

September 2004

Lawn & Landscape

**Ergonomically
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Guide**

**Special Focus:
Fall Fertilization**

Systematic Success

*For the Pro Scapes team, where
there's a service, there's a system
for getting the job done right.*



PRO SCAPES

HEADQUARTERS: Jamesville, N.Y.

FOUNDED: 1978

INCORPORATED: 1987

MANAGEMENT TEAM: Rick Kier, president; Colette Gleason, vice president and office manager; Jeremy Oliver, operations manager; Penny Barrett, bookkeeper; Frank Tomasi, equipment manager

COMPANY PRIORITIES:
No. 1 – Safety of employees, customers, environment, equipment and the public.
No. 2 – Quality: Doing every job well and portraying a professional image.
No. 3 – Efficiency: Meeting goal times and using creative solutions to save time on jobs.

CLIENT MIX: 82 percent commercial, 18 percent residential

SERVICES MIX: Complete grounds maintenance including spring clean-up, mowing, edging, pruning, tree and shrub care, lawn care, deicing and snow removal

AVERAGE ANNUAL PERCENT PROFIT: 10 to 12 percent

AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH: 8 to 10 percent

FISCAL YEAR: April 1 to March 31 to include the snow season

2001/02 REVENUE: \$1 million

2002/03 REVENUE: \$1.1 million

2003/04 REVENUE: \$1.24 million

PROJECTED 2004/05 REVENUE: \$1.4 million

EMPLOYEES: 30, including six H-2B workers and five permanent staff members

Nuts

Bolts

For the Pro Scapes team, where there's a service, there's a system for getting the job done right and keeping customer relations front and center.

by Lauren Spiers

Systematic Success

Some people just have an affinity for all things handy. Install your air conditioner? No problem. Change your tires? Piece of cake. And as a teenager jump-starting a small business, Rick Kier remembers adding all manner of odd jobs to his early list of services offerings.

"I really was willing to take on just about anything from the get-go," Kier says, thinking back to his first customer – a little old lady on his neighborhood paper route. "She hired me to mow her lawn and I started doing odd jobs around her yard," he says. "She paid me to put snow tires on her car, wash her windows, clean out the basement. I think she would have paid me just to stand there and chat with her."

Talking with clients and listening to their landscape visions is a characteristic Kier continues to make a priority in his company, Jamesville, N.Y.-based Pro Scapes. The company's clientele, however, has veered from residential work to high-profile commercial accounts throughout the Syracuse area.

Since purchasing his first truck in 1978 at age 16, Kier has implemented a number of instructional, business-building systems at Pro Scapes. With management approaches that match crewmembers' personalities and track work hours to boost efficiency and teamwork, Kier and his staff have built Pro Scapes into a solid \$1.4-million company.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS. Though providing quality service to his 90-percent residential clientele was important to Kier early on, his business views became more sophisticated after his freshman year of college in 1983. That summer, Pro Scapes won a \$14,000 annual commercial maintenance contract for an area Pepsi distributor.

Over the next several years, Kier and his employees took on more commercial jobs, many of which were condominium complexes. "We were really attracted to the size of the condominium and HOA accounts because we knew they could help us bring in more revenue and increase our efficiency," he says. "We could have a crew spend half a day or even a whole day on one site, which meant a lot less driving time." By 1991, the

company had grown to 15 employees and about \$500,000 in revenue due to the success of its commercial work.

"We discovered that residential, although it was very rewarding, required a tremendous amount of overhead," Kier notes. "You can spend two hours with a nice old lady and walk away with a \$60 sale, or you can spend the same two hours or less with a commercial client and walk away with a \$6,000 sale. It really became obvious to us that commercial work gave us more opportunity."

Additionally, Kier took significant steps to focus the company's core services. "I came to the conclusion that if we were going to do something, we should do it all the time. And if we had something that we were not doing regularly, we probably shouldn't do it at all," he says. With that, Pro Scapes focused on complete grounds maintenance and stopped looking for installation work, saving those services for existing maintenance clients only.

