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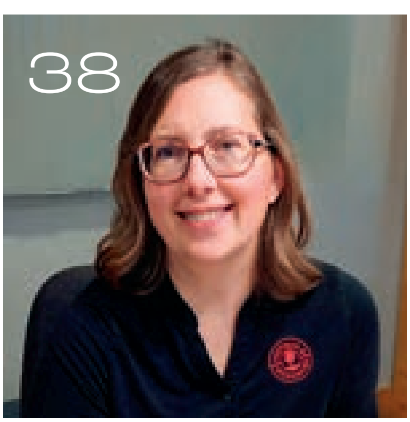

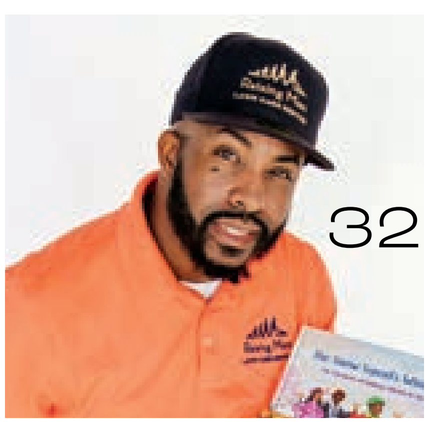

DEPARTMENTS

Cover photo: Jacob Kepler

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Brian Horn
Editor, Lawn & Landscape

"If you have a good 30, 60 and 90 day and beyond onboarding process, it will help you train and retain the best talent."

Be ready in 2026

I had the chance to moderate our annual State of the Industry webinar in December. The panel was made up of contributors to Lawn & Landscape and they had a wealth of knowledge to share.

Go to bit.ly/Lawnsoi26 to see who was on the panel and listen to the hour-long discussion. Here are some of my takeaways:

FIND AN IDEAL CUSTOMER. Not every company can pick and choose who they want as a customer, but if you get to that point, you should take advantage.

With people having increased expectations for their yard, some customers may not be worth it from an attitude, spend or service needs standpoint. At some point throughout the year, evaluate what customers are profitable for you.

BE PREPARED. I had not heard much from landscapers about employees being approached by ICE agents until early December when emails began to trickle in. Advice ranged from cooperating with the agents to making sure your I-9 forms are up-to-date.

SHOW THEM THE WAY. Everybody talks about trying to find labor to hire, but once they are on staff, they are on their own with minimal onboarding.

One panelist said that the companies that can master onboarding will have dominance in their market. If you have a good 30, 60 and 90-day and beyond onboarding process, it will help you train and retain the best talent.

CRYSTAL BALL. Panelists were asked where they see the industry in 3-5 years, and the answer is similar to what is happening now — artificial intelligence, technology and private equity/mergers and acquisitions.

All three will help the industry become more professional and change the perspective of outsiders that this is an industry where you can have a career and not just a job. Another future trend is platform companies will buy each other instead of single companies, much like the Experigreen and Turfmasters merger that you can read about on page 10.

— Brian Horn

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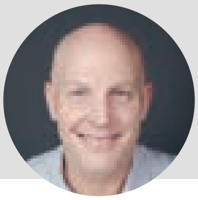

WORDS OF WILSON
WITH ROBERT CLINKENBEARD
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WORDS OF WILSON features a rotating panel of consultants from Wilson360, a landscape consulting firm.

BEYOND THE NOISE IN 2026

IF A HEADLINE READS: *"New home sales down 3%,"* it sounds definitive. It isn't. Dig even a little deeper, and a different picture emerges. In many markets, starter and lower-priced homes are indeed struggling. Interest-sensitive, price-sensitive buyers are on the sidelines. Some builders are laying off staff and slashing budgets, including landscape allowances.

But in those same metro areas, mid- to high-end homes are selling before completion. These buyers are less rate-sensitive, more focused on lifestyle and long-term positioning. If your firm's core is high-end residential, amenity spaces or master-planned communities, the national "down 3%" story may have very little to do with your real opportunity set.

If you forget that base effect and build your 2026 strategy on a simplistic narrative of "we're down from last year," you risk cutting muscle instead of fat or missing the moment to invest in the right segments.

MIXED SIGNALS ARE A CLUE, NOT A CURSE. Talk to five strong design-build companies around the U.S., and you'll often hear a split-screen story. Two firms report delayed contracts and painfully slow decision-making. Three report the opposite: a major uptick in Q4 activity, fast-moving clients and healthier 2026 pipelines than they expected.

The macro environment is the same. What differs is client mix, local economics and positioning. Firms with clients tied to distressed asset classes or speculative development feel more drag. Firms embedded with well-capitalized owners, high-end residential markets or mission-critical facilities are seeing momentum.

The right conclusion is not, "the market is up," or "the market is down." The right conclusion is that **there is no single market**. There are many overlapping micro-markets, and your results will depend on which ones you're in and how you show up in them.

STOP GUESSING: GO ON A STRATEGIC LISTENING TOUR. In this environment, spreadsheets and newsfeeds aren't enough. As you frame 2026, your most valuable insight will come from deliberate, structured conversations with both clients and your internal team.

With key clients, your goal is to surface forward-looking realities, not just confirm this year's budget. You want to understand how they're thinking about 2026 spending compared to the last two years along with which capital projects are truly critical and which can be deferred.

WHAT PRESSURES THEY'RE FACING FROM STAKEHOLDERS. Consider the asset manager overseeing a portfolio of office buildings who tells you, "We're projecting a 20% reduction in occupancy in 2026." That single data point should materially change your posture. A 20% drop in occupancy guarantees a tightening of maintenance and enhancement budgets. It invites tougher scrutiny on every non-essential dollar.

Your job isn't to argue with that reality; it is to **reframe your value** within it.

Inside your own company, you should be asking branch managers, account managers and sales leaders what they're hearing: Which segments are leaning in and approving enhancements? Where are proposals stalling and why? Which clients are signaling growth, contraction or asset sales?

You're not collecting stories; you're building an internal, ground-truth **market map** that's far more relevant than any national average.

