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Taking Care of Business

by Tom Crain

Ruppert Landscape flourishes by giving back to its employees



The Maryland landscape construction branch's green roof installations include one at Shady Grove Hospital and another at Ruppert's own facility (pictured here).
Photos courtesy of Ruppert Landscape.

When most of the industry's large companies make headlines, it's all about acquisitions. At Ruppert Landscape in Laytonsville, Md., the headlines are all about the company's corporate giving programs and executive philanthropy. When industry leaders talk about growth strategies, they advocate centralization of services and trimming middle management. At Ruppert, it's all about decentralization of services and empowering divisional managers and their staff. When the top companies tout sustainability, they spend years planning initiatives that rarely get off the ground. At Ruppert, a multitude of green projects started in-house by its employees-from green roofs to rain barrels to LEED-certified corporate buildings to recycling-have been completed and operating successfully for years.

"There is an overriding Ruppert culture that includes the elements of hustle and efficiency," explains Chris Davitt, president, who started mowing lawns with the Ruppert brothers at age 11, coming on full-time in 1981. "Within the Ruppert culture, we ensure that subcultures continue to operate, and that's where our real strength lies."

For example, at the Forestville Landscape Management branch serving the east side of Washington, D.C., Jack Jones, a former drill instructor for the U.S. Marine Corps, is manager. Many of Jones' employees are from the U.S. Marines as well. Naturally, he incorporates some military-style operations and daily routines into his branch. "Jones' military practices have absolutely had an influence on other branches," says Davitt. "It's a great example of just how each branch sort of takes on its own personality based on its leadership and how it best operates."

Innovation is one of the company's core values, and employees are taught that it's everyone's responsibility to find a better or more creative way to get the job done. "Our decentralized structure enables us to then trial-test innovative ideas at a smaller level, and then if successful, take it to a larger, company-wide level," explains Davitt.

A unique history strengthens leadership and management loyalty

Ruppert has had a unique history for its past three decades, incorporating a sell off and a resurrection from a restart.

It all began in the early '70s with a few brothers and their neighborhood buddies-Chris and Craig Ruppert along with Chris Davitt and his brothers-who began mowing lawns in their upscale Chevy Chase neighborhood. The grass cutting gradually grew into a bona fide landscaping maintenance business incorporated in 1977.

The conversion from residential to all commercial began around 1980 with 20 employees. The company grew steadily, and in 1998, with annual earnings in excess of \$45 million and 850 employees serving in 14 branches between Philadelphia and Atlanta, Ruppert Landscape services and equipment was sold to Servicemaster (Tru Green-ChemLawn) as part of industry consolidation.

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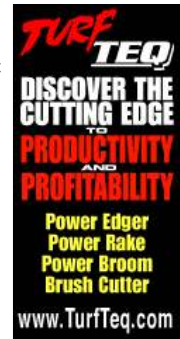
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In less than a year after that, several key employees of the former company, including Craig and Davitt, left Tru Green to focus on an existing tree growing business, known as Ruppert Nurseries, and to begin developing two other entities: Ruppert Ventures to assist in the business development of small to midsize companies, and Ruppert Properties, designed to invest in, develop and redevelop industrial flex-warehouse properties.

In 1993, the five-year non-compete agreement, which limited the amount of landscape work Ruppert could do, ran out. He could then re-enter the commercial landscape market and began to rehire many of his key managers.

Today, the business is even larger than it had been before the sale, with \$60 million in revenues last year and 600 employees in 12 locations. Ruppert Nurseries continues to operate as a 475-acre wholesale tree nursery based in Montgomery County, Md., that specializes in large tree relocating and growing up and down the East Coast.



For the past four years, Ruppert has contributed sponsorship dollars and organized three Ruppert wiffle ball teams to play in the tournament every year to raise more than \$25,000 for Georgetown University Medical Center's Pediatric Center in honor of an employee's neighbor who is in remission from bone cancer.



Ruppert's Maryland maintenance branch spent a day at Laytonsville Elementary School where they performed edging, mulching, pruning and a basic cleanup of the school yard.



The Georgia branch of Ruppert Landscape hosted their third annual Sustainable Landscape Summit in March. Over 35 property managers, engineers and maintenance professionals attended.



Ruppert made an in-kind donation of landscape materials and installation supported by corporate and each of the branches to Easter Seals, which has recently moved into its brand-new intergenerational center in downtown Silver Spring.

