

Seek and Succeed



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Stuck in a rut, Arkansas landscaper Terry Delany sought the guidance of people eager to help him become an entrepreneur

GroundSERV Property Services

President: Terry Delany

Industry Involvement: PLANET Trailblazer

Community Service: GroundSERV donates annual maintenance services to The Children's House

Headquarters: Fayetteville, Ark.

Founded: 2001 as AAA Lawns, Inc.; renamed and repurposed in 2009 as GroundSERV

Market Area: Northwest Arkansas (larger area with Emergency Storm Response Team)

Services: Landscape maintenance, installation, enhancements, seasonal color and mulch, irrigation repair, snow and ice, pressure washing, parking lot striping and sweeping, tree care, emergency services.

Website: www.groundserv.com

You don't have to go it alone when building a successful landscape business. In fact, you will save yourself a lot of false starts and, ultimately, grief and sleepless nights if you seek out and emulate others who have, in a sense, "blazed the trail" before you.

That's exactly what Terry Delany, owner of GroundSERV, did, but not after almost working himself to death getting his career as a landscape company owner off the ground. His story is typical of most startups.

Delany, 39, started his business in 1996 in Fayetteville, Ark., with a 1984 F150, a trailer and a 21-inch Toro push mower. He called his new venture Southeast Landscape Management. In 2001, he renamed the company AAA Lawns,

Inc., and took on two partners. Still, it was hard getting traction in their market in northwest Arkansas.

"We were trying to be everything to everybody. We even did synthetic putting greens, Christmas lighting, just about everything," recalls Delany. "We learned that we couldn't be good at everything." For three years, AAA Lawns struggled to find the formula for landscape success, instead, Delany and his partners found day after day of hard work and frustration. Delany knew there had to be a better way. He took his first big step in the right direction in 2004 when he attended his first event sponsored by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA, which later merged into PLANET).

Delany attended a presentation by Michael "Mike" Rorie, then owner of Groundsmasters, based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Rorie shared how he grew Groundsmasters to be the largest landscape company in Ohio by focusing exclusively on commercial maintenance and other closely related services. That decision proved to be fateful for Delany, who says Rorie's story gave him just what he had been seeking.

"I came back to my business and told my employees that we were going to drop most of our services and concentrate on commercial maintenance," says Delany, who was now sole owner of the company. Not everybody in the company felt it was a good idea. In fact, it took more than a few months to generate enough money to pay the bills, admits Delany.



Offering a broader approach to property services, in 2009 Delany changed his AAA Lawns, Inc., to GroundSERV.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GROUNDSEV.

It turned out to be the right call at the right time. The company went from \$400,000 to more than \$1 million in revenues within a year and a half; AAA Lawns was off and running. Still, Delany was unsure how to manage the growth and keep the company financially healthy. He realized he needed more guidance.

He turned to consultants Tony Bass and Bill Arman. Both had run and grown successful landscape companies. "Arman helps us with the numbers, but mostly with how to take care of our customers and work with our employees," says Delany. "I still talk with Arman, who is with the Harvest Group, and I learn something new every week."



Delany says that from 2004 to 2007 AAA Lawns slowly gained prominence in the commercial maintenance market in northwest Arkansas, a region that serves as headquarters for three large companies: Wal-Mart, Tyson Chicken and J.B. Hunt trucking. But he felt there was more opportunity for his company if only he could unlock it. One of the keys lay in a PLANET Crystal Ball report. When Delany read "Marketing, Invent Your Future," he saw his next business-building step.

"One of the things the report talked about was companies that offered

multiple outdoor services for their clients. After reading that, I decided to expand our company's outdoor services, but only as the services applied to our commercial customers," recalls Delany

"I noticed that some of our maintenance customers were hiring six different companies for their outdoor services, things like parking lot sweeping and striping and window washing, and I thought why not incorporate them under a single company like ours."

The concept seems easy enough, but making it work is a multiyear process, which, in 2009, led Delany to change the company's name from AAA Lawns to GroundSERV to better describe the expanded vision of the company.