TURNING INSIGHT INTO A 2026 PLAYBOOK. Once you've separated signal from noise, three disciplines will matter most as you set your 2026 course.

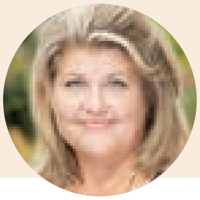
First, **segment your book with ruthless clarity**. Break your portfolio down by property type, client type and revenue mix. Treat high-conviction segments differently from those genuinely under pressure.

Second, **elevate your leading indicators**. Proposal volume, win rates by segment and backlog duration will tell you far more about your trajectory than last quarter's P&L.

Third, **double down on relationship capital while others retreat**. In anxious markets, many vendors go quiet or purely transactional. The firms that emerge stronger are those that sit beside their clients at the planning table, help them think strategically about their sites and tailor landscape solutions to support leasing, sales, ESG and brand objectives — not just "keep the grass cut."

The dominant story going into 2026 will be one of caution: choppy real estate, uneven demand, headline risk. You can't ignore those forces, but you also cannot allow them to dictate your decisions. L&L


NEW YEAR.
NEW GEAR.



CREAM OF THE CROP
WITH ALISON HOFFMAN
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CREAM OF THE CROP features a rotating panel from the Harvest Group, a landscape business consulting company.

EVALUATING YOUR BUSINESS

AN OWNER AND TWO KEY partners set up a phantom stock plan when their business was worth $1 million. Each partner had $200,000 of coverage to fund the buy-sell if someone died. It made sense at the time, and the cost was low because everyone was young and healthy.

Eight years later, the company is now worth $9 to 11 million.

The insurance? Still $200,000.

If a partner died today, the company could owe over $2 million to the spouse. Even if paid over time, that cash still must come from the business, pulling money away from growth, acquisitions, equipment and the strategic investments that build the company in the first place.

No one planned for this. And it's not unusual. Owners assume the documents "are done" and move on to the next challenge. But as the business changes, the agreements and insurance behind them become disconnected from reality. In some cases, they can create a financial strain large enough to stall the business right when it's gaining momentum.

All of this could have been prevented by reviewing the valuation and then updating the buy-sell agreement and related insurance once a year.

After closing out 2025, many of the owners I work with finally get a little breathing room — time to step back from the day-to-day urgency and look at the long-term health of the business. One of the simple and most overlooked ways to do that is to understand what your business is worth today.

A current valuation helps you understand whether your investment is generating a competitive return, whether your long-term agreements still make sense and whether your key employee plans match the company you have now and not the smaller one you had years ago.

YOUR BUSINESS IS AN INVESTMENT — TREAT IT LIKE ONE. When you look at your business as part of your overall wealth, a valuation becomes more than a number. It helps you answer real financial questions:

- What is my business worth today — and what could it be worth?
- What specific levers increase value, and what do they cost?
- Is each dollar I reinvest in the business earning a competitive return, compared with other places I could put that capital?

You may be willing to sacrifice short-term returns to build something meaningful. But it's important to know whether the long-term return is worth it.

WHERE OWNERS GET CAUGHT OFF GUARD. In the early years, most owners are focused on survival. You are gaining clients, managing cash flow, hiring employees and building basic systems. Often a trusted number two emerges, and the owner puts a phantom stock or long-term incentive plan in place, along with a buy-sell agreement. These plans keep your key people aligned with you and gives them peace of mind.

The mistake comes later. Once the documents are signed, no one looks at them again for years.

I see this all the time. A company puts these plans in place at $2 million in revenue and grows to $10 million or more. The business is far more valuable — but the agreements still reflect the early version of the company. The valuation, the terms and the insurance coverage all lag far behind the reality of the current business.

A REAL EXAMPLE WHY AN ANNUAL VALUATION MATTERS. A current valuation doesn't just prepare you for selling your business. It protects the business with stronger decision-making today. For example:

- It shows whether your re-investment is producing a better return than you could get elsewhere.
- It highlights the parts of the business creating the most value — and those holding you back.
- It helps you evaluate acquisitions, debt decisions, equipment purchases and expansion plans.
- It keeps all ownership and incentive agreements rooted in real numbers, not outdated assumptions.

Most importantly, it protects both you and your key people from unintended consequences that could drain the company of cash at the wrong time. For many landscape owners, their business is the biggest asset they will ever own. It deserves the same attention and updating you give to other investments.

A current valuation isn't just a number. It protects you from outdated agreements, keeps your key employee plans aligned with the value you've built and helps you make smarter decisions about where to invest next. It ensures you're managing your business like the major asset it is and not leaving your future to chance. **L&L**


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ExperiGreen, Turf Masters Brands merge

The Wind Point Partners acquisition unites two of the industry's Top 100 businesses under the Turf Masters Brands corporate name.

WIND POINT PARTNERS has acquired Turf Masters Brands, and effective immediately, the company will be combined with Wind Point's existing portfolio company, ExperiGreen Lawn Care.

The move unites two of the industry's Top 100 businesses under the Turf Masters Brands corporate name. CenterOak Partners, a Dallas-based private equity firm, sold Turf Masters and terms of the deal were not disclosed.

For its part, ExperiGreen received an investment from Wind Point Partners earlier this year. ExperiGreen ranks No. 50 on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100 list. Turf Masters ranks No. 25 on the same list.

The merged company will employ more than 1,800 team members and serve nearly 400,000 residential customers across 16 states and two Canadian provinces, with significant presence in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic and Southeast markets.

Similar to ExperiGreen, TMB is a provider of fertilization, weed control, aeration, seeding, tree and shrub care and exterior pest services, principally focused on residential homeowners.

Luis Orbegoso, current ExperiGreen CEO, will serve as CEO of the combined company. "By uniting two strong, complementary organizations, we are creating a platform for exceptional service across North America," Orbegoso says. "Our combined capabilities, talent and market reach give us a powerful foundation for continued growth and expanded opportunities for our teams."

In recent years, the combined company has completed multiple acquisitions.

During CenterOak's investment, Turf Masters more than doubled its customer base and branch network, growing to over 40 locations and more than 1,100 employees.

