



## **Features - Cover Story 1/18/2010 TIME CRUNCH**

*How contractors find the time to mow, manage and market.*

When landscaping season ramps up in Parker, Colo., Steve Tinnes thinks nothing of devoting 60 to 80 hours a week to his residential landscaping business, Tinnes Lawn Service. It's the nature of the beast.

His day starts at 4 a.m. with paperwork. Employees arrive at 8 a.m. And often, as late as 9 or 10 p.m., Tinnes is still making calls. "It's pretty grueling for the first six weeks or so until things settle down," he says.

Tinnes isn't interested in dominating his market. He says \$200,000 in sales is about all I'd ever want to achieve. Still, he's looking for ways to delegate more work to his employees to make his life easier and his business more efficient.

"While my objective is to delegate everything, I end up putting a lot more hours in per week due to training and follow-up, scheduling, customer concerns and equipment maintenance," Tinnes says.

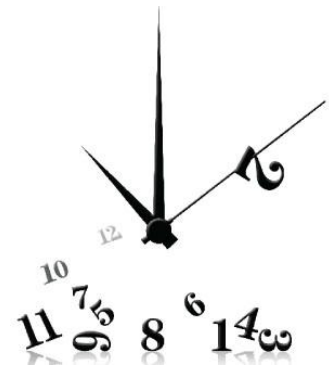
The challenges he faces in juggling his daily to-dos are common among landscape business owners. Many log long hours – particularly when the weather warms and customer start calling.

On average, according to Lawn & Landscape research, an owner running a \$778,000-revenue business works 50 hours a week – with 26 hours spent on the job performing landscape duties and 24 hours spent working on the business rather than in it.

Those figures vary drastically depending on the size of the company, however. As the

business grows, owners should spend significantly less time out in the field and more time behind the scenes. But for small shops, owners are often spread thin. And even owners of larger outfits find it challenging to juggle ever-increasing demands on their time.

Like most things in business, it all comes down to the bottom line. If you want to make a fair wage, time management is key.



## Finding Balance

Landscape designer Alison Fleck, owner of San Francisco-based Simply Perfect Gardens, runs a one-woman shop. She estimates that each week she spends about 8 hours in client meetings, 16 hours on client designs, 12 hours on field work and about 4 hours on what she calls “stinking accounting.” Plus there are additional activities – such as networking, working with service organizations and continuing education – that she doesn’t count as part of her workweek.

“I usually do four 8-hour days and two half days. That way I can spend a half day on continuing education or networking or whatever and not burn out,” Fleck says. As much as possible, she keeps Sunday work-free. “It’s socially acceptable not to pick up your phone on Sunday, so it’s easy to do,” she says.

To maintain balance, a few years ago Fleck began tracking her work hours as if she were an employee. “So when I come in at 5:30 in the morning, I’ll start writing down what I do. It may just be a note, but I really do keep a daily log,” she says. “That way, I’m more aware of burning time in the office.”

Like Tinnes, many business owners find early morning is prime productivity time. Fleck starts at 5:30 a.m. to get in a few hours of work before clients start calling. One of her biggest challenges is the fact that many clients aren’t available to meet until the evening. “That means if I start my workday at 5:30 in the morning and finish it at 9 at night, I’m going to have to take a really long lunch break or I’m going to burn out,” she says.

It all comes down to billable hours for Fleck. “I try to keep my billable hours to at least 50 percent of my work hours, and if I’m not, I try to tweak it. I have to have at least 20 hours of billable wages a week or I can’t survive.”

Paul Rapoza, president and founder of Rapoza Landscape in East Falmouth, Mass., typically works 40 to 50 hours a week, although in the spring that weekly number is closer to 60 hours. His residential landscaping company does about 60 percent maintenance and 40 percent construction and brings in an annual revenue of 1.8 million, mostly by catering to clients who have vacation homes on Cape Cod.

