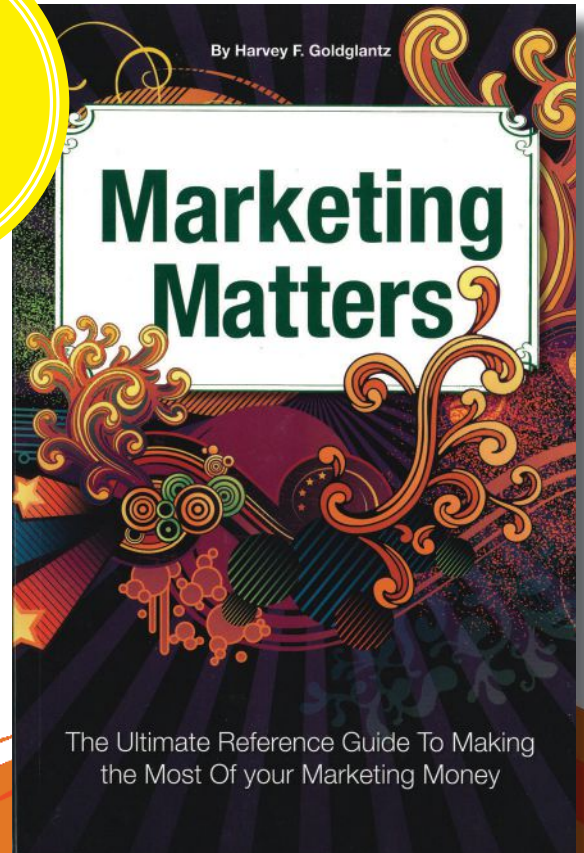


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Landscape
Management

PROJECT PORTFOLIO

A SCRAPBOOK OF DESIGN/BUILD OVERHAULS

Grounds control

THE MISSION

Update a country club's grounds to complement its refreshed facilities.

For more than a century, the Wisconsin Club has been revered as one of the finest private social and business clubs in the country. The architecture of the former Alexander Mitchell residence and its surroundings is a magnificent setting for indoor and outdoor weddings and parties, and yet it is quietly located on Wisconsin Avenue, the busiest street in downtown Milwaukee.

A 10-year project for the club was to renovate and redecorate the main building and the circa-1873 gazebo known as The Belvedere, their interiors, and then finally, the surrounding grounds to reflect the "new face" of this historical property.

Perhaps the biggest challenge that Milwaukee-based Stano Landscaping faced was time: The team had less than 120 days to complete the project — and all the while, the facility was open daily for lunch, dinner and weekend events.

"During the day, the installation of the large circular driveway had to be sequenced to allow access to the building for other trades and construction traffic," notes Randy Hill, landscape construction project manager for Stano. "Each night, the construction site had to be cleaned and presentable for the public, with the jobsite hazards removed or minimized."

The hardscaping used Brussels block pavers for the driveway, a new bluestone entry to the front of the clubhouse, and thermal finish patterned flagstone and paver walkways to and around the gazebo.

The landscaping, notes Hill, was continuously modified to work within existing grades, requiring the installation of small retaining walls as well as other, on-site adjustments. Special care was taken to preserve the root systems of the established trees remaining on-site.

"The effect was to keep the property feeling secluded and private," Hill says.



1



2

THE WORK

- 1 | Curb appeal.** The view of the Wisconsin Club from the south side shows the new paver drive and natural stone entryway.
- 2 | Round of applause.** The new drive provides an elegant focal point to the club's main entrance.
- 3 | Access with style.** The finished entryway incorporates a wheelchair-accessible ramp, softened with the use of plant material on both sides.
- 4 | Color in bloom.** A bright array of plantings welcomes guests to the Wisconsin Club.
- 5 | Focal point.** The restored Belvedere gazebo, which now boasts a walkway that integrates it with the rest of the grounds, is also surrounded by garden delights.

Founded in 1963, Stano Landscaping specializes in residential and commercial landscape design, construction and management. It's also a snow and ice control contractor, servicing more than 200 commercial accounts in the greater Milwaukee area. This particular project garnered a 41st Annual Environmental Improvement Grand Award from the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). For more information, visit StanoLandscaping.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY: STANO LANDSCAPING

Appliance repair

A company drops some services to capitalize on others.

RGS OPENED SHOP in 1983, providing services in commercial and apartment landscape maintenance, renovation and tree work in Southern California. Half of the company's revenues are derived from the apartment sector, with the remaining coming from commercial, residential, retail, homeowners association, resort and hospital work.

"When the company first started back in the 1980s, the owner's idea was initially to try to be able to create a captive client group, and recognizing in the apartment industry there is a lot of different needs apartments have," says Vice President Spencer Arnold. "If they can go to one company rather than having to go to a lot of different companies, there's an economy there for them."

While one strategy in making it through a recession is seeking revenue streams, another is to drop services no longer producing income. At one time, RGS was renting appliances to apartment dwellers.

