

Slow, Steady and Vigilant



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Connecticut firm relies upon business basics to stay in step with changing economic and market conditions

E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting

President: Ed Quinn

Founded: 1984

Headquarters: Glastonbury, Conn.

Markets: New England for mulch and bark-blowing services; Connecticut only for other services

Services: Landscape maintenance, fertilization, landscape design and installation, erosion control and hydroseeding, snow and ice management, commercial and construction, low-voltage lighting, mulch blowing services and playground fiber, pavers, retaining walls and natural stone

Employees: 35 (peak season)

Website: www.eaquinn.com

Ed Quinn had a sense of what it takes to run a successful business as a teenager. He started a residential mowing business in 1984 when he was a junior in high school. He drove to jobs in a Mustang, a mower wedged into its trunk. During his senior year he added snowplowing. By the time he graduated from high school he was providing full-time residential and commercial maintenance services with a small crew and two trucks.

E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting has several service categories, including landscape design, stonework and pavers, commercial work, outdoor living and landscape management, with each segment headed by a crew leader.

The company works throughout southern New England in the residential, commercial and government bid markets, and the company has revenues just short of \$4 million.

Changing with the times

E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting took bold steps toward success just as the economy was starting to sour. “A good chunk of our business was commercial; we saw the construction market changing as a result of the economy,” says Matt Bagshaw, operations manager. “We’ve always had a residential side as far as maintenance goes, but we re-tooled and re-gearred to aim towards the landscape design and build type projects for higher-end residential when we saw the market changing.

“We’re fortunate enough that we’re in a part of the country that really wasn’t hit as badly as other parts of the country were, so that’s helped us significantly. We’ve been able to have steady growth through economic times when other people were struggling and we attribute that to trying to change with the times.”

As a result of the strategic shift, the company did more residential work than commercial work last year. “We’re finding a lot of these are people have been in their house for 20 years and they’re looking to overhaul,” Bagshaw says, adding that property owners are investing money into their properties instead of going on vacations. “They’re turning their backyards into something they can use every day.”

Employees help company succeed

One of the keys to the company’s success was that Ed Quinn was “very smart five years ago seeing this downturn coming and changing our market direction,” notes Bagshaw. “We were already in a good place when the downturn happened.”

Planning slow and steady growth has been another effective strategy, Bagshaw says, adding that the company will not take on more in the way of services or projects than it can do at the highest level.

Another positive influence has been hiring people who fit in with the company’s culture, are accepting of new ideas, and whose work ethic is to not shy away from tough jobs, he adds. The company has 35 employees during the peak season, with about 12 staying on in the winter.

“We can train people, but if they don’t fit in with the culture, that’s not good,” Bagshaw says.



The company has about 35 employees during peak season. It uses 23 vehicles plus production equipment. The company maintains a full-time crew of 12 during the winter and employs as many as 68 people for snow services. PHOTOS COURTESY OF E.A. QUINN LANDSCAPE CONTRACTING.

The company utilizes the H2B seasonal guest worker program. “Our general labor force is very secure. The employees return every year. Some of them have been here 10 years,” says Bagshaw.

E.A. Quinn offers its employees health and dental insurance, paid vacation

and sick time, paid holidays, bonuses and profit sharing. "If you treat the help well, it's going to treat you well," Bagshaw says.

The company also hosts parties and takes the workers fishing once a year. The company not only paid for computer training for the H2B workers at a local college last year, but also bought them laptop computers.

"We're helping them get acclimated," says Bagshaw. "To help them communicate with their families is huge. To do the Skype thing, they really enjoy that."

In addition, E.A. Quinn helps employees obtain their commercial driver's licenses. "It helps us as well as them," Bagshaw notes.

Total-control maintenance

Landscape maintenance is normally done with an annual contract. Property maintenance services include pest control, fertilization, ornamental and shrub pruning, hedge trimming, parking lot sweeping, spring and fall clean-ups, overseeding and new lawn installation, streamline mulch installation, and comprehensive property care.

"We're very picky about what we take on for maintenance clients," says Bagshaw. "Our approach is 'all or none'. We don't like to pick and choose service. Fertilizer is an example. The watering, the mowing cycles, the environment, changes in the weather all affect how the lawn is going to look.

"If we don't have control of all aspects of that, then we can't ensure the final product. So we try to incorporate everything from annual plants to the weekly mowing to the fertilizer to the bed weed control right on through. If a customer doesn't want us to have that total control, we usually just shy away from it because we don't want to put our name on it. To put your name on something, you want the quality to be there. We don't take on just anybody who calls. They have to meet our criteria."

The company uses a four-step seasonal approach to apply the fertilizer in spring, early summer, late summer and fall. "We used to just refer clients to preferred contractors, but to get that total control and do it right, we decided to do it in-house," Bagshaw says. "Our area has a lot of higher-end executives and people who don't want to put up with crabgrass or any weeds. They want a perfect-looking lawn."

E.A. Quinn uses Polyon controlled -release fertilizer, which is released strictly by soil temperature, and its reactive coating allows for fewer applications. Nutrients release through diffusion and it is not affected by rainfall or irrigation.



E.A. Quinn is a full-service landscape company, offering complete property maintenance along with high-end design/build and landscape lighting services.

Organic products on the market aren't as effective and many of his clients aren't willing to tolerate that, Bagshaw says.

Umbrella services

Optional property maintenance services include lime application, fungicide application, bad weed control programs, core aeration and overseeding, hydroseeding, and new lawn installation and soil sampling.

