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## Renewal & REMEMBRANCE

July 22, 2013 | Arlington, Va.

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Register for both events at [LandcareNetwork.org/renewal](http://LandcareNetwork.org/renewal) or call 800-395-2522. #rrlegday

Participation in Renewal & Remembrance is limited to PLANET members and capped at 500 volunteers—Register early!

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continued from page 60

It's important that your ads reflect the user's search query. This cardinal rule is often broken, with advertisers using generic ad text about their company instead of copy regarding the keyword that's associated with the ad. If your ad is connected to an ad group containing keywords about a certain product or service, make sure the ad text has a variation of those keywords in the ad text. This will allow your ad to be noticed by more consumers and improve your quality score, making your ads more relevant and reducing your costs.

Let's take a look at two ads written for the same group of keywords:

### AdGroup Example

**Keywords:** belgard, belgard patio, belgard pavers, belgard landscapers

**Ad No. 1:**  
 Jim's Landscaping  
 From Trees and Shrubs to  
 Lawns, Check Out Jim's!  
[www.JimsLandscaping.com](http://www.JimsLandscaping.com)

**Ad No. 2:**  
 Belgard Paver Installer  
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 Save 20% Off a Belgard Patio!  
[www.JimsLandscaping.com/Belgard](http://www.JimsLandscaping.com/Belgard)

Ad No. 1 is a poorly written, generic ad that has nothing to do with the keywords for this AdGroup. With all the keywords centered around Belgard pavers, it's hard to imagine consumers feeling confident that this ad will lead them to find the answer to their search query. Ad No. 2, however, is well written, using keywords from the AdGroup in the ad copy itself. A consumer will no doubt realize this ad will lead him to an answer regarding his search query about Belgard pavers.

Finally, where your ad takes consumers on your website is just as important as the ad itself. Similar to the rules when creating an effective ad, you'll want this page on your website to talk about the keywords contained in that AdGroup and ad. Using the example ad above that talks about Belgard pavers, you should lead visitors to a page on your website that discusses that product and service. Taking visitors to your main page will irritate them and increase the chances they leave without converting into prospective customers.

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- Robert Kershaw  
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### Expanding your knowledge

As you can see, pay-per-click marketing is a powerful tool that can help even the smallest companies advertise effectively on the Internet. The ability to alter your advertising strategy in real time allows you to test different things, increase or decrease your investment and accurately track the overall success of your advertising immediately.

Additionally, your success with pay-per-click marketing depends on how much time you put into expanding your knowledge on the subject. Many resources on it are available, and most of the good ones are free through Google's AdWords Knowledge Center. The website features tutorials, videos and online seminars that you can use to increase your skill set.

Finally, Google's AdWords team is available during business hours and will perform an audit on your AdWords account at no charge. Google feels that helping you become more successful with AdWords will only encourage you to spend more with them. **LM**

» WEB EXTRA

For more from Kanary, including 5 killer PPC ad tips and an ad copy-writing worksheet, visit the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

*Kanary, a Certified Google Adwords Individual, is director of marketing for Weed Pro, based in Sheffield Village, Ohio.*



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# Side *by* side



Competitors Laura McMurray and Michael Ackerman share office space at work and a life together.

**T**hey say “If you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em.” Or, if you’re Laura McMurray and Michael Ackerman, join in matrimony.

When the competing landscaping business owners decided to share space to save money, they ended up sharing so much more.

“Ultimately, the two of us fell madly in love,” says McMurray. “You are now speaking to two fierce competitors who are (almost) married. We still compete and run separate businesses side by side.”

As of press time the pair had yet to make their personal commitment official, but they considered themselves married. As far as the businesses are concerned, though they share the same grounds, they remain two separate entities.

“We have legally binding agreements, both personally and professionally,” McMurray says. “We have pro-

## *Two landscape industry competitors decide to share space and find a whole lot more than they bargained for.*

BY **DAN JACOBS**

tected ourselves as much as any business owner would. We have worked too hard for our respective successes or failures, and neither one of us would ever be willing to jeopardize one another’s security or our employees’ livelihoods.”

