

Contractor Success Guide

Volume 8

A SUPPLEMENT TO
GREEN INDUSTRY
PRO
Business Strategies For Landscape Contractors

The LOOK of Success

A look back at some of the most popular *Green Industry PRO* magazine contractor profiles of 2007-2008 help shed light on what successful contractors have done to build durable companies capable of bouncing back quickly from the recession.
page 4

How To Overcome Pricing Pressures
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6 Tricks to Get Crews Out Faster
page 12

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Price vs. Value

Dear Contractors,

American investment entrepreneur Warren Buffett has said, "Price is what you pay. Value is what you get." This is true not only with products but also with service. In a tough economy, competitors are often more willing to drop their prices to get the business, making winning the bid and maintaining quality service particularly challenging. In "The Battle Rages On" in this issue of *Contractor Success Guide*, you'll read advice on how to deal with "low-baller" competition.



Other articles include tips for improving crew efficiency in the morning, measuring employee performance, and promoting your business online, as well as building a durable company that can bounce back quickly from a recession. The editors at *Contractor Success Guide* continue to be a valuable resource for ideas to help you improve your business.

Another resource for landscape contractors is the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Whether a member or not, you should consider attending the PLANET Green Industry Conference (GIC) at the Green Industry & Equipment Expo (GIE+EXPO) Oct. 27-30 in Louisville (www.gie-expo.com). The GIC offers an excellent opportunity to network with peers and learn from other top landscape contractors, consultants and other speakers from around the country. This year, STIHL is pleased to sponsor the session, "Grow Your Business with Tree Care," being given by Mark Chisholm, a certified, third-generation arborist, three-time International Tree Climbing Champion and industry consultant and spokesperson.

If you're attending the GIE+EXPO but aren't yet registered for the PLANET GIC, I encourage you to maximize the value from your time and check out the PLANET educational sessions. Find out more about PLANET at www.landcarenetwork.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Keeler".

John Keeler
National Training Manager
STIHL Inc.

Measuring Success



**Gregg
Wartgow,**
Associate
Publisher

The obvious measure of success for a company is its ability to grow. For a fortunate few landscape contractors, success over the last couple of years has still meant crazy sales growth (reminiscent of the 2000-2007 Green Industry Gold Rush). Many other contractors have also grown, but at a much more tame pace. For some, it's been about simply living to fight another day.

Each of these types of contractors will likely have a very different definition of what "success" means in today's economy.

Our cover story (page 4) takes a look back at some of the more popular contractor profiles we'd published in the year or two preceding the Great Recession. These reflections shed light on what great companies should always be doing, in both good times and bad, to create durable companies capable of not only growing, but also surviving difficult periods of economic slowdown. For instance:

Customer Connection. Have you and your team discovered ways to improve customer service and communication with your existing customers? Many contractors fell victim to the "quest for lowest price" game which consumers began playing in 2009. But many others said their customers stuck with them because, quite simply, they didn't want to take a chance at missing out on such tremendous service.

Staff Connection. Have you and/or your management team found ways to improve not only communication amongst yourselves, but also communication between you and the other employees in your company?

Process Improvements. Have you and your team found ways to improve work process throughout your company to improve efficiency, morale and your competitive edge? Visit GreenIndustryPros.com/workingsmarter for some insight.

Companies are indeed measured by their ability to grow, but it's the "little successes" they achieve on a day-by-day, instance-by-instance basis that put them in a position to grow over the long term.

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Cover Story

THE LOOK of Success

A look back at some of the most popular *Green Industry PRO* magazine contractor profiles of 2007-2008 help shed light on what successful contractors have done to build durable companies capable of bouncing back quickly from the 2009 recession.

With all of the negative news of the past few years, one can only wonder where the bright spots are. The answer is that this industry continues to offer plenty of opportunity for contractors who take advantage of best business practices. Here are a just a few of them.

Professionalism

Only a small percentage of the Green Industry takes advantage of national and state certification programs. Earning your certification becomes an obvious point of difference. Competition is very keen today, so being and acting professional, and employing certified and licensed employees, set your company apart and give you a leg up on competitors.

Honesty and Integrity

Being honest and transparent



Jason Cupp is a former landscape contractor and past PLANET president

with employees, clients and vendors will create opportunities in both good and bad times. These two words are the foundation for building strong business relationships that will outlive—and help your company outlast—any economic downturn.

Communication

Unfortunately, our industry is guilty as charged when customers

complain about lack of responsiveness. This less-than-favorable view of contractors presents an incredible opportunity for responsive companies. Having phones answered by people and not by a recording, responding to requests within the same day, and listening to clients and following through on your promises are tried-and-true business practices.

Leadership

Successful companies require strong leadership, and that is no more apparent than when times get a little tough. This is not the time to, as they say, ride out the storm. Companies need to be proactive and develop strategies to find new customers, offer new services and capitalize on a new niche—all of which require sound leadership. ■

*First published May 2008,
Green Industry PRO magazine*

Cost Cutting

Gerry Andrews, Landscape Associates in DePere, WI.

“Lean is about mapping out standards and procedures, but it’s also about empowering employees.

When employees participate in kaizen events and other lean strategy meetings, they are learning to do things their way and not the owner’s way. They are making the important decisions about how to reduce waste.”

Landscape Associates’ first lean training event targeted a troublesome Homeowner’s Association (HOA) account that was routinely over budget. “We looked at labor, how we mowed, what we used for equipment, and how we loaded and unloaded it. We even analyzed



where we parked our vehicles at the site. The exercise helped us reduce our labor cost by 20%.”

Landscape Associates has also realized a couple of percentage points improvement in production and 10% improvement in inventory management just by reorganizing their tools in both the shop area and on their trucks.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg. Our goal is to standardize and document virtually every phase of our operation, from mulching and mowing to how crews plant trees and trim around them. If nothing else, practicing lean makes employees more aware of how they operate, and it forces a company to measure tasks. Generally speaking, people don’t think in terms of doing something in the least wasteful way. With lean, they begin to think that way. It is a great journey.” ■

Bruce Moore Sr. of Eastern Land Management in Stamford, CT.

“We’re experimenting with Palm Pilots to further reduce data entry time and optimize our job costing. We’ve also considered the use of GPS technology in our trucks. It’s something we have to consider, despite the ‘big brother’ perception it conveys to our employees. If and when we use the new technology, we will employ it initially in our snow trucks to help document when a crew arrived on site and how long it worked there.”

Moore has also reconfigured maintenance crews to reduce their size and increase their area of responsibility. Two-person crews are now the norm, which provide full-service maintenance, making it easier to track costs and provide accurate performance incentives. To reduce windshield time, crews for larger accounts often report directly to the site. ■



Maurice Dowell of DOWCO Enterprises in Chesterfield, MO.

“To help cash flow, we offer customers a 5% pre-paid discount. The move costs us a few percentage points, but we make some of it back in a money market account. The money is inexpensive operating capital for us, and the discount gives our customers a break.

