

Making a Good Impression



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Tomlinson Bomberger, in its 32nd year, remains a force in Pennsylvania Dutch country

Tomlinson Bomberger

Owner: Clark Tomlinson

Founded: 1981

Headquarters: Lancaster, Pa.

Markets: Lancaster, Pa., region

Services: Lawn care, tree and shrub care, landscape maintenance, landscape design, landscape installation, tree pruning, sports turf and pest control

Employees: 90

Website: www.tomlinsonbomberger.com

With more than three decades in business, Tomlinson Bomberger in Lancaster, Pa., has not only sustained its growth and reputation, but continues to excel.

So when owner Clark Tomlinson sat down with employees recently to do strategic planning for the next several years, they did not talk about future goals. Instead, they discussed what it is that they care about.

"That's a great question if you ask your team or people in the organization," says Tomlinson. "First and foremost, I care about the well-being of our co-workers and our clients. I care that our reputation continues to be at a top level. I care about our culture, that we are treating each other and our clients well and also have a mentality of service."

It's that approach that has underscored the growth of Tomlinson Bomberger.

Tomlinson Bomberger is a 31-year-old full-service company serving more than 5,000 residential and commercial clients throughout the Lancaster County region.



The Lancaster, Pa.-based company has offered customers the option of traditional or organic lawn care services for the past 15 years.

Tomlinson started the company on a part-time basis with Dave Bomberger, whom he had met while working at the Lancaster Country Club. Tomlinson was an educator who put himself through school working there; Bomberger was a Penn State graduate who had studied turfgrass agronomy and was employed as the assistant golf course superintendent. The two started doing lawn care and landscape work part-time from 1981 to 1984. By 1984, they were able to resign from their day jobs and take the company full time.

Bomberger provided the technical expertise until he retired in 2009. Tomlinson focuses on human resources.

Tomlinson's background in psychology and counseling in the school system gave him a strong sense of putting customers' needs first through active listening, communication, empathy and looking out for their best interests.

He also believes in keeping promises to customers. "If you say you're going to do something, make sure that you do it," he says.

Diverse business lines

Tomlinson Bomberger's different business lines include lawn care, tree and shrub care, landscape maintenance, landscape design, landscape installation, tree pruning by certified arborists, sports turf and pest control.

"When they hear landscape maintenance, a lot of people think that's primarily mowing," says Tomlinson. "Years ago, we were subbing mowing out. With the economy in 2008 and things being more difficult, we decided to get back into mowing. It's a renewable type of business. It's not the highest grossing margin, but it does add to the top line."

Landscape maintenance also includes edging, mulching, shrub care, pruning, fall and spring clean-ups, aeration and slice seeding.



Employing ISA-certified arborists ensures that clients have their trees properly pruned and maintained.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOMLINSON BOMBERGER.

Tomlinson Bomberger also has found athletic field renovation to be another line of renewable business. After the schools' sports teams' seasons are finished, the company renovates the fields for the next playing season. It also services larger sports turf venues, such as colleges.

The Tomlinson Bomberger team of nearly 90 employees includes certified

arborists, horticulturists, turfgrass managers and pest control technicians, so programs are customized to meet clients' specific needs.

The company's approach to umbrella services is to provide its customers with one-stop shopping, a business strategy Tomlinson calls "consumer friendly". Clients like that they only have to deal with one contact to provide a variety of services, he notes.

It's also been good for revenues: the company generates about 40 percent of its business growth from existing customers who request more services.

Advocates organic fertilizers

Tomlinson Bomberger's lawn care approach consists of an organic six-visit program that includes fertilizer, crabgrass control, weed control, insect control, grub control and a soil test every three years, with samples sent to Penn State for analysis.

The company has, for the past 15 years, offered clients with the choice of organic-based fertilizers for steady, sustained growth and turfgrass root development. Other benefits include improved tolerance to drought, reduced pressure from insects and diseases; building the soil, and assisting with thatch decomposition. The company utilizes granular organic base fertilizers developed in-house.



Six years ago, Tomlinson Bomberger successfully added structural pest control to its palette of property management services.

"We believed it was time to start considering feeding the soil, looking at a more organic-based fertilization program," says Tomlinson. "We're not 100 percent organic by any means, but our fertilizer is organic-based, 50 percent by weight from an organic source. We've found that to be very successful for improving the turf."

About 50 percent of the client base has transitioned to the program, Tomlinson says. "We've grown significantly in both over the years."

He adds that by using the fertilizers with the organic component, and by aerating and slice seeding, his company has been able to reduce the incidence and damage caused by lawn diseases, reducing the need to use expensive fungicides on clients' properties.

"We do realize that consumers do like to hear the organic concept, but when it gets to be 10 to 15 percent higher in costs, they're not as on-board with that," he says. "We do offer the synthetic fertilization program as well."