It all started with a plan to save a little money. Ackerman, who runs Michael’s Complete Lawn Care and focuses on the Wichita, Kan., area, had a facility

that included too much office and not enough yard for his dirt and mulch.

McMurray, whose Complete Landscaping Systems is more nationally focused, had the opposite problem. She wasn’t using her yard.

That’s when she decided to give Ackerman a call.

They planned to meet in early 2013 for an hour to discuss some options. The pair now considers that meeting to be their first date.

In fact, Ackerman used an old-fashioned first date ploy just in case things weren’t working out; he had one of his trusted employees call him after an hour, which gave him an out if he needed one.

“I guess I was OK for that first hour,” McMurray says. “Six hours later we were still brainstorming. From that first face-to-face meeting, we’ve never really left each other’s side.”

McMurray and Ackerman estimate they'll each save about \$65,000 a year by sharing the facility and related costs, such as trash and utilities. And that does not include the bulk buying power they have or the increased revenue from subcontracting work to the other.

Factoring all the elements, Ackerman thinks they might each be able to have a \$100,000 impact from the arrangement.

The pair admits their employees had some initial concerns. And even though they have different management styles, the staffs have since bought into the new approach.

"I'm probably a bit more firm," McMurray says.

"And a bit more hands on," Ackerman adds.

"I'm a bit of a control freak," McMurray admits.

On the other hand, Ackerman says, "I'm of the belief you provide them with the tools; you provide them with the systems and then you back off."

But at the end of the day, one of the nicest things about having a spouse in the business, Ackerman and McMurray say, is having someone who truly understands your problems.

"For us to be able to simply vent to one another, it's almost as if we absorb about 50 percent of each other's stress," Ackerman says. **LM**

*Jacobs is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*

## AT A GLANCE

### Complete Landscaping Systems

**Revenue:** \$13 million

**Employees:** 115 in 38 states

Laura McMurray purchased Complete Landscaping Systems four years ago and has grown the company from \$1.2 million to \$13 million. The company has been on the *Inc.* 5000 list of fastest-growing companies for the past four years and is No. 97 on the *LM150*.



### Michael's Complete Lawn Care

**Revenue:** \$3.5 million

**Employees:** 60

Michael Ackerman started his company as a way to make some extra money during high school. By the time he was 16 years old, he had revenue of \$1 million. He made a deal with a private school he was attending to

trade out grounds maintenance services for his tuition. "At the time it made sense to me," he says. "They probably got the better deal."



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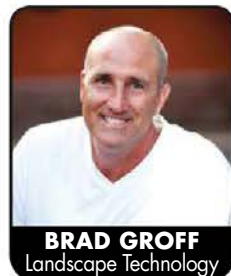
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# MARKET WATCH

DESIGN/BUILD

## Getting attached

For one business owner, a small investment in attachments pays off big. *By BETH GERACI*

PG 67

**DESIGN/BUILD** The value of attachments

PG 70

**MAINTENANCE** Minimizing equipment loss

PG 71

**IRRIGATION** Smart marketing for Smart Irrigation Month

PG 72

**LAWN/TREE CARE** Bed weed control an appealing option

It's no secret that finding innovative ways to grow your business has become increasingly important in recent years. And some landscape business owners, such as Carl Williams, general manager at Lawn Sense in Monroeville, Pa., are finding compact equipment attachments to be a direct and inexpensive path to diversifying.

"Using attachments has allowed me to not give my competition the oppor-

tunity to service my accounts," Williams says. "It allows me to offer additional services and retain customers. I don't want my competition to get their foot in the door."

Williams, whose business is 70 percent commercial and 30 percent residential, has expanded his business and saved money largely through two attachments—Bobcat's Brushcat mower and Box Blade plow.

Brushcat mowing jobs have generated for Williams \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year, he estimates. The mower attaches directly to a skid steer or track loader. Williams' team uses it to cut grass that hasn't been maintained for several months, such as undeveloped parcels that need to be maintained just annually or semi-annually.