“We’ve also made extensive use of new technology. Bar-coded time cards and GPS-equipped trucks help us keep our payroll in line and better manage our people. Employees simply scan-in in the morning and scan-out at night. Their time at work automatically downloads into our computer system. With the GPS system, we know when trucks leave, how long crews spend on jobs, how fast employees are driving, and so forth.” ■



Unlocking employee potential

Maia Highsmith and Gabriel Lopez of Special Gardens Inc. in Redwood City, CA, have each paid their dues as crew workers for other landscape companies over the years. Highsmith is a CLT in landscape maintenance, while Lopez is a CLT in maintenance, installation and irrigation. There's nothing more important, the partners concur, than continuous education and becoming certified. That's why they encourage their employees to also become certified—and even offer to pay for the exam.

Training is an integral part of the Special Gardens culture and sales message. “We have about 45 minutes of training every week,” Highsmith relates. “In addition, we have a few all-day, on-site training sessions throughout the year.”

“We have about 45 minutes of training every week. In addition, we have a few all-day, on-site training sessions throughout the year.”

The on-site sessions allow employees to acquire knowledge by addressing real life challenges as they are happening in the field. Training topics include working with chemicals, measuring lawn areas, pruning, plant identification, equipment operation, detailing, irrigation, filling out paperwork, team communication and customer care.



Back at the shop, a series of training initiatives are ongoing. Most sessions take place first thing in the morning before crews depart to the field. Some of the usual topics are covered, including safety, first aid and proper equipment operation. Handouts are provided in both English and Spanish.

On that note, Special Gardens began providing classes to help employees improve their English a few years ago. Obviously, words and phrases that will improve jobsite communication are covered. However, the primary purpose of these workshops is to help employees learn better English in general to make their lives easier.

The training doesn't stop there, though. The Plant of the Week program helps employees improve their plant identification skills, and also gain a better understanding of how to care for different kinds of plants. Safer and more efficient pruning procedures are also frequently discussed, as well as safe spraying application for plants and trees.

Similarly, ongoing training at Special Gardens includes discussions on the safe use and storage of chemicals. Thorough irrigation training in both English and Spanish is also offered. Detailed maintenance processes are also taught:

- Things to do when patrolling a property before maintenance work begins
- Mower and string trimmer operation
- Proper edging techniques with special considerations for sprinkler heads
- Safe and courteous debris blower operation
- Things to do when patrolling a garden area (before and after work is complete). ■

Michael Becker of Estate Gardeners in Omaha, NE.

The company uses the Kolbe Index, originally developed by education experts to measure the instinctive action and problem-solving styles of individuals, match the right candidates with the right job, and manage them more effectively.

“The Index tells us how people process information. A ‘fact finder’, for example, wants to know everything there is to know before starting a task. That’s ideal for, say, someone putting together an estimate. But that’s not ideal for a salesman who has to work more from the gut.”

Now that he knows what to look for, Becker says he can see an employee’s frustration level rising and change his tactics before a conflict develops. “I now know that it’s not the employee’s comprehension problem; it’s me. When the frustration starts building, I take a breath, step out of my natural way of looking at things and give them the information they need.”

Similarly, Becker has worked to improve the



flow of information throughout the company. He says each stage of the company’s work is now expressed in writing, from the estimate to the invoice.

“It forces me to put down details in a format that others can utilize, instead of keeping it all in my head and giving verbal orders. We

have a paper trail that includes all the information about a job as it moves through the process, from the time it’s sold to materials purchase. And we do a lot more tracking of everything—time, materials, service orders, and so forth—with more detail.”

The emphasis on information has also given Becker a better grip on where the company stands at any given moment, and allows him to head-off problems before they become crises. “Before, we were watching dollars; now we’re watching pennies. Our numbers are real-time, not a broad-brush look at the end of the month. I can look within a two- to three-day window and see what’s actually being produced and what’s actually being billed.” ■

Jeremy Eck of Spruce It Up in Springfield, MO (2007 Pros in Excellence Award Winner).

One of the best decisions Jeremy Eck ever made was when he decided to invest in more effective crew leaders. When Spruce It Up was just starting out, Eck hired some of his classmates to deliver the young company’s services. They delivered pretty well, but were limited in the number of hours they wanted to put in.

“I decided to hire two mature men to run my crews. To help with retention, I offered them a year-



round salary.” Having more mature, career-minded crew leaders helped with quality control. Plus, they allowed Eck the freedom to spend more time working on business growth.

“I handle all contracts and the initial pricing for most of our lawn maintenance jobs, but our crew supervisors handle the interaction with their respective customers. This frees me up to stay in touch with the larger homeowner associations and commercial accounts to make sure we are meeting their expectations. That personal touch makes them feel like they are more than just a job to us.” ■

Sales, Service & Customer Retention

Nick DiBenedetto (left) and Manuel De Souza of N.D. Landscaping in Georgetown, MA.

More than 15% of the company's maintenance customers sign up for the Classic Care Service. "These customers want more than core maintenance, which is how we refer to a weekly regimen of mowing, trimming, blowing, and so forth," De Souza says. "They want someone on their property every week who's actually playing the role of gardener to dead-head flowers, weed beds, prune and keep their landscapes looking immaculate. We believe that's the future of maintenance, at least in our market. Offering this level of service helps separate us from a myriad of competitors who only offer a cookie cutter service."

"As more customers start to understand the true value of their landscapes, and the importance



of maintaining them, they will be willing to pay more for the services we provide," DiBenedetto adds. "It's all part of our effort to educate them, just as they are educating us to have a larger knowledge base and more skill sets to meet their expectations."

The partners are in total agreement that the industry has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Technology, customers, equipment, government regulations, costs and concern about the environment are just a few of the changes transforming the landscape for business owners and creating a new world of challenges and opportunities—something these friends and partners are looking forward to dealing with together. ■

Joe Chiera (right) and Micah Posten of Impact Landscaping & Irrigation in Norton, OH.

Like many contractors, Joe Chiera's early days were spent comfortably mowing a handful of properties. He thought about expanding and growing, but wasn't sure how—or if it would be worth the risk. He and partner Micah Posten had to make their minds up in a hurry when a general contractor suddenly asked for their help on a pretty sizable project.

"We had done some smaller install projects for him in the past, and he was always pleased with our work," Chiera recalls. "This particular job was a much larger commercial job."

Chiera says the most important thing with jobs over \$50,000 is to present your company at the highest level of professionalism:

- Always have an impressive portfolio with you
- Always have a list of references with you



- Always get to know the customer and make him or her feel like part of your family.

There are also several keys to successfully completing the job and making your margin:

You need great supervisors who you

develop a plan with ahead of time. You need to talk through each phase of the project and develop realistic timelines.

Try to stick as close to the contract as possible, and anything extra should be viewed as a change order and discussed with the customer. Many customers are notorious for adding and changing things on the spot, so you have to be right on top of it and get them new contracts and quotes before completing the work. ■

Doug Robbins of Robbins Landscaping in Richmond, VA (2008 Pros in Excellence Award Winner).

