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Accreditation, eco cars put Arborguard on cutting edge

Arborguard Tree Specialists, Inc. is on the cutting edge of incorporating “green” practices into its daily operations, including adding a fleet of hybrid gasoline/electric cars for its sales force. So it is only fitting that it topped off its 25th anniversary celebration with another cutting edge business move – achieving TCIA Accreditation.

Spence Rosenfeld, president & CEO, founded the company (Arborguard Inc., dba Arborguard Tree Specialists) fresh out of Duke University in 1981 with a master’s degree in forestry.

“Basically, I had four days of work lined up. I went out and borrowed about \$15,000. I had an old Asplundh truck, a chipper and some old chain saws. I had a couple of guys who were going to go out and do the work. The challenge was to stay ahead of them with sales, so that’s what I did. I sold work for tomorrow, more or less,” recalls Rosenfeld. “I climbed trees in college to make money, then made a conscious decision to move to Atlanta and start a business. I just did it.”

Today, Arborguard has about 50 employees, with a mix that is 60 percent commercial business and 40 percent residential. Located in Avondale Estates, Ga., just outside Atlanta, the company also has branches in Charlotte, N.C., and Augusta, Ga. “We provide general tree care – pruning, tree removal, cabling,



Eco Friendly “Arborcars” at Arborguard.

lightning protection – and we have a separate division for plant health care.”

“We have a fairly well established client base. We have a lot of repeat business, and some clients we’ve been taking care for over 20 years. We also network quite a bit through trade associations, garden clubs, and get a lot of referral business.” A TCIA (then NAA) member since 1983, Rosenfeld was a TCIA board member from 1990-1995.

Arborguard has a full-time director of marketing who keeps the Web site fresh and coordinates targeted mailings. But it is how they approach the customer that sets them apart from their competition, says Rosenfeld.

“It goes back to the culture of the company, where everything we do is oriented around solving problems for the customer,” he says. “When we go out and visit a property or meet

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New Hazard Tree Quick-Check stickers

TCIA’s Hazard Tree Quick-Check stickers have been reprinted and are again available for purchase.

The sticker points out dangers to look for every time you approach a tree, and are great to keep

where they will be of use.



The new ones have been updated, stream-

lined and sized to fit on the visor or your trucks or cars, or to stick right on the dashboard.

They are available in English or Spanish.

The prices are \$2 for members, and \$3 for non-members.



If you feel that a tree is unsafe to climb, check with your crew leader or supervisor.

One free sticker has been included with this issue of Reporter as your member benefit of the month. An order form is also included so that you can order one for every vehicle in your fleet. You can also call (603) 314-5380 or visit our online store at www.tcia.org.

Arboguard

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with a new customer, we don't talk about Arboguard and how great our trucks are and our insurance policy and everything else about us; it's not about us at all. It's all about them. We ask questions. We try to find out what kind of problems they have that we can help solve, and then we provide solutions. It's a little different angle of looking at things, but if you get it, it's very powerful."

"If somebody calls us up and says, 'How much to cut this tree down?' we're not just going to just cough up a price and leave it at that. We might start out asking them some questions. Why do you want to cut the tree down? What's important to you about your property? We try to get some dialog going where we might provide a different solution than the customer thought they were going to end up with."

Rosenfeld's biggest business challenge is similar to that of many in this business – finding and developing good employees.

"It's always been the hardest thing. We are constantly recruiting. We visit colleges. For our salespeople, we have a program where somebody who has ambition to be involved in this industry, in sales, will come on board and work in the field for 18 to 24 months. We have a very specific group of skills they have to learn and be exposed to; they'll work in plant health care, tree care, and they'll ride with our arborists. After they go through that training program – and get certified – then we'll put them in a territory. We found that's the best way to expand our team."

Arboguard was the first company in Georgia to achieve TCIA Accreditation. They pursued Accreditation, says Rosenfeld, because "it was the right thing to do."

"We want to be out in front leading the industry and that's what that program, I think, is all about."

