

All systems

While visiting with his neighbor one evening in the mid-1980s, Roger Mongeon ventured down to the man's basement office to take a look at his business. The neighbor ran a two-truck Weed Man franchise from his home in Ajax, Ontario, outside of Toronto.

Mongeon, a chemical engineer with an interest in owning his own business, was fascinated.

"He was doing \$110,000 in sales and his bottom line was \$55,000," Mongeon said. "I said, 'Wow. I didn't realize you could do this with lawn care.'"

After months of analysis and research, Mongeon "felt good" about his decision to leave his decade-long career at Union Carbide Corp. and purchase a Weed Man franchise. In 1987 he moved his family to his hometown of Ottawa, Quebec, to own and operate his first territory in Hull, just across the river from Ottawa.

For his foray into lawn care and franchising Mongeon created a 10-year business plan—a practice he refined working in marketing and facilities planning at Union Carbide.

"My initial concept was to have a \$700,000 lawn care company and live happily ever after," he said. "I felt that would be my life. I'd stay there and develop that franchise. I never would have dreamed it would have turned out to be what it has."

How has it turned out? In addition to owning multiple Canadian Weed Man franchise territories, Mongeon and his team, including daughter Jennifer Lemcke, have helped many other lawn care professionals flourish since they acquired the rights

to sell Weed Man license agreements in the U.S. through the firm Turf Holdings Inc (THI).

With a combination of top-tier talent and solid business planning practices, THI has grown Weed Man USA to more than \$60 million in total franchise system sales in 2013 since acquiring the rights to the U.S. in 1996 and developing an expansion strategy in 1999.

Entering the U.S. market

Though Mongeon's team is the Weed Man franchisor in the U.S., it's also a multiunit franchisee in Canada through Turf Management Systems, which did \$27.3 million in 2012 sales. Mongeon's Canadian-owned operations all started with that initial franchise in Ottawa 27 years ago. His first year there he grossed \$123,000 in sales, losing \$8,000. The second year in business, that location doubled its revenue and made about \$50,000 in profit.

"That's when I realized it was going to be a great opportunity," he said.

In 1989, Mongeon and partners expanded into Montreal with seven territories. Four years later, with Weed Man's Canadian territories already sold out, Mongeon assembled a group of shareholders made up of family and friends to acquire multiple existing franchises in Ontario. That year Lemcke decided to join her father's business (despite telling him at one time, "I'm not ever going to join Weed Man"). She took on a yearlong management trainee

» WEB EXTRAS

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Weed Man USA:

- Goal-setting chart
- Hiring evaluation sheets
- Staff daily, weekly and monthly checklists
- Sample business plan/budget creator

GROWING LIKE A WEED

Weed Man USA officials projected to have 148 license agreements and 316 territories by the end of 2013. Here are some key growth figures.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 (projected)
Revenue	\$34.1 million	\$38.6 million	\$44.3 million	\$53.4 million	\$66.5 million
Revenue growth	n/a	13%	15%	21%	25%
Customer #	72,000	81,000	93,000	106,000	135,000
Customer # growth	n/a	13%	15%	14%	27%
Production vehicles	228	241	259	296	336
Production vehicle growth	2%	6%	8%	14%	14%

GO

BY **MARISA PALMIERI**

Weed Man USA's strategy banks on planning, processes and people. How you can learn from its model.



Despite telling her father Roger Mongeon, "I'm not ever going to join Weed Man," as a teenager, Jennifer Lemcke is COO of Weed Man USA/Turf Holdings Inc.

position in Ottawa, eventually being promoted to manager of that location. She and her husband, Chris, grew it from less than a half a million dollars to \$2 million in annual revenue in six years. Today, Chris Lemcke is national technical director of THI, managing vendor relations and product testing for all Weed Man USA materials.

By 1996, Mongeon's sights crossed the border, and he struck a deal with Weed Man founder Des Rice to acquire the U.S. franchising rights. Several years later Mongeon connected with Terry Kurth, a former Barefoot Grass Lawn Service franchisee, who was under a three-year non-compete agreement after TruGreen-Chem-Lawn's 1997 acquisition of Barefoot. Mongeon didn't yet have a strategy for entering the U.S. market, but he knew Kurth from the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA, now part of PLANET) and wanted to pick his brain.

