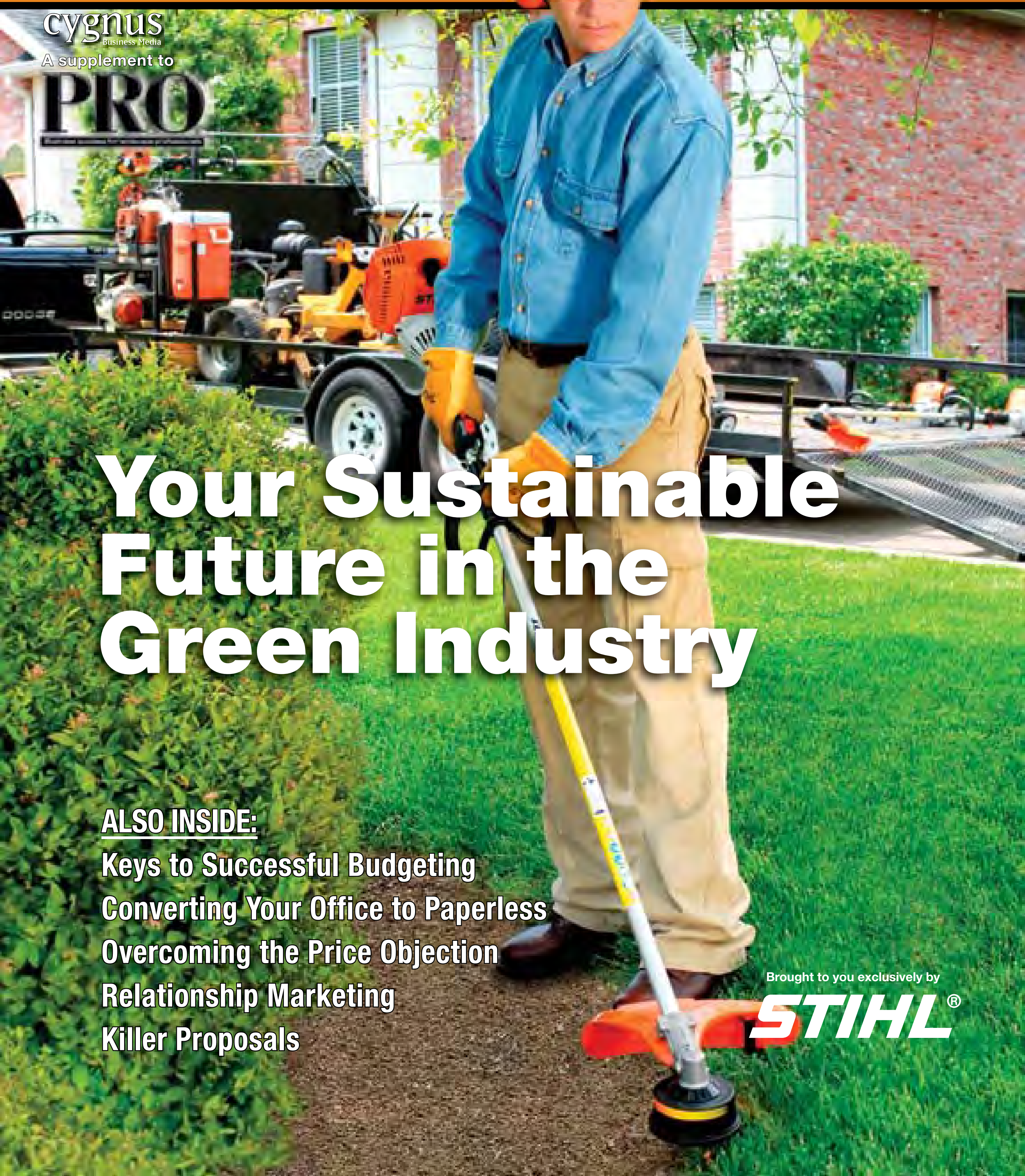
Volume 7

Contractor Success Guide



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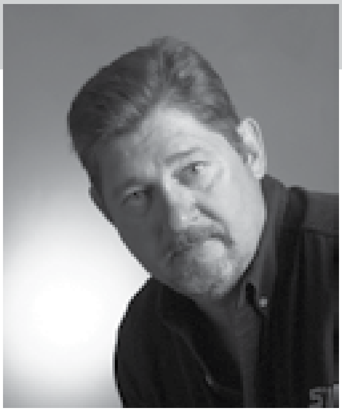
A supplement to
PRO

Your Sustainable Future in the Green Industry

ALSO INSIDE:

Keys to Successful Budgeting
Converting Your Office to Paperless
Overcoming the Price Objection
Relationship Marketing
Killer Proposals

Your Sustainable Future



Dear Green Industry Professionals,

In this issue of *Contractor Success Guide*, the editors have focused on a theme of sustainability. In today's world, sustainability is most often thought of in terms of the environment, and while this issue addresses the environment, it also addresses the importance of financial planning for your business to ensure the sustainability and profitability of your enterprise. "Putting the 'Green' in the Green Industry" will introduce you to the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) Crystal Ball Report and the three P's of sustainability: people, planet and profit. Other articles will provide you with tips for improving office efficiency and building your business in this challenging economic environment.

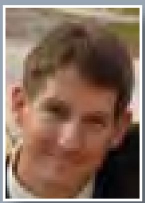
STIHL is proud to be a member of PLANET. PLANET provides its members with a good business foundation to help them evaluate, plan, and better manage their companies and provides direct access to marketing tools, industry specific business publications, updates on legislative issues, and networking opportunities that can assist them in becoming more profitable. PLANET also provides an opportunity to gain local media exposure for your business and build relationships by giving back to the community. This Earth Day, April 22, is the second annual PLANET Day of Service, when you can join fellow green industry professionals for a day of giving back by donating your services to a local school, park or other entity (www.planetdayofservice.org).

If you've not already done so, I urge you to make a resolution to investigate the opportunities available with PLANET, become a member and take advantage of the resources it offers to grow your business. Find out more at www.landcarenetwork.org.

Sincerely,

John Keeler
National Training Manager
STIHL Inc.

Gregg Wartgow, Associate Publisher



Where is Sustainability on Your Priority List?

It's nice to know that I'm not the only person becoming desensitized to all of this talk about going green. STIHL's Roger Phelps has expressed a similar sentiment in a great article he's written to kick off this edition of *Contractor Success Guide* (page 4).

But here we are, jumping on the bandwagon, making sustainability our cover story. Why? Because, as Roger points out in his piece, going green is important to all of us. Furthermore, it's not going away. And further furthermore, sustainability creates opportunity for lawn maintenance and landscape contractors—from both a marketing standpoint and a financial standpoint.

In our "2010 Landscape Contractor Outlook" (email Editor@ProMagazine.com if you'd like a copy), the top two contractor critical issues right now are finding and retaining customers. No. 3 is dealing with competitors. No. 4 is controlling overhead. A distant 10th is sustainability.

Maybe that should come as no surprise. As things have gotten tough, bringing business in the door and staying in the black are naturally front and center in the minds of most contractors. But the following is what is interesting/concerning to me:

- 57% say retaining customers is more important than in years past, only 2% say it's less important
- 68% say finding new customers is more important, 1% say less important
- 65% say controlling overhead is more important, 3% say less important
- 28% say sustainability is more important, 22% say less

My hope is that more landscape contractors come to understand the simple fact that taking the concept of sustainability more seriously can help you address your other critical issues of finding and keeping customers, standing out from competitors and controlling overhead. You see, sustainability isn't just about jumping on a bandwagon or trying to preserve the planet. It's also about trying to preserve your company.

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Check out these articles online –
offer comments, ask questions, share insights –
ProMagazine.com/ContractorSuccess

PRO
Business Success for Landscape Professionals

By Roger Phelps, promotional communications manager at STIHL Inc.

PUTTING THE

Can the industry truly do well by doing good?

We hear about it all the time. Green products, green services, recycle, save energy, reduce emissions, good for the planet. We are constantly bombarded by so many "green" messages that it has almost lost its meaning. What does it really mean to be green, and more importantly, does anyone really care?

Nowhere does being green, or more correctly, sustainable, have greater importance and relevance than in those individuals responsible for creating, maintaining and promoting green spaces in our society, America's Green Industry.

Last year, I had the pleasure of working with a group of industry professionals in drafting the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) *Crystal Ball Report* on sustainability. Most recently, during the 2009 Green Industry Conference (GIC) held at the Green Industry Equipment and Expo (GIE+EXPO), I had the opportunity to sit down with more than 40 landscapers and discuss their take on sustainability and what they thought it meant to their business. What I discovered from these two experiences should come as no surprise. Everyone was interested in improving operations and lessening their impact on the environment. However, the challenge was balancing this with the need to run a profitable business.

The Three P's of Sustainability

So what is sustainability? The 2009 PLANET *Crystal Ball Report* encompassed the hard work of more than 24 Green Industry representatives who discussed, studied and presented information concerning environmental issues—and what they mean to the business.

Using a wealth of resources including the Sustainable Sites Initiative, EPA guidelines and the Green Gauge Report, as well as personal experiences, the group sought to provide a clear definition of sustainability and, thus, identify recommendations for the industry to follow.

