Two halves make a whole... and then some

Even after 26 years, partners Nick DiBenedetto and Manny DeSouza see plenty of growth potential in their market.
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Our Mission

To advance and communicate the interests of PLANET’s members in the conduct of effective and environmentally responsible landscape services.

The national trade association representing the landscape industry that continuously strives for the highest level of professionalism through education, best practices, and certification.
I’ve been a member of PLANET for more than half my 35 years in the landscape industry and still take for granted the positive impact being a member has had on me and my company. The genesis of this influence can be found in the name itself, Professional Landcare Network.

Among its many goals and initiatives, PLANET is first and foremost charged with raising the level of professionalism within the industry. It does this by offering certification programs, developing community service events, hosting seminars and other educational venues, and providing a wealth of printed material and digital resources, including those found on the industry’s premier search engine—PLANETUniverse.org. All these resources are available to members, and that’s without mentioning the exceptional networking opportunities.

Taking advantage of these programs and resources has been instrumental to my growth as a professional and as the owner of a full-service design/build, landscape management, and irrigation company in Northern New Jersey. Being a professional is one of many common bonds that PLANET members all share. Another is “giving back.”

**GIVING BACK**

A culture of giving back is a thread that runs throughout the very fabric of PLANET and the landscape industry and that is woven into the meaning of being a professional. In fact, in this issue, you will read how three landscape contractors give back to their communities by participating in JP Horizons “Come Alive Outside” initiative and PLANET’s Day of Service. As all three will tell you, giving back comes back in so many positive ways.

Promoting a culture of giving back will be a key initiative during my tenure as president. I also want to continue to advance awareness about our industry among consumers and career-minded students. Student Career Days (see page 5) is just one example of how PLANET, with industry-wide support, works to increase awareness at the college level about landscape industry opportunities. New initiatives are also underway to raise awareness among students in high schools and vocational education programs.

**ENGAGEMENT**

If someone were to attach a theme to my presidency, two words would standout, “engagement” and “involvement.” As a landscape professional, I firmly believe we need to be engaged with our communities and our schools, and then become actively involved to help them and our industry grow and prosper.

The same theory applies to being a PLANET member. You can be engaged as a member by joining and taking advantage of the association’s many resources. There’s value there, a lot of value; yet, you don’t get full advantage until you attend PLANET events, meet other members face to face, and share best practices and experiences.

Several such events are coming up, including two next month: Renewal & Remembrance at Arlington National Cemetery on July 22, and the Design/Build/Installation (D/B/I) Symposium at the Chicago Botanic Garden, July 28–29. This is the second year for the symposium hosted by PLANET’s D/B/I Specialty Group. In addition to educational sessions that feature industry experts, attendees will get a close-up look at the city’s popular Millennium Park. For more information about these and other events, visit LandcareNetwork.org.

When I joined PLANET (back then, it was the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, one of PLANET’s founding associations), I couldn’t possibly fathom how much value it would lend to me personally and professionally. What’s in a name? The answer to that question is “more than you can imagine.”

God bless.

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**GLEN JACOBSEN, PLANET President**

Landscape Industry Certified Manager
It was lively, noisy, and full of enthusiasm. The place was the Memorial Coliseum on the campus of Auburn University in Auburn, Ala. The venue was the opening ceremony for Student Career Days (SCD). Close to 900 students from 71 colleges and universities across the country were in attendance, anticipating two days of industry networking and competition.

The stage was befitting the national event, held March 7–10, one that actually began with a series of student workshops the day before on Thursday. Friday’s Career Fair included approximately 50 companies, some of which also co-sponsored many of the 28 competitive events held on Saturday.

SDC Chair Ed Furner, Landscape Industry Certified, welcomed students. “You’re here to compete,” he told them. “You’re competing against fellow students in the many competitive events and you’re competing for jobs at the Career Fair.” A client representative for Mariani Landscape and former SCD competitor, Furner emphasized how their time on campus would also give students an opportunity to network with company recruiters and provide an overview of just how big the green industry is and the many career opportunities it offers.

Auburn’s Dean of the College of Agriculture, Bill Batchelor, Ph.D., gave students an overview of the university, noting that it was founded 1856 and features an 1,875-acre campus and an enrollment of 25,000 students. Picking up on Furner’s comment about size and opportunities, he explained that the landscape industry has a billion-dollar impact in Alabama and is responsible for 35,000 jobs in the state. Bachelor focused on the ever-increasing urbanization that makes green space more valuable and the fact its jobs are not exportable as being among the many reasons to find a career within the industry.