Using satisfied clients from past installation projects, Robbins has quickly grown his “property management” division. One of the main reasons Robbins decided to branch into maintenance was to create a department that would generate recurring revenue. He knew he could do it without having to put together an elaborate, expensive marketing plan. With a substantial list of existing install clients, maintenance business was there for the taking if the professionalism the company had been



The guarantee also says Robbins Landscaping will be prepared to provide a wide range of services from landscape and irrigation design to follow-up installation and maintenance. That’s why Robbins prefers to call his maintenance division his “property management” division.

Robbins Landscaping’s complete landscape management package includes mowing, edging, weeding, shrub care, trash removal and clean-up, mulch, fertilization and integrated pest management, floriculture, and just about anything else a valued client might ask for.

“We want the client to view us as the expert who can handle just about anything on the exterior of their property, even if it’s siding or waterproofing.”

projecting since 1989 could be matched by a newly created maintenance department.

Right off the bat, Robbins drafted a 13-point guarantee to put prospects at ease. The guarantee touches on things such as employee training, crew appearance and timeliness, equipment and truck appearance and quality, property inspections and workmanship, billing procedures and more.

“We want the client to view us as the expert who can handle just about anything on the exterior of their property, even if it’s siding or waterproofing,” Robbins explains. “Customers appreciate us being a one-stop shop. In some instances, we use sub-contractors. But the goal is to provide an easier time for our customers and keep other landscape companies away from an account.” ■

Dean Cox, Chestnut Oaks Lawn & Landscape in Greenville, SC (2007 Pros in Excellence Award Winner).

“We tell our customers that we are on call for them 24/7. If a problem with their yard arises before our crew is scheduled to return the following week, I personally go and correct the problem within 24 hours of their



call. We don’t just mow their property—we manage it.”

Ever the proactive owner/operator, Dean Cox doesn’t just wait for customers to call with emerging problems. He personally visits each property at least once a week to make sure the irrigation is on, check for signs of lawn stress or disease, or to simply visit with customers. ■

Sales, Service & Customer Retention

Kevin Burns of Maximum Service Landscaping in Burlingame, CA.

“Features such as outdoor kitchens and fireplaces became a routine part of our service offering back around 2007. One of our newer offerings is finish carpentry. Rather than slap a quick wooden fence in, we take the time to use higher-quality materials and quality construction technique to build doors in place of simple gates.

“Building gates with stiles and rails connected with mortise-and-tenon joinery and inlaid tongue-and-groove boards has really made a big difference. We’ve also switched to using kiln-dried, vertical-grain Western Red Cedar whenever budget permits. The wood is beautiful and much more rot-resistant than the usual Redwood fence lumber. It really sets us apart from what many other contractors are building.”

newest irrigation and drainage technologies to maximize efficient water use and reduce run-off.

“We’ve used a variety of ET controllers with some success, though these products are still evolving.” (ET refers to evapotranspiration, the rate at which plants lose water through the combined processes of evaporation and transpiration.) Maximum Service also uses MP Rotator nozzles, offered by Hunter Industries. (The MP Rotator is a stream rotor-type nozzle that fits onto a spray sprinkler body.)



Unfortunately, new product technology can only provide the tools for conservation. “It’s hard to prevent the human urge to increase watering every time a client thinks their lawn or plants look too dry or wilted. Educating our clients is an ongoing effort.”

“It’s hard to prevent the human urge to increase watering every time a client thinks their lawn or plants look too dry or wilted. Educating our clients is an ongoing effort.”

Similarly, Maximum Service Landscaping uses a lot of natural stone instead of manufactured products. “We’ve been experimenting with natural lime-based plasters for wall veneers in place of stucco. Unlike stucco that typically needs painting every couple of years, the lime-based plasters get better with age. These higher-end finishes are getting noticed by customers, and the better we get at working with them, the less price is an issue.”

With environmental responsibility in mind, Maximum Service Landscaping stays on top of the

Maximum Service Landscaping also tries to keep drainage water on site whenever possible, storing it in subterranean percolation chambers that ultimately recharge the aquifer. Burns says he’s looking at building cisterns into the landscape for an alternative method of storing run-off, but he’s concerned that the impact of having to displace tons of soil and use electricity to pump the water into the irrigation system may prove self-defeating from an environmental standpoint. ■

**Jon Zertuche of
Certified Lawn &
Landscape in San
Antonio, TX.**

"Our property manager clients like our Service Maintenance Report, which must be signed by both the property manager and our foreman before the crew leaves the property. We want any questions answered right away, before they turn into problems."



Another example of Jon Zertuche's proactive approach is the laptop computer he keeps in his vehicle. "I can prepare proposals and other paperwork on-site right after meeting with the client. They don't have to wait for me to get back to the office, re-sort everything out and get back in touch with them." ■

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Working Smarter – Operations



OUT THE GATE

Six tricks contractors are using to help get crews on the road faster in the morning

Greeter's Table

Consider what happens in the morning when all of your employees arrive. People are walking around looking for tools, each other, etc. Nature Works Landscape Design in Walpole, MA, has found that a greeter's table helps bring some order to the frenzy.

Foremen are seated at the greeter's table. Cell phones are also distributed there. Employees know that when they report to work in the morning, they head right to the greeter's table to get their marching orders for the day and hook up with the rest of their crew. It's a blessing for foremen as well, because they don't have to wander around the yard looking for their guys.

Pull your managers and crew

leaders together to discuss your options before you implement something like a greeter's table. There is no single way to do it, and you have to do what works best for you and your operation.

Melissa Crayford of Greener Grass Systems in Eau Claire, WI, says, "We do a hybrid greeter's table. We have our division managers at their desks, which is fine in our case because we have a very open office format. Then, while we don't have a physical greeter's table in place, each of our foremen are instructed to greet their crewmembers when they arrive in the morning. They punch in, gather what they need for the day, and head out to their trucks."

The key is creating awareness and Standard Work so employees

know exactly what to do when they report to the shop in the morning, and everything flows logically from there.

Yard Crew

For one large Phoenix company employing more than 300 people, having maintenance and installation crews "hand over their keys" to a designated 10-man yard crew every evening has helped boost efficiency. The yard crew inspects trucks and equipment; loads and unloads equipment, tools, materials and waste; performs basic maintenance such as changing oil and sharpening blades, etc. This approach helps crews get on the road faster in the morning because everything is in its place and ready to go when they arrive.

Learn how you can transform your company into a lean, productive and passionate organization that can continue to be competitive for years to come by visiting GreenIndustryPros.com/WorkingSmarter, or call 920-563-1614.



It doesn't have to be a big yard crew, either, so this approach can also work for much smaller companies. "We're doing it at Greener Grass Systems, and it works," Crayford exclaims. "We've tried it a couple of different ways. For awhile we had a full-time mechanic who worked at night. That worked great, but we were missing out on some of his other abilities. Now he splits his time as a mechanic and route supervisor. We've then brought in a college student to help out with basic equipment maintenance."

