



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Mike Kukol has spent more than 40 years learning and growing Horizon Landscape Co.

BY CHERYL HIGLEY // PHOTOS BY KRYSYTI SABINS PHOTOGRAPHY



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Mike Kukol, founder of Horizon Landscape Co. in Wyckoff, NJ, is a firm believer that continuous learning is the key to success — even if you’ve been in the industry for more than 40 years. Kukol spoke with *Snow Business* at length about what he has learned since starting his business in 1976 and how that has helped him keep his eye on the horizon for future growth for himself and his company.

Don't neglect business education

Kukol graduated from Mercer County Community College in 1975 with a degree in ornamental horticulture. In hindsight, he wishes he'd taken a different path. "I would have gone to school for business and learned about landscaping elsewhere," he says. "Your business is like marriage — it's the most important relationship in your life and no one teaches you anything about it. You end up making mistakes — sometimes big ones."

Like many in the industry, Kukol got his start behind a lawnmower and became well versed in operations. But to grow, he says owners must eventually get out from behind the wheel.

"We're all technicians. It took me having a heart attack in 2007 to make the break," Kukol says. "As owners, we spend too much time working and supervising as opposed to coming inside and learning how to run the business. Some never make that jump."

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A-HA MOMENTS WITH MIKE KUKOL



Mike Kukol has learned a lot over his 40-plus years as owner of Horizon Landscape Co. Here are a few of his transformative growing pains:

- 1 Your business is not YOU:** As a sole proprietor or someone starting in business, you have to take a weekly paycheck. You're an employee like everyone else and your salary is an expense that your business has to pay.
- 2 Get involved:** Do not join an association to get a decal and credentials on your business card. Meet people, learn and share with each other.
- 3 Keep learning:** Take business or finance courses and continue to educate yourself on industry topics.
- 4 Establish boundaries:** Blending a family-run company into a corporate culture is not easy. Those cultures are diametrically opposed. You are responsible for 50 other people and have to balance being a father with being the president. Sometimes, you need to run it as a corporate entity when you really want to be someone's family.
- 5 Track your time and costs:** Separate expenses by department so you can see down to the hour and dollar what each is costing and what each is making. Before we did that, we had no idea which department was making or losing money.
- 6 Organize and delegate:** Make a list of everything you do, check off those that others could be doing and hand them off. Before I did this, my list had literally more than 250 tasks. I have been able to whittle it down to less than 100, freeing up my time to work on the overall vision and strategy for the company.



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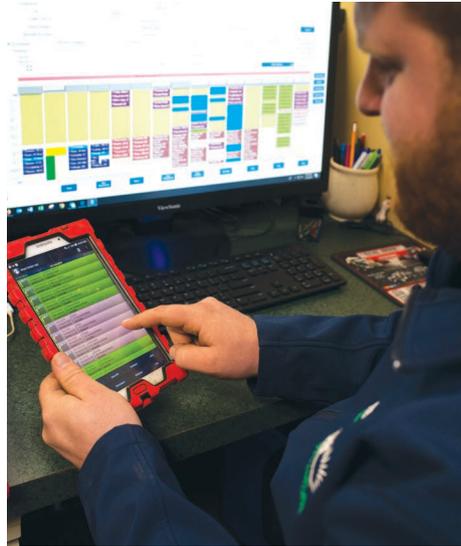
CROWDED MARKET DRIVES HORIZON'S SNOW SERVICE

In Bergen County, NJ, landscaping/snow removal companies are a dime a dozen. With such a crowded and high-expectation market, Horizon Landscape Co. has built long-lasting, quality client relationships ... some of which top more than 20 years.

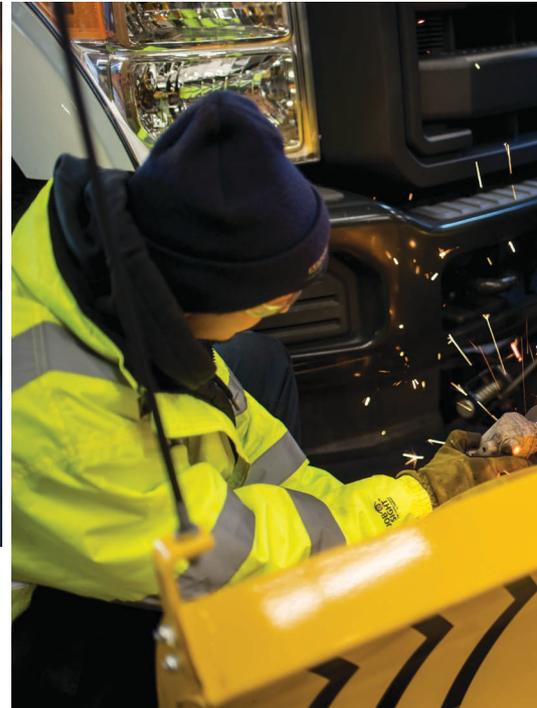
Commercial snow management is a growing component of Horizon's business as it has reduced its residential portfolio. Snow represents about 15 percent to 20 percent of the company's overall revenue.

"Even for our small market, it's amazing how many companies there are — from companies with one to three trucks, to mid-size like us to large companies. There are probably 10 companies with revenues between \$5 million and \$10 million," says Horizon Landscape owner Mike Kukol.

