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→ **Interview**
with
U.S. Lawns
President Ken
Hutcheson

PRODUCTS, TRENDS AND STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

Equipping a Basic TREE CARE CREW

What you
need and
what to
look for
→ **Page 32**

CONTRACTOR BEST PRACTICES

CUSTOM APP drives
client engagement

→ **Page 42**

SPOTLIGHT DEALER

Helping pros with
**PROPANE AND
PRODUCTIVITY**

→ **Page 46**

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By Gregg Wartgow



Pennsylvania Contractor Targets **First-time Homebuyers**

Kirk Brown of Kirk's Lawn Care in Spring City, PA, caters to first-time homebuyers by speaking their language, on their terms. And now there's even an app for that.

First-time homebuyers are a critically important piece of the housing market. They're also important to lawn care contractors who specialize in residential work. First-time homebuyers are often busy, young professionals who are more inclined to hire a lawn service contractor.

This market has been beaten up a bit, though. Consider this:

- The homeownership rate in the U.S. in July was 65%, down from its historic high of 69% in 2005
- The homeownership rate for people under 35 was roughly 37% in July, down from its high of roughly 44% in 2004
- The more dramatic decline in homeownership among this younger crowd is cause for concern among many housing market analysts ... some even refer to this demographic as "the renting generation."

Kirk Brown from Kirk's Lawn Care in Spring City, PA (roughly 30 miles northwest of Philly), doesn't seem to care—for good reason. "I've found that

➤ Kirk Brown caters to a younger crowd of first-time homebuyers in their mid-20s to late-30s. Funny thing is, this "younger" crowd is actually older than their 22-year-old lawn care contractor. Kirk started his business in 2003 at the age of 12.

there's more opportunity to make more money with this type of customer," Brown relates. "About 80% of my customers are in their mid-20s to late-30s. They just bought their first house and are busy working and starting families. They don't have the time to do their own mowing and yard work."

➤ continued

When it comes to lawn care, many of these customers might not even know what they really need to have done. "If I explain to a customer that their lawn could use a core aeration, and also explain the benefits of having it done, they almost always sign up for one," Brown cites as an example.

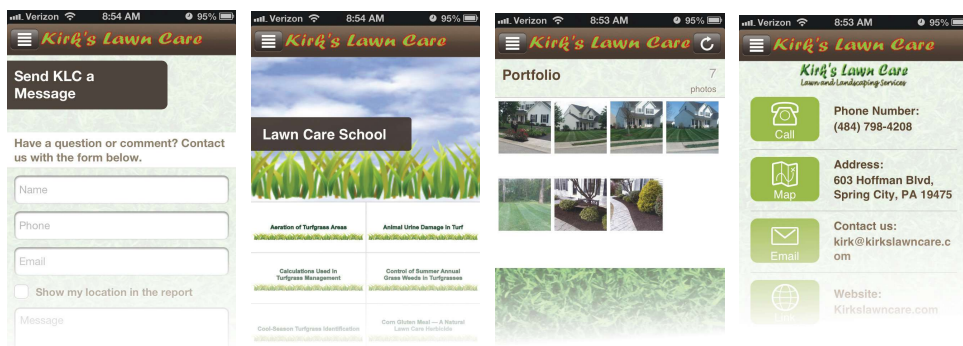
Upselling is central to Brown's business model. Roughly 90% of his customer base is residential. Then, at least 80% of those homeowners have less than a third of an acre to mow. "I'm usually on and off a property in less than 30 minutes," says Brown, who mows with a Hustler Super Z rider with a 60-inch deck. So he also offers aeration services, overseeding, complete lawn renovations, mulching, light planting and snowplowing as a way to grow sales and become more valuable to clients.

"A new service I've gotten into is mulch recoloring," Brown continues. "I found an online vendor. You spray a dye onto the mulch to brighten it up, like right before you have a big party. It's a great service to offer in between the yearly re-mulchings because it gives the customer what they want without them having to spend as much."

Going forward, Brown says he'd like to get more into landscape installation and hardscaping. Next season will be his fifth full time since graduating high school. He's looking to hire his first full-time employee and take his company to the proverbial next level.

Communicating with younger clientele

Client retention is the name of the game in the maintenance business. Fortunately, Brown says he hasn't had any issues here; he rarely loses an account and has gone from 20 customers to 36 in the past two years. Performing quality work is obviously



the first step. But communication is what really separates one contractor from the next.

Brown says he strives to remain accessible to his customers by giving them numerous ways to get in touch with him—*how* they want and *when* they want. That naturally means providing an email address and mobile phone number.

Brown's website also features a "get an estimate" tool which allows customers to fill out a brief form, which includes the services they are interested in, along with basic information about their property. A text message is sent to Brown's mobile phone when a new request is submitted. "A lot of my customers are online at night, so this gives them a way to get in touch with me when it's convenient for them," Brown says. "Many times I can respond to them in a few minutes, which gets things off to a great start."

Brown has also taken steps to ensure that his website (kirkslawncare.com) is mobile-friendly, meaning that it can be easily viewed on a smartphone and tablet, not just a computer screen. He's even created a mobile app for his customers to download, which is available at both the Apple App Store and at Google Play.

"It's not designed for attracting new customers," Brown points out. "It's a service app for my existing clients. It gives them another convenient way to get in touch with me. I also wanted to make the app useful so they'd want to have it on their phones. So the app contains more than 75 landscaping-

Customers can communicate with and learn from Kirk's Lawn Care by downloading a free mobile app.

related documents, which I got from some cooperative extensions like Penn State. The documents are organized by main topics, such as lawn care and insects. Some contractors might be afraid to teach their customers too much. I'm not too worried about it. You can do a simple internet search and find this information anyway. But regardless, time is really the issue with these younger homeowners."

Brown actually built this app himself through mobile.conduit.com. "It's an easy drag-and-drop type of program," he points out. "I had a coupon, but I pay \$19 a month (normally \$29 a month). Then the Apple Store charges around \$100 a year and Google Play charges \$25."

As you can see, there is some cost involved—in both time and money—when developing your own mobile app. There might be more cost down the road for Brown as he looks to evolve his app. "Eventually I'd like my app to integrate with my scheduling software (Jobber) so customers can log in and see when their next service is scheduled, etc.," Brown says. "I'd need to look to a professional app developer for that. Right now I'm doing what my budget will allow. But going forward I'd like to put more money into the app because I think it can become very, very useful." >

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