

The People Difference



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Ruppert Landscape's employees, the key to its future



Each month the managers at Ruppert Landscape's branches gather at the Maryland headquarters for a day and a half of updates and meetings.

Landscape companies can buy and use the same trucks. They can operate identical models of skid steers and mowers. They can access the same chemicals, hardscape materials and nursery stock.

Depending on where they're located, they face the same economic challenges as their competitors. They and their competitors must deal with and provide services in the same environmental conditions, be it blistering heat, freezing winds, rain, snow or drought.

Nobody in the landscape business can (or should) blame any of these factors for their success or lack of success.

Every firm's biggest challenge

So, what's left? It's obvious: people. Nothing else even comes close to being as vital to any company's survival and growth as trained and committed employees, says Craig Ruppert, CEO.

"We may not have been as conscious of it when we started as we are now, but the biggest challenge in my mind is growing our people," says Ruppert.

"Attracting them is part of it, but keeping and growing them is the bigger challenge. It always has been that way. The daily challenge is to do it in an efficient, productive and noble way so that the people that come here can grow within the business, meet their life goals through the business."

Ruppert Landscape

Officers: Craig Ruppert, CEO; Chris Davitt, president; Ken Hochkeppel, CFO; Bob Jones, vice president & director, Landscape Construction Division; Phil Key, vice president & director, Landscape Management Division; Jay Long, director of organizational & people development; Amy Snyder, director of public relations

Headquarters: Laytonsville, Md.

Founded: 2003

Markets: Landscape construction (One corporate and four branches from Philadelphia to Atlanta), and landscape management (10 branches, four in Maryland, two in North Carolina, two in Virginia and one each in Pennsylvania and Georgia)

Services: Landscape construction, landscape management, and tree growing

Employees: Approximately 650

Budgeted revenues for 2012: \$75 million

Website: www.ruppertlandscape.com

Ruppert Landscape is headquartered in a bucolic country setting near tiny Laytonsville, just outside of Baltimore and Washington. It's just a few miles from where Ruppert and his team grew the "first" Ruppert Landscape starting in 1976. That operation became a nationally recognized industry leader known for its sound business practices and the quality of its services.

Second time around

Growing to a dominant landscape force in the mid-Atlantic with sales of about \$47 million, TruGreen Landcare (ServiceMaster) acquired the company in 1998. Ruppert and his longtime associate Chris Davitt left the landscape business a short time later and focused their attention on their Maryland nursery operation.

In 2003, Ruppert and Davitt, completing their five-year non-competes, returned to the landscape industry and reconnected with former customers. Soon they were also reunited with most of the firm's previous management team, along with former top field supervisors. The team was back with a plan.

To this point (and in spite of the turmoil caused by the "Great Recession" of 2008) the plan's been working. Ruppert Landscape has been profitable every year since 2003.



Field supervisor Alex Brooks, center, and his crew. Training for all Ruppert Landscape employees begins with learning the firm's 12 Core Values. Value number one is "take care of people."

Now employing 650 people, with 15 branch operations from Philadelphia to Atlanta, the company, as it did in its first incarnation, specializes in providing quality, full-service landscape management and large-scale construction services. Responding to today's economic conditions, it's focusing more intently on commercial landscape management services.



"We're creating as much energy as we're using."

-Ken Hochkeppel

Putting the Sun to Work

In August 2011, Ruppert Landscape turned on the solar farm on its rural property near Baltimore. The farm consists of 15,000 square feet of panels (about one-third of an acre) and is expected to generate 300,000 kilowatt-hours per year.

"It took a year to pull the trigger on this project. There's always apprehension about spending a million dollars, but all the stars aligned and made this project a financial no-brainer," says Ken Hochkeppel, CFO.

In addition to very low interest rates and being able to depreciate the solar farm in a single year, Ruppert Landscape obtained a state renewal energy grant for the project. Hochkeppel adds that on a cash basis, the payback period for the solar farm is less than a year.

