A change in priorities

'The days of easy lawn care are over,' claims this suburban Detroit LCO, but geographical considerations help keep his company thriving.

Manager Scott Brunais, left, and President Tim Doppel, Atwood LawnCare, Sterling Heights, Mich.

Just barely into his 30s, Tim Doppel admits it's time to slow down. It's not that he can't keep up any more. He's just refocusing his efforts, he maintains.

That's because Tim and his wife, Alice, are busy with their three children—ages 10, 8 and 4. Second comes the business: Atwood LawnCare, Sterling Heights, Mich.

Then—and this is a switch from just a few years ago—Doppel says he'll help out with any industry affairs that he can. But, he's definitely casting a sharper eye to the time he can devote to industry affairs.

In 1984 Doppel, then just two years out of Michigan State University, bought Atwood LawnCare. Since then, in addition to starting a family and running the business, Doppel served on the board of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), participated in the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation, and was the managing director of the Lawn Sprayers Association of Michigan. He also keeps close ties with MSU and is a frequent, and entertaining, speaker at the Michigan Turfgrass Conference in Lansing each January.

"Now I'm doing Cub Scouts, and baseball and all those kinds of things," he laughs. That, and running Atwood, keeps Doppel on his toes.

"The lawn care business around here is incredibly competitive. The last time I looked, metro Detroit had close to 500 licensed lawn care applicators. It's beyond being a real challenge now."

Tim started with Atwood LawnCare several years before he bought it from its founder who had decided to move to warmer climes. A student at MSU, Doppel worked weekends each fall and spring and full time in the summer. Atwood LawnCare had been started in 1970 and was named after a resort lake in Ohio, and because it would appear near the beginning of the listings in the Yellow Pages. Nobody by the name of Atwood ever worked at the company, says Tim. "When somebody calls up and asks for Mr. Atwood, I know it's either a sales person or an irate customer."

Atwood's headquarters are about a 35-minute drive northeast of downtown Detroit. It carries 15 employees through spring and 10 to 12 in the summer and fall.

The company offers a full range of lawn care services, excluding mowing, and tree/shrub fertilization to a 30-mile radius of customers, mostly in the northern and eastern Detroit suburbs. It does little work within the city itself. "Detroiter seem to prefer to buy from Detroiter," he says.

"I prefer to get tighter in the areas that we're already in rather than expanding geographically. We've been sticking to that strategy and it seems to be working for us," he says. The acquisition of a smaller company helped to make last season, 1993, strong, he adds. "It helped fill in some areas where we were relatively weak. And we were able to up sell some of those customers aeration and tree service, too."

Doppel admits that national companies like TruGreen/ChemLawn and Barefoot maintain a strong presence in the Detroit market.

"I don't worry about them because they're always going to be there. We can sell well against them," says Tim. "The companies that are about my size are the ones we have to watch. There are about six of them within about a five-mile radius of here," he says.

When you add the large but unknown number of tiny unlicensed lawn applicators, the pressure to keep prices low is intense.

"I guess they figure that as long as they've got $20 in their pocket they're making money," adds Doppel. "They don't continued on page 34
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Study shows that pesticides provide more than weed, disease control

A recent study shows that some fungicides have the ability to “jump start” the development of turfgrass rooting systems during the first few weeks after planting.

The study, conducted at Iowa State University by research associate Roger Roe and Dr. Nick Christians, examined the rooting of Kentucky bluegrass and how selected products aided root systems.

Rooting measurements were recorded at two, four and six weeks following the application. A hydraulic lifting device was used, along with a pressure gauge, to calculate root strength and knitting.

Results of the test follow. Higher pulling pressures indicate an increased root strength:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TREATMENT</th>
<th>RATE 2 WKS.</th>
<th>4 WKS.</th>
<th>6 WKS.</th>
<th>Pulling pressure, lbs.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>588</td>
<td>660</td>
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<td>LSD</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Circle No. 101 on Reader Inquiry Card

7) Records incomplete or partially done.
8) Spray tank not cleaned properly. Applicator doesn’t know tank’s use history.
9) Applicator makes improper product safety claims.
10) Failure to use personal protective equipment as specified in product label.

Lorah said that inspectors want to help LCOs remain in compliance with regulations, but they have to respond to all callers and complaints.

Among the things that LCOs should realize about inspectors, said Lorah:
✓ They have lots of bosses.
✓ Everybody complains about them.
✓ Activists say they’re on industry’s side.
✓ Industry says they’re on the activists’ side.
✓ They dislike confrontations as much as anybody.

“Basically, their job is to examine if you are in compliance,” said Lorah. But, before an inspector examines an LCO’s operation, that inspector must issue a “notice of inspection.”

His advice to anyone facing an inspection: be truthful, and don’t be afraid to ask for the inspector’s advice on pesticide use concerns, “Contact the inspector for help before he shows up to do an inspection.”

—Ron Hall

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