

# Residential Maintenance Thrives

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Companies around the country share the secrets of their success



Residential lawn care is about quality, but company owners around the country say that the success of their businesses relies on good customer service and marketing.

*Photos courtesy of J & M Lawn Care.*

Residential lawn maintenance can be a dynamic way to make a living. Business owners around the country have adopted creative strategies to acquire business and help their company stand out among the many lowball mowers and goers. This is a compilation of the major elements reported by several companies that have enabled them to thrive even in a trying economy. Most owners say communication or business innovations are vital to their success, rather than anything to do with the physical aspects of lawn care.

Jackson Hole, Wyo.

“You have to learn how to [manage] cash flow,” says Todd Graus, owner of Green Turf Lawnsapes with his wife Holly. The business side is the hardest thing to learn, he says, but until a company makes sure it earns more than it spends, it can’t be a profitable enterprise. By paying attention to those

details, the company has become debt-free.



Matt Hollerman of J & M Lawn Care in Alabama says that success in residential landscaping isn't so much about machinery as about great communications.

The Grauses ensure they have positive cash flow by not buying anything they can't pay for with a check, and the credit card they occasionally use out of modern necessity is paid off daily, not monthly. They also keep a cash cushion and don't buy items just because they can deduct it on their taxes. They have 20 summer employees, which they pay weekly.

They are just as diligent with clients as they are with themselves. They hang a bill on the customer's door when they leave a job and follow up with a monthly statement if it hasn't been paid by then. If they aren't paid in six weeks, they suspend work for the client until payment is received and add service charges for anything unpaid after 30 days. They haven't had a complaint about the policy from one of their thousands of customers in Wyoming and Idaho.

Dothan, Ala.

Matt Hollerman says that the crucial element in his business, apart from ensuring that he not leave a property until a quality job is done, is good communication. The owner of J & M Lawn Care says that although he's a busy man as the sole field worker for a client list of 40-his family helps in the office-he makes time to keep in close contact with every customer and makes sure they are satisfied.



Matt Hollerman, owner of J & M Lawn Care in Alabama, says that you can't be successful with quality landscaping alone.

"We try to stay strong on the communication skills," Hollerman says, because that not only builds a solid client relationship, it also gives him feedback on how he can improve his services. His company focuses on lawns, but will take on most any landscaping task. He makes regular follow-up phone calls, sends out survey letters and makes sure they have his business card.

In addition, the Internet has become an important tool for Hollerman, who is in his sixth year of business. He maintains a good Web site, which has brought him 75 percent of his clients, and he also has other Web links so anyone who searches for a landscaper in Dothan will come up with multiple hits on his name. If that isn't enough, he has an active MySpace page.

Wichita, Kan.

Brandon Hay, owner of Hay Lawn Care, tells a related story. He says the biggest factor in his success is that his customers know he is the owner/operator, and that he is always accessible. He establishes a relationship with his clients, who once were solely residential customers, but now include businesses and homeowner associations.

Hay learned this the hard way. When he was a junior in high school, 13 years ago, he bought an existing lawn care business. He was introduced to his client list, almost all homeowners, and discovered that honesty, reliability and accountability are the core ingredients for a long-lasting client list.

"You treat people right, and they will stick with you," says Hay, who now has eight employees and has kept all of those original clients who are still in the area. In fact, he has seen no downturn during this economic struggle, and his business is growing steadily. He encourages his customers to tell him right up front what they want, and he accommodates them. One other factor has helped; Hay cultivates clients who need more than one service, but above all, his clients know that even if he isn't right there on the job, he is only a phone call away.

Bird In Hand, Pa.

Research is one key to the success of WiseGrass, a turfgrass health business

run by Paul Stoltzfus and his wife Marina. They wanted to find out how to create a solid business, so they first began to read magazines outside their own field to see how companies in the aviation, hairdressing, computer and other fields became successful. This led him to the conclusion that it is quality that counts most, and he set out to improve his own product.

Another set of research was to find out what the people in Lancaster County want from any business, and especially women, who do most of the purchasing for the household. They found that local women want to make sure the job gets done, that there are no hassles in the business relationship, and that they can have confidence in the company's ability to do the job right. This led them to creating active Web site with how-to lawn videos and a green industry blog, raising their credibility.

Once a customer is contacted, Stoltzfus draws up a service plan based on square footage of the lawn. Payments are made evenly and monthly over the span of a year, and the first month's payment is the same even though much of the company's work for the year will be accomplished then.

"I don't make any money the first year," Stoltzfus says. Once the client sees how the health of his lawn is enhanced, they usually stay with the company long-term. Clients could opt out after those early enhancements, but over 90 percent have honored their agreements, even though they are not contracted. The company has even been able to raise prices to improve profitability.

O'Fallon, Mo.

"The main thing I try to do is return phone calls as soon as possible," says Jeff Koper. Gaining business can be as simple as that sometimes, because potential clients repeatedly tell him that landscapers often are slow to return calls or don't do it at all. He tries to do it the same day, even if he's busy, and his business has grown steadily.

Koper, the owner of KustomKare Lawn & Landscape, works in the field with his two employees, but technology allows him to accomplish communication tasks that he couldn't in the past. For example, his home office phone has a business line, and he uses two area codes, one for St. Louis County and one for St. Charles County. He does that because many people won't place a long distance call. In addition, he set up e-mail inquiries to be directed from the Web site to his Blackberry, which enables him to respond quickly.

Using technology also saves money. He is able to do billing through e-mail, and he uses his cable company package deal to set up his office phone.

Nashua, N.H.

Deciding what to communicate to potential clients is important, and Jim Campanella, president of Lawn Dawg, Inc., long ago noticed that nine out of 10 people in his area were asking whether the practices and products of his company were safe for people, pets and the environment. "I knew we had to be able to answer that question," he says, so he came up with his company's Earthcare strategy for environmental responsibility, which is now the byword

of the company.

"It's a different way to present IPM," says Campanella, who notes that most people don't know what IPM is, but can relate to the term Earthcare. It is prominent on the company's Web site and in its presentations. Customer education is important, because they want to know how the bugs will be killed and the grass fertilized. They appreciate being informed about the company's policy of using custom-blended, organic-based fertilizers as well as commercial pesticides that are utilized in the safest and most responsible way possible.

Customer retention, Campanella says, comes from quality lawns. Just as important is good communication. Lawn Dawg field workers are trained to maintain good relationships by knocking on customers' doors. They communicate before, during and after a treatment. The extra time spent must work, because the company now has 78 employees serving 15,000 mostly residential customers from seven locations in New England and New York.

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