

By Gregg Wartgow

# When Opportunity Knocks

A willingness to change with the market helps California contractor achieve maximum results.

When running your own company, you can easily end up running yourself ragged. Kevin Burns is a landscaper who's been running for the past 28 years. It's his willingness, though, to run in many directions that's kept him going all these years. In an ever changing marketplace, innovation is key to success.

Today Maximum Service Landscaping in Burlingame, CA, is an award-winning, full-service landscape company that provides clients everything from basic landscaping and hard-scaping to water features and decorative finish carpentry. It's a far cry from what the company looked like when Burns got his start during college in 1978. After many attempts at self-employment and years of working for other companies, he began picking up residential maintenance accounts on the side while working for another landscape contractor.

"My weekend work grew to a full-time business," Burns recalls. "I was burning the candle at both ends working 80-90 hours a week between the two jobs. By 1998 my maintenance clients were requesting more landscaping services, so I finally got my contractor's license and struck out on my own. On January 1, 2000 we began operations as Maximum Service Landscaping Inc., starting out as residential maintenance gardeners. Today our company is 90-95 percent custom residential construction."

Oddly enough, Burns now plans to put more emphasis on maintenance again as he



looks for ways to strengthen his company's value offering, cash flow and bottom line profits. Re-establishing his maintenance division is something Burns has wanted to do for some time.

"Our sales hit \$360,000 with four employees our first year," Burns points out. "We added a crew and doubled sales the next year. We were just under \$2 million our third year. The growth was crazy. We really benefited from the dot-com boom here in Silicon Valley."

## No substitute for industry involvement

Sales have mellowed some since the boom. Perhaps that's been a blessing in disguise. Burns has kept plenty busy, though, serving on the executive board of the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of the

**MAXIMUM SERVICE LANDSCAPING INC.**  
BURLINGAME, CA  
maximumservicelandscaping.com

OWNERS: Kevin and Robin Burns

YEAR FOUNDED: 1999

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN: 10% maintenance, 90% construction which includes outdoor lighting, water features, hard-scaping and decorative carpentry

CUSTOMER BREAKDOWN:

95% residential, 5% commercial

EMPLOYEES: Roughly 15 year-round

FLEET includes Bobcat 763 skid steer, Bobcat 331 excavator, Wacker 36" drum roller, Wacker and Bomag vibratory plates, BOB-CAT 36-inch mower, Honda 21-inch mowers, Echo & Stihl blowers, Shindaiwa string trimmers, Ford F700, Ford F550, two Ford F250s, three Ford F150s

California Landscape Contractors Association (CLCA) for the past six years; last year as chapter president. CLCA participation has required a substantial time commitment—time Burns could have spent working on his business. But he wouldn't have done it any other way.

"The resultant exposure has proven to drive sales our way," Burns says. "Without a doubt, getting involved in my local trade association has been just about the best advice I've ever received.

"I started doing maintenance in 1994, worked my tail-end off and went nowhere for six years. The minute I got my contractor's license in 1999, I joined CLCA. I've since had the opportunity to meet fellow contractors and materials suppliers across the state.

"Established, successful contractors have always been more than willing to share information with me that has ultimately contributed to our success. I've learned how to work with legislators, properly estimate projects and train employees. The effort of getting involved is considerable, but the payoff is unbelievable.

"We're projecting that we will get back to the \$2 million mark this year with our current workforce," Burns continues. "Maybe I'm an optimist, but we plan to reach \$2.5 million in 2009 and \$3 million in 2010.

"Based on the assumption that the housing and mortgage markets will stabilize by 2009, and with the greater number of baby boomers retiring, we're expecting to see older homes in the San Francisco Bay Area being sold to young families who will be renovating and updating gardens to include many of the amenities that have become so popular in the past few years, such as outdoor kitchens, fireplaces and upscale hardscapes."

### Stand-out services

Maximum Service Landscaping has made features

like these a routine part of its service offering. Staying on top of trends has always been one of Burns' biggest charges. "Find out what your customers want, figure out ways to set yourself apart from your competitors, and get good at delivering the absolute best," he advises.

One of the company's newer offerings is finish carpentry. Rather than slap a quick wooden fence in, Maximum Service takes the time to use higher-quality materials and quality construction technique to build doors in place of simple gates.

"Building gates with stiles and rails connected with mortise-and-tenon joinery and inlaid tongue-and-groove boards has really made a big difference," Burns says. "We've also switched to using kiln-dried, vertical-grain Western Red Cedar whenever budget permits. The wood is beautiful and much more rot-resistant than the usual Redwood fence lumber. It really sets us apart from what many other contractors are building."

Similarly, Maximum Service Landscaping uses a lot of natural stone instead of manufactured products. "We've been experimenting with natural lime-based plasters for wall veneers in place of stucco," Burns explains. "Unlike stucco that typically needs painting every couple of years, the lime-based plasters get better with age. These higher-end finishes are getting noticed by customers, and the better we get at working with them, the less price is an issue."

