

date the other. Therefore, if your business has a thin online presence, the likelihood of those personal referrals holding up is nearly cut in half, according to the data from this survey.

Professional landscape services are a significant investment, and consumers will seek businesses that measure up in multiple categories: trusted by friends, professional in their online appearance and, of course, active in their local communities, which is another measure of trust.

If the majority of consumers make their buying decisions based upon recommendations and online search, it stands to reason landscape professionals should focus on two things: Do good work to earn referrals and learn to use social media and other forms of online marketing to amplify that.”

JEFF KORHAN / *Author of Built-In Social: Essential Social Marketing Practices for Every Small Business* / [JeffKorhan.com](http://JeffKorhan.com)

EXPERT  
SAYS

“ Research is one of the most valuable tools in business when designed, analyzed and leveraged correctly.

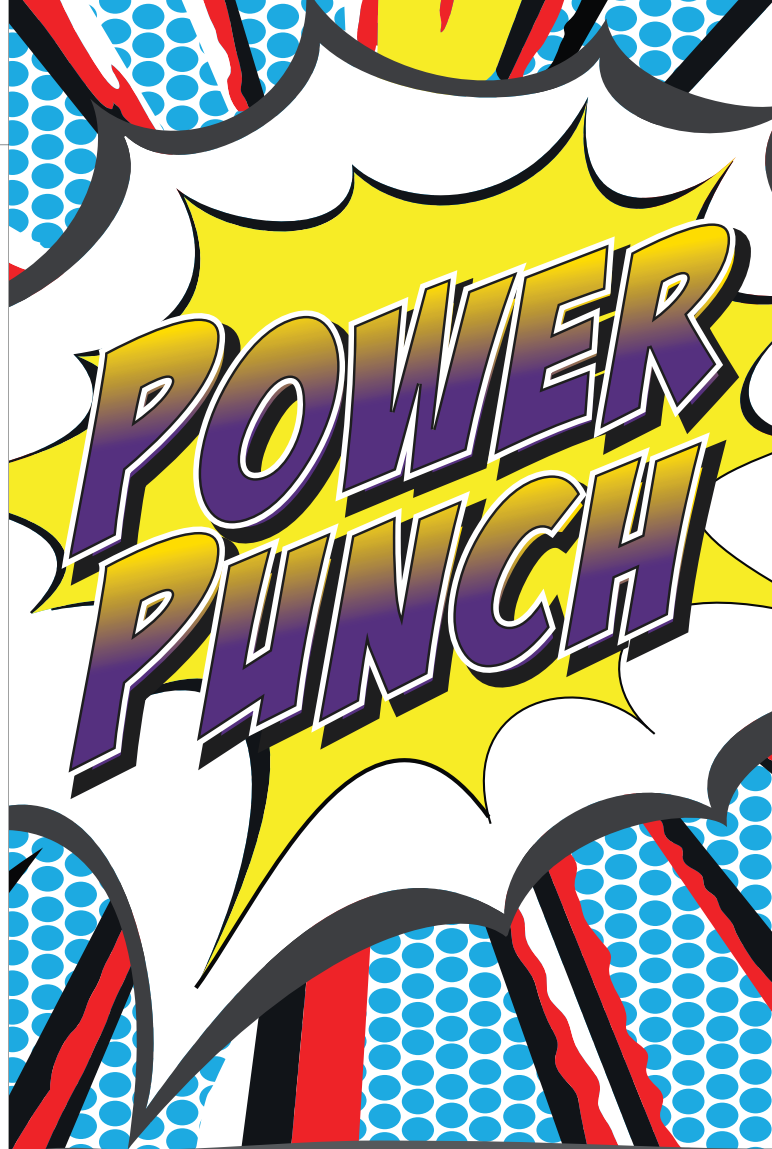
Looking at this research, you see that price and quality of work are rated No. 1 and No. 2 for both questions. Therefore, in order to be successful you’ll need to market and sell value and risk, not price, since value is defined as benefits divided by price.

What you want to communicate to customers is everything they’d lose by not buying from you (risk), and, conversely, everything they’ll gain by hiring you. You must clearly identify all of the benefits they’ll gain by using your products, services and team. Things that go a long way in communicating value and validating price include credentials, warranties and guarantees, sustainable practices and/or innovative payment plans. Sell opportunity not price.

Quality of work issues can be handled by the presence of a reputable list of references, strong warranties, a checklist of daily site activities performed, a map or personal tour of completed work and/or by providing product samples. All employees should be in uniforms with your company name clearly visible. Also consider having an English-speaking account manager with 24/7 accessibility, regularly scheduled walk-throughs and an easy-to-use feedback mechanism.