Gas-em-up breakfasts will also

disappear when you establish a yard crew. "Guys need to come to work prepared now," Crayford says. "We put in a 500-gallon bulk fuel tank in our yard, and figure it is saving us \$350 a week in lost production time (due to the gas-em-up breakfasts)." The yard crew now fuels trucks and equipment in the evening.

Staggered Start Times

Having crews start at different times can help you get them on the road quicker. This is especially true for companies that are pressed for space and deal with bottlenecks.

One drawback is not having your entire workforce there at the same time, potentially resulting in a loss of camaraderie. "We make an effort to bring the entire company together in other ways so this divide doesn't happen," Crayford points out. "For instance, we have a safety breakfast once a month, and a gathering when we recognize our employee of the month."

Communication is also critical. Convey in writing to division managers and crew leaders when their crews are to report to work in the morning and/or when they are to





end the day. It is then their responsibility to communicate this to their crewmembers.

On the Clock

D. Foley Landscape in South Walpole, MA, lights a fire under its crews by posting 2' x 3' digital clocks: one in the scheduling area,

On potential drawback, Crayford points out, is the possibility of creating this sense of being rushed, which can ultimately lead to crews being sloppy or careless. "There's a big difference between being efficient and being hasty," she adds. "Part of making this work means crews get out the gate quick-

"The goal has to be achievable so everyone feels like they really have something to strive for."

— Contractor Melissa Crayford

one in the loading area, and one right by the gate. It's helped create awareness and establish accountability, since goals are set for departure times.

"Our crews are actually asking for something like this," Crayford relates. "Now I just have to go out and find some clocks to buy."

ly, but also have everything they need to complete their work orders."

Incentive Programs

Creating a campaign around the concept of getting crews out by a certain time can be effective. For instance, a battle cry such as "Out the gate by 6:58" creates awareness

and gives crews something to rally around.

Incentives for accomplishing the goal bring it all home. For example, "If we're 'Out the gate by 7:08' for 30 days straight, everybody gets \$30." Jim Paluch of JP Horizons says an Ohio company rewarded its employees by taking them to a Cleveland Indians baseball game when it met its goals. The options are endless, so see what resonates with your employees.

"It has to be a total group effort to make something like this work," Crayford reminds. You always deal with the issue of "is it fair" when a certain crew's shortcomings can negatively affect another crew(s). "I think you have to keep it fun, and the goal has to be achievable so everyone feels like they really have something to strive for."

Positive Peer Pressure

More than a third of landscape contractors say they utilize this tactic—and it is effective. For instance, Crew A doesn't want to be outdone by Crew B. Posting stats helps make everyone aware of what everyone else is accomplishing.

"You have to be very consistent when reporting stats," Crayford says. "If you're doing it weekly, you have to do it weekly, for example. When you're measuring 'out the gate' times, you also want to make sure you're comparing back to the old data when you first started—so crews can see the progress being made and stay motivated." ■

Business Management

Disaster PLANNING

Employee Theft

Try to have more than one person in the office handle finances. Have checking statements mailed to your house and review them. Here are some more tips:

- Have an embezzlement rider on your insurance policy.
- Put safeguards in place for electronic banking such as debit and credit cards.
- Be on the lookout for employee personal issues that can create financial stress such as children of

for risks and offer advice. As your business changes, your coverage needs also change.

Keep your incorporation and legal documentation in order. If you have a huge multi-million-dollar problem, one alternative is to close the company, start over and protect your personal assets.

Video or photograph your office and keep those records off premise so you have a visual of what you own, and can more easily list it for insurance recovery.

to establish relationships with up-and-coming leaders within your customer's organization.

If a key employee is in a sales situation, make sure you have him or her under a non-compete. Unfortunately, non-compete laws vary from state to state, and it is best to have them signed when hired as part of the deal. If you have a key employee who needs to be under a non-compete, you may have to offer some type of carrot of encouragement, or clearly explain the new need for them to sign. There are many parts to non-competes including stealing employees, company property such as customer lists, etc. Call a lawyer.

Managing, developing and keeping key employees is important as you grow. But don't create a sense of entitlement.

employees with medical or legal issues, sudden behavior changes which could be drug-related, gambling problems, etc.

- Have a clear policy regarding employees doing side work or accepting cash for a change order from a customer.

Insurance

Focus on coverage and needs first, then worry about the price. Make sure you have an agent who is familiar with your industry needs and is a practitioner, not just a salesperson. Make sure the agent understands all the little things that can go wrong and checks your coverage. Have him inspect your business

Handling Key Employees

Managing, developing and keeping key employees is important as you grow. But don't create a sense of entitlement. If you have underpaid a key person who thinks you owe them something, or you have made unclear promises, this can create real problems.

If a key employee is going to retire in three to five years, you need to talk with them and begin to build a replacement strategy. Don't be surprised if this never occurred to them. If that key employee manages sales contacts, make sure you have access to their records and a way to follow up that effort. Also, remember that as they age, their contacts may be aging, and they may fail

Data Backups

Don't leave it up to an office person to copy a disc. You may discover that they don't do it every day, and now you've lost three weeks of data. Know how the system works.

Remember, a fire safe will not automatically protect a computer disc because the heat can destroy it. If you have a tape drive or other system, restore it to make sure it works.

If salespeople or estimators keep information off site, what happens to your data and info if they leave? Don't allow such uncontrolled access.

Make the system automatic so an employee does not have to remember to back it up. Consider an off-site company that backs up off site during off hours. ■

Are You Ready for STIHL at GIE+EXPO 2010?

GIE+EXPO



Kentucky Exposition Center
Louisville, KY
www.gie-expo.com

PLANET's Green Industry Conference (GIC) is a one-of-a-kind program designed to focus on education and networking that will advance your business. Intensive sessions and workshops are combined with opportunities to engage in a personal dialogue with leading industry, government, consumer, and academic experts. GIC will bring attendees up to date on all the latest topics, tips, techniques, and technology guaranteed to keep green industry company owners, managers, supervisors, and employees on the cutting edge of business practices.

Grow Your Business with Tree Care

Mark Chisholm

Thursday, October 28 • 2:00 – 3:30 p.m.

Register: www.landcarenetwork.org

Explore the ins and outs of working with other green industry professionals in your community to expand your offerings for a win-win combination. What types of work can landscape contractors do from the ground and when do you need a trained climbing professional?

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Mark Chisholm is a three-time International Tree Climbing Champion and is certified by the state of New Jersey and the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). As a third-generation arborist, Chisholm conducts educational seminars nationwide on behalf of STIHL Inc. Learn more about Mark at treebuzz.com



PRO Magazine Pros in Excellence Awards

Sponsored by Ariens, STIHL and GIE+EXPO, the PRO Magazine Pros in Excellence Awards recognize landscape contractors who are successfully growing their businesses with professionalism and innovation. The two winning landscape contractors will be announced at GIE+EXPO and featured in the November/December issue of PRO Magazine. Visit greenindustrypros.com for more information.



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STIHL®

Production

HOW TO Know if You Have the Right Team

Building the perfect team starts with measuring each employee's performance. Here's how to get that process started.

