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Design by Carrie Parkhill Wallace using illustrations by iStock International Inc.

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Jeffrey Scott's five steps for successful strategic planning in 2013:

1. Assess your financials.
2. Set goals that motivate.
3. Create a budget.
4. Make roles clear.
5. Refine incentives.



WEB EXTRAS

» Don't miss NastyClient.com's free, one-year membership offer for LM readers (see page 6 for more details about the customer review site for businesses).

» Get an in-depth background about the tree-damaging Asian longhorned beetle and its introduction to North America (see story on page 23).



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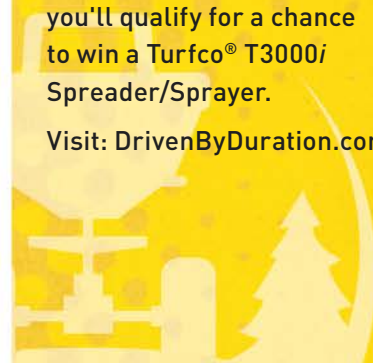
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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI EDITOR

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On first impressions

Knowing full well that you get what you pay for, I occasionally dabble in Groupon-purchasing. Who doesn't like a good deal? Plus, as someone who writes about small businesses, I'm intrigued with the process.

The draw for most daily deal merchants is less about making money from the deal itself and more about exposure to new customers. After all, Groupon requires offers to be at least 50 percent off the sticker price and it keeps half of the sales, so you can assume the most sellers earn from their deals is a quarter of their product's or service's original price.

When I buy a daily deal I recognize I'm likely buying the merchant's "loss leader," so I maintain relatively low expectations and I expect a hard up-sell.

Recently I bought an offer from a heating, ventilation and air conditioning contractor for an air conditioner/furnace tune-up. I decided to take a chance on a deal of this nature, figuring the cheap tune-up was the contractor's strategy to gain access to many new customers, who he could sign on to his recurring maintenance plan or target in the future for new unit sales.

I was pleasantly surprised when I called the company, a person answered the phone and I had an appointment scheduled within a week. Next, I was happy when the technician arrived for the appointment promptly. He was friendly, did his work efficiently inside and out and was on his way.

When I buy a daily deal I recognize I'm likely buying the merchant's "loss leader," so I expect a hard up-sell.

Check marks all around.

I thought it was odd he didn't try to sell me anything else. That's when I went downstairs to inspect the furnace and uncovered the crux of the company's strategy. Slapped to the side of the unit was a sticker with its logo, phone number and website. The contractor's concept was to take a hit on the tune-up to plaster contact information to the place homeowners will look when something goes wrong: the furnace itself.

Although I would have preferred a magnet to a sticker, I was OK with the tactic. In fact, I thought it was clever. Then I went outside to see if the same sticker appeared on my air conditioning unit, but before I could get there I was stopped in my tracks. Stretching down the driveway, across the deck and half of the yard was my garden hose, which the technician used to spray down the unit's exterior. "C'mon!" I thought. I have no problem with him using the hose, but everyone knows rolling up a hose is one of life's least desirable tasks. Why would you leave that for your customer to deal with?

With that, the contractor confirmed my suspicions about the quality of service you get when you buy a daily deal. I know it sounds like a minor misstep, but the company had an opportunity to blow me away with great service. Instead, it blew its chance to earn a repeat customer. (By the way, I'd hope merchants know that only 22 percent of Groupon buyers turn into repeat customers, by the site's own estimates.)

But this column really isn't about my experience with the HVAC company. It's about you—all Green Industry professionals—and the opportunities you may be blowing with customers due to "little things," whether it's lack of training, a rude receptionist, shoddy-looking equipment or the like.

It's expensive to acquire customers, no matter how you do it. Don't blow your opportunity to make a good first impression on a client you invested to get in front of. You only get one chance.

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GIE+Expo buzzes about E15

BY MARISA PALMIERI EDITOR

Though the official show attendance figures have yet to be released, exhibitors at the GIE+Expo, held in Louisville, Ky., Oct. 24-26, reported a busier event than in the past few years. Organizers and observers attribute the traffic to a few factors, including a new “dealer day” format on the show’s opening day, 80-degree temperatures on day two and cold, rainy weather on the last day, which drove everyone inside, making the aisles feel crowded. Plus, show partner the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) reported registration for its Green Industry Conference was up 20 percent over last year.

What was the buzz around the conference and show? You couldn’t avoid

talk of E15 fuel and the effects it will have on outdoor power equipment. E15 is fuel that’s 85 percent gasoline and 15 percent ethanol.

With the advent of E15, landscape companies fear their workers will inadvertently fuel their gas-powered equipment with fuel their engines aren’t designed to withstand, potentially causing damage and voiding their warranties.

