

When to Call an Arborist or Landscaper

From a presentation by Scott Jamieson, Eric Schultz, Trent Sible and Tom Tolkacz

Landscape contractors and arborists sometimes work together, and if they don't, they should. There has been a trend for landscape contractors adding on tree care services and some landscape contractors have spun that business out to companies that just focus on tree care. So what are the benefits, pros and cons, of having an in-house landscape contractor – or arborist – and how can arborists and landscape contractors work together?

Scott Jamieson: At The Care of Trees in Chicago, we work with landscape contractors a lot. We have tried to position ourselves to be their tree division. Our position has always been to add value to the landscape contractor. We have all sorts of relationships with landscape contractors and they range from bidding on removals to where we are actually part of their tree division and their marketing materials position us as their tree division. When we work with landscape contractors our primary focus is, can we work as a team and add some definable value for their clients? Our mission is to bring value to our landscape contractor clients by bringing value to their clients.

Tom Tolkacz: Eric Shultz with Shultz Industries happens to be one of our key landscape clients at Swingle Tree and Lawn Care. We all like additional revenue streams and I truly believe that a strong relationship with landscape contractors in your marketplace can bring you additional revenue streams at probably a lower cost than getting new business yourself. They key difference is that at Swingle, we do some of the services that Shultz Industries offers. We do aeration and fertilization, so there are points in time where we have to be very cognizant of what properties he manages and what property managers he



deals with. We run into this type of situation, but there is a great opportunity for arborists to partner with landscape contractors and increase the revenue stream – help the landscape contractor out and also help yourself out. There are some great seasonal influences, especially with commercial properties. We tend to take care of a lot of our commercial properties in the fall and winter months, which helps us when our traditional residential business may not be in such high demand. It also fits the commercial properties from a mowing maintenance standpoint, and we can work together on that property and not be inter-

fering with each other.

Trent Sible: I serve as a project manager in our maintenance division for Moore Landscapes out of the Chicago area. Moore is currently and has always been a family-owned business. We are a full-service firm. We have landscape architects on staff as well as maintenance and construction divisions. However we do have a pool of subcontractors that we rely upon heavily, one of which is The Care of Trees.

Eric Schultz: I made a decision years ago that we wanted to market and focus our

services on things that we did well as a landscape contractor. A lot of landscape contractors try to do tree work, but they really don't do tree work well. We found that the insurance requirements and the equipment and all of the overhead to get a division ramped up wasn't worth what we could generate in revenue because we had so many other things going on. We struggled for a couple of years trying to find a tree company that we could work with because most of the arborists in the Denver metro area are treating commercial landscape like a typical residential client. They put the job on a list and maybe get to you in two to three months. It wasn't until we got in with Tom at Swingle that we realized that there are things that you need in a partnership between an arborist and a landscape contractor and it can work well both ways. Today, we get a bit better service than the typical person off the street. We also have somebody we can refer work to. We do not subcontract all of our tree work. A lot of the time we will give Swingle's name to a client or give the name to somebody that is asking for information and Swingle will deal directly with the client. There are a lot of different ways that the partnership can work as opposed to just us generating work.

Scott Jamieson: Trent and Eric, what are the advantages and disadvantages of keeping tree care in-house – what has been the greatest advantage to outsource tree care and what have been some of the disadvantages of doing this?

Eric Schultz: You can certainly spend an awful lot of money moving into tree work and you have to be able to recover those equipment costs. A lot of landscape contractors can't do that. You have to be a pretty good-sized company to invest revenue and not pursue or market that section of your business. Insurance is another big issue. We have a tremendous safety program, but when you start swinging guys out of trees it is a different story. While we can perform the services and we do have a certified arborist on our staff to assist in dealing with the client relationships, a business owner really has to look at the cost associated with tree work, then ask your-

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Scott Jamieson

self if you can do it as well as somebody else who does it day in and day out.