Another area that has come a long in way in terms of product development is landscape lighting. According to Burns, the quality of transformers and fixtures has gotten much better, as have the efforts of manufacturers to provide training for installers. "Good landscape lighting design requires a working knowledge of the various illumination techniques, as well as the mechan-



**Maximum Service Landscaping sets itself apart by offering high-end hardscaping and finish carpentry.**

ics of the system," Burns points out. "Our installers have become experts."

### Warming up to global warming

Looking to the future, Burns is keeping his eye on emerging markets for solar and wind power technologies, and how they might be incorporated in landscape installations. Energy consumption is at the forefront of many consumers' minds, so this could become a valuable service a landscaping company like Maximum Service could tap into.

Along with concerns regarding energy consumption, "global warming" and "climate change"

are becoming household terms. Many of Burns' customers are becoming more concerned with the environment. "High-end customers are not only OK with paying a bit more for us to use sustainable landscape practices, they are beginning to demand it," Burns relates.

Maximum Service Landscaping has changed its approach to soil preparation, and now uses organic composts as much as possible. Plus, when designing a landscape, Burns tries to minimize the removal of materials from a site, instead trying to re-use everything possible. He also incorporates more native, drought-tolerant plantings to



**A before and after of a recent renovation in a high-end neighborhood.**

help homeowners conserve water.

With environmental responsibility in mind, Maximum Service Landscaping stays on top of the newest irrigation and drainage technologies to maximize efficient water use and reduce run-off.

"We've used a variety of ET controllers with some success, though these products are still evolving," Burns says. (ET refers to evapotranspiration, the rate at which plants lose water through the combined processes of evaporation and transpiration.) Maximum Service also uses MP Rotator nozzles, offered by Hunter Industries. (The MP Rotator is a stream rotor-type nozzle that fits onto a spray sprinkler body.)

Unfortunately, new product

technology can only provide the tools for conservation. "It's hard to prevent the human urge to increase garden watering every time a client thinks their lawn or plants look too dry or wilted," Burns says. "Educating our clients is an ongoing effort."

Maximum Service Landscaping also tries to keep drainage water on site whenever possible, storing it in subterranean percolation chambers that ultimately recharge the aquifer. Burns says he's looking at building cisterns into the landscape for an alternative method of storing run-off, but he's concerned that the impact of having to displace tons of soil and use electricity to pump the water into the irrigation system may prove self-defeating from

an environmental standpoint.

Finally, Burns has recently passed the CLCA Water Manager Certification Exam, and is looking to implement their management program this year with a test property. "With California's increasing population and propensity for drought, successful water management is certain to become an invaluable and necessary service," Burns says.

### Sharing the wealth

One thing Burns learned years ago, while working 80 hours a week and going nowhere, is that even an award-winning project isn't successful if you don't recover your overhead costs. He's since implemented an estimating and job costing system that's tailored to his operation. Expenses are tracked on a daily basis and shared with the crews.

"If the guys in the field aren't provided the job cost information they need regularly, they're unable to make the necessary adjustments that make the difference between being profitable and losing money," Burns points out. "Armed with the facts, our employees want to succeed as much as we do. When we're not profitable, they'll let us know whether it was us or them that missed the mark. And that provides us the information we need to improve."

Along with sharing job cost information, Burns and his wife Robin are also willing to share the wealth when things go well. The company has implemented a profit sharing program. "We don't bonus based on individual job profits," Burns says. "We bonus based on company-wide monthly profits. That way nobody can hide."

In the past, Burns tells, a supervisor who didn't want an underachiever on his job would push that employee off to someone else's crew. Now he finds employees self-policing because everyone wants to make their



**Kevin and Robin Burns believe in sharing the wealth with employees.**

monthly bonus. Likewise, crew workers are quick to let the estimator know when he's not allowing enough time for a job. It's a system that seems to hold everyone accountable.

Maybe Kevin Burns understands the value in sharing information—and wealth—with his employees because he's been one himself for years. "I worked more than 20 years for other contractors before I decided it was time to go out on my own," he reminds.

Burns has also learned first hand what it's like to work like mad and have little to show for it. Not anymore. To stay on top of trends and deliver maximum service, it's a total team effort. "We've developed a crew with very diverse talents," Burns says. "Every day we get to build something new. It's what keeps our work vibrant and fun."

It's also what keeps customers satisfied. A recent e-mail from a customer who'd hired and fired a handful of designers and contractors brings a smile to Burns' face. "Thank you guys for a great job ... you've restored my faith in landscapers," the client said. In high-end residential, that's the name of the game. As Burns states, "When you and the client are friends afterward, you know you've done a good job." Needless to say, Burns has plenty of friends these days. **PRO**