



## Adding Voltage to Your Business

What you need to know to launch a successful outdoor lighting service.

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*Landscapers interested in adding outdoor lighting as a service will have to dedicate a lot of time to training and becoming certified. Those who rush into the service or try to learn on the job without proper training won't last.*

### Do you need a license to practice?

Licensing and certification can be good for established contractors, as it increases the barriers to entry for "lowballers" and newer companies without a track record or positive Better Business Bureau docket.

Licensing and certification requirements vary by state, and while a few states require little or no qualifications, some, like Georgia require a low voltage contractor's license for the installation of outdoor lighting, some irrigation systems and electronic burglar alarm systems.

Many states are also requiring contractors to earn special licenses (similar to electricians) to do business.

While the biggest pro is eliminating barrier to entry, the biggest con is often the upfront cost involved, which is something relatively new businesses and those "against the margin" of profit may struggle with in the industry.

You can consult AOLP's website at [www.aolponline.org](http://www.aolponline.org) for information on its CLVLT program.

You can also contact your local building department and consult online at [www.licensedelectrician.com](http://www.licensedelectrician.com) for state requirements and contact information.

Outdoor lighting is a niche service for contractors, but it's a profitable one. The profit margins are consistently in the 30-40 percent range. The lights are used to highlight buildings, plants and water features.

A typical residential installation can run more than \$5,000 in price, which often inspires other skilled contractors – namely irrigation specialists, landscapers and fence companies – to pick up outdoor lighting as an additional offered service.

But the transition is anything but an easy one. Often, these contractors rush into the job without proper research, proper licensing, certification or education – all barriers to entry for new companies.

Ask any outdoor lighting professional and they're likely to tell you that the "fake it 'til you make it" mentality just won't fly when staking out the niche and then carving out one within it.

So, what does a newbie coming into the outdoor lighting business need to know and watch out for when entering this niche market? Contractors can't enter the line of work and expect to be successful by osmosis, says Jeff Tullis, president of Accent Outdoor Lighting, Chesterfield, Mo.

"When I started out in outdoor lighting, I spent many hours educating myself and learning about design principles by driving through subdivisions and scoping out houses. I would go out night after night looking at all the work, and it got to the point where a partner of mine was afraid I'd get arrested for it," Tullis says with a laugh. "But like anything else in life, you really have to educate yourself first. You just can't absorb how good lighting is done by sitting back and waiting for it to happen. Training and certification are really important – not just for ability, but for credibility as well."



Tullis, who is a certified low voltage lighting technician (CLVLT), says that certification can be a big help in bolstering a new contractor's lighting knowledge and expertise. Members of the Association of Outdoor Lighting Professionals (AOLP) can take the exam at the annual conference.

"I've been a member of AOLP and did their certification and both have been immensely helpful – not just in creating work but keeping abreast of products, service and equipment and how the service and lighting has changed," he says. "Being involved in AOLP helped us with success – in partnering with other companies who have complementary skills, finding good distributors, building valuable relationships and in providing support for our learning."

Beyond the assistance of AOLP, another lighting industry expert points to creativity and good experience as the bedrock for launching a successful outdoor lighting endeavor.

"I've been in this business over 40 years and my observation is you need an artistic eye to do this work," says Jim Paulin, head of Lumical Technologies Group in Sarasota, Fla.

"For those just coming in, the best lighting designs come from those who are more than perfunctory lights and wires people," he says. "New contractors might find it very difficult to work on a property and know how the trees will absorb or reflect light, how to back-light properly, do front-light wall-washing ... a lot of this comes from years of apprenticeship and being an understudy working in the field."

Paulin also says that newbies should know that "equipment is generally quite minimal, but we do most everything by hand."

Irrigation contractors might have water trenchers at their disposal, which can make parts of our job easier," he says. "But really the amount of equipment necessary has been small for us. We sweat solder all our own connections ... of course, high voltage lighting is a whole different ball game than low voltage, because you need conduit and you'll need an electrician, or an electrician's background and their tools."

Paul Gosselin Sr. of NightScenes Corp. and the president of AOLP is quick to point to the association as a great resource – and to temper the complexity of entering the new niche with some much-needed levity.

"These folks need to know that it's not rocket science, but that it's not easy either. They need to know something about lighting design," he says. "If they just want to plug in some lights, a half-day seminar would be enough. All I do is lights. When I got into it I was an electrician, but got in the mindset that I wanted to do this well.

"When I run into the guys from the irrigation supply houses who offer the basics of the basics – they may know how to do it well, but any idea of design they might convey translates into crappy systems that don't work right," Gosselin says, adding the installers give up when the systems don't work.

Ask Gosselin what he wished he had known before he started out and he offers a laugh.

"I wish I had known there was pro lighting equipment available," he says. "For my very first job, I bought Malibu equipment at Home Depot. I knew nothing about lighting design back then, either. I just started lying it down and hoped it looked good.

"The online forums I participate in today are really good – a real wealth of knowledge is out there," he says. "I wish I had those back then as well."