"Teaming with CenterOak was one of the most important decisions we made for our family-owned business," says Andy Kadrich, founder of Turf Masters Brands and CenterOak Operating Partner. "They shared our core values, they cared deeply about our legacy, and they made it clear from day one that they wanted to build a business with us. Together, we mapped out priorities and executed a growth plan that allowed us to triple earnings and surpass our goals."

"Lawn care is a large, attractive market with a strong value proposition, that is only increasing with consumer demographic changes and ability to leverage technology to further enhance the service offering and delivery," says Alex Washington, managing director at Wind Point Partners. "Our vision for TMB is clear — to lead the industry — and we will achieve that by continuing to build and invest in a best-in-class organization."

Court Carruthers and David Alexander continue to serve as board co-chairs of the combined company. Carruthers is the retired CEO of TricorBraun, a board advisor to Wind Point portfolio company SmartCare and a longstanding member of Wind Point's executive advisor partner program. Alexander is the former CEO of TruGreen (ranked No. 3 on Lawn & Landscape's Top 100) and has been board co-chair for ExperiGreen since 2022.

Strathmore acquires Royal Tree Service in Montreal

Alexander Nicholson, founder of Royal Tree Service, and his team will join Strathmore immediately.

STRATHMORE HAS acquired Royal Tree Service, which has offered residential tree care on Montreal's West Island and surrounding areas for over 15 years.

Located in the Baie-d'Urfé industrial park, Royal Tree Service's facilities will enable faster response times and greater operational efficiency. By combining fleets, crews and scheduling, Strathmore aims to deliver better service and productivity to homeowners throughout the West Island and Off-Island communities.

Alexander Nicholson, founder of Royal Tree Service, and his team will join Strathmore immediately.

"This acquisition is a perfect alignment of values and vision," says Jessica Milligan, president of Strathmore. "Royal Tree Service has built an outstanding reputation through the same dedication to quality, safety and client trust that lies at the heart of Strathmore. Together, we are creating the strongest, most responsive arboriculture team in the region and taking a major step toward our goal of becoming Canada's undisputed leader in snow removal, landscaping and tree care."

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF RESPECTIVE COMPANIES

Unity Partners forms platform under Yardmaster brand

The move combines four companies in three Midwestern states: Yardmaster, Big Lakes Lawncare, Good Guys Lawn and Landscape and Kunco Landscape.

UNITY PARTNERS has formed a new Midwestern landscaping platform spanning three states with completed investments in Yardmaster of Columbus, Big Lakes Lawncare of Detroit, Good Guys Lawn and Landscape of Ann Arbor and Kunco Landscape of Erie, Pennsylvania.

Terms of the private transactions were not disclosed. The combined business will be led by Yardmaster CEO Mike Montenaro. All four businesses will be integrated and operate under the Yardmaster brand.

All four companies provide a range of landscaping services including landscape maintenance, lawn care, enhancement and installation, as well as snow management services to clients in the commercial, multi-family, HOA, office, industrial and retail end markets.

“We are thrilled to launch this partnership with Unity,” Montenaro says. “Our teams are excited about the strong alignment with Unity around our shared values, ambitious goals for the business and our passion for serving our teammates and clients.”

“Each of these businesses represents the type of partnership Unity seeks: ambitious leaders with deep roots in their markets, exceptional service quality, impressive track records of long-term growth, and clear growth opportunities,” says Brett Stoehr, vice president of investments at Unity Partners. “Our partnership is an ideal result of our investment thesis around commercial landscaping, and we’re excited to support the continued expansion and combined vision for a leading regional landscaping platform.”

Yardmaster will be implementing an employee purpose plan that provides all of its employees with a stake in the firm’s financial success and capital events.

“Since our first interactions, the teams at Yardmaster, Big Lakes, Good Guys and Kunco have all expressed enthusiasm in partnering to be part of something larger,” says Jim Sharpe, partner and head of propel at Unity Partners. “We’re excited to contribute to value acceleration across key operational levers, including technology, sales and marketing, talent development and platform integration.”

“We’re thrilled about the strength and scale that this combination brings,” says Chester Buczynski, founder of Big Lakes Lawncare and current president of Yardmaster. “Partnering with Yardmaster allows us to leverage additional resources, talent and expertise to better serve our clients and accelerate growth. Our team is energized about the opportunities ahead.”

Connell Foley served as legal advisor to Yardmaster on the transaction. Kirkland & Ellis LLP served as legal advisor to Unity Partners. 3PG Advisors served as financial advisor to Yardmaster and Big Lakes.

Agellus Capital acquires HighGrove Partners

Founded in 1989, HighGrove provides commercial landscape maintenance, irrigation, arbor care and enhancement services from its four locations across the Atlanta metropolitan area.

AGELLUS CAPITAL announced the acquisition of HighGrove Partners. Headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, HighGrove is a provider of commercial landscaping services across the Southeastern United States.

Founded in 1989, HighGrove provides commercial landscape maintenance, irrigation, arbor care and enhancement services from its four locations across the Atlanta, Georgia, metropolitan area.

“We saw strong alignment with Agellus’ entrepreneurial mindset and growth-oriented approach to scaling our business in a way that honors our people and core values,” says Jim and Erin McCutcheon, CEO and CFO, respectively, of HighGrove Partners.

“We’re excited to partner with Jim and Erin and the HighGrove team to build on the impressive momentum they’ve created and expand their success across the Southeast region. HighGrove provides a solid foundation on which to build our landscaping services platform. We look forward to supporting their continued growth and identifying complementary partners that share their commitment to excellence and customer service," says Agellus Capital Co-founder and Managing Partner Jeff Aiello.

CCG Advisors, an Atlanta based investment banking firm focused on the green industry, acted as the exclusive sell side advisor to High Grove in the transaction. Piper Sandler acted as financial advisor and Squire Patton Boggs (US) LLP served as legal counsel to Agellus Capital.

Chapel Valley president retires; 4 take on new roles

Following Bill Fiester's retirement, Lucas Castor, Josh Richman, Tammy Fisher and Brian Hoffman have all received promotions.

