

Savoring the Tough HOA Market



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As Bemus Landscape approaches its 50th anniversary, it keeps finding new ways to deliver first-in-class service

Bemus Landscape, Inc.

Principals: Founder Bill Bemus, General Manager Jon Parry

Founded: 1973

Headquarters: San Clemente, Calif.

Markets: Southern California

Services: Landscape maintenance, environmental services, tree care, street sweeping, landscape construction, and green waste recycling

Employees: About 400

Website: www.bemuslandscape.com

Homeowners' Associations (HOAs) are the ultimate in hybrid management structure. Landscape management companies coordinate with a property manager, representing the property management company and a board of directors. These boards typically consist of unpaid volunteers chosen by property owners as their representatives. In some cases, a landscape committee, appointed by the board, is also involved.

If the HOA has 200 homes, there are 200 or more bosses to consider – and, theoretically, that many bosses to please.

While all those eyes have the opportunity to watch what's being done in their HOA, they may not have the same desires or goals. Keeping everyone happy is a huge challenge for any service provider. It's one Bemus Landscape, Inc., welcomes, says General Manager Jon Parry. He says HOAs comprise 70 percent of his company's maintenance business, with commercial property maintenance representing the remaining percentage.



Plantings integrated with hardscape and water features create a relaxing area that is appealing, yet low-maintenance.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BEMUS LANDSCAPE.

Based in San Clemente, Calif., Bemus Landscape has four satellite locations and has been serving Southern California since 1973. New landscape installations and landscape renovations make up about 20 percent of its overall business.

Bemus provides total property maintenance: irrigation management, tree work, mowing, trimming, pruning, color changeouts, and green waste recycling, all with in-house personnel. Parry says, "With a single-source provider there's no question about which company is responsible. It works better for us and for the clients."

Job sequencing

Bemus plans everything, from the initial presentation to the onsite work, to make the process easier for the property manager and seamless and quick for the HOA board.

"While most of the process in terms of customer service is channeled to the property manager, final decisions are made by the board," says Parry. "The people on the board are the ones authorized to make the decisions since it's the owners' property and their property values are at stake."

Preparation for all this starts with careful job sequencing prior to presenting a proposal.

"We break down all the steps at the beginning to decide how we're going to service a job on an ongoing basis," says Parry. "Specific tasks, such as maintenance of a slope that is planted to native and drought-tolerant plants rather than manicured turfgrass, don't require weekly service. Since many tasks with different maintenance requirements are involved, we don't do all that is needed on a site in any one week. We'll set up a property on a four-week to 10-week rotation so that all maintenance will take place within one of those sequenced intervals."

The property is mapped out, with each section identified and color-coded. Every little detail is plotted beginning with when the crews pull up on a job site, including where to park. Everyone knows their role in every segment of that week's rotation, making service more efficient and more consistent.



Tasks with different maintenance requirements are integrated into color-coded job sequence rotation maps for each job site, providing detailed guidelines for the crews.

Job sequencing has improved efficiency in the "art and science" of the bidding process, too.

"We have a variety of production rates based on the job particulars," says

Parry. "This breakdown helps us hone-in on the exact numbers." The color-coded sequencing is incorporated into the multiple copies of the bid presentation packet for the HOA's board. It helps them envision how the process works to their benefit.

Implementing the program

"We focus the majority of our efforts on the basic five things that make the biggest impact: no weeds; no trash; no dead plants; green grass; and beautiful flowers. Our decades of experience tell us that 90 percent of dissatisfaction and complaints can be eliminated by concentrating on these things," says Parry.

Yet, as much as every company likes to standardize things, Parry says, "It's more important to provide the service the client requires on their terms."

Each account is assigned a client representative and a field supervisor. The representative serves as the client's eyes and ears on the job and handles all client communication. With smartphones, access is available 24/7. The rep anticipates client needs and takes the proactive management approach in bringing things to their attention. All day-to-day operations go through the field supervisor, but they don't directly interact with the client.

"Our field supervisors have from up to 10 sites under their care, with anywhere from 10 to 30 people working under them. Each crew has a foreman. For general maintenance, the number of crews, crew members and equipment assigned is all dependent on the specific site. We also have specialty crews designated for tree care and irrigation," explains Parry.

