



A Letter To CEOs

By Monroe S. Miller

Like most of the letters which appear in the editorial sections of our daily newspapers, this one is being written under the stress of frustration and anger.

What has me upset is the equipment that manufacturers are turning loose in our marketplace. Too much of it is poorly assembled, poorly engineered and even poorly conceived. Some of it's just plain junk. I wonder if the people who run our turfgrass manufacturing companies — the CEOs — have a clue to how many of us feel.

I am becoming weary of dealing with equipment problems. I'm tired of hearing all the excuses, and your companies have the dictionary on those. I am sick and tired of having to buy four aerifiers to keep three running; of having to buy six mowers to keep three on the golf course. I find it incredulous that my new sprayer was a year and two months old before it functioned like it should have when it was delivered.

I've had it with overpriced parts — the morphodite wire size in a throttle cable, for example. "You have to buy the whole assembly," my distributor said.

Frankly, I'm worried about your companies. Despite the good times you're having now, I think you are headed down the same stupid path the American auto industry has been travelling.

When the foreigners decide to get into your business in a substantial way, I'm afraid some of you will be hurt badly. You might even be forced out of business. If you haven't noticed, most overseas companies, especially those from the "J" country, make good products.

There will always be some like me who put a premium on "Made in America".

But believe me when I tell you a whole lot of my colleagues don't care where a piece of iron is made. They will buy the one that works the best or the one that offers the best value.

Even those of us who may remain clinging to your products for whatever reason — nationalism, patriotism, customer loyalty — are going to give up sooner or later.

Here's an example of what happens. I purchased a Pontiac 6000 in 1982. The car was bad news from the day I picked it up (from a very marginal dealer). I ultimately returned to that dealer 23 times for warranty work and repairs. No appointments accepted by the dealer. No loaner car. Sometimes that car was at the dealer for two weeks — no parts. When it was out of warranty, I had to pay the bills — transmission, engine, etc.

I will never own another GM car. Ever. My bitterness remains. Not long ago, GM closed the Framingham, Massachusetts factory where that lousy Pontiac was built. I shouted for joy! "Serves the incompetent bastards right," I said.

How sad. Four thousand Americans out of work because of poor management. GM sold so much junk that a lot of

people like me vowed not to buy any more of it. Check and see how their market share in the U.S. has dropped.

Could that ever happen to your company? You bet it could.

Unless you do better. You have to do better. But instead of doing better, I see a lot of short term orientation of your companies. I see underinvestment in solid and creative research and development, and I see the beginnings of merger-mania in your businesses.

You lack innovation in the pieces you're bringing to our marketplace. Worse yet, you lack quality. **QUALITY**. Quality costs more, but it also wears well. Most of us will pay for **QUALITY**. We are sick of paying for junk. You need to promote high standards within your companies. Your obvious attitude of "good enough" won't be good enough for much longer.

If you decide to put quality in all the machinery you make (I'll believe that when I see it), then you have to go beyond even that. You must work for complete customer satisfaction.

"Who," you may ask, "does this guy think he is, preaching like this? What does he know? He's probably just some chronic complainer."

Well, I'll tell you who I am. I'm your **CUSTOMER**, a loyal and long-standing (and suffering) customer. I am the ultimate authority on your business and management. I'm speaking from personal experience.

And I'll tell you one other secret, a secret that doesn't require an MBA from a prestigious business school to figure out: **THE CUSTOMER IS KING**.

I am very proud of Wisconsin's agricultural heritage, and an important part of that heritage is her strong agricultural manufacturing history. This story I'm about to tell is about one of those manufacturers. The lesson from the story is obvious and powerful.

Jerome Increase Case founded the J.I. Case Company in 1842. Case manufactured threshing machines and steam engines in those earlier years. Case equipment was known for its quality and fair price.

This story proved Case's dedication to fairness and quality. It started in 1884 on a farm near Faribault, Minnesota. By this time, J.I. Case himself was an internationally-known industrialist. A new wooden threshing rig was belted to a traction steam engine. The engine was working well, but they were having trouble with the Case separator. It had just been delivered from the dealer in Faribault. When it was working it consumed too much power and the grain wasn't threshed clean.

The farmer complained to the Case company field representative who rushed out to adjust the machine, but to no avail. The dealer contacted the factory in Racine and they sent out their best troubleshooter.

(Continued on page 19)

(Continued from page 17)

He arrived at the farm, worked on the machine, but couldn't make the repair either. He telegraphed the company with this recommendation: "Take the faulty rig back and send the farmer a new one, or refund his money."

The factory agent received an immediate reply: "Am taking next train (stop) Meet me in Faribault (stop) J.I. Case."

Despite his 65 years, the world-famous industrialist was coming to fix the machine himself!

The founder and head of the J.I. Case Threshing Machine Company of Racine, Wisconsin was riding the train across the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota, all so a farmer was assured that Case did not take his responsibilities lightly. All Case threshing machines were warranted over the big, bold signature of J.I. Case himself.

As Case moved from Racine toward Rice County, Minnesota at 20 MPH, he recalled the many years he handled ALL complaints personally, just as he was doing now, by going to the farmers who had the problems. Never had he been unable to repair and adjust even the balkiest machine in all those years.

Word got around the county that old man Case was coming to fix that threshing machine. When his train arrived in Faribault, a substantial crowd had gathered to see the famous J.I. Case.

An hour or so after he arrived at the farm, he ordered the machine started. He fed grain into it for a while and then had it stopped. For the next four hours, as twilight had started to fall, the machine was started and stopped time and time again.

That machine that had defied the dealer and the field representative and the factory troubleshooter now stumped J.I. Case.

Case, his pride hurt, turned to the farmer and asked:

"Have you a sizable can of kerosene handy?"

The farmer nodded and brought the kerosene to Case. Without a word he proceeded to douse the threshing machine from one end to the other. Calmly striking a match, he put it to the thresher, lighting the night by the flames of a brand new Case thresher.

Case was filled with anger that a piece of bad workmanship had been permitted to leave his Racine factory. The direct manner with which he resolved the matter was evidence of his commitment to quality. The farmer was delivered a new threshing machine within 24 hours.

Word of the burning spread quickly. His act proved that J.I. Case and his company stood by their product guarantee.

The lessons of quality and integrity and responsibility apparently need to be relearned by far too many of the companies in our turfgrass business. Jerome Case understood that THE CUSTOMER IS KING. Too many golf course superintendents like myself have many pieces of turf equipment deserving of Case's kerosene treatment.

The stakes for you and your companies are high and going higher; competition will be more fierce. Some of you have a big hole to dig yourselves out of. Your work is cut out for you. You'll need to open the doors and windows of your companies and ask questions. Talk to us. Find out what we need. Then build it in the best way possible.

We are in a time of rapid change. The old habits and ways of doing things aren't going to get you much farther. Work on your strengths and attack your obvious weaknesses. Hire the engineers who can do the job. Be tough-minded in your planning and ambitious in your goals.

We want you to succeed. We are counting on you. Please don't let us down. Show us you subscribe to the philosophy held so tightly by Jerome I. Case over 100 years ago.

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