

Contractor Success Guide

cygnus

A supplement to

PRO
Business success for landscape professionals

A landscaper wearing a white cap, safety glasses, a dark hoodie, and blue jeans is using a STIHL backpack blower to clear a sidewalk. The blower is orange and white with 'STIHL' written on the side. The background features a dense green hedge and a flower bed with yellow and purple flowers.

**Profitably
growing your
company**

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STIHL®

Service Differentiation is a Key to Success

Dear Landscape Professional,

It is a wise person that seeks to learn from others. You, the landscape professionals, have expressed a need for knowledge and programs to improve and expand your business. The publishers of *PRO* magazine heard your request to receive information and advice targeted specifically at your operations, and on behalf of STIHL, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the pages of this inaugural issue of the *Contractor Success Guide*. I trust that you will find the contents beneficial much as you have with articles in *PRO* magazine.



At STIHL, service is at the core of our business strategy, and so I found the theme of this first issue of the *Contractor Success Guide* particularly interesting. Whether it is *PRO* magazine producing a supplement for landscape professionals, STIHL adding a new line of low-emission backpack blowers, or a landscape professional offering tree care service, determining how to set yourself apart from your competitors is a key to success.

While today's customers are better educated and more affluent than ever before, they are also more demanding. You experience that every day in your companies and so do we. "Good enough" just doesn't cut it anymore.

Are you ready to meet these challenges in '07? STIHL is.

My best wishes to you and yours for a successful 2007,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Fred J. Whyte".

Fred J. Whyte
President
STIHL Incorporated

Bob Warde, editor



Another tool to help you build your business

Welcome to the *Contractor Success Guide*. This latest tool from *PRO Magazine* is designed to provide you with a great deal of information about one topic, which is “How to profitably grow your business” in this inaugural edition.

The *Contractor Success Guide* is modeled after a version that has been distributed with our sister publication for outdoor power equipment dealers, *Yard & Garden*. After seeing how much the readers of that magazine came to rely on the Success Guide, it only made sense to offer one to the readers of *PRO*.

Thankfully, industry leader Stihl Inc. agrees. They, too, have come to appreciate how the readers of *Yard & Garden* have come to seek their Success Guide. They’ve demonstrated that support by sponsoring your Success Guide, having sponsored the dealer version for the past six years or so. Helping your business to stay profitable and thrive is the goal of this publication and Stihl is glad to help.

The benefits of the *Contractor Success Guide* include:

- It’s separate from the magazine, making it easy to collect, store and refer to whenever a challenge covered here presents itself.
- It covers one theme. In this case, how best to profitably grow your business. Want to brainstorm? Refer to the *Contractor Success Guide*.
- As new editions are published twice each year, the series becomes a library of information from which to glean ideas. In fact, we still get requests from readers for certain volume numbers they’re missing from their collections.

Enjoy this premiere issue. And don’t forget to save it! **PRO**

Contents

Should you add services?

The decision may seem easy, but it’s not a slam dunk. 4

How to research an opportunity

Knowledge is power. Take these steps to find out if you’re on the right track. 6

Tree care services as a profit center

The sector is ranked as one of the top five for growth. 10

Overcoming obstacles to your company’s growth

Know the risks of growing your business and get a plan in place before you move ahead. 12

Vision quest

Company adjusts its strategy after a bout of explosive growth. . . 20

Growing with opportunity

As sales soared, this contractor made sure his business was poised to accommodate. 24

A family’s business

Alan Skoog and his family have worked for more than 37 years to grow their company in two rural Midwestern towns. 26

Making the cut

Landscape contractors are generating revenue by adding hardscape services to their offering. 30



Page 6



Page 12



Page 30

Growing your company



Should you add services?

The decision may seem like an easy one, but it's not a slam dunk. Some analysis and discussion are in order as sometimes less is more.

By Bob Warde

You want to grow your business, yet you're not sure how. Should you take on another service line? If so, what should that be: Snowplowing? Irrigation? Hardscapes? When considering all the choices, what's the best way to figure out which opportunity will take you to your next level? Can you grow without adding services at all?

"Most people tend to dive into things without thinking about how it fits in with their other businesses, how does it fit in with the skill set of the personnel? This is, I think, one of the biggest problems we run into. People

don't actually think about whether they have the expertise in a new area to successfully estimate it and make money," says Dickran Babigian, a former landscape contractor and now a consultant with Navix, Inc.

Dickran says that contractors often only consider new products and services from a revenue standpoint, but they don't think of it from a profitability standpoint.

"That can be really dangerous. Just because you bring in \$1 of revenue, doesn't mean you only spent \$1 to produce it. Normally, if you brought in \$1, I'm hoping you're left with 40 cents in gross margin or profit."

Often contractors will go into new ventures and, for every \$1 they bring in, they lose \$10, according to Dickran. Once you consider the marketing effort that it takes to launch it, and you really consider all the people it's going to take to execute, and all the other things it's going to take to get the thing done, will you really recover your cost?

Do some homework

Dickran says the main roadblock to success is the fact that the new venture isn't thought through. "Contractors tend to jump in and say it's complimentary to what they do." He recalls a

client who added a dumpster service to his landscape offerings. After he got into it, he found that, maybe contractors do construction work and maybe people do need dumpsters, but the landscaper is coming in last and not when they need the dumpster for a long period of time. It really wasn't the natural fit he thought it was going to be. In addition, it was expensive to purchase the equipment and real expensive to promote, since it wasn't enough to add the service to existing marketing materials, an important part of the evaluation process, Dickran says.

For Alan Skoog (pronounced Sk-oh-g), owner of Skoog Landscape & Design in Chadwick and Sterling, Illinois, adding services has been an important part of his company's history. Founding the company in 1970, Alan hired a consultant who helped him set up processes and accounting systems, including a chart of accounts to help him track sales through the profit center concept. (See "A family's business" on page 12.) "By having

this chart of accounts, we strive to have background and data that we can use to somehow plug into what-if situations to see if this is going to be a profitable enterprise or not, as best we can determine," Alan says.

As he takes out a two-inch-thick binder full of brochures, calculations and other research, he says "This is the amount of work I did to decide whether I should buy the lawn care business or not. When we're spending sizable amounts of money, then we put a lot of time into creating scenarios and other research."

Some may not work

Not all opportunities pass muster. "I had binders of research for two opportunities: swimming pool installation and parking lot cleanups. We did a lot of study and decided not to move ahead because I couldn't get the numbers to work," Alan says.

Alan and his son, Andy, have also added services by buying businesses. For example,

in 1992, the family bought a retail nursery and landscaping business in Sterling, Illinois. They closed the nursery and retained the landscape business. As part of that

acquisition, they received the Bomanite stamped concrete franchise and began offering the service. In 1998, they bought a lawn care business and added those services. Regardless of whether a service is added or acquired, it is still heavily scrutinized.