Don’t forget, these value and risk proof points need to be embedded into all of your communications—everywhere you connect with your customers and prospects.”

JUDY GUIDO / *Guido & Associates*  
[GuidoAssoc.com](http://GuidoAssoc.com)



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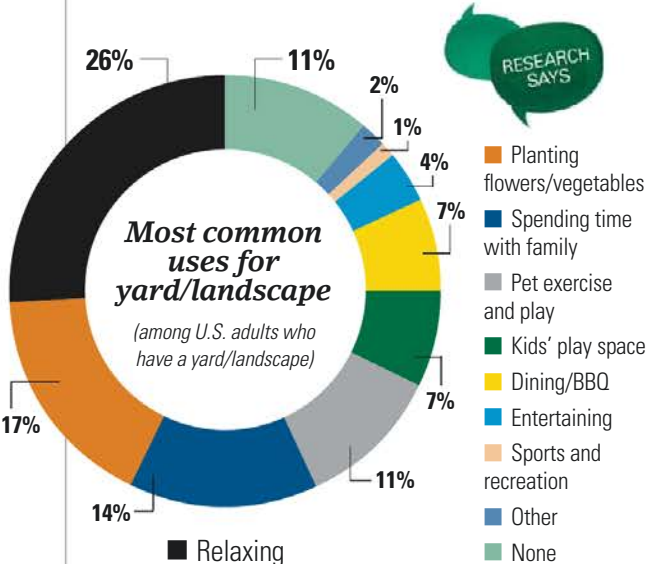
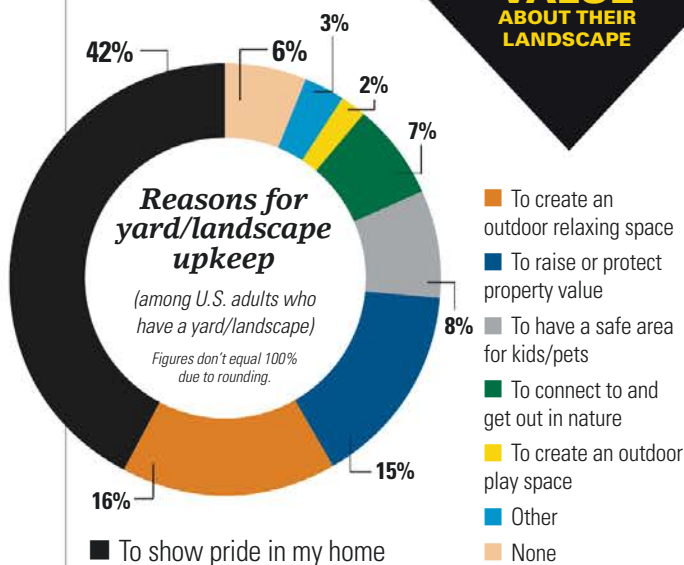
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WHAT THEY VALUE ABOUT THEIR LANDSCAPE



RESEARCH SAYS

EXPERT SAYS

“Looking at your communications, are you targeting these themes (homeowner pride, property values and relaxation) when you market? If not, it's time to make adjustments to your messaging. Think about your elevator speech and ensure your wording paints a clear picture of your work to a prospect. For example, 'The gardens my team and I create complement our clients' beautiful homes, enriching their lifestyles and giving them more time to relax with family and friends.'”

In reviewing images for future materials, which ones speak to pride, relaxation and property values while mirroring your sales messaging? Clients often don't know what they want, but they do know what they don't want. Plan your marketing well and help them make educated decisions.”

LARA MOFFAT, ASLA / LM Creative Consulting  
LMCreativeConsulting.com

# The power of youth

Every Thursday at 1 p.m. Professor McCafferty sat in her office, gazing out the window. She wasn't daydreaming. She was waiting for me. But I'd just pulled an all-nighter at the college newspaper.

While Professor McCafferty was waiting for me in her office, I was halfway across campus, oversleeping my independent study in fiction writing.



**Hear Me Out**  
BETH GERACI  
Senior Editor

Today, I'm feeling much more inspired. Not because I'm especially energized. Or because I woke to the sun streaming through my window. But because I've spent a good deal of time interviewing sources for this month's cover story.

They're all landscape business owners who launched their companies while full-time students. They're all much more disciplined than the stereotypical college student—and

they're all quite inspirational.

"I had a lawn mower and figured if I worked hard I could succeed," reasons Craig Ruppert, CEO and founder of Ruppert Landscape, Laytonsville, Md., who launched his business as a high school student.