The company uses hydroseeding for lawn establishment, and the erosion control services include erosion mat/control blanket installation, flexible growth mat installation, bonded fiber matrix installation, tackifier, dust control, hay mulch spraying, bio-swale installation, National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System compliance, soil and slope stabilization, straw wattles and roll installation, and temporary cover.

E.A. Quinn is also a certified playground mulch installer, with playgrounds being the biggest market for the company's mulch- and bark-blowing services. The company also provides services such as blown-in topsoil and compost, live roof installations and terraseeding

These services are primarily offered throughout New England, sometimes working for other landscapers who do not have the equipment to do it. However, most of the company's maintenance services are performed in Connecticut only.

E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting does a fair share of federal, state and commercial construction jobs, with most of the erosion control services being directed to federally-funded jobs.

"Pretty much every bid we see now is a lot more in-depth," says Bagshaw. "Another aspect of business we're getting into and haven't seen much up to this point is invasive species removal. That's proven to be quite good for us and a unique niche. Every single bid has invasive species removal on it as the guidelines get more strict every year."

Equipment purchases "strategic"

There often is no downtime for the company, which offers snow and ice management services during the off-season. Therefore, even the equipment purchases are strategic, in that the company seeks to buy equipment that can serve more than one purpose.

"Instead of dedicating a single truck to hydroseeding, all we do is wench that body off and we can put a dump truck or flatbed body on it or move equipment with that truck or haul snow. It's so versatile for us," says Bagshaw. "All of our trucks usually have multiple purposes."



The company has a full-time mechanic for in-house repairs, who also has a mobile truck he uses for onsite repairs if equipment breaks down on the job.

Designing for the future

One of the key components in landscape design that gets overlooked in the

industry is designing for easy maintenance, Bagshaw says. "We see a lot of bids that come in for commercial projects that we question," he says. "Obviously the person who wrote the plan didn't have any real world experience in installing. We tend to tell that to the customer. Hopefully they entrust us to steer them in the right direction when we're doing the designs."

Sometimes when customers come up with ideas, they don't think about how difficult it may be to maintain it, Bagshaw says. "When our designer is there, he will get some basic concepts of what they'd like to see and we'll come back to them with an initial design. At that point, we will explain to them why we've done certain things."

In one case, the designer had to explain why someone's plans created a situation where there would be no access for lawn mowers or future improvements to the backyard. "We altered the plans to curtail what needed to be done for future improvements and maintenance," Bagshaw says.



E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting, using a 45-yard Express Blower and a 20-yard Finn unit, offers mulch-blowing services from New Jersey to Maine. The units save labor in mulching playgrounds and large commercial properties.

Comprehensive marketing strategies

E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting casts a wide net for marketing, putting a strong presence on the Internet. Its new website is interactive, allowing customers to pay bills online, for example.

"We're trying to establish ourselves as the forefront of information," says Bagshaw. "We've gotten into blogging, YouTube."

The company continues to do magazine ads and print advertising and puts out a monthly newsletter for clients.

Networking is another key marketing strategy. "Our owner is very active in a local Rotary club," Bagshaw says. "Right now, we are working on a project for a wounded soldier who's come back from Afghanistan. Our town is building this guy a house and our owner is one of the chairpersons on that project, so we're lining up the tradespeople."

The company is also involved in the local Chamber of Commerce and other networking groups. "The more people you encounter, the more possible leads you can get," Bagshaw points out.

Sustainability practices save money

The company is big on sustainability. It recycles as much material as it can, composts landscape material to make mulch, and grinds up and crushes construction and demolition waste from landscape installation jobs for gravel for road construction. "We haven't bought topsoil in years," says Bagshaw. "The days of dumping in a big pile in the woods are over," he adds. "Every

single thing pretty much has a home or re-use right now.”

The company has even taken its green efforts inside, retrofitting its office with energy-saving light fixtures and ballasts. “That’s one of the things people like to see is that you try to keep the environment in mind,” Bagshaw says.

Monitoring the political landscape

As the industry changes over time, E.A. Quinn Landscape Contracting will poise itself to play a role in those changes, Bagshaw says.

“We try to stay active in some of the associations,” he says. “One of my concerns now is the pesticide legislation being pushed. If some people have their way, we’re going to end up like Canada where we really can’t do anything. There’s going to be a lot of fall-out.”

In the local region, there are regulations preventing the use of pesticides or chemicals on the grounds of elementary and middle schools.

The H2B program also is becoming an issue “because of the pressure the government has put on about the program itself,” says Bagshaw. “We’ve been talking to our local politicians. It’s got us nervous. If they take away H2B, that would be a huge problem for us.”

Bagshaw says there’s a misconception that H2B workers are taking jobs of local citizens. “Our point is that nobody wants to do some of the jobs these guys are doing,” Bagshaw points out. “We’re in fact creating jobs with these guys, because they’re doing the general labor, but we’re bringing on the managers and the support to keep them going.”

In the past five years, the company has added two H2B workers, but has brought on five managers, Bagshaw adds.



After E. A. Quinn installs a beautiful landscape on a residential property, the homeowners usually hire E.A. Quinn to maintain the lawn and the ornamentals. This particular project posed serious terrain challenges but finished up beautifully.

“In Connecticut, we have to post a job ad every year as part of the H2B regulation in showing we tried to hire local people first,” Bagshaw says. “Last year, we had 130 people apply; only 25 showed up. We told them all to come at the same time. We said if you don’t have a clean driving record you can’t pass a drug test, don’t waste our time. Almost all of them walked out. There were five left. We interviewed the final five and after we did the background checks on them, there was nobody to hire. We did at one point offer a job to one guy and he didn’t show.”

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