The company added clients, but most of the growth came from providing more services to each client. During the 2008 recession, his company grew 10 percent, with double-digit growth increasing every year since. He attributes that, in part, to the region's stable economy thanks to the presence of Wal-Mart, Tyson Chicken and J.B. Hunt.

Trailblazers Pay Back

"This is a great industry," says Terry Delany, owner of GroundSERV. "Everybody in this industry will share everything about the business they know if you're not in their region, if you're not a competitor."

That's what Delany, whose business operates out of Fayetteville, Ark., discovered when he joined the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) and went to his first national event in 2004. That's when he heard Mike Rorie of Groundmasters, Inc. share how he was growing his Cincinnati-based company.

Rorie, who was an ALCA Trailblazer, eventually became a mentor to Delany, who describes it as the first huge step in transforming his company from just another landscape company into a regional power. As part of the program, Delany traveled from Fayetteville to Cincinnati, where Rorie showed him his operation and shared many of his experiences in building his company. The two still talk occasionally, much to Delany's delight.

The ALCA has since merged with the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) to form the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Even so, the Trailblazer program is still going strong, in fact, it's growing.

So, what is a Trailblazer?

A Trailblazer is an experienced and successful PLANET member who has agreed to devote one full day each year to mentoring a less-experienced or less-successful PLANET member. The mentoring is conducted on-site, either at one or the other's operation. Becoming a Trailblazer isn't as simple as just signing up; you have to go through a review process by the Specialty Group and Membership Committee.

For more information about the PLANET Trailblazer program, please type PLANET

Trailblazer in your search engine.

This past September, Delany was among a small group of landscape professionals who became Trailblazers. He says it's a huge thrill and he's looking forward to sharing what he's learned with a less-experienced business owner. It's a way of paying back, he says.

"In what other industry can you talk to somebody who has built a multimillion dollar business and they will tell you everything they know about how they did it? Why wouldn't you take advantage of that," asks Delany.



Snow and ice management is just one of many services in GroundSERV's "one-shop" philosophy. Some of the services are performed by trusted subcontractors.

"It's taken us two and a half years to get to the point we're at now. It hasn't been easy," says Delany. "You have to start by defining and instilling your core values into your company and, of course, you have to get the right affiliates on board."

By affiliates, Delaney means subcontractors. In most cases, subcontractors actually perform many of the services that GroundSERV offers under its brand. It's an arrangement that works well for GroundSERV, the subs who can count on a steady stream of work, and for commercial clients who look to one company for many services.

"If one of our commercial clients has a problem with an outdoor service, they immediately know who to call – me," says Delany.

The subs benefit because they can reduce or eliminate their marketing, selling and administrative costs; the customers benefit because they no longer have to deal with perhaps a half-dozen service companies; and GroundSERV benefits by getting a markup above the cost of the subs.

That's not to imply that Delany thinks he has the game of business completely figured out, not by a long shot. He retains an ongoing relationship with consultant Bill Arman, and he put together a three-person advisory board that he meets with monthly. Next year it will probably meet quarterly, he says.

"These are three local businessmen, people from outside the industry, who have built and run very successful companies on their own. We talk almost exclusively about growing profitably and about planning one to three years out," says Delany. "I pay them a stipend, but they're not doing this for the money. It's something they like to do, and I value the information and experiences they share with me."



Even with his market's relatively healthy economy and a low (by national standards anyway) unemployment rate, property owners have become more careful with how they spend money for services.

"We thought we had seen some of the lowest prices we were ever going to see, but we're starting to see some desperate pricing in our market," says Delany, who acknowledges that pricing is becoming an increasingly bigger issue with clients.

But the bigger issue he sees in keeping his company in growth mode, at least for the approaching season, is educating his clients to his "one-stop outdoor services" concept. He says it often takes more than a few visits or reminders before they get it.

"Three or four years ago I was run ragged, worried and not sure what to do next," says Delany. "Now, I spend my time meeting with my clients, supporting my management team – I have great managers – and planning for the future."

Ron Hall is editor-in-chief of Turf magazine.