

Texas Tree Care Company Expands Services



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Everything is oversized in Texas, right? Texas is the largest state in the Lower 48 and covers more ground than many countries. Dallas, Houston and San Antonio are three of the 10 most populous cities in the United States. Dallas is home to 58 Fortune 500 companies, more than any other city in the United States. In the residential areas that surround the city, there are plenty of big trees that require ongoing care to thrive.

Enter Sam Hill Tree Care. Since 1999, Sam Hill Tree Care has been providing customer-pleasing tree care services in the Dallas/Fort Worth market. "About 99 percent of our work is high-end residential tree care," says Sam Hill.

But just like any company, Sam Hill Tree Care has its strengths and weaknesses, and Hill believes having a great awareness of the areas where he thrives and the areas where he needs improvement can help him continue solid, stable growth.

Growing pains

Hill's flair for business could very well be in his genes. His parents had a cabinet business, and his three siblings are business owners as well. "My wife would tell you that neither I nor my siblings could work for other people," he laughs.

A love of nature and the outdoors, plus an insatiable curiosity, led to Hill changing his major several times in college. While working as a bank teller, a friend suggested that Hill take a horticulture class. "I guess the rest is history," says Hill.

Along with gaining a strong science background, Hill wasn't afraid of the numbers game a successful business demands. "I know many in my field feel uncomfortable with accounting and other business topics, such as human

resources and leadership,” he says. “I always want to understand how it all works and fits together. Nobody wants to follow an incompetent leader.”

Although his business grew at the rate of about 20 percent most years, not everything has gone the way he would have liked. He looks back at having to lay off a crew the week before Christmas as being a disheartening experience. “Seeing the look in their eyes and the eyes of those that were still with the company, I no longer had a problem with being over-confident,” he admits ruefully. As he was forced to take that action the year prior to the 2008 recession, in a sense, it prepared him and his company for the recession.

“I changed the way I did business, but honestly, Texas fared pretty well,” Hill says. “We actually stayed flat. We tightened up our expenses about 10 percent and managed to get through it. We kept our people busy and kept the cash flow going. We kept our clients for the long term, as well.”

An admitted introvert, Hill also worked on developing his people skills.

“I’ve learned that you need to take care of the people and be yourself. This was a bit of a challenge for me,” Hill says. “Clients can see when you are passionate and knowledgeable. I don’t make a lot of small talk, but I learned to do so to help establish good communications.”



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Sam Hill, a certified master arborist, built a science-based IPM program when he added lawn care to his tree care company. PHOTO: SAM HILL TREE CARE

Clients vary in their demands and expectations, and his conscientiously developed skills help him fulfill each unique need. “We have some clients who just love their trees and are willing to invest in them. I have clients who tell me that they ask for tree care for anniversary or birthday gifts. Others say, ‘I don’t take exotic vacations, but I take care of my trees.’”

“I remember seeing a survey that the ISA (International Society of Arboriculture) published about tree care consumers,” he continues. “Some are investment driven, some just like to be good neighbors and some are environmentally conscious. Different things appeal to different folks.”

Along those lines, Hill also matches his crews to the job and individual client. “I do most of the scheduling, and I remember most of our jobs,” Hill says. “So I select the appropriate crew to perform the job. Each of our crews has its strengths. I try to match the client, the work, the route and the equipment with the best crew.”

Strengthening personnel management

Ask most business owners, and they will tell you that personnel management can be the biggest challenge they face. Hill won’t argue the point.

"After losing several good employees and putting myself in their shoes, I now treat them (employees) really well," he says. "But I don't do it just to retain them. I do it because it is the right thing to do. It also works amazingly well. It's the Pygmalion effect. People will become how you treat them. If you treat them as lazy and dishonest, then they will be lazy and dishonest."

Setting high expectations and providing extensive training results in top-notch employees. "All our arborists are ISA certified," he says. "We emphasize leadership and promote from within our company. Our arborists meet with each client, listen to their needs and prepare a personalized plan for each and every job. The arborist also meets the crew on the job to get them started and visit with the client."



Safety is critical in arboriculture, and Hill is keenly aware of the hazards associated with the field. "We have a robust safety program that includes tailgate safety meetings, OSHA 10- and 30-hour training modules, first aid and CPR, EHAP (Electrical Hazards Awareness Program) and more," he says.

