

PRO PROFILE

By Bob Warde

'I'm pleased, but never satisfied'



J. Lee Buffington, owner of Turf Tamer, Inc. in Fort Payne, Alabama.

TURF TAMER, INC.
FORT PAYNE, ALABAMA

OWNER: J. Lee Buffington

BUSINESS FOUNDED: 1995

2005 SALES: \$1.6 million

2006 PROJECTED SALES: \$2.1 million

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN: 65% construction, 35% maintenance

BUSINESS MIX: 45% residential, 55% commercial

EMPLOYEES: 22 full-time, year-round

EQUIPMENT: 2-Bobcat and 1-New Holland skid steers; 2-John Deere 4300 compact tractors; 1-Case track loader; 1-Case track loader; 1-Case trencher; 1-Vermeer trencher; Lesco spray rigs; 3-John Deere Z-Trac mowers; 2-Scag zero-turn riders; Snapper walk behind mowers. Handheld: 90% Stihl of all types and 10 Shindaiwa backpack blowers

VEHICLES: 5-International dump trucks (models 4700-4900); 1-Mack dump truck; 3-International loaders; Isuzu box trucks; 2-Ford F250; 1-Dodge 2500; 2-Dodge 3500; 1-Chevy S10; 1-Dodge Dakota; 1-Dodge Durango

An Alabama contractor liked the return on investment he discovered in landscaping – so he passed on medical school

The way Lee Buffington sees it, the return on investment from running a landscape business is far more lucrative than a career as a physician. He started in the business cutting lawns with a friend during high school. By the end of the second year, the partner was gone and Lee was doing about \$100,000 in business. As he prepared to go to medical school, he started thinking about what he had accomplished, and whether he wanted to abandon it all. After all, they hadn't spent much money on equipment and secured the customers they had by cold-calling on them.

"We'd mow lawns on Saturday morning while still being involved with football and other activities. After the first season, I could see that with a bit of an investment in equip-

ment – even at 18 years old – I could see that we could make more money, whether it be short-term or whatever. I could see the payoff. I went to my partner and asked him about investing in nicer and bigger equipment to carry on some bigger accounts. He elected not to invest and so we parted ways. He took what he had and I took what I'd gotten in the way of accounts and we went our separate ways and started building from there," Lee remembers.

Building the business

Though he made some money, Lee had to have his parents co-sign the loan for upgraded equipment. At the end of his first solo season he had brought in about \$100,000. Rather than go away to college, he decided he didn't want to start over building

his business and instead enrolled at Northeast Alabama Community College to study horticulture. "It was tough for me to make the decision to go off to school for two years and come back and start over. I just started hitting the books and moving forward," he says.

Lee says he's always found sales to be the easy part of the landscaping business. He got most of his customers by making cold calls; driving around and finding the types of buildings with the size of landscape he wanted to care for. He also made a short speech at a Kiwanis Club breakfast and obtained a couple of accounts there. His message, whether delivered during high school, college or later, has been that he would provide quality service and give the cli-

ents what they want, and that he would always finish the projects once he started.

He really got rolling in the business by putting good people around him. "I tried to create a good working environment and tried to provide a quality service to our customers. If they don't get what they want, they know we're going to correct it. They know we'll correct it. They have confidence in us to do business. That's the way we started and the philosophy we work under today," Lee says.

Once the business hit the \$500,000 mark, Lee noticed a couple of things. First, he had to decide whether he was going to grow and move to the next level or maintain that size. The challenge, he says, was to keep his hands on everything they were doing. Though he liked the hands-on part of the business, he found it difficult to maintain his performance in the field and still run the company. He was getting spread thin. Second, his lack of business training caused him to take some missteps.

"When I saw that we sold a half-million dollars in business in a month-and-a-half, I thought we'd need many more people to complete the work and you don't. You have to have efficient people to complete the work. You can't go out and hire 40 people. You're going to spend \$20,000 a week on payroll and you've just lost 30% to 40% of the job's profit. You're better off not selling the job and being less exposed," he says.

School of hard knocks

Much of his business education came from hard knocks early on. "I was learning by the seat

of my pants – learning about losing money and those types of things. I hired a lot of people and built up to more than 30 employees after about five years in business. I quickly learned a lot of lessons in that. Within a five-month period, we made a lot of changes, including cutting the workforce in half and started building up sales from there. That's where we are now. This will be our 12th season and we're building slowly so that we don't capture more than we're capable of handling."

Some of the key positions Lee has created help him as he passes along responsibility in managing the business. He's added a landscape designer who also sells and handles turf grass management, project management and coordinates change orders. An operations manager has been added. The manager handles both construction and maintenance management.

As a result of an annual planning meeting Lee holds with managers, he has committed to adding a second operations manager who will serve the maintenance side of the business. In the recent past, Turf Tamer had experienced some quality control challenges in that area and the person coming on will handle sales and operations of the division. He's tried adding an account manager, which worked in terms of improving quality, but the relatively low 8% to 10% margins made a position that didn't directly increase revenue impractical. The maintenance and construction divisions will then be officially separate.

