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[Table of Contents](#)

**NORTH FEATURES**

**Making the Green Industry a Better Place**

*by Tom Crain*

**New Jersey company invests in its employees and has a pay-it-forward attitude**

With 30 years under its belt, CJL Landscaping in Waldwick, N.J., knows exactly who they are, and who they aren't. Because of that, they continue their rise to the top as one of the most successful full-service landscaping and snow removal companies in the Northeast, surviving the economic downturn quite handily.



Chris James with Jason, his operations manager, doing an installation at a client's property.  
*Photos courtesy of Chris James.*

CJL has about 40 employees divided up into five maintenance/detail crews, one heavy construction crew, one irrigation crew and one lawn care service crew. It services a mix of 20 percent commercial companies with 80 percent residential customers.

"Our corporate clients' image matters to them, and our residential customers tend to be mid-to-upscale clients who are not looking for a 'mow, blow and go' company," explains Chris James, owner of the CJL Landscaping and its namesake. He is confident that their customer base appreciates, and is willing to pay extra for, trained, certified, supervised, insured, uniformed, well-equipped, legal personnel to work on their properties. He isn't worried about charging higher prices for its customers, in fact, it's part of his marketing plan.

Sitting in the epicenter of many of the most affluent counties in America helps. The company's residential and commercial clients are located in and around Bergen County, a most coveted piece of landscaping geography.

James, who is also the head sales guy of the company, tells prospective customers flat out, "We are not a low-cost provider. If you're a homeowner or commercial client whose decisive factor is the cheapest price, then we're not your company."

James finds there are still plenty of people willing to pay for good service. "These folks are proud of their home or place of business," he says. "They are willing to pay for it. Their time is valuable, and they want to deal with professionals that offer a consistent

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quality service or product who provides staff that meets their expectations, such as answering the phone directly instead of voicemail."

CJL invests a lot in customer relationships. "Prospective clients' complaints and concerns about other landscaping companies have become fairly predictable," explains James. In his 30 years in the landscaping business, he has heard every complaint. "We listen to all these complaints, which are really 'wants,' and then we go on to explain that each one of these wants has a cost attached to it," says James. CJL educates every prospect to look at his service as professional, not unlike a doctor, lawyer or accountant.

"We have real people and real costs to cover, even though the customer may not see it, just like any other professional business, such as office space, office staff, supervisors, training and new equipment purchases that contribute to overhead costs," explains James. "I've been in this industry since the '70s, and, yes, the equipment and technology has come a long way, but it's still a labor-intensive people business that customers need to realize."

The company deliberately institutes timing strategies that both helps its clients as well as increases efficiencies for work crews and conserves company resources. For example, the company performs commercial work early in the week on Mondays and any spillover work is conducted on Tuesdays. Its business customers like it because their facilities look best during the work week when customers and clients visit. Residential maintenance days are Tuesday through Fridays to set up homeowners to enjoy their landscape for the weekend when they are most likely to use it.

James knows the value of employee training both for retention and performance. All employees are continuously encouraged to take company-provided and paid-for training. The company is one of the top five participating in The Green Industry training through Rutgers University Continuing Education Program. It has put five employees through the Rutgers' certified landscape technicians (CLTs) program. "We want to give our employees the message that if they want to get ahead in this company, and the industry in general, they need to personally try to improve themselves," says James. "And, as a result, CJL as a company can provide a better experience for its clients."



The yard at CJL Landscaping's headquarters in Waldwick, N.J.

While in high school, James worked part-time for a small Wyckoff, N.J., landscaping company, becoming its top dog right out of high school. After a couple of years, he was offered the chance to buy the company. "I was young and had a good work ethic," says James. "I was brazen enough to take the plunge." He learned that he was completely unprepared to run the business aspects of the company, but, fortunately, had a good accountant and attorney. "I'm a firm believer in outside people coming in," he says. "They're a new set of eyes and ears, they're open-minded and help us look at our company without preconceived opinions. It's worth the time and money."

