

A lush garden scene featuring a stone waterfall cascading down a hillside. The garden is filled with various plants, including purple flowers in the foreground, green foliage, and a large, stylized bird sculpture. The background shows more greenery and a clear sky.

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Serving interior and exterior landscape maintenance, installation and design/build contractors

12
How to keep your customers smiling

20
Growing your own plants

32
When to build your new facility

Winter 1999

How to keep your customers smiling

Service is job #1 at Pro Scapes, Syracuse, New York

Left: The grounds at Pro Scapes reflect the company's mission to provide the highest level of quality service to customers. Right: Owner Rick Kier in front of one Pro Scapes maintenance buildings.



PROFILE

COMPANY NAME

Pro Scapes
6810 East Seneca Tnpk.
Jamesville, NY 13078

Owner: Rick Kier

Founded: 1978

Full-time employees: 5
30 seasonal

ALCA size category:
over \$1 million

Rick Kier started Pro Scapes Inc. in 1978 when he bought his first pickup truck. He was in ninth grade. After making all 36 payments he bought a second truck and never looked back.

Even at that age, Kier had already learned a thing or two about service. When he was just 11 years old, he constructed some home-made business cards and passed them out along his paper route. He asked customers if they wanted their yards raked or mowed. Only one person responded, a little old lady. Kier took care of her yard for the next 15 years.

Kier learned from those early experiences that service is job one. "Whatever customers want, give it to them," says Kier. "Just keep giving and giving until the customer smiles.

service. The difference between a good contractor and a bad contractor is not whether or not you have problems. It's how you handle those problems."

Service first

Service is Kier's constant mantra. He takes pride in taking on new customers who have never been happy with other contractors. He talks about listening carefully to what customers want, writing things down and doing the work according to what it will take to meet those needs. That might make Pro Scapes a bit more expensive than the low-bid competition, but it's what the customer wants, and that's Kier's primary consideration.

"After we write down the customer's needs," says Kier,

"we put those notes into our system so they show up on the work order every single time we print it. We constantly reinforce with our guys the importance of those notes and that they do the job the way the customer wants. So if a customer has a special request that they made 10 years ago, we continue to do the work that special way. That gives us a very high rate of customer satisfaction."

Kier believes in the power of process. Because of the nature of employee turnover in the landscaping industry, Kier attempts to train the system as much as employees. "The information is there for our crews every week, no matter who is on the crew. And, when a customer asks them for something special, our foremen are instructed not just to do it and forget about it. They have to write it down so we can put it in the computer system for future generations of foremen who



Really, you make a customer unhappy and you're not only going to lose their business but they're going to tell other people. I don't have a single customer today that, at one point or another, didn't have some kind of problem with our

may be working on that job."

Like other landscape contractors, the most challenging part of Kier's business is labor. "I'm a good organizer and

(Continued on page 16)



Primarily a grounds-maintenance organization, Pro Scapes serves a balanced mix of residential and commercial customers.

problem-solver. I think I'm a pretty good thinker. If I could just get a handle on that labor thing, I think my business would be twice its size right now.

Figuring out how to keep good employees, and how to keep them happy, motivated and organized, is what Kier desires most. He's constantly looking for new ways to instruct employees without coming across as negative or critical. "A lot of us in

this industry tend to think things will get better all by themselves if we just keep on doing the same old things. It's not true. The definition of insanity is doing the same old things and expecting different results. We have to find ways to get out of the rut and make a concerted effort to do things differently."

One way is with new technology. To that end Kier hopes the digital camera will come in handy for instructional purposes. "I can take a picture of something — say a weed growing up through the middle of a juniper. Then without a lot of fanfare, I can turn it into a clear example and label it. Then I don't have to pick on a specific crew or job site for not noticing such a thing. And I can use that image to help current and future employees to visually identify what a weed looks like hiding in the junipers. I can make that part of a training pro-

gram."

Pro Scapes bills about \$1.2 million and employs about 30 full- and part-time employees. In winter, eight people stay on full time and all other employees are on call for snow plowing.

