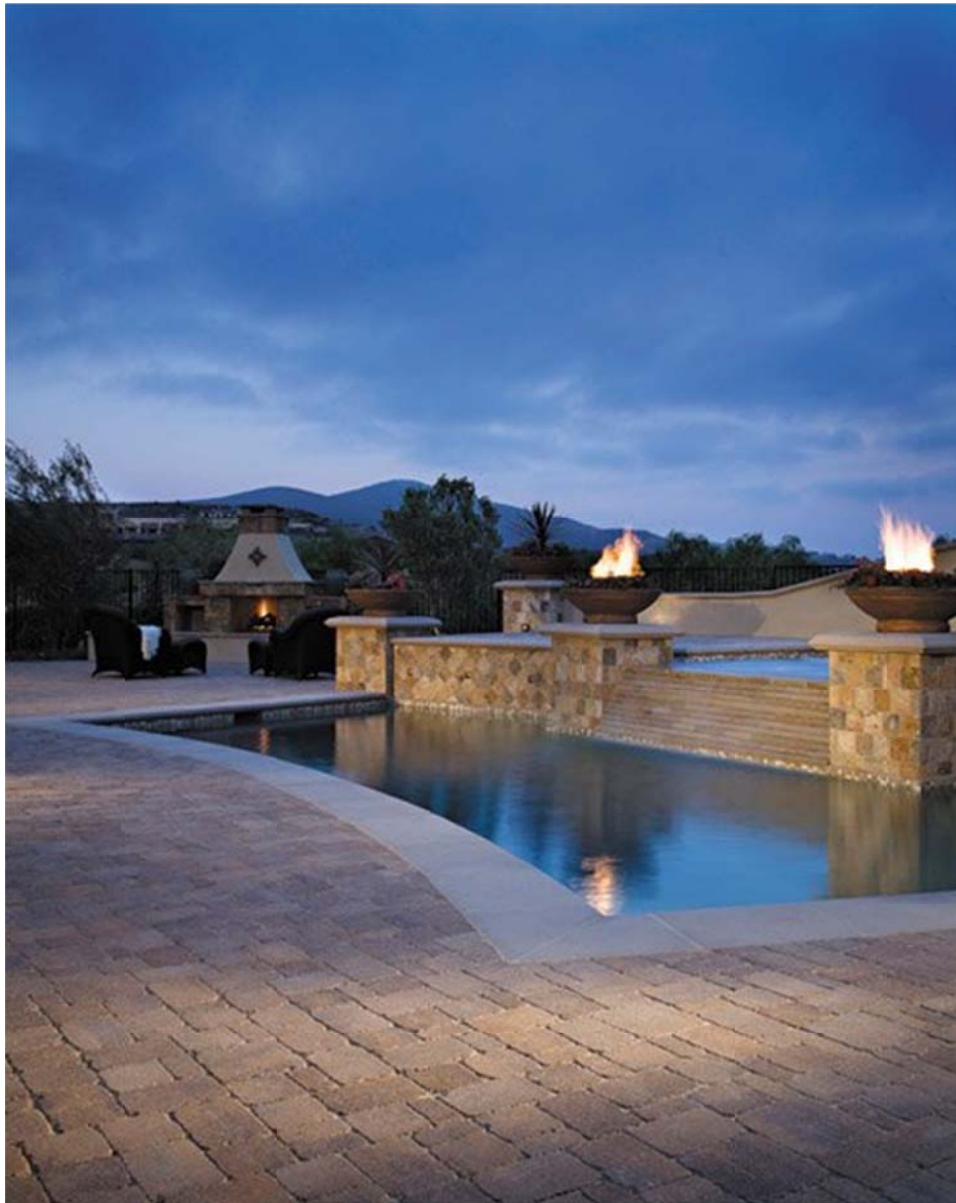


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Expand your business by design

Hardscape projects can grow a landscape professional's business with repeat customers and profits.



October 4, 2010 - When it comes to selling hardscape installations, landscape contractors and designers can make or break the bank. Just as homeowners have misconceptions about the affordability and practicality of hardscape

installations, many outdoor design / build professionals implement only select aspects of this kind of profit-earning project.

Proactively educating clients regarding hardscape design, build and installation possibilities for their specific sites can act as a means to selling or cross-selling new jobs. Conversely, neglecting to show clients new materials or high-end ideas for fear of losing jobs is perhaps a passive approach to business growth. Building more diverse project portfolios and client rosters can begin by offering new services. Ultimately, taking well-researched risks and strategically supplementing services and products leads to wider sales and revenue.

Tips from an industry expert

As a member of both the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute (ICPI), an organization which spans both Canada and the U.S., and the National Concrete Masonry Association (NCMA), Ken O'Neill has more than 20 years of expertise with segmental interlocking concrete pavers, and holds an ICPI Certification in paver construction. O'Neill is also the vice president of Belgard Hardscapes, part of Oldcastle Architectural, Inc., a company that manufactures interlocking pavers, paving stone and garden wall products.

"Showing homeowner and commercial space customers a range of installation options and products increases confidence both in the job and in the contractor," says O'Neill. "If a contractor pitches a project and the customer balks at the cost, the contractor can show the client different lines and generations of a product."