Trent Sible: We have no intention of getting into the arboricultural business. We contract out our services primarily for the professionalism they can offer. We have worked with The Care of Trees for a number of years and we know they have qualified people on staff, a safety program and a proven safety record. We contracting out our tree work because that is their specialty, not ours. There are many reasons for the success of Moore Landscapes, but we would like to believe that it has been a consistent focus on our client, delivering continuous good service and value to our customer. One of the ways in which we are able to do this is by bringing in a qualified tree contractor whose sole business is trees, whereas ours is the landscaping.

Scott Jamieson: What are some of the pluses, minuses and challenges of working with a landscape contractor as their subcontractor?

Tom Tolkacz: I use a set of questions, which I call a prenuptial, before entering into a relationship. How much are they going to mark the price up? Who is going to be doing the billing? What happens if I don't get paid on time? What are the terms?

Who is doing the scheduling? Who is in direct contact with the client? A lot of basic things, but questions that oftentimes we forget to ask and which eventually become problems. It is very important to go through these questions and give a copy to the contractor. This way we both know what is going on and we know that there are some agreed upon terms. From that standpoint, we try to avoid as many problems and eliminate the disadvantages by going through this set of questions.

Scott Jamieson: I used to sell quite a bit in the city of Chicago. I worked with a lot of landscape contractors and found them to be extremely demanding from the standpoint of needing prices as soon as possible – if not yesterday. For them, contracting tree care is often relegated to the last line item on the landscape contractor's bid. It is often not high on the priority list. What also happens quite often is landscape contractors are getting last minute calls from their clients, which cascades down the ladder. It has been a challenge in my firm trying to get my salespeople to realize this and deal with it. It is crucial that we understand the needs of all of our clients. If they need it now, it is up to us to figure that out and serve our best clients.

The other challenge we face is that our salespeople often take on a “holier than thou” attitude when it comes to landscape contractors doing tree work. There is a lot of bad tree care that goes on with landscape contractors but there is also a lot of good stuff. One more than one occasion we have been on a site maintained by one of our top landscape contractor partners. Our arborists talk to the client about how the tree was planted too deeply, or about something else that the landscape contractor didn't do. When we are called out to a site by a landscape contractor one of our jobs is to make that contractor look good to the client. One of the hardest things our organization has to deal with is to learn how to quit throwing stones at the landscape contractor, or the landscape architect, and get rid of the “holier than thou” attitude.

Being sensitive to both sides – trying to understand each other's worlds, and trying to get our industries to talk – makes a huge

difference in the relationship. In the end it will not only be better for the trees but also the clients. We often bring the sales team of our landscape contractor clients in for lunch meetings. We will exchange ideas and do presentations back and forth. The landscape contractor will explain who they are and what they do and tell us what is important on different sites. We will do the same for them, talking about why they should be looking up as much as they are looking down. I don't believe you could ever do too much cross education back and forth.

Eric Schultz: We have pretty good relationships with our customers. We give them good service at a fair price. If somebody else comes in and can do that job better, the customer will leave – it's that simple. Once we lose those relationships and they start looking for somebody else you often run into bad situations: they don't pay their bills and you end up in court

over nickel and dime issues. When it comes to competition, if one of our contractors wants Swingle to do their irrigation work, then Swingle will do the work. We overlap with Swingle on a lot of different service lines, such as irrigation and fertilization. We do all of our own shrub pruning in house because we have an arborist on staff. We partner where it makes sense. If Swingle gets a client that needs full service, they will sub-contract the lawn mowing to us since they don't mow. It is a good partnership. If you're worried about a partnership from the standpoint of losing customers, then you probably are not doing enough to keep customers.

Scott Jamieson: We have a great relationship with Moore Landscape and we also work with a number of other landscape contractors in the Chicago market, so how do we form relationships with others that may be competitors? Even though we

don't do the work, often we are serving competing clients. We are given tree care bids from five or six different landscape contractors for the same property.

