



Lighting professionals exchange their companies' marketing materials at The Lighting Summit 2014.

said. Their mindset is everything and it must strike a balance between being detail orientated and quick.

Not all installers, for example, are good for service because of their extreme attention to detail. They may want to check every fixture on a project, but that's not what the customer called them for, McKay said.

On the other hand, a service tech must be meticulous enough to real-ize offsets in a system that need to be addressed, such as if a timer is incorrect.

Service techs must be focused on fixing only the problem they're called for but have the communication skills to suggest other enhancements to clients, McKay adds.

"You want that person within your business to have good people skills," he said. "It's hard to have a service tech that doesn't speak well in front of clients."

KNOWING WHEN TO MAKE THE JUMP

McKay said most business owners will know inherently when it's time to boost their service department by adding a tech. Typically, he says, it's when clients are dissatisfied or service calls are slowing down your installation processes.

One of the most difficult parts of that decision is overcoming the financial nervousness of adding a new position, McKay said. But business owners must realize service is a make-it-

or break-it component of any business, he said.

"Without it, you wouldn't have a business," he said. "Either you embrace it and make a good ROI or it will sink your business."

For some perspective, McKay

returned to the bullet point that service calls make up a quarter of his company's revenue. That cash flow alone is twice the annual revenue of the landscape company he sold in 1998.

"That's a pretty strong ROI statement," McKay said.



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The green infrastructure opportunity

Irrigation and landscape pros can brighten their futures by acting as resources to water quality managers. *By* MARISA PALMIERI



Rain gardens, like this one at the Brooklyn (N.Y.) Botanic Garden, are considered an element of green infrastructure.

The green infrastructure movement is growing in communities throughout the U.S. as a way to manage stormwater in urban environments while having a positive impact on the ecosystem.

To be more specific about what green infrastructure is, the Irrigation Association's (IA) John Farner turned to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) definition during a webinar in January, titled "Green Infrastructure: The Role of Stormwater Management." That is: "Green infrastructure uses vegetation, soils and natural processes to manage water and create healthier urban environments."

Why is this an important topic for irrigation and landscape professionals, Farner asked rhetorically? His answer was multipronged, but rested in co-presenter Paul Lander's succinct response.

"The opportunity here is to be a resource for water quality managers and sustainability professionals," said Lander, Ph.d, ASLA, LEED AP, a consultant with Dakota Ridge Partners in Boulder, Colo. "In almost every city across the nation, they're going to have a whole suite of things on their plates. If there's an opportunity for (irrigation professionals) to be seen as a resource, the profession's going to go a lot further, and we'll get more resources coming our way to help with this green infrastructure movement."



Paul Lander

MORE ON GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

At the scale of a city or county, green infrastructure refers to the patchwork of natural areas that provide habitat, flood protection, cleaner air and cleaner water for the community, Farner said. At the scale of a neighborhood or site, green infrastructure refers to stormwater management systems that mimic nature by soaking up and storing water.

Many states and municipalities (Philadelphia and Nashville, Tenn., to name a few) are exploring and adopting more holistic approaches to watershed management and stormwater control, including nontraditional green infrastructure approaches, such as vegetated swales, rain gardens, porous concrete and rain barrel installations. In addition to stormwater management benefits, officials are hoping to reap other green infrastructure perks like the enhanced livability and improved air quality that come from adding trees and vegetation to the urban environment, thus reducing urban temperatures and carbon dioxide in the ecosystem, Farner said.

WHAT ABOUT DROUGHT?

Drought is no doubt a primary concern in many pockets of the country, Farner said.

"You have to think about how drought affects green infrastructure," he said. "If a municipality is using plant material to

promote green infrastructure, that plant material needs to be living. If it's dead, that can have the same effect as concrete.”

So the question becomes, can the plant material officials are investing in for their green infrastructure projects sustain itself, especially under the threat of drought? That's not likely the case in all regions. If members of the irrigation industry have a seat at the table in green infrastructure discussions, there's a better chance irrigation will be considered a solution, Farner and Lander said.

SERVING AS A RESOURCE

Unfortunately, landscape overwatering is commonplace, Lander said. And it's the bane of water quality managers—officials at the local, state and federal levels whose jobs are to ensure compliance with regula-

tions to minimize ill effects on water sources.

