

Successful Arborists Today Are Good Business Managers

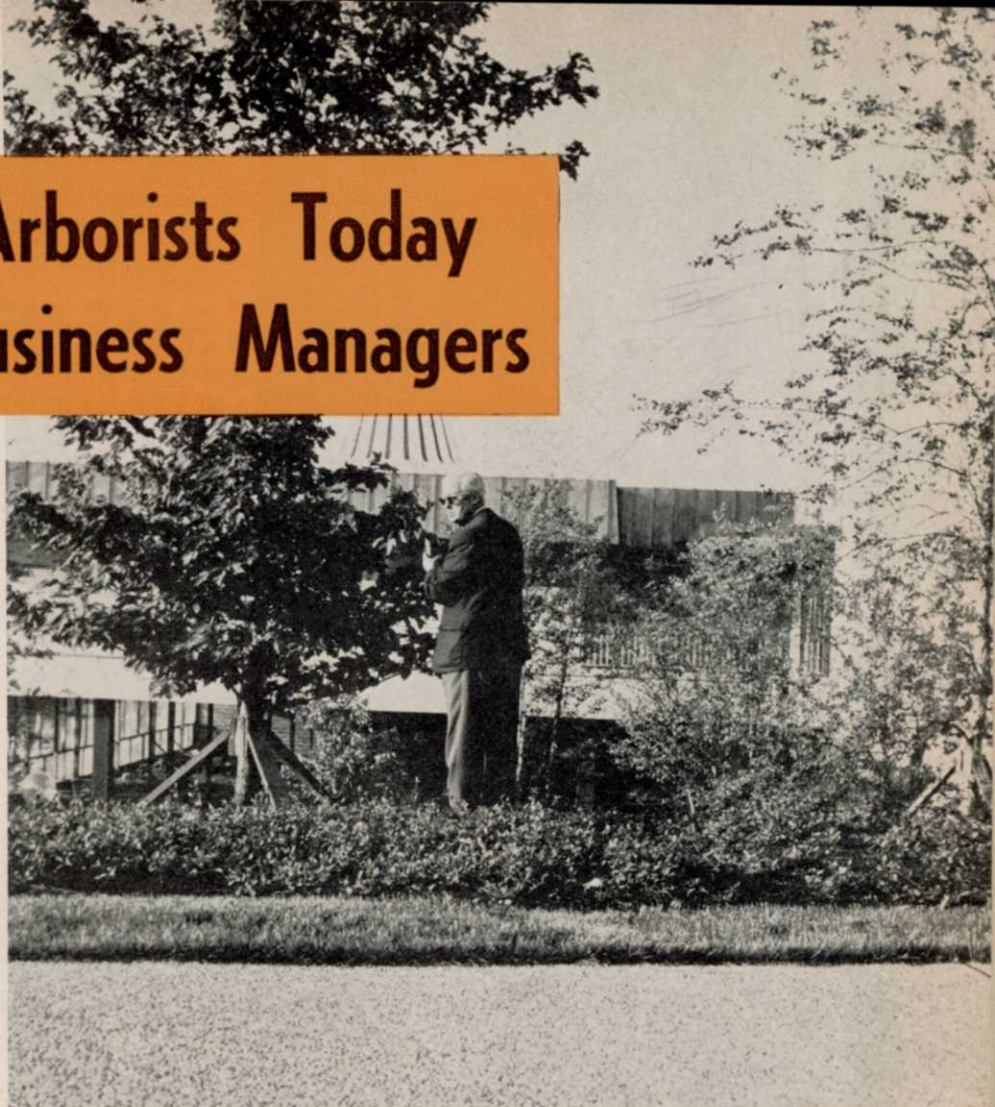
A WTT staff report based on an interview with F. L. Dinsmore, founder and senior partner of Dinsmore Tree Service Company, St. Louis, Mo.



Knowing how to grow and care for trees doesn't insure success in the tree business today. The arborist has found he has had to become a businessman, and a good one to survive. Experience in tree culture is still a valuable asset. The same can be said for customer service. But experience and happy customers do not guarantee the income needed to pay labor, maintain a modern office, carry liability insurance, and buy the expensive equipment needed to operate.