The Horizon team says it sets itself apart by being selective about whom they service, using technology to better track operations



SOFTWARE: As Horizon has switched its focus to more commercial work, it has implemented technology and procedures that make it easier to track equipment, provide quality assurance and communicate with its clients.



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CONSISTENCY: Horizon has standardized its equipment, which streamlines the parts that must be kept on hand and narrows the focus of the mechanics to just a few brands. This allows the company to more quickly address any breakdowns and get the equipment back into the field as soon as possible.

and delivering the unexpected. How have they set themselves apart?

1 Choosing clients wisely. “We prefer to work with clients who own the property and aren’t afraid to spend the money to make sure it’s in good condition,” says Mike’s son Shawn Kukol, who oversees the snow operations. Nearly 100 percent of the company’s clients sign per-push contracts with all other services a la carte. “Our clients want safety, not the bottom-dollar price. They want to pay for what they get,” says Snow Salesman Chris Tanzola.

2 Staying close to home. “We don’t plow far from our headquarters — maybe a 7-mile radius,” says Sales and Marketing Manager Karishma Ramani. “That allows us to provide a high quality of service. In the event of a problem, we can be there in 5 to 10 minutes.”

3 Using technology to stay ahead. Horizon teams rely on software for routing

and service verification. A color-coded system allows them to easily establish and communicate routes to the crews, see what services have been provided, etc.

“All of our vehicles have tablets with route information and the ability to live track where they are so we can communicate our progress to our clients,” says Maintenance Production Supervisor Tim Grosman. Additionally, Horizon has installed dash cameras in supervisor vehicles. “As they go from site to site, we have a recording that shows work that was or wasn’t done,” says Shawn Kukol. “Our goal is to download these from each storm and keep them for legal purposes and to also use them as a training tool.”

4 Communicating with clients. All commercial clients have access to the “snow phone,” which gives them direct access to Shawn or Tim if they have questions or need to report a problem.

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COVER STORY

“Your business is like marriage — it’s the most important relationship in your life and no one teaches you anything about it. You end up making mistakes — sometimes big ones.”

— MIKE KUKOL, HORIZON LANDSCAPE CO.

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Learn from your peers

Kukol also knows the importance of sharing and networking through his participation in state and national associations and peer groups. He attributes peer group participation and business coaches for helping him get over roadblocks he has experienced as his company has grown.

“The business grew steadily, but I felt like I had spent too much time stuck in a rut. When I started working

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BRINE PROGRAM: Horizon Landscape Co.'s in-house brine program is helping the company differentiate itself with its clients, who see it as a cleaner and more environmentally friendly option to ice management.

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EXPANDING LIQUIDS INTO HORIZON'S OPERATIONS

Maintenance Production Supervisor Tim Grosman is spearheading Horizon Landscape Co.'s growing use of liquids in its ice management strategy, from researching how to correctly make and apply them to which equipment to buy.

"He's become our brine specialist. There is a lot of trial and error that goes into the process. It really is a science that you have to understand, get your hands into and figure it out," says Horizon Landscape Co. owner Mike Kukol.

The team started primarily with using liquids as a pretreatment and over the past few years has turned toward learning how to implement them as a pre- and post-treatment on sidewalks and as a post-treatment on commercial parking lots.

"Post-treating is different and requires different nozzles, calibrations and logistics. We believe there is a better way to do post-treatments without putting a ton of salt down and still getting a good result," Grosman says.

SIDEWALK APPLICATIONS:

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with peers and coaches, I started getting the guidance I needed to change the business and start moving again," he says. "Now when we hit a hurdle, we know how to find what's holding us back, fix it and move on."

He encourages companies to get past holding expertise close to the vest

in the name of competition, noting that he has learned a lot from other contractors who have been willing to share information.

"You cannot solve everything on your own," Kukol says. "To quote a local contractor that I respect, 'The more educated my competitor is, the better business will be for both

"I learned to hire people to do those things I'm not good at or to make the business flow better so that I can spend more time on the things that really matter."

— MIKE KUKOL, HORIZON LANDSCAPE. CO.

of us.' You have to be involved and participate in your industry. I've grown to understand that more fully as I age."

Encourage your team to learn

The importance of learning extends to the Horizon team. Kukol requires each of his employees to complete eight hours of continuing education each year. In addition, company meetings feature a learning component, even if it's a quick five-minute video.

"It frustrates me when people say they don't want to waste their time on it," he says. "Learning gives you the tools to overcome challenges you're facing and makes you a source of knowledge for others."

Get out of your own way

Kukol's thirst for learning has given him the realization that as a business owner he can't do it all. As he looked back at the roadblocks Horizon hit during key periods of growth, it was tough to realize that he was often the bottleneck stifling progress.

"It's very difficult see the big picture when you're deeply involved in every aspect of the business. I was trying to do it all and had allowed a noose to grow over everyone. The result was that no one was being effective," Kukol says. "As a small business owner, there is only so much you can do. I learned to hire people to do those things I'm not good at or to make the business flow better so that I can spend more time on the things that really matter. It's a work in progress, so I'll let you know next year whether or not that bottleneck broke wide open!" **SB***

Cheryl Higley is Director of Education and Content for SIMA. Email her at cheryl@sima.org or call 262-236-9972.

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