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ISSUE

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## A CONVERSATION WITH THE TOP 100

Leaders from the Top 100 discuss the biggest challenges facing their companies and how they're solving them. Turns out, their solutions work for landscapers of any size.

By Chuck Bowen

**A**s part of this year's Top 100 coverage, Lawn & Landscape convened CEOs, presidents and other leaders from companies on the list. We asked to eavesdrop on their conversations – which ranged from how to find good employees to how to choose services to how to make the landscape industry sexier – so we could share their ideas with the broader industry. On the pages that follow, we have two of those conversations for you. The first is among Jen Lemcke, COO at Weed Man USA in Oshawa, Ontario, and Frank Mariani and Fred Wacker, CEO and president, respectively, at Mariani Landscape, Lake Bluff, Ill. The second is between Christy Webber, president Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago, and Jim McCutcheon, CEO, HighGrove Partners in Austell, Ga.



JEN LEMCKE



FRANK MARIANI



FRED WACKER

**LEMCKE:** Recruiting right now is one of our big issues. We're seeing it in pockets across the U.S. Gone are the days when you can put an ad in the newspaper and get the phone ringing for people coming in.

It's also acquiring online customers and really adapting our technology with some of our processes with customer service. People are expecting a higher level of service, and we've got some of the highest retention rates in our segment of the industry, so we're very happy with that, but I think we could be better, and I think technology will help us be better.

**WACKER:** Jen, you're talking about the need for assistance to allow for someone coming to Weed Man to be able to engage with you in an easy-to-do-business way so that they could start their program with you?

**LEMCKE:** A little beyond that. If they want a quote, they fill it out and it goes to the right franchisee. What I'm talking about are the people that come to our website ... but they didn't quite request a quote. We're not doing enough for those people, and then on top of that bringing people to our website.

We have a system where you can manage your account online, pay your bills online, order services, all of that but it's going beyond that, Fred – allow them to maybe not commit fully to a quote or engage with the company. You get these ser-





JIM McCUTCHEON



CHRISTY WEBBER

## COMMERCIAL VS. RESIDENTIAL

Jim McCutcheon lays out why he doesn't do residential work, and Christy Webber outlines why she'll never give it up.

**MCCUTCHEON:** I know everybody around the country, and I've done it myself, thinks they can do residential and commercial. I will debate it with anybody, all day long, that I've never seen anybody in this country do both of those very, very well. I've seen people that do one very well and the other one pretty well, but never seen anybody that does both very well. And I recognize that we're better on the commercial side of things. So, I've eliminated all the residential.

**WEBBER:** So how much revenue did you give up when you got rid of your residential?

**MCCUTCHEON:** I sold Charlotte about 10 years ago now. That was about a \$5-million branch. I sold about \$3- or \$4-million worth of residential work here in Atlanta.

**WEBBER:** We did an acquisition of Kinsella Landscape, which focused basically on HOAs and commercial work, because we were so heavy into the municipal work. And three days ago somebody said to me, this residential gig is so intense – men, trucks, is it worth it? – one of my VPs.

I said, "I will never, ever get out of residential maintenance because it's always been what we're

known for." When I started it, many customers that I've spent 25 years with are still my customers.

**MCCUTCHEON:** About nine or 10 years ago we started looking at things very differently and kind of split off traditional account managers and reworked that whole thing. Once we got over that hill, the dynamic in that changed significantly. Our enhancements went through the roof.

**WEBBER:** So you don't have account managers. What do you call them now?

**MCCUTCHEON:** We split the role down the middle and we have what we call CRMs, or customer relation managers, and they are the ones that deal with the customers. They are managing the portfolios, they are selling enhancements. They're also doing new sales and then they work in conjunction with a separate operations manager.

**WEBBER:** We call them account managers but they definitely do not deal with the operations at all. I have operations guys that manage the crews, and each guy has four to five crews, so that's 20-some-odd people. Every account manager does about \$1 million. A million-two is about the most they can handle well.

vice companies now, and these are small industries, that will tell you 10 minutes before your technician's about to come in and do a service on your fridge.

**WACKER:** I can take a shot at our lead challenge in 2015. We probably get a lot of the same

challenges, Jen, but I think recruitment is really important to us, too.

Professionally, we know that sales talent is going to come out of the colleges and universities that have good horticultural programs, and we've turned them into our best source.

It's more than sales, but sales is an important aspect, but it's the people that really get engaged with the clients on a professional dialogue and be able to manage a landscape program.

**MARIANI:** I think Fred brings up an excellent point. Nobody's

going to do a better job of enticing people and getting people excited than their peers. So having these young people visit the schools for the job fairs – they can see students that they were in school with a year or two ago, and say, "Hey, this is a great place to work."

We, in turn, need to be very open and honest and make sure everybody understands that this is what you're going to do when you're at Mariani. We like to say you're going to get your MBA in the field.

I remember years and years ago I would hear horror stories about people taking kid interns and basically throwing them on a lawnmower and leaving them there, or putting them in the field and they're watering or pulling weeds.

