

# PRO

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## Rural Kentucky Contractor Builds Big Footprint

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*Full-service contractor establishes a large footprint in rural Kentucky through systematic networking.*

When you're based in a rural town of roughly 10,000, growing revenue can take a lot of work. John Rennels has found that out first hand. But a systematic approach to networking has enabled A Plus Lawn & Landscape in Lawrenceburg, KY, to jump-start sales and push the company over the half million-dollar mark this year.

### **Get the Whole Team Involved**

Rennels, like most owners of smaller to mid-size landscape companies, is the lead salesperson. However, all employees are given the opportunity to sell, and also receive sales training.

Each full-timer also helps A Plus stay active in five area chambers of commerce throughout the year. Rennels actually sits on the board for one of them.

Community service projects have been another important component to the A Plus networking strategy. "Our projects have included Green Care for Troops, along with the renovation and maintenance of a local T-ball field," Rennels says.

Sponsorship of several area organizations has been effective at generating word-of-mouth. A Plus sponsors Little League baseball, Youth Soccer, the Optimist Club and the American Legion. "Two of our employees are Youth Soccer coaches," Rennels says.

### **Target Influencers in the Community**

The most effective marketing, Rennels points out, is the company's high-level approach to systematic networking. "Each year we put a list together of influential people in our service footprint," Rennels says. "Our hope is to earn both their personal business and other business they can send our way."

There are two types of influencers:

Type 1 represent important, well-known people who do not have a business A Plus can service. "We solicit their personal business, which typically is very minor and does not have a big financial impact for us," Rennels says. The goal is simply to make these Type 1 influencers happy and get a strong testimonial.

Type 2 influencers represent who Rennels calls "the ideal customer." A Plus still solicits their personal business, but the bigger opportunity stems from the relationship that's soon forged.

"The Type 2 influencers have control over commercial accounts," Rennels explains. "Taking care of their personal property helps us build a relationship with them. Then we have a much better chance of earning their commercial business; we're

no longer just another proposal in a big stack of proposals."

This strategy has worked very well for A Plus Lawn & Landscape, though Rennels is quick to point out that it does take time. It also takes a team effort, no different than the other networking and community projects the company is involved in.

In working with consultant Jeffrey Scott and his Leader's Edge peer group, Rennels has been able to formalize many of the company's procedures for networking and relationship marketing-and that has allowed him to make it a company-wide effort.

"For existing clients, we use a system of unsolicited proposals," Rennels relates. "Our employees are encouraged to identify services on our clients' properties that need to be done. We then send the client a proposal for that service. This has helped us tremendously; in many cases the client didn't even know we offered that specific service. There is nothing that turns my stomach more than seeing a competitor on one of our properties performing a service we offer ourselves."

A Plus staff also keep in touch with property managers who went with another contractor altogether. "We have picked up several big clients by staying in contact with them-and by being prepared for when that other contractor makes a big mistake," Rennels says.

### **Grooming New Hires as Leaders**

A Plus Lawn & Landscape still makes a few mistakes itself; Rennels and his team are only human, after all. But they continue on a relentless quest for improvement, and the mistakes come a lot fewer and farther between these days.

"Joining the Leader's Edge peer group has reinforced my thinking on delegation," Rennels says. "We are still a relatively small company, but I have taken the attitude that each new hire needs to be more than a laborer. Our new hires are groomed as leaders of our company. They are encouraged-and expected-to take on responsibilities that, in a larger company, would be handled by a division head or operations manager."

### **Reducing Paperwork, Improving Productivity**

Rennels and his empowered staff are always on the lookout for ways to improve productivity. For example: "We've put a system in place where employees use their PDA's to replace paperwork," Rennels tells. Employees access contracts and work orders, and enter notes and arrival/departure times. A report is then sent directly to Rennels' email, which he uses to create an invoice for billing the customer. The software was designed from the ground up by A Plus' IT person.

"We've also started an email system for our snow and ice management division," Rennels says. "We send email notifications to clients in advance of weather events to let them know what we are doing to prepare. Customers really like that."

### **Implementing Sustainable Solutions**

More and more customers also seem to be liking the various "green" initiatives A Plus Lawn & Landscape is undertaking. "We spend a lot of time teaching our employees maintenance practices that can help reduce the amount of herbicides used for weed control," Rennels says. "We've also begun offering organic fertilizers."

Rain gardens represent another sustainable landscaping component A Plus now offers. And as Rennels sizes up a possible expansion of his company's irrigation services, becoming more familiar with new technologies that can help property owners conserve water is at the top of his to-do list.

So are about a hundred other things. A Plus Lawn & Landscape is growing fast-which is exactly what Rennels had envisioned. "We have a long way to go to reach our goals, and by the time we get there we'll have a whole new set of goals," he says. Out in rural Kentucky, building up a half-million-dollar landscape company in a down economy is one goal worth taking a little time to celebrate.

### **A Plus Lawn & Landscape in Lawrenceburg, KY**

**Owner:** John Rennels

**Year Founded:** 2002

**Business Mix:** 49% maintenance, 19% installation, 26% lawn care, 5% snow, 1% irrigation

**Employees:** 5 year round, 10 peak season

**Maintenance Equipment** includes Scag mowers; Stihl trimmers, blowers and chainsaws; Salsco chipper; Salsco leaf vac

**Lawn Care Equipment** includes one GNC tank sprayer

**Installation Equipment** includes one ASV skid steer

**Snow Equipment** includes two Boss V-plows; two Henderson V-box spreaders; one Magnum ride-on spreader

**Truck Fleet** includes one Isuzu NPR, one Ford F-150, one Ford F-250, one Ford F-350 dump



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