The Arboguard management team completed the requirements in just about two months, without any help from consultants, finding that much of what was required was already in place. "We've spent a lot of time developing programs – our safety program, our employee development program. All new field staff also go through an employee development program.

We've been doing that for years."

"I think the hardest part (of becoming accredited) was creating the determination that we were going to do it. It's easy to put it off and it's easy to say, 'We'll get to that. We'll put it on the list and we'll get to it later.' But once we really made a commitment everybody jumped on board. And it was really kind of fun once we all got into it. We knew that there wasn't anybody else in Georgia and that got our competitive spirit fired up."

"It was a process that helped us tighten up a lot of our policies and procedures, tweaking things, getting a more organized internally," he says. "It separates us from our competitors and we use it in our marketing program. It's a powerful statement to stand up in front of our customers and other people in the industry and say, 'Look, we did this.'" Other industries have had Accreditation and it's made a big difference in the professionalism within those industries. I think it's going to change our performance, too, and get more people on board."

Another thing Arboguard does that is a bit different, according to Rosenfeld, is separate its sales force by market niche.

"I've got four residential arborists who only handle residential clients. Somebody who works with residential clients all the time is exposed to those particular sets of problems and gets to learn how to talk to those people and see things through their world."

"I've got one woman who has been with me 12 years. All she handles is office buildings and office parks, so she's dealing with property managers all day long. She's very comfortable in that environment and she knows how a property manager thinks; she understands their budgets and their view on safety and their view on problems with security lighting and visibility for their tenants. She has a mindset that dials in with those people."

"I have someone who deals with golf courses. He's a scratch golfer. He used to be a superintendent, so he knows their language and how to relate. I've got another who deals with developers for tree preservation on construction sites. He also specializes in ordinances, so he has a totally different way of looking at things. His background is in environmental sciences and wetlands management. He also has a forestry degree."

"I don't know too many businesses who have segmented like that," he notes. "Most companies divide things geographically."

Where does he hope to be five years from now? Obviously, he wants to continue to grow the business in Atlanta and Charlotte and per-

haps open up a couple of other branches in the Southeast. Rosenfeld was in Savannah when we talked for this interview. Could that be the next location?

"I don't know," he admits. "You've got to find the right city. It has been a challenge finding the right marketplace where we'll fit in well. There are a lot of companies in these smaller cities."

Eco-friendly arborcars

Arboguard has made a commitment to several environmental initiatives, the latest of which is the purchase of a fleet of seven "eco arborcars," gasoline/electric hybrids, for the sales staff.

"We don't just want to be a company that preserves trees. We want to do everything we can to create a positive impact on the environment, so I decided to invest in a fleet of cars for all of our salespeople. I wanted hybrid cars that get 60 miles to the gallon. And then this name popped up, "eco-friendly arborcar," which we painted across the back bumper. It's really made quite a statement. We're already out there working with the environment."

The fleet of Toyota Prius hybrid vehicles cost about 20 to 25 percent more than non-hybrid Ford sedans, says Rosenfeld, "but I think it was just the right thing to do, and we're going to save a lot of money on fuel."

Reaction from the public has been great, Rosenfeld says. He says it is good for educating the public and for business.

"Everybody comments on those cars. We probably get two or three calls a day from people who see them driving around town. People see the car (with the phone number on the door) and call with questions. 'Who are you guys? I saw that arborcar – what do you do?' We'll tell them about our business. Next thing you know we're out looking at something at their house."

Other environmental initiatives at Arboguard include recycling all wood products and using organics in their PHC program as much as they can. "And we've gone to a new plant health care rig that has eight tanks so that we can mix things on-site and minimize any kind of waste."

On his Web site, Rosenfeld has a letter explaining his business principles. The environmental initiatives seem to be covered by the last two:

- ▶ Contribute to the welfare of humanity and the community as a whole.
- ▶ Know what I believe in and live by those same principles.

Seems like Georgia's first accredited company is driving in the right direction.



Spence Rosenfeld

