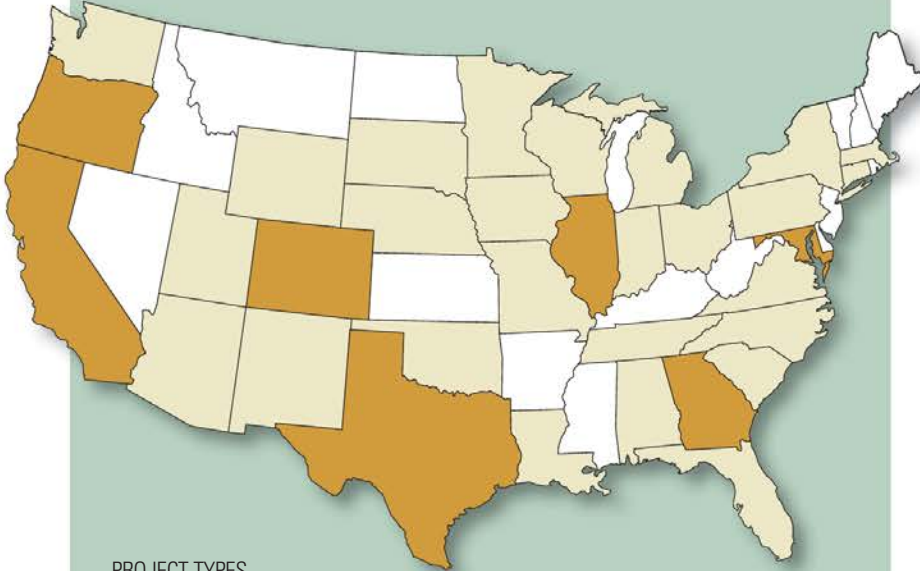


LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR INVOLVEMENT

(BY STATE)

Landscape maintenance contractors have contributed to projects in **seven** of the 33 states (and D.C.) that are home to SITES pilot projects.



PROJECT TYPES

25% park / 20% institutional/educational / 15% commercial / 3% residential
8% transportation corridor/streetscape / 8% garden/arboretum
6% government complex / 4% mixed-use / 1% industrial

continued from page 19

materials up the driveway. The logistics was mostly the problem more than any of the work was.”

Yet those obstacles made the project all the more enjoyable for Foil. “Everything was different from the ordinary,” he says. “That was fun because it’s not something you do on a regular basis.”

As for Cook, his pilot project at Marriott headquarters in Bethesda, MD aimed to improve soil health and reduce use of drinking water for irrigation, among other things.

Going into the pilot project “I hoped we could achieve certification but knew it would be difficult,” says Cook, whose project did not meet SITES stormwater quantity and quality measures.

“We expect a lot of obstacles during the pilot project and embrace them because it will help the system become more robust in the end,” he says.

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Cook felt his Marriott project was a valuable learning tool that will provide helpful data for SITES certification going forward.

“I feel like we’re learning...and will apply this knowledge and understanding of the rating system to our projects in the future,” he says. “We hope our customers see we are not only serving our contractual obligations, but our obligations as caretakers of the ecosystem.”

Getting a SITES project certified is no easy task. In addition to having to pay for their own materials, assemble their own crews and meet the 15 prerequisites, volunteers also are required to document their work in detail. If they don’t, volunteers have to go back and cover their tracks.

But “if you weren’t going to make it, you wouldn’t just get a negative in the

continued on page 24

PROJECT PROGRESSION

The DeSantis Landscapes team was charged with turning this 7,500-square-foot weed field into a native and adaptive plant garden.

1. The team sheet mulched the weed field as a means of improving soil quality and water holding capacity.
2. The project also entailed tearing down this garage.
3. The team then used the garage foundation as part of the native plant garden. To the right of the garden runs a stream, which the DeSantis team did riparian enhancement on to ensure the health of fish.
4. The garden is beautified by colorful rocks and stones, and a pathway through the property highlights improved soil quality.

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continued from page 22

mail,” says Holly Shimizu, executive director of the U.S. Botanic Garden. “We would let you know early on so you don’t have to go through all that effort and then get rejected.”

Certified or not, Rieff says, “by doing the pilot projects they are helping us revise the system down the road.”

That’s because participants share with the SITES staff their feedback about obstacles they encounter along the way. That feedback will be used to adjust the final SITES certification requirements when they are officially released in spring-summer 2013.