CHAPEL VALLEY Landscape Company President Bill Fiester has retired after more than a decade of leadership to the organization. Since joining the company in 2014, Fiester has led the company's growth.

As Chapel Valley enters this next chapter, the company has advanced several long-tenured team members into expanded leadership roles.

Lucas Castor has been promoted to president. A Chapel Valley leader since 2014, Castor has shaped key areas of the business including strategic growth, business development, marketing and operations. In his new role as president, Castor will continue to oversee the business development team, ensuring continuity in the strategic areas he has helped strengthen over the past decade.

Josh Richman has been promoted to chief operations officer, maintenance. Richman brings more than 20 years of Chapel Valley experience and extensive industry expertise to this role. He will focus on operations, enhancing the client experience and developing high-performing teams across the company's maintenance operations. Over the past year as regional leader, Richman has led multiple Virginia markets.

Brian Hoffman

Lucas Castor

Josh Richman

Tammy Fisher

As Chapel Valley enters this next chapter, the company has advanced several long-tenured team members into expanded leadership roles.

Tammy Fisher has been promoted to vice president, human resources. Over the past 10 years, Fisher has helped shape Chapel Valley's culture and talent strategy. In her expanded role, she will continue to help align people and business strategies to support Chapel Valley's long-term success.

Brian Hoffman has been promoted to vice president, construction. A 32-year veteran of Chapel Valley, Hoffman leads construction operations across branches with a focus on elevating quality and schedule performance, strengthening safety and mentoring field and project leaders. He also works to enhance the client experience from pre-construction through project closeout.

NaturaLawn of America adds Schwartz, Medd to operations team

Pete Medd is the company's newest franchise business consultant, while Doug Schwartz has been hired as its new director of operations.

NATURALAWN OF AMERICA has welcomed two new members to its operations team.

Doug Schwartz has been hired as its new director of operations. In this role, Schwartz will oversee day-to-day operational activities, implement strategic initiatives and drive performance improvements across the company's national franchise network.

Schwartz is a seasoned executive with over 20 years of experience in business growth, operational efficiency, strategic planning, and team development.

Schwartz most recently served as director of operations and integrator at Columbia Academy, a private school system in Columbia, Maryland.

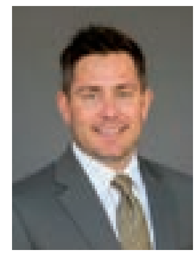
"Their proven leadership and strong backgrounds in franchise operations will be instrumental as we enhance our processes and focus on continued national growth."

— Jesse Catron, senior vice president of NaturaLawn of America

He played a key role in preparing the company for an acquisition in 2024.

Previously, Schwartz held senior roles at Kiddie Academy, one of the nation's fastest-growing childcare franchise systems. As director of operations, he led national expansion efforts and enhanced operational performance.

Meanwhile, Pete Medd has joined NaturaLawn of America as the company's newest franchise business consultant. In this role, he will provide hands-on support to franchise owners and their teams, offering expertise in operations, business planning, performance management, agronomics and marketing.



Medd brings a wealth of multi-unit franchising and entrepreneurial experience to the NaturaLawn of America team. For the past decade, he served as co-founder and CEO of Mpower Interactive, an education and workforce development platform that partnered with national spa franchises including Hand & Stone and Massage Envy. In this role, Medd worked directly with corporate teams and franchisees, helping them strengthen staffing, training and operational execution. He has also led consulting engagements with franchise owners, a global sports apparel brand, and previously managed a professional soccer organization as president and general manager.

"We are thrilled to welcome both Pete and Doug to our growing team," says Jesse Catron, senior vice president of NaturaLawn of America. "Their proven leadership and strong backgrounds in franchise operations will be instrumental as we enhance our processes and focus on continued national growth."

Manitou Group names Boehler as North America president

An engineer by training, Brad Boehler has over 25 years experience in the construction and lifting equipment sector, holding high-level leadership positions.

MANITOU GROUP is appointing Brad Boehler as president of the North America region and as a member of the executive committee.

Based in West Bend, Wisconsin, Boehler's mission will be to accelerate the market share growth for Manitou Group's product ranges and to enhance the customer experience through faster service. He will also be responsible for operational excellence at the two manufacturing sites located in Yankton and Madison, South Dakota. He will thus ensure alignment between commercial priorities and industrial performance, and the integration of a strong customer-centric culture throughout North America.

"I am proud and enthusiastic to join Manitou Group and take on this new challenge. We have highly committed employees and two strong value-added brands in Gehl and Manitou. I am eager to apply my extensive industry experience with both the sales and industrial teams to make the North American market a powerful growth engine for Manitou Group, by continually staying closer to our valued customers," says Boehler.

An engineer by training, Boehler has built a vast experience of over 25 years in the construction and lifting equipment sector, holding high-level leadership positions. Notably, he served as president of the Canadian group Skyjack for over eight years, a role he subsequently held at Morbark and, most recently, at Makinex USA, where he was responsible for business development and managing a dealer network across the entire United States. ■

"I am proud and enthusiastic to join Manitou Group and take on this new challenge. We have highly committed employees and two strong value-added brands in Gehl and Manitou."

Brad Boehler, North America president

the RULES OF SUCCESS

Center Cut Landscape Management drives rapid growth with a people-first model and five core values.

by Kristen Hampshire

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACOB KEPLER

When new team members join Center Cut Landscape Management, they are given a business card — and it has nothing to do with their name, position and mobile number. It's not a card to give away, not a point of contact for clients or prospects. It's a card to keep.

One side bears a pinwheel of ribbons, each connected, each listing one of the company's five core values. The other lists 11 rules of success — "behaviors to obtain growth for all," it reads.

The wallet-sized card format is intentional so team members can carry these culture-creating messages with them. It's not just a token or an orientation handout. "These are the principles I have lived by my whole life," says Reza Taba, CEO and co-founder of the Las Vegas-based commercial maintenance and design/build firm he runs with COO and Managing Partner, Matthew Quispe.

At its core: open communication, respectability, adaptability, creative solutions and high standards. The rules are habits, ranging from showing up with a "yes" attitude, never saying, "that's not my job," and working as efficiently as the strongest person on the team.