One of the best ways to develop a relationship with a landscape contractor is to give them referrals. That is one of the toughest things our sales people have to do. Our approach has always been that instead of narrowing the competition, let's expand and extend the market. If a client asks me who I would recommend for a large landscape project I may tell them that Moore or Chalet or another great landscape contractor in the area is the best project manager for this sort of project. I may tell them at the same time that there are four or five others that they can contact as well. I then call the landscape contractors and tell them that I had just given their name to a potential client.

Tom Tolkacz: We have clearly found that a good relationship with a maintenance contractor can get us on more properties. When we are unsuccessful on our own, we find out who the maintenance contractor is and we let them know how much tree work the property needs. We ask the contractor if we can show them what we are talking about. We have been compelled during Denver's drought situation to share the value of trees with our clients, both residential and commercial. We have had to tell them how much it costs if they lose even a 5- to 8-inch ash tree. When you have to cut it down, grind the stump and bring a new tree in, the cost is \$1,500 to \$3,000. What does it cost to prune the tree properly, spray it or do some additional fertilization? We have been very successful with landscape contractors taking our recommendations and selling those recommendations. They mark it up 10 to 15 percent, so they are making more money than they would on their normal mowing maintenance, and we get in the door. It is a win-win situation.

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customers, where we might do one-third of the work per year for three years. These types of opportunities are waiting out there on a lot of commercial properties. I really suggest that you try and find a contractor on some key properties. You will find some revenue out there.

Scott Jamieson: In our experience, the best landscape contractors are the ones whose values match up with ours; landscape contractors who have some sense of the value of trees. When we started seeing Moore's people show up at ISA meetings and workshops we got a little nervous. We thought, here is one of our best clients getting trained on tree care. We thought they might want to start their own tree care division. That didn't happen, but now they have very educated people on staff. When they go out to sites and bid projects, they look up and are aware of the trees. They know how important it is to have a good

tree company come in and do the work for them. If you are considering or trying to enhance your relationships with landscape contractors, it is important to encourage them to get educated. Encourage them to learn more about trees, or find companies that have the same set of values. As Tom said, budgets will expand more than you think is possible. Don't get narrowed or focused into thinking the budget is whatever the landscape contractor dictates. You can expand that budget quite well.

Eric Schultz: I made the comment earlier that a lot of landscape contractors don't understand arbor care and don't take it seriously enough. Tom brought up the point that the clients will find the money. We just went through a drought and I could not get a client to water a 2-inch to 14-inch tree in the Denver market to save my life. It is a big deal in Denver because we will go for two or three months with no moisture in

the middle of winter and the wind will blow. People are not interested and say the trees are fine. In the wake of the drought, the money came. We sold more water than ever. We have more watering accounts this year and the people expect it. The money is there, but you have to convince the landscape contractors that the money is there. Often, landscape contractors chase a little piece of the pie and they don't understand the potential. You have work with your landscape contractor to develop the mindset that the property's potential is more than just mowing grass. It is taking care of and managing all of that landscape, of which tree care is a big part.

Trent Sible: Getting back to tree value, Scott mentioned that some of our staff are certified arborists. It has actually become a requirement for our entry-level supervisors. As landscape contractors, it is critical that we understand the value of trees in terms of the overall landscape. I think you should communicate that to your landscape contractors. I feel that as a landscape contractor we have the responsibility of communicating the value of trees to one's property.

Scott Jamieson: Planting depth is a big controversy in Chicago right now and it is whipping up a frenzy. The nursery plants too deeply and then the landscape contractor plants too deeply. There is a positive side to this problem, because landscape contractors and nurserymen came together and formed a task force to look at this planting depth issue. For the first time in history these separate groups are starting to talk versus shooting at each other. The answer for arborists and landscape contractors also lies in communication and education. There is no easy answer but certification and TCIA's accreditation program are things that can help us.

Scott Jamieson is president of The Care of Trees and a TCIA board member. Eric Shultz is president of Shultz Industries Inc., and president of The Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. Trent Sible is project manager-maintenance for Moore Landscapes Inc. Tom Tolacz is president of Swingle Tree in Denver, Colo., and a TCIA board member.

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