Grassroots charitable giving garners significant gifts

Ruppert Landscape commits 5 percent of its profit annually to charity. In 2009, that translated to \$300,000.

Ruppert looks to its employees to bring their ideas about charitable projects they've personally become involved with directly into the company. "Employees are encouraged to get their branch involved in charitable efforts that are near and dear to them," explains Davitt. "Two percent of our total 5 percent of profits is managed directly out of our branches to ensure that employees are directly involved in the giving and charitable projects."

Davitt adds, "Having a social conscience is a self-perpetuating thing; it helps the community, it motivates our employees and gives them pride in the company. Those employees work hard at keeping our customers happy because they work for an organization that they believe in, and, in turn, the company continues to be financially successful, which enables us to contribute even more money to worthy causes."

This strategy increases employee morale, expands knowledge and brings in potential business. Some of the most memorable charitable projects include: Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, working for 96 hours to assist the chosen family with a landscape installation; Jubilee Support Alliance building play areas for its low-income child residents and outdoor spaces for its adult residents; and building a new athletic field and basketball court and performing renovations and additions to the property's landscape and hardscape for Washington Jesuit Academy to benefit disadvantaged youth.

Environmental stewardship steered from within

Ruppert is applying for LEED certification at its corporate campus facility on two new office buildings, and platinum level certification, which is the highest rating available, on its constructed vehicle and equipment shop.

Additional environmental stewardship is conducted on job sites with installation and maintenance of green roofs, recycling of debris and waste materials on job sites and responsible use of irrigation systems, just to name a few.

The Forestville maintenance branch has introduced a couple of propane-powered mowers into their equipment arsenal. The purchases followed a considerable amount of research that showed the potential savings in fuel. The company has begun tracking and analyzing the data to determine what advantages are possible with alternative fuels.

The Maryland landscape construction branch has been working on green roof installations for several years now, but most recently has been installing one at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville, Md., and one at its own facility to evaluate which green roofs are most cost-effective and highest in quality and performance.

Several of the Georgia branch employees installed a 10,000-gallon cistern to capture rainwater and runoff from roofs and existing irrigation systems for re-use. It cost over \$26,000, which the company expects will pay for itself in just over three years. The facility went from using 2 million gallons of water per year, spending an average of \$9,000 a year on its water bills, to using just 96,000 gallons per year at a cost of \$500. Over the course of the next seven years, the company is anticipating saving approximately 13 million gallons of water and nearly \$47,000.



Several Georgia-based employees installed a 10,000-gallon tank to capture rainwater and runoff from roofs and existing irrigation systems for re-use.

The reclaimed water is being used to irrigate the nursery holding yard and the facility's landscape, and is also being used to help wash fleet vehicles. This green model is one that Ruppert has been able to share with several customers, who are also looking at adapting it.

Recognition rules for employee retention

Ruppert goes to extreme lengths to recognize its employees. This is accomplished through a number of avenues, including developing skills and management training programs; hosting employee appreciation events; communicating with employees through internal newsletters and town hall meetings; and recognizing performance excellence and employee milestones through awards, birthday cards and commemorative medals. In addition, the company keeps a continuous stream of impromptu "thank yous," both written and verbal, for many employee accomplishments.

"For several significant anniversaries, we have arranged weekend trips, helicopter rides, hosted surprise parties and arranged 'This Is Your Career' photo timelines with notes from past and current co-workers, as well as customers," says Davitt.

In addition, every branch holds team-building picnic events in conjunction with a town hall meeting. Special acknowledgements are shown to spouses by including them on business trips, events like the company picnic and awards banquet and in major anniversary celebrations throughout the year. It is also not uncommon for the company to find out where an employee is planning to celebrate a significant wedding anniversary in order to pick up the tab as a surprise.

The company rewards employees who make notable sacrifices on behalf of the company in numerous ways, such as biannual trips to the Caribbean for managers and their spouses, shared ownership, employee awards programs and bonus system for managers at all levels based on profitability.

"Over the past 30 years, we have tried to build a culture of empowerment and accountability in our company," explains Davitt. "Our employee recognition program is one good example. As we grow, we are taking that culture a step further by broadening the ownership base, thus putting key employees in a formal decision-making role and in a position to be directly affected by the results of those decisions through ownership."

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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