"It's for builders that may want to maintain their lots just to keep them walkable, that's been the niche for that piece of equipment," says Williams.

*continued on page 68*



Carl Williams uses equipment attachments strategically.



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## MARKETWATCH

*continued from page 67*

By filling that niche, Lawn Sense has been able to retain customers who otherwise would have sought service from its competitors. "It's allowed me to offer that same service to a few more customers that I maybe would have turned away in the past because I would have had to rent that piece of equipment," Williams says. "It's opened up a new market for me."

Williams also has turned to Bobcat's Box Blade plow, a snow pusher, to save money—and a substantial amount of it. "I can buy one of those for a few thousand dollars and put it on my skid loader," Williams says, adding that snow constitutes about 15 percent of his business. "The snow pusher allows me to not have to purchase an additional pickup truck to service that account," he says. "If I wanted to put a plow on a pickup truck, I'm into \$8,000 to

\$10,000 for that pickup truck, just so it can plow snow."

Williams' decision to invest in attachments was a strategic one he came to early in the 12 years he's owned his business. "Ever since I started, I've been benchmarking what we do, how long a task takes, what the cost associated with each task is," he says. "That's why those pushers make sense on a skid-steer instead of having a pickup truck that sits there all winter. You have to keep your costs as tight as you possibly can."

Some winters, Mother Nature doesn't bring as much snow as others. With that in mind, Williams reasons, a truck is a big investment that doesn't provide as strong a return as a \$3,000 snow pusher.

All of Williams' attachment purchases "have been money well spent," he says. "To me, if I couldn't work those situations with my customers, I don't think I'd be in business today."

### WHEN TO RENT, WHEN TO BUY

While rental remains a strong alternative to ownership, an improving economy is convincing contractors to buy compact equipment again. Rental and acquisition strategies each offer unique benefits for different stages in an operation's life cycle, and both are demonstrating positive trends.

The final decision boils down to being able to complete your work in the most efficient and affordable manner possible. As you weigh your options, it's important to evaluate the following considerations:

**Job site conditions** – Are your typical project tasks, terrain or space constraints changing enough to require a different type or size of machine than you currently operate?

**Project frequency** – How often will a machine be used? Will the length of your contracts and the volume of work generate revenue to support a short-term payment schedule or long-term investment?

**Attachment versatility** – Do your attachments provide flexibility, compatibility and accessibility for multiple job sites? Attachment utilization of 50 to 75 percent usually justifies a permanent fleet addition.

**Capital resources** – Rental payments can be tax deductible, but are there greater tax incentives for purchasing? If you're repeatedly renting a machine, but cash is tight, does a rent-to-purchase option agreement (RPO) pencil out?

The decision to buy or rent entirely depends on your company's situation, so take the time necessary to fully evaluate what is best for your operation.