“Until recently, E15 was a “hypothetical problem,” Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), told *Landscape Management*. Now, it’s a reality. E15 debuted in Kansas this summer and is expected to be offered in gas stations in other Midwest states this fall and winter.

One of the main problems, Kiser said, is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency isn’t effectively communicating what he calls a “paradigm shift” in what Americans can put in the tank.

“It’s always been, whatever I put in my car, I can put in the can,” he said. “That’s no longer the case, and the warning label is a 3-in. by 3-in. square,

With E15 now on the market in some states, it’s no longer just a hypothetical problem, said OPEI CEO Kris Kiser.



only printed in English.”

Kiser said the agency isn’t doing a good job telling consumers what E15 can and can’t be used for—and that it cannot go in the gas can.

“A lot depends on how E15’s retailed, and it’s not consistent,” Kiser said.

While OPEI and several other groups appeal their rejected lawsuit against EPA, OPEI plans to ramp up industry education efforts.

Meanwhile, several GIE+Expo suppliers exhibited premixed fuel options in a variety of sizes to make it easy for contractors to know they’re getting the right fuel into their machines without having to rely on their operators to pay attention at the pump.

Another possibility is that E15 uncertainty will drive some companies to try equipment powered by alternative fuels.

“We see an expansion in the market for propane and natural gas products, where there is some certainty,” Kiser said.

Site lets contractors review customers

A former contractor created NastyClient.com to give companies the same voice customers have with review sites. BY CASEY PAYTON

The customer is always right—*right?* Well, yes, if you don’t want to risk bad press by not complying with what your client has asked. Today’s customers have a lot of leverage with business review sites like Angie’s List or Yelp, and most landscape

companies would rather keep their customers happy—even at a cost—than wind up with a negative review that could hurt future business. But what if the clients’ demands are outrageous? After a difficult experience with a customer, Matt Stachel, a former Philadelphia-based landscape contractor, decided to turn the tables and give businesses the voice that customers have long leveraged.

After completing a privacy line of trees for his customer, Stachel felt trapped when the homeowner insisted a tree needed to be moved and it ultimately died. The client had signed a contract

» WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extra section of LandscapeManagement.net for a link to a free one-year membership to NastyClient.com, a \$15.99 value.

that stated the health of a tree could no longer be guaranteed once it was moved, and Stachel had advised against the move. Still, the client insisted and he did the work. When the tree died, he wanted it replaced for free.

“He threatened me with bad reviews on three different sites and to go to court over the matter,” Stachel said. “So I replaced it and probably lost about \$500 in time and expenses. It made me realize that businesses don’t have a lot of power, even when they’re right. Going to court is expensive—even if you win—and most people would rather just fix the problem than have to go through all that. But it’s not fair for honest businesses out there.”

So Stachel decided to level the playing field a bit. In March 2010 he started working on a website where businesses could review clients. By October of that year, NastyClient.com was launched. It’s now his full-time venture. “No longer do you have to say, ‘They owe me \$400, but if I sue them I’ll be out \$800 in legal fees so I’ll just let it go.’ Now you can file a report through a website that other businesses use to review customers,” Stachel said. “The clients will realize that not only can they not get your service, but they can’t get the service of other businesses in your area, as well. Until now there were no repercussions for a bad customer—but that’s changing.”

Once users are registered, they can anonymously submit



A bad client experience led Matt Stachel to launch NastyClient.com.

reports documenting problems with their customers. “We do keep your business name in our own database so that if your customer contacts us and said they want to pay you, we can then reach out to you and let you know.

If a customer sees the review and wants it down all they have to do is follow through with paying you and the account gets marked ‘Paid.’ Our goal is to help protect businesses and resolve some of these problems that used to seem impossible.”

While the site is an opportunity to report difficult customers, it’s not an outlet for bad-mouthing and slander. “The simplest way to avoid committing slander is to just state the facts, plain and simple,” he said. “Our site is the same as any other business review site out there. If a customer did not pay you, you simply state that you completed the job and were not paid for your work. If you said the customer was ‘sneaky,’ that would be slanderous. Just stick to stating the facts and not your opinion.”

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A tour to remember

Mariani Landscape gives its peer group a peek at two of its most special projects.

BY BETH GERACI SENIOR EDITOR

We drove down scenic Green Bay Road in north suburban Chicago, passing one gated mansion after another.

Mariani Landscape was leading executives from five other landscaping companies on a tour of two exclusive residential properties it designed and maintains. On the bus were owners from Heads Up, Pacific Landscape Management, HighGrove Partners, Lambert's and Stay Green, all of whom were in town for the next day's Next Level University peer group meeting, facilitated by *LM* columnist Bruce Wilson.

After a short drive, we pulled alongside an estate Mariani had restored in Lake Forest, north of Chicago. In addition to restoring the mansion, the company designed the driveway, the patio, gate entrances, fencing, terraces, gardens—everything on the site.

