

Restless Spirits

Entrepreneurial PLM constantly innovating to be a "1/green" leader



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Elias Godinez, left, and Bob Grover co-founded Pacific Landscape Management, Portland, Ore., in 2001. "Orange is the New Green" reinforces the company's brand.

by SuzTrusty

Innovation in action took a 2001 three-person start-up, Pacific Landscape Management (PLM), to today's 110-person, award-winning, industry leader.

Armed with years of management experience in landscape maintenance in both privately owned local firms and a corporate giant, co-founders Bob Grover and Elias Godinez took the leap. They had the vision of the culture they wanted to recreate, focused on customer service and employee development.

"We launched with basic commercial landscape maintenance," says Grover. "As we grew, we found the enhancements a significant part of the services our clients wanted."

That required multiple steps of developing the expertise, staffing and equipment levels to deliver those services.

"It's taken commitment and dedication. But innovation is exciting to me," says Grover. "I'd get bored if everything stayed the same with no opportunity to make improvements. As entrepreneurs, our company succeeds or fails by the decisions we make. It's a risk we're willing to take for the autonomy to do the right thing."

Embracing sustainability

Sustainability, as defined by the EPA, " ...is based on a simple principle: Everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either

directly or indirectly, on our natural environment." Sustainable landscapes incorporate low-impact, low-maintenance practices that make a positive impact at the social, economic and environmental levels. Think of these levels as three circles positioned within a triangle, with sustainability the spot where the three overlap.

As the sustainability movement began to unfold in 2007, Grover says,

"We started talking with the customers we had the strongest relationships with, asking them, person-to-person, about their interest in sustainability. We also included questions about sustainability in our annual client survey for a couple years. About half of our customers had some interest; about half didn't consider it important. Half is pretty significant, so we decided we'd better have answers and ideas."

The first step was examining all existing practices and procedures, asking, "Is this the best way?" At PLM, innovation in action links sustainability with practicality. Grover says, "We tried to take a very pragmatic approach. We challenged ourselves to work with fewer chemicals, less water, more efficient equipment rather than going for 100 percent organic or no gas. We viewed it not as a destination or exact perfect science, but as a mission on how to enhance the positive while reducing those inputs."

Once PLM determined what they were capable of doing as a start, they began to explore

how all those sustainable initiatives related to the customers and their expectations. While the concept of sustainability appealed to many of them, typically they were not capable or willing to pay extra for it.

Pacific Landscape Management

Owners/Partners: Bob Grover, co-founder/president; Elias Godinez, co-founder/vice president

Founded: 2001

Headquarters: Hillsboro, Ore., with locations in Sherwood and Parkrose (East Portland)

Markets: Portland Metro

Services: Full service property maintenance, landscape renovation and enhancement, aquatic management, irrigation service and renovation, wetlands creation and restoration, seasonal color, seasonal lawn and landscape services, and snow and ice services

Employees: 110 peak season

Website: www.pacscape.com

Grover says, "The sustainable efforts had to be related to the financial resources we had and, whenever possible, as cost savings for the client such as lower water usage, fewer fertilizer applications or reduced mowing frequency."

Meanwhile, a strong sustainable green movement was developing in Oregon, especially in the Portland area. Grover says, "We explored the various programs and incentives, identified those that have an impact, and began working toward those certifications."

One example is the EcoLogical Business Certification. PLM literature states, "Several local jurisdictions including the city of Portland have come together and developed a certification program for landscape companies that recognizes companies that provide design, installation and maintenance that reach the highest standards for minimizing its impact on the environment. We have completed the requirements and are one of the first companies to be certified."

While sustainability is the company-wide mission, Grover says, "Corey Petersen serves as sustainability coordinator, our go-to guy for sustainability-related research and development. He participated in the Green Roof research project at Oregon State University and is certified as a Liveroof installer. He's also accredited as an organic land care practitioner by Oregon Tilth, which allows us to offer certified organic maintenance programs."

Show to sell

When the company began focusing on sustainability, they wanted to experiment with various initiatives both to gain experience with them and to demonstrate them to clients. Their Hillsboro main office became their research lab and show-to-sell site.

They've installed a functional rain garden featuring attractive, water-tolerant plants along the front of the building. It traps water from the roof thus reducing stormwater runoff. They also installed a bioswale to treat runoff water from their service yard. This

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allowed them to experiment with different plants and maintenance techniques for these facilities.

A lawn area has been planted with one of the EcoLawn seed mixes they've developed for larger expanses of lawn in low-visibility locations. White clover within the mix returns nutrients to the soil, while the dwarf, drought-tolerant grass varieties reduce both water usage and mowing frequency.

The area between the sidewalk and the street showcases sedum and other low maintenance ground-cover plants as an alternative to turfgrasses.

