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less money a buyer will have to inject into the business as working capital after a sale closes, the more the business will be worth to him.

Another important step is identifying potential roadblocks to completing a transaction and working to resolve them. Examples of potential roadblocks include unpaid taxes or unfiled tax returns. In many cases, these issues won't derail the deal if they're identified and addressed. However, if a buyer finds this kind of issue during due diligence, his confidence will lessen. Another potential roadblock is unresolved litigation. If possible, these matters should be resolved. At a minimum, they should be discussed openly with the potential buyer so their impact can be evaluated and a solution can be found.

\$ THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO WHEN PREPARING A BUSINESS FOR SALE IS KEEP IT GROWING AND OPERATING PROFITABLY, GENERATING CONSISTENT, POSITIVE CASH FLOW.

One more potential roadblock is ownership, which should be made clear to the buyer. Are there former partners who, legally, still retain an interest in the business? Another problem can arise from promises of equity ownership that might have been made to a key employee. Such promises often are forgotten by business owners, but rarely by the key employees to whom the promise was made. If these issues emerge late in the sale negotiations, they're more difficult to resolve without unexpected costs, difficulties and delays.



QUICK TIP

It's a sound idea to take an objective look at the business and consider what attributes it has that would make it attractive to you if you were a potential buyer. Focus on what you can affect positively in the period before a sale is made.

Consider impressions

Another important step involves facilities and equipment. Do they present a favorable impression of the business and its operation? For example, a junk pile of old equipment somewhere behind the main warehouse facility presents a generally negative impression, and it might raise questions in a buyer's mind about potential environmental liabilities.

Cluttered and disorganized storage facilities present a negative impression, even if the facilities aren't part of a proposed transaction. The condition of facilities and equipment will affect a buyer's perceptions of the value of the business, especially if he perceives a significant amount of deferred maintenance that will have to be addressed after the transaction is closed.

As you plan for the sale of your business, assemble your team of advisors—your lawyer, accountant and merger-and-acquisition advisor. Make sure they're deal makers, not deal breakers. Your team will guide you through the process and help you avoid mistakes.

Taking steps to ready your business for sale often will improve the value of your business and its marketability. Preparation can help increase the sale price of your business and make it more likely to sell within a reasonable time frame. **LM**

Edmonds, a corporate finance professional with experience in merger-and-acquisition transactions, is the principal consultant for The Principium Group. Contact him at redmonds@principiumgroup.com.



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HOW-TO

Be a woman in a male-dominated industry

BY CHRISTY WEBBER

Landscape Management asked me to write about my experience as a woman doing business in the landscaping industry. You know the drill: Write about how the industry held me back, how men treated me unfairly, how I never could catch a break and throw in a few of those big words I can hardly spell, such as bigotry, prejudice, chauvinism and sexism.

Gals (and anyone else who may be reading this), my story doesn't follow that pattern. Maybe I am too naive to recognize all of those terrible things. Or maybe I just don't care. I am not saying those terrible things don't exist or that I didn't experience discrimination as a woman. But I can tell you this: I never let it stand in my way.

I got started in this business in 1988. I was teaching high school in Chicago—and hated it. So, for extra money, I began mowing grass for friends and others who would hire me. My residential business grew, and in 1997 I hired a great landscape architect who helped me win a prestigious contract for a new arena—the United Center—during the Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan era. Go Bulls!

Today, 15 years after landing that contract, Christy Webber Landscapes employs 400 staff and has gross revenue of \$32 million. And we're still growing.

So, how did I do this as a woman in an industry completely dominated by men? In an industry so male that

when I signed up for trade shows, women in the industry had nowhere to meet but in rooms reserved for our male counterparts' wives? I did it by doing the same things successful men need to do—work hard, put in long hours, make smart hiring and banking moves and learn from your mistakes. I never allowed my being a woman to work against me.

Make connections

Yes, there were comments such as, "Honey, how are you?" or people like the beast in the job trailer who treated everyone poorly, not just me. I never let it get me down or let my frustration show. Instead, I schemed



QUICK TIP

Do the same thing successful men do—work hard, put in long hours, make smart hiring and banking moves and learn from your mistakes. If you experience roadblocks, never let them get you down or let your frustration show.

to figure out how to make men *want* to work with me. Sometimes that meant simply retreating and letting one of my male staffers handle the situation. But more likely it meant letting go of those things that could be considered discrimination and just doing a good job so they had to deal with me.

Many times I would bring a man with me to client meetings if I knew the client would feel more comfortable speaking “man speak.” Literally, some clients would look and talk only to the man on my staff—even though I owned the darn company! Did I care? Hell no. If I could get the business, the product or the answer, why should I care? I didn’t take it personally. I just listened, took notes—and took the work.

