

Getting Their Firm Off the Ground



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Partners, two commercial pilots' landscape firm lifts off in the Arizona desert

Stone Age Landscape & Construction

Owners: James Werner and Dean Baker

Founded: 2008

Headquarters: Cave Creek, Ariz.

Markets: Phoenix Valley

Services: Landscape installation and maintenance

Employees: 5

What started as an interim job for James Werner during a temporary layoff has evolved into a profitable landscape business. Stone Age Landscaping & Construction, Cave Creek, Ariz., owned by Werner and Dean Baker, both US Airways pilots, is located in the North Valley of metropolitan Phoenix. Hard-hit with declining property values, foreclosures and a huge drop off in home construction, the area has lost a number of large landscapers, but their company is taking wings.

One of Stone Age's services is landscape installation that includes desert plants, irrigation and pavers. "We do most of whatever the customer needs to upgrade their landscapes," Werner says. In addition, Stone Age offers landscape maintenance with about 70 percent residential customers and 30 percent commercial customers. The company focuses not only on providing resort-quality service to its residential and commercial properties, but also on maintaining the professional standards that enhance the landscaping industry in general.

Living in Southern California, Werner was furloughed from his job as a commercial pilot following 9/11. "I had to go to work, and my neighbor was a

landscaper. He offered me a job," Werner says. He returned to his position as a pilot six months later, but continued working part time in landscaping. "I learned the ropes in landscaping, and did some grading work with my neighbor's Bobcat. I bought my own Bobcat, and he started using me exclusively on his jobs," Werner said. A few years later, Werner relocated to Arizona where he continued to do grading work part time as a subcontractor for area contractors.



This is a fitting image for a company named Stoneage Landscape & Construction.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STONE AGE LANDSCAPE & CONSTRUCTION.

Werner, 45, and Baker, 48, launched Stone Age Landscaping & Construction in 2008 initially considering the business a backup for income. They're now focused on maintaining – and growing – Stone Age. "Our vision for the business has changed," says Werner. "We would like to get to the point where we are less involved in the hands-on work but continue to manage the business." They have a way to go before they get to that point as, counting themselves, the company has just five full-time employees.

Growing the business

While most of Stone Age's work is in the North Valley, the company has worked throughout the Valley. With little new construction during the economic downturn, the company has been growing the maintenance end of its business, which now constitutes about 70 percent of its revenues. It's also been promoting and relatively busy upgrading existing landscapes, as well as offering grading as a subcontractor to other construction and landscape firms.

Werner and Baker both hold contractors' licenses issued by the state of Arizona, and Stone Age is bonded and insured, and is a member of the Arizona Landscape Contractors Association.

"Our quality of service is very important in our keeping our customers," he says. "We have to be sure that all jobs are done the way we would do them. That means we have to drive around where our customers are located to check and be sure that everything is being done the way it's supposed to be.



Airline pilots James Werner, left, and Dean Baker now have their feet solidly on the ground with their landscape firm.

"Our business comes from word-of-mouth referrals. Our clients know that if they call us about any problem with their service, we will call them back within about 24 hours or sooner. We sell the jobs with the expectation that we'll provide resort-quality service for their landscapes," says Werner.

Clients are very cost-conscious, and Werner says it is important to give careful advice to clients contemplating landscape upgrades. "Often, they're pulling out sod for a newer look to their properties," he says. "But they also do it to lower their water costs, so it's important that we advise them

on using plants that require little water in their new desert landscape to help keep their irrigation costs down.” He adds that helping clients understand the ongoing costs of landscape maintenance in terms of the amount of trimming that may be needed with different plants is important.



Brick pavers are used extensively in landscapes.

Irrigation is an essential element in the desert, so Stone Age also installs and upgrades irrigation systems. “We usually install Rain Bird systems with Rain Bird or Hunter heads. Our dealer is John Deere Landscapes on 21st Avenue in North Phoenix,” Werner says. “When we’re doing landscape upgrades, we convert their existing irrigation system. We try to use as much of the system as we can when converting the system to the type of irrigation needed for the new landscape, so it’s less costly to them.”

Pavers have been used extensively in new construction for a number of years and are very popular in the landscape upgrades that Stone Age does. The company uses mostly Phoenix Pavers from Rock N Rollin, Peoria, Ariz., which is also Stone Age’s supplier of rock and a number of other landscape elements.



While much of the landscape maintenance is on desert landscapes, many property owners still like their turfgrass lawns.

“We have one large property where we maintain the sprinkling system to keep a large area of grass green, and we’re on riding mowers when we cut the grass.” Stone Age uses both Land Pride and Walker riding mowers.



Even though Phoenix is in the desert and landscapes typically feature native plants and decorative stones and rocks, some customers still enjoy small lawns.

Challenges to landscapers

“Landscaping is a very competitive business, and competition has increased here in the Valley,” Werner says. “One of our problems here in the Valley is the number of start-up operations that have increased as larger firms have disappeared with the downturned economy. We have some people providing landscape maintenance who are not professionals in the sense of being licensed by the state of Arizona, insured or bonded.” He says that the frequent undercutting of prices for services by people who are operating at minimal costs are hurting the industry.

Rising fuel costs also continue to be a major concern. Werner says that these costs are of particular concern when landscapers are looking to increase their client base. If clients are in far-flung locations, not only is travel time an issue, but the travel costs in higher fuel prices.

Werner says that ALCA membership adds credibility to the company, and he cites additional membership benefits of education, information and networking provided by ALCA. "The Association is putting together new recommended standards that will be helpful to all of us," he says. New standards will be issued in the near future for the most efficient maintenance of desert landscapes in the arid Southwest to help in conserving water.

Looking ahead

While increased development has offered new opportunities to Valley landscapers over past decades, Werner sees new opportunities coming from different types of development. "We think there will be more commercial landscape development opportunities," Werner says. "We've had a lot of foreclosures here, and as those residential sites are re-occupied, new landscape maintenance and upgrade opportunities will increase."

Werner and Baker expect to continue meeting the challenges of competition by offering resort-quality service on their clients' landscapes and personally responding to any issues promptly, while keeping a watchful eye on their costs to maintain an acceptable profit margin.

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