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Company is profitable by consolidating businesses

Steve Jomides' company, Lawns by Yorkshire, is enjoying revenues that have more than doubled in the past decade, growing an average of 15 to 20 percent per year. Even in the midst of the worst economic downturn since the early '80s, the company experienced its most profitable year in 2009, and is on pace to do even better in 2010.



Jose Luis Ramirez, a tenured team member, performs fall leaf service at a commercial site's parking garage. *Photos courtesy of Steve Jomides.*

"Steve has an expert memory and a command for details," says Una Werner, office manager. She has worked with Jomides for the past 11 years after her

company was bought out by Lawns by Yorkshire. "He ensures that everyone gets involved in the decision-making process, constantly asking employees for their opinions in making improvements," she says. "Because of this, he has a great feeling for what's really going on around here."

Lawns by Yorkshire, based in Westwood, N.J., 30 miles northwest of New York City, primarily serves HOAs and large commercial properties. The company also offers snow removal services, and during the high season of landscaping and snow removal, the company employs up to 100 people.

The early years

In 1987, Jomides, then 25, who had little experience in operating a business and little knowledge of landscaping other than summer mowing jobs and a short gig hauling gravel and rock, borrowed \$15,000 from his father to run his own lawn maintenance business.

During his early years with Lawns by Yorkshire, Jomides was on a steep learning curve. When his goal was diversification, he bought a garden center; at another point, a bark blowing venture; and he moved into new construction and subcontracting for other landscapers. What his colleagues say was "a real hodgepodge and mishmash" of too many companies nearly sank him on a few occasions.

After someone concluded that there were too many moving parts in Jomides' operation that were taking time, focus and resources away from his profitable core business, maintenance, the other businesses were consolidated.

"Over the years, I learned that you need to do what you do best and focus on that," explains Jomides. "What were once 10 or more companies, we streamlined into a handful of key profit centers. We are now down to four core competencies: landscape maintenance, landscape design, irrigation and snow removal."

At another point, Lawns by Yorkshire became too dependent on a small number of key clients. The loss of any one account would have been catastrophic. "We lowered the aggregate value of each client," explains Jomides. "We now have quite a few clients that we consider small to medium-sized. It's more comfortable to operate that way."

Jomides was also finding that he was spreading himself thin, unable to focus on what he did best. He elevated a one-time employee, Marc Boggio, to co-owner and partner. "Marc shares my work ethic. He's a great complement to my talents. His honest nature and strong people skills give us an advantage with our field talent. With Marc on board, I can focus on developing our client base while he develops the staff."

Networking and marketing

Jomides finds time to attend a multitude of local community and professional association events, and he's an active committee member for PLANET, Community Associations Institute and the New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association. "I surround myself with successful people and keep learning from them every

day," says Jomides. "I'm like a sponge. I take a little from all of them into my head, and base decisions on a combination of all of their strengths."

"Steve develops relationships with the best-in-class people in every facet of life," says Judy Guido of Los Angeles-based Guido and Associates, a consultant to Lawns by Yorkshire. "He purposefully aligns himself with high-profile people to keep growing and evolving and is constantly growing professionally and personally."

Many who know Jomides say that he not only moves on key decisions quickly, but his extreme adaptability is part his success. "My mantra is 'adapt or die,'" says Jomides. "You must constantly change as things change around you. I am constantly looking at trends in the industry to implement before they're not trends anymore."



A typical day in the office for Steve Jomides using two Dell computers to maximize efficiencies and minimize paper.

When many landscapers succumb to the same old advertising and direct mail channels, Jomides takes a different route. "If I do anything beyond word-of-mouth, it has to be something totally unique," says Jomides.

Last year, Jomides clinched a multiyear, multitiered, co-branding business development deal with the NBA's New Jersey Nets, including high-profile events, such as the "Greenest Fan" contest, involving fans providing environmentally sound advice, with winners being awarded environmental prizes. It also included the installation of the Lawns by Yorkshire Putting Green available for fans during Nets games, offering putting contests to win prizes, and sponsorship of the Nets' Metropolitan Madness Basketball Challenge during the annual five-on-five basketball tournament for 60 or more major companies.

"I'm not a fan at all, and never went to any of their games prior to this promotional campaign," says Jomides. One day, he received a phone call from the Nets' ticket sales department inviting him to attend a free open practice. "At that time, I bought a couple of tickets, and before I knew it, I was negotiating a promotional partnership with the team," says Jomides.

So far, the program has been a success, generating a multitude of inquiries, allowing Jomides the ability to leverage a major sports team to get in front of the decision-makers at major companies who also happen to be season ticket

holders.

Business practices and efficiency

"Over time, we've gone paperless," says Jomides. "We're getting better and better at going paperless every year since we started. This way, I can be in another state, 40,000 feet in the air, and have the same access to everything that everyone else in the office does."

Other green principles in Jomides' life include the use of a personal hybrid vehicle and conversion to LED lighting at home and work. He is also researching the use of propane and electric-power for his lawn mowers. "This is just the tip of the iceberg for our sustainability measures in the future," he says.



Lawns by Yorkshire crews use Husqvarna backpack blowers at a commercial site in Teaneck, N.J., as part of its maintenance services conducted during the months of October and November.

For efficiency, Jomides is a strong advocate of the single equipment manufacturer relationship. "We use 50 Fords in our fleet for our vehicle requirements [F-650 aluminum body dump trucks and F-550s], Husqvarna for turf maintenance requirements, Wells Cargo for maintenance trailers and Bobcat for loaders. If something goes wrong, there's a single point of contact," he explains.

Jomides has firm command of all technology systems, which he personally researches and tests. "These technology manufacturers aren't always the lowest cost choice, but we find that quality and customer service are even more important," he says.

Twelve different sites (including some company-owned sites, like the equipment yard) are under constant surveillance. "Numerous flat screens are installed in our corporate headquarters for live viewing of properties and maintaining GPS stats," says Jomides. "Video cams are set up at several key locations, giving the home office a first-hand view when the snow starts to fly, monitoring how much accumulates for us to deploy our crews."

For the past 20 years, Tom Crain has been a regular contributor to B2B publications, including many in the green industry. He is also a marketing

communications specialist for several companies in the travel, agriculture and nutrition industries.