It's easy to understand the impact incorrectly measuring a job can have on production—as wasted materials, time and labor speak directly to the bottom line. The same is true when you incorrectly measure (or do not measure at all) the job performance, skill capacity and productivity of your production employees.

Metrics, which are quantitative goals assigned to individuals

benefits—remain constant.

You might experience turnover in the beginning, perhaps losing some of your most senior, dedicated staff who aren't used to this way of life. You will have to share at least some financial information. You will have to pull out of the day-to-day operations and move away from micromanagement. Your employees will take on more responsibility as all of you start analyzing data.

- You will see your efficiency level increase dramatically
- In some cases you will be able to do the same revenue—with half the overhead

Measuring Performance by Department

First and foremost, you cannot begin to define the measures until you have figured out what will affect the performance of the business as a whole, such as:

- Sales volume
- Gross margin
- Net profit
- Customer satisfaction

Then you have to determine what performance benchmark each department has to meet to achieve the goal. These departmental benchmarks then are drilled down to reflect each individual's role. Employ no more than three or four metrics per department because anything beyond this can be unmanageable. It may take a couple months of scrutinizing your recent production and financial history to determine your benchmarks, and keep in mind that a consultant can be a big help.

Your employees will take on more responsibility as all of you start analyzing data.

and company departments, give you the information to make job performance evaluations that are effective and consistent across the board. Metrics are all about tying performance to a standard that can be documented and measured. Some contractors who take this approach use sophisticated software and technology to calculate the data, while others rely on handwritten logs and verbal reports. Despite these differences, the stumbling blocks—and

Managers will have to work hard to reward people for what they do correctly rather than just telling employees what they do wrong.

But getting past the stumbling blocks will lead to great benefits:

- Introducing job performance metrics will weed out the under-performing employees and leave you with only the cream of the crop
- You will see company morale boosted

High-Performance Metrics

- > **Leads per month** – determines how good business will be in three months
- > **Gross profit per month** – shows how much is actually being produced and how productive each project manager is
- > **Customer satisfaction** – company must have high customer satisfaction scores for employees to receive their bonuses
- > **Attitude** – in addition to peer interaction, this is measured via a telephone interview conducted by office staff with the client after each project
- > **Gross margin** – set your margin for each aspect of your business and make sure it is met
- > **Job delivery** – On budget and on time, 100% of the time
- > **Customer satisfaction** – the company must survey and review feedback to determine if your target has been met
- > **Job profitability** – you must meet your target gross profits for each division
- > **School rules** – timeliness, appearance, honesty and values, as measured through observation by co-workers, notes in daily logs and the customer sign-off at the end of the job

Operations managers must input their weekly performance numbers on scorecards stored on the company's computer. The scorecards can be formatted Excel forms, so employees get real-time calculations with ratios that show where they stand based on monthly, quarterly and annual goals set forth during planning sessions. The overall company numbers are presented at a weekly staff meeting.

The scorecards can be accessed

by anyone in the company, a crucial facet of a complete open-book management style. Although open-book management is not necessary for job performance measures to be fully effective, the data must come directly from the field. Opening the books can ensure that the supplied data is valid because employees can spot check one another. In addition, showing employees where the company stands gives them a stake in the outcome and helps them under-

stand how their individual actions shape the entire unit.

It may take up to one year for the metrics to transition fully into the company. It's crucial for you to look at this as an ongoing process. Measures can change, become irrelevant or simply fail to give the information sought, especially in the face of growth or a shift in goals.

Measuring Performance by Employee

Owners and managers need to analyze weekly job performance on all levels—and then make relevant notes in each individual's performance file. The fallout will almost be immediate.

Some employees will not do well with the changes; especially those who've been with the company for a long time. But the rest of the crew that embraces the new system will prove to be very valuable and productive. They feel like you're investing time in them. They will step up.

Investing in employees is imperative to helping them adjust to the job performance microscope. It is sometimes necessary to hold bimonthly half-day workshops led by an outside consultant, covering topics such as embracing change, synergy team building and conflict resolution in order to put your staff at ease.

You need to focus more on non-monetary perks, such as giving MVP awards and recognizing each employee's important life events.



This can be done at your weekly or monthly staff meeting. Coupled with these things, the increased frequency of performance reviews has taken away the trepidation associated with the process, making them ideal times to talk about the work rather than just raises.

If you don't give employees information to understand what the metrics mean, it's hard to hold them accountable.

In addition, good-natured peer pressure has helped reinforce the team atmosphere. Mentoring, which is pairing a high performer with someone who might be lagging, is a great way to increase productivity.

Act on the Results

You should review departmental metric summary reports, provided to you by each department manager, on a weekly basis. Then, about every three months, you should re-evaluate each of the metrics and potentially redefine some of them based on the

data you're analyzing. Be sure to set aside time to do this.

Likewise, be sure to share the information with your crews. Many business owners struggle with the notion of giving financial information to employees. Would they understand it? Would they

believe the information or think that no matter what the boss says, he's really getting more money than he's admitting? Regardless, if you don't give employees information to understand what the metrics mean, it's hard to hold them accountable. Plus, it's detrimental to job performance. So you may need to remove yourself from daily functions of the business, open your books and close your mouth.

If you trust your employees to walk onto someone's home or business property unsupervised, you

should be able to show them basic mathematics and tell them this is how their job performance is rated. The fear of doing so could hold your company back for years. To your surprise, you will find that there are people who actually want to meet those goals, and the workers will start sharing helpful information with management.

You cannot hold employees to a higher level of accountability and then fail to follow through on honoring their needs or negate their influence when they expect changes to be made. On the other hand, be ready to act when an employee fails to meet goals. There has to be a system in place to deal with under-performers. In companies I have been involved with, employees were given two warnings, one written and one verbal, and an offer to undergo training to help them improve their scores. Termination is not the immediate option, but the workers understand that if they don't continually meet the goals, they will be looking for another job.



Good employees will give this system a shot, but if you are not consistent and don't follow up the information with action, you'll lose them. Sometimes it's just a matter of people not being trained well.

Metrics Should Inspire, not Dishearten

Employees have three options: exceed, meet or fail to reach expectations. If you're not careful, such strict conditions can breed a culture

of negativity and fear within your company.

It is necessary to maintain a human element if you switch your company to metrics. Even though metrics aim to remove subjectivity from the evaluation process, they can turn evaluations into tough, sometimes disheartening conversations. Managers must find a way to lighten up the workplace.

Sometimes it's as easy as playing a simple game. Quarterly goals

are highlighted in elaborate display cases within each department. A payout is assigned to each metric. If workers meet or exceed those numbers, the entire company gets a bonus—and every employee gets the same bonus. If the company meets the top end of its goals each quarter, each employee can earn a designated dollar sum in bonuses annually.

With the bonus game in place, you do not have to tie the results of job performance evaluations to an employee's salary. Your company can plan parties and events at the end of each quarter to celebrate successes and get revved up for the next quarter. Before metrics, when you were not looking at numbers regularly, these successes (and failures) might have gone unnoticed, and issues would not be addressed as promptly.