Outgoing PLANET President Norman Goldenberg, Landscape Industry Certified, added to the list by telling...
attendees how awesome the industry really is, how it gave him an opportunity to develop life-long friendships while doing something he truly has enjoyed. “You represent the passion and energy of the industry,” he told students. “You’re the future and that’s what we hang our hats on.”

TALENT HUNT
Company recruiters, many of whom through the Career Fair were looking to fill internships along with full-time positions, would not disagree. Rich Wilbert, Landscape Industry Certified, garden management division manager for Virginia-based Surrounds Landscape Architecture & Construction was looking for at least two interns. He said, “If there’s been a change over other years, I think students are more willing to do more traveling to gain experience.”

Mariani Client Representative Nate Birch was interviewing students for three client representatives-in-training positions and one project manager. “We always look for good production supervisors, too,” he noted. This was the 12th SCD for HighGrove Partner’s Jim McCutcheon, and he was interviewing for both internships and full-time positions. “The students are very well prepared for interviews and seriously looking for career opportunities,” he remarked. “That’s good for us since our company is growing and very bullish on the market.”

TerraCare Associate’s Vice President Bill Horn, Landscape Industry Certified, added, “Students seem very interested in sustainability and the role the industry plays installing and maintaining green spaces. It’s not rhetoric to them, it’s a reality. The individuals we’ve talked with are dead serious about working for companies that place a premium on providing sustainable solutions.”

CAREER SHOPPING
Finding a summer internship was high on the list of priorities for BYU-Provo student Ben Proulx, who had stopped at TerraCare’s booth. “I’m interested in California and working for a company that believes in sustainability.”

Another BYU - Provo student Sarah Asay was also shopping for a summer internship. “I’m excited to be here and to know that companies are excited about us,” said the junior who is making her second trip to SCD. “I haven’t decided in what part of the landscape industry I want to work, but making things beautiful will be part of my decision-making process.”

North Carolina State University student Catlin Davis planned to visit with recruiters at eight company booths. “My number one goal today is finding an internship,” she stated. “I’m interested in all areas of the landscape industry, but I might be leaning toward a career in landscape design.”

Other students, like Iowa State sophomore Andrew Foy, already had summer internships lined up. “I’m just enjoying the experience and the networking,” he commented, noting that he was competing in Saturday’s annual and perennial plant I.D. competition. Kansas State seniors Justin Brock and Jaret Hanson were also networking. Brock was looking forward to competing in the Arboriculture event while Hanson had his sights set on the Computer Aided Landscape Design competition.

LET THE FUN BEGIN
The conclusion of the Career Fair on Friday afternoon marked the start of the following day’s competitive-event briefings sessions and, of course, some last-minute preparation for participants. By Saturday morning, Milwaukee Area Technical College student David Witt was fairly confident about competing in the Woody Ornamental Plant Identification and Landscape Installation events, especially since he worked at a garden center and had other industry experience. “I’m a competitive guy, so I’m looking forward to the events. This is my second SCD. I enjoy visiting big campuses like Auburn and seeing plants here that don’t grow in Wisconsin.”

Meanwhile, at the skid-steer, competitive Kishwaukee College student Haleigh Bialas was setting the bar high for competitors. She maneuvered her machine through all the cones without knocking off a single tennis ball.
Afterwards, Bialas beamed a relaxed smile. “Not spilling water was the biggest challenge, but the tennis balls were difficult, as well.” Despite her operating prowess, her goal was to find a job as a floral designer.

TEAM EFFORT
Just as teamwork was highlighted in the many competitive events, it was also the key to putting on a successful SCD. “We have more than 200 volunteers on campus, not counting student volunteers,” explained Auburn University professor Joe Eakes, Ph.D. The school wouldn’t be able to host this event without their support and the support of all the sponsors, including Platinum sponsor STIHL, Gold sponsor JOHN DEERE, and Silver sponsors Caterpillar, New Holland Construction, and Gravely, among many others.