At the end of the day too, the thing we can't forget is that this is an industry where the hours can be long and there can be a lot of manual labor. So we want everybody to have an open, honest look at what we're all about and quite frankly – Fred, if I'm not putting words in your mouth – but we feel rather bullish when it comes to middle-management and up.

**WACKER:** I agree 110 percent. Frank and I painted the picture of what we needed and it took a little while for the leaders to kinda get their arms around the fact that if we just continue to grow at the rate that we're growing, you're gonna need to replicate this many people per year in your department to be able to stay even. And once we kinda did that simple math and laid it on the table, it's amazing the uptake.





# News & Notes

## JANUARY 2015

**SCOTTS** acquired Action Pest Control, the first time Scotts has purchased a home pest control business.



## FEBRUARY 2015

**SOUTHERN BOTANICAL** expanded into Houston. The maintenance-only firm announced it will begin offering a complete package of services in 2016.



## FEBRUARY 2015

**RYAN LAWN & TREE** acquired Maisch Small Engine, a Kansas City-based STIHL dealer.



## MARCH 2015

**YARD-NIQUE** acquired Estes Landscape in Sharpsburg Ga., which was the company's third acquisition in five years.



## MAY 2015

Scott Jamieson, **BARTLETT TREE EXPERTS**, took over as president of the National Association of Landscape Professionals. He replaced Jim McCutcheon, CEO of **HIGHGROVE PARTNERS**.

## ACQUISITIONS

**MASSEY SERVICES** made the following acquisitions: Green Pest Services, Austin, Texas; BACO Exterminating Services, Norcross, Ga.; MayDay Pest Solutions, Austin, Texas and Wolf Pest Control, Charleston, S.C.

And our guys and gals ran it out this year and did a great job of recruiting and they got more than we budgeted for. If we get good people, we don't want to lose them to another opportunity that they might take, and then when we get these young folks from the schools recruiting, and then bring in people that are inspired to come because of the enthusiasm that those young folks showed them, then they see, they understand our culture.

**LEMCKE:** We did an apprenticeship program and what you said, Frank and Fred, it's so true. I had the opportunity to co-chair an event with Steven Cohen from Maryland and he's a professor.

He said exactly what you said. "I'm sick of sending students to these companies and they just put them into these jobs just to get work done over the summers. They didn't give them the tools that they need to succeed after they finish this."

But you're absolutely right, you need a roadmap for these kids to come in to see where they could go with this.

**WACKER:** We connect them with someone and they have a mentor. They've got a clear path in what their early weeks, months and year are gonna look like. They meet with me and Frank, and then carry around a piece of paper that gets signed off by every department. So that time when suddenly they are coming into a company (we're) not just saying, "That's your desk, or that's your truck; get up and work."

## READ MORE ONLINE

To read both interviews in their entirety, visit [LAWNANDLANDSCAPE.COM](http://LAWNANDLANDSCAPE.COM) and search "conversations."

**MARIANI:** Last year, we made a decision to raise our minimum wage substantially, and to communicate that to Latinos and other minority organizations, and to the public at large.

And so far this spring, we've got about 40 percent more applicants than we had the same period last year.

We just did the math on how many guys were turning over last year where a dime or a quarter or a dollar make a difference. And we just raised it and people are telling their friends. We're getting a lot of men and women coming in the door that were from somewhere else and once they come in and see, and learn the Mariani culture, which is one of respect and reward for hard work, they want to say.

You know, this industry is really a little sad when it comes to the way you promote somebody. If they've been there two years, they do this. If they're three years, then they do that; four years they do that, but quite frankly, they may not have the skill to climb that ladder.

For example, if you can convince us that you're gonna sign up for a class at a local junior college because it's actually gonna increase your skills or your skillset to do something better at Mariani, get a passing grade—we're happy to pay for it.

It's kinda silly, but to a lot of people in the industry, well you're a crew leader when you get a driver's license. I mean,

really? I mean you're a truck driver when you get a driver's license. And what—did that help you hone your pruning skills, your horticultural knowledge and all that?

**LEMCKE:** You're creating a competitive spirit, you know, where you had maybe guys that were motivated before but they're seeing people bypass them. They've either got it or they leave.

**MARIANI:** Looking at the last 40 years, one of the mistakes I made—I assumed wrongfully that everybody was like me and if you were a laborer then you want to become a crew leader in training, then you want to become a crew leader, then you want to become a supervisor, then you want to become a client representative. And guess what? There are a lot of people that are happy and content being a laborer. You should celebrate that. There's nothing wrong with that.

**LEMCKE:** It is a huge concern, and to attract good people to our industry, because we're not that sexy industry when kids are coming out of their business schools, their marketing schools, and how do we get in front of them?

**MARIANI:** Well, when you walk the floor at the trade show in Louisville, it just kills me that we can't make all the different jobs a little bit more sexy—everything from designing multi-million dollar machines, or working for the chemical companies developing new products. I mean, there's so much more than cutting grass and digging holes. 🍀