

Smarter Strategic Planning



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Planning. It's essential in most businesses. And depending on the calendar or fiscal year in which you operate, it happens about the same time each year. For magazine publishing, we're always looking ahead at the next calendar year during mid- to late summer of the current year.

And, while an editorial calendar may be in place for the year, planning still takes place throughout the year and during each issue to ensure content is updated and relevant, as well as to address new topics or change current ones if market conditions have changed. I often find if I'm not planning the upcoming issue and even the issue after that (if not the next four issues) while I'm working on the current issue, then I can fall behind. In fact, not only do I fall behind, but I stop thinking innovatively. I lose time to conduct the kind of research I want to pursue. I feel rushed through each issue. This leads to last-minute decisions, which may work in a pinch, but always leaves me wondering how many other better options are available-whether it's finding better art to go with a story or editing the entire issue one more time to ensure there are no mistakes or adding another source to an article-if I only had the time to explore them.

Planning is important for budgeting as well. It helps you prepare to spend money wisely throughout the year or lets you know when you can hire additional staff or purchase a new piece of equipment.

Ultimately, planning makes things better. Yet, planning always comes with a few caveats. First, it can be a long and arduous process, involving a lot of time focusing on the future versus completing a current job. Next, after spending time going through the planning process, many times business owners tend to store their strategic plan on a shelf or in a computer folder referring to it initially and then, as work becomes busier, forgetting about it entirely.

A year later, wiping away the dust from the plan, an owner finds himself

looking at an outdated document wondering what to do next.

Market conditions change continually, so the plan likely needs to be revisited and updated, forcing him or her to start again from square one.

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So the trick to smarter strategic planning is . wait for it . more planning. Ironic, isn't it? Once a business' key players conduct the steps to determine the company's strategic plan, including setting a company vision and mission, conducting SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis to determine the relevant drivers in your marketplace and setting an ultimate goal or goals and associated timeline, the next steps are even more crucial.

These involve carefully listing the strategies that will enable the business to reach its ultimate goal and then listing the action items under each strategy that will lead to its success. While one person can be master of the entire plan, holding others accountable, it's important and helpful to assign a leader to each strategy with their respective teams. Invite these leaders to attend mandatory bimonthly or quarterly strategic planning meetings where they share updates and reveal their strategy status-in the green and on target, in the yellow and at risk, or in the red and in danger of not meeting deadlines. No one wants to be in the red, so this encourages the plan remains a priority. They can even communicate regularly with the master of the entire plan, who can help them update their action items as things change throughout the year (since no plan is ever without its changes and updates as the year progresses).

Getting serious about strategy

Schaffer Consulting business consultants, Ron Ashkenas and Logan Chandler, recently shared their top four tips for smarter strategic planning that can also make a difference for landscape contractors who find themselves stuck in a planning loop.

1. Insist on experiments to test assumptions you've made. "Strategic plans involve hypotheses that certain outcomes (increased revenue, improved margins, higher ROI) will result from a given set of initiatives," Ashkenas and ChanChandler explain. But these assumptions are often supported by educated guesses, which make business owners feel uncomfortable committing resources to something unproven versus staying with business practices they know. Conducting short-term experiments throughout the process can help alleviate these fears and keep the planning moving forward.

2. Ban fuzzy language. Strategic plans are notorious for including empty phrases. Instead, use direct phrases that are hard to misunderstand. "Leverage" and "synergy" are some of the words you can ban. Check out [this link for a list](#) of the most overused terms in strategic planning.

3. Do not be tied to a template. While templates are common in strategic planning, Ashkenas and Channdler recommend adjusting templates to meet the company's needs.

4. Ask tough questions. Strategic planning should foster intense discussions; these produce the best ideas and results. To ensure action items don't become stuck, ask tough questions throughout the process. Some ideas from Ashkenas and Chandler: "What are the top two or three things that must go right for this strategy to work?" "If we pursue this strategy, what are we deciding not to do?" "What specific capabilities will we need to develop in order for this plan to succeed?"

Make your next strategic planning session more than just a business initiative that ends up gathering dust or taking up hard drive space. Get smart about planning. And if you need help, don't be afraid to reach out to a business adviser or fellow landscape contractor you meet at a trade show who has gone through the process and would be willing to share his or her tips and tricks.