At surface level, a skeptic could write off these values as things your elementary principal preached on morning announcements. But at Center Cut, the expectations go much deeper and touch every aspect of the operation. Put into practice, they raise leaders from within, allow the business to scale substantially, and attract more people who act and work like they own it.

"Often, when people say, 'We have a strong culture,' others immediately think maybe there's a pool table in the corner — maybe people are playing basketball and there are lots of after-work events," Taba says.

"Have fun!" is one of the 11 rules of success, but it's not about rolling out extras that aren't tied to the company's purpose as an operation focused on standards.

The ultimate value, however, is respectability.

And this is exactly how clients view Center Cut, evidenced by its growth: $3 million in sales in 2019 has blossomed into

"WE GAVE (CLIENTS) REPORTS OF WHAT WE'D FIND SUCH AS ELECTRICITY ISSUES, GRAFFITI, A BROKEN WINDOW OR ANYTHING THAT FELT UNUSUAL. WE BECAME MORE OF A PRESENCE, AND THIS REALLY *helped our business.*"

– REZA TABA, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER

175 employees and almost $17 million in revenue.

The culture keeps scale personal.

"I know everyone in the field by name, and you may not even know I'm the owner because I walk around, greet everyone. I know team members personally," Taba says.

ALL SET TO SCALE. Taba and Quispe met as architecture students in Las Vegas, pursuing degrees during the economic fallout in 2008. Casinos weren't popping out of the ground, nor were internships in their area of study. They began working at a landscape maintenance business, eventually running it as if they were branch managers.

This was their first exposure to recurring income.

Taba grew up in hospitality before college, bringing these customer service and team management skills to Center Cut. Meanwhile, Quispe was in a property management position overseeing 1 million-plus square feet of Class A commercial real estate.

The combination meshed into a client-centered, operationally optimized resume, passion for hands-on work with visual results, and connections — enough to seed routes for several crews before trucks pulled out for the very first route.

Quispe says, "In the few months before we officially opened, we started reaching out to clients we knew from property management, and they were so excited that we had started a business and wanted to know when we were opening the doors. They said, 'I'm going to move our contract over to you.'"

They really did. And the momentum continued. "We were securing contracts, negotiating and because they had partnered with us at the previous landscape company or we knew them through property management, there was trust," Taba says.

Center Cut Landscape Management went from only $3 million in revenue in 2019 to nearly $17 million today.

During COVID-19, rather than cutting costs, raising prices and losing people, Center Cut did the opposite. "We gave our people raises, and while a lot of competitors were scaling back, that left property managers who let like their landscapers weren't cutting it," Taba says.

Rather than layoffs, Center Cut reassigned talent. Office staff "switched seats" to the field for client service calls, visiting all properties to act as owners' eyes and ears. "We gave them reports of what we'd find such as electricity issues, graffiti, a broken window or anything that felt unusual," Taba says. "We became more of a presence, and this really helped our business."

During lockdown from March to

> “IF A CLIENT CALLS THE OFFICE OR REACHES OUT TO ONE OF OUR TEAM MEMBERS IN THE FIELD, THEY DON’T HAVE TO REPLY WITH AN ANSWER — BUT THEY HAVE TO GET BACK TO THOSE COSTS AND LET THEM KNOW *we're working on it.*”
>
> – MATTHEW QUISPE, COO AND MANAGING PARTNER

June 2020, Center Cut doubled its growth, escalating in capacity, customers and revenue by the end of the year. Because Center Cut’s volume had expanded exponentially, economies at scale were in play to continue profitability, attractive wages and even more growth.

Center Cut had landed on a formula for success.

Rather than amassing more work, spreading crews thin — paying overtime, triggering burnout — the company took a think-ahead approach to hiring and equipping crews. Taba and Quispe wanted to avoid the “sell-then-man-up” tact. It’s hard on everyone and quality erodes. That would be against Center Cut’s pillar values.

“Before we’d have a full route for a truck, rather than overloading another route, we’d start a crew and send team members to different properties to give them extra attention,” Quispe says. “Otherwise, when you overload a route, you don’t have enough hours to maintain the quality you promised.”

Cutting margins and pumping up profit for the sake of jamming up routes to say yes to more customers just isn’t their style.

“We sold those hours to the client — they deserve to have that time or more,” Quispe says.

BUILDING MOMENTUM. Center Cut applies the same philosophy to expanding service lines. After accruing team members and spreading the talent to enhancement jobs until a full commercial maintenance crew was in play, Center Cut began fielding inquiries for landscape renovations in five-figure range.

Then came some high-visibility projects. Word travels and the asks get larger. The City of Boulder heard about Center Cut and reached out for a 2-acre turf conversion into native park land. The scope included 300 boulders, each about 17 tons and the size of an SUV.

Every one of Center Cut's 175 employees carry a small card with the company's 11 Rules of Success on it.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CENTER CUT

All the while, Center Cut had been socking away reserves, putting capital back into the business — "we sacrificed to grow," Quispe says — and this allowed the company to submit big bids. Not that they should have and were warned by peers not to, but healthy risk backed by their formula for success paved yet another inroad.

They were upfront. "They asked us what was the biggest construction job we had done so far and we were honest," Taba says. "They said, 'We like you guys. We like your culture. We want to work with you.'"

This ties into the creatives solutions core value. Center Cut needed to hire 20 more team members to manage this heavy load. They needed to ramp up during the bidding process, knowing they might not win the job.

"We told our account managers to go to their clients and say, 'Hey, you know that enhancement project you wanted to do next year? If you do it this year, we'll give you a discount,'" Taba says. This switched wait-and-see to immediate labor hours and utilization of staff.

Center Cut completed the giant job with referrals to follow. The construction division is still in its infancy in Center Cut terms, given the maintenance service line's rocket growth.

Quispe and Taba expect to finish 2025 with continued growth, and the construction division is still evolving. Taba says, "We can't say that it has fully taken off — it's been about a year and a half in the making — but the number of big breaks is helping scale this division."

