

Daring to be Different



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Creative marketing creates growth in slow economy

It would be easy in this rough economy to hunker down and ride out the storm by cutting costs and hoping for the best, but for Make a Difference Landscaping in southern New Hampshire, that approach just doesn't fit. Instead, the five-year-old company is opting to do more of what has proven successful in the past: sales, marketing and promotion.

*PHOTOS
COURTESY OF
MAKE A
DIFFERENCE
LANDSCAPING.*



Make a Difference Landscaping in Lee, N.H., uses a number of creative sales and marketing strategies to build its business—even in a slow economy.

"We're in the worst economy since the Great Depression, but we're still hoping to grow our business," says Naithan Couse, owner of Make a Difference Landscaping (www.makeadifferencelandscaping.com), based in Lee, N.H. So far, things are going well, with sales up 30 percent this year. This success has

been accomplished in a number of different, innovative ways.

To help generate publicity, Make a Difference Landscaping is conducting its own "Yard Makeover" competition, modeled after the national televised events that have proven popular. By sending out press releases and creating a stand-alone Web site for the competition, the company has found itself featured in local newspapers and radio programs. "It's given us quite a bit of exposure, and we've had a lot of people visiting our Web site to check us out and see what we're all about."

This is the first time Make a Difference Landscaping has conducted this type of event, but Couse says everything came together pretty quickly. "We were in the process of updating our Web site, and between the Web site designer, our sales associates and I, we sort of all came up with this idea," he explains. "The goal was to get as much publicity as possible for the least cost. At the same time, we wanted to give back to the community." The competition is formally named "The Perfect Makeover," and will give only homeowner a complete landscape makeover worth \$3,000 to \$5,000.

"We began by looking at how other similar events have been run throughout the country," Couse says. The format the company decided upon was to create a special Web site where entrants could submit essays about why they (or someone they're nominating) should receive a yard makeover. Couse and his company would narrow down the entries and select three finalists, and the public would vote for the final winner.

"If it goes well, we'd would like to make it an annual event and make it even larger," says Couse, who adds that next year he may approach suppliers to become involved in the contest by donating materials.

Make a Difference Landscaping has been branching out and trying new marketing techniques in other ways, as well. For the first time, the company exhibited at two local home and garden shows this spring. "It was actually very, very successful," says Couse. "We picked up a lot of business there, primarily residential customers. It was a good experience, and we'll definitely do it again next year." He says they were held in the late winter, which proved to be a good time to pick up new customers for the growing season ahead, and also before the busy spring work season began.

Make a Difference is a full-service landscaping company, serving clients throughout the Portsmouth and seacoast area with mowing, maintenance and planting/hardscape construction services, as well as irrigation. (The mix of customers is 90 percent residential, with 10 percent commercial/condos/homeowner associations.) In addition to Couse, there are 12 employees that work in four different crews divided between maintenance, construction and irrigation.

"One thing we do that's a little unique for a company our size is that we have two sales associates," he explains. "They're out on the road, they hang door hangings and talk to people. We create our own direct mail lists to send out mailings. And, we just completely updated our Web site. A lot of companies in this business don't have Web sites, and many of the ones that do

are multimillion-dollar companies. We're much smaller, but we think it's important. We're just trying to actively promote the company and continue to grow, especially with the economy being as bad as it is. Couse earned a degree in business as well as landscaping/horticulture from the University of New Hampshire. He started the company when he was 17 and continued running it while at school. After graduating last year, he's been committed to even greater growth.

In addition to the various marketing and sales strategies he's implemented, Couse also recently bought-out a small, local irrigation firm. "That's really helped our business grow; we brought on another 45 clients," he says. The purchase wasn't easy, however. Finding financing in this economic environment was difficult. "I just kept calling around," says Couse. "It took me about a month and a half just trying to get a simple \$10,000 loan. I had a couple of deals that fell through, and I was disappointed that the bank I had worked with for five years wouldn't give me the loan. So, I closed all of my accounts with them and moved to a small local bank, and within 24 hours I was approved. You just have to keep plugging away at things like that."



Naithan Couse, owner of Make a Difference Landscaping, has found that residential customers are generally more willing than commercial customers to pay extra for quality work.

The company uses RedMax blowers and trimmers, two Lesco walk-behinds with sulkies, and both 52 and 61-inch Bobcat zero-turn mowers. "All of our trucks are Fords, with matching colors. We try to keep things consistent, so people can see that they're working with a high-quality, reliable company," says Couse.

He adds that residential customers are willing to pay more for quality, while commercial customers seem to be interested only in the lowest price. "With a homeowner, I can educate them about why something might cost a little more," says Couse. "I can show them that I have a degree in landscape horticulture and I'm not just some Joe Schmo. I can talk to them about the fact that we're certified in doing retaining walls; I can point out that we're recognized by the Better Business Bureau. It's tougher to make those arguments with

commercial customers.”

Couse uses QuickBooks to handle billing, payroll and other accounting functions at the company. “We do everything ourselves, and we have a bookkeeper who comes in once a month and reconciles everything just to make sure we’re on the right track,” he explains.

In the future, Couse hopes to relocate to a larger facility with enough room to begin selling mulch and other landscape supplies. More immediately, however, he’s just hoping to catch his breath and keep up with the recent growth in business—a good problem to have.

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who has covered every aspect of the green industry in the past 13 years. He is based in Middlesex, Vt., and is always on the lookout for unusual stories.

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