Smartphones Can Manage Crews

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A look at how today's smartphones can increase profitability for your crews.


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In today's customer-centric and data-driven culture, not even the humble business of landscape maintenance and design is immune to the new normal. Gone are the days where priorities could merely center upon keeping operational expenses low and increasing efficiencies to the benefit of cost savings.

Today, the customer comes first, and it is all about having the right team in place at the job as quickly as possible—not to mention doing the job perfectly every time. This change is driven not only by concerns that customers can quickly turn to a competitor at the slightest dissatisfaction, but they can also easily and quickly share a negative experience over the milieu of social media now dominating our culture. Considering the constant battle to do as much as humanly possible with often limited resources, these two business realities often find themselves at odds.

As a result of these changes, it is not surprising that landscape companies of every size are now looking at the investment in mobile devices as a way to redress these dueling priories. They understand the advantages that technology adoption can bring: better crew deployment and productivity, improved customer support and faster response to unexpected events, such as delays or urgent service needs coming from weather-related happenings.

Start with the basics

Managing employees in the field and accurately tracking their hours for

billing purposes is a key challenge that landscape companies face daily and, not surprisingly, one that smartphones can help to simplify. For example, Lawn Ranger, a full-service landscape design, installation and maintenance company based in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, recently took on a new digital tool called StreetSmart for its 60 to 100 crews, and it's paying big dividends for the company.

This app focuses on the needs of small and mid-sized clients. It turns any mobile device into an assistive data collection tool, which is vital to increasing crew productivity. "It has saved us a lot of time and paperwork, and got us the accuracy that customers demand," says Lawn Ranger Vice President Todd Dilley. "We use it to run all of our crews in both summer and winter."


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Smartphones can help simplify employee hour tracking for more accurate billing. PHOTO: INCLUDE SOFTWARE

Dilley says every crewmember now carries an iPhone with the application loaded onto it. Each morning, the office IT system automatically populates crewmembers' phones with a list of every job for the day, and also establishes the day's job order and driving routes to eliminate as much drive time as possible. It can even self-adjust based on current traffic conditions. Then, when a crew arrives to a job, all workers "punch in" and get to work.

When the job is complete, the phone prompts them to answer a few questions about the job, such as, "How long was the grass today? How deep was the snow? What equipment did you use today? What was the job outcome? Did the customer have any concerns? Is there any follow up required?" Finally, the crew closes out the job, heads to the truck and moves on to its next assignment.

Tangible and intangible benefits

Smartphone applications provide a number of tangible and intangible benefits to the company. For example, during a snow event, a crew might have to be sent back to a site two or three times in succession. Management is able to make real-time decisions based on how long the storm lasts and instantly informs the crews if and where they have to go next.

Since the application includes GPS tracking, it is rare for customer disputes to become a lingering issue. "Now we can capture and track electronically the exact hours our team spent at every jobsite instantly," Dilley says. "We can tell the minute a crew arrived to a job, the minute it left and what they did while they were there. There is no longer a question of whether and when we were there or how many man-hours it took to complete an assignment. We can show clients the GPS coordinates of exactly when we were there and for how long."

Moreover, all the data from every job flows directly into the company's IT

system, which is a vital aspect of smartphone-based crew management that companies tend to overlook. It populates spreadsheets for billing, job status reporting and more accurate job proposal metrics going forward. “We can look at a spreadsheet and see if any given job is done, not done or active,” Dilley explains. “We can also determine instantly if the job ended up needing over-service, so that our proposal process going forward is based on actual, and current, job data.”

Best of all, Lawn Ranger has drastically reduced turnaround time for getting invoices out to customers. Under its former system, every employee had to complete a paper worksheet for every single site visited during the course of a day. In a snowstorm, that could balloon to more than 45 sites in a single, 20-hour shift. This led to crews logging inaccurate numbers or forgetting to fill out paperwork and then having to guesstimate their arrival and departure times after the fact.

“We’d have stacks and stacks of paper,” Dilley points out. “Five or six people would work for two weeks before we’d be able to bill our clients. And if the customer had a complaint, all we could really say was that we logged it on a piece of paper, but there was no real proof beyond our good word.”

Lawn Ranger has been using StreetSmart for nearly three years; Dilley estimates it took the company two weeks to implement the system, then two months to perfect it. The payback, he says, has been immeasurable.

Click image to enlarge.

GPS tracking makes it simple to capture and track electronically and instantly the exact hours crews spend at every jobsite. PHOTO: CLICKSOFTWARE

Get predictive

The concept of using past data to “predict” what the future will entail with greater certainly is becoming a key enabler for service-based organizations to take their service to the next level, deliver a superior customer experience and remain competitive. According to Mike Gualtieri, principal analyst for technology firm Forrester Research, “significant competitive advantage can be gained by firms that use [predictive analytics] to improve operational efficiency and to provide a better customer experience.”

How do predictive tools work in a service organization?

Company owners can predict what next week’s (or next month’s) schedule will look like, and this helps them get ahead of any potential gaps in capacity.

Schedulers and dispatchers can use predictions to do things like account for fluctuation in traffic during the day and predict task duration based on measured individual worker efficiency.

Field crews’ smartphones can detect context, analyze the situation, and either make a recommendation or take action on behalf of the crew, like

prompting the supervisor to call and notify a customer when they are 15 minutes away from arriving to the job. Small gestures like this can mean everything to a customer in terms of keeping or dropping your service.

By integrating to back-office information and automating workflows through mobile apps, smartphones and cloud-based applications create new opportunities for even small service companies to turn data into a strategic, value-creating capability.

Click image to enlarge.

Regardless of number of employees, using smart mobile technology can reduce your cost of doing business. PHOTO: CLICKSOFTWARE

How does “predictive” play out for landscapers?

As a crew supervisor begins his or her week, the app might compare the jobs scheduled for that day (and the next few days) to the equipment that’s available on his truck and his crew size. If he needs the stump-grinder that week for example, or might need extra hands based on the scheduled workflow, the app automatically alerts him to the missing pieces before the day, or week, even starts.

The app also knows that specific job types require specific pieces of equipment. When a crew arrives on a job site, the app will inform workers which gear to remove from the truck and which equipment to leave on their truck. Here, you can see the time-saving mechanism at work, and it’s all based on predictive and prescriptive features that are built into the application.

Going beyond the smartphone

Smartphones are not the be-all, end-all new tech for business efficiency. Not by a long shot. Even as you read this article, wearable technology is sweeping into the lives of consumers, and it will not be long before business-focused wearables come to deliver remote workers with seamless and (largely) hands-free access to real-time information systems.

The situation continues to evolve, but now is the time for executives to take notice and plan for the future. Take for example smart glasses, which could bring additional efficiency and higher-margin service capabilities to the landscape professional. Imagine being able to survey a customer’s plot instantly and electronically while on site to determine the most efficient mowing pattern. Or being able to virtually overlay proposed plantings or landscape design onto a customer’s lot, then handing the prospect the pair of smart glasses and letting them see your vision as it would look in their yard, right then and there. The potential for both productivity and new services is boundless.

Yes, workers today still must physically hold a mobile device to achieve most of the benefits listed above. But as smart glasses, cameras and sensors

become the new normal for connecting to job information, the industry may be poised for even greater leaps forward.

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