The client representatives report to the director of client representatives. The field supervisors report to one of four branch managers. Foremen of the specialty crews also report to the branch managers. The field supervisor contacts the branch manager when making the request for specialty work. The director of client representatives and the branch managers report to the president of the maintenance division.

All the client representatives walk the job sites in their portfolio every month. They take notes and photos and write a landscape report based on their observations.

"IPads have made that process even more efficient, allowing them to complete the report and email it off before they leave the site," says Parry. "A copy goes to the predetermined contact, usually the property manager, but it could go to the board of directors or landscape committee or all three entities, as well as the director of client representatives."

Any issues within the report requiring action are channeled to the field supervisor. Minor work is handled immediately. The field supervisor discusses any larger issue with the branch manager before acting on it. If expenditures are required, the request is presented to the board for authorization prior to action.



Caring for beautiful, yet low-maintenance, landscape areas is plotted into the job sequencing rotation.

Parry says, “Should an emergency occur, work deviates to deal with it, then moves back to the predetermined sequence. The sequencing program is reviewed annually, fine-tuned if needed, and reiterated to keep everyone moving in the right direction,” says Parry.

Going green

Parry notes their services extend across numerous water districts, including the Irvine Ranch Water District, at the forefront nationally in terms of efficient irrigation management and reclaimed water usage. Many of the districts have financial incentives for water savings or upgrades to conserve water.

“Our irrigation manager inspects all new jobs, then works closely with the client to recommend specific upgrades,” says Parry. For HOAs, smart controllers are the first step, followed by more efficient heads and more intensive management of the water data.

“The manager uses an ROI calculator to illustrate how long it will take to recoup the costs of doing the upgrade. He manages the implementation and helps with the paperwork to capture all the related incentives. We also have a specialty in erosion control and in capturing or diverting runoff on building construction sites.”

To most efficiently comply with California’s heavily regulated chemical use, Bemus has one designated individual in charge of the chemical-related issues. This chemical manager handles all purchase and usage decisions, oversees the applications, and ensures appropriate data is recorded to ensure compliance.

Bemus recycles 98 percent of its green waste. Materials are taken from the job sites to the company’s in-house processing location where they are converted to mulch. The mulch is then returned for use on the sites.

“Green waste recycling is probably neutral from a monetary standpoint, but it’s good horticultural, good for the environment, and clients like it; so it’s a plus overall,” Parry says.

If a landscape architect is required for major renovation work or new construction, Bemus can help the client make that connection.



Client representatives walk each Bemus job site and record images and their observations onto iPads.

“We work with the architect on key elements of the design process for most effective long-term maintenance,” says Parry. “We also do the installation. For renovation upgrades below that level, we handle the design process as well.”

The IQ Program

Bemus Landscape has implemented an additional step they call the IQ (Improve Quality) Program. An independent inspector walks every site once a quarter, grading it for job performance based on a broad set of horticultural criteria.

Parry says, "The criteria are clearly defined so we are able to quantify the results and measure progress. Each site must meet a minimum standard. If one should fail that, the inspector revisits the site in six weeks to ensure improvements have been made. Employees are evaluated according to the site scores, with incentives based upon those results."

All of the scores are posted and made public within the company, so there's competition between the crews, as well as the internal incentive within the crews on each site to better their scores.

That brings everything into alignment, according to Parry. "If we do the job sequencing properly it produces the IQ outcomes that we want. As the crews' scores improve, we tighten up the specifications, constantly improving quality. With the IQ Program, client feedback on site conditions has been so positive that we plan on sharing the reports with clients in the not too distant future."

Initiating these processes took quite a bit of training, but with approximately three years of experience, they're now ingrained, notes Parry. "Though the standards are more exacting, knowing precisely what is expected of them actually lowers the stress level for our employees. And the processes help fulfill our ultimate goal, which is better service for our clients."

Suz Trusty is a partner with her husband, Steve, in Trusty & Associates, Council Bluffs, Iowa. She has been involved in the green industry for over 40 years. Contact her at suz@trusty.bz.