

Chesapeake Conservation Landscaping Council's
3rd **Turning a New Leaf** Conference
Friday, December 4, 2009
George Washington University, Washington, DC

TRACK B: SELLING GREEN: BUSINESS MODELS, PLANNING AND MARKETING

Session B1. Panel. *Business Models*

Luke Jessup, Father Nature Restorative Landscaping, Wheaton, MD

Jeff Potter, J&G Landscape Design; President, Landscaping Contractors Association

Carla Thomas, Nature by Design, Alexandria, Virginia

Overview: Several companies discuss how their business models meet growing demand for green services.

Presenter: Luke Jessup, Father Nature Restorative Landscaping

Luke started his small restorative landscaping company two years ago to offer conservation landscaping services to create “healing natural spaces, for all walks of life, one yard at a time.” When Luke launched the business, he had limited business skills, no tools or truck, and limited time. He started small and focused on three things: 1) incorporating his values; 2) educating himself; 3) educating others. As his business grew, he formed alliances with others in the eco-business to share tools, info & employees. He developed a limited staff, each with specific skills and responsibilities (i.e. plant specialist, design specialist, “tough guy,” business end (payroll, taxes, etc.)). Luke’s diverse background heavily influenced his business model: art-loving family, landscaping “grunt work,” preschool work, and particularly wilderness survival. His services reflect this background: stonework, habitat restoration, edible plants & gardens (“Gardens of Eat’n”), natural play areas (“nature forts”), water solutions, etc. The services naturally blended: water solutions are addressed with permeable & sustainable hardscaping (salvaged); meadow habitats increased edible garden production and IPM benefits; etc.

Presenter: Jeff Potter, J&G Landscape Designs; President, Landscaping Contractors Association

J&G Landscaping is a 20-year-old design/build firm that incorporates conservation into its services with attractive, environmentally friendly solutions. Jeff’s business also started small: P/T and “paid for with his check from Safeway.” J&G has implemented several projects at Brookside Gardens (Wheaton, MD), including: reflection terrace to remember 2002 sniper victims; rain garden; permeable paving; etc. J&G also implements a number of projects to address water issues (i.e. rain gardens, permeable paving), varying from small spaces to very large scale.

Presenter: Carla Thomas, Nature by Design native nursery (Alexandria, VA)

Carla & her husband developed the idea for an environmentally-responsible garden center after tiring of visiting nurseries marketing invasive plants and ecologically destructive products with staff who were usually unable to answer questions on native plants or sustainable, ecologically beneficial gardening. Despite having no related professional experience (backgrounds in software & finance), they started a landscaping company with a small nursery, learning landscape design along the way. They focused on native plants to address specific issues: deforestation leading to loss of native species, decrease of predators, the pollinator crisis, the “green” industry’s reliance on chemicals and pesticides, prevalence of invasive exotics, a loss of ecosystem balance. They rely on IPM – they have never sprayed, never had a “stop sale” order. A visiting inspector commented that native nurseries have far less pest problems than conventional nurseries. They decided to focus on education when they were getting questions like: “I planted a beautiful butterfly garden and terrible caterpillars are eating the

leaves –what should I spray?”; “We have too much shade & want grass to grow-do you remove trees?”; “What is the proper way to prune a Bradford pear tree?” They decided to focus on: 1) great signage; 2) edibles (permaculture); 3) five steps to great soil (leaving leaves); 4) explaining successful symbiotic relationships (i.e. seasonal defoliating caterpillars (i.e. forest tent caterpillars) actually performing a beneficial service at height of heat). Their marketing reflects their philosophy: “*Stop! Don’t Kill Your Lawn! Let Us Kill It For You!*” and “*Fungus, Insects, Dead, Rotting Plants? We Sell Them All!*”

Q&A

What training & skills did you find most useful?

- J&G: Learned from those with other skill sets (i.e. designers teaching contractors)
- Nature By Design: In some cases, training & skills can be a liability (i.e. traditional landscaping programs). Need more sustainable landscape design & ecology programs.
- Father Nature: Wilderness survival training provided great skills, understanding & appreciation. Collaborating with others in business extremely helpful

What will push conservation landscaping to the forefront?

- J&G: It is moving forward, it’s just all so new
- Nature By Design: Homeowners associations & garden clubs are a missing link – target them for education
- Father Nature: Community-involved programs like Montgomery County’s Rainscapes program are excellent ways to reach the public, increase marketing of CL services. Tax incentives for native, conservation plantings: invasive plants cost \$20+billion/yr for control

What business skills are necessary for success?

- J&G: Don’t be afraid to charge for your time
- Nature By Design: Do not focus on conventional advertising
- Father Nature: Know your true costs – start with what you need to make and go backward

Tips for finding employees?

- J&G: Look for contractors in your area who share your values, understand big picture
- Nature By Design: Craigslist – affordable; young, progressive thinking people
- Father Nature: Utilize freelancers, part-timers, share with collaborating businesses

[Summary prepared by Julie Dieguez]