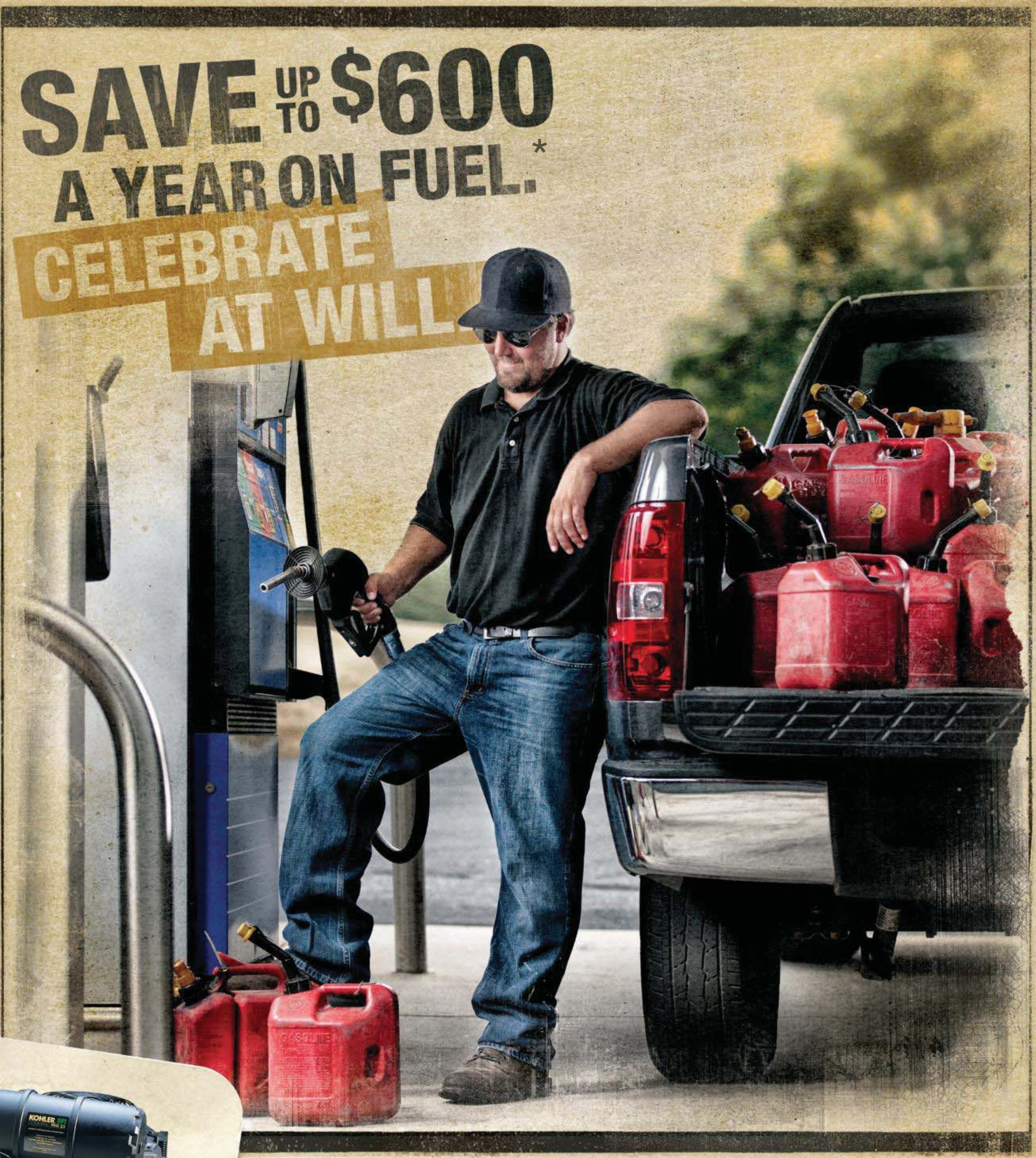

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GIVING BACK

PLANET COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP AWARD WINNER

CATEGORY ▶ Large Green Industry Service Provider ($5 million or more in annual revenue)

Well worth it

Acres Group invests in its community with an array of service work.