PEOPLE FIRST. Many companies' barrier to growth is not selling jobs; it's acquiring talent. But on any given day, about six Center Cut candidates drop into the office to apply for a position. "We've never really struggled to find people," says Taba, relating a polar opposite perspective from many industry professionals.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Hiring great, hard-working employees isn't a struggle — and he's talking about field technicians.

The company pays above average compared to their market's wage, and word of mouth is key. "Our people want to bring their friends and family here — other people they've worked within the field," Taba says.

Another anomaly: "We have a backlog of people we can hire at any time if we need to," Taba says.

How? Quispe says, "While many rely on H-2B or high turnover labor, we've grown a legal, year-round workforce by hiring individuals without landscaping experience and training them through our internal programs."

Taba adds, "Experience can be taught. Personality cannot be taught. We hire for personality."

Taba's hospitality background informs Center Cut's talent recruiting and retention strategies. "Everything I've learned from the hospitality industry has in some way translated to this business," he says.

Both also apply a property management perspective to customer service. "We have a two-hour response time rule," Quispe says. "If a client calls the office or reaches out to one of our team members in the field, they don't have to reply with an answer — but they have to get back to those costs and let them know we're working on it."

Center Cut leadership say they'd rather hire based on personality than experience.

Meanwhile, Quispe and Taba continue working on the business, developing a workplace they're proud to own. "We have so many success stories of people who have found career pathways here, and for us, the growth of the company and our people is the biggest reward," Taba says. L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

IN THE LAWN, THAT DEEPER ISSUE IS SOIL HEALTH, and lawn care professionals who specialize in organics have long emphasized digging deeper — to turf roots and soil microbes — to make a long-term positive impact.

But then there's waiting and not much instant gratification. Most clients expect results and associate a healthy lawn with the color green. Tolerance for weeds varies greatly; a few weeds to one is a jungle to another. And plenty of clients who sign on to organic lawn care with do-good intentions grow weary when the idea of sustaining an organic program over time sets in as reality.

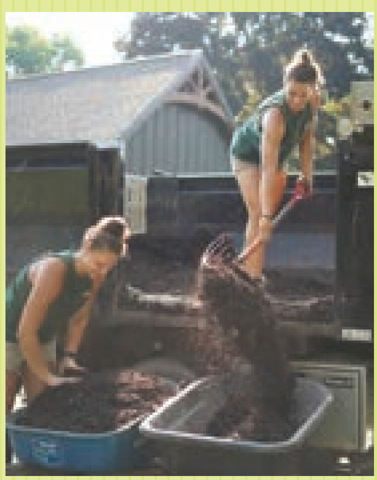
Does every customer want it all? Most do — and more homeowners today are interested in lessening the impact of inputs, turning toward organic lawn care options that have expanded by way of products and service providers.

Shay Lunseth recalls introducing a then-fledgling consumer organic division of their Bloomington, Minn.-based commercial landscape business 15 years ago at trade shows. "People would say, 'it's never going to work,'" she says of a "this is the way we've always done it" mindset.

The tune is quite different today.

Demand for organics is up, customers see results and more people are asking for it. "People who call us are educated," Lunseth says.

Pets, kids and concern for the environment are top reasons homeowners, in particular, go organic. And companies offering organic lawn care adopt varying degrees of "purity," with some like Lunseth committing to Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI) certified products and others offering a hybrid option with mostly organic products and occasional targeted, synthetic weed control applications.



Organic lawn care seems to be trending upward — especially for homeowners with pets and young kids.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VANDE HEY

TEA TIME. The secret sauce to organics at Vande Hey is a geeky, tweaked concoction the company calls its compost tea. The company's microbe-rich soil drench is a lot like chicken soup for the soul or an immunity drink, and Vande Hey has adapted the initial formula it acquired after purchasing an organic lawn care company in 2021.

"Part of our mission is to support a healthy lifestyle and family-friendly environment for the landscapes we create, and we've been refining our organic service to improve it and mirror this vision," says Kelly Smith, who heads up the marketing for this and other service lines at the 75-year-old business.

Since acquiring the organic lawn care operation, Smith says Vande Hey has been introducing it to existing customers who are on a synthetic program, which is still a choice. "There was an interest in the area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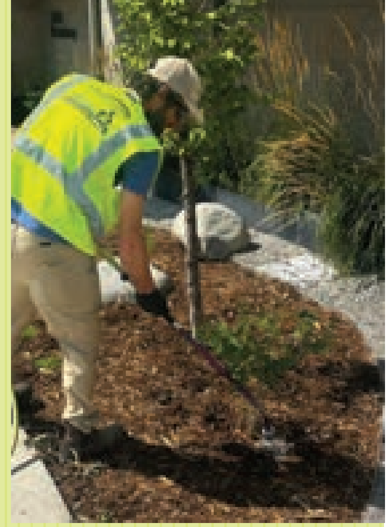

Making customers aware that results of making the switch will take time is the key to selling organic.

we service," Smith says of overall acceptance and demand for an alternative.

When customers move from synthetic to organic, conversations center on "the long game" and what lies beneath the turf: soil, the root system, beneficial bacteria. "Helping people understand this is a journey," Smith says.

For the most part, "customers are fascinated by organics because of the science behind it," she says.

There's a nerding out factor. Those who embrace the science and want a sustainable option realize patience is key. For those who choose organics but want a boost of crabgrass control, for example, "we do a quick hit with weed control if the customers isn't looking for a fully synthetic program but doesn't get the weed control they were hoping for with organics," Smith says.

Vande Hey first explains that mowing at a higher height and mulching clippings to naturally regenerate nitrogen are ways to gradually squeeze out weeds. And the real secret sauce to the organic program that draws customers in is the compost tea. The company maintains test plots to measure how the mixture performs. "We measure microbial populations so if we need to make an adjustment, we can — and this comes with the territory," Smith says.

Aside from interest in the science and the feel-good nature of choosing organics, Smith says what really sells clients on the alternative is their family dynamic: "With organics, your dog and kids can run out on the lawn and play right away."

