

The Upside of the Down Economy



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Las Vegas landscaper stays busy providing services on foreclosed properties

Safari Landscaping, Inc.

Owner: Mike Sickles

Founded: 1994

Headquarters: Las Vegas, Nev.

Markets: Las Vegas Valley

Services: Lawn maintenance; irrigation installation and repair; shrub & plant installation, maintenance and care; tree trimming; landscape design; pet clean-up; trash hauling; sod, seeding and artificial turf services; retaining and garden walls; curbing; landscape remodeling; pond installation and maintenance; and tree stump and plant removal

Employees: Five (peak season)

Website: www.safarilandscapinginc.com

Las Vegas is much more than its neon-bathed Strip, which draws millions of show-goers, gamblers and gawkers annually. It is homes and businesses with people coping with the same battered economy that's hit communities all across the nation. In Las Vegas, though, the downturn hit harder than just about anywhere else. Las Vegas and surrounding communities have registered the nation's highest home foreclosure rate since the housing market began crumbling five years ago. One out of every 14 homes was in foreclosure (7.38 percent) throughout the course of 2011.

With new home construction at a standstill in the region, landscape company owners have had to re-evaluate their approach to business, and Mike Sickles, 51, founder and owner of Safari Landscaping, Inc., did just that. Instead of fighting the economic trend, he found a way to work with it by offering services for foreclosed properties.

"My dad started a landscaping business in 1961 right after I was born," says Sickles who worked in the family business as a teenager following his father's death and until that business was dissolved. In 1994 he launched Safari Landscaping.



Mike Sickles says that maintaining relationships is an important element in obtaining referral business in the downturned economy.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAFARI LANDSCAPING, INC.

"With the economy, we had to re-invent ourselves," says Sickles of the recent economic collapse. "When the economy got so bad about three years ago, we saw we could never turn down work." This was a major change for his family business with a dramatic shift to providing services to foreclosed properties.

Rehabbing is big business

"People often don't take care of their properties when they know they're going to be foreclosed," Sickles says. That means that by the time properties are foreclosed, after complex legal requirements are met, there's often major clean-up and repair required before the loan-holder can put the property on the market for a successful sale. While interior painting and sprucing up homes is the norm, landscaping is also a major element to be considered.



Upgrading small landscaped areas contributes extensively to the attractiveness of residential properties.



"I've had a good relationship with a cleaning service, a real estate service and some investors that has resulted in jobs," says Sickles. "In addition to the exterior cleanup, usually including landscape and irrigation repairs, interior cleanup has been required. The cleaning service had a number of established cleaning contracts for office buildings, but cleaning foreclosed homes often meant hauling away heavy furniture and other items left behind. We were willing to do the interior clean-outs as well as the exterior. The cleanup work offered a lot of opportunities for us."

In addition to landscape cleanups at these foreclosed properties, general landscape upgrades remains a mainstay of Safari's business. While some of the jobs are done simply for a new look, others are to take advantage of an incentive offered by the Las Vegas Valley Water District to reduce water use. "A rebate on a square-foot basis is offered to pull out grass and replace it with desert landscaping," Sickles says. Water use is controlled with an escalating pricing structure, which does not actually limit water use but makes water-thirsty landscaping much more costly to maintain.

He points out that in addition to upgrading neglected landscapes, his involvement in the rehabbing process has allowed him opportunities to let people know of his upgrade work. He says, "New owners often want to add to

the existing landscaping that may have just been cleaned up before the sale. Most of our jobs are through word-of-mouth, and that's another way we obtain new business."

Sickles says it is important to educate customers when planning upgrades. "Most people are concerned about how much it's going to cost to maintain their new landscapes," he said. "We look for plant material that is low-maintenance and is drought-resistant," he says. "We also look for bug and disease resistance so the plants don't require a lot of chemical treatment." Additionally, Sickles notes that cold hardiness is an important feature in landscape material because, despite the location of Las Vegas in the desert, winter temperatures can get down to 20 degrees Fahrenheit. "That's cold enough to freeze many plants," he says.



Neglected landscaping must often be restored on foreclosed properties to enhance a sale.



What really matters

"We're actually in the people business, and that's been important to us," adds Sickles. Previously established relationships have given him an operating advantage in the new environment facing landscapers in Las Vegas. He notes that since his business is small, he's personally on most jobs at some point. Sickles says that maintaining relationships is a major element in his successful operation.

"The most important thing with customers is to follow through and do what you tell them you'll do, and you have to do that regardless of the weather or anything," he adds.

Sickles says the first contact with customers is important. "You have to put your best foot forward with that first contact. I try to get an idea of what their budget is and what they want. Most people want more than they can afford on their budgets. I try to give them a realistic picture of what their landscaping is going to look like, let them know what is affordable. I try to be up front with them, to let them know I'm not the cheapest, but I'm probably not the most expensive."

Safari Landscaping has done very little advertising over the years. "With our long-term maintenance customers, we get a lot of referrals. It's an ebb and flow in maintenance. We may lose some customers who move, and we gain a few new ones along the way," he says. The maintenance side of his business has remained stable in spite of the economy's ups and downs.



"We're small, and I've been around Las Vegas all my life, so people know us and our work. I've had some of my landscape maintenance customers more than 20 years. Most of them are established residents, many are retired, and they

continue to want their landscapes maintained.”

He says there have been a high number of improvements in landscaping equipment in recent years. “We used to trim everything by hand and sweep the walks and patios.” Now, Safari Landscaping uses Echo blowers and trimmers. “Much of our landscape maintenance is in rock and desert plant lawns,” he says. “That may mean maintenance is required only about every three months. In Las Vegas, only 20 percent of the property can be in grass in newer construction.” Fescue is the primary grass used, and Safari uses Toro walk-behind mowers for cutting the grass. Fertilization, weed and insect control, and reseeding services are also offered.

Sickles holds a C-10 Nevada contractor’s license, which allows him to do landscaping and irrigation work. “We do a lot of irrigation repair and complete upgrades. I often recommend complete irrigation replacements if there are enough problems that I think the resident will incur more extensive costs later on.”

Safari generates about \$400,000 annually through a combination of landscaping and irrigation work along with landscape maintenance. About 75 percent of the company’s work has been residential with about 25 percent commercial. About one-third of the revenue is produced through maintenance work. Safari employs three to five people who have been with Sickles for a number of years.

Nancy Riggs is a freelance writer from Mt. Zion, Ill., and has been covering the green industry for Turf for more than 20 years. You can contact her at NFRIGGS@aol.com.