In interviewing such former and current student business owners, I was struck by their wisdom, their foresight and above all, their determination. They attended class during the day, worked until dark and studied at night. They took the train home from college to work weekends. And they sacrificed much of their social lives for the sake of financial independence.

What stands out most about these men is the value they place on a college degree. They recognized that a degree would empower them. They took what they learned in class and used it to strengthen their businesses. They also kept in touch with their professors, relying on them later to expand their networks.

When I was in college, I didn't work during the school year. I suppose it would have been nice to have had additional spending money, but the thought of getting a job—much less running a business—didn't even cross my mind. It was hard enough writing my senior thesis, surviving chemistry and rising for an 8 a.m. gym class.

By waiting for me to arrive every week, Professor McCafferty taught me as much about patience as she did about fiction writing. The people in this month's cover story, however, taught me much more than that.

For a valuable lesson from them on how to run a business well, see "The old college try" on page 50.

Reach Geraci at bgeraci@northcoastmedia.net.



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**FREIGHTLINER**



# Students and survivors

Columbus State Community College students and alumni band together to help cancer patients.

BY CASEY PAYTON

**Elaine Euwer knows how difficult** it can be to give up favorite hobbies like gardening because of cancer treatments. She's lived it. As a breast cancer survivor, Euwer was hit hard by her cancer diagnosis. She not only had to give up her landscaping business, she also had to put her passion for gardening aside.

With the many medical restrictions cancer patients face during treatment, gardening can simply be too strenuous for them. But Euwer's journey gave her the idea to found an organization that could help restore cancer patients' landscapes while benefitting students in the field.

She founded Helping

Hands in the Garden, which provides support to patients receiving treatment for breast cancer in central Ohio by assisting them with the care and maintenance of their landscapes. Euwer is a graduate of the Columbus (Ohio) State Community College (CSCC) landscape program and has close ties with many students and alumni. In fact, the structure of Helping Hands in the Garden has been set up through the student-run Columbus State Landscape Association and its alumni affiliate.

With more than 25 volunteers, the organization has assisted 58 families with their gardens since 2009, completing general cleanups, installing a vegetable garden, adding seasonal color to a front yard and much more. The jobs are determined based on clients' needs.

Helping Hands in the Garden leaves brochures in local oncology clinics and doctor's offices throughout the Columbus area, so patients can apply to receive volunteer services.

Over the last three years,



Helping Hands in the Garden volunteers have provided landscape services to more than 58 families since 2009.

as well as the chance to network with industry professionals who are also volunteering.”

In addition to student volunteers, Euwer says her organization gets a lot of cancer survivors who want to help. The projects are handled like any landscape job, she says. There's a walk-through of the site, followed by a meeting to discuss plans.

Euwer says being able to help other cancer patients has been gratifying. She adds that she has seen just how therapeutic gardening is.

“This has been a wonderful experience,” Euwer says. “We feel we're making a difference in these cancer patients' lives, and it's also been a great way for students to learn.” **LMI**

## AT A GLANCE

**Student Chapter:** Columbus State Community College

**Location:** Columbus, Ohio

**Advisor:** Richard Ansley, professor

### SELECT PROJECT LISTING:

▶ **Helping Hands in the Garden**—Founded by CSCC alumna and breast cancer survivor Elaine Euwer, this nonprofit affiliate of the student group has helped 58 families maintain and clean up their gardens since 2009.

Landscape Management is the media sponsor of the Professional Landscape Network's (PLANET) Community Stewardship Award. We'll feature each of the program's winners January through June. For more information or to read about the other winners, visit [landscarenetwork.org/awards/communityaward](http://landscarenetwork.org/awards/communityaward) or [landscapemanagement.net/givingback](http://landscapemanagement.net/givingback).



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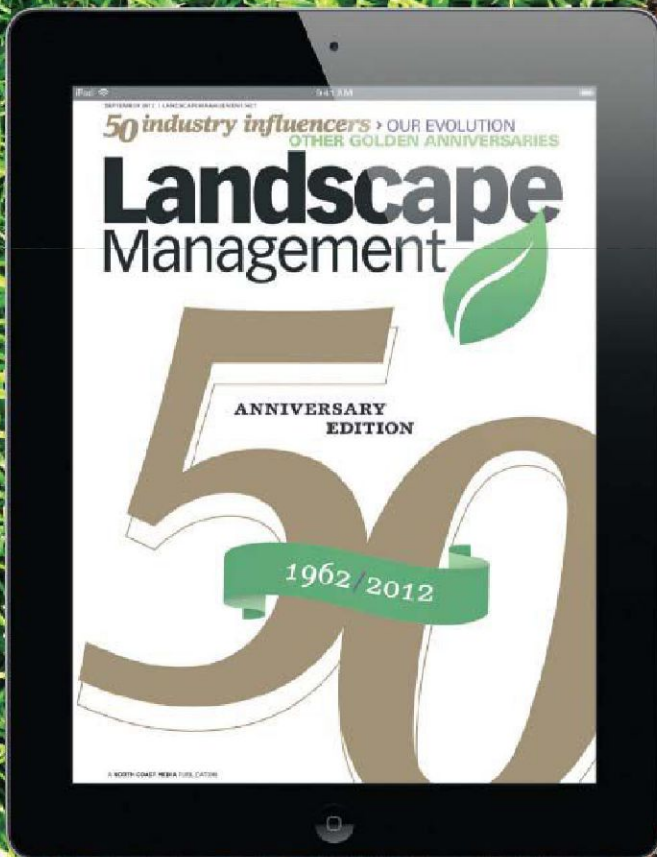
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## BEST PRACTICES

