

Professional landscaping: Tree care firm only hires workers with arborist degrees

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Reporter - *The Business Journal*

Plenty of local companies will cut down a tree and haul it away.

But there's a big difference between a guy with a chain saw and a professional arborist who will care for your trees throughout their lifetimes, said **Ken Ottman**, owner of First Choice Tree Care Inc.

It's a perception battle Ottman has been fighting throughout his career, especially since he bought his own tree care business in 1999. The company, based in Mequon and Junction City, hires only certified arborists with two- or four-year degrees. He pays his employees professional wages with benefits, and he encourages other companies to do the same.

"There are professional tree care people and then there are people who are out of work cutting down trees," he said.

Customers said they can see the difference in the professionalism and knowledge of Ottman and his staff.

"My clients have huge amounts of money invested in their landscape and their trees, and I need someone with the knowledge like Ken to make sure that they're healthy," said **Bob Ackerman**, a salesman for M.J.S. Landscaping Services LLC, Menomonee Falls. MJS often hires First Choice to work on trees for large corporate clients such as [Roundy's Supermarkets Inc.](#) and [Aurora Health Care](#), both of Milwaukee.

Ottman has a doctorate in arboriculture and worked as a forester for the city of Milwaukee for 31 years. In 1999, he and his wife bought First Choice Tree Care in Junction City, near Stevens Point, with a partner, **Mark Pinkalla**. Ottman is the majority owner. The company opened a Mequon office in 2005, and Ottman oversees that office. It offers planting, pruning, removal and fertilization services in addition to insect and disease prevention and treatment.

He has been able to grow the company through his extensive contacts in the industry. Many landscaping companies remember him from his city work, and they pass his name to potential clients. He is a past president of the Wisconsin Arborist Association and the International Society of Arboriculture.

Six years after opening the Milwaukee office, referrals are spreading exponentially, and business in southeast Wisconsin is taking off, he said.



Dave La Haye

Ken Ottman... "There are professional tree care people and then there are people who are out of work cutting down trees."

“We’re starting on the steep end of the (growth) curve,” he said.

Patrick Rollo, Waukesha, knew Ottman when he worked for the city. He hired First Choice to care for his 5 acres of wooded land, including 18 spruce trees he planted 20 years ago.

“Those trees are extremely important to me,” he said. “Ken has been my confidant throughout the entire growing of them.”

Ottman prides himself on hiring some of the best young arborists in the state. To do that, he works with programs at the [University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point](#) and Mid-State Technical College in Wisconsin Rapids — two of the best arboriculture programs in the country, Ottman said — offering internships, field exercises and opportunities to work on short-term projects.

“He not only provides that hands-on training, but he also has the ability to stimulate some of that passion (for forestry),” said **Les Werner**, an urban forestry professor at UW-Stevens Point.

First Choice employs 15 people, and 13 of them are arborists. Ottman held onto his staff even when the company went through a rough patch in 2008. It had just opened a Wausau office and invested in a new computer program when the economy collapsed, leading to a 25 percent reduction in revenue. Instead of laying off staff, Ottman held off on capital expenses such as new equipment. He eventually closed the Wausau office.

The company started recovering in 2009, and by 2010, sales had surpassed 2007 levels. This year, he expects growth of at least 20 percent over 2010. He declined to reveal specific revenue numbers.

Ottman wants to capture even more of the market in southeast Wisconsin. He keeps an eye out for potential acquisitions and would like to expand south and west of Milwaukee.

In recent years he has hired outside firms to handle issues such as marketing and technology so he and his staff can focus on what they do best, he said.

“We’re good arborists, but we’re not good at some of the other stuff,” he said.

LESSONS LEARNED By Ken Ottman

- What is your greatest business challenge? "The business of arboriculture, the care of trees, has no barriers to entry. There are many businesses in the Milwaukee area that have sprung up overnight as people have lost employment in other segments of the economy."
- What's the best way to keep a competitive edge? "Our firm strives to offer our clients a palette of tree care services that represents the leading edge of technical developments in the industry. Our new hires all have appropriate university or technical-school degrees and we maintain a strong focus on education for our staff."
- What is your greatest frustration? "In Wisconsin, we have two of the best schools of forestry/arboriculture in the United States. The graduates of these programs fail to achieve professional recognition by the buying public, and therefore salaries and benefits in the industry are below what they should be."
- What was your smartest move? "In a down economy, we worked diligently on retention. We sought out each client, thanked them for their past business and worked with them to prioritize their tree care plans to reflect both their needs and budgetary constraints. Secondly, rather than downsize, we made a decision to retain our entire staff of skilled arborists."