



## Features - Leadership Lessons

### Pay it forward

6/16/2010

The ROI for do-good projects can't be measured exactly. But these companies know: what goes around comes around.

[Print this Story](#) [Share](#) [Save to MyLL](#)

The giving started nearly 12 years ago with a sincere desire to beautify the superintendent's office in Fort Payne, Ala. "We wanted the property to have a nice appearance for visitors who came to town," says Lee Buffington, president of Turf Tamer and former board member of the city's chamber of commerce.

Buffington is a civic champion who keeps close ties with city leaders. He applies his green industry expertise to local projects he's passionate about – and that's anything that will paint the town pretty for residents, tourists and businesses considering relocating there.

So after a series of donation projects like the superintendent's site, Buffington founded Project GreenShape in 2007 as a community outreach effort. Turf Tamer volunteers time and materials to one local project each year, and the company accepts applications from organizations that want a chance at the pro bono services.

"We wanted to put a program out there that will be a legacy we can continue on, and something different from what other companies do," says Buffington, noting the name GreenShape stems from the green industry and Turf Tamer's ability to shape change in the community.

Before the program's inception, Turf Tamer had already donated projects to the local airport, a city walking park and a child development center. And since launching GreenShape two years ago, the firm took on a creek/river cleanup project in the city's walking park, and last year installed a \$30,000 landscape at the tourism and economic development center.

Now, most materials are donated by vendors and Turf Tamer eats the rest of the costs, including manpower for the two days employee volunteers work for GreenShape projects. The payoff, Buffington says, comes in soft stuff that is not easily measured but more valuable than receiving a check: camaraderie, pride and a reputation for giving back.

On a grander scale, this concept that "doing good" is good for business has been highlighted most recently in national corporations' efforts to achieve a triple bottom line (TBL) that includes people, planet and profit. This business theory underscores the importance of being community stewards (fulfilling the "people" part of the bottom line).

On an industry level, PLANET last year began influencing landscape firms to volunteer in their communities with an annual Day of Service tied in with Earth Day weekend. Shayne Newman, president, YardApes, New Milford, Conn., has participated in both annual Days of Service.

"We're all on site together, having a real good time," Newman says, remarking that he didn't expect the "community" aspect of the project to evolve into bonding time for his crews, who treat the day as a team-building outing. Newman couldn't be more pleased, and 90 percent of his staff chose to volunteer on PLANET's Day of Service this year.

The payoff for YardApes? Newman doesn't focus on this matter. "If you look at it as an investment you take away from what you're trying to do," he says.

The PR YardApes received by making front-page news in the local paper last year was a bonus – but not one that motivates Newman to participate in charity events. When asked, "What's your return on investment?" for donating his



services, Newman doesn't want to crunch numbers. "You're trying to do a good thing," he says. "I believe in good karma. If you do something good for someone it will come back to you whether it's months or years down the road."

### **The Power of Participation**

People notice when a business is doing good. Blatant marketing often is not necessary to build a positive image when an owner and employees are engaged in the community. This is what Joe Chiellini, president of Ameriscape in Tampa, Fla., has found when he volunteers with Habitat for Humanity sites alongside other members of his region's Bay Area Apartment Association.

"When you're out there swinging a hammer, painting or cleaning up, people see that and I think they appreciate doing business with you," Chiellini says. "We're on neutral ground, and I'm not in their offices trying to sell services."

Chiellini's company services 60 apartment complexes in his area, and all of his clients have become good friends. By supporting clients' events – such as Habitat for Humanity work days and other fundraisers through the association – Chiellini sends a message that his company cares about their causes.

"When they see their vendors supporting events, they think, 'That's who we want to do business with,'" he adds. Meanwhile, Chiellini packs his schedule with volunteer efforts, some sponsored through the fire department where he works 24-hour shifts (in between 48-hour-plus shifts spent managing his \$3 million landscape firm.) It's through his fire department comrades that Chiellini began hosting charity wrestling tournaments – and eventually participating in them as "Big Joe Bucks."

Clients and others in the community purchase tickets to the wrestling events for \$10 each. All proceeds go toward a charity. Chiellini shows off some dramatic smack-down moves in center ring, and his clients who attend get a kick out of the spoof (and really get some laughs when he's down for the count). They know Chiellini is a fun-loving guy, and they appreciate his enthusiasm and anything-for-the-cause attitude.

