

Sound Business



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For Rick Bayo, running a successful landscape company is all about applying sound business principles that will keep it afloat regardless of the state of the economy.

“The nature of the business is being able to roll with the punches. Every year is different,” says Bayo, owner of GreenScene Lawn & Garden, Dryden, New York.

The principles he follows include focusing on employee retention, maintaining good relationships with vendors who will be there when needed, and keeping an eye out for strategic moves in services and service areas that will reap bottom-line benefits.

It’s a lesson he’s applied over time since starting GreenScene Lawn & Garden 15 years ago.

Growing up in northeast Pennsylvania, Bayo had worked for his uncle’s landscape company. That experience led to his interest in the industry and upon moving to Ithaca, New York, where he started his own company. Within four years, he bought out another small company. Today, he has 18 peak-season employees, eight of them year-round, servicing both commercial and residential customers.

GreenScene Lawn & Gardens works in Ithaca, Dryden, Cortland, Lansing, Cayuga Heights, Aurora, the Finger Lakes region and most of the southern tier of New York, most of it within an hour drive of his company’s location.

GreenScene Lawn & Garden

President: Rick Bayo

Headquarters: Dryden, New York

Year founded: 1999

Services: Landscape maintenance, installations, spring and fall cleanups, hardscape, fencing, decks, walls, walkways, arbors, drainage and water containment, rain gardens, Japanese gardens and gravel driveways, among other services.

Service area: Ithaca, Dryden, Cortland, Lansing, Cayuga Heights, Aurora and the Finger Lakes region

Employees: 18 in season; eight year-round

Website: www.greenscenelg.com

“Since I’ve made the commitment to go a little bit further, the jobs have gotten a little better,” he says. “We’re positioned better to do it now. I’ve set up things to make it more efficient to work those jobs.”

Bayo also would like to get more into campus maintenance, given his company’s proximity to Cornell University and Ithaca College and other schools in outer lying areas.

Bayo attributes several factors to his company’s growth over time.

“Having a good staff, wanting to keep them, having the ability to grow and enjoying the aspect of actually doing business, not just the landscape end of things, but following everything up with good business sense,” he says of his business philosophy.

By good business sense, Bayo means avoiding trying to do everything himself.

“You can’t really grow a business and be in the field all day,” he opines. “It’s one or the other at a certain point. Even though I love the work, I don’t do much of it anymore. I have to put more emphasis right now on growth.”

Keeping good employees is key for company growth, says Bayo, who concentrates a lot of his efforts on picking the right employee in the first place. He doesn’t necessarily seek landscaping experience, but he does look for candidates that don’t shirk from physical labor, such as construction.

“This (physical labor) is a real slap in the face for people who have never done this kind of work,” he says.

“A seasonal business is tough,” Bayo points out. “We have about 70 percent employee retention, which is good. We don’t have to retrain every year, so that helps.”

Developing leadership from within will ensure customers get the service Bayo wants them to.

"I've had good luck with bringing guys through the ranks. I think the new employees see that and realize that's what we're trying to do," he says. "I think that offers promise to the new guys."

In distinguishing his company from others, Bayo insists on quality work.

"The skill level of our guys is outstanding," he adds. "They are good in customer service and communication. That's such a big part of the business. When you've got 10 different jobs going on in the day, whether it be a small job or a big job, I think being on site, double-checking and making sure the customers are happy is important. A lack of follow-up is where a lot of contractors make their mistakes. They might be good at their job, but they're not really good at their business."

To ensure quality control for his own company, Bayo has a management team of five men who have been with him for five to 10 years, have a good sense of the business and want the same thing for the business.

Managers will bring in new employees to see if they're a good fit.

"I'm always looking to hire," Bayo says. "It's trial and error with the labor sometimes. A lot of companies make the mistake of just trying to hire for the season and look at trying to hire in May. I try to hire all year long because you never know when you're going to get somebody good."

Bayo can tell within a few weeks if an employee isn't going to work out. But before he turns someone loose, he makes sure that if they're not a good fit for one service area that perhaps they may be in another area.

"Maybe the guy doesn't work out so well for mowing, but he does some landscaping," Bayo adds. "If it's not working out after two weeks, you really are going to know it and you have to part ways."

