Top Technology Trends

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Blueprints, mechanical time clocks, two-way radios and messy stacks of paper reports — these are just some of the exhibits one may find in the Green Industry History Museum if we constructed one. While it's fun to reflect in jest, the technological landscape has changed rapidly over the past couple decades, and the alarming rate of technologies being swapped for newer counterparts seems to increase as time presses on. To run a successful company in the lawn and landscape industry requires being able to change over and over again. Legislation, technological advances, consumer behaviors and culture itself are shifting, progressing and refining every day. We must not only be OK with change, we must be excited about it. Our businesses depend on it. These shifts and developments are often met with new technological solutions to meet the demands. What worked just a year or two ago may be becoming obsolete, and it's important to keep tabs on what leaders in our industry are finding to be the top technology trends to follow.

New trends

While individual technological advances may lead to an exhaustive list, industry experts and savvy company owners are seeing these main trends being adopted and used widely.

1. Virtual and interactive landscape design software.

The majority of landscape companies utilize some sort of drafting program to create scale landscape plans via a computer. While the blueprints of just 10 to 15 years ago have been traded in for newer technology producing full-color renderings and 3-D sketches, that common method is now becoming a passing trend.

Noah Nehlich, founder of **Structure Studios**, a professional pool and landscape design software solution, is excited about not what just the past two years

have brought to the design world, he's also enthusiastically embracing the very near future. His clients are not only using 3-D video for presentations, they're moving to virtual reality (VR).

"Not only can the designer sell more with VR, customers are demanding it." With VR sets becoming mainstream for recreational purposes, pioneers in the landscape industry are getting their prospects to strap on a headset and take a peek at their new outdoor space.

But Nehlich says an even more exciting future is not as far away as we may think. Virtual reality has led to rapid development to augmented reality (AR). "In the next 9-12 months, expect to see AR." Using augmented reality takes elements from the real world and puts them directly into a phone or tablet. Looking through a device, a prospect will be able to turn and move about outdoors, virtually seeing a design in their own space as it existed in real life. "Today they are just novelty items, but by end of next year (2018) they will be incredibly useful."

2. Automated marketing and sales software.

"I feel that we are ahead of our time compared to most of our competitors," states Claude Kershner IV, president of **Reef Tropical Pool & Landscape in Key Largo**, Florida. The company offers not only a cutting-edge portfolio of high-end design projects but uses the latest technology to automate much of their sales and marketing processes.

"Customers want information now. They don't want to wait or meet, they want descriptions, pictures, graphics, and have user-friendly proposals to sign and send back." The increasing speed of buyer behaviors has led Reef Tropical to utilize an inbound marketing approach that uses their website to deliver a robust array of useful content to prospects and integrates with their CRM to continue to nurture lukewarm leads into closed deals. Kershner says that it allows his sales team to "step back and have opportunities to come to when the prospect is ready."

Smart marketing and sales automation tools such as these help green industry companies prioritize their efforts and close a greater percentage of jobs.

3. Interconnected landscape business software.

Green industry companies who remain competitive in their markets, maximize the most profit, and minimize the most internal headaches are relying on software to help them run the many processes of their business from sales to operations to billing to financial reporting.

Crew leaders and technicians who use devices to video call their teams and access vital information in their companies' databases are the present reality. They're part of the present reality. Buddy DeLong, vice president of **Bluegrass Landscaping & Maintenance** in Bridgeton, Missouri, is continually

finding new ways for technology to improve his business.

From mobile technology that instantly imports data into a united landscape business software program, DeLong keeps tabs on what is valuable to his business. "At the end of the year, you're able to see how many hours were spent on each job, which ones weren't estimated high enough, and which ones made us money."

"We used to never know how much we used in materials and now finally we have exact figures on how much we used. Thanks to technology we saved a ton of money because we audit estimates and red flag certain quantity issues. Those kinds of errors mean a lot of time and money. The bigger you get, the more things you need to keep track of this stuff. Everyone sees the data coming out off the software."

Using technology such as an integrated business software solution allows company owners like DeLong to make educated decisions versus relying on gut instincts.

Researching and adopting new technology

In the admirable pursuit of improving your company, it's important not to hang your profit-generating hats on any one piece of technology. "We find people are buying software in hopes it will solve their process problems. It won't fix it, they need to fix their processes first," warns Ken Thomas from **Envisor Consulting**. Over the past 30 years in the green industry, Thomas has helped grow successful landscaping companies.

Thomas always puts process improvement before technology adoption, but he suggests green industry companies need to keep advancing. "In 10 years, we are going to be in a different world. Our industry needs to evolve because it will limit the size of their business if they don't adopt technology."

Our industry as a whole is categorized by outsiders as late adopters to many technological trends. However, times are changing. Nanette Seven, vice president of **Include Software**, which offers a landscape business software solution, is hopeful because of what she's seen in the past couple years.

"With the millennials entering the workforce, the next generation is very open to new technology," she says, adding that technology is even being easily adopted by Spanish-speaking H-2B workers in the industry at a surprising rate.

With so many new technological options, it's important to research solutions extensively as you incorporate tools into your improved processes. "Do your homework and research" Seven adds. "Go online and research software and other technology.

Talk to industry peers, people you respect. Ask them what challenges they faced, and what has worked for them."

When it comes to moving your company onward and upward, facing forward to the future is the key. Use your past experiences, but utilize new technology to

move you past the age of blueprints and two-way radios. It takes some guts, but with the right resources, you can make more money, provide better services and stand out among your competitors. As Seven says, "You have some risk involved in adding technology to your company, but you have to be a forward thinker and take a chance to propel your business."