Go ahead, take a look at the inside cover. What are you afraid of?
Dear Lawn Care Professionals,

You trust Landscape Management magazine for advice and news to keep you on top of the green industry and help ensure the success of your business. That’s why Bayer Corporation and Landscape Management have joined forces to let you know why you have nothing to be afraid of — at least when it comes to grubs.

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Sincerely,

BAYER CORPORATION
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[Signature]

Jennifer Remsberg
Turf and Ornamental Market Manager

P.S. With MERIT, you need fear no grub — Guaranteed!
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GRUBS
CLOWNS

CLIMBED EVEREST, 1995
TREATED WITH MERIT, 2001
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Circle No. 108
Always listen to your mom

I can hear my mother's voice in my head.
No, it's not the usual situation where there's no physical presence, just her words ricocheting around inside my cranium. I'm actually talking to her on the phone — at work, no less. She's telling me about a situation that's developed with her irrigation contractor. Apparently, she'd given the guy a down payment of $1,500 to install a $5,000 irrigation system and told him she wanted it installed before they went on vacation. Here it was, one week before their vacation, and she hadn't heard a peep from him.

"You're in the landscape business, can't you do something?" she pleaded.

"Whoa, whoa," I said. What was I supposed to do, put a mugshot of this guy on the cover of the magazine with a caption that read, "Wanted: Dead or Alive"? My mother has never quite understood exactly what Landscape Management is all about, but maybe now was the time to explain it to her in detail.

"Mom, the purpose of this magazine is to — "

"You know, I called that guy's secretary and told her I want my money back right now," she said, her voice reaching a feverish pitch. "Not only that, I told her I was going to call the local television news and report them."

Now I felt sympathetic toward this guy. No longer would I question why certain landscape and irrigation contractors choose to make commercial work their primary focus.

"You know, mom, those guys are backlogged beyond belief right now, and — "

"But he didn't even call me back!" she cried.

And it hit me. He may have looked at her as a nagging customer, but she was definitely in her right to demand action. I was willing to bet this guy wasn't a Landscape Management subscriber. If he were, he undoubtedly would have read countless articles about how customer service is so important, and how you should always stay in touch with customers. With all the modes of communication in existence these days, there's absolutely no excuse not to return a client's call. If he had, even if it was to tell her that he wouldn't be able to install the system before the vacation, she at least wouldn't have suspected that he'd run off with her money.

There's a few lessons in all of this:

► Always respond to your customers' e-mails, phone calls or pages. It really doesn't take that much time, especially if you make it brief. It lets them know you're still alive, at least.

► Follow through on your promises but if you can't at least call and explain why. Then tell them when you will be able to start the project so your customer won't go ballistic.

► Don't mess with hotheaded Irish women.

Well, that last statement is probably unfair, not to mention stereotypical. Maybe it should read: Don't create your own headaches. That's exactly what this guy did, and what you should avoid doing.

Contact Jason at 440/891-2623 or e-mail at jstahl@advanstar.com
Inside the Owner's Head

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Your computer: a vital tool

It's often heard in this business, and it always amazes knowledgeable operators. A landscape or lawn care company owner says he's never had a budget, or doesn't know what his costs are. Chances are his business isn't computerized or, if it is, he doesn't understand what it should do for him.

Bob Maffei of Maffei Landscape, Marston Mills, MA, is a smart owner, but even he admits he's traveled a long road with his computer systems and it's taught him a thing or two along the way.

"If you're just starting things or only have one or two machines, you're in luck," Maffei says. "Do all you can to research your software and your vendor. Changes are not so easy to implement as you travel further down the road."

Maffei describes his initial hardware choices as "just plain poor." He relied too much on information he received from local computer dealers.

"Think big," Maffei advises. "Find a top-notch dealer and run away...far away from the mom and pop or 'I do computers at night' guys."

Bill Gerhardt of GreenScapes Landscape Architects and Contractors says he'd do things differently too if he was starting over.

"I would spend more time on training our managers on using the software more," he says. "We're always struggling with getting everyone up to speed."

A vital tool

Computers are a vital tool in all industries today and landscaping is no exception, although some people still want to believe they can do without them.

"When I started my business 20 years ago I never thought or pictured myself using the computer this much," says Bruno Pillari of Pillari Brothers, Howell, NJ. "My advice to the new entrepreneur is to learn to use it proficiently."

Pillari says you'll also be able to maximize the benefit your computer system offers by knowing your business. "Think about the ways you'll be using the computer," he says. "Think about everything — financial information, tracking and accountability, communication, scheduling. Then do your homework. They're all part of the company."

Tips for starting a computer system right

► Research software
► Research vendor
► Learn how to use it well
► Know your business
► Be prepared to upgrade in future
► Have a plan to back up important data

"Be ready for change"

As important as it is to start off on the right foot with computer systems, it's equally important to make necessary changes as your company grows and changes.

"When starting fresh with a computer system, think of the process as ever-changing," advises Heather Schuster of TerraFirma Landscape, Muskego, WI. "Budget every year for upgrades in software, hardware and 'userware' (education). Don't freak out like I do that computers have built-in obsolescence — you'll only make yourself nuts."

Schuster makes a good point that the more you rely on computers, the more vulnerable you are to data loss. That's why she has what she calls "triple redundancy." "Our server has a mirrored hard drive, and we back up the server to two different tape backups every night. We also have a battery power protector that shuts down the server in case of an extended power outage."

— Information provided by the Owners' Network, www.owners1.com, a program of JP Horizons.