

The Lawn Ranger Rides Again



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How this long-established Twin Cities firm is using new mobile business solutions to simplify operations

Lawn Ranger Outdoor Services

Founder/owner: Joseph Unger

Founded: 1985

Headquarters: Eden Prairie, Minn.

Markets: Twin Cities and surrounding 13-county metro area

Services: Full-service outdoor services provider, maintenance, lawn care, tree & shrub, seasonal color, design/build, construction, snow & ice management, irrigation and holiday lighting

Employees: 80 to 100 summer, more than 200 in the winter

Website: www.lawnrangermn.com

Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. The Lawn Ranger rides again.

However, fear not, this is not a story about a masked hero fighting injustice. This is a story about Lawn Ranger, a growing and progressive landscape company, founded and owned by Joe Unger. And apart from the familiar William Tell Overture on the company's telephone answering system, there's little to remind you of a classic television program. But, Lawn Ranger did earn some positive television exposure on its own recently.

Unger's company gained some national fame as of late when the company was featured on an AT&T commercial about the Xora GPS system (www.xora.com) that it's been using to improve the productivity of its employees. We'll explain more about this later in our story.

Here is the take-home on Lawn Ranger. Although he has been in the business

for a much longer period of time, Unger founded Lawn Ranger in Eden Prairie, a suburb of Minneapolis/St. Paul in 1985. Today, this company, that has averaged 15 percent growth per year through the years, is budgeting more than \$8 million in 2012, including both winter and summer revenues.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAWN RANGER OUTDOOR SERVICES

In 2011, the company did \$7.3 million, but 2010 was a better year due to heavy snowfall as Lawn Ranger finished at \$7.7 million. The summer work is done by between 80 and 100 employees, but that figure climbs to over 200 in the winter when employees and subcontractors are combined to handle snow, which is usually pretty heavy in and around the Twin Cities each winter. The operative word here is usually.

Hey, where's the snow?

This past winter produced just 22 inches of snow in the Minneapolis area, contrasted to the more than 90 inches of snow the previous winter. On average, the region gets 50 inches of snow each winter.

"During our heavy snow in 2010, the winter revenue was between 50 to 60 percent of our total," says Unger. "In 2011, we might have had our lowest snow total in history, but we did have a lot of snow contracts so that helped us a lot."

Unger's revised financials for this year estimate that about 40 percent of the company's income will occur in the winter with 60 percent during the growing season.

Not surprisingly given the range of property services that the company offers, revenues are pretty evenly divided among service sections. Lawn Ranger is budgeting roughly \$2 million in landscape projects, \$2 million in lawn maintenance, and almost \$1 million in irrigation, tree work, shrubs and fertilization.

"We do a lot of independent landscaping jobs for residential accounts that we don't do lawn maintenance work for," Unger says.



Todd Dilley (left), vice president, and Joseph Unger, founder/owner, guide the fortunes of The Lawn Ranger, a full-service outdoor services provider based in Eden Prairie, Minn.

"In the summer, we do mostly industrial and commercial work, but when the market went south in 2008, we were lucky because we have always had the opportunity to do townhouses and, believe it or not, commercial construction. During the recession we decided to go after those two markets and we got some jobs that we have never had before," says Unger.

"We also concentrated on residential landscaping and mowing so we were able to survive the recession quite nicely," he adds.

Unger graduated from the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, N.D., in 1981. While in Grand Forks he ran a lawn care company called Evergreen, but then changed the name to Lawn Ranger. In 1985, he moved back to Minneapolis and relaunched his lawn service and reacquired the neighborhood customers he had served as a pre-teen during his first foray into the maintenance business in 1970.

"I got all of my original customers back and became associated with a construction company that took me along with them," he recalls. "That company took me to other management companies and the business grew by word-of-mouth for years and years. That's how it happened."



These beautiful spring bloomers attest to the four-seasons approach that The Lawn Ranger offers to its customers in the Twin Cities and counties surrounding Minneapolis/St. Paul.

From that modest business mowing lawns, the Lawn Ranger is now one of the top independent, full-service landscape firms in the state. "People knew about us and recommended us to other people," says Unger. "We do it all."

In the years leading up to the 2008 recession, Lawn Ranger enjoyed double-digit growth thanks primarily to word-of-mouth. But the recession and its aftermath have forced the company to more actively sell and to maintain a more visible presence within its market.

Bobby Jensen, a full-time employee who handles Lawn Ranger's marketing programs has been a great help there, says Unger. Jensen's featured as a horticultural expert a couple of times each week on the local NBC TV affiliate. "Everyone in town knows him," Unger says. So, when the company goes to home shows people line up to talk to Jensen, who (surprise, surprise) happens to be wearing a Lawn Ranger shirt.

Lawn Ranger's wide range of property management services have now been helped along considerably by the Xora system from AT&T. Unger adopted the system in the winter of 2011.

"Xora has saved us a ton of money. We have cut labor in the office and have also cut way down on the mistakes that we made before," says Unger. "Our billing is now going on right away as compared to previous years. In 2010, when it was snowing constantly, we got backed up more than a month on our billing. It was awful. Now our billing is really quick."

Unger says the system allows the company to know where its service trucks are at all times, and how long they are at each stop.

"It's also easy for our employees because all they have to do is press a button and it starts timing them. And then it goes right to our accounting system. It's really nice for us," says Unger. He adds that the learning curve on the Xora system is relatively short.

"We had a system in the past that was bad for us, but this one has changed everything," he says. "The other system was so complicated that it was

causing problems rather than helping us.” For example, Unger points out that the previous system had trouble jumping from p.m. to a.m. times. Moving from say 11:30 p.m. to 1 a.m. was a problem for the old system.

Now, Lawn Ranger gets satellite photos of the properties where the company’s employees will be working, and then the properties are outlined and shaded in.

“We load in the sites we’re going to and the system’s phone guides the employees to the site. No one gets lost anymore,” he says. “It’s a great tool.”

Unger admits that some of his employees were initially skeptical about the system. “I believe there was a little bit of an objection from the older employees to Xora,” he says. “We haven’t had anyone quit because of the new program. In fact, a lot of them really like the ease of what it does. As time goes on, people are just going to expect it.”



With the feeble 2011 snow season, The Lawn Ranger was grateful for the time management and on-the-site efficiencies that Xora provided its employees.

Adds Vice President Todd Dilley, “Basically what this system has enabled us to do is to live in real time. We are able to manage our employees and our accounts instantly rather than wait for anything. We know exactly where everyone is and what everyone is doing.

“Each crew has a phone so we’re able to dispatch an entire day to a crew or you can dispatch work site-by-site,” he explains. “We can give them a route and if things change, we can add or subtract from the route.

“Employees show up at the site, punch in to do the work, answer a couple of questions, punch out, and then go on to the next site,” Dilley says. “It allows us to manage our day.”

AT&T brought some interesting things to the table regarding the commercials for its Xora product, featuring the system’s performance for both summer and winter services.

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