He noted that the Alabama Nursery and Landscape Association donated plant material and that New Holland Construction will leave behind a new skid-steer loader, something that will be put to good use by his department. Landscape industry service provider support at the Career Fair and co-hosting events was paramount, too, he stressed, quickly adding that there are just too many companies and people integral to this industry event to mention them all.

For Roger Phelps, Landscape Industry Certified, promotional communications manager for STIHL, the key word was “industry.” “The students here represent our industry’s future, and we have to support them and help schools in other ways to strengthen their horticulture programs.” He went on to say that it is imperative for everyone involved in the industry, from the students, faculty members, and supplier companies to industry professionals, to get the word out that we are the original green industry that offers tremendous career opportunities. As he puts it, “It’s time to tell our story.”

SCD certainly deserves to be a big part of the story, one that continues next year in Fort Collins, Colo., where Colorado State University will host the 38th annual event.

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Two halves make a whole ... and then some

PARTNERS MANNY DESOUZA (left) and Nick DiBenedetto have been in business together for 26 years.
At a time when partnerships could be as fleeting as the next day, these two entrepreneurs have grown their Massachusetts-based company into a $6.5 million full-service landscape management operation. Both are long-time PLANET members and DiBenedetto was recently selected as a Trailblazer. When asked to define what separates their company from the competition, they said that having a clear focus on professionalism, continuing to educate themselves and improve their operation, and always analyzing and re-analyzing who their customer is have been fundamental to their growth and success.

“You CAN WRAP IT”
DiBenedetto laughs when he thinks about his first taste of the industry. “My older sister dated a guy who cut lawns,” he recalled. “I was 12 at the time, and he gave me a job of wrapping irrigation hoses. I must have liked it enough because I kept on going back for more, and soon had a few accounts of my own.”

By his senior year in high school, he had 14 mowing accounts and upon graduation was in business full time. DeSouza joined him five years later. “My focus was residential maintenance,” said DiBenedetto. “When Manny joined me, he took over the maintenance, and I started to concentrate on installation projects. That’s essentially how we’ve since divided responsibilities.

“At the time, both of us were living at home,” added DeSouza, noting that big changes were on the horizon. “The first one came when Nick’s mom told us we could no longer take up parking space with trucks and equipment in her driveway. So, we rented a 20’ x 40’ tin shed for $200 a month and installed a commercial phone line.”

“Another big move for us came when we purchased our first computer, which allowed us to build contracts,” DiBenedetto continued. “The computer also forced us into a real office next door where we could operate it.” Two new radios that allowed them to communicate with their trucks and a bag phone were next, but the biggest moment came a few years later.

SEEING IS BELIEVING
The early 1990s were definitely watershed years for their company. The partners were introduced to the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) and started to network with industry leaders.

“The best thing about getting involved with ALCA was meeting other landscape contractors who were doing the same thing we were," DiBenedetto related. “If only we had joined sooner, we wouldn’t have reinvented so many wheels. Soon after joining, we made a site visit to two PLANET-member facilities. I couldn’t believe how sophisticated their operations were. A few years later, at another ALCA gathering, we heard industry consultants Jim Paluch and Frank Ross speak. It wasn’t long before we invited them in to help us out.

“Frank was probably amazed by what he saw or didn’t see in our operation. His first comment to me was, ‘Would you run out and get some accounting paper?’” Ten years later, accounting paper is passé, and so, too, is any naiveté the owners may have had about their company’s financial performance.

“My advice to any person getting into the business is to invite in industry experts like Jim and Frank or Ken Thomas, who we’ve also recently invited in, to shorten your learning curve,” DiBenedetto emphasized. As he pointed out, time is money in this business in more ways than one.

EYES ON TARGET
N.D. Landscaping moved into its present facility, a 10,000 sq-ft building on a

RESIDENTAL DESIGN/BUILD projects and maintenance continue to dominate N.D. Landscaping’s revenue stream.
3½-acre site in 1996. A year later, the company was doing $700,000 in sales primarily in residential design/build and maintenance. “We started noticing a trend that our older customers were moving from their long-time homes into condos,” noted DeSouza. “Nick and I thought it would be a good idea to follow them and try to get a foothold in the commercial HOA market. That’s part of what we’ve been doing for the last two to three years.”