The fact is, most good men have a good woman in the mix. It’s their secretary, their wife or their daughter. Who writes the checks or answers the company phone? Usually a woman. Find her. I figured out early on how to connect with these women and make it work for my

WHO DOESN'T LIKE TO DO BUSINESS WITH A COMPANY THAT DOES GREAT WORK AND HAS A GOOD STORY?

business. If you can connect on a basic human level and find something you have in common, you are in, no matter the race, creed or gender of the person you’re dealing with. Ladies, find that woman you can connect with.

Lastly, my secret weapon, and one that many of you don’t have, is I’m a lesbian. How does that help me? When someone finds out, there’s a curiosity and openness that breaks down the male-female barrier of business. Sure, there are lots of stupid questions and many stares (but not at my chest). Hey, if it works, work it!

Sometimes all the attention it attracts is embarrassing, but it’s a story. And who doesn’t like to do business with a company that does great work *and* has a good story?

Women: Find that niche, that story and that strength to rise above the noise. Business is business, and something is better than nothing. **LM**

Webber is president of Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago.

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be as easy as connecting the dots to bring a proven solution from another industry or community to your own.

Ideally, your value should be published on a stand-alone blog on a domain you own or a subdomain of your primary

website. Make this hub the source for the high-quality, evergreen content you share to the respective social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+, and whenever possible, customize the sharing for the characteristics of each channel.



QUICK TIP

A simple formula for earning your customers' trust and building a process to better understand and serve them is to provide value, engage the community and facilitate the conversation.

Engage the community

The reason for creating and sharing interesting, useful and valuable information is to spark online conversations by giving your audience something to discuss. This engages your business with its customers and the friends they influence.

Social engagement is the result of numerous activities, including listening, asking good questions and offering suggestions and other types of assistance. When these actions are combined with the value your business provides, the natural result is engagement in the form of likes, shares and comments that serve to build your online communities.

As a leading business in the Green Industry, your customers look to you to be current with trends and developments, so it's essential for you to set alerts and notifications to monitor leading publications, blogs and news sources. This can be accomplished through email, but using a news reader such as Google Reader is more efficient.

As you curate and share news, add your perspective to clarify and personalize it for your community. This is invaluable for encouraging engagement. Also, ask good questions—ones that have no right or wrong answer—that respect the community. Here are a few from the Facebook page of Sublime Garden Design, one that attracts a lot of engagement: *Is this a garden or a landscape? Wouldn't you love to have a cozy hideout like this in your backyard? What do you think of this rustic arbor?*

Finally, because social media is virtual and devoid of human qualities, it's vital your content-sharing is accompanied by a photo, video or quotation to connect with people emotionally.



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SMART BUSINESSES LEARN TO LET GO OF THEIR BRANDS AND FOCUS ON HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AND SERVE THEIR LOYAL CUSTOMERS, LETTING THEM OWN IT.

Facilitate the conversation

The purpose of social media is to create sustained alignment with a specific community, namely your ideal customers and fans. To accomplish this, you have to be worthy of their attention, actively engaged and willing to share the spotlight.

Encourage them to talk and then step into the background. As the facilitator, you're only there to moderate the discussion so the community can interact and share their views. When your customers talk within an online forum centered around your business, they're marketing for you. Here are suggestions about how to make this happen:

- › Create expectations.
- › Publish regularly.
- › Stay on topic.
- › Be brief.
- › Clarify with a relevant perspective.
- › Break things down.
- › Provide practical examples.
- › Point out trends.
- › Build excitement.
- › Be awesome.
- › Inspire.
- › Hint at what's next.

Online marketing works best when it's driven by the customer. What matters most is what your customers say. This is what lubricates the social networks. Smart businesses learn to let go of their brands and focus on how to use social media to better understand and serve their loyal customers, letting them own it. It's a fundamental shift that, when embraced, builds a more engaged, relevant and profitable business. **LM**

Korban is a consultant who helps Green Industry businesses use social media and Internet marketing to create exceptional customer experiences. Contact him at jeffkorban.com.



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HOW-TO

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BY MICHAEL BECKER

I've been involved in certification for several years as a candidate, certified individual and volunteer. My motto is "I'm certifiable, and so are you."

If I grabbed your attention, my mission is partially accomplished. Getting your attention is important, but encouraging you to act is essential. My sole purpose is to convince you to become Landscape Industry Certified.

My story

I care about certification and encouraging others to pursue it because it made a difference in my life and career. I became involved in the landscape industry during the 1980s but didn't earn my certification until 2001. I was a technician who started a company and believed obtaining the Certified Landscape Professional credential (CLP, as it was called then) was my ticket to personal benchmarking. I wanted to know if I had the knowledge to operate a business. Now I'm a proud Landscape Industry Certified Manager and member of the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) operating a successful company. Being able to study and test my business and leadership savvy through certification was, and continues to be, inspiring, motivating and empowering.