The definition agreed upon was that sustainability meant conducting operations and using resources in such a way that the present needs were met, while not reducing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. In short, it came down to three points:

- Planet (taking care of the environment)
- People (caring for employees and ensuring their health, safety and well-being)
- Profit, (ensuring that businesses enjoyed a healthy, long-term bottom line)

Does Anyone Care?

Despite all the press dedicated to going green, the committee found that a low percentage of the population is actually willing to make significant changes in their lifestyle and pay a great deal more in order to be "green."

Using data from the 2007 GfK Roper Green Gauge® report, it appeared that only about 40% of the population surveyed would

actually be willing to make some changes in their lifestyles, including paying more, while 60% would either buy green if it fit their specific need or were not interested at all.

These results coincide with a September 2009 article that appeared in *Nation's Building News*. The article reported that only 11% of builders nationwide indicated that their customers ask about environmentally friendly features, and among buyers who are willing to pay more for green features, more than half (57%) are unlikely to pay more than an additional 2%.

Why Do It?

If the support for green is less than impressive, why should the industry embrace it? Landscapers at the GIC cited several reasons for pursuing a sustainable approach to their work.

The first is **regulation**. While regulation seems self-explanatory, it was interesting to note that there appeared to be different levels of awareness when it came to existing or pending regulations and legislation that could seriously impact the Green Industry.

Some contractors appear to be deeply involved in issues such as water usage, pesticide restrictions and bans on power equipment like leaf blowers, while others appeared to be hearing about one or more of them for the first time. Tapping into resources provided by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI) and PLANET to get the latest information and guidance is critical. PLANET, for instance, has a legislative tool kit available that helps contractors stay aware of the latest developments and provides resources to help them protect their interests.

The **marketing potential of sustainability** was another key motivator for the landscapers I spoke with. Being able to present their existing and potential customers with information about their sustainable practices set them apart from their competitors.

Two important considerations were cited:

- Ensure that whatever was being offered was in fact for real and not "greenwashing"
- Ensure that the performance of the services could not be below that of their "non-green" counterparts.

In the end, performance and price were still the two key drivers for customers; however, given two relatively equal choices for price and performance, consumers would tend to pick the "greener" alternative.

Finally, **profit potential** was cited. Several of the most successful contractors had done significant operational cost studies and determined that taking steps considered sustainable had a direct impact on their bottom lines. Whether it was setting up recycling and mulching operations at their headquarters, which reduced their waste removal costs by as much as 90%, or switching to low-emission handheld equipment, which lowered their fuel usage by up to 26%, or installing low-energy lighting in their offices, these businesses took effective and measurable steps to reduce their operating costs, while at the same time providing them another story to use in their "green" marketing efforts.

An additional reason that should not be underestimated is the positive feeling that was shared by company employees in knowing they were taking part in making their operations more environmentally friendly.

In the end, members of our discussion panels wanted to remind their customers and the public in general that we all share the same environment, and we all want to have it clean and safe for ourselves and our families now and in the future.

Getting Started

Getting started on the road to sustainability is perhaps the most difficult step. The sidebar on page 7 shows some quick-start goals identified in the PLANET *Crystal Ball Report*.

Another suggestion was made by a contractor on our panel: Take a look at your financial reports and find the largest cost line items. Find ways to reduce each one through sustainable efforts. However, when deciding to get involved, it is important to heed some of the cautions offered up by the participants in our workshop. Their advice was to take it slow and do your homework to understand the full costs and benefits of any step you are considering. Ensure that measurable ROI targets are established and tracked.

Also ensure that you have communicated any steps you are taking to all of your employees and make sure they agree with the program. Too many times managers come back from a conference full of ideas and make sweeping changes only to have them fail because the individuals who have to implement them don't understand or don't support what is being proposed.

Don't overlook the fact that often many of the best ideas for your operation come from the employees themselves. We recently changed the way we were handling cardboard boxes based on a suggestion from a forklift driver responsible for their disposal.

Looking to the Future

Regardless of your personal stance on the issue of sustainability, the fact is that the green movement is not a fad, it is here to stay. Whether to comply with federal, state or local regulations, increase profit, or just feel better about yourself and your operation, contractors need to embrace sustainable practices in their businesses.

At STIHL, our position is that, as an industry leader, it is our duty to practice socially responsible environmental stewardship in our operations and in our products. And as a member of the Green Industry, we believe that when it comes to understanding the relationship between people and ecology, there are few people more regulated, qualified, trained or educated in caring for the environment than those who interact with it on a daily basis.

By pursuing sustainability efforts we can leave a healthier environment as our legacy to future generations, and, in fact, do well by doing good. **PRO**

Resources:

The Crystal Ball Report #29: Available in the PLANET bookstore at landcarenetwork.org

PLANET Legislation Resources: landcarenetwork.org/cms/legislation/overview.html

The Sustainable Sites Initiative: sustainablesites.org

10 Quick-Start Goals for Going Green

1 – Agree on what sustainability means to you and your operation. Share your vision and get buy-in from employees. Embrace their ideas as well.

2 – Take steps to conserve energy usage in offices and shops. Turn off unused equipment and install programmable thermostats and energy-efficient lighting.

3 – Implement employee health awareness and safety programs.

4 – Start a recycling program in offices and shops by recycling paper, plastic and metals. Expanded programs can include wooden pallets, building materials and scrap metal.

5 – Minimize the use of disposable items or items that cannot be recycled. Doing so reduces waste production and costs—a key tenant of sustainability.

6 – Manage service vehicle routing more efficiently to conserve fuel and reduce costs. Consider installing GPS and train employees to reduce idling.

7 – Purchase fuel-efficient vehicles and maintenance equipment. Consider biofuels as an option.

8 – When purchasing products, consider their lifecycle. Cheaper equipment and products rarely offer the best value for the money and have to be repaired or replaced more often. Seek durability.

9 – Buy local whenever possible to cut down on the use of fuel needed to move products over long distances.

10 – Implement soil testing to determine exactly what nutrients landscape plants need.

As cited in the 2009 PLANET Crystal Ball Report

By Gregg Wartgow

The One Thing That Could Save Your Business

Developing an effective budget doesn't have to be time-consuming. What it does have to be is realistic, revisited, adjusted and communicated to key personnel within your company.

This was the message of a recent JP Horizons "A Great Time for Business" Webinar. Consultant Jim Paluch of JP Horizons moderated a discussion between three of the Green Industry's most scrupulous budgeters:

- Jerry Gaeta, senior associate of consulting firm Vander Kooi & Associates
- Ken Hochkeppel, chief financial officer for Ruppert (Landscape) Companies
- Mark Bradley, founder and president of The Beach Gardener (contractor)

The trio discussed a range of topics surrounding the budget process. Here are some of the highlights.

Be Realistic

Avoid the temptation to over-project sales and under-project expenses. If you do, and business turns south like it did in mid-2008, your company could go down in a heartbeat. At the same time, some people are too conservative on their sales goals and too liberal with expenses. Gaeta says a budget should be realistic, yet attainable.

Use Historical Data

Look at previous financial information and figure out percentages. Bradley uses a three-year history to figure out his costs as a percentage of revenue. Then go about setting revenue goals for the coming year. Apply your cost percentages and desired net profit percentage, and voilá.

Don't Leave Anything Out

Budget every single cost you have. Start with the direct costs of labor, subcontractors, materials and equipment (if you consider equipment a direct cost). Then move to overhead, from advertising all the way down to bad debt. "If someone in your company wants to buy something, who's paying for it?" Gaeta asks. "If it's not in the budget or on an estimate, it's being paid for with your perceived net profit."

Revisit Your Budget

It's a common misconception that you budget once a year and just wait to see how things turn out. Business conditions change from month to month, so the budget needs to be revisited frequently so your pricing can be adjusted accordingly.

"If your prices reflect business conditions that are six months old, you're leaving plenty of room for loss," Bradley points out.

Exchange Costs

Look for opportunities to exchange costs. If you can't avoid spending $10,000 on one thing, spend that much less on another. "That's certainly a lot better than taking away from your net profit," Hochkeppel adds.

Be Patient

The first budget you ever do probably will not be the most

accurate. But you'll get better over time. "It's an evolution," Hochkeppel says. "As your company matures, you'll be amazed at how close your actuals come to your budgeted numbers."

Have a Contingency Plan

This is especially important during economic times such as these, Gaeta points out. "Identify a timeframe for when certain actions kick in so you don't get caught short at the end of the year," he advises.

> ***"I believe your budget has to be totally transparent. We hang our budget on the wall, along with sales to date, for all 35 of our employees to see."***
> ***– Contractor Mark Bradley***

Who Should be Involved?

For smaller companies, budgeting is naturally going to fall on the owner's desk, since the owner is typically responsible for both selling and purchasing.

For larger companies, managers will likely be involved. Basically anyone authorized to make purchases should have a say in the budgeting process, or at least be involved to help answer questions.

Branch managers are not only involved in the budgeting process at Ruppert Landscape, they are responsible for it. "The branch manager pulls his or her entire team together to do the budget," Hochkeppel explains. "But the branch manager is the final decision maker when it comes to expenditures and pricing." Ruppert Landscape operates 11 branches and one wholesale tree nursery in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Georgia and North Carolina.

"Field supervisors should be included so they get a better understanding of your company and its current capacity," Bradley says. "Sometimes owners and managers get a bit ambitious with sales goals, but you need to make sure those goals are attainable."

