

Hitting Projects Out of the Park

How Las Vegas owner made failing business profitable

BY LAUREN HEARTSILL DOWDLE

Greg Struhl
Chip-N-Dale's Custom Landscaping
Las Vegas, Nevada
chip-n-daleslandscaping.com



Greg Struhl's story is as unique as his company's name.

A former college baseball player from California, Struhl found early success in the automotive industry. But, he quickly realized he wanted more from his career.

"No one trusts you in the automotive industry," he says. "Over time, that really wears on you."

So, Struhl completely changed career paths and soon found himself with an opportunity to purchase a small landscape maintenance company in Las Vegas, Nevada.

He came across the struggling Chip-N-Dale's Custom Landscaping – actually started by two guys named Chip and Dale – through his friend, Jason Heep. Struhl and Heep decided to purchase the company in 1994.

Deeper than \$60,000 in debt, the Las Vegas business needed more than a makeover: It required a complete renovation. Struhl and his then-business partner stepped up to the plate.

One of the first issues Struhl had to address was the amount of debt the past owners had accrued. Instead of closing and reopening the company under a new name to get rid of the debt, Struhl made promissory notes to vendors and steadily moved the ledger into the black. "It's wasn't easy," he says. "Every day was a challenge."

A bonus of keeping the company's name was it definitely caught people's attention and helped create name recognition. "We would constantly get asked if the guys wore bowties or if they danced,"

Struhl says. "Every once in a while, we would get a call on the answering machine from someone requesting to book a bachelorette party. The important thing for me was they remembered the name."

In addition to overcoming the debt, Struhl acquired contractor's licenses and learned the landscape business inside and out.

However, his challenges didn't end as he learned the industry.

Battling the recession

Chip-N-Dale's experienced growth during the early 2000s, but like other businesses across the country, it struggled during the housing recession in late 2009.

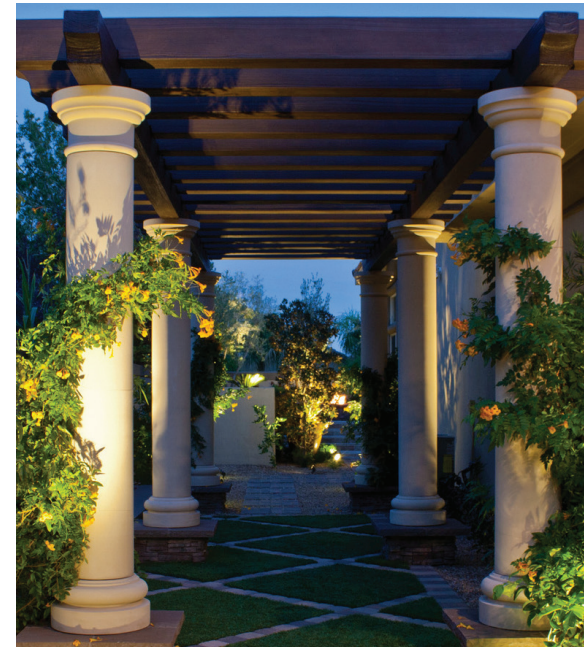
The business experienced a 50-percent loss in revenue, so Struhl did whatever he could to keep the busi-

ness afloat. He scaled back and even took personal financial losses, but he never doubted his purpose or company.

"I kept telling everyone: 'The company isn't broken – the economy is. We need to keep focusing on offering the most unique, creative designs and highest-quality landscapes,'" he recalls.

Aside from the recession, being in Sin City had its own set of issues, including dealing with a lot of transient workers. "We learned we had to retain the right people," Struhl says. "Our employees are the reason we are successful. I have some amazing individuals who I work with on a daily basis, and I owe everything to them."

With his competitive personality and refusal for mediocrity, Struhl transformed Chip-N-Dale's into



the successful business it is today.