The numbers serve as a tool for promoting ethical and equal treatment of employees. No high-performance team functions without respect for its members and confidence in its ability to succeed, both within the group and from managers. In an increasingly competitive job market, giving employees the tools to see unequivocally how they're faring in their positions just might be the right thing to do. ■

Gary Goldman has over 20 years of management experience in the Green Industry. For more information, call 508-652-9771, email gmanaf@msn.com or visit garysgoldman.com.



Business Development

Stand Out in a Crowded Marketplace

Simply having a website is not enough anymore. Here are three things you can do to emerge from the pack online.

Landscape contractors will always battle forces like economic downturns and weak consumer confidence. The good news is that things like this always turn around. What you really need to be wary of is the fact that it's becoming harder and harder to stand out in a crowded marketplace.

In 1970, the average consumer saw 500 advertising messages a day. Fast forward to today and the number is closer to 5,000. Furthermore, the cost of advertising

ing the Internet so my company can stand out during what is an extremely competitive time to be in business?

Consumers Must Find You

"When I go into a new town to meet with a landscape contractor or speak at an event, I like to do an Internet search to see how the local landscape contractors are doing

with their online presence," says Tony Bass. "For example, when I was in Minnesota this past February, I Googled 'landscape contractor St. Paul'. In less than a second, more than 200,000 records popped up."

How can a consumer go through more than 200,000 records? Well, they can't. "What matters is that your listing is in the top 30,"

"What matters is that your listing is in the top 30. More than 90% of the click-throughs come from those first 30 listings."

in newspapers and on the radio has about tripled during this same time period—and most small businesses get significantly fewer leads. What is a landscape contractor to do?

Here's a pretty revealing statistic: 81% of all major purchases begin with an Internet search. Given that fact, you must ask yourself: Is my company really online? Am I really embrac-



This article is based on a March 18, 2010 podcast entitled, "Make Yourself Competitive in a Low-Bid Environment". Visit GreenIndustryPros.com/ProCast to take a listen.

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Bass points out. "More than 90% of the click-throughs come from those first 30 listings."

Get Listed in Directories

Getting back to the St. Paul example, the majority of the top 30 listings were directories, as opposed to links to specific landscape contractor websites. "Popular online directories include the Better Business Bureau, yellowpages.com, yellowbook.com and dexknews.com," Bass says.

Google also offers free business directory listings. This is an essential tool for landscapers who want to stay in the game when it comes to Internet searches. "When I clicked on 'local business results' after I'd searched for 'landscape contrac-

tor St. Paul', the number of links dropped from more than 200,000 to just over 4,000," Bass relates.

Specifically Describe What You Do

"Here's where the rubber meets the road," Bass continues. "You need to be very specific with the words you use in your directory listings, not to mention your website. I typed in the term 'paver patio St. Paul'. This time around 30,000 records came back. When I clicked on 'local business results' only, the results were narrowed to 160."

The contractors with information-rich content in their listings were the ones who were at the top of that 160-record list. These contractors included text about paver patios.

"Make sure you write specifically about the services you offer and products you sell," Bass hammers home. It would be a shame if a great hardscape installation contractor lost out on a potential lead because he simply wrote that he offered hardscaping, without specifically citing things like paver patios and/or retaining walls.

Post Videos

Taking the Google search yet one step further, video is a great way for landscape contractors to emerge from the pack. "When I first clicked on the video tab in Google before searching for 'landscape contractor St. Paul', only 30 records came back," Bass says. In other words, at least in the St. Paul, MN, market, there are

hundreds of thousands of listings for landscape contractors, but only 30 that are videos. "What an opportunity this presents for contractors to stand out," Bass adds.

You've all heard of You Tube. It's free, so feel free to use it. And for less than \$100 you can get a decent video camera.

You can also post video to your Facebook page. If you don't have a Facebook page for your business, set one up; it's another free tool for you to use.

You don't have to be the biggest landscape company in your market with a multi-million-dollar advertising budget to do some creative, powerful things on the Internet that will help your company stand out. Just make your mind up to do it—and get started right away. ■

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@superlawntucks.com.



Keyword Tool

QUICK TIP: Start assembling a list of popular keyword search phrases that consumers are using today, such as paver patio, tree trimming, lawn maintenance, landscape design, etc. Visit seobook.com, create a free account, click on "tools" and then click on the logo for the keyword tool.



What is Your Internet Marketing IQ?

Answer these questions and divide the number of yes's by 20.

You need at least 60% to pass. (Courtesy of Tony Bass and Super Lawn Trucks.)

1. We have a URL (web address) registered to match our company name
2. We have published a company website
3. We have registered our company with Google local search
4. We have optimized our website for search engines
(search engine optimization, or SEO – see quick tip on page 23)
5. Our website features a sign-up page to request a quote/info
6. We have an email address database for our existing clients
7. We have developed an e-newsletter to send to existing clients
8. We provide an e-newsletter at least once per month to our email database
9. We can track our e-newsletter to see how many emails were opened
10. We can track the number of click-throughs on links within the e-newsletter
11. We can update our website from our office
12. We have a Press Release and/or News Page on our website that we can update in house
13. We have before and after photos of our work on our website
14. We have a company video on our website
15. We have a YouTube channel for our company with one or more videos published
16. I have set up a Facebook, LinkedIn or Plaxo page for my company
17. I have a blog or Twitter account set up
18. I regularly update my blog, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook or Plaxo page for my company
19. I have published info-rich articles or written and published an e-book on my website
20. I plan, budget and find ways to update my website each year

Facebook Tips



For landscape contractors who are looking to make Facebook a part of their marketing efforts, Green Industry consultant Jeff Korhan offers some tips.

Consider creating a Facebook page for your business, as opposed to a group. “Pages get indexed by Google, where groups do not,” Korhan points out. That means people who search for certain keywords in Google could see your Facebook page come up in the results.

The trick is incorporating the right keywords into your page. Use phrases such as lawn maintenance, land-

scape design, outdoor living and green industry. A handy online tool that will help you identify popular search phrases is tools.seobook.com.

Simply using the right keywords is not enough. You have to **update your page on a consistent basis**. “You must let people know you’re alive,” Korhan stresses. “You also want to add value, not just say, ‘Hey, come check out my website.’ Make an announcement or offer some advice. It’s very simple: If you’re not posting, people won’t be reading.”

You also want to use your Facebook page to **show a personal side**. “Show people who you really are,” Korhan says.

“Talk about your kids, hobbies and causes you support. These days it’s about having a professional presence, but also a social and personal connection with a market.

“Here’s the thing: Everyone is doing good work these days,” Korhan goes on to say. “Everyone is offering competitive prices. So the differentiating factor could be, ‘That Bob is a funny guy,’ or ‘Bob likes to hunt.’ The social element kicks in and differentiates you—and gives consumers a reason to buy from you.” ■

To contact Jeff Korhan and learn more on how to use social media to grow your business, send an email to speaker@truenature.com.