Typically, Rapoza's time is evenly divided between working on job sites, meeting with clients and doing sales, handling office work, and managing the business and any challenges that arise. "I would like to get out of the production/management," Rapoza says. "I enjoy it, but it takes a good chunk of my time, and a lot of time is not planned. Especially with construction, there are things that will pop up that are pretty distracting."

Rapoza would devote that extra time to focusing on clients. "I made an effort this spring to spend more time with clients, to take them out to breakfast or lunch and visit their properties more often," he says. That was helpful for sales and also for building rapport and strengthening relationships with clients."

Rapoza is on the right track. The secret to finding balance lies in identifying your most valuable activities, says business coach and time management consultant Dave Crenshaw, author of *The Myth of Multitasking*. "Those are the activities that you do that are worth the most per hour and would be the most difficult to replace," he says. "So once you've identified that, you need to establish in your schedule how much time you're going to spend for the different activities. You might try to manage employees on Tuesdays, put in all estimates on Mondays and Fridays, and so on."

This doesn't mean you ignore all employee questions except on Tuesdays. It's about devoting time to certain tasks on a regular basis. "Most of the time business owners manage crisis-by-crisis, and what they need to do is take a more proactive approach and work on building systems that minimize those emergencies that take place," he says.

Crenshaw stresses that it's also important to leave a buffer in each day for interruptions. "A lot of business owners have a tendency to over-schedule their day and pack it completely full. When you do that, whenever an emergency or interruption comes along, it messes up your whole day and makes you feel like you can't get in control," Crenshaw says. "So it's better to under-schedule than to over-schedule."

## The Myth of Multitasking

Alison Fleck says she spends a couple of hours each day multitasking to tackle the paperwork that builds up in her office. "I kind of have to," she says. "Office work is best done on a multitask basis for me." That way, she says, she can file papers and tackle other office chores while she's waiting for someone to call her back.

Yet when it comes to focusing on designs or meeting with clients, everything else is on hold. "There are times when I don't even pick up the phone," Fleck says. "I'll just return the call later."

Paul Rapoza says he multitasks too. "It's probably not the best idea, but sometimes when I'm driving to a job that's 20 or 25 minutes away I'll use my Bluetooth while driving to make a few calls," Rapoza says.

In some cases, multitasking may be unavoidable. Yet time management pros stress that it's not an effective means of getting things done on a regular basis. "When you're constantly switching between tasks, you're incurring a lot of costs in terms of attention and focus. You want to minimize those switches as much as possible," Crenshaw says.

And whatever you do, he adds, don't multitask with human beings. "It's one thing to be inefficient with your time – jumping back and forth between paperwork, e-mail, that sort of

thing. But when you multitask on a phone call or when meeting with a client or employees, you're going beyond inefficiency and damaging the relationship as well. Whenever you multitask you send the message to that person that they're unimportant."

Denise Landers, founder and CEO of Key Organization Systems, says the first step to avoiding multitasking is grouping as many similar activities – such as responding to phone calls or processing e-mails – together as you can. "Do it all together in a block in the morning, then again in the afternoon. You're still being responsive if you get back to people within a day or half a day."

One system Rapoza employs involves his entire management team. "If they have something they need to talk to me about or have a question, I prefer they e-mail me if it's something they don't need an answer to immediately. Then I deal with it when I have time rather than being bombarded by questions." In addition, Rapoza and his management team often schedule appointments with one another to address issues, rather than dropping everything each time something minor surfaces.

Grouping such activities opens up uninterrupted blocks of time you can use to focus on other aspects of your business, such as planning and marketing. "I know landscape business owners are out in the field and have customers and employees, but how do you do estimates? How do you do marketing for your business? You can't ignore that or your business isn't going to grow. You may be very busy, but you have to feed the pipeline," Landers says.

One of the unique challenges landscape professionals face is that work locations are often spread out. "That's all the more reason to have systems in place so you know what time you have to deal with work in the office or meet with customers," Landers says. "You need to know what you're doing every day and have your day prioritized."

