

Taking control

By ELLIE TAIT



Don't worry madam, it will look so much better in a few months time!

Mark Stenning is a 35 year old with big plans for the future. A groundsman (on and off) since leaving school, he's finally living the life he's always wanted since taking a leap of faith into self employment a year ago. We took a look at his journey and asked him to share some of his experiences.

“I had no idea what I wanted to do when I left school and spent three years working at an apple orchard cutting paddocks, pruning trees and driving tractors. When the company I worked for went bankrupt I had a spell as parcel delivery driver but my thoughts quickly turned back to horticulture. I enrolled on a

full-time City & Guilds course in landscape construction at Sparsholt Agricultural College in Hampshire which featured modules in turf management and lawn maintenance. I hoped this would arm me with good all-round knowledge and give me lots of career options once I'd finished. The course took two intense years to complete. Giving up full-time work meant money was tight. I was lucky to receive a council grant but had to take on small gardening jobs on my free days so I could pay the bills.”

“Once I'd qualified, I took a six month temporary contract with Cannons Hygiene looking after sports facilities at local schools before accepting a full-time post

with Scottish & Southern Energy where I spent four years as part of a gang of three spraying weeds, cutting grass verges, strimming and hedge cutting at sites across the country.”

“Eventually a senior groundsman's job came up on my local council. I applied and was successful. Our team had 70 acres of sports facilities to maintain including six football pitches, eight junior soccer pitches, a cricket pitch and a bowling green. Budgets were limited and we were only expected to take work up to a certain standard which I found frustrating. Low wages, long working hours (sometimes seven days a week) and long delays in getting things done due to bureaucracy led to a high turnover of staff and morale was

unsurprisingly low.”

“Then, early in 2005 I opened a copy of *The Groundsman* and saw an advert for Lawnmaster franchises. The figures on the advert were attractive but what really caught my eye was their statement 'We only recruit qualified groundsmen and greenkeepers'. After 20 years of hard graft in low paid jobs, it was then that I decided to look seriously at self-employment. I'm not afraid of hard work but had grown tired of working long, hard hours to put money into someone else's bank account and was motivated to build a better future for myself.”

“It's not a decision to be taken lightly. I spent almost a year talking to self-employed people, looking at different franchises and checking out my local area. I

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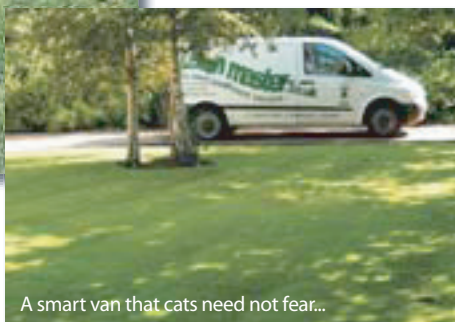
Hope no-one wants to swing a cat in there.

was a big problem for me. I wasn't a homeowner and had no capital at all. When I'd made my decision, I asked my local bank branch for a start-up loan but they were wary of lending me the full cost of the franchise. Frustrated but undeterred, I managed over a few months to get a proportion of the money together and went to my own bank in a neighbouring town who

generated a good number of enquiries and I've also received a lot of recommendations from other groundcare professionals in the area. From day one, I've been on a steep learning curve. I'd got basic business management experience from working on the council but have had to get to grips with a complex new computer system, job sheets and marketing as well as actually being out there doing the job. The business development is enjoyable but what I find hardest is doing all my quotes and paperwork in the evening after a long day at work."

"On an average day, I leave the house at around 8am, earlier in the summer. I'll have printed out all my job sheets the night before, planned my route for the day and checked that the van is tidy and well stocked. I carry four or five different feeds, liquid and granular, pre-seed feeds, moss killer, fungicides, herbicides, insecticides and a variety of knapsacks. I also carry a Classen slitter, spiker and scarifier, rakes and a variety of hand tools."

"Having a good relationship with my customers is absolutely business critical. I don't just turn up and throw a feed on. I always carry out a thorough inspection of a lawn before I make any recommendations. If the customer is at home, I'll chat with them about the work I'm planning and take the time to show them a problem if one exists. After



A smart van that cats need not fear...

agreed to let me have a business loan. But it was Lawnmaster who gave me the break I desperately needed. Money was really tight and they allowed me to defer some of the franchise payments indefinitely. Again, there was no pressure, they had faith in me and I hope they feel it was justified now."

"I'm just about to complete my first full year in business and it's going well. From the first month I've exceeded both my expectations and those of the company and made my repayments very early. Initially, households in my local area received a mail shot which

was amazed to meet unqualified people who were earning £400-£600 per week doing lawn maintenance whilst I, a qualified and experienced groundsman, was taking home less than half that."

"Lawnmaster stood out from the competition. Its MD, Bob Underhill really knew his stuff and had a very open approach.

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He put me in touch with other franchisees and let me contact them at my leisure. There was no 'hard sell', no pressure and no time frame to stick to. Finance

Franchising

Franchising comes from the French for honesty or freedom. Generally it is a way of doing business whereby the originator of an idea or a business - the franchisor - licences names, methods or technologies to franchisees. The franchisee will generally pay a one off fee for the privilege and, most often, an annual payment or percentage of profits for the franchise. In return the franchisee will get help with advertising, book-keeping, training etc.

years of having no feedback at all about the grass you work on, it's nice to have that dialogue with people who are really interested in the care of their lawn. Some have used lawn maintenance companies before and are initially very sceptical, but it's satisfying when they can see the results for themselves several months down the line."

"About 90% of my new customers ask me if I mow, which I don't, but there are guys working locally who I've worked with on the council and feel confident recommending for mowing, hedge cutting and tree work."

"Like the majority of groundsman, I take great pride in my work and now in my business too. The most important thing to me at this stage is to retain my existing customers and to grow my customer base. I'll be marketing my business more intensely this year and if all goes well, I'm aiming to have another vehicle on the road by the end of the year. There are several guys who I worked with on the council who've seen what I've achieved and are interested in joining me. When my business is ready to expand, I'll have some good groundsman who I know and trust ready and waiting."

"My advice to anyone looking at franchising or any sort of self-employment is to take advice and to check all the figures out carefully. Make sure the opportunity you're looking at suits you and your local area. Take your time, do your research thoroughly and be organised! It's very hard work but also incredibly rewarding and it feels good to finally be in control of my future."