Other employees can also be involved in the budgeting process, regardless of the size of your company. Examples are administrative staff and salespeople. "The sophistication and maturity of your employees will play a role, because they need to be able to understand what the data means—and that it is confidential," Gaeta points out.

Sharing Your Budget

Once you have a budget, who do you share it with? Everyone. Everyone?!

"I believe your budget has to be totally transparent," Bradley says. "We hang our budget on the wall, along with sales to date, for all 35 of our employees to see. We don't want to hide anything. We want to make sure everyone on the teams knows that we're keeping score—and knows when we're winning or losing."

"We're very much an open-book business," Hochkeppel says. "It amazes me that some companies aren't, because not being open creates a totally different culture. We're big proponents (at Ruppert Landscape) of sharing information, because it's empowering—employees feel like it is their company."

Foremen and crewmembers might need the budget information communicated to them in a different way. "Sharing indirect costs can be confusing to these employees," Gaeta says. "I prefer to talk to them about only those costs they can help control: labor, materials and equipment." Then you can talk to them about overhead in terms of a percentage of sales, at least so they understand that the company does need to generate a certain amount of profit to pay all these other bills you call overhead, Gaeta adds. **PRO**

For information on JP Horizons and their webinar series, visit jphorizons.com.

By Gregg Wartgow

Writing Your First Budget

It took this young Florida landscaper about eight hours—and now he's ready to take his company to the next level.

Landon Wise has been in business for four years. His customer base and sales volume have grown leaps and bounds. He employs six in peak season. He's never had a budget—until now.

After spending roughly eight hours with Green Industry consultant Tony Bass of Super Lawn Trucks, Wise developed his first budget for Wyscape Professional Landscaping & Design in Niceville, FL, the company he founded in 2005 after earning his degree in landscape/horticulture from Auburn University.

"My eyes were opened to things I wasn't even aware of," Wise says in reference to attending a Tony Bass business seminar a year ago. Then, on December 17, 2009, he met with Bass for a one-on-one consultation. Their mission was to hammer out a budget for 2010. Here's how they did it.

Create Sub-Categories for Each Major Expense

List each primary area of known overhead expenses, which include:

- Rent/mortgage
- Utilities
- Vehicles/equipment
- Insurance
- Advertising
- Administrative salaries; i.e. office help that isn't directly "billable" to a client or project
- Office supplies
- Uniforms

> ***"Forcing myself to break things down has really opened my eyes to what my money is really going toward ... Now I'm watching everything, and I actually know what to watch for."***
> ***– Contractor Landon Wise***

Break down each major overhead expense category into smaller sub-categories. "Being too broad makes it harder to get your arms around how much to budget," Bass points out. "You want to be very specific about the individual elements in each major category so you can identify exactly what you intend to spend."

Advertising is great place to start, especially for smaller companies. For example, consider the following items, and identify how much you want to spend on each in the coming year:

- Yellow Page ad – do you have one, how much per month, do you plan on expanding it this year?
- Newspaper ads – do you plan to run any, how much will it cost?
- Jobsite signs – do any need replacing, how much will that cost?
- Direct mail – do you plan any, how much will it cost?
- Website – do you have one, want to improve it, how much will it cost?

Add all of that up and you

To hear Tony and Landon describe their budgeting process, listen to "Plan Your Financial Future in 8 Hours" at ProMagazine.com/ProCast

PRO

Business Success for Landscape Professionals

have your advertising budget for the year.

"Forcing myself to break things down has really opened my eyes to what my money is really going toward," Wise relates.

Identify Cost-Saving Opportunities

Breaking expenses down into detailed sub-categories has also opened Wise's eyes to areas where he can save some money. "Before I had this budget on paper, sometimes I didn't even know why my money was going there—I just wrote a check," Wise says with a chuckle. "Now I'm watching everything, and I actually know what to watch for."

Workers' comp insurance, a sub-category of "insurance," is a great example. "There's a general job code I was listed under, as were each of my employees," Wise tells. "In reality, my employees could be listed under a different job code that could save me a lot of money. Plus, my estimated payroll was wrong, and that was causing my workers' comp premiums to be higher than they should be, as well." (See sidebar below for more on workers' comp.)

Other sub-categories that often present cost-saving opportunities include cell phones (utilities), vehicle insurance on trucks you no longer need (insurance), and non-production personnel (admin salaries).

"The largest negotiable items are related to labor," Bass points out. "So before you hire your first non-production worker, such as an office manager, you need a written budget that takes this new expense into consideration." **PRO**

Ex-contractor and trailblazing entrepreneur Tony Bass is now a successful inventor, author, consultant and speaker whose purpose and passion is helping Green Industry small businesses achieve their fullest potential. For more information, email tony@superlawntrucks.com.

Overpaying for Workers' Comp?

Premiums for workers' comp insurance are based on a variety of factors, including:

Classifications – The insurance industry places your business in one of more than 600 business types it has pre-defined. This is why, as contractor Landon Wise learned, it's important to first make sure your employees are classified correctly.

Payroll – Total payroll includes wages and salaries, holiday and vacation pay, etc. Total payroll works in concert with your business's classification to determine what your premium will be.

If you regularly experience shifts in the number of people you employ from year to year or season to season, it's a good idea to talk with your insurance agent about scheduling regular audits of your payroll.

Be sure to keep good records of all overtime pay. Some states allow employees to reduce overtime pay to regular pay for purposes of calculating their total payroll. Again, check with your insurance agent.

Experience Modifications – This factor examines your past claims history. If you're better than the industry average, you'll likely receive a better experience rating.

Be sure to quiz your insurance agent about your rating. If you've been a safe company, you don't want to be penalized simply because the landscaping industry in general has a fairly high accident rate.

For more on workers' compensation insurance, visit ncci.com.

Goodbye PAPER

Turning your office into a paperless communications center can help reduce labor hours, eliminate missed billing opportunities, cut down on stress and improve customer satisfaction.

Any piece of paper a company would normally file—including estimates, contracts, customer notes, materials bills, etc.—can be scanned and filed on the computer, resulting in less office clutter, less time wasted searching for files, and less money spent on paper and printer ink.

Landscape companies that would benefit most from a paperless office would be generating at least $500,000 in annual revenue, according to Dickran Babigian, president of consulting and software firm Navix (navix.com). More importantly, the company would have at least one dedicated office staff member who would be responsible for scanning documents into the computer, etc.

Still, as Glenn Zior of Clip Software and Clip Lawn Care points out, you'd be hard-pressed to find any contractor who wished he had more paperwork sitting around. "When I visit contractors, even the smaller companies, virtually all of them say they wish they could go paperless," Zior relates. "They are receptive to the idea, for sure. It's just a matter of execution. The dollar investment can actually be pretty low. The main investment is in time. But when you think about it, it really doesn't have to be that much of an undertaking, and the time saved later can more than make up for it."

Some landscapers who've gone paperless have been able to eliminate as many as eight hours per week creating invoices. Profits have also been increased due to better tracking of labor and materials.

Contracts, Invoices & Materials Bills

Clip Lawn Care has had an almost 100% paperless office since day one. Even with contracts, the paper copy goes right in the trash once it's scanned into the computer. The next step is to get 100% of customer bills sent via e-mail.

The only thing that isn't at least partially paperless at Clip Lawn Care is accounts payable, though that too may change soon. "The IRS now allows a PDF scan as a legitimate receipt," Zior explains. "So materials bills and other receipts could also go paperless now, making it much easier for contractors to keep track of these things and recover the costs."

Estimates

"The biggest issue is finding the estimate when a customer calls," Zior relates. "Understandably, busy contractors have a growing pile of 'to be filed' paperwork ... namely estimates. It's not always a quick process to get an answer back to the customer. With an electronic filing system, it can be more orderly and much faster."

MowCow Lawn & Landscape in Fairfax Station, VA, has recently begun heading in the paperless direction for this very reason. "We wanted important documents like estimates and notes from the field to be easier to find, while also reducing the chance of their getting permanently lost," owner Richard Lindsay says. "Even with the best paper filing system, things always seem to get misplaced."

Reminder Notes

Post-it notes and other hand-scribbled reminders also lend themselves well to a paperless system. "You want to be able to retrieve and share notes on customers and specific phone calls without having to dig out a paper file or track someone else down in the office," Babigian says. "The goal is to get rid of all those notes around the office, which are easily lost, forgotten or simply not legible."

Communicating in the Field

An electronic post-it note system comes in especially handy when you are out in the field. You can retrieve information, log notes and respond to queries from customers or the office on your laptop computer or mobile communications device—without having to scribble a note to yourself or drive back to the office.

According to Zior, many landscapers lose money by not billing for extra work they've done. The ability to electronically log the information in the field so it syncs back to the office can make a big difference over the course of a season.

Mike Ryan of Tempco Pest Control in Fort Meyers, FL, recently began transitioning to a paperless office. "I'd like to get to a point where I don't use any paper whatsoever with routing, scheduling and daily operations," he says. "We'll save two trees a year."

Ryan, a Clip Software user, is currently transfixed on two areas: customer information and routing. All contracts are scanned into the computer. "Clip lets me easily file the information by customer name so everything I have on a given customer is all in one place," he says.

To assist with mobile communications, Ryan was initially thinking about putting laptops in each of his 10 trucks. Instead, he's gone with Clip2Go mobile palm devices. Drivers can access customer notes and enter new data. "At the end of the day, they can send me the information over the Internet, or bring me the device the next morning to sync it to the main computer," Ryan tells. "Either way, it saves me hours of paperwork each day."