"In some ways, an acquisition is a bit easier. At least there are numbers. The seller can tell you they have so many customers and how much they pay for the service. In theory, that's a lot easier than something started from scratch," Says Andy.

He recalls that even after they examined the lawn care company and moved forward with the purchase, they found a

discrepancy with some of the clients' lawns. "We found out that they did have a lot of lawns, but many of them were measured wrong and were larger than what

"Just because you bring in \$1 of revenue, doesn't mean you only spent \$1 to produce it. Normally, if you brought in \$1, I'm hoping you're left with 40 cents in gross ... profit."

they were sold at. We serviced them until the contract was up, then re-priced them and many were lost. Apparently they had some sales guys who were shooting for numbers and not profitability. You can get sales all day long, but you have to make money, too," Andy recalls.

Who will do it?

Another big question to be answered is who is going to champion the effort within the company, according to Dickran. "You have to consider whether this person has the time to do this new business."

Often the decision is whether to grow the business or remain medium sized. That

Growing your company

HOW TO RESEARCH AN OPPORTUNITY

When considering whether to add a product or service, knowledge is power. Take these steps to find out if you're on the right track:

Consider your customers

The easiest way to grow a new opportunity is to sell it to your existing customers. Poll them to find out if they're interested and when they might buy.

Ask your prospects

As you're out selling, tell prospects that you're considering the service and if they would be interested. If the response is positive, move forward.

Educate yourself

Talk to as many contractors who have successfully offered the service as possible. Find a mentor to help you see if the opportunity is really what it looks like. Is it as good as you think it is?



Bounce ideas off of people

Your staff. Your accountant and others who are in business are a great place to start. They may think of things to explore – both positive and negative – that you didn't think of. You're almost guaranteed to have a better outcome if you do this.

Put together a mini business plan

If your research so far has been positive, create your plan. Consider

who will do what, on what timetable and list your goals and how you'll get there.

Go for it

If your add-on idea garners good feedback, the potential challenges and pitfalls have been explored, you know who is going to do the work and the numbers check out, do it! **PRO**

was the fork that Lee Buffington came to a couple of years ago. His company, Turf Tamer, in Fort Payne, Alabama, had reached the point where he was maxed out leading it alone. “We reached that stage that most companies do, where at about \$500,000 as a one-man operator, you can’t do much more. You have to decide whether you’re going to stay at that level or really make it go, expand your horizons and take it farther.”

Lee decided to take it farther. After growing too quickly, he cut his workforce in half and worked more diligently from a plan. He has added key personnel, including a landscape designer, operations manager, crew supervisors and an office manager. He has also refocused the business toward high-end home sites while shoring up its traditional maintenance division. “We’ve got a little more time under our belts and we’re trying to build slowly so that we don’t get too far past what we can handle,” Lee says. Turf Tamers has grown to about \$1.6

million since redirecting its energies.

Without considering how the new service is going to impact personnel, you may be heading for disaster, according to Dickran. Often contractors will rush into a new line of business without considering who is going to execute it for them. They also need to consider their role. “Often they believe they’re there to think about it and tell someone to go do it. They don’t see themselves as the ones who will create the marketing material, set the pricing and come up with ways to track it in accounting and develop the systems and paperwork to make it go,” he says.

The advice is even more important when dealing with technical services that require specialized personnel. “If it’s a technical thing that you’re doing and you don’t have the technical expertise, it will end badly. Sometimes we over simplify what we’re doing. When you analyze all of the steps involved in successful delivery of that product or service,

TAKEAWAYS

BEFORE OFFERING NEW SERVICES, ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

DOES IT TAKE A HIGH SKILL LEVEL?

- If it does, and your people aren’t doing it that often, it’s hard to see the competitive advantage needed in delivering the service. If you don’t have an advantage, you’ve got to work it hard with a payoff of two or three years down the road.

DOES IT FIT IN YOUR EXISTING MARKETING MATERIAL?

- Is it truly a bolt-on, add-on service or is it something that takes a lot of work? Including the new service in your current program reduces cost and simplifies the marketing effort, increasing your chance for success.

DO CURRENT CUSTOMERS WANT IT?

- Consider who your customers are and do they want the new service? You may think so, but you need to poll them to discover if they will actually buy the new offering. (See “How to research an opportunity” on page XX.)

DO YOU AT LEAST HAVE ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE?

- It’s a minimum a contractor should do. For many owners, it’s easy. While you’re out selling, ask 50 people if they’re interested and when they’d want it. This will be the first step and the basis for whether you move forward or not.

WHO’LL BE THE IN-HOUSE CHAMPION AND WHO WILL MANAGE HIM?

- Ask these people if they have the time to perform additional work. Once these people are identified, ask them if they are interested in the next step. Include them in research so that, together, you can spot potential challenges and opportunities and act as a sounding board for each other. Set goals and then create a plan to attain those goals.

HAVE I CREATED BENCHMARKS?

- Commit in writing what you’re willing to put in and what you hope to get out so you can make an honest assessment of how you’re progressing toward that goal.

DO I UNDERSTAND MY FIXED COSTS?

- If you don’t keep your guys on in the winter, for example, don’t include that in your analysis. The first thing to consider is why you want to get into this in the first place. Don’t try to do too many things with too few resources. **PRO**

Growing your company



you may find that you're able to do certain aspects, but there may be other areas in which you'll be woefully short. Do you want to put a great client at risk by trying to get in with them on something else, then not performing up to your high standard? I ask my clients that all the time," Dickran advises.

Are you bored?

One dynamic Dickran has seen relatively often is entrepreneurial

boredom. At times, owners get tired of what they're doing and believe that adding another

service is going to bring some excitement back when really it just ends up bringing aggravation.

"Some of my clients tell me they go do these things because it's something new and exciting and they want to

go build something new. That's their rationale for doing it. It's exciting so they go do it. It's not that

it made a lot of financial sense, but they thought it looked good and they had what I would call this romantic view of the idea and what it would be like," Dickran says, adding, "Then you start 'dating' this company

you're trying to start and you find out it's not a bed of roses. You find out it's not as easy as you thought and you didn't consider as many things as you should have and you have to go back and ask, 'Does this fit into what I do already?'"

Ultimately, Dickran says such efforts are a distraction from your core business. He calls it "diluting your strength" and recommends owners ask themselves, "If I go into this line, am I really offering added value or am I just diluting my strength?" Often, he says, adding another product or service line appears to be an easy answer, but it's definitely not easier.

To be truly successful adding services, it ought to be something that is really complimentary to what you're already doing,

stresses Dickran. "Maybe it's something you add in a time of year when you're not real busy. It could be winter work or it could be things that you do when there's just not a lot of demand for your core offerings at a particular

"Are you looking for something quick? I often recommend to clients that they're better off trying to expand what their good at than to get into a line of business that they're not real good at and that they don't know."

time of year.”