Accept only the best

Now with 65 employees and more than \$4.5 million in annual revenue, Chip-N-Dale's focuses on high-end, custom residential projects. They offer design/build, horticultural services, custom masonry, LED lighting, custom barbecues and water features, which have won the company awards like the Best of Houzz and made them one of TLC's Landscaper of the Year Finalists.



"I've only ever wanted to be the best – not the cheapest. I feel you can't offer the best quality, service and design and be the cheapest at the same time," he says. "Quality costs money. More importantly, quality is value, and value saves money in the long run. You always get what you pay for."

Struhl also expects his employees to hold themselves to the same standard and not accept anything less. "They know if a cut is bad on a paver, if a plant dies or if they don't follow the procedures correctly, they'll have to redo it, so they might as well do it right the first time," he says.

Each crew leader is held accountable for his project and has to sign off on a quality-control checklist when a project is complete. "Having checks and balances is important. If it's a \$5,000 or \$250,000 project, the quality has to be the same. All of my clients deserve our very best."

For a worker to be successful at Chip-N-Dale's, they also have to buy into the teamwork system. "We are a team, and we fail as a team and succeed as a team," Struhl says. "We take immense pride in our work and reputation."

Struhl posts project photos around the office to give the crews pride in their work and accomplishments. "It's important to create a pas-

sion in your employees for what they're doing," he says. "As a team, we have created thousands of beautiful landscapes and transformed homes and dreams for families. I want them to know they are the best and take pride in the work they do on a daily basis."

Professional from start to finish

This professionalism extends to every aspect of this business, which means all of his employees wear uniforms and the trucks are wrapped with the company logo.

He provides all of the employees with back braces, gloves and restrooms at the jobsites. There are also three administration assistants at the office on a daily basis who answer the phone so client calls never go to voicemail. "You can't be a professional company if you don't look and act professional," he says.

Struhl and his crews also take care of their jobsites. "How can I tell you I care about your landscape but not care about your street or neighborhood?" he says. "I don't think you can have one without the other."

Not only do they care about their customers' properties, but they also make a point to serve



to work with customers who value quality. "If price is the only factor, that's not my customer," he says. "It's not about being expensive – it's about being great at what we do."

When the company's vice president of design, Franco Volpone, meets with clients about projects, he gives them an eight-page design questionnaire to learn more about their project and what they hope to achieve. Questions include basic design

preferences such as asking if they like squares or circles, do they have allergies, what are their favorite colors and favorite plants.

"The design needs to meet their needs," Struhl says. "Understanding and addressing our clients' needs help make us successful."

After he has all of the information, Volpone presents them with his unique ideas and shows them 3D renderings of their property. He presents them with a range of material and design options, instead of pressuring them on what to buy.

"We focus on educating our clients," Struhl says. "They appreciate that you aren't trying to sell them. It's all about options and creating flexibility."

Another part of going the extra mile with their projects is demanding quality vegetation. "Nurseries know we're very particular," Struhl says. "We recently sent one of our drivers to Phoenix to pick up some specialty plants for a project. These Agave's were very important to our client, so they were important to us."

Complete package

Struhl has created a business that covers everything, from the initial consultation to offering maintenance service for years to come. To achieve this goal, he has surrounded himself with employees who share his passion for the industry.

"I love landscaping and being creative," Struhl says. "I take great pride in Chip-N-Dale's." 



those customers' neighbors. The crews post door hangers that read, "Pardon our dust," during the project and instruct neighbors to call the company if there are any problems.

They also make sure the streets and area stay clean and safe for children. "We try to be proactive in everything we do," he says.

Customers' neighbors get a firsthand look at the before and after of their work, which has helped them gain clients. "If they see we've done a good job and their neighbor is happy, we'd be a logical choice to consult with," he says. "That's all you really want – the opportunity to showcase our skills."

Find the right customers

Over the years, Struhl has learned not every one is meant to be a Chip-N-Dale's customer. They look