PLANET's certification program has been a driving force in my personal growth and development as a leader and business owner. It's opened so many doors. The benefits have been tremendous, mostly because I promote my landscape industry certification to customers, colleagues and the community whenever I can. Certification gives me a competitive edge.

While more than 5,000 people worldwide hold this distinction of excellence, it's a relatively small number compared to how many Green Industry service providers are capable of becoming certified. And certification as a marketing vehicle won't work effectively until customers who want to specify Landscape Industry Certified service providers have access to them.

These realizations led to my pivotal next step of progressing from newly certified bystander to participant. I

became involved in the International Certification Council (ICC)—PLANET's certification administrative body. Now I chair the council and couldn't be prouder of ICC members, past and present, along with our certification partner, the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association. Our passion for certification bonds us to improving the programs under the manager and technician labels. For several years, we've made many strides, beginning with:

- › planning certification strategically;
- › conducting occupational analyses (OAs);
- › revamping our brand to Landscape Industry Certified to replace the alphabet soup of acronyms;
- › introducing a two-year recertification process that requires continuing education units (CEUs); and
- › aligning the program with best practices in general.

We even launched a new exam last year—the Landscape Industry Certified Lawn Care Technician-National—and released two OAs for educator documents for use in curriculum development.

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For me, certification progressed from being a personal and professional achievement to a cause I've committed my time and energy to with other like-minded volunteers. We have momentum and drive, we just need more people to invest in the program to create demand and reach critical mass. I can visualize a variation of the famous Uncle Sam poster: "The ICC wants YOU ... to get certified!"

We need to build legions of certified professionals, and it starts with you and me. We must work together to create demand and simultaneously build an inventory of certified individuals. This will help shorten the time frame needed to reach critical mass and a widespread demand for certified individuals.

That's where you come in. While you might have different motivating factors than I did for becoming certified, it's important to certify your skills and knowledge. It's time to get certified now. If you're an owner or manager, it's the right time to encourage your crew to become cer-



QUICK TIP

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tified. I invite you to join me and thousands of certified professionals who've earned the Landscape Industry Certified status and continue to maintain our credential through recertification. As Green Industry service providers, we need to show we care enough about our craft to continually sharpen our skill set by pursuing certification.

Take Landscape Industry Certified Manager and Technician Shayne Newman, owner of YardApes in New Milford, Conn., for example. In a recent issue of Inside Certification, PLANET's e-newsletter to certified professionals, he said: "Certification is something that allows me to define and set the standard for what I want from employees. To be certified means, unequivocally, that we're safer, more knowledgeable, more efficient and more productive. I can say, with confidence, once they become certified, our employees are professionals who absolutely understand the proper management and care of property, execute quality work and are dedicated to safe practices."

It's your turn to join the certification ranks and enjoy the benefits that being Landscape Industry Certified affords.

Certification has upped my A-game and made me more marketable to customers. Earning bids, impressing customers, distinguishing yourself from the competition—these are just a few of the potential benefits you can look forward to once you study, test and become certified.

Seize the opportunity, map your certification game plan and go for it. The first step is to visit the certification section at landcarenetwork.org, review the manager and technician certifications available and determine the best program to meet your needs. Once you've reviewed this information, don't hesitate to contact PLANET's certification team at certification@landcarenetwork.org or 800-395-2522.

Good luck, and I look forward to counting you among my fellow Landscape Industry Certified colleagues soon. Remember, I'm certifiable, and so are you. **LM**

Becker, a Landscape Industry Certified Manager, is the owner of Estate Gardeners in Elkhorn, Neb., and chair of PLANET's International Certification Council.

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HOW-TO

Build a company that runs itself

BY JEFFREY SCOTT

Are you ready for the good life—by handing off the reins of your business? It requires making a three-step transition from full-time and overworked owner-operator, to professional manager, to partly or fully retired owner enjoying the fruits of your labor.

To achieve the dream of more discretionary time and money, you have to make eight personal shifts in how you think about and run your business.

1 Shift from gut instinct to data-based decisions.

Many owner-operators start off running their businesses based on instinct and manually gathered data, which they use to confirm their instincts. To transition to a professionally run firm, managers must acquire data, and employees must use them to improve their performance without having to wait for the owner's feedback.

Every day, foremen and supervisors should gather and use important data such as job costs, contribution per hour, revenue per day and percent of chargeable time.

To stay on track, managers should collect and report gross profit, overhead expenses and other data weekly and monthly. They also should create and use sales goals to keep salespeople engaged.

Sometimes an owner needs to hire a manager who understands numbers better than he or she does. Don't be ashamed of your weaknesses; instead, hire people smarter than you. It's common in the corporate world.

2 Shift from owner-centered to management team lead.

The management team you put together can be as small as you and one other person or it can be a team of managers; it all depends on the size of your business. The team can consist of a general manager who oversees the entire operation, or it can consist of a team of managers each overseeing their own divisions (including the administrative division). You won't achieve wild success without building a team of people you can count on.

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