One consideration is how quickly you need to boost revenue. “Are you looking for something quick? I often recommend to clients that they’re better off trying to expand what they’re good at than to get into a line of business that they’re not real good at and that they don’t know. The challenge is that if the guys don’t really know how to do it and the owner doesn’t know how to bid it, there is going to be a lot of expense of time, at a minimum, and you have to consider what you could have been doing with that time if you focused on something that you knew how to do well,” Dickran says.

The ideal opportunity

That’s why an opportunity that can be added to existing marketing materials is ideal. “When I talk to most people, they just hope the phone rings and they’ll respond to it. So the natural inclination to add something instead of developing an advertising and

marketing program to promote their current services, leads them to miss a less costly and easier to implement growth strategy. They can often end up making good money doing that,” he adds.

Dickran says some contractors go too far outside their business model and their ability to deliver the service cost effectively. I think that’s a common place where people fall down, but if you’re already there, it’s a great thing and if you can look at something that you only have to make a nominal investment in and it’s not a huge departure from your current advertising

program, meaning you can advertise to the same exact customer in the same ways, I think it makes huge sense to add services.”

Not forever

If an opportunity doesn’t make sense today, it may next year or beyond. “You may grow your customer base another 40% or 50% and then it would make sense to bring it in house. It’s not that it would never make sense, it’s just that, at the level I see most people at, it just wouldn’t make sense. That’s the value of research. For example, if 5% of your customers are telling you they’re

interested in the new service and the volume isn’t enough, then if you double your core business and the ratio still holds or increases, then at 10% or more it might make sense.”

Many owners are looking for something that will generate big bucks, which is another way to quickly get into trouble. “I think you need to be cautious in going for the big kill. A lot of people like the big numbers. Remember, you can make a lot of small numbers turn out big over time, you just have to have some patience,” he adds. **PRO**



Growing your company

Tree care services as a profit center

Tree and ornamental care sector of the landscape industry is ranked as one of the top five for growth.

Adding tree care services to a professional landscaping business can be a natural fit for financial growth. According to at least one ranking, the tree and ornamental care sector has consistently ranked in the top five fastest growing business segments for contractors.

One advantage of incorporating tree care services is the opportunity to maintain a steady workload throughout varying seasons.

“In many areas, young tree pruning can be scheduled during times when lawn services such as mowing and trimming have

stopped for the season,” said Jim Skiera, associate executive director of the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). “It is also a service that can provide work for key seasonal personnel during off-peak periods.”

Peter Gerstenberger, vice president of safety for the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), agrees.

“By adding tree care services to a seasonal business, the greatest benefit is employee retention,” he said. “Stable employment and diversity has been the leading challenge of the green industry for the last 50 years.”

Adding value

Charles Gonzalez, owner of Tropics North, a full-service landscaping company in south Florida, adds that tree care services can create added value for customers, which translates into stronger client retention.

“We added an arborist division in response to customer demand,” Gonzalez said. “We’ve maintained and grown our

customer base because we are able to provide more complete service offerings.”

What kind of tree care services should you consider?

Young tree pruning that can be accomplished from the ground without the use of ladders, rope or saddle are good options according to ISA. TCIA recommends similar services including fertilization, pesticide application and ornamental tree and shrub care.

“Adding a full-service tree care division can be cost prohibitive. Mature tree pruning, climbing and removal is one of the most hazardous occupations,” said Skiera.

“And, the capital investment and insurance costs are significant for large arborological divisions,” Gerstenberger said.

While Tropics North now offers complete tree care services by certified arborists, Gonzalez said his company started by subcontracting difficult tree work.



“We’ve maintained and grown our customer base because we are able to provide more complete service offerings.”

Subcontracting can be a first step

“Subcontracting can be the first step to establishing an arborist division, he said. “However, it’s important to ensure the tree care professional you work with maintains the same standards of quality as your own company.”

Both ISA and TCIA also suggest partnering with a local arborist and then subcontracting the more complex tree work to that professional.

“This arrangement can be a win-win for both companies,”

Gerstenberger said. “Landscape maintenance companies can benefit from referral revenue without a significant financial investment.”

Eventually, adding more comprehensive tree care services may be an option.

“We ultimately hired a full-time certified arborist because we had a strong safety program in place, there was customer demand for more complex tree care services and we found the right person to fill the position,” Gonzalez said. **PRO**



Where can you learn more about tree care services? Arborist or tree care professional associations are an ideal starting point.

TCIA (www.treecareindustry.org) is an excellent resource for companies seeking to add tree care services to their business plan.

ISA (www.isa-arbor.com) can provide excellent support for training and education. .

Growing your company



Overcoming obstacles to your company's growth

Know the risks of growing your business and get a plan in place before you move ahead.

Most contractors would say they went into business for themselves so they could be their own boss. Some have said they want to have control of their own destiny, and build a company to secure their futures. Others have said building your own company is akin to having a child. You put so much of yourself into it that it is the natural inclination to want to see it grow, prosper, succeed. Almost as if the company becomes a separate entity with a life of its own.

As you nurture that business and begin to reap the fruits of its success, it is only natural to

have the desire to keep building that company to new levels. Even with all its challenges, the market has been full of opportunities. Existing customers want more services. Prospects are waiting to become new customers. The possibilities are seemingly endless. The very nature of a business owner is to keep building that successful business.

But along with all those opportunities, there are many risks. As the potential for expanding sales, services and profits grows, so does the chance of peril. Many contractors know this. You can grow too fast. You can take on new business before your company is ready.

Many times, while taking advantage of the opportunities all around, contractors commit to them before they have the necessary systems, the people, the administration and the management ability in place.

All companies experience some growing pains, even when they are models of efficiency and follow “the perfect plan” as they grow. The best thing to do to minimize the risks involved is to identify what the obstacles to growth are, and to prepare for them.

Here, with the help of an industry expert, we identify some of those obstacles and talk about how you can overcome

them. And we talk with a contractor who took growth on a little too fast and faced the peril all business owners fear. He was lucky in that he realized some of the wrong turns he made in time, and was able to correct the direction his business was going — though not without some temporary injury. He learned from his mistakes, and shares his story with you so that you might avoid them in your business.

Employee management

There are many aspects of managing employees that can get in the way of efficiently managing your business as you try to increase size and profitability. Finding good employees is a constant battle for all contractors. Once you find them, the care and feeding of a good workforce is a full-time job in itself. Training them is just one aspect. You've got to pay a competitive wage and benefit package that will keep them. If that weren't enough, it's up to you to motivate them to stay productive.

Finding and keeping good employees

"There is a shortage of qualified labor," says Drew St. John, confirming the pain all contractors feel at one time or another. Drew is executive vice president of the Symbiot Business Group.

"When I had a landscape business, I could always find the work and the materials. People are the limiting factor. And it's not just getting them, but retaining them that makes it a continual problem," says Drew. He contends that if you don't get this part of the business under control for the most part, you'll never be able to grow to another level. You can't build a company up without a workforce that grows with it. If you have to keep starting from scratch by hiring and training a new team, you won't get the opportunity to grow.