"We're creating as much energy as we're using," says Hochkeppel, adding that the solar project is a big step in the company's quest to obtain LEED Silver certification for its headquarters building and Gold certification for its shop building.

"It has connected us to a lot of people we would never have been connected with otherwise," says Hochkeppel.

Other recent "green" initiatives undertaken by the company include equipping its managers with fuel-efficient hybrid Toyota Camrys, installing cisterns at several facilities for irrigation, and spending more than \$30,000 to put energy-efficient lighting at two of its branches.

Hochkeppel says these and other energy and resource-saving steps the company is taking has given it confidence to recommend similar initiatives to its customers.

"We can now tell customers what we're doing and what else we can do."

While it's easy to view a solar farm or a fleet of 27 hybrid cars as being greener than alternatives, President Chris Davitt says Ruppert Landscape's understanding of green goes beyond the obvious.

"Another important way to be greener is to be more efficient, making fewer trips to a job site, being able to accomplish projects using fewer people and resources," he adds. "We're becoming better managers because of this growing emphasis on green and being more efficient."

As for its structure, Jay Long, director of organization and people development, describes it as "a decentralized systems structure" with branch managers.

"These branches are like small businesses," says Long. "It's probably not the most efficient way of doing it, and we might be more efficient with a more centralized approach."

Even so, what about a \$75 million (2012 budget) regionally dominant landscape company doesn't qualify its management team as being the "experts" in the industry?

Plenty, responds Ruppert. He says that he and other key employees are still learning just like everybody else in the business.

"Some people might think we have it all figured out. We don't have it figured out," says Ruppert. "We're focused on what we want to do, but getting it done is never-ending, many times difficult and not always pleasant. In fact, we don't always do it well. It's an unending challenge to do it well."

The key element to "doing it well," he's convinced, lies in the company's success in attracting quality applicants, educating and welcoming them into the company culture and building their skills and confidence.

Getting onboard

The start for every newly hired employee a structured orientation program based upon the company's 12 Core Values. First on that list: is "Take care of people."

That's people in the broadest sense – clients, fellow employees and the individuals in the communities where Ruppert employees live and do business. Few green industry companies have a larger percentage of employees donating their time and talents to community service. (See sidebar: "Strong Spirit of Service".)

Ruppert Landscape invests a lot of effort and expense in its people. It starts at the field level with basic training programs that become increasingly personalized and rigorous as individuals move through the supervisory and management ranks.

It's not all classroom and not all rah-rah either. There's celebration, too.

The company puts on a huge annual summer barbeque for all of its Maryland and area employees and their families at its beautiful rural headquarters. Branch locations likewise plan their own barbeques, pizza parties and fishing trips to celebrate successful projects and wins.

Ruppert Landscape goes to great lengths, in fact, to recognize employee birthdays and anniversaries with cards and letters. They're celebrated as well in the company newsletter that clients also receive. Special anniversaries (20, 25 and 30 years of service, for instance) get special, and sometimes surprising, treatment.

On one occasion, for example, Ruppert's top managers showed up in a limo on a job site and whisked away 25-year employee Leroy Barton. The small party drove to one of the first properties that Barton had worked on as a Ruppert

employee. After walking the site and reminiscing about the project, they picked up Barton's family with the limo and all went to dinner together. That's when management presented Barton, in the presence of his family, with a plaque for his efforts and loyalty.

Trying to come up with different ways to honor and educate employees is a constant challenge, says Davitt. But, it's fun, too.

For example, last year Ruppert took a large group of its employees on a manager's trip to Under Armour, Inc., the popular sports clothing and accessories company headquartered in Baltimore. The landscape pros got an up-close-and-personal view of Under Armour's business philosophy and operations.

Some of the company's employee-building initiatives are more structured.

Every year in February the company brings its managers and some crew leaders from its many locations to its Maryland headquarters for two days of management development. It's a practice the company established more than 20 years ago.