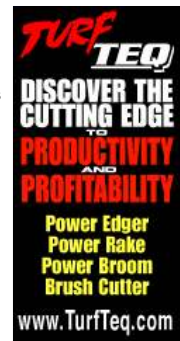
James is a huge proponent of people in the industry joining NJLCA, PLANET and SIMA, and is very active with these associations. "This is the best way to learn and grow as a person and business leader," he says. "This would be one of the top three recommendations to any young person in the landscape and snow removal industry."

Every year, CJL budgets specifically for the cost associated with not only the membership, but also travel to attend trade shows and seminars. "You only get out what you put in, so if you don't go, you're missing out on knowledge and expertise available to you," he says.

James served on the first CLT Committee in New Jersey, and has also held the position of vice president and president of NJLCA. With Planet, he was a CLT Proctor and attended CLT tests in New York, Wisconsin, Maryland and Halifax. He was also an early member of SIMA when it consisted of under a dozen members. "To see SIMA with 1,500 plus membership is amazing," he says.

Peak sales for the company occurred in 2006-2007, which were just shy of \$1.5 million. However, James admits, it has been a rocky road for his company the past two and a half years, weathering one of the country's worst recessions. "We streamlined our operations, held back on larger purchases and increased our marketing with a new client referral program," he says.

With the opening of its newly-expanded headquarters in 2007, CJL realized large savings in travel, loading and unloading time allowed the company to be more efficient and provide its clients better service. However, overhead costs have also increased.



Until 2007, annual growth had been self-financed and averaged about 10 percent per year. In 2009, sales fell to \$1.275 million, taking a 17 percent hit. As soon as the economy started to sour, James says, he looked at every process, cost and cut he could make, provided it did not hurt service quality and would keep the company's core in tact. The company's goal is to increase snow and ice removal sales to an average of 18 to 20 percent to help cover some of the additional overhead costs. Snow and ice removal currently accounts for 14 to 16 percent of gross revenues in an average winter.

So far, 2010 is a rebound year. The spring quarter of this year, CJL retained 90 percent of its clients, which brought it back to its normal range. Year-to-date, landscape maintenance, lawn care, irrigation and snow service sales are all up over 2009, except for design-build, which is down. "We project \$1.375 million unless design-build picks up in the fall of 2010, then we could go over \$1.4 million," says James. The company's plan is to be at \$2 million within the next five years .



The executive team of CJL Landscaping accepts the Excellence in Business Award from SIMA.

CJL Landscaping is known as the landscaping company that rises to the top with the pay-it-forward philosophy. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf States, it stepped up to assist victims with yard cleanup. The mission started the day after Katrina hit. "We called about 60 landscape companies in the areas hardest hit before finally reaching one in north Mississippi that told us to come down," explains James. "They welcomed our help, but said it wasn't possible for anyone to get within 50 miles of the coast." That didn't stop James from sending 25 percent of its staff to help out within a few days. He organized moving equipment for multiple crews, taking them 1,100 miles safely with all support gear including fuel, enough food and water to be self-contained for two weeks just north of Gulfport, Miss. "We had overwhelming support from vendors and clients," says James.

The company worked 15-hour days, seven-days-a-week out of a nursery facility. The work was lined up by a local nurseryman who put CJL volunteers in touch with senior citizens unable to physically, or financially, handle yard cleanup. "Our crews removed upwards of 250 cubic yards of debris per day," says James. "We also repaired wells for potable water and removed 60-foot fallen trees from homes."

CJL's other community projects include regular volunteer duties for the Green Care for Troops program sponsored by Project Evergreen and restoration of a courtyard teaching garden at a local school.

*For the past 20 years, Tom Crain has been a regular contributor to B2B publications, including many in the green industry. He is also a marketing communications specialist for several companies in the travel, agriculture and nutrition industries.*

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