FEWER BARRIERS. When Josh Larson and his team at Greenwise in Skokie, Ill., return home after servicing clients in Chicagoland, there's no need for a separate laundry basket for uniforms. He doesn't have to double-wash his work clothes to be sure there was "a complete breakdown of chemicals."

Larson is in his sixth season at Greenwise after a career in synthetic lawn care and pest control. He admits some initial reservation about the efficacy of organics when he was considering joining the team — but after visiting properties that Greenwise had consistently serviced for several years, he was completely sold on the sustainable alternative.

There are no short cuts to cultural practices, and no quick-fix replacements to improving the turf root system and soil content. Aeration, overseeding, proper mowing height — all this is just as much part of an organic program as the five-application service Greenwise offers.

Beyond lawn care, Greenwise is 75% on the way to its goal to only operate electric vehicles, mowers and hand-held equipment by 2030.

As for the cost of organics, some companies express a good-sized pricing and profitability gap between organic and synthetic programs — such as double the price — but Larson notices the opposite. Products labeled as natural, organic or sustainable cost less now, he says. In fact, he recalls the same products he's using at Greenwise costing twice as much six years ago.

This can make the service more appealing for some property owners. But for others, the decision to go organic or stick with synthetics is largely about weed tolerance. Greenwise does not offer a fully synthetic service.

Greenwise also does not offer a hybrid program, but if a customer is really struggling with weed tolerance, the company suggests subcontractors who can offer a synthetic application. Larson notes "definite limitations" and reviews cultural practices, including manual weed removal.

"But from our standpoint, it would be hard for us to turn away a customer because of a one- or two-time chemical application they decide to make," Larson says.

HOME-BREWED RESULTS. Microbial soil drenches are one type of biological enhancement Native Edge Landscapes clients can choose from the company's organic lawn care program, and these compost teas "have to be served fresh," points out founder Tom Sunderland, who brought lawn care in-house in 2020 after subcontracting organic and synthetic offerings for about eight years.

Now that the service is within the Native Edge fold, the company only offers organic — and the program is more than a

TOP LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF LUNSETH / ALL OTHERS COURTESY OF NATIVE EDGE LANDSCAPES

“This is one way we are integrating organic plant health care into another service line, in confidence in what the service can do.” — TOM SUNDERLAND, FOUNDER, NATIVE EDGE LANDSCAPES

product swap setup that replaces synthetic applications for ones that are considered more sustainable.

At Native Edge, it’s all about the home-brewed enhancements, which are tailored for each lawn. “The soil health results are amazing,” says Sunderland, who shares with customers the benefit of biologically healthy soil that requires fewer inputs and less maintenance.

Every custom program starts with soil testing to establish a baseline for improvement. “It’s not one-size-fits-all,” Sunderland says. An in-house specialist finetunes biological additives. “She curates the compost — there’s a scientific element,” Sunderland says.

Herein lies a challenge: scaling for greater profitability.

However, by working organic lawn care into other business verticals, Sunderland sees gains in plant health and reduced plant warranty claims on design/build jobs. “We started incorporating organic treatments into our plant establishment program, which is baked into design/build contracts,” Sunderland explains.

“It’s not an optional add-on,” he says. “For every plant we install, including lawns, we return three to four times during the course of a one-year warranty period to feed them with those microbes.”

Because of the organic establishment program, Sunderland says a typical 7% plant replacement rate in Colorado where extreme weather creates undue stress has been reduced by half.

“This is one way we are integrating organic plant health care into another service line, and we’re seeing this is also a great way to introduce our customers to organics and build trust in confidence in what the service can do,” Sunderland says.

A LONG GAME. A move into organic lawn care began as a personal choice for Eric and Shay Lunseth in 2008, after they had their first child. “We were figuring out what worked,” says Shay, who joined her husband’s commercial landscape maintenance business in 2010.

What started as a peace-of-mind mission for their own property quickly expanded into a “what if?” for the business. To get a better handle on horticulture, she went back to school at University of Minnesota to learn about organic turf management. “We started slowly selling the service to neighbors,” says Shay, who now heads up this division, which is only for homeowner clients.

“It’s a harder sell for HOAs,” she says, relating that higher prices and weed tolerance are deterrents. The company still offers a fully synthetic lawn care program for its commercial clients, along with maintenance, landscaping and snow removal. Homeowners, on the other hand, must

and we're seeing this is also a great way to introduce our customers to organics and build trust

elect organic lawn care.

Lunseth rewinds a decade and acknowledges that early sales were a struggle. "We almost shut down several times in the very beginning," she says.

Results and an understanding of the service have taken time. Also, qualifying customers is critical. Lunseth pinpoints an ideal demographic: double-income households, dog owners and parents of children who play in the yard. "Dog ownership is even more of a factor than kids," she notices.

Usually, one person in the household prioritizes organics. "Another person at home might not care," Lunseth says, relating that involving everyone in the education process reassures skeptics that occasional weeds happen and rebuilding a lawn's root system requires a few seasons of sticking with it.

The company hosts monthly webinars with Q&A sessions, along with updating its blog and communicating how customers should participate in the process on service tickets and emails. "We set the expectations for involvement," she says.

This can mean hand-picking some weeds. It includes embracing the whole program, which includes seasonal overseeing with allelopathic grass species that naturally regenerate the lawn. Lunseth is an organic purist. "If we are going to put the word organic in our name, it has to be 100% organic," she says, pointing to natural weed control with a non-GMO, OMRI-certified corn-gluten product for pre-emergent.

Organic Lawns by Lunseth offers a chelated iron post-emergent product that it will not call organic, though it is permitted in places where synthetic herbicides are banned, such as Ontario, where there are cosmetic pesticide regulations.

Lunseth says demand for organic lawn care has increased and so has weed tolerance. The company's online reviews demonstrate that good, healthy turf takes time. "We love these honest reviews," says Lunseth, "because a lot of them say, 'I've been on the program for seven years, and my grass looks amazing, I don't have to maintain it as much and it's softer on your feet.'"

Looking back, Lunseth is glad she got schooled in horticulture and organics before the company formalized its service. The company sustains a lose partnership with the University of Minnesota's extension service. "We have a lot of experts at our fingertips," she says.

