

Finch Tree Surgery – first in California

Count Randy Finch, owner of Finch Tree Surgery in San Gabriel, Calif., as someone who didn't think Accreditation was a good idea for the industry.

"Initially, I fought against the idea of TCIA implementing an Accreditation program," admits Finch. "I thought that we small tree care companies didn't need another hoop to jump through. When Accreditation becomes the standard for tree care companies you either have to do it or fall behind. As the leader in our area, I knew we would have to do it – and I didn't want another credential. I didn't want to go through another program."

"Now, I would endorse it as a very worthwhile project," he stresses.

A TCIA member company since 1985, Finch notes that his company has been a local leader in many ways ... first member of the National Arborist Association in the area, first certified arborist, first ASCA registered consulting arborist. Accreditation seemed like the next thing to do to maintain his market lead. Finch Tree Surgery has 25 arborists in the field, four salespeople (including Randy), and an office staff of one. The company is almost exclusively high-end residential tree maintenance, pruning and removals in the Pasadena and San Marino areas.

"The staff is pretty excited about being the first Accredited tree care company in California," notes Finch. "This is confirmation of what they already knew – they are working for a good company and other people think so, too."

He initially signed up to be part of the Accreditation pilot program, but didn't realize there was a time limit until he talked with other company owners at Winter Management Conference in Los Cabos, Mexico. When he returned, he started working in March to fulfill the program's requirements and finished in August.

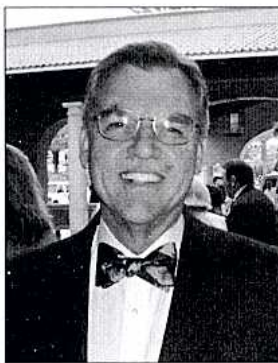
In going through the Accreditation process, Finch unearthed some things that he had overlooked in the past. Accreditation forced him to concentrate on business and regulatory processes he knew he needed to upgrade and to discover some things that he had overlooked. One of the requirements is a business plan that includes financial management guidelines with a monthly operating budget.

"I always had one in my head," says Finch, "but never a written one. I formed two teams of two salespeople each. I had them talk independently, then we got together to formulate a plan on where we want to take the business. I incorporated that into a wonderful tool, Quickbooks 2006 Premier edition, which has a business plan tool that builds your financial information automatically."

Another requirement of Accreditation is a written client complaint/dispute resolution procedure. Finch Tree Surgery had what Finch describes as "an aggressive resolution procedure" that always went right to the top. Again, it wasn't formal or written down. He used to keep track of complaints with a note here, a slip of paper there, an e-mail stored on the computer. Now, he has a written complaint resolution follow-up log that can be seen by every employee in the company.

The company already had a written employee handbook, another requirement, which he got years ago from a TCIA member. At one of the very first Winter Management Conferences Finch attended, Lauren Lanphear of Forest City Tree Protection Company in South

Euclid, Ohio, handed over his company's handbook. Finch has been updating it ever since.



"I did discover two or three things that weren't in it that needed to be," Finch says.

They also had an employee training program, but it wasn't as well organized at he would have liked. From the very beginning, TCIA's Home Study packages have formed the training requirements for his company. His employee handbook defines training objectives based on those levels.

"The paperwork was always there, it just wasn't as organized," he says. "Now I can lay my hands on one folder for commercial driver's licenses, one folder for training or customer complaints. Organization was the best thing that came out of Accreditation. It's easy just to throw things in a folder. Now that everything is organized it is easier to maintain."

"The CD Rom for the program is very well laid out. It has become not only a checklist but a tool to guide me and instruct me," says Finch. "The program was more comprehensive than I thought it would be, and the CD helps me to do a better job. Specifically, it has forced me to focus more closely on my training programs. We tend to get a little slack when business is busy. Accreditation gave me an opportunity to do some things I had always intended to do, like

monitoring who was qualified for various jobs, and how quickly they were qualified. I put together a new tracking program that helps me organize it better."

Upon receiving Accreditation, Finch immediately added a banner notice to his Web site. "The CD that comes with Accreditation has marketing tools with it," he notes, "like a banner ad, press releases, truck decals, brochures and other things."

While Finch thinks a neater desk and a more organized office will help him run his business better over the long term, they weren't the most useful parts of Accreditation. It was finding those two or three things that he had overlooked that impacted safety and regulatory compliance. The process gave him confidence that he no longer had any holes. It eased his worry that he might be missing something from the standpoint of safety or compliance.

In cooperation with the City of Pasadena, the Pasadena Beautiful Foundation maintains a list of arborists who are certified by the International Society of Arboriculture and are licensed to conduct business in Pasadena. In 2004, they added consulting arborists who may be registered by the American Society of Consulting Arborists and are also licensed to do business in Pasadena. This year they added TCIA accredited companies who gain this credential "through an audit of their adherence to industry standards, maintenance of trained staff and dedication to quality business practices" according to their Web site. Finch hopes other accredited companies will follow suit and inform community and local volunteer groups about Accreditation and what it means.

Finch advises those companies that are considering Accreditation – or have signed up but haven't done much about it – to get moving or be left behind.

"If you don't do it, you're just doing what you did yesterday. If you want to progress you need to be moving forward, always forward," he says.