"Don't start with the lower-end product, or losing money is guaranteed," he says, and adds that establishing a budget up front will help contractors advise clients about the potential for construction phases, which makes affordability less of an issue and creates repeat customers.

O'Neill urges landscape professionals to become familiar with the wide spectrum of hardscaping materials to help expand their design repertoires and the variety of projects they can sell to their clients. He says many contractors are hesitant to put a great deal of time into design, in case their ideas are declined. Instead, they stick to designs they know will work and that their crews can build more smoothly. While being cautious and vigilant are good characteristics when selling and starting new jobs, stretching service models and implementation practices addresses today's homeowners, who want unique features in their hardscaped patios, walls, spas and fire features.

"Design is important to customers and clients," O'Neill says. "We're currently introducing the Belgard Design Studio which enables installers to submit their drawings and turn them into three-dimensional designs." The program helps users enhance their creativity and sell designs in different phases. O'Neill also provides landscape professionals with education through a lifestyles collection catalogue, a resource of photos, products and plans. Project options throughout the catalogue are detailed with specifications.

"Hardscaping is a fairly young business in [North America]," says O'Neill. "It's the installer's job to sell the project, but

we need to provide installers with the tools for selling products and installations to homeowners.” To further landscape contractors’ educational resources on hardscape products, design and sales techniques, Belgard has launched Belgard University (www.belgarduniversity.com), a series of workshops in cities throughout the United States in 2010. The company has commissioned speakers on topics ranging from providing estimates and knowing and controlling costs, to running a crew and marketing.

“Gaining accreditation as an ICPI certified installer will also enable professional landscape companies to differentiate their businesses and promote growth and profitability,” says O’Neill. The organization lists certified professionals, searchable by zip code, on its web site (www.icpi.org), and offers continuing education, technical specifications and industry networking.

Materials and trends

Manufactured concrete pavers, commonly used in driveways, walkways and patios, provide years of protection and beauty in all climates. Pavers stand up to temperature extremes, effects of de-icing salts and even earthquakes, and can be easily replaced.

Pavers as a whole are a great product, offering sustainability and affordability. “In Europe, pavers are used widely, and consumers understand the sustainability of the product,” O’Neill says. “Put in a driveway of pavers and it will last 50 years. In the United States [and Canada], people do not yet realize the long-lasting use of the product.”

Indeed, while sustainability is a newer concept in North America, it is one that is taking the continent by storm. Landscapers can sell paver installations by using the “sustainability factor.”

In the past few years, customer preferences have favoured antique- and natural-looking textures. Products such as Belgard’s Arbel and Mega-Arbel are textured to imitate and complement natural stone, and its Old World and Dublin Cobble pavers provide a coveted antique look and feel. O’Neill offers his own outdoor kitchen as an example of how new paver textures can allow contractors creative options. He has incorporated three different pavers for the floor, retaining walls, and the kitchen surround.

“Looking at the three products individually, it doesn’t seem like they would look good together, but seeing the final installation transforms the look of the house and creates a new environment,” he says.

Installation of sustainable permeable pavers has increased dramatically in recent years, due to homeowners’ growing concern with environmental issues and legislation that requires municipalities to incorporate sustainable products in large areas like parking lots and sidewalks to better manage storm water runoff.

“Permeable pavers allow surface water to drain into their sub-base through gaps or joints situated within and between each paver,” O’Neill explains. “Water then returns to the soil, cleaner and able to recharge the natural water table.

The aggregates in the base and sub-base collect the sediment, allowing natural bacteria to settle in the void storage, and the collection process reduces toxins such as nitrogen, bacteria and phosphorus in the soil and water supply.”

The use of some permeable concrete paving stone systems can also earn contractors points in the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system. LEED utilizes a point rating system to recognize sustainable site and building design, and many municipalities around North America are mandating LEED projects.

Meanwhile, private businesses are voluntarily seeking LEED credit points so that they can be on the forefront of environmental construction. Stronger than concrete and less prone to cracking, paving stones are ideal for walkways, driveways, pool decks and patios. Set in a friction-base sand mixture – so they do not move around but remain flexible – paving stones allow for the expansion and contraction that inevitably occurs with weather extremes, without affecting paving stone installation.

Pre-built or modular systems, such as Belgard’s BelAir Wall systems, allow for effortless construction of free standing walls and retaining walls. They incorporate two, three-inch and two, six-inch high modular products to create a natural stone pattern, and can be used in residential applications such as curves, corners, terraces, raised patios, steps and columns.

“Contractors sometimes believe they can build walls and other features cheaper than using modular product lines. In the end, they just break even,” O’Neill says. “The latest technologies have made modular systems user-friendly and rival the organic beauty of natural stone.”

According to O’Neill, landscape professionals who want to maximize their returns-on-investment with each new installation job, grow their clientele, and retain repeat customers should consider partnering with a product manufacturer with supportive resources. Going it alone or sourcing hardscape products from multiple resources can be costly.

He adds; “Remaining cognizant of the latest trends and technologies, and taking on new kinds of product installations are possibly the most strategic methods pros can use to invest in and grow a landscaping or outdoor design / build business.”