**BRUCE WILSON**

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

# Just getting started?

**W**hether you're starting up or starting over, becoming a landscape entrepreneur can be a rewarding enterprise. The industry has a low cost of entry, and a business is often inexpensive to start and operate.

Classic examples of successful landscape businesses beginning in a garage or an apartment abound. Some have evolved from the owner's part-time landscape or grounds work during high school or college. Others spring naturally from a passion for gardening or landscape design.

Like any business, the secret to developing a successful landscape operation is simple: Never jump into it without any thought or planning.

Here are 10 practical insights to help you get your landscape business off to a smooth start and keep it strong for the long haul:

**1 Start with a business plan.** A business plan will help you determine the legal structure of your business, establish the framework for key financial decisions and identify the licensing and permits necessary to run your company. The planning process is essential to define your direction, give thought to your customer profile and your market mix, frame your value proposition and establish goals and a corresponding timeline for growth.

**2 Create a budget.** Manage your cash flow and understand the actual capital you'll need to support your business and equipment purchases, and develop and maintain a chart of accounts similar to the chart of accounts template used by the Green Industry. This will let you track costs and margins by business type and benchmark yourself against the industry.

**3 Get your day-to-day operating and technology systems in place.** Your company won't have the infrastructure to support growth without great systems and processes.

**4 Join your state contractors association and the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET).** Professional trade associations are well

worth the investment for business assistance and training, networking, certification opportunities and continuing education. They also offer valuable advice and practical information about pricing.

**5 Market your company.** Become savvy in public relations and the use of social media for marketing on a tight budget. Having a communications strategy is a must to own your message and keep it strong. If you're new to the market, getting the word out is essential.

**6 Grow organically.** There's a temptation to bid low to build up volume. It's OK to do a little of this, but too much will hurt your margins. It's much better to grow organically, price competitively, stand up for your personalized service and "wow" your customers. It's possible to do small acquisitions and buy business, but costs to do so are high.

**7 Leverage your skills and the capabilities of others.** If you are a great operations guy, find a sales partner. If you are an energetic business developer, balance your entrepreneurial style with a strong administrator. Match up early with someone you trust who will challenge your thinking and then capitalize on your capabilities together.

**8 Understand your core competency and don't work outside your expertise.** If your company or team doesn't have the ability to perform specific technical work, consider a great subcontractor to partner with.

**9 Remember you're in the service business.** Your reputation depends on the quality of your work as much as on how you deliver it. Be professional at all times. Invest in a good website, return calls and be a proactive solutions provider. You're in business to make someone else's home or business look and be better.

**10 Commit to continuous learning.** Not only will continuous learning and improvements have a positive impact on the professional growth of your company by driving revenue and profits, it will play a vital role in establishing a more empowered workforce over time as your company grows.

### » WEB EXTRA

To download a sample Green Industry chart of accounts, visit [LandscapeManagement.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net) and click on Web Extras.



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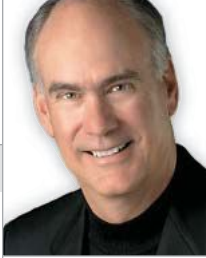
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\*Fully charged battery voltage measured without a workload is 40 volts. Nominal voltage is 37.



# THE BENCHMARK

FRANK ROSS

The author is owner-manager of 3PG Consulting. Reach him at frank@3PGConsulting.com.

## Growing net profit

Last month, my good friend and partner Kevin Kehoe wrote about the trends in revenue growth from 2011 to 2012. (See [goo.gl/IKoWMM](http://goo.gl/IKoWMM) for the column.) He referenced a random sampling of 30 companies from the collective client base of 3PG Consulting. This month we'll look at those same firms, honing in on my favorite line item on the income statement—net profit.