The value of SITES in marketing

DeSantis sees his company’s SITES experience as a valuable marketing tool, “definitely.” It doesn’t advertise it on its business cards, but staff members mention it in client meetings.

“We’ve got more like white paper type of things we’ll slide across the table and say, ‘Here’s an example of a site where we swapped out all the irrigation nozzles, here’s what their payback was.’ We show the numbers. When it really comes down to it, people are concerned with how much it costs and what’s the return on the investment.”

Cook says he does not advertise his sustainable activities as much as he should. But when customers ask about his sustain-



The cascading water at the Novus Campus passes below a pedestrian footbridge and into aquatic habitat. The cascade helps improve water quality through circulation and filtration and provides an aesthetically pleasing amenity for employees and visitors.

able efforts, he is quick to tell of his SITES involvement.

“Our participation in the project has proven very beneficial,” he says. “It gives us an edge when we’re competing.”

Phil Loughman, president of L.I.D. Landscapes in Boulder, CO, was looking forward to retrofitting a residence in the area as part of the pilot program, largely so he could

trumpet his involvement in the program in his marketing. But due to the tanking economy, the property’s owners decided to hold off on the project.

“We thought it was good business,” Loughman says. “This sort of thing is right up Boulder’s alley.... We’re a bit disappointed that the project didn’t go further.”

What’s next

When the pilot program ends in June, SITES subcommittees will assess credit achievement history and participants’ comments, all of which will be used to revise the SITES final version.

Ultimately, feedback from teams working on the pilot projects will be used to create an official reference guide for professionals interested in sustainable land practices.

The U.S. Green Building Council, a stakeholder in the initiative, also plans to incorporate the SITES guidelines and benchmarks into the LEED Green Building Rating System.

When the pilot program ends, says Nancy Sommerville, chief executive officer of ASLA, the SITES staff will adjust the rating system based on insights gleaned from the pilot program. Then there’ll be another public comment period (already there have been two) before a final version is published and open enrollment begins.

“We think we’re offering up some good practices and performance benchmarks,” Rieff says. “We hope people will want to step up to the plate and use them.” **LMM**

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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.

Get them to ask one question

It's not the product or service you are selling that matters to a prospect. It's what ails them and what you can do about it that matters. If you are selling quality, capability, service and professionalism, you are selling exactly the same thing that everyone else is selling. When this is the case, the only clear point of differentiation for the prospect is price. And if you are not consistently the lowest price vendor you will more often than not fail to win the sale.

I tell salespeople I work with to change the approach. It's not about what you have (landscape services) and how good they may be, it's about what they need and whether they believe you are the answer to their problems. Therefore save the sales pitch. This is especially true when you consider the process of trying to win work with a property manager when you are only one of many bidders.

The first thing to realize in this circumstance is that their key concern is not with the "goodness or rightness" of proper landscape. Their key concern is keeping their job. They cannot afford to make the wrong decision. The second thing to realize is that the way they keep their job is by keeping their customers happy (whether it is homeowners in an HOA or tenants in a commercial property) and by managing their costs. Lastly, it is important to realize that most of these decision-making people believe that they are underpaid, overworked and under loved and that you potentially only add to and complicate their already busy lives. So excuse

them if they are not bowled over by the "fact" that you have a great water management program.

Taking all this into consideration I suggest a better differentiation strategy — one not based on your product but one based on your selling process. If you want to improve your close rates, you have to look, sound and be different and get them engaged in solving their problems (i.e. reducing tenant dissatisfaction and managing a landscape budget). If you fail at this you will look and sound like everyone else.

Let's start with the obvious. You already know their problems in general, so the challenge is to connect their problems in a very specific way to your services as the potential solution. Doing this requires confidence, some moxie and expertise. The application of these practices is directed at one very specific outcome. You want them to ask you a question. When they do this, they are now engaged with you in creating a solution to what ails them. The way to get them to ask you a question is to sow seeds of doubt.

In many instances property managers are vague about the origin, accuracy and "goodness" of the specs for their properties. They are however, certain about one thing, and that is that everyone has to bid to them. Unless, of course, someone suggests that the specs may not be the best way to keep tenants happy and manage costs. For example, you can sow the seeds of doubt as follows: *"Mr. Property Manager, the problem very often with property specs is that they are old and designed for a very different landscape than you now have. The result is you could be spending more money than you need to in the wrong places increasing costs and the odds that your tenants won't be happy because the problems they see are very often baked into the old services spec."*

Once this is said, it is time to be silent and wait for them to think about this. If they ask you a question like, *"Really? How does that work?"* you are now in the sales process. If they don't, then your chances of making the sale go down dramatically. At the very least, you won't sound like every other salesman. And that's your goal — be different and get them to ask you one question.