Ultimately, Lunseth says, a temperament for the time and weed allowance required to establish a successful, fully organic program requires this understanding: "There's no lawn care emergency." L&L

The author is a freelance writer based in Ohio.

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Giving back with words

Rodney Smith Jr. has now authored four children's books aimed at helping kids fall in love with kindness and the green industry.

By Jimmy Miller

When Rodney Smith Jr. created the 50 Yard Challenge, he never imagined that writing children's books would be part of that plan.

Still, Smith Jr. is now an author of four books, including his most recent addition that highlights the 50 Yard Challenge, which encourages young Americans to mow 50 lawns for those who need the help. Kids receive a different colored T-shirt for every 10 lawns they mow, and on their 50th, they receive a black T-shirt and a complimentary lawn mower.

Smith Jr. estimates 500 kids have actually completed the challenge. And now, he's highlighting some of his experience running Raising Men & Women Lawn Care Service. His fourth book, "The 50 Yard Challenge: How a Simple Act Became a Nationwide Movement," is his latest work and debuted earlier this winter.

Smith Jr.'s other three books all highlight green industry services from across the four seasons. "One Lawn at a Time" is about mowing in the spring and summer, while "Leaves, Litter, and Leadership" and "The Snow Squad's Winter Rescue" are respectively about the fall and winter months.

Smith Jr. came up with the idea to write books two years ago. There were parts of the process that proved more difficult than others like finding an illustrator, buying an ISBN number

"I really think it's important to show kids how to give back at a young age, and I think this is a great tool and a great way to do so."

— Rodney Smith Jr.

Rodney Smith Jr. has added children's books to his green industry education for youth.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RODNEY SMITH JR. / © EVY ROSS PHOTOGRAPHY

and contending with printing costs. Still, Smith Jr. says writing his book ended up being easier than expected.

"It's really just sharing my story as if I was a kid," he says. "That was pretty easy to do. Then I had my aunt, she's a teacher and has a master's (degree) in education... edit the book for me."

The books have received rave reviews. Smith Jr.'s first book, which he says is "like my baby," earned a Book of the Year award from Story Monsters Ink in its May issue. It features his own experience becoming a champion for spreading kindness through green industry practices.

"It was pretty easy to imagine yourself as a kid," he says. "Your audience that you're writing for, that plays a huge part."

Smith Jr. has a program with preschools across the country where he comes in to read his stories, and each kid walks away with a sponsored copy of the book. He's also starting a program where the students will hear the story, then pretend they are serving a cardboard version of a character from the story like it's a client. For example, he says there will be fake leaves scattered around a character's cardboard house, and the students will race with plastic rakes and wheelbarrows to clean up the mess — much like the characters do in "Leaves, Litter, and Leadership."

"I think it's important to show kids kindness from a young age. Instill that in them early in life, and they can grow up and maybe even one day take on the 50 Yard Challenge," Smith Jr. says. "I really think it's important to show kids how to give back at a young age, and I think this is a great tool and a great way to do so." **L&L**

The author is digital editor with Lawn & Landscape.

Rodney Smith Jr.'s books have already earned awards and recognition for their impact with future landscapers.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RODNEY SMITH JR.

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WOMEN IN LANDSCAPING is a column brought to you in partnership with the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

Steph **Girgen**

Nursery Sales & Logistics Specialist, Hoffman & McNamara Nursery & Landscape

Steph Girgen is an active member of the National Association of Landscape Professionals Women in Landscape Network (powered by Stanley Black and Decker) which provides a forum for industry professionals to support each other's professional growth. The Network is free to all industry professionals.

Most women in the landscape industry are used to being outnumbered by men. Career advancement can feel difficult in a patriarchal scenario. A few excuses I've heard for keeping women in subservient roles include women are too emotional for business, women need too much time off work for family (darn that pesky childbirth and, by societal default, most of the task management of a household) or women aren't physically strong enough (Guess what? Men aren't either. That's why humans created tools and skid loaders).

I could write diatribes about each of these, but in the interest of disproving the stereotype of being shrill when showing passion or emotion, I'd simply like to explore emotion. Why is such an important feature of being human often considered a weakness in the workplace?

Business leaders seem to pride themselves on compartmentalizing their emotions and focusing only on hard data in their decision-making, but should they? Humans crave authentic connection. When selling to customers, emotion and empathy are powerful business tools because asking the right questions to put yourself in a customer's shoes helps you learn what is important to them and what motivates their buying decisions. Human psychology tells us buying decisions are not made solely with concrete data but also with emotion.

A potential landscape design client and her husband were demolishing an older home to build a new one on a property bordered by woods along the Mississippi River. The conversation at our first consultation led the homeowner to share her fear of the snakes she had been seeing around the property. She worried landscaping would create too many hiding places for them but felt pressure to make the outdoor spaces as grand as the new home. My first take: Another client expecting me to magically solve impossible problems. But then I tried to picture myself living there. What might make me feel safer? Why not spec poured concrete surfaces rather than flagstone or pavers for less seams for critters to hide in? Design extra-wide walkways between the parking area and the entrance for quick visual scanning and adequate space to react. The first contractor she met with laughed her off when she shared a vulnerability. I listened with empathy and paused long enough to consider whether I might be wrong about my initial assessment. I got the job.

Within an organization, being in touch with emotion makes you a canary in the coal mine in any interdepartmental meeting or colleague interaction. An empath may perceive discord in relationships or company processes that could be corrected before the problems trickle down to affect the bottom line, at which point they may no longer even be traceable. Use your superpower. Ask the hard questions. Dare to contribute and argue for a different viewpoint if you feel it's important.

Showing emotion about an issue you're passionate about is not a flaw. It means you care.

I admit it's intimidating to speak up when you feel outnumbered, because traditional gender roles afford males innate authority that, frustratingly, women must earn over time. Do it anyway. It takes time and work for systems to change. Take. Up. Space. Advocate for yourself and ask for what you want in your organization. Or start your own business and create the role you want. Stay curious, be authentic and show empathy for others in your customer base, your company and the wider landscaping industry whose voices aren't being heard.

That is being a leader. **L&L**

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