

Plugging In



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Hanging holiday lights becomes value-added business venture for lawn care companies

Photos on this page courtesy of Brite Ideas Decorating.

Hanging holiday lights is a task that few look forward to, so, not surprisingly, a market has developed for professionals who hang holiday lights. Sometimes this is done by lighting specialists, but a number of lawn care and landscape companies have found that providing Christmas light services can be a lucrative sideline—at a time of the year when extra income is important.

Tyler Menee, owner of Appalachian Land Design (www.appalachianlanddesign.com) in Chattanooga, Tenn., says he began offering Christmas light services three years ago. “I was looking for something for our guys to do in the winter,” he says.

Menee says he’s taught himself about Christmas lighting design and installation, adding that most of the electrical skills involved are pretty basic, such as limiting the number of strands of lights connected together, but whenever he has a specific electrical question, he turns to a professional (conveniently, his father has been an electrician for 30 years).

He explains that he’s come across several good sources for lights and related supplies. “I find a lot of them online through Web sites like www.christmaslightsetc.com, and then I also buy them at Home Depot and Lowe’s,” Menee explains. “We can supply the lights for a job, or if the customer already has lights that are in working order, we can use theirs.”



Many homeowners, especially in high-end neighborhoods, want their houses decorated for the holidays, but don't want to deal with the hassles of designing, installing and storing the lights.

Menee feels that demand will continue to grow for Christmas light services. "Irrigation systems used to only be for the wealthy homeowners, now everyone has an irrigation system," he says. "I think Christmas lights are sort of going that same way. More and more people are realizing they don't want to deal with putting the lights up and taking them down and are willing to pay for that service." Beginning in early January, Appalachian Land Design begins to remove lights for customers, charging half of the installation price for removal.

During the growing season, Menee lets his lawn and landscape customers know that he offers Christmas light services and also markets the niche service through his company's Web site. "We even installed an online cost calculator to give customers an idea of how much it will cost," he explains of the idea he borrowed from another landscape firm in Texas offering Christmas light services. Appalachian Land Design charges by the job, rather than by the hour.

While some lawn and landscape professionals getting into the Christmas light business opt to sign up with a specialized national holiday light company, Menee says he opted not to go that route. "I looked into a couple of different franchises, but they all have specific territories, and I didn't want to be in a position where I could only serve certain neighborhoods," he explains.

In Kalamazoo, Mich., Naylor Landscape (www.naylorlandscape.com) has taken a much different approach, becoming an enthusiastic member of the Christmas Decor (www.christmasdecor.net) franchise network. President Barney Naylor credits that decision for much of his company's success in this arena. "The year before we officially started offering the service, we did one house all by ourselves, and it took forever. It took four or five guys the entire day to put up the lights. We didn't make any money on it," he recalls. "The next year we became a Christmas Décor franchisee and learned a lot about how to do things right. That year we did the same house with three guys in three hours."

Naylor Landscape now handles Christmas light installation services for about 140 homeowners, and the company has managed to turn several of those into lawn/landscape customers in the summer. "We seem to pick up one or two lawn care customers each year from our lighting customers," says Naylor. "We've learned a lot about marketing through Christmas Décor, and we've actually adapted some of those strategies to our summer business." Mailed fliers are an important part of that marketing, and something that Naylor Landscape now includes periodically to its existing customers as part of its regular billing. "We also use some direct mailing to targeted clients," Naylor adds.



Brite Ideas Decorating provides its distributors with 44-inch "linkable" light units with metal frames, which can speed installation.

Although still a service typically aimed at higher-end customers, more and more homeowners are realizing they don't want the stress and hassle of hanging their own holiday lights.

The marketing of Christmas light installation services to residential homeowners typically begins in October, says Naylor. "In some ways, the marketing is year-round. For example, all of our business cards now list both landscape management and Christmas light services." Right now, Naylor Landscape is providing holiday light services strictly to the residential market, and Naylor says, "There's not a ton of competition in our area, though some markets have already gotten competitive."

Being part of Christmas Décor gives lawn and landscape professionals access to training on installation, as well as pricing guidance. In fact, franchisees are required to undergo mandatory training. "We get manual and videos and education sessions to teach us how to do every part of the lights and decorations, which creates some standardized consistency and ensures quality," says Naylor. There's also electrical training. He explains that because Christmas lights are considered "temporary" rather than "permanent" electrical fixtures, no permitting is required. "You really have to follow the rules or you could end up with lights that don't stay on, or you could create shorts," he stresses. He's also made significant investments in high-quality, specialized ladders to ensure the safety of his crews.

Christmas Décor franchisees, rather than the individual homeowners, actually own the lighting equipment, something Naylor says many customers appreciate, because they don't need to store or maintain lights. "It makes it easier for us, as well," he adds. "We can show up on the job with the lights to install them, and we don't have to worry about coordinating with the homeowner to get the lights out and ready."

