

MY BIGGEST MISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY LINDSEY GETZ



John Rennels' biggest business blunder was thinking he was alone in this business. Since reaching out to his peers, he's turned his story of error into one of great success.



COMPANY: A Plus Lawn and Landscape

PRESIDENT: John Rennels

EMPLOYEES: 8

FOUNDED: 2002

HEADQUARTERS: Lawrenceburg, KY

WEB: www.aplusalawnlandscape.com

REVENUE 2 YEARS AGO: \$220,000

REVENUE TODAY: \$500,000

JON RENNELS was a lone wolf. As a result, his company, A Plus Lawn and Landscape, Lawrenceburg, KY, struggled.

Rennels had no strategic sense of direction. He wasn't paying himself. And he had some serious cash flow issues.

"We had no banking relationships to speak of," he says. "We had no idea what banks wanted, part of which was because we couldn't understand our own financials. The extent of our business planning was: find more work."

To make matters worse, Rennels says two years ago it wasn't uncommon for him to top 100 hours a week during peak season.

The problem was simple: "I was not working *on* the business; I was working *in* it," he says.

And it all "got old after a while," he says. He knew something had to change.

It takes two or more ...
Rennels needed advice

beyond those closest to him. "Your friends and family will often tell you what you want to hear instead of giving you good business advice," he says.

Steep competition in his region meant he didn't spend a lot of time talking with other landscape business owners either.

So he joined a peer group — a collection of business owners across the country who get together to discuss ideas and hold each other accountable to their goals.

"The feedback from my peer group is honest — sometimes even brutal and painful — but it's the best business advice you can expect," he says. "And it comes from leaders who know what they're talking about and have been through it themselves."

Today, the company has more focus and revenue has increased. Rennels has also had a significant increase in personal income, and the company has lines of credit that are being properly maintained. He attributes it all to the help of his peer group. "We still have a lot of issues, but finally we have a process on how to identify the major problems and deal with them," he says.

Fears abound

In seeking help from other landscape business owners, Rennels was wor-

ried he would struggle to stand out. He wanted his business to be unique and to do things his own way. He's since learned he can still be his own company, even while taking advice from peers. "We take a good idea and make it work for us," he says.

Joining a peer group was also a significant financial investment for Rennels' small company. A Plus currently has only eight employees and is the smallest company in the peer group, which includes seven businesses.

While he admits he invests thousands each year, Rennels says it's proven worthwhile. This year, the fees were recouped with some help from the peer group on his brochures.

"The peer group edited the copy," he says. "It went through six revisions. The final result had great response. The fertilizer and weed control brochure alone brought in about \$60,000 worth of work. That made the peer group expenses well worth it."

Looking ahead

While Rennels' attempt to do it all on his own was his biggest mistake, he says joining a peer group was his biggest success.

"I consider the peer group my board of advisors," he points out. "Today I would not make a decision without running it by them first."

The author is a freelancer with experience writing for the landscape industry. To share your biggest mistake, contact Nicole Wisniewski at nwisniewski@questex.com.