

Hit The Big Time



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Managed growth and top-line efficiencies propel landscaper to regional giant status

Greg's Lawn & Landscaping, a small Midwest landscaping company based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has maintained annual double-digit growth during the past several years despite the economic recession. Greg Scharf operates his company with the same kind of tools, systems and savvy that a major corporate landscaping entity with multiple branches and offices coast to coast enjoys. However, he isn't interested in being that kind of landscaping company. He is content with maintaining his 70 percent commercial and 30 percent residential customer base spread over the two Iowa counties of Linn and Johnson, incorporating the cities of Cedar Rapids, Marion, Iowa City and Liberty with managed growth.



Greg's Lawn & Landscaping uses Scag mowers to create a lawn striping effect for this condo association in Cedar Rapids.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREG'S LAWN & LANDSCAPING.

Although considered a small landscaping company with 35 year-round and another 40 to 45 seasonal employees at the height of the growing season, Greg's Lawn & Landscaping is recognized as a pioneer in top-line efficiencies, supply chain and strategic marketing in the Upper Midwest landscaping industry. It was one of the first small landscaping firms to employ smartphones, customized accounting software programs and cost analysis in supply chain management. It was also one of the first Upper Midwest lawn maintenance companies to employ striping in mowing techniques, and partnerships with local minor league baseball and hockey teams to uniquely grow its customer base. (Over the past several months, the company's phones were ringing with new customers every time the "Rider Girls" skated out on the ice with their customized shovels engraved with the Greg's Lawn & Landscaping logo in hand at half-time during a Cedar Rapids Rough Riders

minor league hockey team home game.)

Scharf attributes his success to operating the business like a well-heeled corporate entity, while employing the personalized customer service that you'd expect of a "mom and pop" Main Street enterprise. "Smaller landscape companies that compete against us don't know their profit margins when they bid," says Scharf. "We won't take on any jobs unless we know be they are going to profitable. We work out a cost analysis on all jobs first."

Over its nearly 30 years in the landscaping business, Greg's Lawn & Landscaping has accumulated two dozen landscaping services, all customer driven, the total of which outweighs its competition. "We've added just about every landscaping service imaginable over nearly three decades," says Scharf. "Maintenance is a large part of our revenue source, and our design/build business is growing every year."



This office park in Cedar Rapids features a pond with a water fountain.

Of all the services provided, the company attributes snow removal as the catalyst for building the commercial side of its services. It now operates a separate business entity called "Winter Wonderland," set up to not only remove snow, but also to sell plowing equipment. Both new and used Arctic and Blizzard brand snowplows are offered. Scharf explains, "We took on this snow removal equipment dealership because we couldn't find a dealer in our area that supported us properly."

Scharf is one of the "elite 150" certified snow professionals in the United States, passing a rigorous six-hour exam that covers all aspects of snow removal, including business, legal, subcontractor, snow science, snow mechanics and human resources. He approaches snow removal like a science, where each job is customized with variables in methodologies and types of equipment needed. "After a winter storm, Greg can look at a space that needs to be cleared and, within minutes, come up with a plan for the most efficient way to remove the snow with the proper selection of equipment to do the job," says Judy Guido of Guido & Associates, a landscaping consulting firm based in Los Angeles. "What would ordinarily take a day and a half to remove snow, Greg will do in a matter of hours. These same efficiencies reflect in his mowing and lawn care practices."

For the past few years, one of Cedar Rapids' largest corporations has used Greg's Winter Wonderland division for snow removal. "Because we have paid attention to detail and been available to them 24/7 during winter storms, just this year we finally got a call from them to also bid on their landscape maintenance," says Scharf. "That was my goal when I took on their business for snow removal. It's all about building relationships."

Scharf has been building relationships with landscaping customers since the age of 10 in his hometown of Cedar Rapids. He started Greg's Lawn Service 27 years ago, breaking away for a mere two years due to a hip injury while playing football in junior high. "Those were the most difficult years for me because it was the only time in my life that I couldn't go out and mow

lawns," he says.

Scharf's landscaping business began in his family's single-stall garage, which doubled and tripled in size, followed by moving into an unoccupied building down the street to accommodate the equipment storage needs of his growing business. Today, Greg's Lawn & Landscaping is located in a 38,000-square-foot building on a commercial strip in northeast Cedar Rapids. Scharf also operates a 10,000-square-foot nursery used exclusively to store plants for Greg's Lawn & Landscaping clients, despite its location in a significant retail area.

Scharf has developed an acute understanding of his market due to the longevity of his company in a single locale. "The Cedar Rapids area is all about practicality," explains Scharf. "For example, we have little call for seasonal color changes when it comes to plantings." He says that in other U.S. markets, it could be a lucrative niche for landscapers, but in a community like Cedar Rapids, it's considered excessive. Scharf sees a growing interest in sustainable landscaping with his customers, such as the use of recycled materials, including plastic wood and the installation of rain gardens, but only when he can demonstrate that it doesn't add a surcharge to traditional landscaping services. Scharf also explains that the east-central Iowa economy has not been affected by the recession as much as other regions because it has never been a boom-bust economy; rather, it just keeps clipping along steadily.

A market trend that Scharf has capitalized on in his area in recent years is "cocooning," a trend that sees customers socializing less and retreating into their homes and properties more. "People are working to make their homes more of a destination, vacationing in their own backyard instead of out of town," observes Scharf. Clients are investing more in backyard patios and walkways than in plantings with a surge in the installation of outdoor fireplaces, refrigerators and stoves. "We're installing a multitude of outdoor game units, too, including ping pong and pool, corn hole and bocce ball," says Scharf.

Greg's Lawn & Landscaping's longevity in a single market coupled with efficiencies and a keen eye on local landscaping trends will contribute to the strong odds of the company experiencing a 5 to 10 percent revenue growth for years to come.

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