Ryan is also saving big by not having to print route sheets for his drivers. Clip2Go links to a GPS system, allowing it to schedule routes in the most efficient order, helping reduce fuel expenditures.

Picking a Good Scanner

The first tool you need if you're thinking about going paperless is a document scanner. Consultant Dickran Babigian says you should look for the following characteristics:

- High capacity
- Duplex (double-sided, one pass-through)
- File format outputs: TIFF, JPEG and searchable PDF
- Output resolution that can vary from 75 to 600 dpi
- Document handler that can hold up to 50 sheets

Larger companies will also appreciate a scanner that:

- Is networkable
- Has security features
- Has email capability
- Does black-and-white, grayscale and color
- Has output methods to scan to network share, scan to print, scan to email, scan to portable USB drive, scan to FTP, and scan to fax

Paperless Tools

There are a variety of products available to help you transform your office into a paperless communications center. Here's a look at a few.

cabinetng.com – Electronic filing cabinets form the core Cabinet NG's Shared Access Filing Environment (CNG-SAFE). Documents are filed independent of document type or format, enabling seamless integration with popular third-party business applications. The company offers set-up and installation assistance and training to bring your employees up to speed.

ecopy.com – eCopy ShareScan enables users of a network to share the digital copier's ability for document scanning into digital files, which can then be distributed down the hall or around the world over the network or Internet. eCopy PaperWorks is an easy-to-use desktop document imaging software that enables you to convert electronic and paper documents into text-searchable, secure PDFs, and directly include them in business applications and workflows. eCopy PaperWorks provides advanced tools to scan, merge, modify and connect documents with the software you use every day.

efilecabinet.com – eFileCabinet was developed using Microsoft Visual Studio 2008 in the C# language on the .NET Framework. eFileCabinet software requires the Microsoft Windows operating system and will run on Windows XP, Vista, 7, Server 2003 and Server 2008. eFileCabinet delivers its innovative electronic document management system to a wide range of diverse industries, from aerospace to real estate to construction and landscaping.

For a look at additional paperless office solutions, google "paperless office software".

Getting Started Cheap

Thinking you might like to head in the paperless direction? Babigian says it is the perfect time of year to begin this type of project. The amount of time you'll spend transitioning depends on how much you decide to actually undertake.

While the implementation of incoming documents is pretty straightforward in terms of time, committing to an electronic conversion of your prior paper documentation is another story. Based on the volume of documents already in storage, Babigian says prior-year conversions are usually done as time allows.

If you're just going to scan documents and simply file them in folders you've set up on your computer, you can get going immediately. "Prior to that, though, you should carefully consider the file structure and document naming scheme," Babigian advises. "Remember, one of the goals of going paperless is quick and easy retrieval of information."

Document Filing Software

While a simple, low-investment system can help you achieve some of the objectives of going paperless, document filing software is available that can help you accomplish even more.

"If you don't employ a more formal documentation software program to file and secure the documents," Babigian points out, "you are unlikely to realize some of the benefits of going paperless. Secure file sharing is also more difficult. You could password-protect sensitive documents, but that provides its own set of challenges in terms of remembering all those passwords."

Clip Software (clip.com) has document filing features. eCopy ShareScan (ecopy.com) quickly turns paper documents into digital files. A couple of other popular products are also available from a company called Cabinet NG (cabinetng.com). CNG-SAFE is document management software, while CNG-Books integrates with QuickBooks Enterprise Solutions to share billing, credit card, payment and other information.

When going paperless, Babigian says, it's very beneficial to invest in programs that integrate with QuickBooks, such as Cabinet NG, to streamline data entry. "Another feature I like about the QuickBooks link is the ability to have employees approve documents, such as vendor invoices, via electronic submission," Babigian points out. "For example, the bookkeeper could send a document electronically to an account manager for review, and the account manager could sign off and approve the invoice without ever touching or seeing a physical piece of paper. The approval is then sent back to be filed electronically."

Have a Backup Strategy

While there are many differences between a paperless office and one that is bogged down by piles of files, there is also a similarity: Files and data can be lost. "As with any server or computer-based system, there needs to be a solid backup strategy," Babigian reminds. "Off-site backup storage is always important."

Zior says most of Clip Software's customers backup on CD-ROM. "I'd advise getting an automated program and pop a CD in every night, or at least once or twice a week," he adds. "How often you backup your files depends on how much data you're willing to re-enter." Online services are also available for backing up files.

Making Paperless Happen

A final thing to consider when transitioning to paperless is who will do the work to make it happen. Babigian says smaller companies will most likely have the bookkeeper perform the function, while large companies may have a single person dedicated to it.

"Learning to scan the documents is very simple, so no cross-training is required, per se," Babigian points out. "However, if a company is employing a product like CNG-SAFE in the secure filing of its documents, someone should be cross-trained on how to file and secure the electronic documentation."

Depending on how far you want to go in the paperless direction, there will be some investments that have to be made—in both dollars and time. Consider the near- and long-term benefits of going paperless, their associated savings, and the issues that have plagued your company due to filing inefficiencies. More contractors are going paperless, and wish they would have a long time ago. **PRO**

The Benefits of Paperless

- Documents are easier to locate, less likely to be misplaced or lost
- Saves time and space
- Lowers storage and retrieval expenses
- Documents can be searchable by keywords
- Documents can be shared
- Eliminates photocopying
- No need to purge files annually
- Documents can integrate with QuickBooks
- Increases employee productivity
- Provides disaster recovery
- Eliminates problems associated with document wear and tear through frequent and/or careless use

Increased Durability. Improved Technology. Reduced Maintenance.

Save time and money on the job with these new products from STIHL!

NEW STIHL Magnum™ BR 600 Backpack Blower

Tough. Efficient. Powerful.

The STIHL Magnum™ BR 600 offers the standard STIHL proven fuel efficiency–up to 28% more fuel efficient as compared to competitive models tested*, an impressive power-to-weight ratio and a host of new enhancements to deliver superior product durability – all backed with a new 2-year limited commercial warranty!

- **Improved engine design for increased durability and operational life**
- **Enhanced nozzle with extended wear area for longer nozzle life**
- **New, improved nylon harness for higher wear resistance**
- **69% cleaner than current Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements, making it one of the cleanest running backpack blowers in its class***

INDICATE **[300]** ON INQUIRY CARD

NEW STIHL MS 362 Chain Saw

Engineered for Efficiency.

The new STIHL MS 362 professional chain saw delivers an ideal combination of torque, power, fuel savings, and weight, all designed to save you both time and money. Because of the low-emission, fuel-efficient engine technology, you'll use up to 20% less fuel and produce up to 70% less emissions as compared to previous models. The advanced anti-vibration system allows your crews to keep working comfortably for longer periods of use during most applications.

- **Simple starting procedure, gets you started quicker**
- **Advanced anti-vibration system for comfortable handling and operation, less fatigue**
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- **Advanced engine technology improves fuel efficiency, saving time and money**

INDICATE **[301]** ON INQUIRY CARD

STIHL High Performance Oil

Highly Biodegradable. High Performance. Clean.

STIHL HP Ultra 2-Cycle Engine Oil

STIHL HP Ultra is a fully synthetic 2-cycle engine oil specially suited for high performance chain saws and power tools. This oil has outstanding engine cleaning characteristics, plus "ultra" superior lubricating qualities in comparison to other 2-cycle engine oils. This oil is biodegradable, degrading by 80% in 21 days.

INDICATE **[302]** ON INQUIRY CARD

STIHL BioPlus™ Bar Oil

Made with a vegetable oil base, STIHL BioPlus™ bar oil is less harmful to humans, animals, micro-organisms and plants. STIHL BioPlus oil also offers excellent flow characteristics at low temperatures and has a high flash point. Available in 1-quart, 1-gallon, 5-gallon and 55-gallon containers. Rated by the Coordinating European Council to be 93.8% biodegradable in only 21 days.

INDICATE **[303]** ON INQUIRY CARD

*Fuel consumption data provided by a third-party, independent laboratory: Porsche Engineering Group GmbH. 1240 hours of run time (equal to 2 seasons). Information based on EPA Web site as of March 2009.For more information, please visit www.epa.org or www.stihlusa.com/BR600.

NEW STIHL FS 70 RC-E String Trimmer

Fuel Efficient. Durable. Lightweight.

Save time and money with the new STIHL FS 70 RC-E grass trimmer. Featuring a low-emission, fuel-efficient engine for longer run times between refueling, up to 28% less fuel consumption and a low weight of 10.6 pounds, the FS 70 RC-E is engineered for the professional user trimming all day.

- **STIHL Easy2Start™ system makes the starting process almost effortless**
- **Semi-automatic choke lever creates a smoother start and helps prevent flooding**
- **Easy-to-use, low-maintenance TapAction™, 2-line AUTOCUT® head**
- **High durability forged connecting rod and four-bearing gearbox for longer service life**

INDICATE **[304]** ON INQUIRY CARD

NEW STIHL FC 70 C-E Edger

Fuel efficient. High performance. Easy to use.

The only STIHL professional edger with advanced Easy2Start™ technology for fast and easy starting, the STIHL FC 70 C-E provides an ideal blend of performance and ease of use. Powered by a low-emission, fuel-efficient engine, this curved-shaft edger can save you time and money with longer run times between refuelings and up to 28% fuel savings as compared to previous models. Impressive power-to-weight ratio for optimal balance and reduced fatigue.

