

GROWERTALKS

Features

8/1/2018

A Leader of a Different Stripe

Allison Westbrook

Full disclosure: My brother, Max, is employed by the company I'm profiling on these pages. I was intrigued when he told me about some of the out-of-the-ordinary ways that owner Andy Fristoe approaches his business. I just had to take a trip down to Lafayette, Indiana, in June to see Zebra Landscape and Hardscape for myself.

Andy and his wife Tracy founded the company in 1999. Andy actually has an advertising and public relations background, but got interested in the business when he worked at a lawn/landscape company while attending Purdue University. After graduation, he started working for the landscaper full time, but the stress and workload caused him to leave.

But a funny thing happened ... former customers kept calling and asking him if he could do work for them. So he put an announcement in the paper that he was starting his own business. He needed a name right away.



A standout in the community

So why "Zebra"? Andy explained that he wanted a memorable name, rather than the often-relied-upon variations of the word "green" or the initials of the owners. It turns out that his other job at the time was refereeing women's basketball and refs are often called "zebras." While traveling out of town to a game, he was turning over ideas and inspiration struck.

Pictured: The trademark black-and-white striped Zebra Landscape trucks.

The name certainly stands out, as does their trademark black and white zebra-striped work trucks. And Zebra has a great reputation in the community—as well as residential properties, they service many commercial properties in the area as well. Driving around Lafayette, you can see their trucks at local businesses and in residential subdivisions.

In addition to full maintenance, they do irrigation services, hardscapes, pavers, water features and carpentry, deck work, screens and mailboxes. For a crew of around 16, the scale and quality of work is amazing. With any project, Andy says their focus is on happy customers and employees.



Trust and communication

I asked about the challenges in running a landscape company as opposed to managing a greenhouse or garden center: He said the main difference is that the crew works away from the main property. In a greenhouse and garden center setting, it's easy for the manager to watch over the daily work of employees at one location. With landscaping, the crew works away from the property and that takes a lot of administration and monitoring. I asked Andy how he manages this and he told me, "Trust, communication and lots of texted photographs!"

Pictured: Andy and Tracy Fristoe, owners of Zebra Landscape and

Hardscape, Inc.

Even though Andy has a steady crew, with lots of long-time employees, he still says that finding potential employees is his greatest challenge. He would love to add to his staff, but finding good, qualified people can be difficult. He needs people available all year round, to do fall and winter work, and that doesn't work for seasonal job seekers.

He also says that the perception of the industry can be that there's nowhere to move up and that the pay is lower than in other industries. This isn't necessarily the case, but perceptions can be slow to change.

And indeed, he describes how it can, at times, be challenging to get his crew the price they're worth. He speaks of fly-by-night landscaping operations, which charge the lowest possible amount, and drive down the price of landscaping services. They don't understand what they need to be charging and that damages the reputation of the industry and deflates the hourly rate, says Andy.

He talks about how other service industries are able to price themselves higher, with less equipment and overhead. He wants people both within and outside of the industry to recognize the value, investment and professionalism he and his crew bring to their jobs every day.

To Andy, the key is treating his crew like people and co-workers versus treating them as just employees.

"We recognize the difficulty of this job, both mentally and physically, and we appreciate them beyond words," he said.

Andy prioritizes keeping the equipment in good condition, so the crew doesn't have to worry about those details and can just focus on getting the job done right.

Another key to retaining his employees is the benefits that Andy offers. There's insurance and days off, but benefits are so much more than just that, he says. It's the little things—like crew dinners, flexibility, paid birthdays off, and most of all, appreciation. He says he greets each employee when they come in. They get "slammed with a smile and a good morning."

And it's obvious that Andy sees his co-workers as family. He gave me a tour of his house on the property, decorated with artwork done by current and former co-workers. He says he likes to find out who they are as people and celebrate their talents, beyond what they do at work.

Above all, Andy wants his company and staff to be recognized for the skill and hard work, both emotional and

physical, that they put into the job. He says, "The projects don't create themselves. It is important for us to be more to the customers than just a mowed lawn." **GT**

