

# Building a Customer Service Culture



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In his mid-20s, Hank Wilson learned it's easy to get into the landscape business. He also discovered, soon after launching a one-man mowing operation 12 years ago, that it's not particularly difficult to make money at it—some money anyway. That's especially true if the individual is, like Wilson, willing to put in the hours and is conscientious about pleasing customers.

"So I wrote up a business plan with the idea that I could grow it into a commercial landscape business," recalls Wilson of his modest start as a "landscaper."

Farsighted? Premature? Both?

Even Wilson agrees that "both" probably best describes his vision as he embarked on his ambitious goal to own and grow a successful commercial landscape company. But, while he admits it took him longer to build the system-based operation focused intently on customer service that he envisioned in 2003, it remained top of mind.

## **Developing a strong company culture**

Wilson, 37, is owner of [SunScape Landscaping](#), which provides commercial maintenance, enhancements, installations and design/build projects in and around Austin, Texas.

He says he instinctively knew what he needed to do. But it wasn't until he generated the self-discipline (and help in the form of coaching) to do it. Only then has he been taking concrete action to make it happen.

But first he realized he had to make himself "accountable" for building a great company before he could expect the same of his employees and especially his managers.

"Looking back on it, I wish I had created a strong company culture right out

of the gate, even when it was just me and an employee or two,” says Wilson. “We never had a mission statement or developed core values. I think I knew what we were all about, but I never put it on paper. I was just flying by the seat of my pants.”

It’s not that he wasn’t particularly good at flying by the seat of his pants; he was. In fact, by 2014 he and his team, through hard work and providing customer-pleasing service, had pushed SunScape Landscaping beyond the \$2.5 million mark. But he was (and remains) convinced greater opportunities await SunScape Landscaping if he and his managers all get on the same page in terms of making the company run more efficiently and with greater internal transparency.

## **Optimism and coaching in a thriving market**

One big reason for his optimism lies in the economic health of his service market.

The Austin-Red Rock metro area, with its 1.6 million residents, is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing regions in the U.S. Austin, the state capital and home to the University of Texas, is awash with technology, business services, education, government and entertainment. His market is similarly awash with great service companies, including industry leaders such as TruGreen, LandCare (formerly TruGreen Landcare) and BrightView (VallyCrest and Brickman).

How competitive is the Austin market?

“I really don’t know,” says Wilson thoughtfully. “I can’t compare it to any other market. It’s the only market I am familiar with.” That said, he is convinced there’s business aplenty for any system-based landscape company that consistently delivers great customer experiences.

Rather than concern himself with competitors, Wilson, a native Austinite, has been busy getting a better handle on what he and his team can do to improve themselves and their company’s service.

That’s the quest he initiated more than a year ago: to take his company to the next level by building a culture of customer service based on accountability. Just a year later, it’s starting to make a big difference.

“In the end, we’re a service company. We have to provide quality, but that’s not enough,” says Wilson. “We have to provide great service, as well. That’s really what we’re working on—developing a culture of providing great service.”

But to do this, Wilson realized he had to become more involved in the industry, including supporting industry associations and reaching out and making new friends to share and learn with. One big step in that direction was befriending long-time industry consultant Bruce K. Wilson and becoming an active participant in one of Wilson’s peer groups. He and three other landscape companies from across the U.S. and one in Canada meet twice

annually to share best practices and discuss common issues.

Another step he took to was to seek the services of business coach Greg Herring, owner of the [Herring Group](#), which provides analysis, leadership and change for companies in transition.

Wilson said he contacted Herring on the advice of a fellow peer group member. However, little did he know at the time that Herring was a fellow Austinite. In fact, Wilson learned some months after he began working with Herring that the two of them lived in the same Austin neighborhood.

"We developed a rhythm for meeting once a week," explains Wilson. "We establish specific items to go over and discuss. He's really got us on track as far as things such as accountability."

## **All about accountability**

The concept of "accountability" is now one of the cornerstones upon which Wilson and his management team insist upon to take SunScapes Landscaping to the next level. It figured prominently in the working retreat that he and his managers participated in this past fall.

"Had we developed more processes earlier in our company, I am sure we would have been ahead of where we are now," says Wilson reflectively. "Now, everybody in the company has their KPIs (key performance indicators), and they report back to our entire group on their progress regularly.

"Before we instituted these changes, everybody had an idea of what they were supposed to do, but they often didn't have clear directions on how to do it," continues Wilson. "For example, a sales guy knew what he had to do to be successful, but he didn't have a system to track it and make sure he was doing it.

"Now, I believe each person knows what they have to do to be successful. We now have a system for them to manage themselves and hold themselves accountable," he adds.

The benefit to Wilson is that the changes have freed up more of his time to lead, coach, cheerlead, "or whatever you want to call it."

In line with Wilson's growing optimism for a successful 2016, he has implemented a system of incentives for employees that meet or exceed their KPIs.

"I am a firm believer in incentives. I know there are different viewpoints, but I believe incentives encourage employees to meet their goals," he says.

He is also developing a benefits package for key employees, including a 401(k) with a company match and health insurance.

In spite of a subpar 2015, due to not receiving his seasonal guest workers until mid-July rather than March 1 because of political infighting among federal agencies, Wilson says he is looking forward to 2016 being his

company's best year yet.

"My outlook for this year is considerable growth for maintenance, enhancements and installs," says Wilson. "I'm also looking for big-time growth for our team."

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