"I really think that's going to give us the best chance to make it work. I think we can see some

tremendous growth from the changes. That end of the business has stagnated. We have not focused on it as much as we have on the construction and that residual income is important," Lee says.

At one time, Lee thought about getting out of the maintenance side and transforming Turf Tamer into strictly a landscape construction firm. A downturn in the Fort Payne-area economy in 2000 changed his mind. "We didn't see a major drop in sales, but the mix of our business changed. Residential sales started to pick up, but a lot of commercial construction projects that were \$80,000 and \$90,000 were just obliterated while the maintenance side remained unchanged. That's where I saw the need to keep that cash coming in. It's a matter of cash flow vs. profit. You have to have both."

A lesson on systems

Lee has learned few things about systems, as well. The main lesson he's picked up is that it's one thing to devise and implement a system, but "... you can't just put it in place and expect it to run itself. You must have someone maintain it. That's one of the challenges we face: finding time to maintain them. My attention is always on what I believe is more important or more immediate," Lee says.

Most of his time these days is spent on the business side of the company. He has very few hands-on responsibilities anymore. In his eyes, one of his main duties is to become a better businessman. "I continuously read all kinds of things and I enjoy hearing objective viewpoints.

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What's worked for me

Lee Buffington has used a few guiding principles in building Turf Tamer, Inc. Among them:

Learn from mistakes

"That's one thing I've always been a big believer in. You want to give people some rope – don't let them hang themselves – but give them some rope so they can make decisions and make mistakes. That's one of the biggest things for us. If we have a guy who backs a truck into a house and damages it, we don't cuss the guy out and threaten him with firing. We just try to figure out what

happened and prevent it the next time and that's the whole approach company-wide."

My operating philosophy

"You want to say profit is the motivator. Profit has to be somewhere near the top, but I would truly say from the heart that the customer is what guides our business. That goes down to, if a job is quoted at \$5,000 and costs us \$7,000, then we learn from our mistakes."

My main focus

"First is the customer because without the customer, no one else needs to be involved. Second is my teammates, the people here with us and they're next on our list. Next, I would have to say it's know your numbers. That's not necessarily watching only your profit, it means knowing what your costs are – and that's where your profit comes in."

Working in a small market

"We're in such a small market, everyone knows what we do. It's not like being in Atlanta where you might not serve

the same person twice. Here you have to have repeat business or you're not going to be in business. There just aren't that many clients that are in the bracket we want to service. We can't take a job, screw it up and go down the street and expect to get more work. It's not going to happen. I never go into a situation and knock the other guy down. We compete against a lot of people."



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"I'm about that with everything. If there are 10 ways to do something, I want to know all 10 and I pick the one I like best."

Another action Lee took that he views as a misstep was to have an in-house employee design and build the Turf Tamer Web site. "My objective was to control everything in house and keep it updated. We had someone who we trained and she spent a lot of time setting it up and she did a good job with it, but she's not here anymore. I spent a considerable amount of money

getting the thing up and running and she's gone. Outsource it. Let someone who's got the knowledge and resources run it," he says in hindsight.

Though he hasn't done much with the site over the past year, it has become a renewed priority for him. One of the bright spots of the site was the fact that he had an e-mail list with between 1,500 and 2,000 names on it. The subscribers primarily were getting a tip of the week. The popular service has all the past items archived on the Web site and Lee believes it



Lee Buffington has moved Turf Tamer, Inc. into more high-end landscape construction work. His staff works hard to find a niche for workers who show potential.

went a long way toward keeping the company's name before prospects.

As he moves his company forward, Lee has set the expansion of the geographic area Turf Tamer serves as a priority. Currently, the company serves a four-county area surrounding its base of Fort Payne. The city is home to the crossover music group Alabama and once boasts that it is the "sock capital of the world." But the population is only so large and Lee has been directing Turf Tamer toward more high-end work.

"We're moving up the ladder with the type of work we want to focus on. We're getting everything fine tuned here, then we can grow to these other counties," he says.

Expanding the market

Much of the company's work in the surrounding counties comes from customers who either work in the Fort Payne area while running businesses in the other counties or vice versa. To capture more of its expanded market, Lee plans some direct mail campaigns to build name recognition.

One thing that Lee has been able to do over the years is build pricing power for the company's services. "I don't know whether it's good or bad, but we've kind of got a stigma within the area in which we work as not being big negotiators. We come to the table with our best price and we can assure you you're going to get a quality product and service when we're done. We get a few we know we have to negotiate with and we take that into consideration," he says.

Lee says one of his biggest challenges over the years has been personnel. Knowing he's not alone in that challenge, he says his most important policy has been to be consistent. "I've always tried to be firm but fair with my people and it's worked real well. If you're consistent, you won't have as many problems with employees."

Lee sees himself as somewhat demanding. At 29 years old, he believes he can build Turf Tamer into a much larger company. "I'm pleased, but I'm never satisfied." **PRO**

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