

Western Horticultural Services, Houston, TX, makes safety job No. 1. It has been recognized as a leader in the annual Safety Recognition Awards Program sponsored by the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) for maintaining a consistent accident-free and “no days lost” work record for its crews. “We stress safety every day,” says owner **John Catapano**. “We bring our crews together every month for breakfast exclusively to discuss safety issues and provide safety training. Creating a safe work environment shows our employees and clients that we care.”

Catapano offers tips about staffing, customer service and sustainability at his company:

TOP TRENDS

› **It's service, service and more service.** We have a corps of professional client service representatives whose exclusive responsibilities are to meet personally with our clients to develop a strong professional relationship removed from any operational duties. We realized the importance of this when I first started this practice. I dropped in on clients for friendly visits, asked the right questions, and then saw their accounts grow exponentially. Our goal is to make the client service reps become part of our clients' teams as well as a strong resource. I strongly believe that in the commercial arena we're in, people want to do business with those they like and feel like they could be part of their family.

› **Strengthened supplier relationships.** Our seasoned professional managers also understand the importance of forming a strong alliance with our supplier vendors. By creating loyalties with select vendors, we get preferential treatment, including special privileges and price breaks.

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Owner turnover.** The downturned economy is still a big factor affecting our business. In the current commercial real estate environment, there has been quite a bit of change in ownership and management triggering re-bidding processes. We often see our current fees being cut in half when we participate. After cost analysis on a re-bid, we must re-work the relationship, dropping several services or just walking away. It's encouraging to see that over time, the new management company often comes back to us. They will match our past fees after realizing their new company can't deliver and/or cut in services severely affecting their property's value.

John Catapano



INSIDE INFO

Company: Western Horticultural Services L.P.

Headquarters: Jersey Village, near Houston

Employees: 120

2011 revenue: \$6.7 million

Owners: John and Ruth Catapano

Key to being a maintenance leader: Being a leader in landscaping or any other industry involves holding yourself out there as a professional, and along with that, maintaining a professional image. Everything we do at Western Horticultural Services, from the appearance of our work crews to the condition of our trucks to the customer service we deliver, all reflect on you as an owner; and having every employee understand that is essential.

› **H-2B non-agricultural temporary worker program.**

It fits well with our seasonality, but I don't know how much longer we can count on it being there. It also takes much time and energy for the application process. Since its inception, it has been politically charged. I would love to see the program continue, but it's on such shaky ground. Our long-term strategy is to wean ourselves off of it because we can't depend on it in the long run.

› **Fuel costs.** Even though our headquarters is technically in Houston proper, our service territory extends hundreds of miles. If you have to spread five crews consisting of two to three people each over that territory, it's not very cost-effective. We are setting up small satellite offices from north to south to keep costs down and reduce travel time so we can spend more time on property. We already have two in operation.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Sustainability.** With the push toward LEED-certified buildings and recent prolonged heat and drought affecting the entire State of Texas, the use of native plant material and smart irrigation systems has led to an interest in replacing established traditional landscapes.

› **These landscapes are being replaced with native plant materials that are drought and heat tolerant.** Older traditional irrigation systems are being revamped to the new smart irrigation systems emphasizing water saving abilities directly translating into saving dollars. These systems also improve the health of the landscape by zoning each plant type separately. When our clients share their water bills with us, we can demonstrate ROI sometimes within six months by conversion to smart irrigation systems.

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[Coming in April]

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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Denise Putnam found that she was losing cold callers by giving out her price on the phone. Now, she always meets the client first.



Giving estimates in person has helped Denise Putnam's business.

COMPANY: Hands to Work
Hearts to God

HEADQUARTERS: Brighton, MI

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 3

CLIENTELE: 80% residential;
20% commercial

SERVICES: 10% installation;
10% refurbishing;
80% maintenance

DENISE PUTNAM, OWNER of Hands to Work Hearts to God in metropolitan Detroit, knows she lost potential business simply by the way she handled cold calls. So she changed her whole approach.

"Whenever I got a cold call, the first thing they always wanted to know was how much I charge per hour," says Putnam. "In the beginning, I made the mistake of telling them — and I learned the hard way that I lost most of those jobs. It was all because they were turned off by the price before I could even tell them more. I have learned to tell cold callers that I don't bid jobs that way."

Putnam says callers used to be taken aback when she told them what she charged. She says the tone of the conversation would immediately change. She realized she was losing jobs with this approach.

"They were taking what I charge hourly and multiplying it by the number of hours it would take *them* to do the work," says Putnam. "But I've been doing this a long time and am very efficient. I have all the right tools and know what I'm doing. So what could possibly take a homeowner eight hours to do might only take me two. But I wasn't even getting a chance to explain that."

Today, Putnam offers to come out and see the property free of charge and says she'll write up a quote after that free consultation. "People really appreciate this, because they're basically getting a service for free when all they called for was to get a price," she says. "I walk around the property and talk to the homeowners about their concerns. Even before I get hired, I try to give potential clients a little bit of free

BY NOT GIVING OUT PRICES OVER THE PHONE ANYMORE, I'M AT LEAST ABLE TO GET ON THE PROPERTY.

information, maybe telling them a plant isn't in the right place. This gives them a little bit of free service — and even if they don't hire me, it leaves them with a positive taste of what my business is like."

This new approach has changed her business, Putnam says.

"I used to not even be able to get my foot in the door," she explains. "Potential clients would close it before I could even go out and meet them. But by not giving out prices over the

phone anymore, I'm at least now able to get on the property — and I have a better chance at getting the job.

"It's better for me to see the project and know exactly what they need done, and it's better for the homeowners, because they're getting a little bit of service and information from me without paying anything," she adds. "Of course, I don't get every job, but I get a lot more than when I was giving out prices on the phone."

Once the consultation is complete, Putnam also advises putting together a written quote — with *everything* you're including on the quote, even if it seems minute.

"Write it all out," she urges. "Whatever you're doing — pruning, trimming, installations — put it all down. And be as specific as possible. If you're going to put in five shrubs, say that, and say what size. This way, the clients can never come back and say you didn't do what was agreed upon. It also helps the clients realize everything they're getting for their money. They might not realize all the work you were going to do, and now your price might seem more worth it. Even if it's a basic service, don't assume they'll know you're doing it. You should list everything so they see the value of what they're getting. I've found that this, too, has helped me get more jobs."

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

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