Drew's company, in an effort to help contractors with this difficult management

aspect, launched Team Symbiot. "This is a program to help contractors with their most important asset, their people," says Drew.

"People are the limiting factor. And it's not just getting them, but retaining them that makes it a continual problem."

"We just see this as one area where people need the most help."

Among the services available with Team Symbiot are an H2B program where the workers are trained while still in Mexico, so they arrive ready to work; online training for employees; a national employee benefit program and accessibility to a Human Resources advisor where contractors can get advice on employee issues.

When it comes to

finding good employees, Drew recommends building alliances with local schools and organizations to find a steady stream of young

people with an interest for the field. "Get involved at local schools that have horticultural and landscape classes and programs," says Drew. "And check into your local chapter of FFA (Future Farmers of America). These are great organizations that provide career paths into our industry."

Proper management of managers

Beyond finding and keeping good employees, there is another tricky aspect to employee

TAKEAWAYS

MANAGING PEOPLE IS TRICKY.

Be tough, smart and get help to make sure your workforce grows with you.

CASH IS KING.

Make sure you anticipate what you need and have capital in place to support growth.

SMART MARKETING.

Zero in on your prospects, and market to only them.

Growing your company



Determining what your additional costs will be, and how much additional income you'll require is crucial to your plan.

management that causes many sleepless nights for contractors trying to grow the business. As you grow your team, there comes a point where you can't manage everyone on your own; you must entrust that task to others. Building another layer of management for your company becomes necessary.

Training managers and then properly delegating the right formula of management duties is an area that can

make or break your company, depending on how it's done. Tom Polak of Property Upkeep in Chaska, Minnesota, found this out the hard way.

When his company grew to about \$600,000 in annual sales, he decided that it was time to make installations a separate division and grow that portion of his business. Last winter was spent putting systems and people in place to prepare for the company's new focus. Tom implemented

a new installation/irrigation division and made one of his "best" men the head of that division. "It took a few months to realize the person running the division for me wasn't the right person to take care of it," says Tom. Sales were up, but something didn't compute. "The profit numbers were way down, and I couldn't figure out why we were losing money."

Looking back with the clarity that only 20/20 hindsight can provide, he realized that

he let someone else take too much control over a part of his business, and trusted what this manager told him instead of keeping closer tabs on the new division himself. "Things weren't getting done in a timely manner, and we were losing money on jobs," says Tom. "And expensive mistakes were being made."

It was easy for the manager to mislead Tom on the details, because he didn't have some of the usual management tools to

gauge jobs in progress. “He wasn’t doing the daily and weekly reports,” says Tom. “He wasn’t giving me regular paperwork, arguing that taking the time to fill it out was taking time away from the job. I let him get away with that.” Without regular paperwork, Tom got away from daily job costing. Things quickly got out of hand from there.

He doesn’t blame the manager entirely ... he is the first to admit that it was a lack of management execution that let the small problem become a large one. “I was the boss, but I didn’t act like it,” says Tom. “I wanted to be everyone’s friend. That’s a tough lesson to learn. I look back and I think, why didn’t I say ‘What’s going on?’ I was letting him tell me what to do, when I should have been telling him.”

By mid-summer that year, the numbers gave Tom a wake-up call, and he took action. “On July 19, I fired the manager and his foreman (who he had hand picked). And

we’ve spent the rest of the summer cleaning up all the loose ends they left,” says Tom. “I took an additional \$5,000 hit correcting their mistakes.”

Carefully executing a plan for growth

Tom says the biggest lesson here is that you can have the best plan in the world, but if you don’t execute it properly, it’s not worth the paper it’s printed on. Follow-through is the most important part of the plan.

Over the years, Tom’s had the benefit of advice and training from some very well-reputed industry consultants and programs. “Four or five years ago, we experienced a \$45,000 loss to the bottom line and I realized I needed help managing my business,” says Tom. “I went to an industry consultant’s workshop to learn more about estimating and managing the numbers. We turned that loss around quickly, with a \$60,000 swing in the right direction,



“What is your niche? How do you differentiate yourself? Once you decide, you have to market directly to the customers for that service. You won’t succeed by just throwing a broad net out there trying to catch any and all customers,” says Drew St. John. Often, direct mail is the answer.

bringing us to \$15,000 in the black.”

While he learned much about the components necessary to running a profitable, growing business, unless you continually apply that knowledge with discipline, he says it is a short-term solution at best.

To help in this area, Drew recommends putting yourself into strong networking opportunities, where you can get a continuous stream of advice and support from contractors with the same goals and obstacles. “You can become involved with a company like ours, or join a strong organization like

PLANET,” says Drew. “Your peers know what you’re going through and can tell you how they handled the same situations. You can learn from their experience.”

Lack of capital

According to Drew, the second major obstacle to growth behind employee management is lack of capital. It’s another scenario where the saying, “It costs money to make money” rings true. As you grow, the costs associated with additional headcount, equipment, soliciting new business and proper administration of the growing business can be staggering

continued on page 18



Blake Williamson, founder of Diversified Services Lawn & Garden, and his crew have tackled Union Power's massive 330-acre grounds since the plant opened in 2003.

An Arkansas Powerhouse

The town of El Dorado, Ark. was one of the region's original boomtowns of the 1920s. Settlers came in search of gold. And they found it—black gold. It is now home to one of the country's premier oil refineries; and this tiny Sunbelt community has recently grown to include the Union Power Station, the largest independent power plant in the U.S.

Maintaining Union Power's massive 330-acre grounds is a tall task—one that Blake Williamson, founder of Diversified Services Lawn & Garden, and his crew have tackled since the plant opened in 2003. Williamson's full service grounds maintenance, installation and irrigation firm also managed the plant's six-acre wetland mitigation project, using more than 17,000 wetland plants and creating two, multi-acre ponds.

"The development of this power plant was a huge boon to our local economy and a major undertaking for my crew," Williamson said. "They worked tirelessly to ensure every detail was in place in accordance with strict environmental standards."

His team's hard work paid off. Their outstanding performance on the mitigation project earned the company the contract for the site's ongoing grounds maintenance.

So, how long does it take to service the 2,200-megawatt, state-of-the-art facility that provides power to more than 2 million households?

"More than 300 man hours. My eight-man crew is on the job for five days straight every three weeks," Williamson said.

That means eight- to 10-hour days, carefully mowing and trimming around slopes, storm water drains and intricate power grids.

"Due to the terrain, the project involves a tremendous amount of hand edging and grass trimming," Williamson added. "When you have thousands of feet of storm water drains and retention ponds to maintain, mowers alone can't do the job."

That's why Williamson and his crew rely on the powered STIHL FS 110 trimmer—and a fleet of STIHL equipment including hedge trimmers, edgers, and backpack and handheld blowers to do the job.

"We run our equipment non-stop, seven hours a day," he said. "When temperatures soar to more than 100 degrees in the summer, our crew is still in the field working. We need equipment that can do the same."

For Diversified Services, power and reliability are essential.