The property was as functional as it was beautiful.

"We left a dump area for snow, because you have to think about that in this area," explained Mariani Design

Director John Mariani as the group came up the driveway. "We tried to use unusual materials here."

The bluestone in the home's walkway is chiseled to give it an antique feel, yet it's smooth enough to shovel on. Trees were strategically planted to provide shade on the patio. And the property has about 30 or 40 native plant species to foster indigenous wildlife.

Soon, it was time to head out to the second property, a home on a prairie in Lake Bluff, Ill., that once was part of a 200-acre farm. Mariani designed the 14-acre parcel in 1985. "A 14-acre prairie back in those days was a big deal," he said.

And it's still a big deal today. "Always having been somebody who loves nature, we saw this huge savannah that was being grazed by cattle and I thought, 'Let's restore this to a natural landscape to attract butterflies and birds, etc.,'" Mariani said.

So he designed the home in a way that would showcase the property surrounding it and make wandering the property an adventure. "The driveway was a big focal point," he said. "A good landscape architect is always going to take into consideration how to make the drive an experience in itself."

Larry Weil, who showed the group around the property, has overseen its care



(Clockwise from top left): A table and chairs a worker carved from fallen trees; Peer group event organizer Cheryl Nadelhoffer with John Mariani; the prairie in spring; and Mariani's Larry Weil discussing the prairie in November.

for more than 30 years. "When we first came on board, it was a grassy, wooded grazing field for the cows," he said.

Now, Weil said, the land features countless native plant species, three-fourths of a mile of paths, many 150-year-old oak trees, a maze, a rose garden and a 12,000-square-foot house and guest house.

As they explored, the group was met by surprising artistic elements around every corner, including a gorilla peeking from behind a tree, a huge decorative frog on a high branch and a table and chairs one Mariani worker carved after trees toppled in a storm.

Such elements add to the sense of adventure Mariani strove to create at the outset. The house itself is far more formal than the prairie surrounding it, Mariani said, and that's part of the fun.

"When you are in the interior and you're looking out, the contrast of the formal and the informal is almost shocking," he said. "But that creates excitement."

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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@wilson-oyler.com.

Understanding social media

Companies are stretched thin, and everyone is looking for the one new tool that will bring them the greatest value. Unfortunately, there isn't only one. But if there were, it would be a commitment to shift your business communications strategy to social sites.

In 2011, when I decided to pursue a social media strategy, many people said, "Ask Scott." Scott Harris runs Mustang Marketing and is a go-to expert for social media and branding strategies.

Scott not only told me what to do, he also helped me understand why it would work. In six months, my social media initiative was up and running. Within a year, taking the online leap delivered on its promise: My business has grown faster than ever and many new clients said they found me through LinkedIn or Facebook. Others said they knew of me but social media reminded them to connect with me. Think about what it could do for your landscape business.

Looking to get started? Here are some basics, courtesy of Scott, guaranteed to give you a much better understanding of the three biggest sites for the landscape industry:

FACEBOOK — This social media giant gives you direct access to your audience—and gives your audience direct access to you.

Quick steps to success:

- › Set up a business page (Don't just put up your company name—flesh out the page with company history, details and pictures).
- › Post two to four updates per week.
- › Monitor all comments, likes and posts and respond as necessary (particularly to critical or negative posts).
- › Review weekly Facebook analytics (sent to you via email with statistics, such as the number of new fans and page visits versus the previous week).

LINKEDIN — It's the world's largest professional network and a potential lead generator.

Quick steps to success:

- › Set up a company page (Again, take the time to fully develop your company's profile and state its accomplishments.).
- › Reach out and invite connections into your network (people who will see your company page and can offer recommendations).
- › Ask your employees to follow your page and place a Follow button on your website or blog.
- › Make recommendations (the easiest way to get recommendations is to give them—these work as testimonials, offering positive reviews for both the company and its professionals).
- › Join and participate in relevant industry groups. There are hundreds of them.
- › Review profile metrics (how many have viewed your profile in the last 90 days, etc.—and make sure these numbers are going up).

BLOG — The best medium to demonstrate your leadership, subject matter expertise, experience and connection to your field.

Quick steps to success:

- › Establish a blog (make sure it's linked to your website and social media pages).
- › Have a strategy and editorial plan for high-value content. Balance original content with material from other sources. Search for relevant blogs to read, post, share, comment on, etc., to help build connections back to your own blog. Cross-promote on other social channels.
- › Review all comments and shares to your blog posts.

These social media avenues reach your audience where they live, work and play, allowing you to create and maintain unprecedented authenticity, immediacy, participation, connectedness and accountability with your audience. But it's not enough to just set up a page and wait for your audience to do the rest. Engage them, reply to their comments, keep them interested—and be sure to do so in a way that's relevant.