

Lawn Maintenance Matchmakers



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Ordering online is a trend that's been growing for years, and not just for products. Consumers are increasingly using their computers and smartphones to purchase services online, too.

Transportation, for example, is just a click away, thanks to services like Uber. Third-party shopping is another trend. If you want a hotel room or a flight these days, you're likely to turn to Travelocity or Priceline and let those services find the right matches. Even those individuals looking for soulmates can let Match.com narrow the field for them. And if people are willing to find a future spouse this way, it stands to reason they'd be comfortable shopping for lawn care services with the help of an online service.

Enter [LawnStarter](#), a service that uses a high-tech approach to accomplish a pretty simple mission: make ordering lawn services easier for homeowners, while making the process of finding and managing customers easier for lawn care providers. It does this by bringing the two parties together online.

LawnStarter was created by CEO Steven Corcoran, who operated a lawn care business with a friend when he was going to school. Corcoran later offered to use his business and marketing skills to help that friend get into the business full time. Corcoran got in touch with another friend who had business experience, Ryan Farley, and asked him to help analyze the lawn care industry. "We started looking around and realized there wasn't a lot of infrastructure as far as technology," Farley explains. They also determined that most marketing in the industry was dependent on word-of-mouth. Soon, the pair began to wonder whether there was a larger opportunity to assist lawn care companies nationwide. ❌

In 2013, Corcoran and Farley were joined by Jonas Weigert, and together the three founded LawnStarter in the Washington, D.C. area. The company soon moved to Austin, Texas, a hotbed of tech start-ups. Currently, LawnStarter

services the entire Washington, D.C., metro area (including large chunks of Maryland and Virginia), as well as Orlando and Austin.

"The average lawn care company doesn't have the time to build a full technology backbone," observes Farley. "A lot of companies, even some very good ones, really run on the owner's cell phone and voice mail." It also takes money and tech expertise to get automated systems up and running. He says LawnStarter is designed to let lawn care professionals keep working in the field rather than trying to keep up with the latest in technology or chasing leads.

When LawnStarter enters a new area, the first goal is to build relationships with professional lawn care companies. "We look to partner with companies that have a track record of good service and are looking to expand and grow, but may not have the time to go after additional customers or answer all of their phone calls or make that jump to adding the next crew," says Farley.

There are other related services popping up in the lawn and landscape industry. (In [November 2014](#), *Turf* profiled Plowz & Mowz, which specializes in arranging on-demand snow plowing and lawn mowing services. There's also the Lawn4.me app.) However, Farley says a service called Handy, which specializes in the ordering of home cleaning services, is perhaps most similar to the model LawnStarter is using. "Most other services are more focused on booking, whereas we're focused on providing an ongoing customer experience," he explains. The goal isn't to provide a one-time job, but to keep the customer and contractor working together through LawnStarter.

Each partner lawn care company provides LawnStarter with a list of its services, as well as a copy of its existing routes and a calendar of when they are working in a given area. When a customer comes onto the LawnStarter website requesting one of those provided services in a given area, a computer algorithm matches the customer with a relevant lawn care contractor, who is then given a chance to accept the work. "They will either get a text or a push notification saying that a job is available. They can either claim it or they also have a chance to turn the job down, though that rarely happens," says Farley. "Then we handle all the billing and pay our providers out at the end of the week and centralize all of the customer interactions through our app, email or our call center."

This gives contractors a chance to do their jobs without the time-consuming back-office hassles. "They can keep on working without having to constantly be fielding calls from all these new customers," he explains.

Each landscape contractor that LawnStarter works with is required to carry all necessary insurances and licenses and also pass a background check. "We also check out references and look at any public reviews they might have online," says Farley. Because the goal is not simply to book services but to build an ongoing partnership with these companies and with the customers, the quality of the work done in the field is essential to LawnStarter's own reputation, he emphasizes.

From the customers' standpoint, booking lawn care services is done either

through LawnStarter's website or its mobile app. "They can book there and manage their account there," explains Farley. Customers can also rate the services they receive. "That provides a great feedback loop," he says. "Eighty-eight percent of our ratings right now are 4s and 5s. When we see a lower rating, we know that either a lawn care company isn't a good fit to work with us or maybe the customers' expectations were not realistic and we might not be a good fit for that customer."

Homeowners are provided an upfront price based on lot size and other factors, including imaging of the site. LawnStarter sets the prices based on rates typically charged in that market. "That's not the rate of the guy who's just out there with a truck and doesn't have insurance; it's meant to be the price you would pay for an established, professional service provider," says Farley. By partnering with LawnStarter, the contractor is agreeing to work for an established rate, which is the price charged to the homeowner, minus a fee that goes to LawnStarter. "And they always have the chance to decline a particular job," Farley emphasizes.

LawnStarter has also developed a lawn care business management software that its partner contractors can use to help run their businesses (not just to manage those customers who come through LawnStarter). "And if a company already has software that they use, they can sync that up with our calendar," Farley adds.

Presently, LawnStarter has a waiting list of contractors hoping to take part. Farley says the company has intentionally limited its provider list as it works to develop the right formula for how many contractors to partner with in each of its service areas based on customer demand.

At the same time, LawnStarter is actively marketing its service to customers, and as demand grows, supply will as well. "We market online, but this is still very much an off-line industry," says Farley. Direct-mail marketing during the off-season is one of the company's biggest acquisition channels, "but the key is you can't just spam them with postcards because everyone else is doing that," says Farley. Instead, they have found success with mailing lawn care educational guides to potential customers. "We try to expose them to our brand early on, so when they need lawn care services, they still have our guide sitting on their coffee table," he explains. The company also rents kiosks at the mall and spends time talking with people about what they're looking for in a lawn care provider and forming personal connections.

Just as many lawn care companies don't have the time, money or expertise to take on these sorts of marketing campaigns themselves, many homeowners don't want to spend the time looking through the Yellow Pages or scrolling through search engine results to find a qualified local service provider. LawnStarter is designed to simplify the process for both parties.