They have since divided their maintenance operation into residential and commercial maintenance. Over the last 12 to 18 months, the duo has also made a big push to further refine their service offerings by developing a gardening and enhancement service for small installation projects under $5,000 and separating their fertilizer and plant health care operation under a separate division called Grassmaster Plus.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL
The partners feel great about 2013. Even after more than 26 years in business together, they think there’s still room for improvement in their business model and plenty of growth potential in the market north of Boston. Their optimism extends beyond their own business, however.

“This is a great industry and still very young,” DiBenedetto said. He advises industry newcomers to follow their passions and work hard, like they did, but not wait as long as they did to join PLANET and start networking, seek advice from industry experts and set up a viable processes.

Yes, if they could relive the early years, they would make a few changes. One thing that wouldn’t change, however, is their partnership. They’ve seen each other’s kids grow up and their families have enjoyed many of the same activities, including sharing the Red Sox and Patriot game experience. While at work, the two have complemented one another. The synergy has allowed them to grow something together and shape a business that incorporates their personalities and strengths. Two halves do make a whole and something much more.

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MEMBERSHIP IN PLANET IS REQUIRED.
Homeowners weigh in on their landscapes
Price and quality among key homeowner perceptions

Word of mouth is still king, according to a recent survey conducted for PLANET by Harris Interactive®. When asked where do they turn for professional help with their yards, more than half (53 percent) of the homeowners who responded said they would rely on personal referrals and another 27 percent would take their search online. The phone book and online reviews came in third and fourth respectively.

Non-phonebook advertising, company articles, and contact from companies and national/state landscape/nursery associations rounded out the choices.

The survey sought to understand homeowner attitudes and perceptions about their landscapes. It was conducted online December 11–13 and asked U.S. adults ages 18 and older several key questions.

Their responses indicated that homeowners are more likely to cite showing pride in their homes as the chief reason to maintain or improve their yard. Creating an outdoor relaxing space and raising or protecting their property value was also a top priority for them. When it comes to what the yard is used for, relaxing rose to the top, followed by planting flowers/vegetables and spending time with the family.

KEEP SHARPENING PENCILS
Homeowners were asked to select the three most important traits/aspects they would look for when selecting a landscape professional. Of eight listed, price (at 69 percent) and quality of work (at 68 percent) were definite winners, followed by customer service (35 percent) and references/recommendation (33 percent).

Being professionally licensed/certified (at 26 percent), services offered (19 percent), sustainable practices (9 percent), and the image/look of the company and its employees (6 percent) were the other choices.

With price and quality of work in a virtual tie, landscape professionals were asked by responders to keep prices down while still delivering top-quality work. The relatively low importance of image might be a reflection of the industry’s successful emphasis on look and appearance over the last several years. Minimal interest in sustainable practices is likely because of the geographic nature of the service offering’s popularity.

HOMEOWNER DEMOGRAPHICS
Of the 2,893 consumers surveyed, 88 percent owned a yard or landscape. Ninety-four percent of those with yards/landscapes had a child in the household and 91 percent were over the age of 55. Of those without a yard or landscape, nearly 20 percent were women, ages 18–34, and a slightly higher percentage (21 percent) were single.

When asked to rate the importance of the upkeep and care of their yards/landscapes, 81 percent rated it as important (6–10 on a 10-point scale), compared to just 9 percent who rated it as unimportant (1–3 on a 10-point scale). Women over the age of 55, retired homeowners, and college graduates were among those who placed a high value on care and upkeep. Eighteen percent of men ages 18–34, 23 percent of students, and 17 percent of those earning less than $35,000 felt less inclined to care for their yards and landscapes.

The PLANET study involves a two-part Harris survey, one that focuses on demographic information and the other on economics. More detailed results are available for PLANET members in the online Member Center at LandcareNetwork.org. In the meantime, PLANET recently unveiled a new consumer website (loveyour-landscape.com). The new site provides helpful information to consumers about a variety of landscape topics and promotes Landscape Industry Certified and the importance of hiring a professional landscape company.
Zack Kline, an emerging leader in lawn care, is gaining invaluable insight through Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and STIHL. Impressed with his drive and business plan, STIHL provided Kline, CEO and founder of A.I.R. Lawn Care in Maryland, with a STIHL Entrepreneurial Scholarship to take part in the PLANET Trailblazer Program. PLANET also provided Kline with registration for the PLANET Green Industry Conference (GIC) at no charge. This partnership afforded Kline the opportunity to gain invaluable industry experience by attending workshops, meeting with industry experts, taking the Landscape Industry certification exam and ultimately working with his mentor, David Snodgrass, president of Dennis’ 7 Dees Landscaping and Garden Centers in Oregon, who was paired with Zack due to his years of industry and leadership experience.