The franchisees also have special access to high-quality Christmas lights, which are superior to those you find at retail stores, says Naylor. "We don't make money repairing lights, so we buy the highest-quality lights made, and we can also specify everything we want, such as exact light spacing. And, the bulbs we use now last 3,500 hours, versus maybe 1,000 for those you can buy at the box stores."



Naylor Landscape uses a flat fee program that includes all Christmas light and decoration services. "It includes design, consultation, installation, storage, proactive maintenance visits and takedown," says Naylor. "The flat fee also includes refurbishing of all equipment—for example, even the high-quality bulbs start going out eventually, so we replace all the bulbs with new ones every three seasons, and we also offer garland and other decorations, and we also replace that periodically. So, that's all built into one fee, so we don't have to keep nickel and diming the customers. For us, it's all about the service, that's what makes it easy and a good experience

for the client. They don't have to worry about the lights at all, they just enjoy them."

Naylor says the proactive maintenance visits are an important part of the service. "People hate it when their lights go out right before Christmas, but sometimes they don't even want to call to have them fixed because they think they're being a bother. So, we check on the lights according to a schedule. Depending on when the lights are installed, we'll check on them one to three times before Christmas to be sure they're working properly."

Backyards Plus (www.backyardsplus.com) in Denver, Colo., has offered Christmas light installation services for several years, says Brent Faulkner, who oversees that program for the company. "One of the strong motivations for doing so was to help us maintain employees during that time of year," he explains. Backyards Plus purchases lights from a local distributor and has chosen not to become a franchise for one of the national holiday lighting companies.

Faulkner says he prices each job individually to be sure that it is profitable. He adds that larger jobs, though perhaps fewer in number, have shown to be more profitable than a large number of small jobs. "Pricing is a challenge, and the profit margins on each job are not large. If you price it right, though, you should be able to make money on any size job," he says.

	
As with summer lawn and landscape work, safety is an important consideration when installing holiday lights, which often involves working on roofs and with electricity.	Some lawn and landscape companies have found that offering holiday light services is one way to keep good workers employed during the slow winter months.

Still, Backyards Plus is currently debating whether it will offer the service this coming holiday season. "There is a lot of competition in this area, there are a number of other companies offering holiday lighting services," says Faulkner. In particular, he says, tree care companies are well-positioned in terms of equipment and skills to get into Christmas light installations.

In addition, Faulkner adds, "We provide snow removal services, and that takes priority." For example, when Denver experienced a particularly snowy December last year, crews were challenged to keep up with snow removal while also completing holiday light installations. Faulkner also says he's unsure how the economy will affect demand for holiday light installation services this year.

Partnering with a national company specializing in holiday decorations is one way for lawn care and landscape firms to have the best chance of succeeding in this niche market, says John Minturn with Brite Ideas Decorating (www.briteidea.com). "I've talked to many landscape companies that opt to do Christmas lights on their own, but have found that it isn't profitable," he

says. "We have a system that we've almost perfected, this is what we do."

Brite Ideas sells distributorships, so there are no royalties or renewals year-to-year for those who purchase the distributorships. Minturn says his company is careful to work with only those businesses it feels have what it takes to be successful in the business. What it provides to its distributors is marketing (it can actually do marketing mailings to zip codes provided by the distributor without the distributor having to do anything other than approve the proof of the mailing); assistance with design, including through a built-in feature in Pro Landscape design software; training in sales and installation; access to top-quality lights and decorations; and guidance along the way.

Minturn says that lawn and landscape companies can benefit from a successful holiday decoration business well beyond the added revenue. "It can create a year-round profit center for companies, and that often allows them to keep good employees on board year-round. Then, they don't have added expenses of recruiting and training new employees every year, and their customers are likely to be happier, because they're often more comfortable seeing the same people maintaining their yards rather than seeing strange new people out there every time they look," he says.

The products that Brite Ideas provides are designed for durability and longevity, as well as appearance and ease of installation. Brite Ideas has created a product it calls "linkables," which allow installers to simply connect together 44-inch metal sections that incorporate lights already in the shape of holiday designs-traditional icicles, stockings, or stars or bows, for example. This lets the installers work faster and more efficiently.

Homeowners purchase and own the lights when working with a Brite Ideas distributor, but storage of the lights when not in use is an important part of the service that distributors provide, says Minturn. "For the customer, it ensures that they never have to touch the lights. The only time they see them is when they're hanging on their home. At the same time, storing the lights provides the distributor additional income, it ensures that the lights are not damaged in any way by the homeowner, and it requires the homeowner to contact you again the following season to arrange for the lights that they own to be put up," he explains.

For many homeowners, the prospect of tangled wires, frozen fingers, slippery ladder rungs and bad bulbs is all the incentive they need to hire a professional. For landscapers who get into the installation business, holiday lights might be the gift that keeps on giving.

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