

# Embrace change to grow your business

By Tim Huinker



» Vertical elements, such as an arbor or pergola, draw the eye to a point of visual interest that complements the overall design of the landscape. Photo features the Anchor™ Highland Stone® wall system.

**H**ardscape contractors today have more products to choose from than ever before. Each year new products come out that may be lighter, easier to install, more aesthetically pleasing, more flexible, more eco-friendly or

easier to transport. Some of them are the key to moving your business in new, profitable directions.

About 20 years ago when I was starting out in this business there were railroad ties, landscape timbers and stone for walls, and there were

Holland pavers for patios. Around that time, segmental retaining wall block was introduced and the retaining wall business changed dramatically.

With so many products out now, the decision to give a new product

a try is not as easy as it was 20 years ago. I talk to hundreds of contractors a year in my role as Construction Specialist for Anchor Wall Systems, and one thing I have learned is that I am not the only creature of habit in this industry.

### **Don't get too comfortable**

It's easy to get comfortable with familiar systems and be reluctant to try new things. It takes time to learn about a new product. So, like a lot of people, I've sometimes felt that messing with new products were mostly just going to cost me time and money on the job.

That's a valid consideration – to a point. In the short-term, learning about a new product may cost you time and money. But in the long term, learning about and using new products can set you apart from the crowd. Just think about the first segmental wall installers: If they had the attitude that concrete retaining walls

were too complicated, we could still be installing landscape timbers.

I worked for several landscape contractors early on and was exposed to many different products. I had favorites right away, so when I was put in charge of specifying products, I naturally gravitated to the products I thought were easiest to install.

I learned fairly quickly that sticking to the status quo was costing me jobs. If I went to a client with only a few products, it put me at a disadvantage because my competition was using newer, more innovative and better-looking products.

Realizing it was time to change, I started to pay more attention to new products entering the market and to trends in design. Doing so expanded my personal design abilities, and opened up my business to new clients who were looking for the latest and greatest and weren't afraid to spend money on premium products.

### **Grow your experience and your projects**

In today's economy, you need as many advantages as you can get over your competition. Offering more ideas and products and confidently installing them can bring you revenue opportunities that you didn't even know were there.

When I first started working for the company that I would eventually run, we considered a large project to be from \$6,000 to \$7,000. As I expanded my use of new products and offered more creative designs, the average size of my projects grew dramatically. When I left the company 4 years ago to work for Anchor Wall Systems, our average job was around \$20,000 and we routinely had projects above \$70,000.

I attribute much of this success to getting outside my comfort zone and not being afraid to try new ideas. My attitude was – and still is – that trying a new product or design can be writ-



» Use raised patios and freestanding walls to create cozy seating areas separate from a wide, sweeping lawn. A retaining wall with gentle curves can accent planters and flowerbeds without looking harsh or industrial. Photo features the Anchor™ Highland Stone® wall system.

ten off as a paid education. The first time you try a new product or design, the result might not be what you had hoped for. But the more you do it, the more you will be adding valuable tools to your business.

**Limit your losses**

Using new products and ideas is great, but the key to success is to limit your potential losses. If you are proactive in looking for the proper jobsite to test your new idea or product, you can be ready when your client requests it on something larger.

For example, if you have open space in your yard or office, set up a display area. This not only gives you a space to test new concepts, it is also a great place to bring clients to show off your work and product variety.

If you do not have a display area, you can accomplish the same goal by trying new ideas in smaller projects. For example, a few years ago I drew a design for a small retaining wall with built-in steps. This was a simple wall and I designed it with a product I had

been using for quite awhile.

That year, a new version of the product, with more pieces and a more random appearance, was introduced. Even though the product looked complicated, I wanted to try it. I went to the homeowners and offered to install the project with the updated product at no additional cost to

them. They were very receptive and we made the switch. They loved the completed project.

I was able to accomplish 3 important things with that 1 product substitution:

- First, I was able to have my crew evaluate the new product to see if we wanted to use it in the future.
- Second, I made sure the foreman tracked the installation time so I could accurately bid future projects.
- Third, I had a completed project I could add to my portfolio. By the way, we still made money on that project!

The bottom line is that to improve your business as a contractor, it is really important that you push yourself to get out of your comfort zone and try new products and new design ideas. If you are unsure about your design abilities or want to improve your installation skills, invest in a training course or seminar to help you get started. By spending the money and doing the work now to improve your business, you'll reap the rewards later. ◀



» A freestanding wall can enhance a front walkway and provide a place for seating. Specialty lighting and plantings give the space a pleasing ambience. Photo features the Anchor™ Brisa™ wall system.

**Tim Huinker is a Construction Specialist for Anchor Wall Systems. For more information, visit [www.anchorwall.com](http://www.anchorwall.com) or call (877) 295-5415.**