BY CASEY PAYTON

The list of community service activities the Acres Group in Wauconda, Ill., participates in is more than 20 items long. The involvement in most of these opportunities originated organically, but Acres Group incorporated its community involvement into the company structure by initiating a wellness committee in 2010 that supports ongoing efforts and selects projects to participate in each year.

There are 22 employees on the committee. It chooses community service events that will be meaningful to both employees and the business. "For instance, we chose to support JDRF in 2012 and again in 2013 because we have over 30 employees who suffer from diabetes," says Maureen Scheitz, vice president of human resources. "Our owner, Jim Schwantz, and our vice president of finance, Paul Washburn, are committed to the Wauconda Chamber of Commerce events where a large number of employees have the opportunity to serve."

The company embraces community service from the top down, says Washburn. "As a larger company in Wauconda, we recognize that we can make a difference in the community with our resources and support."

Time and resources are tight for everyone these days, so many companies say they don't have time for community involvement and service opportunities. But Scheitz points out they not only do tremendous good for the community, but they also benefit the company, serving as team-building activities.

"It's a way for employees to connect outside of work and to give back to the community or a good cause at the same time," she says. "Most of our service involvement is commitment of time as opposed to financial donations. Time is as scarce a resource as money nowadays, but the rewards are worth the investment."

Washburn agrees. "One has to make the time to support these events," he says. "Things never fit nicely into a work week, so it has to be important enough to you to work around the obstacles and still find time to give back."

As for donated resources, he says, "it doesn't always have to be money. Many events we support, we donate time or planning rather than funds."

Even a small effort can make a difference, adds Sherm Fields, vice president of marketing. "We understand tough times, but every little bit helps. Donations and volunteerism that come with some real personal sacrifice tend to be the most rewarding to the giver—and hopefully the recipient as well." LM

AT A GLANCE

Company: Acres Group
Headquarters: Wauconda, Ill.
CEO: Jim Schwantz

SELECT PROJECT LISTING:

- ▶ Holiday family sponsorships—For more than seven years employees have sponsored less-fortunate families, providing Thanksgiving meals and fulfilling Christmas lists.
- ▶ Feed My Starving Children—In 2010 and 2011 Acres Group volunteers packaged food for children in third-world countries.
- ▶ JDRF Ron Santo Walk—In 2012, 50-plus employees, clients, families and friends raised more than $12,500 for juvenile diabetes research. Efforts included fundraising via a soccer tournament and a concert put on by an employee's band.
- ▶ Wauconda Food Drive—Employees have donated approximately a pallet of food annually for 10 years. Plus, they've helped pick up food from others and deliver it to the food pantry.

Top: For the past four years Acres has hosted an annual Arbor Day sale in its Wauconda, Ill., parking lot. Proceeds assist the town in maintaining its Tree City USA status.

Bottom: Ten Acres employees participate annually in a two-day, 150-mile bike ride to benefit multiple sclerosis.

PHOTOS: ACRES GROUP

Landscape Management is the media sponsor of the Professional Landcare 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 landcarenetwork.org/awards/communityaward or landscapemanagement.net/givingback.

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

Family business transitions

If you've ever been involved in a family enterprise, you know it can be a bumpy ride.

When it comes to leadership transitions, the process can be particularly difficult if internal conflicts, feuding and personal rivalries obstruct a seamless transition.

Data show that 70 percent of family businesses do not survive the transition from founder to second generation; only about 10 percent are planned and executed through to the third generation.

To ensure the viability of your business and ease the generational transition, a succession plan is essential. It not only will prioritize business needs over family desires, but it also will serve to clarify potential squabbling, put guidelines around awkward communication topics such as finances and mortality, and establish protocols around legal, tax and other asset valuation complexities.

We all know and have seen many cases of dysfunction in the family business. This is often caused by muddled involvement of sons and daughters brought into the business in a less than successful manner.

Avoiding politics & nepotism

Employees often think the owners' children get preference, which they often do. Attracting and retaining high-performing, non-family employees is often made more difficult by the perception that preference is given to family members when it comes to career advancement.

Throughout my career either owning a family business, working in a family business and now consulting with family businesses, I've observed and studied its idiosyncrasies. Experience has taught me that the following work best when bringing your children into the company.