"On a job this important, we can't afford down time," Williamson shared. "With the FS 110 my crew notices the trimmer's increased power and reduced vibration. And, my mechanic appreciates the interchangeability of STIHL parts and the ease of maintenance."

"My dealer, Magneto Service & Supply Co., has supplied me with STIHL equipment since I first opened my doors," Williamson said. "For me, when it comes to power and reliability there's nothing like a STIHL."

Williamson and his crew have reaped the rewards of their hard work. Today, Diversified Services Lawn & Garden is a powerhouse in its own right—as one of the largest landscape contractors in the Union County region. It's fitting that his high-energy crew, equipped with the best equipment STIHL has to offer, painstakingly maintains every inch of the sprawling Union Power Station. It all adds up to one powerful performance.



Growing your company

continued from page 15



without the proper capital. And the profits from that growth, even through meticulous management, will take time to make their way to your bottom line.

Tom says determining what your additional costs will be, and how much additional income you'll require is crucial to your plan. "You need to figure out exactly how much in sales you need to make in order to support your plan for growth," says Tom. "And you need to think about every aspect of

growth. For instance, as you grow, you will need more administrative help. Build that into your plan."

Drew believes it is wise to consider consulting with someone who is an expert in these matters. "I can't stress enough how a good financial consultant helps here," says Drew. "People who have done it will tell you that they end up delivering 10 to 20 times what they cost. This is an area where getting some professional direction

can end up saving much in the long run."

While doing the necessary research to figure out exactly what line items to add to your plan for growth, it's a good idea to shop around and find the most cost efficient ways to execute your plan. A good example, according to Drew, is to examine leasing equipment and vehicles versus buying them. Often, this is less of a drain on your capital.

"This is the way to go for many companies, especially smaller

ones," says Drew. "When you lease, the initial investment is minimal, the payments are smaller, and most businesses can write off the payments on their taxes. You always have the option of buying the equipment at the end of the lease." Symbiot offers a program where it will buy the equipment and lease it back to the contractor. There are also many good leasing programs offered by equipment and vehicle manufacturers.

“They increase generic marketing efforts, such as putting out a bigger telephone book ad, and then they wait for the phone to start ringing. That’s a huge mistake.”

Marketing savvy

Drew’s third component on the list of obstacles to growth is a lack of, or a need for, marketing savvy. The marketing aspect of growth should be considered, really, at the first inclinations of how you plan to grow your business. “Everyone says they want to grow,” says Drew. “And then they increase generic marketing efforts, such as putting out a bigger telephone book ad, and then they wait for the phone to start ringing. That’s a huge mistake.”

Instead, Drew says, the first step is to clearly identify what the true customer base is intended to be. He says you have to decide what your company is. “What is your niche? How do you differentiate yourself?” asks Drew. “And then you have to market directly to the customers for that service. You

won’t succeed by just throwing a broad net out there trying to catch any and all customers.”

Drew says to develop a strategic marketing plan that will zero in on the kind of customer you’ve identified. For instance, if you are looking to target the high-end residential customer, then your marketing plan may include sponsorships of certain events, like the symphony orchestra. “The people who attend the symphony are more likely to have the income level your prospects should have to buy the services you want to sell,” says Drew. “Generic advertising methods like the telephone book will give you prospects who buy strictly on price. You don’t want them.”

And now, for the rest of the story ...

Tom Polak didn’t have to share his

story in such a public fashion, by talking with PRO magazine. But he has an attitude that this is a learning experience, and hopes others can learn from it too. The events of that year shook his business a bit, but he is recovering quickly. In spite of the issues he faced, Property Upkeep’s numbers began turning around. “Sales were up about \$47,000 gross for the (following) year,” says Tom. “We had to increase our sales and make them profitable sales after the hit we took. Our net was up \$1,000 or \$2,000. We’re getting there.”

Luckily, Tom has a strong snow business in the winter, with enough contracted business to keep cash flowing even if the snow isn’t flying.

“My game plan now is to finish the year out lean,” says Tom. “And to get my systems set up and work them. I’m going to go through COMPASS training

and go through all my books, my Vander Kooi book and the Moore’s book for budgeting.

“I have to get everything in order, and I have to make some hard choices. I need to decide if I want to continue the landscape side of the business.

To find out more about The Symbiot Business Group, call (801) 307-0730, ext. 1010 / (888) 233-5518 (toll free) or visit symbiot.biz.

If I do, I will set a new budget and stick to it. I’m going to let go of some excess equipment, and consider things like renting instead of buying the equipment we don’t use all the time.” **PRO**

Growing your company



Vision quest

Tennessee company adjusts its strategy after a bout of explosive growth.

By Grant Dunham

Jason Garber and Lonnie Hance Jr. hadn't planned to make a career as entrepreneurs. But a few months after starting their lawn mowing business, the future looked so bright, they had to wear shades.

Leaving another landscape company in 1998, they had originally intended their business to be temporary. When it took off like a rocket — growing to three mowing crews within weeks — they decided to pursue the ideas they'd dreamed up while working for someone else.

They soon learned that rock-

ets have two important characteristics: they're extremely fast, and very hard to steer. Within three years, the company was approaching \$1 million in sales. But it had also veered off course. What had been an exciting ride had suddenly turned scary. It would take months of wrestling with the controls to point the rocketship back in the right direction.

A new look at the market

When they started out, Jason and Lonnie leveraged their experience in operations and management to quickly attract a loyal customer base in maintenance.

"We were able to establish a reputation for quality by striving for perfection on the job site — like double and triple cutting and bagging if needed and exceeding expectations. We also made it a point to reduce downtime and keep up customer satisfaction by carefully maintaining equipment."

Word spread quickly. "For every client we signed up, our quality of work got us five more," he says.

Yet from the beginning they were looking to diversify. They had developed a theory about the Knoxville market while working as maintenance supervisors.



**Lawn & Landscape Professionals/
Envirotexx Inc.**
Knoxville, Tennessee

Owners: Jason Garber, CLP,
Lonnie Hance Jr.,
Kent Manion, CLP

Business founded: 1998

Client mix:

Maintenance: 60% residential; 40% commercial / HOA

Envirotexx: 60% commercial; 40% residential

Business philosophy: Differentiate the company by offering exceptional service and unique services, and cross-promote the maintenance and mulch/erosion control divisions.

They saw opportunity in maintenance, but also a plateau that would limit growth.

The area had become saturated with maintenance companies, which competed for a relatively small customer base with fewer commercial clients than larger metro areas. "I counted 86 maintenance companies in the phone book, and I'd estimate there are

20-25 others not listed," says Jason. "I knew that a company would have to do something different if it wanted to grow past a certain point."

Moving into mulching

Jason and Lonnie saw an opportunity in mulch blowing, as most mulch in the area was being placed by hand. Within a year, they purchased their first machine, a Finn 302 Bark Blower.