EXPECTATIONS & EFFICIENCY. To handle approximately 500 clients across all company divisions, Pro Scapes has become a company of systems, the most important of which is the customer database. Though the system has been in place since the mid-1980s, its functionality is clearly long term.

"When we bought our first computer in 1985, we set up a database where the work orders we used to dispatch the crews would have all the customer requests and hot-buttons on them," Kier says. "Then, every year when a customer renews their contract, those details will still be on there. Mrs. Jones may have asked us five years ago to be sure to close the gate in the back yard so the dog doesn't get out and that note is still on every work order we print for her."

"That system is something we still use today and our customers really appreciate it," Kier continues. "By doing that, we keep our existing clients and they end up giving us more work and referring us to other establishments."

This early customer satisfaction system set

a high bar for Pro Scapes' current employees, as well. "Our motto says 'We're big enough to do a good job, and small enough to care,' and our company goals and systems help us keep



The Pro Scapes team relies on a sizable fleet of vehicles and equipment. By matching crewmembers' personalities, Vice President and Office Manager Colette Gleason ensures that crews operate at peak efficiency.

up with that," says Jeremy Oliver, Pro Scapes' operations manager. To consistently meet customer expectations Oliver says that a new white board system allows him and Pro Scapes' 12 crews to track goals and efficiency for each day's work.

"We've always given our crews hour goals, but we never had a really accurate way to track the numbers and make sure we were really in the ballpark," Kier says. "This year, we streamlined the idea by putting a white board system in place so each crew not only knows what's expected of them as they're going out the door, but they can track how well we're meeting those expectations."

Oliver explains that two large dry-erase boards in the company conference room show each crew and their respective accounts for the current and previous weeks. As he schedules the upcoming week's work, Oliver writes the goal times calculated for each job on the white board so crews know exactly how long their workdays will be and how many hours are allotted for that day's work. The crew can read their work orders to see how much time is allotted to each job. At the end of the day, crews must update the boards by writing in their actual times next to the goal times – either in green for jobs that came in under budget or in red for days when the work took long.

"At the end of the week, I total up the goals and the actuals so people can see where the slow spots were every day," Oliver says. "Some guys don't realize that taking an extra five minutes in the morning can affect their goal times for the day. Other people realize that they've been moving one way for so long and they always come in behind, maybe if they change their mowing pattern they'll get ahead. It really gives the crews ownership over their jobs."

Though Oliver notes that there was a minor slip in quality during the first two weeks that the white boards were in place, the urge to sacrifice a job well done for a green mark on the board quickly came to an end. "One of the checks that we have set up with the white board is that if the crews have to go back to fix mistakes on a property, that counts against their time also," he explains. Overall, Oliver says maintenance crew efficiency has gone up 20 percent across the board since the white boards went up at the beginning of the season, making the company available to take on more work.



Jeremy Oliver, Pro Scapes' operations manager works on crew reports. In the background is Pro Scapes' newly implemented white board system where crews track their hours on the job in order to track efficiency without sacrificing quality.



COMPANY COLLABORATION. On the human resources side of the business, Vice President and Office Manager Colette Gleason knows that increased efficiency as seen on the white boards also stems from a high level of teamwork among Pro Scapes' crewmembers.

In keeping with Pro Scapes' nature, Gleason follows a hiring system that makes it easy for her to find the right people for open positions. "After someone turns in an application, I don't let them leave the office until I've had a chance to read through it and ask them a couple of questions to get a feel for their sincerity and if they really want the job," she explains, knowing that someone who's only halfheartedly looking for work won't be able to meet Pro Scapes' top priorities of safety, quality and efficiency.

After collecting several applications for crewmember positions, Gleason then schedules group interviews with six or seven prospective employees to get an initial feel for how each individual interacts with the others and, potentially, with the other members of Pro Scapes' staff. Individual interviews follow, at which point Gleason explains the company's history, expectations and drug-free workforce policy.