1. Let your children make their own choices. Give them opportunities to do odd jobs around the company appropriate to their interest and skill sets and allow their interests and passion to develop organically.

2. Starting them at the bottom works best. Coach them on how other employees will watch them and set higher expectations for their performance because of who they are. Establish clearly defined compensation structures based on merit and abilities, not familial relationships. Reward them for sweat equity and call them out on arrogance. Do not tolerate condescending behavior. Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined.

3. Formal education and on-the-job learning/training go hand in hand. Require them to develop professional skills through college horticultural or business programs, in combination with working in the business.

4. Encourage them to work for another landscaping company. Either during college or upon graduation, allow them to work somewhere else. It can be a really valuable building block for creating a well-rounded experience base from which to build.

5. Establish criteria for job performance. Use good management practices to keep standards high. Keep a balance between holding your family member to a high standard for performance and being too demanding and never satisfied. The other employees are already holding them to a higher standard. Avoid making it a no-win for your children to share in your business. Make the process personally rewarding.

6. Change your thinking from your son or daughter "replacing" you to "complementing" you. Some of the more successful transitions occur when the second-generation family member brings special talents to the leadership mix that adds value to or augments the owner's capabilities, making him or her more of a partner in the business than a threat. For example, if, as the owner, you're operationally focused, your family member might have talents in technology, finance or marketing/sales.

Despite some of the above difficulties, some companies make smooth generational transitions. In fact, sometimes the next generation leader takes the company to higher levels.

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KEVIN KEHOE | The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

Revenue growth: How do you compare?

Are you wondering how the industry fared in 2012? And how you did by comparison? Over the course of the next few months, the consultants at 3PG Consulting will provide answers to these two questions in this monthly column.

In this first of the series, I'll share information on industry revenue growth, the strategies that worked and some predictions for 2013. The information is derived from the 3PG Consulting's client base. We looked at 30 companies (randomly selected out of more than 100) to compile this for you.

Table 1 shows the results of the benchmark analysis. The average revenue growth rate from 2011 to 2012 was 8 percent. This average disguises some very high and low growth rates.

Table 2 breaks out growth rates by annual revenue size and clearly shows the most robust growth took place in companies with less than $5 million in annual revenue. If we sort the information by region, the lowest growth rates took place in snow markets and the highest growth rates occured in non-snow markets. If you're in a snow market, this in fact might be your experience.

What can we learn from these figures?

1. There's still growth and solid conditions in most markets, especially for smaller to medium-size players.

2. It's really hard to grow a larger business at high growth rates. This is the result of the continued slowdown in overall economic growth. In most markets there's still precious little construction and new development to drive big dollar growth.

3. The highest-growth companies invested money in employing customer relationship management (CRM) systems, like BOSS or Sales-Force.com, sales management programs (putting someone in charge of the sales team) and sales force training (coaching business development and account management staff in time management and face-to-face skills).

4. While there's still low pricing by some industry participants, this strategy was not the tactic that drove sales growth rates for the high performers.

What drove growth? It was targeted and assertive direct sales force efforts. Period. Companies that invested in sharpening the marketing message, the lead-generation machine and negotiating tactics did well. In other words, an investment in No. 3 above paid off last year—finally.

What can we expect in 2013?

1. Market growth may not be robust, but it will be steady enough to support 10 percent growth in most markets.

2. CRM systems will continue to be a good investment—driving sales team productivity and effectiveness.

3. Increasing customer loyalty will present a selling challenge. "Taking business away" from competitors will get harder. There was a clear improvement in retention rates in 2012 in most markets. This trend will continue.

4. The biggest risk to growth might be cheap money and rising real estate values. Cheap money combined with rising values is leading to consolidation in the property management business. And anything that happens in that business affects our business.

Overall, I expect another year like 2012 in 2013—at least on the revenue growth side.