"We share information on the company's direction and performance, like the year's budget, and we also bring in outside speakers," says Davitt, president of the company. "The first day the whole group is together. The second day we break into groups to learn about and discuss specific topics."

About 275 employees took part in this year's "Learning from Past Mistakes" event. At the end of the second day, the company hosts an honors banquet for the participants and their spouses, about 425 people in all.

"If we didn't do this, we might forget to share important information about the company with these people. We might forget to say thank you to them," says Davitt.

Let's talk it over

Each month managers from all of the branches gather at corporate headquarters. The first day is devoted to division meetings; the following day all of the managers meet together.

Ruppert Landscape also periodically conducts "town hall meetings" at its branches. An officer from the corporate office in Maryland will visit the branch and share general company and branch information, including budgets and any new initiatives. Then that person will listen.

"During a town hall meeting in Atlanta two years ago, the employees let us know that they needed heavier-duty blowers, which we provided. Town hall meetings are a valuable inter-company communication tool," says Davitt.

Rewarding employees for their contributions and keeping them informed of the company's progress is obviously a top priority for Ruppert Landscape. It builds cooperation among branches and divisions within the company, boosts morale and offers support when things don't go so well.

"Turnover costs you far more than you see on the surface. You don't just lose that one individual's experience, but it upsets the culture," says Davitt. "You have to bring someone else that doesn't necessarily know the team culture and may not be a team player. Also, other people have to train them, so the turnover of one key person may affect 25 people, and it's a terrible thing."



Approximately 250 managers and field staff spend two days learning and getting company updates at corporate headquarters each February.

Now especially, when market conditions are tough, is not the time to be losing key people, he adds.

"We're in a down market. Is that our biggest challenge? Are the new green initiatives that are impacting our industry our biggest challenge? Is our shift from landscape construction to landscape management our biggest challenge?" asks Davitt rhetorically.

"No, I would say that the solution to every one of those challenges is our people. Our challenge remains that we have to motivate and train people. Our people are going to get us through this down market."

That's not to downplay the company's efforts to adopt green initiatives. (See sidebar: "Putting the Sun to Work".) Or its efforts to expand its landscape management services as a percentage of revenues. While landscape management business represents slightly less than 50 percent of total revenues, it's growing. By contrast, in 2004, the company's revenues were 80 percent construction and 20 percent maintenance.

Strong Spirit of Service

Ruppert Landscape strongly supports community service, says Jay Long, director of organization and people development.

"When we got back into the business we formalized this," he says. That includes giving 5 percent of the year's profit before tax to worthy causes.

Causes (not a complete list) include: Intrepid Fallen Heros Fund; Jubilee Support Alliance; Food for the Poor, Inc.; Easter Seals; Washington Jesuit Academy; Don Bosco Preparatory School; and Christo Rey Jesuit High School.

Dozens of other activities and causes that reflect the interests of employees and clients are chosen annually.

Long says that participating in philanthropic causes is consistent with the firm's guiding principles in that it aids in building an organization that both employees and customers are proud to be associated with.



Each year Ruppert Landscape donates five percent of its profits before tax to community service and charitable organizations.

“We think that our construction market has been cut in half because of the economy,” says Davitt. “We’ve had to increase our market share, which means we’re continually estimating more work, but we’ve had to expand geographically to do it.”

In many of its big construction projects, an estimated 40 percent, the company serves as a construction subcontractor, which is attractive to certain customers because it gives them fewer people to deal with.

That they’ve been able travel from their primary markets – even taking on a sizable construction project in Oklahoma City – and profitably take on projects is a testament to their resourcefulness, says Ruppert.

In other words, it gets back to the most vital element in Ruppert Landscape (indeed any company): its people.



“In football, you play the game on the field. Sometimes it’s cold; sometimes it’s raining. We can’t control that,” says Ruppert. “And we can’t control what our competitors do either. What we can control is how we coach, lead and manage. It makes focusing on our people the obvious right business move.”

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