- **Low-emission engine is 28% more fuel-efficient for longer run times between fuelings**
- **STIHL Easy2Start™ system makes the starting process almost effortless**
- **Semi-automatic choke lever creates a smoother start and helps prevent flooding**
- **Optimal balance and low vibration for extended use and reduced fatigue**

INDICATE **[305]** ON INQUIRY CARD

Introducing a Warranty as Tough as You Are

2-Year Limited Warranty Now Available on Trimmers, Brushcutters, Blowers, Sprayers and More!

STIHL ups the standard – again. It's not enough to be the number one selling brand of chain saws and cut-off machines worldwide. STIHL continues to raise the bar with a 2-year limited warranty coverage on STIHL lawn care products and other selected power tools for homeowners and commercial users alike, extending the coverage period for defects in materials and workmanship. Add on the benefits of the industry leading extended warranty coverage STIHL customers presently enjoy like lifetime drive shaft coverage, lifetime clutch warranty and more, and you have another reason to trust legendary STIHL equipment and service.

STIHL®

By Rod Dickens

Turning HEADS

Concentrate on these eight areas to take focus off of price during the sales process.

You're bidding against more competitors. Customers have ultra-tight budgets. How do you win?

"You have to set yourself apart," says David Snodgrass, president of Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping in Portland, OR. "Price should be one of the last topics of discussion in a sales presentation. Yes, we all have to work within a customer's budget. But if a sale comes down to price and price alone, then the lowest common denominator will win, and more likely than not, that's a losing proposition for the customer and the service provider."

Education Starts with a Consistent Image

Snodgrass emphasizes that the effort to educate the customer about what makes your company different begins well before any sales presentation. It begins by having a good reputation and by being consistent with the quality of your work, image, response time, and literally all the things that comprise a good, professional company.

"Being consistent is extremely important," Snodgrass stresses. "As a company, you can do nearly everything right, but that one inconsistency—such as showing up late for an appointment, poorly dressed employees or a shabby-looking truck—will stand out like a sore thumb and literally shout at your prospective customer that you're no better than the other landscape contractors they've talked with. When there's no perceived difference, price becomes the issue."

> ***"Being consistent is extremely important. When there's no perceived difference, price becomes the issue."***
> ***– Contractor Eric Spalsbury***

Eric Spalsbury, an account manager and business development team member for Heads Up Landscape Contractors in Albuquerque, NM, agrees. "Price only matters when there is parity," he relates. "The promise of quality and exceptional service, on the other hand, allows for premium pricing."

Six 'Non-Price' Differentiators

For Spalsbury, price is only one of what he refers to as seven "differentiators" that can set companies apart.

Exceptional Service – Spalsbury includes prompt and accessible communication, being a one-stop shop, having unwavering reliability and being an expert resource for customers. Among other traits, he notes that industry-leading companies commit to keeping up with the latest innovations and industry standards.

Quality Work – Quality is what's most obvious to customers, and it comes from keeping employee turnover to a minimum, as well as having an excellent company culture and a superior training and education program for employees.

Specialized Services – Offering a specialized service that is unique to an individual market gives companies an edge on competition and a leg up on pricing. Being environmentally aware can have a similar impact, especially if a market is turning green. Environmentally aware companies, Spalsbury points out, may have LEED certification, and offer green initiatives such as using alternative-energy equipment and promoting Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and water resource management services.

Environmental Awareness – Becoming more green can have a profound impact on your bottom line. Also, as pointed out under "specialized services," environmental awareness can give you a leg up from a sales and marketing perspective.

Corporate Citizenship – Being a good corporate citizen by participating in charity events and community forums can make a difference in how a company is perceived, Spalsbury says.

Industry Leadership – Becoming involved in local, regional or national associations says a lot about your commitment to your profession.

Building Relationships

All landscape companies, regardless of their size, share a common bond, says Burt DeMarche, principal of The LaurelRock Company in Wilton, CT. "All clients are looking for someone they can trust, and there's no better way to build trust than to have an ongoing relationship with them," DeMarche says. "In our company, the individual designer/project director who makes the original sale of a project remains as the contact person through the design, contract negotiation, project management phase and into the aftercare. That relationship is there forever."

Although it's difficult to put a dollar amount on relationships, DeMarche notes that it definitely adds value and builds loyalty. He gives this example: "Every morning you can choose to get a coffee and muffin at any deli you pass by. At one deli, the owner introduces himself to you, asks your name, and takes a genuine interest in you and your company. At another deli, the price is a little cheaper and the food equally as good, but the various people behind the counter take no time to form even a simple connection with you. Which deli will you return to? Who do you want to give your business to? It's the difference between treating someone as a client vs. just another customer. The relationship adds value."

Forming relationships and trust with clients starts at the core of any company, says DeMarche.

and other one-off increases, either. We make our case upfront, and nine times out of 10, our clients understand. It really comes back to the value of the relationship that we share."

Being proactive is definitely part of the education process, says Snodgrass. Your actions tell a good story, but you sometimes have to coax customers along to make sure they're getting the full message.

"When selling a customer, talk about your company's safety record and award-winning proj-

Like DeMarche, Snodgrass emphasizes that selling customers on your service offering is about building rapport and trust. Once you earn their trust, it's not about price. "We're not going to be the lowest price in town," Snodgrass relates, "but we strive to be the best value."

Growing Expectations

After all is said and done, you've built some pretty high expectations and added perceived value to your services. The effort, though, has evolved over time. It

"When I'm making a sales presentation, I want my actions to speak for me. I want the customer to have a pre-conceived notion of expectations and where our company stands among our competitors." – Contractor David Snodgrass

At The LaurelRock Company, two of their seven core principles reflect the importance of this bond: Honor the client and act with integrity.

Building strong relationships, however, doesn't mean that a company can charge what it wants to charge or raise prices on a whim. "If we have to raise prices to offset costs, we're very upfront with customers about the increase," DeMarche points out. "We detail the rising costs and, in turn, ask for a reasonable rate increase. We won't nickel-and-dime them with fuel surcharges

ects, as well as some of the other things that separate you from the competition," Snodgrass advises. "In our case, we let our customers know that we're a family-owned company in business for 53 years, and are able to offer an array of services for the long-term with our four garden centers."

After you've sold them on your company, you have to sell yourself, too, Snodgrass adds. "Effective salespeople listen to what customers are saying. They ask questions, offer solutions, and pose as an overall good resource for them."

would be very difficult for a start-up company to demand top dollar for its services with no proof, consistency and relationship-building in the offering.

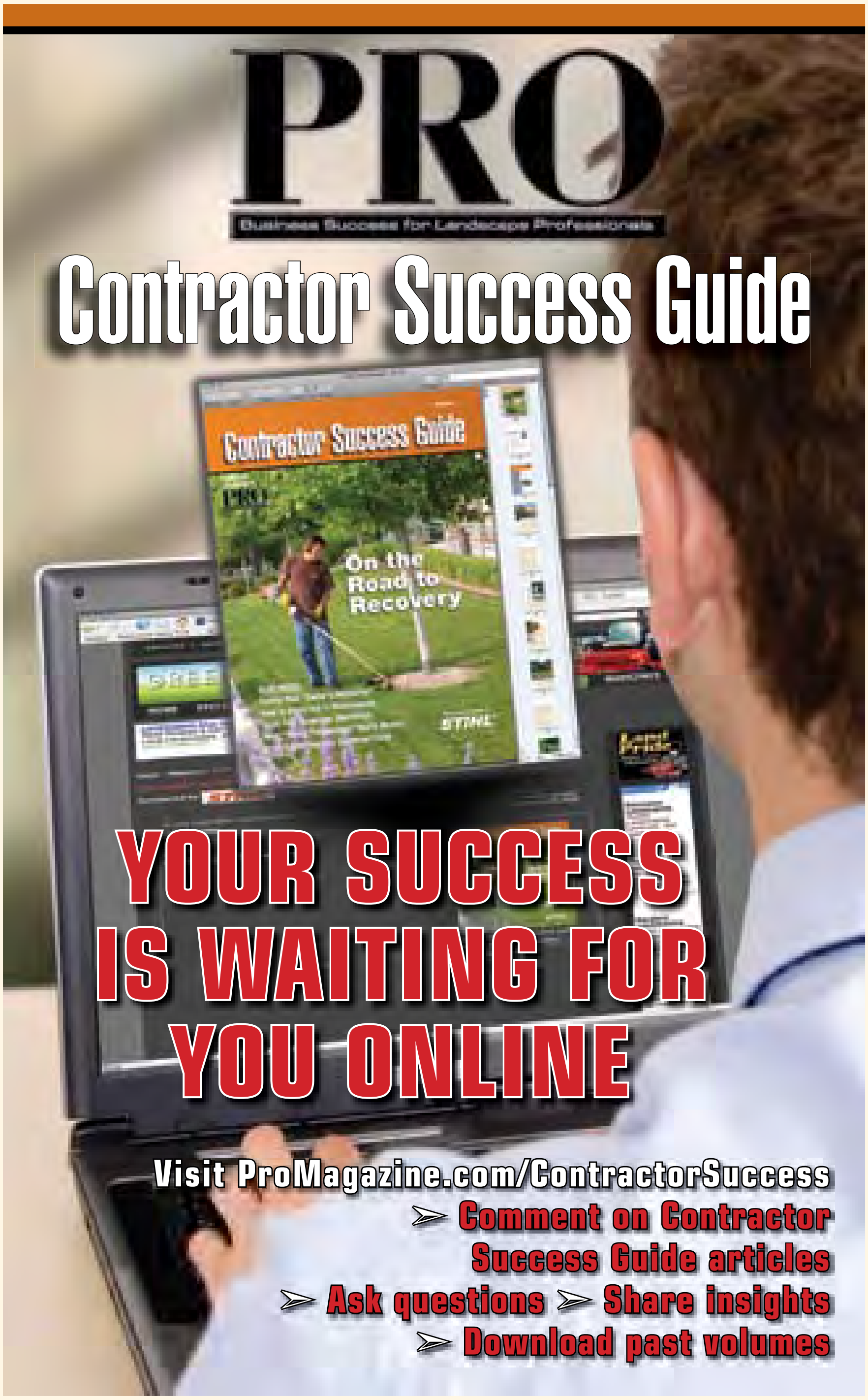
DeMarche says, "Many of our clients come from referrals and, hence, they are pre-qualified." He, along with Snodgrass and Spalsbury, note that having a good reputation is one of the best ways, if not the best way, to translate service and value into a fair price for you and your customers.

