



SOUTH FEATURES

# The Key to Building a Successful Business

by Suz Trusty

**Give your clients the services they want**

*Photos Courtesy of Turf Tamer, Inc.*



Multiple add-on services by Turf Tamer, Inc., from rock work to seasonal color, make this a standout site.

The heart of business success is simple and direct: Do what you do best and do lots of it. The reality of growing a company in a highly competitive marketplace is much more complex. “Focus on what you can excel at, be passionate about it, deliver services that show you really care,” says Mark Lay, CLP, CLT. The CEO of AA Tex Lawn Company in Indian Trail, N.C., has followed that directive since starting the company in 1980. Mowing, pruning and mulching formed the business then and became the building blocks for the multifaceted company now serving the Charlotte metro area.

It takes a dedication to customer service that translates to “Passion in Every Project,” according to Lee Buffington, CLP. As founder and president of Turf Tamer, Inc., based in Fort Payne, Ala., the company’s trademark is the driving force behind the business.

He started mowing lawns at 17 with college on the horizon and a medical career as his long-time goal. But, the business was growing, and by the time he'd completed his second year of college, he realized it was his passion. Now, at 32, the company generates \$2 million in sales, and he's fitting classes into his schedule, pursuing an undergraduate degree in business administration en route to an M.B.A.



This site, with water features, plantings and hardscaping shows the service level provided by Turf Tamer, Inc.

Buffington says that performance is the primary marketing resource for a small company. "You define your business by the quality of your work, maintaining high integrity and doing what you say you will do," he says. "In the end, what differentiates your company is the relationship of trust you've built with the client. You'll grow your business with clients you can sell today and 10 years from now because they know that when you sign a contract you'll fulfill it."

### **Analyze the market**

Each of these companies defined their target market by exploring the needs of their potential clients and determining if they had the ability to address those needs. For AA Tex Lawn Company, the target was commercial accounts. Lay says, "What they needed, and what we knew we could provide, were the basic landscape maintenance services that would enhance the appearance of the site."

*Photos Courtesy of Turf Tamer, Inc.*



Lee Buffington, CLP,  
operates Turf Tamer, Inc.

Mark and Jennifer Rumbaugh launched Bella Terra Lawn and Landscape in Frisco, Texas, this spring. It's a much different operation than what they had several years ago in a previous lawn care company based in Lubbock. "That was a college town with many starter and moderate homes," says Jennifer. "Frisco is a more affluent community. We analyzed the potential needs to develop a full package with a much broader range of services. We offer landscape design and installation and turf and ornamental maintenance for both commercial and residential accounts."

They've also focused on gaining the skills needed to provide those services. Jennifer works on company image development and marketing, landscape design and client communications, and Mark applies his on-site horticultural experience from their first company, and has gained his CLP and chemical applicator certification, as well as earned an M.B.A. in finance.

The analytical approach revealed not only potential needs, but also buying patterns. Jennifer says, "We found the upscale residential customer wants to limit the stream of service providers on their property, preferring to contract for multiple services from a single source. We plan to be that source."

*Photo Courtesy of Turf Tamer, Inc.*



From the plant beds to the lawn, Turf Tamer, Inc. pays attention to detail on the properties the company maintains.

*Photo Courtesy of AA Tex Lawn Company.*



Two AA Tex Lawn crew members wrap the post-pruning cleanup on this project.

## Analyze the add-on

“Anytime you take on a service beyond your core business, it needs to be an astute business decision. Nearly anything can look like a wise move when you first consider it; you need to go through all the steps to ensure you have a viable plan. That includes playing devil’s advocate, asking the hard questions to clearly identify the potential problems that could occur,” says Lay.

AA Tex Lawn Company first expanded into turf fertilization and pest control services, needed services for their clients and a good fit with their overall program.

Customer requests for irrigation repair posed a more complex issue. Lay says, “We didn’t have trained personnel on staff to tackle that service, so we set up a subcontracting arrangement with another company. While they did good work, after a couple years we realized we wanted better coordination between all aspects on each site. So, we made the investment in training personnel and acquiring equipment to bring that service in-house. Initially, it didn’t make money for us, but we knew we were doing the right thing for our clients.” The company has since added irrigation installation, as well as repair and maintenance, and made it profitable for the business. They’ve also branched into outdoor lighting installation and maintenance and added power washing.

*Photo Courtesy of Turf Tamer, Inc.*



Two AA Tex Lawn crew members wrap the post-pruning cleanup on this project.

*Photo Courtesy of AA Tex Lawn Company.*



Mark Lay, CLP, CLT, CEO of AA Tex Lawn Company, is pictured at the company headquarters in Indian Trail, N.C.

The marketplace is constantly changing and your company must be adapting to that continually, notes Buffington. To grow, you’ll need to take some calculated risks. He says, “In business, if you can’t make it work on paper, it’s not going to work operationally, and if it’s just barely feasible on paper, it’s not worth pursuing.”

He develops a plan for each new service under consideration with a targeted profit margin to sustain operations based on a standard he’s

*Photo Courtesy of AA Tex Lawn Company.*



A crew member with AA Tex Lawn works on lawn maintenance.

established. “If you expect the service to be viable generating sales of \$100,000 and you can make it work on paper with sales in the \$50,000 to \$60,000 range, it’s worth going after,” he says. “No matter how thorough your analysis, you’ll encounter bumps in the road that you didn’t include in your calculations. That 40 to 50 percent ratio between what you’ve developed as reasonable expectations and what the real-world operations might bring gives you a cushion to withstand the risk.”

Buffington recommends expanding slowly to keep operations under control. Starting their business with mowing was an easy entry into the marketplace. Mulching and small landscape projects were the first additions he

made, which expanded into plant replacement and plant bed renovations. He says, “Next, we added irrigation services and landscape lighting, taking advantage of all the training offered to ensure we had the necessary expertise and equipment to handle it effectively before offering it to our clients.”

These companies agree that adding services is a key component for growth, but the additional services must fit your company purpose, values and standards.

*Suz Trusty is a partner in Trusty & Associates, a communications and market research firm in Council Bluffs, Iowa. She has been involved in the green industry for over 40 years.*

[Print article](#)