As it stands, Pro Scapes' hiring is very seasonal, beginning with the addition of six H-2B workers in April and about 10 temporary workers for seasonal color installations in mid-May. Gleason also is responsible for hiring seasonal winter employees for the snow division, though the company's regular staff only numbers about 30 people right now, including five office staffers.

"We used to be really exempt-employee heavy," Gleason says. "At one point we had four salespeople and a lawn care department that was very disorganized - too many chiefs and not enough braves." To eliminate some overhead and become more profitable, in 2000 and 2001, the company reorganized responsibilities making Kier the only salesper-

Known best for its cold and snowy weather, Syracuse, N.Y., may not bring thoughts of warm, sunny days to many people's minds. Thankfully, the team at Pro Scapes, Jamesville, N.Y., is brightening up that image one commercial contract at a time.

"We've done seasonal color in some form for about 15 years, but we really turned it into one of our fortes in 1997," says Pro Scapes President Rick Kier. "In our market, we don't have multiple change-outs, but we probably do more single installations than anyone in our area, and the quality of the work we do has helped us land several more contracts."

Not only does Pro Scapes do a quality job of planting begonias, impatiens and other attractive annuals, but the company's unique mass production installation technique streamlines the process among their 15 color accounts. "For every job that we have, I have drawings of the beds and I lay out the planting early on so I know in advance how many flowers will be in every bed," Kier explains, adding that photographs of each bed are placed in plastic sheets in three-ring binders to be used during installation.

Once the company has hired the 10 or more temporary workers required to handle the extra spring work, the real planting excitement begins. "Prior to planting, we rototill each bed so the soil is already amended," Kier notes. "Each bed is numbered, so when the jobs begin, we have a delivery truck drive from bed to bed dropping off exactly the right flowers for that planting. If bed six needs 10 flats of plant A and 8 flats of plant B, the truck will drop off exactly what the crew needs."

From there, the flower patterns are laid out on the surface before any holes are drilled. Yes, drilled. "Instead of hand-digging every hole, we use a generator and a 1/2-inch drill with a special 5-inch auger attachment we developed to literally drill planting holes into the bed," Kier says. With this system, a planting team can finish a job in a matter of hours, rather than taking half a day or longer.

To maintain quality during the short 14- to 18-day planting window, Kier works in the field alongside the crews and ensures that the plants used in the design are healthy and properly installed. "Quality is a function of plant selection, layout and planting technique," he explains. "Because we have a short window with a tremendous amount of ground to cover, I make sure that we have experienced installation employees working with our temporary crews so that all of our planting techniques are implemented correctly. I'm always out there during that time, getting my hands dirty and supervising the overall installation so that the designs are filled in properly and the client is satisfied."

Pro Scapes' color accounts vary from 200 flowers on small sites to 20,000 on their biggest account, Kier says. All the plantings take place in mid-to-late May and last until crews return to take the plants out for the winter. But despite the popularity of the service, Kier notes that most of Pro Scapes' color installations are break-even jobs.

"Color is becoming more and more popular for the company, but the service is still a loss leader for us," he explains. "We make very little, if any, profit on most jobs, and on some accounts we'll even lose money, but the benefit is that it attracts more clients. The potential customers we have in an area can see a visual representation of the quality of work we do and our attention to detail and that's what sets us apart from our competition." - **Lauren Spiers**

COLOR Coordinated

son. The remaining office staff was reduced to Gleason, who handles administrative duties and manages the lawn care department; Oliver as operations manager, Penny Barrett as bookkeeper and Frank Tomasi as equipment manager.

Though Pro Scapes is running lean by many companies' standards, Oliver says weekly meetings on Monday and Thursday mornings help the entire management team communicate despite busy schedules.

Kier notes that the current company struc-

ture keeps everyone busy, but also helps the company stay profitable. "We had gone from .93 percent profit in 2000/2001 to more than 10 percent profit by the end of our 2002/2003 year," he says. "In the early days, we were making forward progress, but we had to rely on a credit line at the bank to meet payroll during the busy season. Now, we have money in the bank and we can use that as a cushion during the cash flow crunch."