Does Big Joe Bucks draw attention to his business while on the mat? Sure. "I have close relationships with my clients, so when they buy the tickets it's like they're coming to see a friend," he says.

Meanwhile, Chiellini leads by example at Ameriscape and instills a do-good mentality in his 48 employees. "Our guys know they need to go the extra mile," he says. "If they see a lady struggling to put groceries in her car and they're wearing an Ameriscape shirt, they know to go help."

Chiellini also gives managers free rein to attend community events during the workday. "What I enjoy most in my company is building relationships with my clients and charity fundraising," he says. "When I can get out of bed and do that, I feel like one of the luckiest guys in the world."

### **Fulfilling a Need**

There is no shortage of good causes out there, and now more than ever organizations with tight budgets and dwindling donations are looking for help. How does a landscape firm choose where to give its time?

Newman gives as much and as close to home as he can, talking to his local parks and recreation department to learn the community's needs, and gets feedback from employees for options.

For instance, this year for PLANET's Day of Service YardApes sent crews to a local playground that needed 50 yards of topsoil, turfseed and a handicap-accessible walkway. "This playground was a hot topic in town," Newman says. "It was an area of interest for the community, and it's critical for me to know that our work is going toward something the community really needs."

Buffington follows a similar method of choosing projects. "We look for projects everyone will benefit from," he says, opting to work on public spaces and not on church or other member-based properties. Sometimes, he learns about a private need and will quietly fulfill that, such as when a local man recovering from injuries after his car was hit in a drunk driving accident could no longer maintain his lawn. Turf Tamer discreetly provided those services.

Chiellini focuses efforts on client interests, which happen to intersect with his own. This summer, seven of his employees will participate in Orlando, Fla.'s Charity Challenge, where a team of five to eight Ameriscape employees will participate in canoe races, tug-of-war and other activities for a cause.

Chiellini's team enjoys the day of team-building, and Ameriscape gets a marketing bonus. "It's called client relations," Chiellini re-emphasizes. "You're out there trying to build your client relationships and show them you genuinely care about what they're doing."

How do companies make time to participate in such activities?

Buffington times his GreenShape projects in June or July, after the initial spring rush has ended. And Chiellini depends on his managers to keep operations moving when he's fundraising or participating in charitable events.

"I surround myself with a good team that allows me the time to get out there," Chiellini says. "I have six managers that handle things when I'm not around, and they also understand the importance of me being out in the community."

#### Plan a day of service

PLANET's Day of Service in April drew more than 3,000 participants in 38 states and Canada who completed 200 projects in their communities. Inspired by the goodwill? You don't have to wait until next year to give back. Why not launch your own day of service?

**Huddle with crews.** Before you plan a day of service, ask employees to commit to volunteering their time. "We felt that if we didn't have commitment from the inside, how could we ask anyone from the outside to partner with us?" says Lee Buffington, president, Turf Tamer, Fort Payne, Ala.

**Save the date.** Mark your day of service on the calendar. Otherwise, tasks will bombard your schedule and squash your plans to do good. "If you don't put a date on the calendar to go out and do the right thing, it's just not going to get done," Buffington says.

**Choose your cause.** Decide what community service will make the greatest impact. Shayne Newman, president, YardApes, New Milford, Conn., talks to his local parks and recreation manager to learn the community's needs. He chooses to take on hometown projects. "We do our planning in winter and we'll ask employees if they have ideas and get feedback," he adds.

**Approach vendors.** Buffington talks to his vendors and gives them an opportunity to get involved by donating materials. Some provide reduced prices or give Buffington an overstock. "They really step up to the plate and donate almost everything that goes on these projects," he says.

**Execute the plan.** A day of service doubles as a team-building event for crews. Make it fun. Newman provides breakfast and lunch, and the whole team gathers at the end of the day for refreshments. That's when he learns just how valuable their time spent volunteering in the field is.

**Share your success.** Draft a press release to send to local media outlets, post an announcement on the company website and let clients know that your team will be spending a day volunteering. Even casual conversations about the do-good projects your company does can reap rewards in the client loyalty department.

[Click here to download PLANET's Day of Service Guide.](#)

*The author is a frequent contributor to Lawn & Landscape magazine.*