

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONALISM IN THE
LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Robert E. Scobee,
Market Development Manager
The Andersons Lawn Fertilizer Division

Maintaining professionalism is one of the most important issues facing the Lawn Care Industry today. Professionalism is the "lifeblood" of, any industry and determines its complexion and longevity.

In order to adequately discuss the basic elements of professionalism and its importance, I would like to start out with some pertinent definitions.

The lawn care industry is composed of the entire group of people providing "outdoor visual pleasure" to the real estate owners of the world. Simplified into groups, we can think in terms of the traditional components of business: research, manufacturing, distribution, marketing and service. In other words, it is "us."

By definition, a profession is a vocation or occupation requiring advanced education, training, and intellectual skills. The term, "professional" can be used in two ways according to the dictionary. As a "noun," a professional is a person who does something with great skill. Used as an "adjective," a professional is a person worthy of the high standards of a profession. In other words, we are only worthy of being called a "professional" (adj.) if we perform our jobs with skill above and beyond the ordinary. To refer to one's self as a "professional" and not be willing to see to it that you, and those over whom you are responsible for, perform their job with great skill, you are doing a disservice not only to yourself, but to the entire Lawn Care Industry.

Is lawn care a profession? Sure it is, and a very important one. We have a tremendous responsibility, not only in terms of managing successful businesses providing a needed service, but also in insuring the good health of our employees and customers, as well as protecting and preserving our environment. That requires a tremendous amount of advanced education and knowledge.

The lawn care industry is a growth industry, dynamic and changing rapidly which requires ongoing training in order to stay current with new technology, techniques and regulations. Certainly all of this could not be performed by people without a high level of education and skills.

A professional in the "noun" form is "looking," "being," and "leading." "Looking" is concern for yourself as well as the overall industry image. This includes such things as products used, dress, facilities, equipment, speech, conduct, and attitude.

"Being" is having the technical knowledge required to perform the services expected by the consumer. A professional knows the rules and follows them, and above all else, a professional never questions ethics.

"Leading" is getting involved in such organizations as the PLCAA, Michigan Turf Foundation, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, etc - three quarters of the people don't. A professional not only maintains the standards, but helps set them. Professionals do not follow unethical practices. Employee development and teaching others is a vital role that must be performed.

Professionals are the gatekeepers and the unifying force for any industry or profession. The same basic driving forces in a free enterprise system such as ours can also be the enemies of professionalism:

1. Growth - Can take a professional, well-managed company and turn it into an uncontrolled, poorly-managed operation overnight through lack of management control.
2. Competition - Growing and attracting new customers results in innovative ideas and fierce competition. This strains the fiber of the industry. The point is that when the limits are exceeded, the image of the industry can be eroded.
3. Profitability - The temptation is always present to cut quality of service or quality of products. Remember, there is no lasting formula that does not include quality. A growth industry allows short-term profits at the expense of quality. Don't fall into this trap.

Who judges professionalism? The customer is not only the judge, but also the jury. In other words, the customer has all of the power:

1. He chooses.
2. He has the influence.
3. He determines the laws.

The Wall Street Journal recently ran an article based on the auto industry data concerning customer satisfaction with quality. In the survey, they determined that a satisfied customer will tell eight people. A dissatisfied customer will tell 22 people.

It is imperative that you know your customers. The majority of the lawn care market is composed of white collar workers and they will judge you by the standards of their industry.

In summary, my proposal is that each of you must become a "professional professional" in everything you do. Be the epitome:

Look professional.

Act professional.

Lead as a professional.