With the degree of exposure and the Portland area's typical dry summer conditions, successful green roofs incorporate some form of weather-based irrigation management, either through smart controllers or moisture sensors. When a client expressed interest in a green wall, which would have similar challenges, Petersen researched the available options. He then developed his own experimental system at the Hillsboro site.

Case studies have long been a highly motivational selling technique for PLM. Thus, Corey Petersen, as an early adopter of sustainability, was assigned to enhance the property of a site open to sustainability opportunities, the Amber-Glen Business Center. The case study of their water savings through the use of Rainbird's ET Manager weather-based smart controller technology



PLM emphasizes teamwork and training. It has been named among the 100 Best Places to Work in Oregon Business Magazine.

delivers a compelling message for other sites to consider.

It takes a dynamic, well-organized team to make this all work. Grover fills dual roles as sales and general business manager. Godinez serves as operations manager and director of training and safety.

PLM's three offices are strategically located around Portland

metro to center personnel and equipment close to the geographic area they serve-sustainability again. Grover says, "Our 350 commercial maintenance accounts are divided into six regions. Two regions are served from each office, with an area manager and operations manager for each region headquartered at that location. The six area managers and our enhancement/construction manager, who is based at our Hillsboro site, report directly to us."

Team organization

Area managers are the primary contact for the clients within their region. Most maintenance crews are three-person, though a few are larger to serve specific sites. Each has a crew leader who is responsible for a grouping of accounts. These crews are supervised by the operations manager of their region, who also coordinates the account assignments and routing. Maintenance crews handle the mowing, trimming, spot weed control and general maintenance of those properties.

"We have specialty crews for irrigation repair and maintenance and spray technicians for general applications," says Grover. "Our enhancement group handles the twice a year seasonal color changeouts and other general enhancements. One equipment service technician is based at Hillsboro; the other splits time between the two other locations. Both operate with mechanic staff assistants."

The seven managers meet weekly with Godinez and Grover to discuss customers, services and promotional materials, insuring all are "speaking the same language." Each location holds a half-hour crew training session 50 weeks of the year.

"Part of our culture is involving all of our people," notes Grover. "And not just with training, though that's extremely important. We continually



PHOTO BY STEVE TRUSTY.

Sustainability Coordinator Corey Petersen developed this green wall system at the firm's Hillsboro site, one of three **PLM** sites in Metro Portland.

ask for their feedback and act on it. Innovation is often sparked by a crew member's suggestion."

Operational sustainability

The company is innovative in promotion as well, spreading the word via their user-friendly website, e-newsletter, blog, Facebook and Twitter. Their annual Sustainability Fair and Workshops, held in June at the Hillsboro office, highlight their "Sustainable Landscape Solutions." The value of the PLM seminars has prompted the Oregon Institute of Real Estate Management (IREM) to offer CEU recertification credits for them. Grover adds, "The event also provides a forum for our sustainability partners, including vendors and agencies, to detail how their products and services support our efforts."

PLM highlights their internal sustainability program with "Orange is the new Green," playing on the signature orange of their uniforms and trucks. Beyond the show-to-sell initiatives already mentioned, they switched to compact fluorescent lighting; and installed rooftop solar panels that now generate 95 percent of their electricity. They amped up the recycling program already in place.

Grover says, "During our annual trip to GIE-EXPO, we engage equipment manufacturers to check out their latest introductions and usually bring back some items to test in our operations. The GIE-EXPO is the best event for us to research new equipment and products to help us become more efficient and sustainable."

In 2009, PLM began switching their small engine fleet (blowers, string trimmers, etc.) to STIHL. The move lowered emissions by 80 percent and reduced fuel usage by 50 percent, resulting in a two-year ROI.

While their walk-behind mowers are still gas-powered, they're converting their fleet of ride-on and stand-on mowers to propane. Grover says, "The national John Deere folks helped connect us with a propane distributor so we can refuel the propane tanks at each of our locations. That step allows refueling with no downtime for our mower operators. The changeover reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 48 percent over gas-powered mowers."

PLM also opted for Deere's mulch-on-demand mower decks. More mulching results in less bagging, which reduces green waste and saves time.

Grover says, "Our managers all drive hybrids. We've been converting some of our Isuzu NPR trucks to diesel. All of our vehicles refuel at cardlock stations."

Rewarding Results

Consequently, Oregon Business Magazine has listed PLM among the 100 Best Places to Work and the 100 Best Green Companies five years in a row. On May 23, 2013, the Hillsboro Chamber of Commerce honored the company as its Business of the Year.

Grover says, "Whether the focus is sustainability or innovation, the big piece is to never be satisfied



Pacific Landscape Management's demonstration rain garden shows clients a practical and attractive way to trap stormwater.

and always be curious. Everything can be better, faster, smarter. We may take baby steps to get there, but they're building to that quantum leap, better overall for our clients, our company and our industry."

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