Contractor Profile

By Lisa Danes



DIY Videos Help Ohio Contractor Stand Out

Wildes Lawn & Landscaping has found that online do-it-yourself videos are a cost-effective way to market its services and stand out from the competition.

Tim Wildes of Wildes Lawn & Landscaping in Dayton, OH, has put a lot of consideration into building his website (wildeslawnandlandscaping.com). He's even taken it a step further by working with employees to create do-it-yourself videos just for the site.

Videos Reach and Teach Customers and Prospects

"Videos provide a unique way to reach our clientele that not a lot of companies out there are doing," says Aaron Coontz, design and installation supervisor at Wildes. "A

lot of people want to understand the basics of landscaping, so we started by providing basic tips."

Videos also help those who can handle the small jobs on their own. "We want to be a resource both for people who want to hire a professional landscape company and for those who want to tackle their landscape projects on their own," says Wildes.

Producing the videos doesn't cost much at all. The Wildes team members created them on their own. Topics covered in the videos include:

- Equipment maintenance
- Planting

- Landscape materials advice
- Mowing techniques

More topics are sure to follow as Wildes has received plenty of praise from site viewers on the videos' quality and helpfulness.

"People are shocked when they find out that we did all the work in-house," says Wildes. "We have many good people working for us whose talents go beyond just landscaping."

To see for yourself, check out wildeslawnandlandscaping.com/videos.

A Website is Also an Inexpensive Billboard

"The Internet is becoming more popular, useful and cost-effective than any other form of advertising," explains Wildes. "As a young entrepreneur, I know that it's important for a website to allow people to find out information about our company from any computer at anytime, anywhere."

"A website is like a billboard, always visible and informative, and has dramatically changed how people conduct business," says Lee Sledge, general manager for Wildes Lawn & Landscape. ■



Tim Wildes (left) of Wildes Lawn & Landscaping in Dayton, OH, with design and installation supervisor Aaron Coontz (center) and general manager Lee Sledge (right).

Business Development

By Gregg Wartgow

Worldwide Game Changer

The smallest landscape companies can stand toe-to-toe with the biggest online—if they follow these simple website design rules.

If you're one of the many lawn maintenance or landscape contractors who has yet to develop a company website, or maybe has a site that's not really helping you strengthen your image and/or grow your business, now is the time to revisit some of the basic principles of what a good website should accomplish.

Your home page should focus on one thing: capturing the attention of your prospects while letting them know you have the solution they're looking for.

First Impressions

Your home page should focus on one thing: capturing the attention of your prospects while letting them know you have the solution they're looking for.

That means having a very **prominent, attention-capturing headline or callout** that quickly conveys how a customer will benefit from the services you provide. For example, check out thornton-landscape.com and their use of the phrase, "Get the neighbors talking."

You might also **consider incorporating some kind of offer** that motivates customers to take action

and contact you. A couple examples would be:

- A free lawn analysis and action plan that tells people what they can do to revitalize a tired lawn
- A free design consultation where you'd walk the property with a prospect and offer specific suggestions

- A free guide to help consumers understand how to select a quality landscape contractor
- A sign-up for a periodic email newsletter

While you want your home page to be attention-grabbing, you also want to **keep it simple**. Many small businesses make the mistake of trying to get too fancy, which often makes things overly complicated for visitors, who end up leaving the site before learning anything about the company. Animations, videos, background music, and things of that nature certainly are impressive, but often won't help you land any

additional leads.

What *will* help you land more leads is a website that conveys a highly professional image, has a consistent look and feel, is easy to navigate and draws visitors in.

Definitely **provide an overview of your services** on the home page. More contractors are listing each of their services individually in the main navigation bar. (Visit inout-services.com for an example.)

In addition to your services, it's also important to include a "contact us" tab in the **main nav bar**. Other effective and often-used items include an "about us" tab, a "photo gallery" tab and a "customer testimonials" tab.

Build Confidence

Placing these key components in your main nav bar allows you to keep your home page clean and simple, providing visitors with a quick overview of your company while enticing them to learn more. Then, by clicking on these important tabs you've set in the nav bar, prospects can discover even more about your company.

For instance, by clicking on your services tabs, visitors can learn how each of the services



you provide can benefit them.

Including photos with each service description is helpful. (Visit ndlandscape.com for an example.)

By clicking on the “about us” tab, visitors can get more of the story behind your company and its employees. **Include important milestones and achievements**, such as industry affiliations, certifications, awards, etc. If you’re a celebrity who’s been featured in local or national media, be sure to mention that—it all adds to your credibility. (Visit 2009 Pros in Excellence Award Winner landscapeamerica.com for an example.)

Your “photo gallery” tab can wind up having a big impact on prospects, especially if you incorporate a lot of **before-and-after photos**. And you don’t have to be a landscape installer. If you’re a maintenance-only contractor, take a picture of a property when your crew shows up, then a shot of how the property looks when the crew leaves; beautifully striped and cleanly edged, etc.

Before-and-after photos can work the same way for lawn care contractors. Additionally, showing photos of different types of turf stress and disease, along with descriptions of what they are, how they’re caused and how your services can help, can work wonders.

And when it comes to just words, nothing compares to a strong

customer testimonial, which is why you should have a **“customer testimonials”** tab in your nav bar. Be careful though, because it can’t just be a generic, watered-down, “Boy they were great!” endorsement. Powerful testimonials are very specific, providing details of the situation before, during and after.

Include as many powerful testimonials as possible. If a site visitor doesn’t want to take the time to read them all, that’s fine. But the more there are the more impressive you look—so load them up. When possible, it’s also helpful to include photos, names and cities. Every contractor should have a testimonials collection system built into his business, so hopefully you have plenty already on file.

Lock in that Lead

Likewise, every contractor’s website should have a **mechanism for capturing a visitor’s contact information**. Some contractors simply have their “contact us” tab lead to a page with address, phone, email, etc. Others have the tab open a new email message.

Many contractors have chosen to have their webmaster create a form that at least captures a name and email address. If the customer is asking for some type of analysis or maybe even an estimate, try to cap-

ture a mailing address and phone number, too. Some “contact us” forms ask for all sorts of other information, such as “where did you hear about us?” or “how much money are you looking to spend?”

When building up a customer database, answers to questions like those can be very valuable. But you have to be careful not to scare the customer away, or ask them to fill out so much information that they just say “to heck with it.” Think about what your objective is and ask the bare minimum required to complete the objective.

When you get down to it, the objective is to gain a new sales lead. That’s why you **must have a system in place for following up while a lead is hot**. In most cases, an automated response is acceptable. If the customer has filled out the form and asked for an estimate, you should follow up that automated response with a personal email or phone call.

The landscaping business is still a personal business—one where retention and referrals is the primary engine for sales growth. These days, a professional, user-friendly website is playing an increasingly important role in revving things up. ■



The **BATTLE** Rages On

More clients are demanding that you lower or at least maintain their current prices, but still provide quality service. "This is especially true in the commercial bidding market," says Bill Horn of Terracare Associates in Martinez, CA. Horn says that if you draw a line in the sand and say, "This is our price and we will not go lower," you'll probably get left behind. You have to adjust to the market.

