

Young Contractors Share to Improve



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More and more, established landscape contractors are joining peer groups that help them keep up with the latest business trends and best business practices. Recently a group of young contractors that run small companies formed a peer group to help them grow their businesses, too. I'm involved in starting the group, Young Guns, to give back to the green industry and help these young, eager-to-learn owners grow their companies and be successful.

I remember an older man I met years ago named Ed. What I didn't realize initially, but I learned as we became friends, was that he had just retired as chairman of one of the largest banks in the country. Ed gave me advice and shared his experiences with me for more than 12 years before he passed away. He helped me through many of my biggest challenges and offered his counsel any time I asked for it. I think of him often. I will never forget him.

Obviously, I'm not a retired bank chairman like Ed, but I plan to help this new peer group in a similar way because most young business people just need a support system and some experienced guidance to successfully grow their businesses. "None of us is smarter than all of us," is a saying often attributed to Kenneth Harley Blanchard, the American author and business management expert. This peer group of young contractors is a perfect example of this saying in action.

"My company uses only battery-powered equipment and we specialize in environmentally friendly landscape operations. I know the experience of sharing ideas and business practices with the group will help me grow my business. I'm also sharing my eco-friendly business model with the group," says Zack Kline, owner of A.I.R. Lawn Care, Rockville, Md., and one of the Young Guns peer group members.

The best thing about peer groups is the interaction of non-competing

companies where everyone shares their business plans, policies and procedures in a way everyone finds ideas to improve. When everyone in the group shares valuable information, everyone benefits and wins. The challenge for younger contractors is finding the time and expense to attend three or more meetings each year. These contractors are truly owner operators and need to be on the job creating revenue almost every day. Skype and Google Hangout make meetings easier and less costly for the new group and we plan to meet regularly using these tools.

AJ Davis, owner of Davis Outdoor Jobs of Binghamton, N.Y., adds: "I think peer groups are very useful, and a great way to grow. It's great to help each other and learn from each other. You can pass ideas on to your peers in the industry and get many valuable inputs in return. Everyone in business has their struggles, and when you share those struggles, it helps everyone learn from each other." Davis has been in business for five years and is a full service landscape provider.



"Knowing and understanding your numbers is vital to the success of any organization," adds Mike Mason, owner of The Lawn Pro, Louisville, Ky., co-facilitator of Young Guns and board chairman of the Snow & Ice Management Association (SIMA). "Through peer groups you have the unique ability to share and gather information in a non-competitive environment with other industry professionals. I have found throughout my career that I tend to learn the most when I am sharing and networking with others.

"Having the ability to benchmark against other companies gives great insight to areas for improvement within your own organization. When professionals get together and collaborate the results can be very powerful," adds Mason who founded his company at the very young age. He's been growing it ever since. His experience and knowledge will help the group members improve their operations.

Kevin Rantanen, owner of Perrysburg Lawn and Landscape, Perrysburg, Ohio, has 10 employees and joined the group to grow his companies revenues and its profitability.

"The peer group offers me a great opportunity to hear how other contractors operate their businesses while I look forward to sharing my best practices and procedures with the other members," says Rantanen.

The group will develop a peer group "Bill of Rights" to govern itself and set expectations so that all members are sharing and giving as well as learning and taking. Members of this small, select group have the final word on topics for discussion, agenda items, meeting times and accepting any new members.

As co-facilitator with Mike Mason, I'll manage things, keep detailed records and recommend issues the group can focus on so members can concentrate on business development and profitability. If you have ever considered joining a peer group, now is a great time and I know the experience will help both you and your business.

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