It all begins by separating yourself from your competition. Heads Up's mission statement tells part of the story. "Our mission is to be the standard by which all other landscape design/build/maintenance companies are measured in our market," Spalsbury explains. "We succeed together by continually 'Growing Better' in partnering with our clients and investing in the industry's best people." Reading from the bottom up, investing in people (quality work) and partnering (building relationships) set a standard that differentiates Heads Up from it competitors.

By following its mission statement, Heads Up is building customer expectations and adding value to its services. The key, all three contractors reiterate, is to back up the rhetoric with action—consistent action.

"The best salesperson a company can have is its reputation," says Snodgrass. "When I'm making a sales presentation, I want my actions to speak for me. I want the customer to have a preconceived notion of expectations and where our company stands among our competitors."

Yes, the impending deal has to fall within the budgets of both the contractor and client. In many ways, a sale is about money, but it doesn't have to be about the price. **PRO**



By Gregg Wartgow

10 Times the Response of Direct Mail

When done correctly, e-communications can cut through a mountain of media clutter, helping you generate more leads and retain more customers—all for $50 a month.

Content-driven, lifestyle-oriented e-communications are becoming more widely accepted by consumers. When produced professionally and managed attentively, they can become an effective marketing solution for service providers such as landscapers.

Purely promotional emails are not very effective, says Dave Fish of IMN, a content-driven e-communications company based in Waltham, MA. Promo-only emails often result in a high number of recipients who "opt out," or unsubscribe from the list.

"You can erode your email base by 2/3 in a year by putting out thin, promotional emails," Fish points out. "Because email marketing is so cost-effective, you certainly don't want to throw this opportunity away by turning off your audience."

Content is the Key

You can hang onto more than 90% of your email base when you provide useful content. Professional, high-quality content that is easy to read, listen to or watch accomplishes a number of things:

- Surprises your audience because they're used to getting promos all the time
- Engages your audience because there is interesting content to hold their attention longer
- Helps you stand out from other businesses that are just sending promotional emails.

The Right Frequency is Vital

Send out your e-communications monthly, Fish advises. Quarterly can be too infrequent, causing a larger percentage of your audience to forget about you and opt out. On the other hand, more often than monthly can be too much.

When you send quality content on a monthly basis, Fish says the following are realistic goals:

- Less than a 1% opt-out rate each mailing
- At least a 20% open rate each mailing

"Direct mail typically generates a 1-2% response rate," Fish points out. "So I think you'll agree that taking the time to get this e-communications thing right is well worth it."

Measure to See What Works

Measuring your content to determine what is being read is an essential part of "getting it right." Companies such as IMN can help with this. "Our unique tracking tools can help you learn what your customers care about most," Fish explains.

Content can include information specific to your industry or company, such as lawn watering tips or lawnmower maintenance advice. If it's informative and engaging, it can work.

"Content that's not so obvious can also work very well," Fish points out. "For example, we do some ezines for several auto dealerships. Movie reviews are actually very well-received by their customers."

Don't be afraid to try new things you believe could be of interest to your audience. But be careful. Measure their effectiveness so that, if they're not popular, you stop doing them before you lose subscribers.

Incorporating Special Offers

Special offers and promotions should still be a part or your e-communications effort. The trick, according to Fish, is to work them in tastefully.

"You can hang onto consumers longer when you give them quality content," Fish says. "This is great news because that means you have more time to pitch them your products and services.

"We think of a three-layered approach," Fish goes on to say.

- Strong editorial that engages and retains the audience
- A "soft sell" such as educational information aligned with what you want to promote
- A hard call to action.

For example, a landscaper outside of the snowbelt might talk about winter lawn care do's and dont's in his winter ezine. A landscaper inside the snowbelt might talk about snow and ice management tips. In either case, it's perfectly appropriate to invite customers to take advantage of service specials being offered in these two areas.

"Coupons and special offers are still very important," Fish reminds. "This is especially true these days with more consumers on the lookout for a deal. But special offers can't be the only thing you do. You still need that first leg: strong editorial content."

Creating Content-Rich Communications

You can incorporate content from other sources into your ezine.

"Be aware of copyright laws," Fish warns. "You can't just grab anything and everything you find on the Internet. But there could be some copyright-released sources they could explore. It's also OK to summarize certain copyrighted works and then link to them."

Creating your own content can be very effective. The biggest challenge is often finding the time.

"Using video or audio as the core of your ezine is a great approach," Fish says. This is less time-consuming than writing and editing copy. Plus, it's more entertaining for the audience. So hopefully you have the capability of shooting short videos and uploading them to your computer."

A third party such as IMN can help create your content. "As an email service provider focused on vertical markets, we can source the content and get it ready to go, including video," Fish says. "You can add your personal message if you want to. We can create ezine editions specifically for smartphones, so the usability is there in the small-screen environment. We also provide the capability of having your special offer texted to your customers' phones."

For $50-$100 a month, Fish says a small business can obtain these services from IMN. A small business generating its own content, and only in need of an email platform, could expect to spend $10-$20 a month.

In either event, when compared to most other forms of marketing, content-rich e-communications can prove to be a very cost-effective way to develop loyal customers and engage new ones. By carefully balancing quality editorial content with your special offers and promotions, you could be well on your way to finding the marketing solution you've long been looking for. **PRO**

Special offers and promotions should be a part or your e-communications effort. The trick is to work them in tastefully.

Dave Fish is CEO of IMN, a content-driven e-communications company based in Waltham, MA. Visit ImnInc.com for information on how IMN can help you create and deliver content-rich e-communications to help you grow sales.

Marketing Your Business

By Gary Goldman

GROWTH in Your Back Pocket

Use your personal contacts to open up a world of business opportunity.

The key to making your business grow may be in your back pocket. Check the names in your PDA, Blackberry, cell phone or address book. All those friends, relatives and associates could lead you to more business opportunities than you can handle.

As you look through the list of people you know, you may be surprised by just how many there are: business associates, accountants, lawyers, insurance brokers, friends and relatives. And the list doesn't include only the people you speak with in your day-to-day life. What about the people who aren't listed, like your next door neighbor, mail carrier, barber, electrician or plumber? The number of names you can come up with is longer than you ever thought possible.

In fact, it is estimated that most people could come up with 250 names. And that number will grow at an increasing rate as you begin to make contact with your personal sphere of influence. Everyone on your list also knows 250 people, meaning that once you get to know a person and he or she becomes part of your network, you're also gaining access to the 250 people in that person's network.

An aspect of human nature is that people would rather do business with someone they know and trust than with a stranger. The proof lies in the fact that most people use the same accountant, car repair shop and doctor again and again.

The same 250 people who make up your personal sphere of influence automatically comprise a network that represents the strongest base of potential customers for your business.

The same can hold true for you. The same 250 people who make up your personal sphere of influence—the people who know you and like you—automatically comprise a network that represents the strongest base of potential customers for your business. They are not only potential new clients, but also potential referral sources.