Cut Costs, Not Corners

Find ways to cut costs so you can hold prices in line without watching your margins erode too

severely. By reducing their own costs and lowering prices where possible, Texas-based Native Land Design has been able to hang onto most of its customers. "I strongly believe that we know our cost structure and manage our expenses with the best of them," says CEO Ben Collinsworth.

Get more productive in the field. Horn says his company is evaluating crew performance on each and every jobsite—from the time employees jump out of the truck until they jump back in.

"Don't let your crews fall into ruts," Horn says. "One guy grabs this

while the other grabs that, and off they go, whether the property needs it or not. That's not good enough anymore. We're altering schedules and identifying what clients want done month to month, week to week—then using our personnel in the right places."

Employees with less experience could do the mowing, for example. Horn says it's often the guy with the most seniority who operates the zero-turn. But it should be the other way around. "The lesser-experienced employee should do the mowing so the foreman can spend his time touring around the property doing detail

How to overcome the tidal wave of low-bidders and other pricing pressures

work, identifying what else needs to be done,” Horn suggests. (Note: Ensure that employees receive proper mower operation training.)

Smaller crews have helped many contractors improve productivity. “We stick with two- or three-man crews,” Horn shares. Bigger crews can result in higher levels of lost time due to confusion and reduced personal accountability. Small crews, on the other hand, must find a way to be super-efficient.

If it doesn’t add value for the customer, see if you can eliminate it. Take a look at every single aspect of how you conduct business, Horn advises, from the time you open the doors in the morning until you and your crews go home at night. “If we’re doing things that don’t add value for our clients, we’re seeking to eliminate them,” he relates.

Don’t Assume Anything

Treat each bid situation and/or client as if it were the only one you’ve ever had. Just because you’ve always done something a certain way does not mean you need to continue doing it that way—especially if a given client doesn’t care.

Find out exactly what the client wants. If you include something in your proposal that the client doesn’t really want, your prices are probably going to exceed what the client is looking to spend.

Pruning is a good example. “If we’re pruning all the shrubs on a property six times a year because that’s what we’ve always done, we

must find out if the client would be just as happy with three times a year,” Horn explains.

Stay True to Your Core Values

Quality is still important, so as a company you’ll have to decide which concessions you’ll be willing to make. While it’s important to find out exactly what the customer wants, it’s also important to guard against seeing your reputation head south for doing less than spectacular work. “Sit down as a company and define your expectations up front,” Horn advises.

Your portfolio and customer referrals will still work overtime for you, even in a tough economy. Back down in Texas, this has been the case for Native Land Design. “Price has seemed to be king in many negotiations lately, but in those instances where price has been relatively flat among bidders, our book of work and client recommendations have meant much more than a slick presentation,” Collinsworth relates.

There may be work you do not want to pursue—especially in those instances where price clearly is king and quality has seemingly gone out the window. For Doug Robbins of Robbins Landscaping in Richmond, VA, a narrow focus has been key to his maintenance division’s growth.

“We work mainly in high-end residential,” tells Robbins, a 2008 Pros in Excellence Award winner. “We install a homeowner’s landscape, then handle the ongoing

property management. We’re strong in certain neighborhoods where our trucks are seen all the time. Sure, we’ve had some customers who’ve lost their jobs and subsequently cancelled or cut back on their service, but it hasn’t been too bad.”

Offering options has also been key for Robbins Landscaping. “We don’t separate our property management services and allow customers to choose one by one,” Robbins points out. “But we do offer three different options. That said, we typically shy away from customers who just want basic mowing. We take a holistic approach to property management—and most of our clients want the full-service package, which includes mowing, leaf cleanup, irrigation service and turf care.”

Become a Star Salesman

Targeting the right customers, offering options, listening to client needs and wants ... all marks of a great salesman. And that’s exactly what landscape contractors need to be in the new economy.

“We’ve invested heavily in business development,” Horn says. “You have to in order to set yourself apart and grow. Five years ago we didn’t have any business development personnel; our supervisors and account managers did all the selling.

“We create sophisticated presentations tailored to the individual client’s specific needs,” Horn continues. “Large corporate clients definitely need a good PowerPoint presentation and glossy brochure. A

\$300/month client probably doesn't need all that, but still needs a professional presentation, and certainly the time to sit down and talk about their expectations."

"Listening to what the client is saying and turning it into what they want is key," Robbins reminds. "After that initial meeting and presentation, if we can come back with what they asked for, and give them a few options, we're almost there."

Be Honest, Remain Patient

Honesty is still more important than anything—even in today's cut-throat marketplace.

"We simply try to be genuine in our presentations," Collinsworth relates. "We don't want to promise something we can't deliver, and we want to be honest about our own imperfections. This approach is difficult; it takes a great deal of belief in your own body of work. But when done well, this approach can inspire clients to really think about what they're looking for in a long-term vendor."

It's also important to remain patient. "Our clients are getting smarter every year, and are tired of the over-promising and under-delivering that is rampant in our commercial industry," Collinsworth tells. "Anyone can promise something, but only a few can actually deliver. Our clients are seeing through those promising the world by checking references, driving properties of similar scope, and having conversations with existing clients to see if the

Calling Out Competitors

The first thing to do is walk the property with the prospect, pointing out the deviations to spec.

Ask if the prospect would like you to bid the services the way they are currently being provided by your competitor, or according to the specs provided in the RFP.

Make sure to point out that performing the services according to spec will be considerably more expensive, but also state that should the prospect have a budget limitation, you would be happy to design a program specifically to his/her needs.

If a site walk with the prospect isn't possible, go ahead and walk the site yourself. Bring a camera so you can photograph the deviations from spec.

Point out the discrepancies (with photos) in your proposal. Include a price for duplicating the current service level, plus a proposed price for the specified service level. Include a reminder that should budget be an issue, you would be happy to work with the client.

Never criticize a competitor because there is always collateral damage. Simply present your own attributes. When done well, you will always outsell the competition.

Special thanks to consultant Frank Ross for offering this insight. For more information, email frank.ross@rosspayne.com or call (847) 381-8939.



company can really do what it says it's going to do."

When the economy comes back, customer expectations likely will, too. "Contractors who've been blowing below the cost of quality work to make up for lost revenue are creating a recipe for disaster," Collinsworth says. "Many of these same contracts will be up for bid again soon. I don't think these contractors stand much of a chance in the renewal process when clients value experience and quality work over minor increases in service fees."

Robbins sees things the same way, which is why he's toying with

the idea of pursuing more commercial maintenance business in coming years. "We're looking at smaller commercial properties that are closely held, such as doctor's offices and apartment buildings," Robbins explains. "We're hearing customers talk about how tired they are of the poor work their current contractor has been providing. They're willing to pay a little bit more for better service again."

"We bid work to make a fair margin—and give the property what it deserves and the client what he or she expects," Collinsworth offers as a parting thought. "This is the best approach in any economy." ■



*Jonathan Souers
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Cornerstone Solutions Group
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