"Because of the downturn, a lot of the apartment own-

ers started offering appliances as a perk to get people to lease apartments," says Arnold.

RGS maintains an appliance repair business, and also has a laundry facility management business in which the company takes care of the laundry equipment in their laundry rooms — including collection, processing, appliance repair and maintenance.

"Our goal is to focus on what we do best; that was largely why we got out of the rental business," Arnold says. "We decided to focus all of our attention and resources on landscape maintenance, arbor care and landscape construction."

A new revenue stream is plant health care.

"It saves money," he points out. "Apartment owners are looking for ways to reduce their liability. People defer maintenance on their tree business, and



Half of RGS's revenue stems from its apartment sector.

usually when we go out pruning, they say they have only so many dollars to spend, and do a certain amount of trees and defer maintenance.

"If they continue to defer and there's a big wind event, it generally leads to car and building damage and someone gets injured. The goal is to get people to take an approach that's proactive rather than reactive, so instead of having to go out and cut down a bunch of trees, if we can fertilize them, we can treat them — then they're not deforesting their urban forest."

Because the biggest investment in debt and capital is tied up in the company's fleet, RGS is focused on maintaining it to get the most mileage out of the vehicles.

The company also focuses on a safety program for its employee base, which averages 180.

"We've spent a lot of time reinventing our safety program," Arnold says. "We're focusing hard on trying to keep our employees safe and healthy, and focusing on the areas that can have some long-term impact on the business."

Training is another strategy RGS employs to stay successful in a competitive market. Basic training in safety practices, the company's doctrine and philosophy is followed by more specialized training in one of the service sectors of trees, appliance repair, landscape maintenance or enhancement department. Employees also are cross-trained.

"Coupling training with benefits that are slightly better than in the market is the key to reducing our turnover," says Arnold. "When the guys start to understand we're offering a career, and it's not something they move to another place for 25 cents for, then we've got a better employee for the RGS family."

The author is a freelance journalist with 20 years' experience writing for the Green Industry. Contact her at brzowski.carol@gmail.com.



» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: RGS Services

HEADQUARTERS: Anaheim, CA

YEAR FOUNDED: 1983

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 200-plus

2010 REVENUE: \$12,500,000

CLIENTELE: 85% commercial; 10% residential; 5% government

SERVICES: Landscape maintenance, tree care, laundry, appliance/HVAC

“There is something about receiving a homemade meal that feels good,” says Native Land Design President **Stan Johnson**. “There’s a certain satisfaction gleaned from preparing and serving those you appreciate.”

The people helming Native Land Design appreciate their team members as well as their customers. After all, the company’s executive team cooks for them, serving up everything from brisket to jambalaya.

Johnson has worked in the industry for four decades. He stops to talk to *LM* about his observations of the field today.



Stan Johnson,
president, Native
Land Design

TOP TRENDS

› **Smart irrigation technology.** In Texas, water is as valuable as gold. We are seeing our large HOA/professional sites moving toward an ability to put out as much water as they can during the restrictions imposed by local municipalities.

It is imperative the systems function as perfectly as possible. The capabilities these new systems bring not only benefit the client but also the contractor. Our ability to manage the site from afar, diagnosing problems and making modifications eliminate wasted trips to the site.

› **Drought-loving landscapes.** Many clients ask us to modify landscapes that were installed when water and weather were plentiful. We have been charged with addressing the deficiencies of the plants on these sites and introducing plant material that will perform in the “new normal.” This includes native and desert plant material. It also means introducing plant material into new areas.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Low bidders.** We are still seeing low-bidding companies coming in and promising results on a shoestring budget. While we have done a great job with our current stable of clients to produce and add value, it is difficult, especially in these tough economic times, to fault a customer for making a change and trying someone else out.

› **Water restrictions/price of water.** Through legislative and economic restrictions, municipalities and customers alike have put severe limitations on our ability to apply the proper amount of water. Our ability to apply the proper amount of water is key to providing a top-notch product for our customers. Recent weather reports are showing that Texas is staged to be in extreme drought conditions for the next eight years.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Native Land Design

Headquarters: Cedar Park, TX

Employees: 49 full-time, 165 part-time

2010 revenue: \$8.7 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: Do what you say, say what you do. Unlike a construction company, you will interact with your customers weekly for long periods of time, hopefully years. This dynamic creates a very special relationship, one that has to be built on trust. In many ways you are the key to their success and prosperity. Like any relationship you need to ensure that the lines of communication are open and flowing. Silence is never golden with a customer.

› **Price of fuel.** Our costs continue to rise with no end in sight. Unfortunately, much of our fleet is incapable of being retrofitted to take advantage of natural gas and propane advances. As we invest in new equipment and trucks, we are investigating the viability of the new platforms and how we can integrate them into our fleet.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Old-fashioned customer service.** Face-to-face communication is still the preferred form of communication. Our customers are busy, but in most cases the landscape is the single most important asset in their ability to sell/rent space.