"I said, 'Come up to Canada, our treat, and we'll talk about some concepts,'" Mongeon says. Out of that meeting came the idea of a subfranchising model: bringing on American lawn care veterans to sell, setup and support franchises within their own territories.

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HOW TO CREATE SYSTEMS

Creating business systems—a linchpin of Weed Man USA's success—sounds like a complicated process fit for a business school grad.

Jennifer Lemcke, COO of Weed Man USA, assures you it's not. Systemizing your business can dramatically transform the culture from one of chaos to one of order, she says. The first step is knowing where to start.

Lemcke takes a tip from business guru Stephen Covey, suggesting you "begin with the end in mind."

In other words, figure out what you'd like the outcome to be. Next, define what you need to accomplish that goal, document the process, determine what metrics will reflect success and follow up to ensure employees are using the system.

For instance, when Weed Man USA franchisees began asking about how other locations were getting customer referrals, Lemcke set out to create a formal referral process. After identifying the goal ("create a system for obtaining referrals"), she began to work backward to achieve it, gathering information from multiple sources. "What's our process in Canada? What are our top 10 franchisees doing?" are the questions she began asking.

She discovered most franchisees receive about 4.5 percent of business from referrals, but some "superstars" have more than double that amount at 9 percent. How could all units get to that level?

She collected all the referral-related marketing collateral she could, analyzed existing data about referrals and brainstormed this topic from the customers' point of view. The conclusion was it's all about the technician, as that's the relationship clients cherish the most. Now, there's an entire process laid out for technicians. It details how to ask for a referral, what materials to use and how to follow up (with a thank-you note asking for another referral).

In December, when Weed Man USA franchisees attended the company's national conference in Florida, they went home with a list of best practices and ready-to-go marketing materials such as door hangers.

"We just work backward," she says.



THE SUB WAY

Turf Holdings Inc. (THI) counts its move in 1999 to recruit American lawn care veterans to be sub-franchisors as one of Weed Man USA's keys to success. These are the subs who've helped build the business. THI itself serves as the subfranchisor for the regions not covered below.

Steve Russell and Chuck Russell

Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Southern Illinois
Brothers and owners of Eradico Services, a Michigan-based provider of pest control; lawn, tree and shrub care; and holiday lighting services.

Ken Heltemes

North Carolina, Georgia
Former multiunit franchisee for Barefoot Grass Lawn Service.

Terry Kurth and Andy Kurth

Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Northern Illinois
Father-son team; Terry Kurth is a former multiunit franchisee for Barefoot Grass Lawn Service.

John Sanders

New Jersey, Eastern New York, Eastern Pennsylvania
Former independent lawn care firm owner; sold to ServiceMaster.

Phil Fogarty

Ohio, Western New York, Western Pennsylvania
Former independent lawn care firm owner; sold to The Scotts Co.

Bruce Sheppard and Brandon Sheppard

Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., Delaware, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Northern Florida
Father-son team; Bruce Sheppard is a former lawn care industry supplier and independent lawn care company owner.

Jon Cundiff

Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Northern Texas
Former independent lawn care company owner.



ALL SYSTEMS GO

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What was the draw for the subfranchisors, many of whom had already operated—and sold—successful lawn care companies of their own? “If they own a part of it and get a chunk of the royalty payments, they’ll be inside Weed Man (USA), but it will be their own business,” Mongeon says of the idea. “That’s how we sold it: An opportunity to leverage their expertise in a way they couldn’t on their own.”

This strategy resonated with many of the lawn care professionals Mongeon and Kurth approached to join the company, and it set Weed Man USA apart from the existing franchise systems in the market. By 2001, THI added as many subfranchisors as it wanted to, peaking at 13. THI has since bought back three subfranchise areas, with those former subs staying on as franchisees.

“Terry’s Rolodex was very important,” says Mongeon, as were his own acquaintances from PLCAA. Although, every potential sub his team approached initially wasn’t a good cultural fit.