**Seeds of Inspiration**

Zack Kline’s passion for lawn care took root when he was cutting his family’s grass as a sixth grader. Six summers later, his stint at a small landscaping company galvanized him to reduce smog, equipment-generated noise and excessive gasoline consumption; and this spawned a business plan for A.I.R. (Atmosphere Improvement and Renewal) Lawn Care in 2010. That year he entered the Salisbury University Bernstein Business Plan Competition and received an honorable mention and $250 prize. Kline reworked his business plan and tenaciously reentered the competition in 2011, winning the $5,000 first place prize. In 2012, while researching power equipment companies that aligned with his values of sustainability, innovation and quality, he found that STIHL had no competition.

Kline went out on a limb and mailed an introductory letter and bagpipe cufflinks to STIHL Inc. President Fred Whyte, having read that Whyte is an avid bagpipe player. Whyte followed up personally and connected Kline with Roger Phelps, promotional communications manager for STIHL Inc.. Phelps was so impressed with Kline’s business plan that STIHL decided to help him start his business with a donation of several pieces of the STIHL Battery KombiSystem. Kline embodies PLANET’s progressive thinking and commitment to excellence, so Phelps, who is also a board member of the organization, introduced Kline to the PLANET staff. They were equally impressed and provided him with a one-year complimentary membership.

“David welcoming me into his business was life-changing. I gained knowledge in a matter of days that would take most people years to get.”
“STIHL is a great company and I am very grateful and fortunate for everyone there and all they have done for me. The credibility, mentorship and networking opportunities this relationship has afforded me are beyond measure,” Kline said. “A friend of mine taught me that it’s not what or who you know, but who knows you and how you can help each other.”

When Kline first approached STIHL with his business plan, he offered to co-promote STIHL and Independent We Stand, a movement sponsored by STIHL that is dedicated to educating communities about the importance and strong economic benefits of supporting locally owned businesses. Kline has held true to his promise, and he and STIHL continue to help each other.

**Bridging the Generational Gap**

David Snodgrass, president of Dennis’ 7 Dees Landscaping & Gardening Centers, has a solid foundation in landscaping. The industry veteran leads an award-winning, family-owned business that dates back to 1927. His company is dedicated to quality and service, specializing in residential and commercial gardening and landscaping needs, in addition to complete design/build services and maintenance for their customers. Snodgrass is committed to cultivating the next generation of leaders and enjoys sharing the knowledge he’s gained along the way.

“When I look at people like Zack starting out and see the overwhelming potential, it makes me want to participate in that process,” says Snodgrass.

Snodgrass mentors Kline about how to structure his business and afforded Kline the opportunity to meet with his team members regarding marketing and other key aspects of running a successful business, including a tour of his facility and a thorough explanation of STIHL products.

According to Snodgrass, STIHL offers a common connection – quality products and very environmentally responsible products. Kline’s vision is to build a national or international brand based on sustainability. STIHL has a full line of products that address concerns and offer solutions toward stewardship of the environment.

“The youth brings an outsider’s perspective, and we are all learning from each other,” said Snodgrass. “The future of our industry will be determined by the Klines of the world.”

Kline agrees and encourages other young landscapers to pursue their goals, and is already registered to attend PLANET’s GIC this fall at his own expense, continuing to grow his expertise. “Never set limitations [on yourself], just have passion, energy and creativity – then no one can stop you.”

For more information visit on A.I.R. Lawn Care visit [www.airlawnncare.com](http://www.airlawnncare.com). Additional information on Dennis’ 7 Dees Landscaping & Gardening Centers is available here [www.dennis7dees.com](http://www.dennis7dees.com). Visit [www.stihlusa.com](http://www.stihlusa.com) or [www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org) to learn more about STIHL or PLANET.
Community projects create outdoor awareness, too

PLANET’s fifth annual Day of Service participants this year had an additional story to share with their communities—that caring and doing can also energize people to become active participants in their newly created environments. Held on Earth Day, April 22, the fifth annual event once again gave landscape industry service providers the opportunity to revitalize their communities, highlight the value of green spaces, and foster teamwork. Thanks to its “Come Alive Outside” theme, it also helped create awareness that the outdoors is a living space for people as much as it is for the flora and fauna that comprise its makeup.