In some areas of the country, violating storm-water regulations is serious business with language like “water used for irrigation purposes shall not be allowed to run off of a site” and several hundred dollar fines.

“Increasingly, nonpoint source pollution, like irrigation runoff, is coming under scrutiny by these folks, as they move to reduce the impacts of urban development,” Lander said.

Landscape and irrigation professionals who aren't familiar with nonpoint source pollution are behind the times—and missing out on a big opportunity to



One area at the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington D.C. demonstrates “rainscaping.”

partner with water quality managers and officials in pursuit of green infrastructure projects, he said.

“It's all the little things around us that in aggregate can have a big impact,” Lander said. “It's about identifying what's helpful for us so we can work with the other people who can help us to control it.”

Again, Lander stated the onus is on the professional irrigation community to step up and participate. Why? “Cities need green infrastructure and green infrastructure will need smart irrigation,” he said.

The Ticker:

IRRIGATION

Controller manufacturer **Galcon** acquired **Cyber Rain**, makers of WaterSense-certified controllers. Cyber Rain will become part of Galcon USA and it will continue to market products under the Cyber Rain brand.

■

The Irrigation Association (IA) created a resource page on its website for the California drought, which the state's Gov. Jerry Brown declared an emergency in January. This page links to drought resources and details the IA's activity in the face of the drought. The association plans to update the page regularly. Visit irrigation.org/2014_California_Drought/ for more information.



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Testing a new strategy

How one lawn care company formed an R&D business unit to improve customer retention.

By JONATHAN KATZ

Joshua Anderson's residential lawn care business, Team Green Lawn, grew almost as fast as his customers' turf. Anderson started the business in 2004 with about 30 accounts. By 2008, the Xenia, Ohio-based company had 800 clients. But the fast-paced growth came at a price. The company's service levels declined and customer retention suffered as a result.

"There was no longer that personal touch and connection with the customers," Anderson recalls.

In 2012, he decided to explore a different approach to serving customers. He formed a separate business unit called Turfway Lawns that would serve

primarily as a research and development (R&D) arm. The R&D business allows Anderson to try new strategies, products and services without risking the reputation of his primary business.

At Turfway Lawns, to control for variances only production managers were allowed to perform lawn applications rather than technicians. Anderson wanted to measure the impact of a more personalized approach to servicing clients.

"They were to handle all aspects of customer service and retention like they owned the accounts," Anderson says. "I wanted them to know every customer personally and be on a first-name basis."

The results were noticeably stronger.

Within six months of forming Turfway Lawns, the company established 1,200 accounts and had a 15 percent higher customer-retention rate than Team Green Lawn. In addition, Anderson says morale across both companies rose along with and referral rates.

He attributes the success to providing more personalized service, similar to how he handled accounts when Team Green Lawn was much smaller.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

When the company had a few dozen accounts, Anderson knew his customers

Daughter of Team Green Lawn's owner Josh Anderson goes on a turf-seed run with her dad.



Team Green Lawn and Turfway Lawns door-to-door marketing staff members pose for a photo during a summer picnic.

by name, answered all their calls and attended to their needs individually.

That became impossible when the company's customer list grew into the thousands. By 2009-2010, Team Green Lawn struggled to retain existing customers. Additionally, technicians were responding to calls outside their designated zones. This further strained relationships with customers because the technicians were not familiar with some clients' properties.

Despite growing the customer base to 10,000-plus properties and annual revenue approaching \$3.6 million, Anderson became discouraged.

"Problems were on the rise, and technicians were merging into neighboring zones, causing conflict with customers due to communication and

routing issues," he says. "Consistency of effort and morale wavered."

Anderson wanted to regain the customer loyalty he experienced in the early years. He wanted to see if experienced managers made a difference in annual retention outcome by building personal relationships with customers.

He initially invested approximately \$150,000 to set up offices, purchase equipment and hire sales representatives to sell the Turfway accounts. He gave two Team Green Lawn managers the responsibility of juggling Turfway accounts along with their Team Green Lawn obligations. Balancing the two jobs was difficult for the managers in the beginning, but they received additional pay from the new company, Anderson says.

Anderson provided cash bonuses to managers who met retention goals. Their goal was to record less than three full lawn-application program cancels per week or less than 20 full-program cancels per application round. The managers also were expected to develop a rapport with their clients. Anderson asked them to be a little less formal and address the clients by their first name.