Hill also matches employees with each other to form the best teams possible. "Our company is made up of high-performance teams. One of my favorite leadership books ("Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies" by James Collins and Jerry Porras) states that you don't form a team and just decide you have high-performance team," Hill says. "Instead, you define a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal), form a team and then get out of the way."



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Sam Hill Tree Care does not take any shortcuts when it comes to safety training. All of its tree techs are ISA certified. PHOTO: SAM HILL TREE CARE

Expanding services

Hill's sensitivity to his customers' needs led him to add lawn care to his business in 2009. From the start, Hill developed an IPM (Integrated Pest Management) program for his clients' lawns.

The primary turf type in Dallas is St. Augustine grass, which is prone to take-all root rot. The disease, which can strike all warm-season grasses, is triggered by high rainfall and general stress. "We were having clients tell us their lawn care companies told them that it was caused by the trees shading the grass too much, and they were recommending that the trees be thinned to almost nothing," says Hill. "I knew it (take-all root rot) wasn't related to the light." (Hill formerly taught turfgrass management at Richland College. That community college no longer has horticulture department, but Hill participates in the Richland's career days to speak to students and to share the many opportunities available to them in the green industry.)

After studying research conducted by Dr. Monica Elliot, plant pathologist and associate professor at the University of Florida, and Dr. Robert Carrow, turfgrass expert at the University of Georgia, Hill developed a proprietary program to deal with the take-all root rot on his clients' lawns.

"We tinkered with the program for about five years," he says. "Last year, we didn't make any changes and had excellent results." Hill says about 50 of his clients take advantage of the program. He says he will be more aggressive in marketing the service along with his firm's IPM lawn care approach for 2015.

Seeking 20 percent growth

Hill's goal is to grow his company by about 20 percent each year. "If we achieve it year after year, then the company literally doubles in size every three to five years," says Hill. To grow, he knows that he will have to learn to delegate. He is in the process of structuring his company, focusing on recruiting and human resources so that he can delegate more. "It's probably the hardest thing I have ever done. It's hard to let go," he admits. To that end, he is grooming a production manager and tasking him with more responsibilities.

"I am preaching that he shouldn't do what I did," Hill continues. "When I assign him a task, I ask who can take that responsibility or who can assist him with it. I want him training his replacement, so he can move up."

Although it's far down the line—20 years or more—Hill is developing a succession plan as he restructures his company. "I love what I do, and I want to keep doing it for a long time," he says. "But I don't want to get to the end of my career and be desperate to sell the business. I'm trying to structure it so that it would be attractive to sell to someone else, either the employees or an outside company."

For landscape professionals looking to expand their services to include tree care, keep in mind it's a whole new discipline – one that revolves around safety. "Never, ever compromise safety," Hill cautions. "People don't get injured in the tree care industry ... they get killed."

In addition, focus on education. "Become an expert and always be learning. If not, you become a commodity. It is difficult to adopt a competitive strategy of being the low-cost provider," Hill says. "There is always somebody willing to do the work cheaper."

Finally, don't be afraid to trust your people. "Those who are closest to the problem often have the best solution," Hill says. "At the same time, trust your gut."

Big trees, big state and a big company? If Sam Hill has anything to say or do about it, this is one company that's that's going to keep growing and getting better.

Knowing Strengths & Weaknesses

When asked about the company's biggest strengths and weaknesses, Hill has a clear picture of what sets him apart and what holds him back. Here is a look at what's on his list.

STRENGTHS:

Competence and credentials. "We have a wide breadth and depth in the field of arboriculture," Hill says.

Low turnover. "Our experienced people mentor and indoctrinate our new hires on the way things are done here," he points out.

Safety. "We have a strong safety culture," Hill says. "Our people are not afraid to tell me, the owner, that I am not wearing my hardhat on a job. How cool is that?"

High trust. "I trust them and they trust me," he adds. "I don't take that lightly. I have been given the opportunity to steward many families."

WEAKNESSES:

Me. "I am constantly trying to overcome the constraints that I inflict on my business," Hill says. "Initially, it was overconfidence. Then, I believed it when I heard so many of my peers talk about how lazy and dishonest employees are. Now I am struggling with insufficient structure for growth and poor delegation skills."

Employee Recruitment. "I did not set up a recruiting system to bring new folks into our company," Hill explains. "Because we brought them in slowly, we were able to take a lot of time to really steep them in our culture. Now, we add two to three folks a year. We have to shorten the growth and development time, but produce the same end results."