Table 1 shows the result of the benchmark analysis. The average revenue growth rate from 2011 to 2012 was 8 percent, while the growth in net profit over the same period was a whopping 27.6 percent. Wow. Let's see if we can surmise why.

Table 2 breaks out the growth in net profit by revenue size and shows that no matter the size of company in the sampling, every volume group grew, and grew substantially, in net profit from 2011 to 2012. Just what can we make of these statistics?

1 My personal interpretation begins with a **psychological opinion**. We all have experienced the economic downturn for about four years. I believe we have collectively come to the conclusion that the only way things are going to get better is if we accept the realities, understand that no one is coming to our rescue (but us) and focus on making

improvements to not only survive in these markets, but thrive in them.

2 Speaking on behalf of those companies for which we have an intimate knowledge, every one has a strong **information system**. No matter the size, all have an effective customer relationship management (CRM) system; all have a detailed estimating system and employ a pricing method that tells them when to walk away from lousy jobs; all have job controls, the information from which cycles daily or weekly; all produce a departmental income statement monthly; and all use a budgeting process that's updated monthly and constantly informs the management team of rough waters ahead so course corrections may be made promptly.

3 **Tough decisions** are now common. We've seen many examples of management constantly evaluating the value of past decisions and measuring their benefits for the company. For example, if a market you serve doesn't add value to the momentum and direction of the company, make the tough call and refocus attention to the markets that do. If a profit center isn't making money, and if its problems cannot be corrected quickly, jettisoning it should not be out of the question. If people in critical positions aren't producing results, analyze why. If a turnaround cannot be realized quickly, a career change may be in the offing. In the past, we may have hung on.

Gratuitous spending is all but eliminated. Compensation and benefit structures are being retooled. All of these are examples of the tough decisions we've seen companies make to improve profits.

4 More than ever, we're seeing companies **benchmark** themselves against other strong organizations. The use of qualified industry consultants has exploded. Peer group interest is on the rise. The drive is to compare oneself against the best, analyze the differences and strive to become the best.

It's been fascinating to watch the industry transform over the last four years, and there's every reason to believe the next four will smoke that experience.

TABLE 1: NET PROFIT GROWTH OVERALL

	2011	2012	Average growth	Highest growth	Lowest growth
Revenue	230,565,723	249,090,541	8%	32.4%	-17.3%
Net profit	12,750,284	16,265,577	27.6%	800.5%	-243.9%

TABLE 2: NET PROFIT GROWTH BY REVENUE SIZE

Under \$3 million	\$3 million - \$5 million	\$5 million - \$10 million	\$10 million-plus
26.9%	32.4%	38.5%	19.6%



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## SLENDER ASTER

*Eurybia compacta*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

▶ This herbaceous annual weed is commonly found in the southeastern U.S. along the coastal plains in dry, sandy soils.

▶ It's a small, erect plant with several stems and a thick, woody base. Left untreated, slender aster can grow 1 to 3 ft. tall.

▶ Thick, veined leaves alternate along the stems.

▶ Pale violet to reddish-purple ray florets with pale yellow centers emerge from mid-summer to early fall.

▶ This spring/summer weed grows in warmer

temperatures and easily camouflages itself in lawns and fields, hiding under taller, more aggressive grasses.

### CONTROL TIPS

▶ Its flowers produce tiny seeds, dispersed by wind and water throughout the grass, so it's essential to control this weed before it flowers and goes to seed.

▶ Apply a preemergent herbicide containing isoxaben or a combination product of isoxaben and trifluralin in early spring, before soil temperatures are warm enough to initiate germination.

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## ENGLISH LAWN DAISY

*Bellis perennis*

### IDENTIFICATION TIPS

▶ This fibrous rooted perennial has a prostrate, spreading growth habit. Because it spreads through a rapidly advancing rhizome system, it has the potential to root and produce new plants at each node along individual rhizomes.

▶ Its basal leaves are nearly smooth, loosely hairy and margined or variably toothed. They are broad at the top and narrow at the base.

▶ Flower heads consist of tiny white or pink petals

surrounding a yellow center; the flower stalks generally exceed the leaves in length.

▶ In California, seedlings germinate from April through September.

### CONTROL TIPS

▶ Postemergent applications of products containing penoxsulam should be applied in late summer to early fall.

▶ To optimize control of English lawn daisy, make two to three sequential applications 28 days apart.

\* State restrictions on the sale and use of Sapphire apply.

For more information regarding these and other turf weeds — and related control technologies and tips — please visit [www.DowProvesIt.com](http://www.DowProvesIt.com) or call 800/255-3726.

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