

Harbinger Partners and Landscape Structures: AHEAD OF THE GAME IN HIGH TECH STRATEGIES

You'll never hear the phrase, "all work and no play," at Landscape Structures, Inc. in Delano. This company and its 425 employees thrive on play.

For the last 30 years, Landscape Structures has designed, manufactured and installed more than 50,000 playgrounds and delighted children locally and around the world. Product lines of playground equipment are created for young children, and most recently, skate park equipment that includes teens.

"We're trying to make a difference in kids developmentally, both socially and physically," says President Barbara King, who with husband Steve founded the company in 1971. "Our mission is to enhance the quality of kids' lives."

Built on innovation

From its inception, Landscape Structures was built on innovation. Steve King, a registered landscape architect, was working for a site planning firm designing playgrounds. He saw a huge need for pre-manufactured playground equipment that would combine quality, affordability and safety with elements that were fun and stimulating for kids. At the Kings' dining room table, the company was born. In the beginning, Barbara retained her job as a home economist for the Pillsbury Company, while Steve started the design and manufacturing operation.

He developed the continuous play concept, now an industry standard. While original equipment was made from wood, the company later developed products using recycled or reclaimed materials.

Landscape Structures grew locally and regionally. In the mid-1970s, they started exhibiting at trade shows and began building a distribution network. As sales

increased, they expanded to national distribution and in the early 1980s went international. Clients are cities, parks and recreation departments and schools.

The challenges of growth

Today, Landscape Structures is enjoying substantial growth with annual sales at \$74 million. But growth also brings challenges. One is the need to stay at the leading edge of technology and use it as a business asset rather than an encumbrance. As Barbara says, "Technology should help us sell more playground equipment and focus as a revenue function, not an expense function."

Fred Caslavka, Chief Financial Officer, adds, "We realized it was time to reevaluate all of our business systems, look at the technology we were using and determine how it would take us where we want to

go. We were at the cusp of needing something and we wanted to tap expertise we don't have at Landscape Structures."

The company looked at four high tech consulting firms and selected Harbinger Partners, Inc. "We were impressed with their business model, a virtual office, Caslavka says. "That model fit our needs because we see the potential for Landscape Structures utilizing the same model in certain situations. We also liked that they pass the low overhead savings on to us."

Integrity and sincerity, too, played a large part in the selection. "We did the standard reference calls and found they were indeed what they said they were."

"They understand our business," adds Mike Mullin, MIS Manager. "It's important that they have knowledge of [the way companies like ours work] and they under-



From Left to Right: Mike Mullin, Tim Everett, Tom Hoverman, Scott Grausnick, Fred Caslavka

stand the capabilities of current technologies. Last and not least, they have knowledge of business practices in an information technology environment for project management, change management, issue resolution, etc.”

Harbinger Partners' solutions

One of the choices clients don't have to make when they select Harbinger Partners is whether to hire a technology consultant or a business person, says founding partner Scott Grausnick. "Our partners are a combination of both. Clients receive the technical expertise balanced by a solid understanding of business."

The business model Caslavka spoke of is a virtual company in which everyone is a partner "who takes pride in delighting the client," Grausnick says. With 42 partners and projected 2001 revenue of \$8 million, Harbinger Partners is succeeding in a market where many are not.

In addition to corporate giants like 3M, Best Buy, US Bank and H.B. Fuller, Harbinger Partners also work with "medium sized companies who are looking to put together a strategy and vision of tying technology to business," says Grausnick. "Landscape Structures is an ideal client in that category."

The solution for Landscape Structures was to move its informa-

tion technology plan from a support function to a strategic business tool, and integrate it with the company's business plan.

The process

Harbinger Partners started with a preliminary look at Landscape Structures' needs and goals. Based on that information, consulting partner Tim Everett, with his background in systems engineering, product and information systems management and strategic planning, became the point person for the next six weeks.

He gathered information, did an in-depth assessment and compiled a draft of recommendations for a working session with executive management. With input from other Harbinger partners, he prepared detailed recommendations, developed a one-year plan to address immediate issues, and a three-year vision of larger issues. At the end of six weeks, the full plan was presented, approved and the implementation began.

Consulting partner Tom Hoverman, whose background includes software development and architecture, business management and an MBA, took over the implementation in May. Three of the initiatives involve software development in design, manufacturing and sales. Another three deal with infrastructure: expanding the

technology skills of the staff, consolidating the technology tools they use and creatively using the company's Web site to support its business strategy. Other consulting partners with specific skills in these areas will be involved over the course of the implementation.

Of the collaboration with Harbinger Partners, Landscape Structures' Caslavka says, "They present options to solve a need at appropriate times, and they are truly presented as options. I don't feel the pressure. They are getting me to look at technology with a broader scope. Both their business and technology expertise is good, but there's a third part. They have the soft skills to make changes, to guide us down those paths without creating undue stress or friction among departments."

Barbara King concludes, "I think our goal for the future is to continue to use technology to help us be on the leading edge, and ultimately, better 'wow' our customers."

For more information on Harbinger Partners, log on to www.harbinger-partners.com. For Landscape Structures, visit www.playlsi.com.

WRITTEN BY BARBARA BRAUN HANSEN

THE PROBLEM:

In its 30-year history, Landscape Structures, Inc. has consistently applied technology to the design, manufacture and sales of playground equipment. As growth accelerated, the company realized it needed to reevaluate its business systems and take advantage of leading edge technology to enhance customer services and internal efficiency.

THE SOLUTION:

Harbinger Partners teamed with Landscape Structures to move its information technology plan from a support function to a strategic business tool, and integrate it with the company's business plan. Harbinger Partners assembled a team to assess current systems, then recommended and is implementing a one-year plan to achieve Landscape Structure's business objectives, and a three-year vision to take them into the future efficiently, independently and easily.

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