TABLE 1: REVENUE GROWTH OVERALL

2011 revenue	2012 revenue	Average growth	Highest growth	Lowest growth
230,565,723	249,090,541	8%	32.4%	-17.3%

TABLE 2: REVENUE GROWTH BY REVENUE SIZE

Under $3 million	$3 million - $5 million	$5 million- $10 million	$10 million- plus
14.8%	20.4%	7.8%	10.3%

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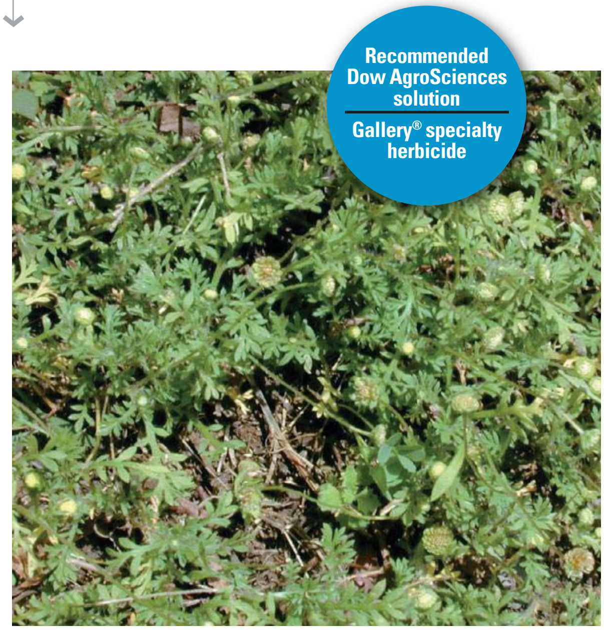


SOUTHERN BRASS BUTTONS *Cotula australis*

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

› This low-growing annual is often confused with swinecress, thanks to its similar leaves and flower heads. Swinecress has a skunk-like odor; brass buttons has no odor.

› Its seed leaves are long, narrow and fleshy, and the first true leaves are divided into three narrow lobes.

› Small, pale yellow flowers cluster into heads atop long stalks and bloom from January through May.

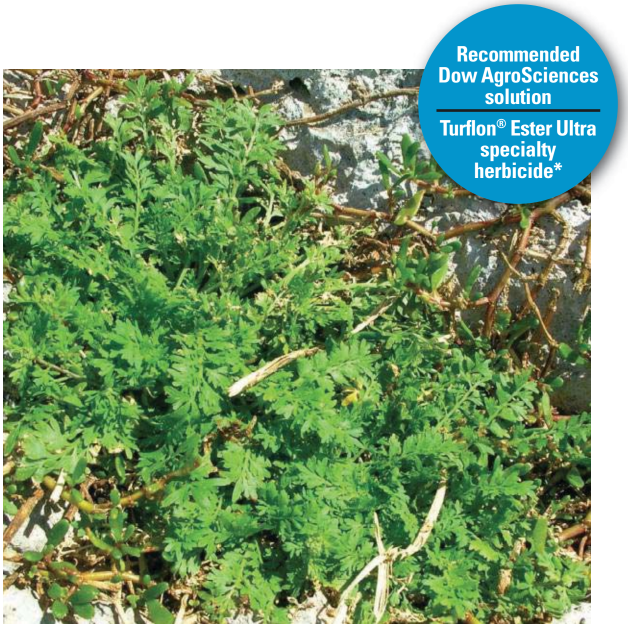
› In mature plants, finely dissected leaves are sparsely covered with short hairs. They're arranged alternately along the stem on short stalks.

› This member of the sunflower family is commonly found along the coast from California to Washington.

CONTROL TIPS

› Its broad leaves can take over a large area quickly, so it's important to treat this weed early.

› Apply a preemergent herbicide containing isoxaben prior to germination, followed by 0.5 in. of irrigation.



LESSER SWINECRESS

Coronopus didymus

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

› This member of the mustard family is a low-growing, prostrate winter or summer annual that's often confused with southern brass buttons.

› First and later leaves alternate along the stems. The edges have one or more rounded, coarse teeth, and there are short hairs on the tips. Its leaves also have a skunk-like odor.

› Small white, four-petaled flower clusters bloom from February through October.

CONTROL TIPS

› This quick-spreading weed is often found in lawns and gardens throughout the U.S. and is common in newly seeded fescue. Prolific seed production, tolerance to low mowing and heavy traffic have increased the prevalence of this weed in turfgrass.

› Apply a preemergent herbicide containing isoxaben early in the season or a postemergent herbicide containing triclopyr to emerged swinecress in late winter or early spring.

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