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PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRO SCAPES, INC.

Rick Kier visited other landscape firms to get good ideas before designing and building his classy headquarters five years ago.

Sunshine & Snow Star Performer

Pro Scapes stays busy in the Syracuse market regardless of season

by Mike Ingles

It's not much of a stretch to describe Pro Scapes, Inc., as "Rick Kier's Summer and Winter Services Company." Kier founded the company in 1978 while he was still in high school. It has grown a tad since that first pickup truck with an attached snowplow. Pro Scapes, Inc., Jamesville, N.Y., now employs 80 during the prime landscaping season and 140 for snow and ice management.

Yes, the company is that busy, both summer and winter—especially winter. Jamesville, located just outside of Syracuse, gets snow—lots of snow.

Kier, CSP, CNP, CLP, president and founder of Pro Scapes, explains, "The Syracuse area typically gets 115 inches of snow



Rick Kier, founder of Pro Scapes, Inc., and his wife and business partner Karen L. Kier, company vice president.

Pro Scapes, Inc.

Founder and owner: Rick Kier

Founded: 1978

Headquarters: Jamesville, N.Y.

Market: Syracuse and surrounding communities in central New York

Services: Maintenance, design/build, pest control, irrigation, fertilization, green roof construction, mass plantings and snow and ice removal

Employees: 80 during landscape season, 140 for snow & ice

Website: www.proscapes.com

each year and our niche in that market is to be reliable stewards of our customers' trust." This means planning and being available with the right amount of equipment and the right tools to get the job done safely and effectively, whether that is December or June, he adds.

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Sunshine Continued from page B1

Kier started out like many in the industry as a high school student looking to earn money by mowing lawns.

"One lady called me each summer for everything that needed doing around her yard; when winter came she called and asked me to put snow tires on her car and shovel snow. So I did," he recalls.

Seizing opportunity

By 1982, Kier had three pickups in his fleet and employed high school kids to work in his lawn maintenance and snow removal company. By 1987, he had incorporated and expanded his mowing services to include lawn fertilizing, pest management, tree and shrub maintenance, snow hauling, salting, parking lot sweeping and parking lot sanding.

But the business really took off in 1990 when Kier reduced his reliance on residential services because of intense competition, some of it offering unrealistically low pricing. That's when he began seriously ramping up commercial services where he could best utilize his training and his company's expanding equipment fleet.

Kier has an associate's degree in landscape horticultural from State University of New York College of Agriculture and Technology at Morrisville, N.Y., and he discovered that what he learned about business there had a very practical side.



Driver safety training is vital for Pro Scapes, Inc., which is one of the busiest snow management companies in the Syracuse market.

"We started looking at systems management and found that one hour of time handling residential accounts might generate \$60, but that same one-hour in commercial applications might generate \$6,000. I considered that time is the limiting commodity of our business; there are only so many hours in a day. We needed to change," says Kier.

So he began changing the company by directing its efforts more aggressively into commercial services.

While Kier still handles some residential, that segment accounts for only about 5 percent of the firm's annual revenue. Full-service property management for commercial and condo associations provide it the sta-

bility of year-round opportunities, and Pro Scapes has adjusted to this strong demand.

"We added mass flower plantings and aquatic pond and lake treatments; we are well-known in central New York for the color changes we provide to commercial properties," says Kier. "We'll design the layout for as many as 20,000 annuals and bring in extra staff. Each location will have an exact count of plantings for each square foot of property."

Technology, and those driving forces are allowing for another transition for Pro Scapes. Last year the company grew by about 20 percent and this year Kier is looking to solidify those gains and update the software and his



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business systems. They have been in place for several years as per a service commitment to the vendor. "By April, we'll have our own proprietary software ready to take us to the next level," he says.

Pro Scapes had been using a monthly-rate GPS service, which allowed its management to monitor and manage employees movements as well as keep it informed of the location of equipment and the status or how much idling trucks were doing. Kier is continuing to define what it need in systems management, including monitoring what time the crews actually arrive and ensuring that crews load only the amount of materials called for on each truck for each property and respond to real-time customer service adjustments.

Along with the new systems, Kier says the crews will use iPads for better on-the-jobs communications and to make real-time service and employee adjustments. Kier says improved productivity and better client service and satisfaction will more than make up for the expense of the iPads.

"All these things will combine to make our office operations that much more effective for ourselves and for our customers," he continues. One of the goals of the project is dramatically reduce the "never ending supply of paper-flow piled up on desktops."

Modern, clean digs

Hiring and training will also be systems driven. The company's five-year-old headquarters feature a modern, large classroom, a clean and spacious location for employee training. The modern facility also provides the company with an efficient HR department, a great place to interview job prospects, review employee knowledge, daily manage the company's equipment and materials and, most importantly, to track and analyze the company's service performance.

Kier believes the company's mission statement covers the three fundamental priorities in his business: safety, quality and efficiency.

Pro Scapes has a full-time safety manager and the company

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holds weekly safety meetings. In addition, a safety committee made up of employees meets monthly to go over any incidents that may have occurred. Employees who demonstrate a commitment to safety in the field get a green wristband to wear as an acknowledgement of their efforts.

“Our employees make efficient use of all assets, including their time, fuel, water, plants and all natural resources,” claims Kier.

Kier says they have completed several “roof meadows builds” (green roofs) and that these new designs outlast typical commercial roofing by two to three times, so they are cost-effective for customers and also demonstrates their clients’ environmental concerns. Kier says that green roofs conserve energy, resulting in lower heating and cooling costs for green roof clients. In respect to energy conservation, Pro Scapes is working in that direction, too, as company managers drive Prius hybrids.

The firm provides typical property maintenance services (mowing, edging, pruning, etc.) with two- and three-man crews. Pro Scapes also offers lawn treatment and employs an irrigation specialist.

Kier says the mow teams utilize John Deere 997 31 hp diesel zero-turns with 72-inch decks. He says they are economical to run, saving 60 percent in fuel usage over the mowers the company previously used. The company also uses John Deere tractors. Three full-time mechanics ensure that the equipment is running properly and maintained to OEM specifications in their four-bay garage.

The fleet also contains Chevrolet three-quarter-ton and quarter-ton pickups outfitted with Boss 8 snowplows for snow pushing. Kier says they have 45 units ready for snow, including 11 with salt spreaders.

“It’s like anything else, when and how much snow constitutes when to bring out the crews. It’s mostly covered under contract, but we’ve found that to be a really good service company we have to adjust,” says Kier. “A snow



Each spring Rick Kier’s Pro Scapes will bring in extra staff to help install more than 20,000 annuals on the properties of its commercial clients.

of 1.5 inches may not seem worth calling out crews, but we can salt and deice instead; or if it is 3 inches, maybe the salt won’t be effective so we go the extra mile. Safety is our immediate concern and not what the contract says.”

Kier says this winter has been a busy one and resulted in a salt shortage that drove up its price by more than 60 percent, says Kier, one of the nine founding members of the Snow & Ice Management Association that now has about 1,500 members.

Mike Ingles is a researcher and writer who loves covering the green industry. He lives and works in Columbus, Ohio.



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