The theme represents PLANET’s partnership with JP Horizon’s “Come Alive Outside” initiative that has caught the attention of landscape contractors from around the county. “The program is another example of the industry giving back,” explained PLANET President Glenn Jacobsen, Landscape Industry Certified. “One of its goals is to get families engaged so everyone can enjoy the outside.

A long-time champion of giving back and supporting community events, Jacobsen said that tying the Day of Service with the “outside” theme helps broaden the message that healthy and well-designed landscapes are more than aesthetic. They are functional and, in this case, provide a venue to bring together friends and family.

“Changing destructive habits

Rutland, Vermont-based Carpenter & Costin recruited more than 100 people, including young students on vacation, to participate in a community-wide “Come Alive” event. “My grandmother suffers from dementia and whenever children would visit her at an assisted-living facility, it was like Christmas for her and other residents,” remarked company president Russ Marsan. “In February, we organized a day when volunteers would decorate the grounds with snow sculptures and snowmen. It proved to be entertainment for the residents while getting kids together outside to do something that was fun and exciting. More than 65 kids came, including those from the Rutland-area Boys and Girls Club.”

Marsan noted that the management team from his company volunteered to help, as did some local business groups, including his Belgard representative who cooked pizzas for participants.

“People are losing their ability to interact because of smart phones, games, social media, and other distractions,” he opined. “I wanted to slow things down a bit and make an effort to change what I consider to be some destructive habits.”

In addition to making the snow experience at the assisted living home an annual event, Marsan has two other events in the planning stages — a bike and hike at a park, which would also involve an educational tour of the area’s plant life, and a 24-hour soccer day at a nearby college.

“One of its goals is to get families engaged so everyone can enjoy the outside.”

— Glenn Jacobsen, Landscape Industry Certified, PLANET President

SOCCER ANYONE

North of the border in Picton, Ontario, Wentworth Landscape Group created a soccer field out of a parking lot to celebrate “Come Alive Outside.” “We transformed the parking lot by laying down 4,000 sq-ft of sod,” company President Scott Wentworth shared. “The community then sponsored a soccer match, hopscotch, and other outside activities for the day.”

Wentworth, whose company has been in business 23 years, said that community events have long resonated with his employees. “Giving back to your community is the right thing to do, and it creates community good will. The “Come Alive Outside” program provides an added dimension by encouraging community members to enjoy a healthy outdoor living space.”

Last fall, his company sponsored an even bigger “Come Alive Outside”
project: a 15-piece outdoor fitness trail adjacent to three schools. “It’s a substantial project with state-of-the-art equipment, but we had help from community funding, local businesses, service clubs, and suppliers,” added Wentworth. “The trail is open to the public and schools can use it for gym classes, too.”

He noted that the concept of creating and taking advantage of healthy outdoor living spaces has also gained traction with clients. “We don’t hard sell the idea, but we offer alternatives. For example, one young family wanted a patio and deck, and we suggested the addition of a safe play area that included a splash pad.”

NATURAL FIT
Tying the “Come Alive Outside” theme to PLANET’s fifth annual Day of Service is a natural fit. Many of the hundreds of projects over the years have incorporated an outside dynamic that encourages interaction with nature.

Last year, Greener Horizon, LLC in Middleboro, Mass., helped install “healing gardens” as part of PLANET’s Day of Service. Working in partnership with the not-for-profit organization Hope in Bloom, the company sent out two crews, one to remove trees for a garden location and another to install a 20 ft. X 20 ft. garden, both for homeowners who suffer from breast cancer. Hope in Bloom provides the gardens to patients undergoing chemotherapy treatment, at no cost to them.

“Healing gardens are known to help patients recover quicker,” explained company owner Mike Quirk. “Gardens...
Consultant Corner

By Chris Heiler

TOP LOCAL SEARCH RANKING FACTORS REVEALED

Each year, local search marketing expert David Mihm, releases his annual Local Search Ranking Factors report that includes contributions from more than 40 top local search marketers from around the world. The report analyzes various search ranking factors and measures the impact they have on how a company’s Google+ Local* page ranks in Google’s local search results.

