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WEST FEATURES

A Humble Beginning

by Tom Crain

Hispanic landscaper owns one of the fastest growing enterprises in the nation

Manuel Castaneda lords over a landscaping and construction company that is among the top 30 fastest growing Hispanic-owned businesses in the U.S. with revenues over \$5 million. For more than 20 years, Castaneda has owned Pro Landscape, a Portland, Ore.-based company that has seen appreciable growth, starting as a business specializing in yard maintenance to a full-fledged construction company with a subsidiary and multiple offices. In 1986, he launched the company in Hillsboro, a tony suburb of Portland.



A general landscaping project by Pro Landscape that included walls, stairs, lighting, irrigation, fence and more.
 Photos Courtesy of Pro Landscape.

"It was just me, an old, blue Chevy pickup truck, and a piece of plastic with an \$800 limit on it," says Castaneda. "I used the plastic to buy a rider mower for a single residential customer."

At the end of the first year, he had four more homes on the same block where the first customer lived. In successive years, business grew by word-of-mouth. As his company expanded, Castaneda scrambled to learn as much as he could about running a business, and plugged into many local business education and networking opportunities. He read all kinds of landscaping and business book and he talked with colleagues on best business practices. He eventually took and passed the state's contractor exam, at which point he decided to focus on landscape construction rather than simply maintenance.

Castaneda joined the Mentoring Protégé program offered first through the Port of Portland, and now adapted nationwide. This program exists to build effective working relationships between minority-owned, women-owned or emerging small-business owners and leaders of mature, established companies. A successful mentor/protégé pairing allows the minority ventures to benefit from the knowledge and experience of the more established firms. For the first three years in the program, he was mentored. The second time around, he gave back by becoming a mentor.

"After a while, I saw that there wasn't much room for growth in yard maintenance," Castaneda says, so he focused his efforts on landscape construction. With that decision, he gave most of the maintenance accounts to his former employees, many of whom used the accounts to start their own companies that still exist today: C & T Landscape Maintenance, Forest Landscape and Beaver Landscape Maintenance. To this day, he

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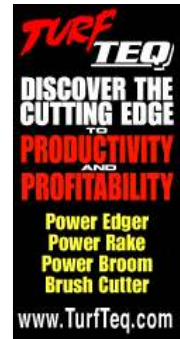
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still keeps in touch with all of them.



A remediation project of severe soil erosion on the Oregon Coast.



There were still obstacles, however, with his new construction work business model. For one, his expenses were higher due to construction costs, and he noticed a significant decrease in work during the wet winter months, something that he saw no way to overcome.

One day, Castaneda was contacted by a British engineer who asked if he would be interested in performing soil stabilization for steep surfaces. He had no idea how to do it, but this new overseas customer showed him how. This one project brought in a quarter-million dollars for Castaneda. Others followed, and the stabilization work, which was piling up, led him to a realization: most of this work came during the winter months, when rain-soaked hillsides were more likely to shift or slide. His business was now busy year-round.



Manuel Castaneda is the owner of Pro Landscape, a landscaping and construction company that is among the top 30 fastest growing Hispanic-owned businesses in the U.S.

Over the years, Castaneda picked up more and more soil stabilization projects. He set up a subsidiary, PLI Systems, for foundations, walls, hillsides and landslides. Pile driving, land leveling and erecting retaining walls through PLI now makes up 80 percent of his business. The addition of this subsidiary has shot up revenues, enabling Castaneda to pay higher wages and offer better benefits to his employees.

"I invest in employee training," Castaneda says. "The people I hire are highly capable of doing many different things. We literally have training every week. With every training, their confidence level goes way up."

Soil stabilization made Pro Landscape one of the fastest-growing enterprises in the nation and helped earn Castaneda the 2008 Oregon Minority Small Business Person of the Year award. The next year, PLI Systems was recognized as the top company by the Oregon Department of Minority, Women and Emerging Small Businesses for obtaining the most contracts worth \$5 million or more.

The company's new focus on soil stabilization increased Pro Landscape's market position. "In the Portland-Vancouver area, we have three competitors in soil stabilization, as opposed to about 1,000 in landscaping," says Castaneda.

Castaneda works closely with the Small Business Administration (SBA) by qualifying for some of their formal training programs, which helped PLI Systems win government contracts. Through this program, Pro Landscape earned a reputation for value engineering, making recommendations that improved the project it was working on. Though the SBA also guaranteed the loan on Castaneda's headquarters building, he said its most important benefit was providing opportunities.



A reconstructed playground area for the federal GSA Building, courtesy of Pro Landscape.

Now in his mid-40s, Castaneda is focusing much of his efforts on opening other offices in Vancouver, Canada; Manzanillo, Mexico; and Marysville, Wash. "Were open in Marysville and have limited operations in Mexico," says Castaneda. "It's a slow process because we've learned that the Mexican government wants to have their hands in everything."

Castaneda's 12-hour days, often seven-day weeks, include serving as an officer of the Hillsboro, Ore., chamber of commerce and chair of the Washington County Business Council. He also continues mentoring for other small-business owners for the Port of Portland.

"We're setting individual goals for every person in the company to look for waste and find a way to minimize it," he says. "Also, we're looking for efficiencies by teaming up with other companies for joint ventures and team agreements. We're making ourselves more valuable."



Renovation of Willamette National Cemetery where Pro Landscape replaced more than 1 million square feet of sod.

Even though Castaneda's annual revenues have taken a slight tumble from \$7 million at their peak to \$5.2 million, and he's been unable to secure a loan to move into larger space to accommodate his growth, Castaneda says you can't let anything get you down, especially the economy. "Motivation must be there at all times to keep up that 'get up and go,' he says. "In this economy, you need to double your efforts knowing that it's really tough out there."



Pro Landscape custom-built this outdoor stone fireplace.

Castaneda also advises to hold your prices and not to run away from problems that customers bring to you. "Oftentimes, when customers bring up problems to you, it translates into more work if you handle it effectively," he explains. "I tell my customers who want me to lower prices to go and shop for a cheaper price. If you have the best interest of your client in mind, they'll stay with you. When you do a good job throughout the year for your customers, they will stick around regardless."

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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