Additionally, Kier adds that the company's systems help the staff to work more efficiently with fewer people. "Growing our company definitely means adding staff members and that will be one of our next big challenges," he says. "As a manager, it's my responsibility to pay attention to my staff and their workload to determine when we need to add another person. But at this point, the systems we have in place are helping us work at the top of our efficiency."

Now in its 27th year, Kier says Pro Scapes is experiencing nearly 11 percent growth for the first four months of the company's fiscal year started April 1. Kier acknowledges that Pro Scapes' future will likely include additional layers of management staff and better profits than the company is seeing even now.

"With the organization we have in place, we don't have to worry about having to start from scratch with every new customer," he says. "With those documented procedures and functions, in the next five to 10 years I envision Pro Scapes to be 100-percent commercial, as well as having the dedicated and talented staff to help us get there." ■



The Pro Scapes management team. Left to right: Penny Barrett, bookkeeper; Jeremy Oliver, operations manager; Frank Tomasi, equipment manager; Rick Kier, president; Colette Gleason, vice president and office manager.

Once again, combining systems and teamwork. Rick Kier knows that a training staple at his company has influenced the small staff's high efficiency. "I learned early on that you have to set expectations and teach people how to do things according to your standards," says the president of Jamesville, N.Y.-based Pro Scapes. "When the business had grown to the point where I couldn't be the one personally doing all the work, I created a library of forms and documents for every service that Pro Scapes offered."

The company's library includes company procedures on everything from how to prune properly to crewleader and crewmember duties, Kier says. "I started doing this in the early 1980s and since then we've been able to add photos and captions illustrating the job steps by using our digital camera," he notes.

To capitalize on the training Pro Scapes how-to library offers, Operations Manager Jeremy Oliver notes that he is currently implementing an in-house certification program that will make employees' training credentials easier to track.

"We have a training program in place now where people get certified on certain tasks before they can perform them on their own, but we're going to have an across-the-board training program in place by next year," Oliver says. "What we're doing is developing a computer program that will let us look up who's certified for the job that needs to be done, which will make it easier for us to determine who we're going to send to a job without worrying if they're ready to handle the work."

Oliver adds that the certification program will include classroom time and book work to learn company procedures, followed by a few weeks of on-site, supervised training. "Our training sessions usually last about half a day depending on how many people are in the group and what the topic is," he explains. "Our average group size is six or seven people and we'll spend about an hour in the classroom going over worksheets and watching a training video, and then we'll go outside and do some hands-on work where we'll actually plant a tree or shrub using the techniques we just studied, or if it happens to be a mowing class we'll get the crewmembers on the mowers and practice the techniques."

Because crewmembers, crewleaders and trainers are paid for their time, Oliver notes that a half-day session could cost about \$500, though having a larger class could add to that amount. "We could be training 12 guys for four hours and that means the price goes up compared to if we were training six people for that same time," he explains. "Also, we could be training on a task like planting a shrub that may require us to buy the planting materials so we can show them how to plant the tree or shrub properly."

However, Oliver comments that the cost for training Pro Scapes employees is offset by the high quality of work that results from the classes. Moreover, the career opportunities that employees gain through training keeps crewmembers coming back for more. "We have a lot of employees who will approach me and say they're really interested in learning how to mow or how to do another service because they know that being trained in that area will give them a chance to get more experience and pick up more hours of work and make a little extra money," he says, adding that occasionally changing training approaches keeps employees interested.

"We like to make the classes interactive so the guys are actually getting to use the equipment or and they're asking questions along the way," he says. "For classes that a lot of our employees attend over and over again, such as a mowing refresher course, instead of just showing the video and doing the worksheets, I've gotten a game going where I'll toss a ball to someone and that person has to share an experience they've had while they were mowing or a technique they've used. It really keeps everyone attentive during the class."