They had some success in cross-marketing the mulch blowing service with maintenance, but the service grew quickly when they began subcontracting with other contractors. "It was difficult at first to convince other landscapers that we weren't going to steal their maintenance customers," says Jason, "but once we established that trust it really took off."

They later added two bigger, truck-mounted Finn 908 units (the second in 2004) to handle larger volumes and add terraseeding — a mix of

seed and compost — to the service lineup.

"We wanted to keep the machines running year-round, and the ter-

quickly with little growing pain. But in 2000 the rocket began to spin out of control.

The problems began

"It was difficult at first to convince other landscapers that we weren't going to steal their maintenance customers."

rasedeeding allowed us to pursue new construction sites," says Jason. "It was a pretty big learning curve, but we managed to overcome it pretty quickly with Lonnie in charge."

Big project, big trouble

It was that division of labor — Lonnie in charge of operations and Jason handling the business side — that had enabled the company to expand

when Jason and Lonnie attempted to expand into landscape construction. Persuaded by existing clients, they abruptly decided they wanted to become a full-service company.

Looking back, Jason says they made a rash decision in part because of a desire to please their customers and also because of overconfidence brought on by their early suc-

TAKEAWAYS

STAY EFFICIENT.

- Carefully maintaining equipment can reduce downtime and keep customer satisfaction high.

CAREFULLY EVALUATE OPPORTUNITIES.

- Making rash decisions based on the requests of a few customers can be fatal. If a few customers ask for a new service, poll other customers and prospects to see how big the opportunity really is.

FIND A NEED AND FILL IT.

- Is there something special about the terrain, climate or customer desires in your area? Find a way to meet the need.



Lonnie Hance Jr., Jason Garber and Kent Manion.

cesses. “It started out with customers asking us to do small projects,” he says. “Before long, we were telling ourselves ‘Hey, we can do this. Our name is, after all Lawn and Landscape Professionals.’”

The projects grew larger, culminating two years ago in a \$170,000 monster involving a water feature, pool decking, retaining walls and circular driveway made of pavers.

They completed the project, but not before

burning through three project managers. Jason ended up managing it himself, taking precious time away from his other duties.

“We bit off more than we could chew,” he says. “[Construction] required a completely different mindset and management philosophy.”

Crash course

The construction venture put incredible stress on everyone, including the company itself. Jason’s time and

attention was diverted, and progress toward the company’s vision had ground to a halt.

But looking back, Jason says the experience was a wake-up call — not just about the need to back out of construction, but to look at all aspects of the business. In examining the aftermath, he discovered just how many “little” things had been plastered over in the company’s rapid expansion.

His first step was to increase his busi-

ness knowledge, which he then put to use in creating a formal strategic plan. He also put a lot of effort into sorting out the management structure, which had been built on the fly as the company grew. “We worked on improving job descriptions and verifying everyone’s responsibilities. We looked at time management and found that a lot of tasks were overlapping and even being done twice.”

But the biggest



change Jason made was in his own role. "I'm forcing myself to delegate things I shouldn't be doing — like scheduling and accounting (he's hired full-time office help for these and other tasks). I need to be training myself out of a job. That will never happen, of course, but that's how you have to think about it."

New horizons

With his feet back on the managerial ground and freed from many day-to-day tasks, Jason

has been able to focus more on developing his strategic vision for the company.

Last year, the company purchased a protected territory for the Filtrex erosion control system. Utilizing the Finn 908 Bark Blowers, compost and seed is blown into mesh tubes called "FilterSoxx" which are used among other things as a replacement for silt fences, in stream bank restoration and in building "living walls" for erosion control. The socks eventually photodegrade in sunlight, making the system both environmentally friendly and cost-effective.

Being a new technology in eastern Tennessee, Jason has to overcome some skepticism. But there's tremendous need for the service in the hilly, watery landscapes around Knoxville. He's developed a multimedia presentation and distributed DVDs showcasing the process, and he receives marketing assistance from Filtrex headquarters. Thus far he's secured contracts

from the USDA, county government (which has also officially recognized the Filtrex process), developers, businesses and some of his residential maintenance clients.

Starting to see synergies

Jason is also happy to see synergies developing between his maintenance and mulch/terrace seeding/Filtrex divisions, the latter named Envirotexx Inc., now about equal in sales. He says he's gained maintenance clients through Envirotexx's services, and vice versa. The firm promotes the best maintenance employees into higher-skilled positions on the Envirotexx side.

Jason adds that the maintenance division provides stability and steady cash flow, while the bark blowers offer relatively higher margins, even when services are subbed out.

"I've been putting a great deal of my efforts into Envirotexx, but now we've established the management of it. I'm

finally getting to where I can put more effort into the maintenance side, which I've neglected. There's definitely room for growth there."

Back to the future

Jason and Lonnie are cautiously optimistic about the future, but they won't be putting on shades again anytime soon.

They've brought on board a new minority-share partner, Kent Manion, who's managing the Envirotexx division and a small retail operation for mulch, compost, small equipment and other items in the front side of the office. Jason is working on a long-range marketing plan that capitalizes further on the crossover potential between divisions. It includes re-branding the maintenance division as Envirotexx Turf Care.

"We've got a long way to go yet, but I think we're seeing everything fall into place," says Jason. "Most importantly, we've learned a lot together and we're coming together as a team. It's a great feeling." **PRO**

Growing your company

Growing with opportunity

As sales soared, this contractor made sure his business was poised to accommodate.

Down to Earth Landscape Designs in Raleigh, North Carolina, recently experienced what some would call “healthy growth.” Others would call it “crazy growth.” Owner Ben Case will tell you it is somewhere in between.

Experts recommend no more than 30% growth in a year; Ben claims more like 50% during the recent 12-month period. “I’ve always been cautious of growing too fast,” says Ben. “But a lot of things came together that gave us a big jump in sales in 2003.”

Ben says that, overall, the company handled the growth well. But he also admits there were a few areas of the business that needed to be changed to accommodate the growth and make sure profit stays in line with the increase in revenue. Ben planned a more modest increase for 2004, which allowed time to get systems in place for what is now a bigger business.

Components of growth

One of the major components of the growth in 2003 was that Down to Earth Landscape Design made some key changes in responsibility, which lightened Ben’s load to focus more on the business. First, he hired a full-time designer before the 2003 season, who took a sales focus and brought in lots of new business. “This was a great advantage for me,” says Ben. “It has allowed me to spend less time on the sales aspect, and more time hand-picking and planning the projects we take on. I’ve been able to focus on increasing efficiencies on the jobs we do. It has really paid off.”

Ben was able to further increase his focus when his wife Catherine took over administration duties. “That really took a load off my shoulders,” says Ben. “Not only does it free up a lot more of my time, but it is peace of mind, having someone I can trust working on the books.”

Ben says overall volume grew thanks to some nice, larger projects. More efficiencies were gained by targeting crews, equipment and materials to fewer properties. Streamlining systems on these larger projects allowed Down to Earth to often finish ahead of schedule and reap the benefits of full payment and starting earlier on the next job. “We stayed focused on job costing and job tracking, which helped us keep a close eye on profit during these projects,” says Ben.

