

# TREE CARE INDUSTRY

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# ATTENTION TO DETAIL HELPS OTTIGER TREE STAND OUT

By Janet Aird

Otto “O.J.” Ottiger and his son, Nick, banter when they talk about their work, but it’s clear that they take tree care seriously.

O.J., a certified arborist, has been working with trees since 1972 and founded his company, Ottiger Tree Service, LLC, in 1998. Nick, who is also a certified arborist as well as a CTSP (Certified Treecare Safety Professional), crew leader and the company’s main climber, worked for the company while he was in university and joined it full time in 2005.

The company is based in Fenton, Missouri and serves the greater St. Louis area. About half of their work is pruning and half tree removal. They also do tree recovery work after storm damage.

“After a storm comes through, anyone with a chain saw comes by and removes the trees that have fallen. After that, you still have trees with broken limbs.” And that’s where Ottiger comes in, making the cuts to help trees recover. For the company, it’s an art as much as a science, because they make sure the final result is pleasing to the eye. It’s also a “green” practice, because it can save some trees that might otherwise be lost. This attention to detail is one reason the company stands out from others, says O.J.

The company has six employees, plus O.J. and Nick, full-time, year-round. “We prefer to be small,” O.J. says. “It lets us do what we do best, and we don’t get into laying off employees when there isn’t enough work.”

The size of the company also benefits



*Nick Ottiger says the company sought Accreditation so they would know they were doing everything right.*

their customers, which are about 70 percent residential, Nick adds. “There aren’t a lot of different levels to go through,” he says. “When a customer calls, they’re either talking to my father, myself or my wife, who works in the office. On every call, the owner is going to show up.”

### Usually they both do.

“Dad just can’t help but show up. He does crowd control and I do tree control.”

And in fact, many of the people who stop to watch them work become new customers. They get 95 percent of their work through word of mouth.

Their specialty is removing large trees from small spaces, which also requires great attention to detail.

“Here in the St. Louis area, it’s pretty close and compact,” O.J. says. “You’ve got 36- to 48-inch diameter trees, 70 to 100 feet tall, expanding across three to five backyards.”

The company will recommend more appropriately-sized trees for the spaces, another sustainable practice. It’s much

healthier for trees to be able to grow to their natural height and width, he says. “When you start interfering with nature too much, you start to make more problems.”

In addition to coordinating with all the affected homeowners and the utility company when they remove trees, they have to bring all the brush down safely. They work around active low voltage power lines, but get the power company to shut down the high power lines, Nick says. Still, it’s almost impossible to walk through some backyards and stay 10 feet away from every energized source, from transmission and cable lines to guide wires and fences.

“Awareness is really the key when working around energized sources. You have to know your limitations. TCIA has sessions for EHAP (Electrical Hazards Awareness Program), and we’ve all been through that. My CTSP comes in handy, too. It helps me be more aware of the big picture when I’m in a tree.”

Nick became a CTSP – one of only four in the state – as part of his company’s com-

pleting TCIA's Accreditation process. It's enhanced his awareness of safety, not only for employees and the crowds their work inevitably attracts, but for traffic in the roadways as well.

Ottiger Tree Service became accredited in 2007, the second company to do so in the St. Louis area. "We got accredited just so I'd know we were doing everything right, not to get noticed or to get more work," Nick says.

In the Midwest, municipalities look for accredited companies, he says, and they've become a new market for Ottiger. Residential and commercial consumers have been a little slower to realize the significance of Accreditation, but he expects them to become more aware as the economy improves.

Becoming accredited was a little overwhelming, says Nick, who handled the process for the company. He found that doing a little at a time made it much easier, and he based his business plan on TCIA's outline. The hardest part was organizing the insurance forms, keeping organized



*OJ Ottiger, left, and Nick Ottiger, third from left, with Nick's sons – the two Ottiger saplings – Will, second from left, and Sam, right.*

and getting all the paperwork filled out.

"Accreditation gave me more pride in the company and in the industry as a whole," Nick says. "To be a good, well-rounded company, you have to go through a lot of education and on-the-job training. We're not just a couple of guys cutting trees."

Being accredited hasn't changed the way they work on trees, he says, but it has kept him more organized. "I know my documentation is correct and I'm doing all the right things. As far as the expense, it seems like a little bite, but you realize it was a


good thing."

Training employees is another requirement of Accreditation. Nick gives weekly training sessions on ANSI Z133.1 safety standards, and the entire company goes to TCIA EXPO for the education sessions whenever it's feasible. He also trains them in the various ANSI A300 standards.

The company has ArborMAX insurance, which they chose mostly because of the affordable rate for workers' comp, their biggest expense. It's only available to accredited companies and is the only insurance endorsed by TCIA.

"You're in a special group," O.J. says. "You have safety training and minimal losses, so you have a chance to keep your rates lower. ArborMAX has been good to us."

### **Both father and son share the same vision for the future.**

"We're comfortable the way we are," Nick says. "We may add another crew, but I still want to micromanage. We don't want to get so big that we can't maintain our standards of work." 

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