Bayo says even though he believes he has been successful in finding the right employees for the right position, employees and payroll remain his biggest challenge.

"It's an area where you can always improve. I'm pulled in so many different directions and wear so many hats for this company. I think I'm getting better at delegating and putting specific people in charge of specific tasks. But I think that's always going to be the biggest challenge," he says.

Bayo is seeing growth in landscaping, hardscaping and in maintenance, too, where the company is adding "a little bit more" every season. If that growth continues, Bayo may add another crew for next season.

"We're striving to get the high-end residential work we like to do and work with the materials that we like to work with and picking and choosing the jobs we like to be doing," he adds.

The company recently expanded to Portland, New York, and built a shop about 15 minutes away from there.

"We're trying to get into that market a little bit more for maintenance and lawn mowing and we've been doing project work there," Bayo says. "The location of our new shop opened doors there a little bit more."

While Bayo has expanded his company's services and its service area, he also has reduced some, such as fertilizing.

"It wasn't a profitable market when we were licensed and registered to do that because we didn't have the right management there," he says, adding he also does not have a "strong interest" in chemical treatments. He subs that work to other companies.

"They can do it cheaper than me because that's all they do," he adds.

One of the trends his company is seeing is a growing interest among the public in low-maintenance and environmentally friendly landscape services. They also want landscapes that survive heavy deer pressure, which is common throughout most of his firm's service area.

"That limits us quite a bit as far as what we can plant and where," says Bayo.

In terms of marketing his company, Bayo says having a good website is a must these days.

"Pictures are worth 1,000 words is a cliché, but it's also so true. I think having a good online presence is key these days. That includes making sure you're coming up in the search engines," he adds.

Equipped for success

No matter how good employees are, if they don't have good equipment, they can't provide quality service, Bayo realizes. The company's mowers range from small push mowers to large Bush Hogs, his firm's dump trucks are always seemingly in use and the firm's Toro Dingo machines have proven to be reliable labor savers, he says.

"Spending time to do the 'behind the scenes' work is so important because the equipment is not cheap and you've got to stay on top of it," he points out.

To that end, Bayo likes to have a mutually respectful relationship with his vendors.

"I like to be good to them and I like to be treated well," he says. "I pay my bills on time and stay on top of things. I like somebody who is going to go the extra mile for me in a pinch because they know I'm a loyal customer. Loyalty is key. You don't start off in business with those relationships," he says. "You develop them over time. I definitely have some allies in the industry and that's helped out tremendously."

Like other landscape contractors, Bayo has been adjusting to weather fluctuations, such as the hard, long winter that hit the region in the past year.

"The nature of the business is being able to roll with the punches," he says. "Every year is different. It's really hard to predict. Two years ago, we were mowing lawns in early April, and this year we weren't mowing lawns until the end of May. You've got to be willing and able to deal with it."

Like some contractors, he started out from his garage. Recently, he built a shop.

"Some people working out of a small garage end up staying there," he adds. "It was nice to build a shop and move into my own space. After being in business for 14 years, I got to press reset and do everything exactly the way I wanted."

"It's a better work environment just to have the extra room, working off a bigger piece of land and be able to get more equipment and tractor-trailer loads in."

Bayo says it all comes back full circle to employees.

"At a certain point, these employees are going to make as much as they're going to make, but them having the right tools for their jobs is absolutely key," he says. "They take so much pride in their work. They're not necessarily always motivated by money as much as they are a good work environment and in transitioning into our shop, I think I provided a better work environment for everybody involved."

Looking ahead

Bayo is encouraged by the direction of the general economy.

"When it slowed down, we geared up a little bit more into the maintenance field and grew that into the business five to seven years ago and have been able to maintain that level," he points out.

During the next five years, Bayo would like to take the company more into the commercial sector, especially in partnering with companies that build high-end homes.

"People build these big beautiful homes and at the end of the day, they're not necessarily out of money, but their landscape budget has diminished quite a bit," he points out. "I'd like to find a way to roll that into their financing so people can get what they want from the beginning instead of years down the road ripping up things they paid for to get what they really wanted in the first place."