

Image is Everything

ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design looks prestigious, but 'dirty work' pays its bills.

Joe Gonzalez could be the typical New Yorker.

His vocal cords reveal a scruff, Big City accent. He has experience working for a successful fashion company. And when it comes to business, Gonzalez never forgets to wear his accounting glasses.

"I have a financial background," Gon-

zalez admits. "Even today, I wouldn't consider myself a horticultural guy."

But for the past 18 years, that's exactly what this Floridian has been.

As the CEO of Venice-based ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design, Gonzalez built a four-man mowing crew into one of the sunshine state's largest, multi-faceted lawn care companies. With 225 full-time employees, a design center, two satellite offices and a corporate head-

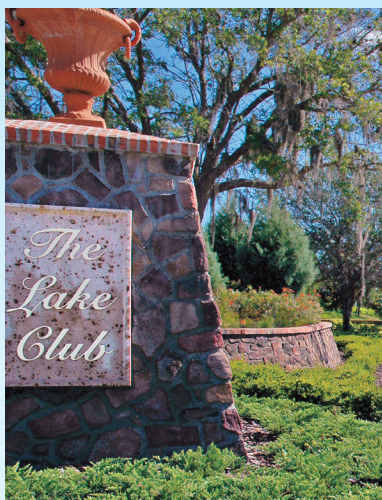
quarters, ArtisTree is positioned to tackle virtually any lawn care requests, including irrigation, pest control and landscape renovation. And although slightly down from 2007, the business' 2008 projected revenue is nearly \$14 million – an astounding figure considering Gonzalez says most customers have trimmed budgets.

"Luckily, our demographic is the baby boomers and retired people who are somewhat insulated from the market downturn," Gonzalez explains. "But regardless of liquidity, everyone is holding onto their money and putting off large renovations or purchases."

For a company that prides itself on offering "vogue" landscaping to Florida's



ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design provides total lawn service to Florida's retired elite.



CEO Joe Gonzalez and president Frank Fistner of Venice, Fla.-based ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance and Design.



retired elite, some might think locked wallets would signal trouble for ArtisTree.

Not so.

While Gonzalez left New York, he took his business and marketing sense with him, creating a glamorous company stabilized by not-so-glamorous work.

COOLING AND CUTTING

Two decades ago, Gonzales knew he wanted to start his second career as an entrepreneur. But that's about all he knew.

"When I landed here, it was somewhat of a slow pace," Gonzalez explains. "I was looking for something to buy that would get me going everyday. There was a moratorium on construction, so I began looking into the air conditioning industry."

Simultaneously, the brokers that introduced Gonzalez to cooling also offered him a small lawn mowing company. Gonzalez says the business was generating about \$20,000 of monthly revenue – all from local housing associations.

"So I bought that, bought the air conditioning business, realized in short order that getting into air conditioning was

a mistake, and started focusing on the landscaping and maintenance side of things," Gonzalez says. "Frank Fistner (one of Gonzalez's original employees and ArtisTree's president) told me this was a worthwhile industry and convinced me to put some dough into it."

Lucky for Gonzalez, Fistner knew what he was talking about.

Gonzalez says there was only one other total lawn maintenance provider in his area, which meant competition was mostly "mom-and-pop" mowing, pruning and chemical companies.

"Immediately, our objective became doing total maintenance, which required getting licenses, irrigation products and chemicals," Gonzalez says.

But coming from the fashion industry, Gonzalez realized his company needed something more than a bevy of services to be successful. It needed a new image.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"ArtisTree" wasn't exactly the company that Gonzalez purchased in 1990. Initially, his lawn maintenance service was called Save-On Enterprises.

"I found the name appalling because that's just not what we were," explains Gonzalez. "But in the beginning it was just a struggle to survive. About six years ago, we were getting bigger and bigger and decided we needed to change the name. Our management team did a brainstorming session and one of the guys came up with ArtisTree. Immediately, it became the only choice for us."

Gonzalez says changing his business' name did wonders for the company. Workers acted different. Attitudes changed. And

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Joe Gonzalez, ArtisTree Landscaping Maintenance & Design CEO

Q & A

What is ArtisTree's biggest challenge today?

The major challenge is the economy. A year ago, I would've said labor. But really it's probably a combination of the two. There's a lot of labor out there now because of the economy, so it's not a critical issue. When construction was in full swing labor was hard to attain here. We are on the H2-B program and that's been a great source of labor in the summer months, but it's a renewed program. We'd love to see some policy solidifying the program.

How do hurricanes affect your business?

ArtisTree is in a unique area where they seem to go around us. We've only had one direct hit (Hurricane Charlie) on a peripheral part of our maintenance range. We were able to deploy and get that community squared away. We did have opportunities to bail and go on the other coast to make some money in a hurry, but we didn't want to do that to our existing customers.

everybody in the company felt uplifted.

"We already had a base of success that represented what the name was, but the name made us solid," Gonzalez says. "We started to attract a different caliber of people. When I look at our clients and the amount of support we have now, it's pretty tremendous."

ArtisTree's customers are mostly southwest Florida homeowner associations located in high-end communities such as Sarasota, Bradenton, Venice and Lakewood Ranch. But while the company's landscape designs garner attention, the majority of ArtisTree's revenue is generated by regular mowing and maintenance work.

"Maintenance is where the value is," Gonzalez explains. "I know what my monthly billings are going to be. But construction is the 'chi-chi' side of the business. People like its creative aspects."

Gonzalez admits that ArtisTree first struggled with its design/build services, but things improved as the company grew financially. Fister says ArtisTree rarely lost accounts during its first 15 years of business, and with construction enhancing profit margins, the company became a leader in landscape maintenance and design.

GETTING THE WORD OUT


Still, being an industry leader means

nothing unless customers are informed. Five years ago, ArtisTree predominantly advertised by word-of-mouth. But after hiring a professional public relations director and outsourcing the production of a first-rate, multi-media Web site, the company is reaping new rewards.

"Marketing is pretty critical to our success," Gonzalez says. "So are our account executives – the people responsible for booking business."

Looking at the challenges of tomorrow, Gonzalez says he won't knuckle down under pressure to change how ArtisTree operates. He recognizes that companies can force themselves into bankruptcy if they begin flexing numbers just to buy business and survive.

So to continue on a healthy financial path, Gonzalez says ArtisTree must do what it does best – manage its money and image, deliver a good product and continue to offer reliable service.

"I've always had the viewpoint that if you get a complaint, you have to answer that complaint as quickly as possible," he explains. "We've always had a 24-hour or same-day procedure in terms of responding to complaints and inquiries. If there's a branch rubbing a client's roof at night and he can't sleep, that branch has to go. There's nothing more important that we can be doing than getting that branch out of there. That's the mentality we infused into our company." 

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