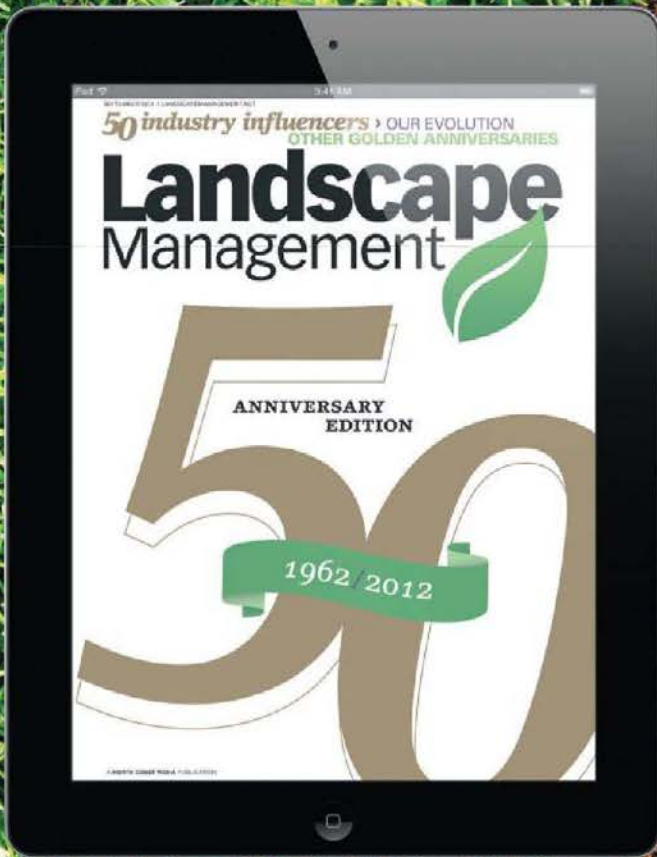
*Source: Bobcat*





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## MAINTENANCE

# Protecting equipment

Pro Care Horticultural Services minimizes equipment loss with a financial incentive.

By CASEY PAYTON



**T**here's no doubt that landscape equipment experiences a lot of wear and tear and many pieces break down over time.

But improper maintenance and carelessness can lead to earlier breakdowns, loss or even theft. Lowell Rolsky, president of Pro Care Horticultural Services in Carmel, Ind., recently implemented a new tactic that aims to minimize equipment problems. By deducting from the bonuses he offers employees at the end of the year, he believes he may be able to reduce the amount of lost, stolen or damaged equipment the company deals with annually.

"We've been in business for 42 years and trying to fight this problem for a long time," says Rolsky, who employs between 65 and 80 people during peak seasons and retains 30 to 35 full-timers. "Over the years we've tried a lot of approaches and nothing really worked. The fact is money is what motivates most people, and while we can't take wages away, we found that

deducting from the employee's bonus is quite effective."

At the end of the year, supervisors and foremen are eligible for a bonus of \$50 for every year they've been with the company. That's in addition to a \$50 bonus that employees get any time their name is mentioned by a customer. But Rolsky has found that deducting money from that "end-of-year" bonus is most effective considering it's a time when the holidays are on employees' minds and they're hoping to make some extra cash.

"We look at the equipment issues on a case-by-case basis," Rolsky says. "We certainly aren't out to penalize our employees for equipment that breaks down for normal wear and tear. But if it becomes obvious that equipment was stolen because a truck was left unlocked or that the equipment was mistreated, that's negligence, and we hold the employee accountable for that with a bonus deduction."

Lowell Rolsky has a plan to limit equipment maintenance costs.

In determining how much to deduct, Rolsky says he looks at the deductible for that piece of equipment and determine a value based on that. "For instance, if it's a \$300 blower that gets lost, we will ask for a third of that by taking it from the bonus," he says. "That can add up if the employee is careless, but the fact is, someone who is regularly careless shouldn't be with the company anyhow. So the second benefit of this program is that it focuses our attention on employees who are perhaps not suited to remain with the company."

While the deduction program has only been in place about two years, Rolsky believes it's working. "We haven't quantified whether this is saving us a lot of money yet, but what I do know is that employees have become more aware that we're serious about them taking good care of the equipment," Rolsky says. "For a long time I think they thought it was just talk. But now that they're seeing consequences, I believe we'll start seeing change."

Rolsky adds that he's already observed positive changes. Workers, for instance, are remembering to lock their trucks, and leaders are doing a better job of looking at their trucks before they leave job sites. "It's helping our employees to pay attention to the bigger picture," Rolsky says.

The end-of-year bonuses are easy to budget for since they're based on how long employees have been with the company, he says. As the end of the year approaches, he knows what he should set aside and says he'd be happy to continue to pay out the full amount and see a decrease in his equipment loss percentage.

But Rolsky doesn't want his employees to expect the bonus no matter what. "I think another good thing this has done is show our employees that a bonus is never guaranteed and it's not just a free hand-out," Rolsky says. "I feel our employees are becoming more aware that a bonus is not a guaranteed entity but is something that is based on your actions."

*Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscaping industry.*