Our ability to meet with customers and address concerns in person puts us far ahead of more technologically savvy competitors. Our ability to determine whether or not we are meeting a customer’s needs can only be addressed by evaluating them in a one-on-one setting. Simply providing services equal to or even exceeding contract scope won’t keep the business.

› **Long-term thinking.** Many contractors are short-sighted. With a long-term outlook on our pricing/service model, we can gain loyal customers who will ride the good and bad times with us. Short-term profits should never be the solution. We are here to provide services for decades, not contract periods. What can we do for a particular customer today that will result in new business 3-4 years down the line? What can we do to maintain a relationship now, and build our long-term trust?

› **Water management.** Much of what landscape contractors have done traditionally is to monitor and repair systems. With new smart systems coming on line we are being forced to be educated on their complexities and how they operate. This requires a specific skill set that not all can handle. This allows for a level of professionalism to be portrayed that goes above and beyond what many think of when they think of landscapers.

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[Coming in March]

MARKETING TO THE AFFLUENT

There is one segment of the Green Industry that remains unaffected by current economic challenges. The truly affluent continue to seek the best maintenance, irrigation, design/build and chemical lawn care services. But reaching this customer takes a different set of skills. *LM's* editors, along with author and consultant Jeffrey Scott, put together a special 8-page section explaining how contractors can understand, tap into, build trust with and properly service this clientele. Also, Scott will conduct a series of webinars on reaching the affluent markets. Look for announcements on upcoming dates.

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MY BIGGEST MISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



A business owner shares key lessons on handling collections.



Geoff Simpson says it's important to talk about money with customers upfront.

FULL COMPANY NAME:
Bucks Country Gardens Ltd

HEADQUARTERS:
Doylestown, PA

2011 REVENUE: Landscape Design/Build: \$1.3 million; retail garden center: \$4.3 million

SERVICE BREAKDOWN:
20% maintenance; 80% design/build

CLIENTELE BREAKDOWN:
10% commercial; 90% residential

TALKING ABOUT MONEY can easily make any relationship uncomfortable.

That's why Geoff Simpson, landscape manager for Bucks Country Gardens in Doylestown, PA, has learned that it's best, whenever possible, to keep the landscaper and designer far removed from those tough conversations. He says having a separate accounts receivable (AR) department handle collections is best.

"It's easy for it to feel personal when the designer and homeowner have worked closely together," he points out, "so it's best for AR to handle collection."

The strong relationships that Simpson says his company builds with customers can also make money talk a bit awkward for the designers. It's like talking money with friends.

"We build really long-term relationships, and do have a personal connection with most of our clients — but in the end, you can't forget that it's still business," says Simpson.

Simpson has also learned that even though talking about money can be uncomfortable, it's always best to have a conversation about it at the start of the project.

"It's always tough to talk money — even in the beginning — but that's the most important time to talk about budget," he says. "If you talk money upfront,

it sets the right tone and helps ensure the client is clear on what they're expected to pay. It also ensures that money has been part of the conversation all along, and when it comes time to pay up, it's not like it's a big surprise."

Still, Simpson has found that there will always be customers who are difficult about paying. He says it's part of the industry, not just because of the economic climate — though that hasn't made things any easier.

"In this economy, you have people negotiating a lot more," Simpson says. "They'll ask for payment plans. If someone is trying to find a way to pay us, we'll work with that as long as they're showing good faith by paying each month."

In addition, the company also has contract terms that include paying a finance charge if the customer doesn't work out an arrangement or agree to pay what's owed. But Simpson says he's found customers rarely take such charges seriously.

"With a credit card, people worry about it affecting their credit score, so those finance charges and penalties are taken seriously," he says. "With us, I think people look at us like the little guy and feel no threat of that finance charge. It's very rare we actually get someone that pays it, but nine times out of 10, we're ready to waive it anyway,

as long as they're willing to pay. The whole point of it is just getting the customer to pay on time anyhow."

Future strategies

Looking ahead, Simpson says the company is considering reworking its contract terms.

"We've thought about trying to collect more money upfront and then really enforcing that we collect on the job the day it's finished," he says. "The longer time goes by, the less likely customers are to pay.... Time is really a killer. It's so important you focus on collections as soon as possible."

And the company continues to plan to let AR hold the reigns on collections. "The design and sales staff is just too connected with clients to handle collections — particularly on tough accounts," says Simpson. "They're too likely to let their emotions be attached to it. But we live up to our end of the deal, and we need our customers to live up to theirs. With the economy, some of today's customers are just waiting for you to bat an eyelash and are ready to jump at the opportunity to ask you to knock some money off. But when you have a separate department handling collection, the customer isn't going to try to get away with that."

"In the end," he concludes, "it's not personal, it's business. And that's how it should be handled."

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

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