



Double-Down on Design/Build

New Jersey contractor Scott Parker has perfected a simple formula that has allowed his company to continue flourishing in the residential design/build arena.

At a time when many landscape construction contractors abruptly shifted their focus to landscape maintenance, Scott Parker doubled down on his bread and butter: residential design/build. He's made it work, thanks to some standards and systems put in place long before the construction and housing markets collapsed.

Parker grew up in a 65-year-old family business. Parker Gardens, a 14-acre greenhouse and garden center, was started by his grandfather in 1948. Parker's father runs that company today. After hearing many stories about contracting "nightmares" from customers, family and friends, Parker saw an opportunity to start a business of his own. He did just that in 2002 when he founded Parker Homescape in Basking Ridge, NJ.

"I saw a niche in focusing on extraordinary customer service combined with a fantastic product," Parker says. Sounds simple—but it's easier said than done for many contractors. Just ask "Lisa", a Warren, NJ, homeowner who nominated Parker Homescape for the Pros in Excellence Award in 2007. She called Parker after another contractor "installed a horrible landscape and never returned a phone call after the job was complete." Parker Homescape did just the opposite, which is why the company has been able to

build a sizable backlog of design/build work—even in today's economy.

Basic pillars of customer service

In just 10 years, Parker Homescape has evolved from a small design/build firm that advertised heavily to attract new business to a near \$2 million company with a backlog of work garnered strictly through word of mouth. Parker says the transformation has been made possible because his team always "goes the extra mile" to please clients and generate buzz.

"Some of the small things that have significant meaning are returning phone calls the same day, replacing plants that have perished in a timely fashion, and other complementary services," Parker relates. For instance, if a client calls five years later with a concern about a plant or an issue with an insect, Parker Homescape will make a visit to the property—free of charge.

Parker views this type of customer service as a marketing investment, as opposed to a profit drain. It has obviously paid off. Just to make sure, Parker sends clients a questionnaire at the end of every season so they can provide feedback on professionalism, workmanship and presentation. "We welcome feedback on any and all areas," Parker says.

› continued on page 18

COMPANY DATA

PARKER HOMESCAPE

Basking Ridge, NJ
parkerhomescape.com

Founded: 2002

Owner: Scott Parker

Employees: 25-30, 40-55 peak season

Annual Sales: In the \$1.5 to \$2 million range

Service Mix: 95% residential installation, 4% residential maintenance, 1% commercial installation

Products include three Ford F250s, two Ford F350 Dump Trucks, one Caterpillar compact excavator, two Caterpillar skid-steer loaders, one Caterpillar backhoe loader, Techo-Bloc and Belgard hardscape materials

Lead designer Jon Mercer
(left) and company owner
Scott Parker.



Continuous improvement is something Parker and his staff take very seriously. Each member of the management team has earned a bachelor's degree. But the learning doesn't stop there. "We offer continuing education through Rutgers University," Parker points out, adding that it's limited to landscaping- and horticulture-related courses, as opposed to business, for example. "We're looking to further our employees' product and construction knowledge."

Most recently, Parker and his lead designer, Jon Mercer, attained ICPI (Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute) certification. Now they're setting their sights on the current evolution of outdoor lighting. "We're really interested in LED lighting, as it is starting to replace low-voltage lighting as the wave of the future," Parker says.

You have to deliver

Parker Homescape is already certified as an installer of low-voltage Kichler Lighting. The company is also Techo-Pro Qualified by paver manufacturer Techo-Bloc. These types of certifications are important—because the first step to providing outstanding customer service and creating positive buzz about your company is delivering a first-rate product.



Parker Homescape isn't choosy when it comes to the projects it will bid on. "We'll do everything from the \$5,000 job to the \$250,000 job," Scott Parker says.

Parker Homescape delivers a lot of them, including landscape design and installation, hardscapes, water features, drainage solutions, outdoor kitchens and lighting. The company also installs outdoor fireplaces, pool decking and unique driveways, and offers excavation and lawn restoration/installation services, as well as many types of masonry services.

What Parker Homescape doesn't offer in-house is provided by its network of strategic partners. The company has a list of Preferred Contractors it recommends to clients. Parker Homescape then general-contracts an entire project, ensuring a seamless process that makes its busy customers' lives easier.

"Although we still offer turnkey exterior services to our clients, some services, such as tree removal and sprinkler installation, have been dropped in order to maintain excellence in services that add aesthetic value, such as landscape, hardscape, masonry work and landscape lighting," Parker explains.

Relying solely on reputation and word of mouth as his source for new business, Parker takes great care in assembling his list of Preferred Contractors. "We bring them to our office to interview, just as we would a potential employee," Parker says. "We want to see all of the essentials, like insurance and licenses. We ask for at least 10 references, and ask to visit multiple properties to inspect both work-in-progress and finished work. We also pay attention to integrity, appearance, punctuality, and so on."

Among the services offered by

Parker Homescape via its network of Preferred Contractors are basement waterproofing, composite and wood decking, asphalt driveways, putting greens and tennis courts.

Parker Homescape isn't overly picky when it comes to projects, which is one reason the company has continued to flourish in design/build over the past few years. "We'll do everything

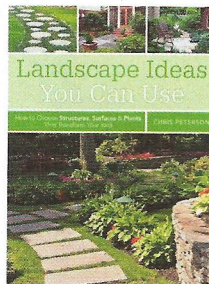
from the \$5,000 job to the \$250,000 job," Parker says. "We don't necessarily target any specific type of homeowner or project. But we are in a pretty affluent area, which has helped."

Parker Homescape hasn't been entirely immune to the effects of the recession. Their average job size did decrease a few years ago. But the ultra-lean company was able to hold the line on profits without sacrificing customer

service quality. They're beginning to reap the rewards today—big time.

"A lot of contractors have shifted their focus to maintenance," Parker says. "We didn't feel the need to do that. We're diverse enough as it is. When design/build slowed down, we still got a lot of calls for drainage, along with calls for existing landscapes and hardscapes which other contractors had installed that were in need of repair."

That's exactly what inspired Scott Parker to start his own landscaping company back in 2002. He saw an opportunity to fill a niche by consistently providing extraordinary customer service combined with a fantastic product. That's what he and his team have remained focused on—in both the best of times and worst of times. It's paying off. ◀



Parker Homescape's award-winning work is now being featured in a new book, "Landscape Ideas You Can Use: How to Choose Structures, Surfaces and Plants to Transform Your Yard."