

A second set of hands

Independent landscape design firms fill the role of staff designers for a fraction of the cost.

By EMILY SCHAPPACHER

Last June Patrick DuChene quit his full-time landscape design/management position to offer his services as an independent designer. DuChene Design Solutions, based in Branchburg, N.J., currently meets the design needs of 20 regular clients and counting, all whose businesses have grown and improved since bringing on DuChene as an extra set of hands, he says. It's a win for everyone, DuChene adds. He's able to offer his landscape design skills to multiple firms, while the company owners receive professional designs without the overhead costs of a full-time employee.

"That's the business model that makes this such a benefit to me and to the landscape company," DuChene says. "I saw what the economy is doing, and I saw a real need for what I'm doing."

Cooperative Design Resource (CDR) is another independent landscape design firm. Since last

year, the five-person cooperative has offered design and sales services to landscape contractors, suppliers and architects in the Denver metro area. About 90 percent of its jobs are for residential clients.

"Our part is to take the workload off the contractors so they can do what they need to do to build the design," says Jennifer Verprauskus, a CDR partner and the firm's marketing manager. "The projects they're getting are going to be really good, and they don't have to have a hand in it and micromanage. They can trust us it's going to get done."



Patrick DuChene



Patrick DuChene (designs pictured here) has about 20 regular clients.

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DESIGN/BUILD

MARKETWATCH

HOW IT WORKS

DuChene Design Solutions provides landscape designs and presentations for primarily residential projects to design/build firms throughout the U.S. Via conversations with clients and by using file-sharing services like Dropbox, DuChene can analyze his clients' properties through photographs and land surveys no matter where they're located and get a good feel for the job. His services cost anywhere from \$45 to \$100 an hour, depending on what the design entails.

For example, DuChene will charge more for jobs requiring 3D modeling or animation. Regardless of the hourly fee, DuChene's services are a "humongous savings" for landscape contractors, particularly those who are in a period of growth but are not in the position to hire another employee, he says.

"The average salary of a landscape designer is \$35,000 to \$45,000, and if

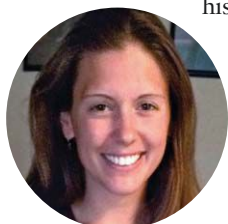
you add in the expenses that go along with that—a vehicle, cell-phone, benefits, uniforms, a computer—that number goes up into the \$60,000s," DuChene says. "If my clients aren't selling landscape jobs, they don't need me. I approach each job as if I am an employee of theirs, but I'm not. I'm there to help them."

CDR charges a design fee up front, a minimum of \$750 depending on the complexity of the design, and then a flat percentage of the project's total cost if the design is sold. The firm touts a combined 135 years of landscape design and sales experience.

Both DuChene and Verprauskus agree the biggest benefit of outsourcing landscape design work is the cost savings for the company owner. Verprauskus also has found many of CDR's clients value the sales services the firm offers, as it's another piece of the puzzle they don't have to worry about.



Sample projects from Cooperative Design Resource, which serves the Denver Metro area.



Jennifer Verprauskus



"The sales part is a huge part of our model," Verprauskus says. "Some contractors weren't confident in sales or design but could do a good job with the install. When we go out to a project we are representing that company, and when we make a sale we are selling on behalf of that company."

One aspect of outsourcing design jobs that some contractors find challenging is having less control during the design process, Verprauskus adds. While

The Goods: DESIGN/BUILD

KICHLER 2700K DESIGN PRO LED FIXTURES

The warm-white 2700K color temperature option will be available in two Design Pro LED 12V two-in-one water and accent lights, three Design Pro LED 12V wall wash accent fixtures (pictured here), 18 Design Pro LED 12V deck and patio fixtures and 46 Design Pro LED 12V path and spread fixtures.

STAY WARM

This warm, white option is ideal for enhancing yellow, orange and red hues in foliage or the natural earth tones found in siding or other building materials, Kichler says.



WHITER WHITE

A 3000K color temperature option is already available for all of these fixtures, giving customers an additional pure white option.

STICK TO IT

The new fixtures adhere to tight LED binning tolerances for color consistency.

CDR offers clients the opportunity to tweak or modify a design, some clients find it difficult to not be involved each step of the way. DuChene agrees this can be an issue, so his design process includes what he calls a “progress proof,” which is a black-and-white design concept he offers clients during the early stages of a project to make sure he’s on the right track.

Other hesitations some clients face is that working with a third-party company will make communication more difficult or that they’ll be overcharged if they don’t have visual proof of how much time was spent on a design, DuChene says. But building relationships and establishing trust can ease these uncertainties and establish a long-term partnership that works for everyone.

“It is a subcontractor relationship, but we see ourselves as partners because we help them and they help us,” Verprauskus says. “The clients’ best interests are our best interests.”

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.

The Ticker: DESIGN/BUILD

Proven Winners named the Rockcastle River Trading Co. its first Proven Winners Botanical Trail, a designation bestowed to a property that integrates Proven Winners plants into a landscape containing indigenous plant material. Rockcastle River Trading Co. is located in Livingston, Ky., on the family property of **Jon Carloftis**, who maintains the grounds.

Now available on the **Landscape Management** website is a free, editable spreadsheet from **LM** columnist expert **Frank Ross** and **A Better Way 2 Learn**. Visit LandscapeManagement.net/downloads to access Ross's estimate summary spreadsheet, which allows you to plug in direct costs, overhead and net profit to determine job break-even point, gross margin and more.

a better way 2 learn Estimate Summary Sheet			
Job Name	Estimate Date	Estimate By	Estimate For
Contract Amount	\$ 40,000.00		
Direct Costs	\$ 12,000.00		
Overhead	\$ 2,400.00		
Net Profit	\$ 25,600.00		
Gross Margin	64.00%		
Break-Even Point	\$ 12,000.00		
Net Profit per Hour	\$ 1,040.00		

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