“For us, the selection process was very key to our success,” says Lemcke, who today serves as COO of THI.

Systems, plan are the secret

As a franchisee in Canada, Mongeon’s business grew fast, fueled primarily by

passion, Lemcke says. But that approach only works for so long. “There’s a time you get tired and say, ‘I don’t know if I can do this.’ You have a choice of going backward or stopping growth, but that’s not where we wanted to go,” she says. “We wanted to continue to grow our business.”

The tipping point for Mongeon’s Canadian franchise group came around 1998. It needed to institute standard processes or risk burnout or stalled growth. Lemcke was integral to creating these procedures for business areas such as hiring, door-to-door marketing and more. (See sidebar, “How to create systems.”) Today those processes, coupled with the annual business plan template Mongeon first developed, are the hallmark of Weed Man USA’s operations.

“If you start off with great people and you stick with your commitment to tak-

ing care of your customers—what Des Rice brought to Weed Man—and then you instill this cultural way of looking at your business through a business plan, that’s the heart of the franchise system we brought to the U.S.,” Mongeon says. “Through that we use people and systems to make sure once you develop the business plan, you can execute the plan.”

More about that plan: It’s a document each franchisee creates during a two-and-a-half-day meeting in the fall for the following year. It’s not merely a budget. It includes a zero-based budget, marketing tactics, hiring, equipment buying and more—all laid out with a schedule for the year.

“Our franchisees are totally committed to it,” Mongeon says. “They look at the business plan and systems as being the core.”



PHOTO: BRIAN TETZ, BRIANTETZ.COM

HISTORY OF WEED MAN USA

1970

Des and Brenda Rice found Weed Man in Canada.

1986

Roger Mongeon purchases first Weed Man franchise in Hull, Quebec.

1992

Weed Man sells out territories in Canada.

1996

Weed Man awards Mongeon’s Turf Holdings Inc. (THI) the master franchise rights to the U.S., creating Weed Man USA.

1976

Weed Man begins franchising in Canada.

1989

Mongeon adds seven more territories in Montreal, Quebec.

1993

Mongeon leads a group of family-and-friend shareholders and expands into Ontario, acquiring multiple franchises. Future Weed Man USA COO Jennifer Lemcke joins her father’s Ottawa, Quebec, location.

1999

THI adopts a subfranchising model to expand into the U.S.

“SYSTEMS ARE ONLY GOOD IF PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THEM AND USE THEM.

—ROGER MONGEON

Also integral to the business plan on the franchisee level is an open-book concept. “What that allows us to do is to get complete buy-in from the employees and management team,” Lemcke

says. “It sets tone for the year and allows managers to work as a team.”

Finally, Weed Man USA’s business plan model gets great results because it’s a living document, Lemcke says.

“Many people make a business plan, but they don’t make it alive throughout the year,” she says. “They put it on a shelf, and at the end of the year say, ‘We either made it or we didn’t.’”

The Weed Man USA plan is interactive. Managers may adjust it on a weekly or daily basis with data from accounting and sales. “For example, if we start to see our marketing is falling behind, we can say, ‘You’re working Friday night,’” Lemcke says. “Because if you get too far behind, eventually you’re going to lose the game.”

As much as the business plan and systems are practical tools, they’re also psychological motivators, Mongeon says.

“All of this is instilling the belief that you will succeed,” he says. “That’s the key ingredient. The thing about systems is they’re only good if people believe in them and use them. If you believe you’re going to succeed, you’re going to work yourself to death because you know it’s going to work. That’s what all of this data and the plan bring. That’s what we have

right now: that tremendous belief we’re going to be successful.”

No surprise, Weed Man USA has a 10-year plan. By 2023 the company expects to more than double its licenses, territories and 2013 system sales to \$138 million. That’s well beyond what Mongeon, in 1987, believed his lawn care company would be. **LM**

2012

Weed Man USA/THI hits \$53.4 million in U.S. franchise system sales.

2013

Weed Man USA/THI projects more than \$60 million in system sales.

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