

The Business License: An Effective Extension Tool and a Challenging Research Tool

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Introduction

The drought of 2007 severely affected Georgia’s urban agricultural industries (Bauske, Florkowski, and Landry, 2008; Flanders, Bauske, and McKissick, 2008). Most outdoor water use was prohibited in the densely populated northern portion of the state which includes the Atlanta metropolitan area. The drought lasted through 2008. It was followed by the recession of 2009 and subsequent housing slump. During the recession, many businesses closed, others consolidated, and membership in statewide industry associations declined (Woodworth, personal correspondence).

In 2010 the economic contribution of turfgrass production, ornamental horticulture, landscape services and related industry was estimated at \$4.0 billion in output, and indirectly at another \$3.8 billion for a total of \$7.8 billion (Kane and Wolf, 2012). The business environment has steadily improved since then, yet industry associations have not noted an increase in membership. Since all new businesses are required to have a business license, we hypothesized that new businesses could be identified by making open record requests (ORRs) to counties and municipalities issuing new business licenses and renewing licenses. Our ultimate goal was to make this data available to Extension and professional organizations, so that resources could be extended to new businesses.

Materials and Methods

ORRs were made for business licenses issued for the years 2013 and 2014 in these Standard Industry Classification (SIC) numbers and/or North American Industry Classification Codes (NAICS):

- Landscape contractor (SIC 078101, NAICS 561730)
- Yard maintenance (SIC 078201, NAICS 561736)
- Tree trimming service (SIC 078301, NAICS 561734)
- Lawn fertilizing service (SIC 078203, NAICS 561732)
- Irrigation system contractor (SIC 162901, NAICS 234993)

To create a complete record of each company (including a phone number, web site address, and email address) Internet searches were conducted to augment the results of the ORRs. Queries were made on Google, Google Plus, AngiesList.com, Mantra.com, and Yellowpages.com. If the company had a website and no emails listed, a “Whols” search for domain name listing information was conducted.

Abstract

Turfgrass production, ornamental horticulture, and landscape services directly contribute \$4.0 billion in output, and indirectly contribute \$3.8 billion to Georgia’s economy. Urban agriculture industries, as a group, were severely challenged by the statewide drought of 2007 and then by the national economic downturn in 2009. Many businesses closed while others consolidated. Although the economy has improved in recent years, industry associations have not noted an increase in membership. This project explored the use of business license information in order to: to 1) provide insight into the state of the industry, and 2) identify new businesses so that Extension and professional association resources could be extended to them. Four counties were selected in the Metro Atlanta urban and suburban area (Cobb, DeKalb, Gwinnett, and Henry), and open record requests were filed for unincorporated counties and 24 municipalities within the counties. Business license information was requested for landscape, yard maintenance, tree trimming, lawn fertilizing, and irrigation system services and contractors. Although data collected on business license applications was similar among the government entities, data supplied in response to the open record requests was not. Responses ranged from no response to requests, to information with incomplete and/or ambiguous labeling, to almost complete information with clear labeling. Follow-up online searches supplied additional information, but the combined dataset was not sufficiently robust to draw conclusions from. The results do suggest the need for online marketing training. Just 38% of the landscape companies identified had a web site and many had no web presence at all.

Table 1. Table 1. Results of ORRs for business licenses for 2013 and 2014.

County	Municipality	Number of Businesses	SIC or NAICS	Business Name	Contact Name	Mailing Address	Phone	Email	Web Site	Date Heading(s)	2013 Population Estimate
Cobb Cobb	Unincorporated	273		x	x		x			No Info	
	Acworth	24	x	x	x	x	x			Date Issued	21,476
	Austell*										6,810
	Kennesaw	7	x	x	x	x	x			Start date	32,001
	Marietta	58	x	x		x				No Info	59,089
	Powder Springs	19	x	x	x	x	x			Date Established	14,411
DeKalb	Smyrna	13		x	x	x				No Info	53,438
	Unincorporated	61	x	x		x				No Info	
	Avondale Estates	3		x						No Info	2,797
	Brookhaven	20	x	x		x				Origination Date	50,603
	Chamblee	15	x	x						Charge Year	15,948
	Clarkston	0									7,791
	Decatur	9	x	x	x	x	x	x		FY 2014-2015	20,086
	Doraville	1	x		x	x				Date Issued	10,603
	Dunwoody	4	x	x		x	x			Origination	47,591
	Stone Mountain	7		x						Year	5,976
Gwinnett	Unincorporated	439	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	Date Established, Renewal Date	
	Buford	15		x		x	x			No Info	12,962
	Duluth	15		x	x					Active	28,404
	Lawrenceville	6	x	x	x	x	x			Date Open	29,868
	Lilburn	12		x		x	x			No Info	12,425
	Norcross*										
Henry	Snellville	15	x	x		x				No Info	19,245
	Unincorporated	202	x	x		x	x			Start Date, Active or Inactive	
	Hampton*										7,104
	Locust Grove	0									5,648
	Stockbridge	0									27,265
Total	McDonough	12		x		x	x			Origination	22,834
		1230	14	21		17	12	2	1		

Conclusions

- The data received from municipalities and counties was heterogeneous, incomplete, and when considered in aggregation, did not support conclusions about business generation and consolidation.
- The process of gathering and compiling ORRs from counties and municipalities was laborious and time consuming. Many of the email addresses we gathered are of companies already familiar to the industry associations and Extension.
- Only 37.6% of the businesses identified had web sites. This suggests that the industry as whole may benefit from online marketing training.

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