## Mastering the Art of Delegation

Delegation can be the key to a business owner's success – but it's often easier said than done. "It's something I struggle with," Rapoza admits. After about 15 years in the business, his company had grown to the point where it was bringing in \$500,000 to \$600,000 a year. But then the growth stopped.

"The problem was me. I wasn't delegating and felt everything had to be perfect," Rapoza admits. "If you want to grow, you have to delegate. It's a necessity."

Over the past five years, Rapoza has worked hard to farm out some of the tasks he used to do. "I would say I'm getting better at that, but there are certainly things I do somebody else could be doing."

One of the best moves he made early on was hiring a part-time office manager. "That was when we were relatively small. It's just the type of thing I didn't need to be doing, and it makes sense to hire someone who's better at it and focused on it," Rapoza says.

Putting a quantifiable dollar value on his time helped Rapoza figure out what he should delegate. "I heard once that if you're making, say, \$100,000 a year, that translates to \$50 an hour. If you're doing a job that's less than fifty an hour, you should look to hire someone else to do it or delegate it," Rapoza says. "I don't do that with everything, but if I do a lot of \$10 or \$15 an hour work, I probably shouldn't be doing it. I look at either delegating or hiring somebody."

On a larger scale, industry consultant Marty Grunder, owner of Miamisburg, Ohio-based Marty Grunder Inc. and Grunder Landscaping, recommends that business owners with more than \$1 million in revenue allocate 75 percent of their time to planning and sales, and only 25 percent working in the field. That may mean hiring more laborers.

Whatever portion of your work you'd like to delegate, the first step to successful delegation, business experts agree, is getting your own systems in place. "What I see most often with business owners is that when they feel they don't have enough time to get everything done, they hire someone or buy some piece of technology they think is going to make their life more efficient," Crenshaw says. "Then they figure out that person or thing can't give them enough time, so they fire the person or throw away the object, and start the process all over. Instead, you need to get as efficient individually as you can by implementing personal systems, processes and procedures."

Only then, Crenshaw says, should you look at new technologies, outsourcing and, finally, hiring employees. "If you get to the point of making a hire then, you can help an employee succeed because you've built the system in advance."

Delegating can help you find the uninterrupted block of time you need to focus on business growth, Landers says. "I hear people say 'it's just easier to do it myself,' or 'I don't have time to train somebody,' or 'nobody else can do it as well as I can,'" Landers says. "If you start hearing yourself say those things, stop and think. It does take time to train people, but the payback in the long-term is worth it. Let employees be part of your business. Involve them in it."

Yet delegation involves more than simply throwing tasks at employees as they crop up. It's all about implementing a system. "Often people have no idea what others in their office are doing on a given day, but you have to know how to cover for each other in an emergency," Landers says. "Get a system in place that you're all using so everyone knows how to jump in and what to do if something comes up – even if you're just a two-man office. Then you're also ready for growth."

Or a much-needed vacation. "I've discussed with my most-qualified employee to take over some management tasks so I can take a few short breaks during the season if I choose to," Tinnes says of his off time. "A fishing trip to Alaska would be fun."

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## Organization Secrets From A Pro

Denise Landers, founder and CEO of Key Organization Systems Inc., recommends three key techniques for staying organized in the office and out in the field.

**Plan your day in advance.** "Plan your day the night before so when you go to sleep you know where you're headed the next day," Landers says. That way, you'll rest easy – and be ready to hit the ground running in the morning.

**Use index cards.** Carry index cards that fit in your shirt pocket or briefcase, Landers says. Leave them next to the bed, in the car, everywhere you go. When you have an idea or a new task comes to mind, you can write it down on a card and add it to your stack. "A list is hard to prioritize, and it's overwhelming with multiple lists," Landers says. "With index cards you can easily prioritize and group."

**Carry hanging folders.** In the office, hanging folders can be used to group everything you have to do in one place. The same system works on the road too, so paper clutter doesn't take over your front seat. Put a box of hanging folders in your truck so you have the forms, materials lists, design plans – everything you need. "You can have a folder for each customer or project right there with you, and when you're done you carry it back to your office and it's all in one place," Landers says.