Oliver says that the new training program will likely include other incentives for employees, including the chance to train other crewmembers in areas where they've earned certification. "If one of our employees gets company certified in a certain area and they're really good at a particular task, we'll be able to give them the chance to pass on what they learned to other employees," he says. "Not only will that give them a chance to earn a little extra money, but it's encouraging because it shows that we as managers recognize the good job they're doing and appreciate their hard work" — Lauren Spiers

TRACKING Training

Seamless Snow Removal at Pro Scapes

Because of its position inland from Lake Ontario, Syracuse, N.Y. is a snow-belt city that receives about 120 inches of the white stuff every winter. Though hazardous and aggravating for commuters and pedestrians, the numerous annual snow events keep landscape contractors like Rick Kier plowing in profits during the normally slow season.

"Overall, about 25 percent of our sales comes from snow removal," says Kier, president of Pro Scapes, Jamesville, N.Y. "It's always been a service segment for our company. From the very beginning when I was 12 with my dad's snowblower, I never thought of landscaping and snow removal as being separate. I always thought, 'This is what you do in the winter when you're a landscape contractor,' and it went together automatically."

Kier says that while the service was always part of Pro Scapes, getting involved in the Snow & Ice Management Association helped him realize that it would be a very profitable and rewarding part of the business. Since becoming a charter member of SIMA in June of 1996, Kier has refined the snow portion of Pro Scapes considerably with a level of organization that reflects the company's systems-based operation.

The majority of Pro Scapes' work comes from commercial maintenance, which can overlap with snow removal work, so preparedness is key. "When it gets late in the fall, it's definitely multitasking at its finest," Kier says. "In Syracuse, we have to be ready for both seasons at the same time, so in the spring and fall we go through a series of checklists to prepare the company for the change in season. We've refined the lists over the years and include dates when we anticipate having particular functions finished so we know we're ready when the snow starts to fall."

One list that Kier and his staff go over in the fall takes care of administrative tasks that need to be squared away before winter. These include setting up snow removal customer renewals, determining prices for services, establishing employee phone lists for

when snow removal crews need to be activated and deciding when to follow-up with customers who have not yet renewed.

Closer to snow season, Kier says he and his staff start focusing on training and equipment to make sure everything is in working order by their Nov. 1 start date and all crewmembers know and understand their jobs. Around Nov. 1, the crews also begin visiting snow removal clients to put up wooden marker stakes at the sites.

"We need to be able to plow snow in full capacity by Nov. 1," Kier says. "That's the deadline we've set and over the last 20 years we've actually plowed snow on the morning of Nov. 1 five times - but we've never had to plow on Oct. 31." He adds, however, that ending dates for the snow season in Syracuse is never predictable. "We've plowed as late as April 30 and one time we had a snowfall on Mothers' Day. At that point, we have to be prepared to be doing snow and maintenance work at the same time again because we typically start spring clean-up the last week in March. For all of April we could be performing either service on a given day."

When a winter storm does hit, Kier says he and Operations Manager Jeremy Oliver work together to make a decision on when to start plowing. "If it starts to snow and we're not sure if there's enough snow yet to make plowing worthwhile or if some parts of town got snow and others didn't, I'll send Jeremy out to scout the area," Kier says. "Once we make the final decision that we need to plow, I call in the drivers and then Jeremy takes over."

Oliver's job at that point is to call in any subcontractors that may be needed, as well as the shovelers so they can report to their respective jobs, Kier explains. From there, Oliver maintains constant communication with all equipment operators in the field. "Any time that a site is completed, the crewmembers note it on their plow log and also call in on the two-way radio so Jeremy can check off the site on his dispatch sheet," Kier says. "That way, he has a running scoreboard of who's where, who's finished and he can gauge which crews are ahead and which crews may be falling behind and make an operational decision of which crews can start heading to other sites to help out."

By going over reviewing contracts, routes, crew responsibilities and equipment wear and tear early on, Pro Scapes' crews are able to move from season to season almost seamlessly and make snow removal a profitable business staple.



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