None of this would have been possible, according to Ben, without Down to Earth’s unique approach to client satisfaction or the distinctive products and services the company offers.

Creating a niche

Ben says it isn’t just the

Owner Ben Case (second from left) and brother David, who serves as vice president of operations (far left), discuss plans with homeowners.



services offered that distinguish Down to Earth. “It is our creativity, and the solutions we create for people,” says Ben. “We offer options for the customer, which is an important part of the design process. We offer creative solutions and stay within their budget. We guide them along the way with different choices and price points.”

Down to Earth employs a number of degreed, certified professionals, which Ben says makes a difference to the caliber of clientele his company targets. In fact, continuing education is encouraged for all employees. “When they participate, it shows me they are stepping up their commitment to the company,” says Ben. “Education improves employee performance. That helps our company’s success in the long run.”

Raising the bar

Professionalism is something Ben tries to convey in every interaction with customers. Details are important. For instance, they hired a uniform service to improve employee appearance. “The employees really like it, and they look more professional,” says Ben. “I think the employees feel more professional. It changes their demeanor.”

Down to Earth also tries to use technology whenever possible to enhance their professional reputation. “By using e-mail, we

can provide estimates, designs and even billing in a timely manner,” says Ben. “We are always available to clients through our Nextel system. We use PDAs and laptop PCs to accomplish more for the client in the field. Anything that allows us to improve communication and address their needs more quickly gives us the advantage.”

Keys to growth

The key element to cash flow and profit is, of course, getting paid ... and getting paid on time. Ben says one area many contractors put on the back burner when they get busy is billing. It makes a big difference, he says, and adds to your professionalism, when invoices are sent out like clockwork. Clients are more respectful of your due date when you are consistent with your billing. Down to Earth uses both CLIP and Quickbooks software to help keep invoicing efficient.

Hand-in-hand with growing a company is growing the systems and processes that make growth possible, and profitable. Top of the list for Ben and his company is an incremental price increase to supplement the extra administrative costs, a new facility and the new equipment that is needed to support growth. He plans to charge 5-7% more in 2004.

Ben also wants to tackle the issue of design fees. Like

most contractors, Down to Earth charges for the design, then gives the customer a credit if the company gets the job. But charging for the design doesn’t always cover all the time and expense involved in creating it. “We are reviewing the costs and hours involved in creating designs,” says Ben. “That’s a very real cost. We don’t want to lose those dollars.”

The same goes with estimates. Down to Earth charges a consultation fee, which, if it leads to getting the job, is credited in 60 days. Not only does this policy ensure getting paid for time that used to be lost, but Ben says, “The policy helps us pre-qualify our leads. If the first question a prospect asks is, ‘Do you offer free estimates?’ we know it’s a bad sign. They tend to be more serious prospects if they know they have to pay for the estimate.”

A big component of gaining efficiencies, according to Ben, was moving the business to the site of its new facility. “We moved late last year, and we are already starting to see improvements in productivity,” says Ben.

When Ben started this business years ago, he never thought he’d be around \$1 million in revenue and build a new facility on land he can call his own. But, building a great team and an excellent reputation of providing unique solutions was the right mix. **PRO**

Growing your company



A family's business

Alan Skoog and his family have worked for more than 37 years to grow their company in two rural Midwestern towns.

By Bob Warde

Business has changed a lot for Skoog Landscape & Design since Alan Skoog (pronounced Skoh-g) founded it in 1970. Back then, he operated out of a room in his home in Chadwick, Illinois, a town of fewer than 600.

Fresh from a nursery and landscape business that, as Alan says, was a partnership that blew up, he and his wife, Mary Ann, had no money to relocate, so they started their business. Alan knew at the time that he wanted to run his business right – to be a businessperson first and a landscape person second – so he hired a consultant.

The work of Frank Ross, of Ross-Payne and Associates, is still with the company today. Frank helped Alan and Mary Ann set up their systems, including their accounting system and chart of accounts. Mary Ann does all the bookkeeping and maintains those accounts.

From humble beginnings

At the time, Alan had one part-time employee. Later the business grew to two rooms in the family home and then a trailer outside. His offerings consisted of design/build services and plantings. It didn't take long for Alan to start planning for growth. In 1971, he

added hydroseeding, purchasing one of the first hydroseeders in Northwest Illinois. From there, it was a steady expansion of the company's offerings, including irrigation, retaining walls, pavers, stamped concrete, water mains and a Christmas Décor franchise.

Though he had gone with Alan on jobs since he was about four years old, Andy joined the business full time in 1988 after earning his degree in landscape construction from Mississippi State University and summer internships with landscape companies in Florida and Wisconsin.

Now that the trio has been

working together for nearly 20 years, the Skoogs believe they've created a significant competitive advantage with the variety of services they now offer. "A lot of our advantage is that we're design-build. We do very little bid work, so to a certain degree, we can design a landscape without regard to having to find subs, we have most all needed capabilities," Andy says.

It took awhile to acquire or develop the various services, but now the company has been hired to do work all across Northern Illinois and the Midwest, including Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin. "We now offer the full spectrum, whereas before, we had to pull in a concrete guy or an irrigation contractor. Now, we're a one-stop shop. Though not all of our customers use all of our services, we can manage the entire project and provide so much more to our clients," Andy adds.

He adds that homeowners are weary of scheduling more than one contractor, initiating contact and soliciting bids.

"By then, especially those building new homes, people are so frustrated with the whole process. We have a lot of appeal to customers because, by that point, they're so frustrated with building that they're happy to have a one-phone-call place. There's no one in this area that can offer the spectrum of services that we can," he says.

Some luck was involved

Not all of the company's service additions were meticulously planned. Skoog Landscape got involved with water mains, now about 15% of the business when counted with excavation, by accident. After buying the Sterling location in 1992, the Skoogs kept the seller on as an employee. While Alan took a rare fishing vacation, the new employee took a job making a street repair for the local private water company. The move wasn't looked on favorably.

"Alan was really unhappy with us when

we started bidding on street patches, because his thought was that we'd be running around patching all these little 4 x 4-foot holes. He wondered

Alan says.

Alan's apprehension over doing the street patches was alleviated after a two-week rainy patch meant that about

"There's no one in this area that can offer the spectrum of services that we can."

how in the world we could ever make money on that?" Andy says.

It turned out to be a good move because the water company liked the quality of the work so much, it asked Skoog to bid on their water main installation work. "Andy watched the water company crews work and he learned how it was done. We started bidding on projects and have been installing them since,"

all they could do was the patching.

Since the water main installation became such a large part of their business, the Skoogs began investing in heavy equipment including bulldozers, excavators, large trucks and a directional boring machine. They also leverage the equipment by using it for other excavation and installation work.

The Skoogs also

TAKEAWAYS

CONSIDER BEING FULL-SERVICE.

