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Cross-selling helps CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape grow

by Ken Wall

The roots of CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape can be traced back to Chuck Monico's high school days when he was just a teenager with a mower and the need for a little pocket money.

Monico never really intended for it develop into a full-time business. Upon graduation from high school he attended the UNO College of Business Administration and went on to spend four years working in public accounting.

Then in 1995 his friend Dan Zoucha (pronounced Zoo-ha) moved back from San Antonio and they started talking about reviving the lawn mowing business, only this time they planned on approaching it from a total lawn maintenance perspective and possibly exploring landscaping and irrigation.

The idea took life in 1996 under the name CM's Lawn & Landscape. The business flourished as Monico and Zoucha learned the benefits of gaining new customers with the lawn maintenance, landscape or irrigation and then cross-selling them on the company's other services.

"We found that our customers liked the idea of putting all of their eggs in one basket," said Monico, president of Bellevue-based CM's Lawn & Landscape. "It gave them one person to call for whatever they needed and one person to be accountable if they ever had a concern."

"Some companies find a niche in servicing one particular area — landscaping, retaining walls or lawn maintenance. We found our niche in being one of the few companies in the metro to do it all."

"About the only thing having to do with a commercial or residential lawn that we don't have internally is a professional arborist. But we have alliances with some arborists in town, so if we feel we can't fulfill a customer's needs, we'll find someone who can."

Based on how well the strategy has worked during its first six years in business, CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape made a significant investment toward future growth with the purchase of a competing irrigation business last year. Monico said the primary motivator was acquiring the more than 300 accounts the company was serving to add to his firm's pool of potential maintenance and landscaping customers.

"Not only did we gain 300 new irrigation clients, we gained 300 new prospects we can attempt to cross-sell on all of our other services," he said. "It's an out-of-the-box way to invest in our business and market our services that has worked out really well for us so far."

CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape is taking a similar approach to attempt an expansion into the Kansas City lawn care market. Riding a wave of solid performance in its irrigation business in Omaha, the firm placed its first employee in Kansas City on April 1.

"Last year with the drought our biggest growth sector was irrigation," Monico said. "There was a definite increased need that turned into a sizable increase in phone calls requesting quotes."

"Through a tip from our irrigation supplier we found



Monico, at right, with Zoucha at a finished landscaping job ... "Some companies find a niche in servicing one particular area — landscaping, retaining walls or lawn maintenance. We found our niche in being one of the few companies in the metro to do it all."

there was a similar need in the Kansas City market. We hired a guy who was originally from here but had lived in Kansas City the past five or six years, so he knew the area pretty well. We brought him back here and spent a year getting him ready to take on the new market.

"We now have one irrigation service truck operating in Kansas City as a test to see if we can build up enough business for a larger operation. He's plenty busy already, but our plan is to hold off at least one year before we commit to putting any more vehicles in that market."

The cross-selling strategy has helped CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape grow to a permanent staff of about 15 and a seasonal peak of nearly 30 employees. In April the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce named the company the small business of the year in the category of one to 15 full-time employees.

Monico said one of the reasons the strategy has worked so well is that it helps maintain a relative balance among the three working divisions. A little more than 30 percent of CM's Custom Lawn & Landscape's business comes from landscaping, about 40 percent from lawn maintenance and just shy of 30 percent from irrigation.

Because of that balance the company remains steady even when there is a noticeable drop in one area or another.

"Honestly, the past couple of years we have seen people pull back on the size of their landscaping projects because of the economy," Monico said. "The jobs have become a little smaller because people are nervous about sinking \$200,000 or \$300,000 into landscaping. Three or four years ago that wasn't the case."

"We've made up for having smaller projects by getting more of them and by having growth in other areas, such as irrigation."

"Administratively it presents a bit more of a challenge to manage, but in the end it probably gives us the opportunity to make more new customer contacts."

"As long as we provide good service now, when they look at scaling up their projects down the road we believe they will be more likely to call on a company they already know and are comfortable with. It's just another opportunity to prepare for future growth."

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