Here are the top five factors impacting your company’s local search rankings:

1. Physical address in city of search. It will be more difficult to rank for the keyword “lawn care service” or “landscaper” in Atlanta if your business is actually located in Decatur.

2. Proper category associations. When you submit your business and website to Google+ Local (Google Places) you have an opportunity to select your “category” of business. Be sure to select the category that best reflects the services your business offers.

3. Address proximity. Businesses located closer to the center of a city have an advantage in local rankings.

4. Domain authority of website. Many factors impact your domain’s authority, e.g., number and quality of inbound links, age of your website, and your site’s content. You can use OpenSiteExplorer.org to discover your website’s domain authority as well as that of your competitors.

5. Quantity of structured citations. This refers to the local search directories where your company may be listed, such as Yelp, SuperPages, and Manta.

OTHER STANDOUT FACTORS

The following important ranking factors also made the top 20 annual report:

- Quantity of native Google+ Local (Google Places) reviews. The number of reviews by Google+ Local users is a major factor in your local rankings.
- Individually owner-verified Google+ Local page. If you haven’t claimed your Google+ Local page for your business, do it today! Get started at google.com/business/placesforbusiness.
- Quality/authority of inbound links to website domain. Inbound links (i.e., when another website links to your website) play a critical role in your ability to rank in local search results.
- Quantity of inbound links to domain from locally relevant domains. The report also reveals that the quantity of inbound links to your website—from locally-relevant domains—also has an impact. This makes a lot of sense because we’re talking about local search results here. So, generating inbound links from local vendors, suppliers, business partners, and other local community organizations should play a key role in your search engine optimization (SEO) and inbound marketing strategy.
- Page authority of landing page specified in Google+ Local. Your Google+ Local page should point back to your website’s home page. Your home page will have higher “page authority” than any other page on your site, typically. Don’t link back to your “services” page or “contact us” page. Play it safe and link back to your home page.

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT

The impact of social signals from Google’s very own social network, Google+, such as number of +1s and number of shares on Google+, were minimal (#57 and #61 respectively). However, we expect the impact of social signals from social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and especially those from Google+, to play a larger role in local search rankings in the future.

CHRIS HEILER is the founder and president of Landscape Leadership, an inbound marketing and PR agency that works with landscape industry companies across the country. Heiler is a Consultant Member of PLANET and plays an active role on the PLANET Public Relations Committee. Learn more by visiting LandscapeLeadership.com.

*Note: Google+ Local has replaced Google Places.
FACE-TO-FACE

Here’s your chance to be part of a real-life case study for a landscape company as you examine six key operational areas, provide the host company with feedback on those areas, and participate problem-solving round-table discussions that will also benefit your company.


▶ YEAR-ROUND CERTIFICATION TESTING Landscape Industry Certified testing is available at industry events or via nationwide, computer-based testing centers. Computer testing is available for select exams only. For testing center details, visit LandcareNetwork.org/certification/testing.cfm or call 800-395-2522.

▶ PLANET NATIONAL LANDSCAPE AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE PROGRAM (Formerly the Environmental Improvement Awards) Get the recognition you desire for the superior execution of your projects. Submit your award entry by the early-bird deadline of July 19, 2013, and save 33 percent off entry fees. The regular deadline is Aug. 16. If you have questions, contact PamelaMoore@landcarenetwork.org or call 800-395-2522.

▶ STARS PROGRAM Open to PLANET members and nonmembers. The STARS (Safe Training Achieves Remarkable Success) Safe Company Program is a free, customizable safety program designed to help industry companies lower their total costs of risk by reducing hazards and injuries. For more information, email PamelaMoore@landcarenetwork.org or call 800-395-2522.

▶ EDUCATION ONLINE PLANET has a full schedule of webinars, free to members, designed to help you make your landscape business the best it can be. Visit LandcareNetwork.org/events/webinars.cfm for the most up-to-date listing.

For information about any of PLANET’s services:

800-395-2522    703-736-9668    info@landcarenetwork.org
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*A majority of STIHL products are built in the United States from domestic and foreign parts and components. “Number one selling brand” is based on syndicated Irwin Broh Research as well as independent consumer research of 2009-2012 U.S. sales and market share data for the gasoline-powered handheld outdoor power equipment category combined sales to consumers and commercial landscapers. © 2013 STIHL
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