"They were using the ownership-thinking mentality just like I used as a new lawn care guy who had a connection with his customers," Anderson says.

He regularly rode along with the managers to see how they were interacting with customers. He also defined specific route zones so only the person assigned to a particular service area was responding to calls in that ZIP code.

The Ticker:

LAWN CARE

The M&A market has seen some bustle lately. **SavATree** merged with **Country Green** and **St. Croix Tree Service**; **Noon Turf Care** bought **Grasshopper Lawns**; **Ryan Lawn & Tree** merged with **Simply Green Lawn Sprinklers**; and **Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care** acquired **Advanced Tree and Lawn Concepts** and **Nitro-Green Lawn and Tree Care**.

Nufam introduced its new Last Call herbicide and Anuew turf growth regulator, both usable on cool-season turf. Anuew also may be applied to warm-season turf.

Bayer CropScience donated \$19.3 million to Texas Tech University to benefit research developments in the Department of Planet and Soil Sciences. Bayer's total contributions to the university since 1998 equal \$276 million.

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Having an R&D company also balanced the risks of trying new products, Anderson says.

“If I try a new herbicide or fertilizer from a manufacturer I’ve never used before, instead of risking my entire customer base or reputation in a certain area from bad results with the use of a certain product for TGL, I could take all that risk and apply it to a smaller business like Turfway Lawns,” he says.

THE RESULTS

Anderson already has applied some lessons learned at Turfway to Team Green Lawn.



John Anderson (above, right), hands out cash bonuses at the annual banquet.

For example, technicians at Team Green Lawn only are allowed to perform applications at properties in a designated ZIP code unless they have permission from management. This ensures customers are receiving consistent care from a single technician.

Anderson is still in the process of comparing retention rates between the two companies. The next step is to measure how well Team Green Lawn and

Turfway can retain “saved” customers, defined as Team Green Lawn clients who canceled and then returned.

Anderson plans to keep the Turfway business operating until he decides he has enough information to implement necessary changes at Team Green Lawn or the business becomes too much of an expense burden. **LM**

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

PHOTOS: TEAM GREEN LAWN

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UTILITY VEHICLES: Create efficiencies, improve productivity

Utility vehicles have historically proven to be a great tool to transport people and haul cargo, but recent advances in technology have equipped utility vehicles to be a true partner on the jobsite.

By integrating the right utility vehicle into their current fleet, landscape professionals have the opportunity to create equipment and budget efficiencies while improving overall productivity.

Equipment and budget efficiencies

While most utility vehicles can support accessories and attachments, very few have the capability of operating a complete line of integrated commercial attachments through a front-end, power take-off (PTO) system.

"It's important for a company to evaluate its current fleet of vehicles to see how a utility vehicle with an advanced attachment system will fit in," says Aaron Stegemann, Polaris business development manager. "They may be surprised that choosing a utility vehicle with attachments can actually eliminate the need for multiple vehicles."

In addition to hauling up to 1,250 pounds in its rear pallet-sized cargo box and towing up to one ton, the Polaris BRUTUS HDPTO makes it possible for landscape professionals to execute additional applications.

Three PTO-powered front attachments—a 70-inch angle broom, a snow blower with a 62-inch cutting width and a 66-inch cutting width finishing

mower—are driven directly from the vehicle's 24-horsepower diesel engine.

The BRUTUS HDPTO also operates three hydraulically-powered front attachments—a 69-inch snow blade, 450-pound capacity adjustable width pallet forks and a 62-inch materials bucket with 500-pound capacity—that also can be used on the BRUTUS HD model.

"Using one vehicle to operate multiple implements will lead to budget efficiencies during the life of the equipment," Stegemann says. "By adding a utility vehicle that can replace multiple machines in its fleet, a company will have less equipment to service and maintain."

Improved productivity

Getting the most from equipment and workers is a top priority for all landscape companies.

The utility vehicle's ability to operate multiple attachments will increase productivity, but it's important for the vehicle to be equipped with an easy-to-use attachment system.

Stegemann suggests landscape professionals look for a vehicle that features an attachment system for easy and quick connection and disconnection of all supported attachments.

In-cab, ergonomic operator controls also are key for increasing a fleet's productivity. The newest commercial utility vehicles will feature an intuitive joystick and independent throttle control that's consistent with other work machines landscape professionals are accustomed to using.