The way they keep their job is by **keeping customers happy** and **by managing their costs.**

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Fred Titensor, Manager
Valley Implement, Preston, ID



Fred Titensor sells and services equipment and machinery to about 1,000 customers in the ag business and believes in “doing transactions over the hood with a handshake.” He rarely visits his West Motor Co. dealership because his BusinessLink dealer knows Fred’s time is valuable and always comes out to see him. When Fred wanted to fly 30 customers to a combine factory, he asked if he could rent a couple minivans to take them to the airport. “They said ‘we got you covered’ and the next day they had a fleet of minivans there for me.”

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Michael Bellantoni has seen a lot in the 59 years he's worked in landscaping (49 owning his own company). And he's reminded of his start daily. "On the wall in front of me is a frame with three invoices," he says. "I had a client who was my father's. After my father passed away, they asked if I would take over their property. She was cleaning the attic and found some old bills." There's one dated 1964. Bellantoni shares how his business and the industry have changed during the nearly six decades he's been in it.

How did you get involved in the business? I actually worked for my father who was a landscape gardener in White Plains. I mowed lawns and I cleaned leaves, back when there was no power equipment. Everything was done by hand. Back then we burned leaves in driveways. When I left high school, I went into the Navy.

How did you get back into the business? My dad got sick and asked me if I would help him. I worked with him for a year until he got better. After the year, I realized two things. I didn't want to work indoors and I certainly didn't want to work for my father. He was a tough guy to work for. With that, I started my own business. There were about 12 accounts that I achieved for him in the year that I worked with him. I took those accounts. He didn't give me any blessings whatsoever. He said, 'you're going to fail.'

But you didn't fail? I went back to school and completed an accounting major and continued studying in the horticultural

field. After the first year, I got 20 more accounts. And the next year I got 20 more accounts. I was growing in leaps and bounds.

How has your business evolved? As I grew, my purpose was to offer everything to the client. I would take care of your lawn, your trees, your driveway. We do blacktopping. We got into all the new materials. I always wanted to provide our client with everything. It's been successful. Most of our clientele we give full service.

How would you describe your market? Our marketplace here is strong. This area of the country White Plains, NY — it is the third most expensive city to live in in the United States. I probably have \$4 million in real estate to run my little company. What I could do with that money somewhere in the Midwest would be phenomenal. We took a hit in 2007 and 2008 when the market dropped out, but we've bounced back this year.

What is your customer base like? We have an upscale

clientele. We're not your mow and blow guys. We like to pick our clients; we like to give them exceptional service and handle all of their needs from flower planting to grounds maintenance to doing their masonry, irrigation, lighting. That's working well for us. Eighty-seven percent of phone calls for new business are referrals.

What have you seen in your nearly five decades as a business owner? Years ago it was a handshake and a nod. You did a job and you got paid. If there were issues you worked them out. Doing business today is completely different. We have to write proposals. We need to get written authorizations. We need sign-off sheets on completion because we want to get paid. Today, there are great clients out there, but every once in a while you run across a few that intentionally want to give you a tough time on getting paid for your services.

I love coming to work and I love interacting with clients. I love helping people with their problems. I get the greatest satisfaction out of



AT A GLANCE

TITLE: President and CEO

COMPANY: Michael Bellantoni Inc.

YEAR FOUNDED: 1963 (Incorporated in 1983)

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 59

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), New York State Turf and Landscape Association (NYSTLA), International Facility Managers Association (IFMA) Westchester Business Council; Commanding Officer (Captain) in White Plains Auxiliary Police Department

EDUCATION: Graduated from HS. Went into the Navy. Two years at Westchester Community College. Has taken decades of continuing education classes.

HOBBIES: Golf, and sports in general

FAMILY: daughter Denise; sons Michael, Mark and Matthew; and married 48 years to Karen

WEBSITE: www.mblandscape.com

accomplishing things. I love coming up with a proposal and it solves the problem. I look forward to that, meeting the challenges. What knocks you down is the aggravation — the HR problems, the bill collection problems, employees not following our guidelines.



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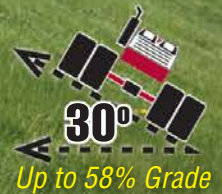
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