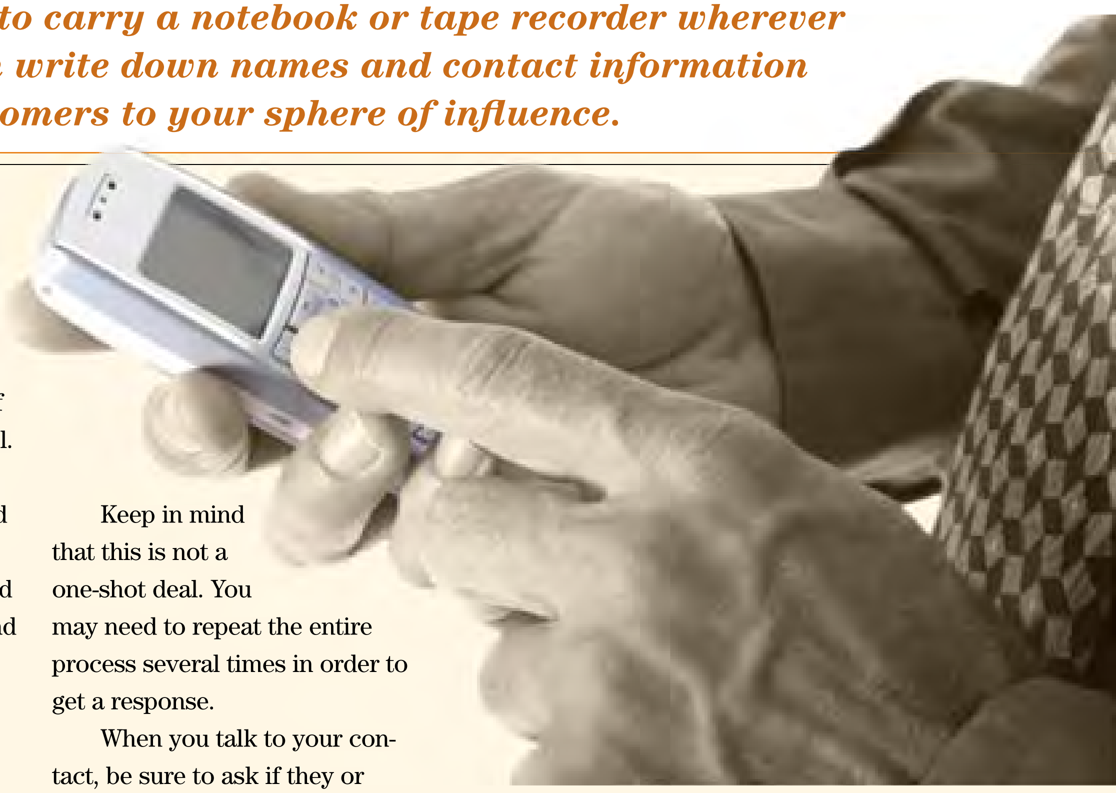
Start Expanding Your Sphere Now

While 250 is the typical size of most people's sphere of influence, there is no need to limit it to that number. Each one of us meets new people every day. We encounter new faces when visiting clients, while attending social gatherings, and even waiting in line for a cup of coffee.

It is mandatory to always have your business card with you. You may also want to carry a notebook or tape recorder wherever you go so you can write down names and contact information of newcomers to your sphere of influence. You'll be astonished by how quickly it grows—and by how many new business opportunities arise out of cultivating your existing, ever-expanding referral group.

Of course, once you're building a business relationship with someone from your sphere of

It is mandatory to always have your business card with you. You may also want to carry a notebook or tape recorder wherever you go so you can write down names and contact information of newcomers to your sphere of influence.



influence, it's critical that you provide the highest level of service. Otherwise, you stand a strong chance of losing their business, which could mean losing the other 250 members of their sphere of influence, as well.

Therefore, it's critical to be consistent, which is the best and only way of building a strong reputation. All it takes is one bad experience for a customer to find a new lawn service or irrigation contractor, even though he has been loyal for years.

Create a Lead-Generating Machine

Getting started with contacting your sphere of influence is always a bit difficult because it's easy to make up reasons why you don't have the time. That's why I recommend that you break your spheres into sub-spheres.

For example, that pile of business cards from potential clients, vendors and professional associates can be put into groups. Then give each a value based on the potential business they can generate to your company. This will help you identify who you should start contacting first.

You must be consistent and persistent once you start contacting your sphere. Start by sending out an initial introductory letter to all of the A's on your list. Follow up with a telephone call, and then a second mailing of a postcard or brochure.

Keep in mind that this is not a one-shot deal. You may need to repeat the entire process several times in order to get a response.

When you talk to your contact, be sure to ask if they or someone they know has a use for your services now or in the future. Do not get discouraged if you hear them say no. Keep contacting that individual on a regular basis. I have found that it can take up to four calls or letters from the same contact before I received either an opportunity to bid or the name of a hot lead.

Most landscape contractors have a file filled with proposals they've given to clients over the years. This is the "hottest" sphere of potential clients in your possession. Contact these clients on an annual basis, asking them for the opportunity to bid on any of their projects. Ask for the names of other project or property managers within their company that you can contact.

You can contact them using the same letter, telephone call and mailing scenario that I outlined a second ago. These are very hot leads and should not be taken for granted.

When it comes to your ever-expanding sphere of influence, none of your 250-plus contacts should be taken for granted. Each represents a potential source of new leads and business. A little planning, persistence and consistency can turn that sphere into a revenue-generating machine. Start making it happen today. **PRO**

Gary Goldman has over 20 years of management experience in the Green Industry. He has a master's degree in business administration and is a licensed factoring specialist. He now runs his own consulting company. For more information, e-mail gmanaf@msn.com, call 508-652-9771 or visit garysgoldman.com.

By Jeffrey Scott

Use Relationship Marketing to POWER Your Growth

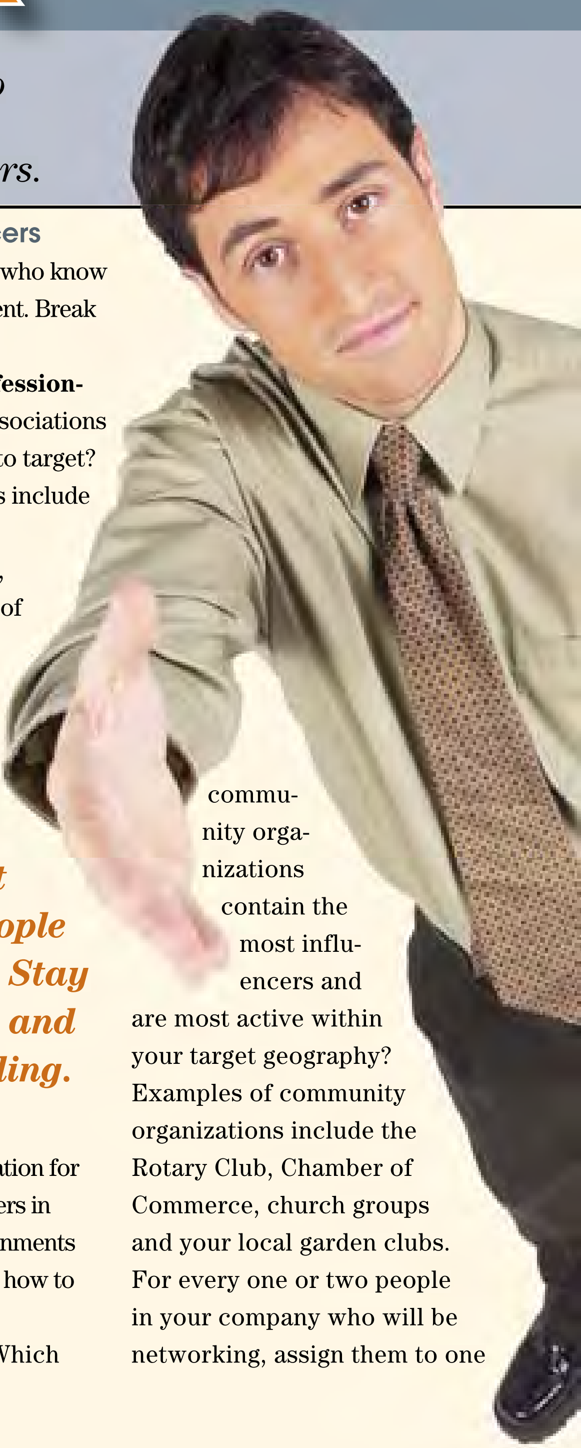
Use the following strategic approach to networking to continue growing your business over the next two to three years.

You can grow your business almost entirely by referrals—even in the current economy—if you take a strategic approach, and if you persevere over a two- to three-year period. Use the following process to create your own strategic networking success.

Find Your Focus

1. Identify which area of your business you want to grow the most. For example, is it landscape maintenance? Lawn care? Design/Build? Irrigation?
2. Identify the client profile that is ideal for that area of your business.
3. Focus your networking efforts around this target clientele.

By the end of 12-18 months, each networker at your firm should have built up a list of 25 top people who are referring you or could be referring you. Stay in front of these people using direct mail, email and phone—along with the meetings you are attending.



Identify Key Influencers

Identify those people who know or influence this target client. Break this into two groups:

The trade and professionals. Which groups and associations in your area are the best to target? Examples of trade groups include BOMA (Building Owners & Managers Association), ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects), AIA (American Institute of Architects) and your local association of realtors.

Start with one association for every one or two networkers in your company. Make assignments and teach your employees how to network.

The influencers. Which community organizations contain the most influencers and are most active within your target geography? Examples of community organizations include the Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, church groups and your local garden clubs. For every one or two people in your company who will be networking, assign them to one

Cull your list of key influencers. Drop some people who have no interest or potential. Then add new people to the list—so you always have about 25 people with whom you are nurturing a relationship.

organization. (Expert networkers can join multiple organizations.)

Plan on going to every meeting. Also spend time with members outside of meetings at their offices, and over meals and outings. Also, try to bring these people on as your clients so they can experience your services (even at a reduced rate, or for a partial service). Don't be pushy, though. Use a soft sale approach.

Stay in Front of Them

By the end of 12-18 months, each networker at your firm should have built up a list of 25 people who are referring you or could be referring you. Stay in front of these people using direct mail, email and phone—along with the meetings you are attending. Don't go overboard, though. If you see them frequently at meetings, then adjust-down the other touches.