Another feature that can greatly impact an operator's productivity is their comfort. "It's no secret we will be more productive if we're content with our surroundings," Stegemann says. "A fully-enclosed, factory-



Ergonomic operator controls

installed cab with heat, air conditioning and defrost will keep the operator comfortable no matter what the conditions are outside."

When dealing with a variety of terrains, operators can find themselves frequently changing drive settings. On-Demand True All-Wheel Drive will keep the vehicle moving, so the operator doesn't have to worry about switching settings. The system automatically engages all four wheels when more forward traction is necessary and then reverts back to two-wheel drive. Additionally, the VersaTrac Turf Mode switch allows operators to unlock the rear differential for easier, tighter turns without tearing up the turf.

The vehicle's pedal impacts productivity as well. Landscape applications such as snow removal and mowing demand frequent back-and-forth motion, and a treadle pedal can significantly simplify travel operation. The shiftless forward and reverse travel means operators never have to remove their hands from the wheel.

"For landscape professionals, a utility vehicle may seem like a small piece of their overall operation," Stegemann says. "I urge those in the purchasing roles to look at how a utility vehicle with a PTO attachment system can further create efficiencies and boost worker productivity."



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PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

Shilan is editor of FromDesign2Build.com. Contact him at 201/783-2844 or jshilan@gmail.com.

When do you disclose design fees?

Q Do you tell clients on the initial phone call that you charge a design fee for your drawings or do you wait until you meet with them?

A My short answer is yes and no. How's that for hedging?

When a client initially calls I use a screening process to determine if he or she is a good fit for me and my company. In other words, I don't just get the name, address and phone number and set up an appointment without doing my due diligence. This means I need to find out what the word "landscape" means to the person before I decide if it makes sense to meet. As many of you know "landscape" means many different things. That's why it's so important to screen customers and find out what their definitions are. Do they want landscape maintenance or landscape construction; hardscaping or plantings; lawn care or a complete property overhaul?

If the caller meets my criteria and sounds like he or she is a solid design/build prospect I'll set up an appointment at his or her home. I have no desire to discuss design fees on the phone because my goal is to have a face-to-face meeting. Prematurely discussing design fees allows the caller to say "thanks but no thanks."

I believe we should provide qualified clients with complimentary one-hour meetings at their homes with no strings attached. This meeting is your opportunity to show them who you are, what you can do for them and why they should work with you instead of your competitors. Regardless of how much money you've spent on marketing and advertising to create a company image, there's still nothing like an in-person meeting. If done correctly, these meetings will give the homeowners the confidence and assurances to decide your company is the right fit for them.

Therefore, if you discuss design fees on the phone or use them as a qualifier, you're going to lose the opportunity to get in front of many good clients. There are two reasons for this. First, since your prospects

have very little time invested in you it's easy for them to hang up once they hear "design fee," especially when many companies are telling them their designs are free. Secondly, landscape plans come in all shapes and sizes—from notepad sketches to computer generated, color-rendered master plans. If you can't set a meeting to show them the type of quality plans you provide, they'll assume a plan is a plan and you'll be just the same as everyone else. On the other hand, if you do meet with them, you can show them a sample drawing from another project to help them understand why they need a design and why there's a cost associated with it—unless you're the notepad-design guy. Then you're on your own.

OK, this all sounds great, but what if a customer directly asks you on the phone if you charge a design fee? Worry not. Here's a little trade secret to help you with those prequalified customers who ask about design fees as their way of qualifying you, possibly deciding right then and there they don't want to meet. Honesty is still your best policy, but there's nothing wrong with spinning your response a little bit.

When a prospect asks simply say, "Yes, there is, but there's no cost for me to come out and meet with you to discuss your project." What you've done is taken away the fear of being obligated to hire you at that first meeting. If you want to pour it on a little thicker, explain the reason there's no charge for the initial consultation is it's important customers feel comfortable with whomever they decide to work with, whether it's you or another company.

Finally, I give you the "yes" explanation to your question. Always discuss design fees with unqualified customers who are not a good fit for your company. If you just know a caller is going to be a complete waste of your time, this is where you use the design fee as a way to essentially scare them off as opposed to telling them they don't have enough money. In the sales world we just say they've been "successfully eliminated."

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.