

Innovating for Sustainable Growth



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Landscape Todd Pugh's partnership with fabricator Steffon Hoppel takes industry's mechanization another step forward

Todd E. Pugh is somewhat of a contrarian when it comes to the subject of sustainability. He doesn't dwell on the emotional and often negative connotations associated with the concept.



Fabricator Steffon Hoppel built himself this masterpiece from the ground up. But, it's his partnership with landscape pro Todd Pugh, right, that's driving the development of labor-saving landscape equipment, like this mini material hauler/spreader, also pictured.

PHOTO BY RON HALL.

He views sustainability as a business and an industry opportunity rather than an obstacle. Pugh, 40, owner of Enviroscapes, Inc., Louisville, Ohio, views it as a positive movement that challenges and spurs the industry's creative energy. He says technology creates value for companies because it allows them to accomplish more with less manpower, material and energy while also providing more value for their customers. He's convinced, based on his own personal experiences, that sustainability opens exciting new service, revenue and entrepreneurial possibilities for landscape/lawn service business owners.

What else would you expect from the owner of a larger landscape company who, from the infancy of his company in a small rural northeastern Ohio city, set himself the bold task of creating "the best landscape company in the world?"

It's a work in progress, he admits with a grin.

Fueled by passion

"I have always been passionate about business and especially the green industry. I have always believed in the quote, 'There is always a better way,

the challenge is finding it.' That's what really drives our culture at Enviroscapes, finding the better way.

"You must be comfortable with being uncomfortable. You must adapt and reinvent your business through technology, innovation and mechanization in all that you do if you are going to be in business in the is includes, but is not limited to, weather-based irrigation controllers, GPS, smartphones, creative ways to engage your team, and while operating your business to find ways to respect the environment around you. We are the green industry, we were green before green was cool. It reasons that we need to be the leaders in sustainable solutions," says Pugh.

Nevertheless, much of the talk among green industry contractors these days focuses on the fierce competition it faces, economic pressures, the desire to grow businesses, and, increasingly, sustainability, he says. While on the surface these may seem like unrelated topics, they're not. They're all intimately connected.

Pugh says that owners desirous of running profitable and growing businesses in these times have to examine their operations in that new light and be prepared to take action and deviate from the path of least resistance.

"The industry is tapped out with working faster, longer and harder; everyone has been trying this for the past decade," he says. "Major breakthroughs in innovation are what's needed to move the industry ahead."

Pugh realized that more than a decade ago. That's when he partnered with master fabricator Steffon Hoppel, 48, president and CEO of Hoppel Fabrication Specialties, Inc., which is located near Pugh's landscape company headquarters.

The two men began focusing their efforts on finding solutions to one of the industry's biggest challenges, reducing the amount of physical labor required to perform property-enhancing landscape services. Pugh says that the implementation of labor- and resource-saving equipment by landscape companies is directly tied to the concept of sustainable growth.

Indeed, Harvard professor Clayton Christensen, in his book, "The Innovators Dilemma," writes that there are two types of innovation: sustainable innovation and disruptive innovation. He tells why and how new technologies redefine the competitive landscape of their respective markets. These are not upgrades or modifications of existing technologies, but new to a particular industry.

A failure of execution

"I enjoy the opportunity of working with many landscape contractors. Every one of them is interested in technology and innovation and talk about changing," says Hoppel. "But when it really comes to execution, I see many companies fall short. The ones who succeed are the companies where the owners drive the innovation or technology."



Working off of the same labor- and time-saving concept as the original Mulch Mule, this smaller, more maneuverable model does the work of several employees.

“It is not easy, it takes discipline and the desire to want to break out of the we-always-did-it-this-way mentality. If you do things the same way year after year, you will get the same results or less due to competition,” adds Hoppel.

In 1996, Pugh approached Hoppel to build a machine to reduce the time and effort required to spread mulch and move other bulk materials. Loading materials such as mulch into wheelbarrows and hand-shoveling it into beds is a labor-intensive, time-consuming task that employees dread.

Hoppel responded with a prototype trailer with an aluminum body and a live floor that could handle just about any bulk material, and also dispenses from the side as well as unloads from the rear. The machine also doubled as a leaf box/trailer in the fall. The machine was a huge labor saver for Envirosapes, saving hours of manual labor.



Sensing opportunity, in 1998, Hoppel and Pugh formed a partnership and founded Green Industry Innovators (GII). GII is a product development company exclusively for the green industry. The two men, drawing heavily and making many modifications based on field-testing, both by themselves and by end users across the country, began producing the first production Mulch Mules.

All of a sudden, Pugh, a dyed-in-the-wool landscaper, and Hoppel, a fabricator, had become manufacturers of a new product. It wasn't something they had planned for, but the unit was well received by contractors that used the machine, so we ran with it, says Hoppel.