Growth big challenge

Tomlinson says growing the business has been his biggest challenge over the years.

"The economy the way it is, we've had to be very sensitive to our pricing model," he says. "We're more on the high end." To boost growth his firm added the Real Green Lawn Care Software System, which he's confident gives his company another valuable customer and service tool.

Another challenge is managing the business once it has attained growth.



Tomlinson Bomberger uses a standardized process to hire carefully, and looks for employees that fit into its service-first culture.

"When my partner and I started the business, we said if we could hit \$1 million, we've made it. It took 10 years or so," Tomlinson says. "We were at the crossroads of doing that and asked ourselves do we want to grow bigger or rest on our laurels? Our designer at the time suggested we branch out and grow."

The company hired a marketing firm, which helped get the company's name out more into the community through flyers, TV and radio spots.

"We grew significantly, 25 to 30 percent a year," says Tomlinson. "We then had a different problem – growth brings different challenges and things you need to overcome. When you're going at that level, you better have your processes, customer service and scheduling in place. At the time we didn't. We were losing control. We needed to put some systems in place to manage that growth."

Weather has been another challenge for Tomlinson Bomberger, especially in scheduling jobs. Tomlinson says he is always looking for better ways to do that. For now, his company does automated calling to let clients know when a weather event passes, crews will return to the property for servicing, which is followed up with a personal call.

Managing growth

One strategy the company uses to manage growth is to divide the business lines between two operations managers: one handling the applications part of the business and the other handling other service lines.

The company added supervisors as a second management level in an effort to be more "customer friendly."

They supervise the teams, interact with customers and report directly to the operations managers.

Another strategy for managing across the business lines is to cross-train employees.

"If all you do is lawn mowing and you have a drought, you're pretty much done," he says. "In our company, we have employees that mow who can also help us with pruning or weeding."

Ongoing education is another part of employee training.

Where the crew clocks in, managers display examples of branches or weeds that are prevalent during a certain time of the year with a description of what it is and how to deal with it. It not only educates employees on what may be an issue on a property, but also helps them convey to clients that something is going on with their property that could benefit from an additional service.

"If you're a mowing guy, you're on the property every week," says Tomlinson. "You have this knowledge and there's an opportunity to be more customer-friendly, knowledgeable and continue to sell that type of service."



Tomlinson Bomberger appeals to commercial accounts because of its full compliment of property services.

Fitting in

Tomlinson looks to hire employees who fit into the company culture.

"We also look for people with similar values," he says. "Integrity is critical to us. We're honest with our co-workers, honest with our clients. We want someone interested in teamwork and doing high-quality work."

Tomlinson Bomberger runs a Step One Survey on all employees. "It's a multiple choice national survey many companies use to assess basic values and a work ethic," says Tomlinson. "We also do a pre-hire drug screen, background checks and check driving records. We want to make sure people coming in are upstanding citizens to the best of our knowledge."

Positive visibility

Tomlinson Bomberger augments its face-to-face customer communication with social media, including Twitter and Facebook.

"We've had some very nice blogs on a weekly or bi-weekly basis that are educational, giving helpful hints to our clients on such issues as planting trees and seeding lawns," Tomlinson says. "If you're not into social media today, you're missing the boat."

Tomlinson Bomberger's visibility in the community has garnered recognition, and the company was voted number one in 2011 for lawn care, landscaping and tree care by Lancaster County magazine.

Tomlinson believes his company's relationship with clients and community involvement leads to such honors. Employees are engaged in a lot of industry-related volunteer work in the community, such as the PLANET Day of Service.

Tomlinson also believes that his company's longevity is in its favor. "Thirty-one years in the community is a positive versus someone who's been here only five years," he points out.



From turf care programs to new field installations and renovation for maintenance of playing surfaces, Tomlinson Bomberger knows what it takes to

keep a beautiful lawn in even the most extreme use conditions.

Industry, company poised for growth

Tomlinson believes the industry will continue to grow.

"Statistics bear that out, particularly in certain parts of the country more than others," he says.

He believes that has to do with people wanting to enjoy their free time more. "Rather than pruning their shrubs on the weekend, they'd rather be at their son's game or Scouting event," he says. He also cites the trend of "staycations," when people spend their vacation time at home.

"In the last couple of years, we have had significantly more hardscape projects," he says. "People are improving the appearance of their homes, spending more time in their home and enjoying their home. I think that's good for the industry."

As for his company, it will continue to grow as well, Tomlinson notes. "We believe it's important to grow all of our divisions, certainly new lines of business," he says. "Christmas décor and lighting is something we're looking to incorporate into our full service line.

"I'm always looking for opportunities. Networking and going to association meetings, whether it's the local, state or national level in the green industry, is something everybody needs to be doing. By sitting around with other colleagues in business, you get a wealth of information about what works, what is beneficial."

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