- Do some research to see whether the investment will pay off. Are your customers and prospects appreciative of dealing with one firm and making one phone call for service?

KEEP AN OPEN MIND.

- Not all opportunities are planned out, though all should be carefully considered. The Skoog's got into work for the water utility by accident. That led to more landscape construction.

REMEMBER CUSTOMER SERVICE.

- If you provide all the services, you're responsible for them all. Make sure the quality is high and customers are happy.

Growing your company

learned the value of bringing work in-house while contracting to install water mains. “We initially were subbing out the heavy work because bankers want small businesses to avoid the capital outlay. Our subcontractor was terrible and we nearly lost the water company as a customer. We got rid of him, bought our own machinery and started doing the work ourselves. Subbing out work sounds good to bankers, but in reality it’s a lot harder to implement. We learned our lesson on that,” Andy says.

Learning has helped

Having the knowledge and capability to add a certain service has also been a determining factor. Two things contributed to the company’s ability to add paver installation, for example. Andy spent three summers learning how to install them while working for Lied’s Nursery in Wisconsin. After joining the family business, he was able to transfer the knowledge to his crew members and the com-

pany could begin offering the service in earnest. “I learned how to install paving brick because I did so much of it. When I came to the business full time, that was another facet we could offer,” Andy recalls.

Another inspiration for additional services are the trade shows and association seminars the Skoogs attend. “The retaining walls and pavers are among the things we’ve observed in the industry and were happening in the big towns. Because of the associations we belong to and

“Subbing out work sounds good to bankers, but in reality it’s a lot harder to implement.”

the meetings we go to, we learn about those things and bring them home with us,” Alan says.

Getting out to conventions and seminars is good for the company, since working in rural areas can put them out of the loop, he adds. “We need to see what’s going on in the rest of the world because we’re so



isolated. Operating here in our rural area, it’s very easy not to develop and grow. We need to bring our clients the additional things the rest of the world is enjoying and it’s

philosophy he learned in college. “I went to the University of Nebraska and all of my roommates were ranch people. One of their grandfathers had a theory: ‘Life’s too short to hassle.’ This is one of the things I try to run my business with. If we have to take something on the nose, even though it may or may not be our fault, we take care of it with that thought in mind.”

While Andy and Alan appreciate what creating a one-stop shop has done for the company, Andy also appreciates what it means for himself. “A good thing about working here is the variety of work you get to do. When I worked in Wisconsin for the summers, it was for

The Skoogs have learned that a great way to build their business is to go beyond offering a lush lawn. Today, they are a full-service company.

a great company, but all I did was paving brick. After three summers of that, you get a little sick of doing the same thing. With the large number of things that we do, it's kind of nice to do the various tasks," he says.

The variety can also be a little hard on his crews. "I don't think my guys put enough thought into how intelligent you need to be. You have to switch gears. If you're the kind of person who doesn't get up to speed quickly, you're not going to work well here because we don't have crews do the same thing all season long," Andy adds. He is quick to say that he holds his employees in high regard, though he'd like them to develop themselves professionally.

Alan agrees with Andy's assessment. "Our projects have all these components to them. When we work on a project, the landscape crew may be working on walls today, get done tomorrow and then they're doing plantings, then low-voltage lighting, so they have to be intelligent."

"We need to see what's going on in the rest of the world because we're so isolated. Operating here in our rural area, it's very easy not to develop and grow."

Keeping the books is a challenge

For Mary Ann, tracking the intricate jobs can be a challenge. "We have a fairly complex system and the cogs have to come together. Our employees have to fill out time sheets to provide information for our database and those time sheets are fairly complex, too. Some of the employees aren't too detail oriented and so that's a challenge, making sure it's not garbage in and garbage out. If they're putting things down without being somewhat close to reality, then all of our time is wasted," she says.

She admits that she is much more attuned to the expense side of the business than either Alan or Andy are since she pays all the bills and everything crosses her desk. Not knowing what goes on in the field sometimes limits her perspective, she says. "Sometimes I have to step back when I wonder how something could happen if we spend too much time on a job.

At times Alan and Andy have to give me a reality check because I'm not out in the trenches. I don't understand as much as I should about how disasters happen sometimes and then we have to do things to keep our customers or employees happy. I'm just looking at how much something costs because that's the side I see. **PRO**

Skoog Landscape has been securing more customers on the Rock River in Illinois. The homes tend to be owned by more affluent clients and the work is larger in scope.



Growing your company

Making the cut

Landscape contractors are generating additional revenue by adding hardscaping services to their offerings.

When Todd Manke, co-owner of Cal and Shan's Landscaping in Woodstock, Ill., goes to work, he brings all of his standard equipment—trimmers, edgers, cut-off machine. Cut-off machine? That's right, because Manke is part of a growing trend in landscape contracting—"hardscaping," the creation of elaborate pathways and patios to complement vibrant landscapes and gardens.

"With the proliferation of home and garden television shows, demand for hardscaping services has soared among the high-end residential market,"

Manke said.

"Customers want

"You can't mow in stormy weather or winter, but you can install a patio."

that perfect terrace, koi pond, fire pit or gazebo to expand their outdoor living spaces."

Adding hardscaping services can also boost business during traditionally slow seasons.

Now, when snow or rain keeps other contractors inside, Manke stays outside.

"One of the primary advantages of diversification through hardscaping is that it allows you to maintain your workload in adverse conditions. You can't mow in stormy weather or winter, but you can install a patio," Manke said.

Your first investment

Install a retaining wall in a mud pit? Manke's done it. Build a natural stonewall in Chicago in January? He's done that too. What should be a contractor's first investment when exploring hardscape services?

Obtaining Certified Landscape Technician certification from The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET, for-

merly known as ALCA) and state trade organizations or attending training courses can help contractors learn about hardscaping techniques and delivering higher quality services to their customer base, Manke suggested.

A hardscape for all seasons

Hardscapes continue to maintain the aesthetics of gardens and landscapes through every season. The professionals at Cal and Shan's thrive on the challenge of bringing a landscape to life brick by brick and believe other contractors can benefit from hardscaping opportunities.

Hardscaping can be a long-term investment and not a means to make a fast buck. An alternative solution for a contractor wanting to expand service offerings is subcontracting hardscaping services. For many landscape contractors, hardscaping – whether in-house or subcontracted – is one addition that's certain to make the cut. **PRO**





— Mark Chisholm, Professional Arborist, Two-time ISA International Tree Climbing Champion

“The question isn’t which chain saw to use. It’s which STIHL to use.”

“In my line of work, you have to be prepared to take on any tree, any place, anytime. That’s why I rely on STIHL. No matter how big or small the job is, STIHL makes a saw that’ll get it done better than anything else. They’re always easy to start, comfortable to use, and they deliver plenty of power without weighing me down. Plus they’re sold and serviced by professionals who know STIHL equipment inside and out. Listen, I might use four or five different chain saws in a given day. But only one brand is all I need.”

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