Keep the List Fresh

Cull your list of key influencers you've been staying in front of. Drop some people who have no interest or potential. Then add new people to the list—so you always have about 25 people with whom you are nurturing relationships.

If one of your top 25 becomes a client, have one of your employees now nurture that relationship. That will free you up to continue expanding your own list.

Referrals & Testimonials

Ask for referrals only after you have delighted a new client, because at that point you have made deposits in your "goodwill bank" with them. But instead of just asking for a *referral*, ask for a *testimonial* you can use—and ask for new clients to literally introduce you to potential clients.

Use Events Cautiously

Events are good for networking only if you can be assured of finding a preponderance of clients or influencers. Your time is valuable, so pick your events cautiously. Guard your time.

Experiment with Online Social Media

While trust is built though face-to-face, social media can help establish contacts. Facebook and LinkedIn are the most effective for networking, though Twitter is increasing in its effectiveness. Don't try them all right away. Pick one and experiment for a while.

Give Back

The key to building your referral base is finding ways to give back. Pay it forward! The more you give to your associations, community organizations and people in your network, the more goodwill you will build up—and the more natural referrals and direct referrals you will receive.

Look for ways to do free landscaping, cleanups, holiday decorating, etc. Show off your abilities.

Networking can take two or three years (sometimes more) before it pays off, but nothing beats a lead that comes from your network—it is worth the long-term investment.

These techniques are proven. I developed many as I grew my own landscape business up to $10 million, in large part by referrals. I have coached many members of my Leader's Edge peer group on how to implement these techniques, so I know they work. For help on figuring out the next steps of your relationship marketing strategy, call me at 203-220-8931. You can also download for FREE the first 6 chapters of my book, The Referral Advantage, by visiting jeffreyscott.biz. **PRO**

Jeffrey Scott is an author, speaker and Green Industry business consultant. He facilitates peer groups for landscape professionals who want to transform and profitably grow their businesses. To learn about the power of peer groups, visit GetTheLeadersEdge.com.

Read Part 1 of Jeffrey Scott's "Reaching Beyond $1 Million" series in PRO's January/ February issue. The subject is "Six Steps to Growth."

Marketing Your Business

By Jon Ewing

Proposals That Keep You in the Hunt

In today's tough market where you're bidding against more competitors, quality proposals that are informative, professional and customer-specific can help keep you in the hunt.

Get Right to the Point

There are basic objectives with every proposal you submit:

- Did you fully address and comply with the customer's needs?
- Can the customer understand what you presented?
- Did you convey that you are capable of handling the customer's needs?
- Can the customer trust you?

The proposal must then provide an excellent customer-focused breakdown of the proposed work into:

- Costs
- Qualifications
- Experience
- Other items that create value for your customer

Strive to keep your proposal focused and direct. Do not include any unnecessary verbiage, marketing material or other information that is not relevant to the job. The information you provide in your proposal should illustrate your capabilities, but only with respect to how those capabilities meet the customer's needs. Just ask yourself, "Does this information add value to the customer's project?"

Keep the font size at 10 or 12. Bold or underline headings. Only use photos or other graphics when they help illustrate a point or add impact—without distracting the customer. Maintain a similar style throughout the entire proposal.

> ***"Strive to keep your proposal focused and direct. Do not include any unnecessary verbiage, marketing material or other information that is not relevant to the job."***

Your proposal should look like it is job-specific, as opposed to a boilerplate presentation developed years ago. Today's proposals can be developed rather easily and quickly on most home computers, and can project an image of being special and attentive to your client's needs.

Use a consistent format that addresses each of the primary elements listed below, either in the body of your proposal or as separate inserts to your proposal material.

Address All Requirements

Make sure your presentation addresses all requirements set forth in your customer's bid package. This means that you assign a full cost to every item within the scope of work.

For example, if the customer asks that you include tree care in your presentation, include it. Conversely, if you discussed excluding certain items, do not put them in your proposal. If there are foggy areas, list them as additive alternatives.

Include a Photo

Including a current photo of the project will convey that you care about the job and have developed a presentation that is specifically for the job.

Take the time to photograph the project—and include it on the cover of your proposal. Take the best picture you possibly can. If you don't have a good digital camera, get one.

If the project is a new construction job, you may also scan a reduced version of the plan or a job rendering of how it may look upon completion.

To download an example of a commercial maintenance proposal written by Jon Ewing, read the online version of this article at ProMagazine.com/ContractorSuccess

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Business Success for Landscape Professionals

Also consider including a few nice photos of similar projects you may have worked on. If you don't want to include this in the proposal itself, you could always stuff some photos in the brochure or pocket folder as supplemental information.

Experience

Make sure that you fully communicate your experience, not to mention the experience of your employees. The goal is to reassure the customer that your company has the practice and confidence to meet their needs.

Consider developing different versions of your capabilities so that you match these capabilities to the type of job you are bidding on. For example, if it is a residential project, have residential references ready. If it's a hotel project, show your capabilities of doing hotel work or other commercial projects of similar scope. Your goal is to convey that you can handle the job and can be trusted to complete the work.

Never assume that your customer knows you or what your experience is. Making assumptions on your customer's behalf can project a lack of preparation and conviction.

Capabilities

Illustrate the equipment, tools, vendor relations and resources you have to meet the customer's needs for this particular project. For example, if the project requires a specific type of mower, implement or other piece of equipment, demonstrate that you either own them or have access to them.

If you employ office staff, operate "new" trucks and/or equipment, or are a member of a state or national association, let your customers know how these things add value to your proposal. These are expenses you incur that have representation in your pricing. Just make sure that your customers understand how these things provide value to them.

Qualifications

Inform your customer of the licenses, certifications, insurance coverage and education your firm provides in order to meet and exceed customer expectations.

Don't forget that uniforms, cell phones, certifications and proper licensing all add cost to your proposal, but also add value to your service. Tout it.

Depth of Staff

Talk about your employees and the fact that they are your biggest asset.

If the project demands a full-time staff, specify who these people are, what their qualifications are, and what their responsibilities will be in order to meet the client's needs.

For larger projects that necessitate more support, you may even want to include short, one-page biographies of key personnel.

Close with a Summary

Take the time to insert a note that illustrates your personal attention to this job, while also summarizing your experience and qualifications, goals and objectives.

Make note of how you will staff the project and service the job.

If you have unique warranties, emergency response policies, etc., note them.

Submitting Your Proposal

You can submit your proposal in a variety of ways:

- In a binder with tabs
- In a pocket folder
- Within a company brochure
- As a stand-alone document

Whichever means you choose, be creative, keep it simple, and submit a proposal that represents your company well.

Remember, your proposal is merely designed to keep you in the hunt. Be sure to follow up with a phone call. And always be striving to get in front of your customers and prospects to deliver live, in-person presentations to further sell your work. **PRO**

Jon Ewing has more than 30 years experience in the Green Industry. For more information, call (858) 229-9893 or visit JonEwingConsultingServices.com.

What Makes a Great Logo

Here are some tips to assist you in designing a logo that is powerful, memorable, and expressive of your company's mission and identity.

Express Your Company's Personality – It is vital for a potential customer to learn something about your organization just by looking at your logo. A logo can also provide a clear and consistent image of your company.

Colors are an important component in helping to accomplish this goal. Consider implementing blue into your color scheme as blue communicates trust.

Make It Pop – The most effective logos are ones that come alive and jump off the page (or wherever they're displayed). Make sure your logo is bold, memorable and pops. At the same time, your logo needs to look professional and make sense for your business.

Don't be afraid to test your logo with existing and/or potential customers to see what their feedback is. What you think works might not resonate with your customers.

Keep It Simple – Don't over think your logo design. Keep it simple and clean. Attempting to do too much will only confuse your target audience and blur your message. A confusing logo is forgettable and useless. Sometimes less is more.

Make It Flexible – A logo is typically displayed on a variety of media. Legibility across each channel is critical. It should be able to work in both color and black and white. Also keep in mind that your logo will likely be viewed on both smaller and larger objects, such as business cards or posters.

Make A Statement – Many logos also include a tagline, which is a statement of the products or services you provide. This tagline separates your organization from others. Some well-known taglines include Subway's "Eat Fresh" or Nike's "Just do It."

Like the design of the logo, a tagline should be short and to the point, yet memorable. For example: Creating & Maintaining Beautiful Landscapes.

Research Your Logo – Research the meaning behind your logo before you finalize it, as it may convey a negative message to those from other cultures or demographic segments of society. And of course, make sure another organization is not using the same or a similar logo design, especially if they are a competitor.

Now Use It – Use your logo everywhere, both online and in print. Put it on all of your marketing materials including business cards, letterhead and even envelopes. Include it in your email signature and on your website, and use it in all correspondence to reinforce your company and encourage repeat customers and referrals. Once you have a solid logo that makes an impact, it should be synonymous with your company name.

Protect It – Provide clear, specific guidelines to anyone who will be working with your logo, and insist on approvals for any use of it.

Be clear as to how the logo should be used, in what form and on what media.

Let people know not to distort your logo, and ensure that they use enough clear space.

If you find that your logo has been used incorrectly, fix it right away.

Be Consistent – A logo is not something that should change regularly. Doing so confuses your target market and causes more harm than good. **PRO**

Melissa Crowe is the vice president of marketing services at VistaPrint, an online supplier of graphic design and printed products to small businesses and consumers. Please visit vistaprint.com for more logo ideas.