A bit of background



Pugh started cutting grass as a 14 year old and earned \$5 from his first customer. It wasn't long before he began acquiring other clients. It also didn't take him long to figure out that hard work alone wasn't going to get him where he wanted to be as a businessowner, so he enrolled in The Ohio State University and earned a degree in horticulture. With greater confidence, he refocused on growing the business near his hometown of Louisville, Ohio, a city of about 9,100.

Pugh's company, now renamed Envirosapes, Inc., grew rapidly and today numbers four locations and more than 150 employees. It's one of the largest independent landscape companies in Ohio.

In Hoppel, the other half of the GII manufacturing business, Pugh couldn't have found a more creative and resourceful fabricator.

Where Pugh understands the many issues related to running a successful landscape company and is, by nature, an inveterate entrepreneur and promoter, the taciturn Hoppel is the creative force behind the designs and the actual fabrication of the machinery. He started Hoppel Fabrication 25 years ago to develop and build equipment and tools that no one else had built before, rugged units that solve specific business needs. To that end, he assembled a team of skilled craftsman capable of turning the two GII partners' imaginative product ideas into reality.

"The current market conditions are not going to change much going forward," says Pugh. "Competition is fierce and clients are no longer going to pay us for our inefficiencies. The way to succeed in quantum leaps is to find new ways to be more productive and become more efficient through innovation."

Enviroscapes is, in a sense, a poster child of that. Pugh added its three branches in the past two years by embracing innovation and sustainable practices.

Pugh and Hoppel approach product development as a process to come up with new and unique units, and then continually upgrading them based on end user feedback.

"You have to almost forget what you know and what you have been doing and start over with a new mentality," says Pugh. "We take a current landscape process and look at it from a completely different perspective."

Hoppel adds that the thought process is as vital to product development as it is with landscape services. Boiled down to its core, it's a three-step process: conceptualization, visualization and execution.

Once the process (whether for a product or a service) is executed, it's time to take it to the field and see how it performs. The feedback that's generated by these real-world trials is invaluable, especially the critical responses.

"This process can be humbling at times, but the feedback you don't necessarily want to hear is the feedback that you need to hear to make the product what it needs to be," says Pugh, with Hoppel agreeing.

Adds Gary Clark, vice president of Environmental Management, Inc., Dublin, Ohio, says of its collaboration with GII: "We have offered lots of feedback and our fleet manager meets annually with Pugh and Hoppel to discuss ways to improve existing products (Mulch Mules) and develop other potential opportunities. We look at them as a partner to help us mechanize our processes."

Fulfilling specific needs

As with GII, the most significant innovations, especially in the development of landscape equipment, don't always come from a large company with a sizable research and development budget. It's often an individual, or perhaps several, that get the creative juices flowing to come up with a piece of

equipment to do just that. (Read the sidebar: 5 Industry-Sustaining Breakthroughs.)

Dave Zerfoss, past president of Husqvarna Professional Products, current vantage chair and PLANET board member, says, "Many large manufacturers have the desire to continually develop new products for the landscape industry. The challenge is there is a large investment in money, time and focus to design and develop the product, and there is no guarantee it will be successful initially or long term. This risk in time and money is one thing that has limited new product innovation. GII has an advantage because they can conceptualize, build and test all within one facility. Because they have an intimate relationship within the industry, they have the unique ability to test the product in the field through the entire new product development process.

Pugh and Hoppel speak frankly about what they feel is the next step for Green Industry Innovators.

"Our strength is in developing equipment and products that eliminate labor and mechanize processes. We have a customer base of over 175 landscape companies across the country as a result of our products. This provides us with a very diverse test bed. This real-world condition is our best asset and where many companies fall short in product development," says Hoppel.

Adds Mike Rorie, who founded and ran Cincinnati-based Groundmasters before selling it to Brickman this past decade, "I have always believed you can not be all things to all people. GII's model of developing and proving products is an excellent opportunity for some of the large manufacturers in the green industry to grow their business. Technology will be the competitive advantage for companies moving forward".

"We're looking for partners going forward to manufacture or distribute our products. Our passion and model is developing and proving products. Setting up mass distribution would take us away from our roots, listening to the contractor and developing solutions," says Pugh.

"We will not run out of products to launch anytime soon. We believe the biggest opportunity is through mechanization and technology, and that's our passion," he adds.

Rick Cuddihe is president of Lafayette Consulting Co. and a PLANET Trailblazer. Contact him at rick@lafayetteconsulting.com. Ron Hall is editor-in-chief of Turf magazine and has been an editor in the green industry the past 28 years. Contact him at rhall@mooserivermedia.com.