Maintenance driven

During the growing season, the company is primarily a grounds-maintenance organization. "Our bread and butter is maintenance, although we do some landscape design/build, mostly for our existing maintenance customers," says Kier. "I try to keep the company growing by keeping service quality at a very high level. With maintenance work, if we do a good job, customers tend to keep us. With design/build, when the job is finished, no matter how wonderful we did, we're off looking for the next job. If there isn't a next job, then there's no work for the crews. Design/build is also a vicious cycle. When the economy slows, everyone's in the same boat. Competitors begin to cut prices just to keep their crews busy. They're not even trying to make money anymore. When they do that, the bottom falls out of the market. But with maintenance, it's very steady and ongoing.

"We find that we get the types of clientele that we're looking for through a natural selection process. The people who aren't willing to pay for top-quality service don't come on board. Or if they do come on board for some other reason, they eventually find the low bidder and gravitate away from us. Those tend to be the people who have lower expectations and want the lowest price. We provide an excellent service and sometimes we have to charge a higher price to do it. Some people aren't willing to pay it."

To further assure quality service, Pro Scapes' account managers conduct property inspections randomly or on a regular basis. They visit customers unsolicited, inspect job sites during and after they have been completed and drop in on work crews regularly just to keep them on their toes and to supply them with anything they may need.

Added efficiencies

If service is the heart of Pro Scapes, then efficiency is its bloodline. Kier has developed a weekly goal-time graph which he posts for his crews. The graph provides a visual gauge so fore-



men can judge how much time a project should take to complete. Says Kier, "It's amazing. A crew will go out on a job with a goal time of 100 hours. And somehow they'll manage to pull it together. Maybe it'll take them 105 or 98 hours. But it rarely ends up being 120 or 75 hours. When they keep that goal in mind, usually they can get it done close to the goal time."

"Before we used this system, we'd send a crew out for a spring cleanup at Mrs. Smith's house. One year it would take 10 hours and the next year it would take 35 hours. When Mrs. Smith would get her bill, she'd go ballistic. So the goal-time graph — especially with hourly time and material work — works out quite well."

Pro Scapes does a significant amount of lawn maintenance work with chemicals and fertilizers. The company used to subcontract all its chemical turf work to a large national company. At one point Pro Scapes was subcontracting 1 million square feet and was the largest customer in Syracuse. But the service was lacking by Pro Scapes standards.

"They were taking care of their new clients first," says Kier. "We would have a client that they had for five years, and yet a new customer would call up, someone across the street from one of our customers, and the company would do an estimate and treat the lawn right then and there. Nevertheless, our customer, who had been with them for five years, hadn't even had their lawn treated yet. So we finally said, enough is enough. That's when we went into the lawn care business and it's been a very good business for us."

Better cash flow

Maintenance customers who pay their bills on time receive an automatic discount. It's an idea Kier came up with years ago to alleviate cash flow problems. The discount is a dollar value (not percentage). In other words, if Pro Scapes charges \$30 to mow a customer's lawn, and the bill is paid by the 10th of the month, the customer will be billed \$29.



High profile customers like these keep a steady stream of new referral business coming into the Pro Scapes offices.

"It's a real incentive," says Kier. "And 95 percent of our customers take advantage of it." According to Kier, the discount dollar value is usually greater than 2 percent of the bill. "I've had that system in place as early as 1978. It has worked tremendously and obviously it helps our cash flow."

Even Pro Scapes' billing process is heavily oriented toward customer service. It goes back to Kier's philosophy of making the customer smile. A lot of Pro Scapes customers are smiling these days. And the business continues to grow. Says Kier, "If a customer is unhappy, we do whatever it takes to make them happy. If we have to reseed a lawn, then we reseed. Because if a customer leaves angry, we lose the business and they tell other people. No one can afford that. A lot of our business comes from referrals. If we do bad work, we're not going to get those referrals. It's as simple as that."

A simple formula — make your customer smile — has elevated Pro Scapes beyond the million dollar mark. With its corporate mission — to provide the highest quality service — there's no limit to the number of new customers this company will satisfy in the future. ☺



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