These are facts of the business. Successful arborists accept them. Typical among those who represent the operator today is F. Lewis Dinsmore, Dinsmore Tree Service, St. Louis, Mo. Dinsmore has spent 40 years in the business as an employe, as a self-employed lone operator, and as manager and owner of a going concern for the past 35 years. He is a businessman.

Experience coupled with business acumen has paid dividends for Dinsmore. He uses experience to keep shop time to a minimum. Shop time is the unproductive hours when employes are on the payroll and earn time which cannot be assigned to a particular job. This reduction in shop time and a number of business principles combine to make the Dinsmore Tree Service one of the best in the country. Dins-



Planners for Northwest Plaza Shopping Center, St. Louis, Mo., one of world's largest, included 600 trees in the development to enhance its beauty. F. Lewis Dinsmore, checking newly planted tree, was one of 4 Metropolitan St. Louis arborists invited to bid on the planting. Result was that the 4 pooled their bids and handled the job on a partnership basis to the mutual benefit of both developer and tree companies. Partners in the major venture were Teston Tree Treatment Company, Suburban Tree Service, Shield Shade Tree Specialists, Inc., and Dinsmore Tree Service.

more's practices are the type which have been used by many arborists, some more successfully than others. Though by some standards Dinsmore's operation, which consists of about 20 employes, is small, it is typical of the vast majority of tree service businesses today.

Take his rules for keeping down shop time hours. They have come as a result of experience and service to longtime customers. Rule No. 1 consists of zoning the St. Louis area. In short, Dinsmore has laid out his own system of zoning to fit the areas he serves. He covers the greater metropolitan St. Louis area but still finds his business concentrated more in some areas than in others. In determining size and scope of zones, the num-

ber of customers and the type of business is taken into consideration. Each foreman is assigned a zone for which he becomes responsible. This works especially well for the usual types of spraying, but tree work is also handled in this manner. By having a zone to work, foremen save travel and route time by careful scheduling. They do very little backtracking. "Jobs are not handled as they come in but by where they are located, that is," Dinsmore says, "if people will stand for it." Spray work, for example, is scheduled in advance to take advantage of the zone system. Customers are assured that their work will be done "at the proper time."

Annual service contracts are perhaps as important as any one factor in reducing unproductive



Attractive and modern office headquarters which is located in affluent suburban area has proved a business asset for Dinsmore Tree Service. Formerly, warehouse and tree lot were located at side and behind this building. When the site became a high tax area, Dinsmore purchased outlying land for a new warehouse and built 5 adjacent store buildings which he now leases to retail businesses.

jobs. This, he says, eliminates the lost time crews use by stopping for coffee enroute to the job. Further, it boosts employee morale and saves the worker spending out-of-pocket change on the job. The employe thinks the free coffee and donuts are a good deal, and a favor from the company. Dinsmore believes this practice does more than save time. Along with the banter, normal in a coffee session, he finds that the men exchange job experience and gain from the morning sessions.

hours. These, coupled with new jobs permit foremen more leeway in scheduling. Summer spraying and dormant oil spraying during late winter or early spring can be scheduled well in advance and an efficient route schedule planned.

Many longtime customers are not on annual service contracts but expect Dinsmore Tree Service to provide them regular service. Dinsmore reaches these people, and others as well, by mail. He uses direct mail service to about 3000 selected customers each month. These mail pieces are reminders to call in for service, aimed at keeping last minute scheduling to a minimum. Just because Dinsmore provides a service to a customer in his prime target area does not qualify that customer for direct mail service. This service is limited to longtime private and commercial customers rather than to the customers who only use a professional arborist for emergency and special jobs. Copy in the direct mail pieces usually concerns spraying, tree moving, and general tree care. He also reminds customers that trees are available.

Direct mail is the only type of advertising which Dinsmore uses on a regular basis. Like other businessmen he supports community ventures such as school yearbooks and the like. But general advertising as such has never been a practice of the company. He has found that regular customers and referrals have combined to keep his crews busy through the years. Much of this

must be attributed to providing good service at a fair price.

Dinsmore readily admits that profits in the business today depend on spraying and tree moving. This makes careful scheduling and timely service even more important. Recognizing this, general tree work is planned around these more profitable phases of the business and used to keep men employed.

When conditions are unfit for spraying, such as on mildly windy days, men can be deployed to pick up waiting tree work.

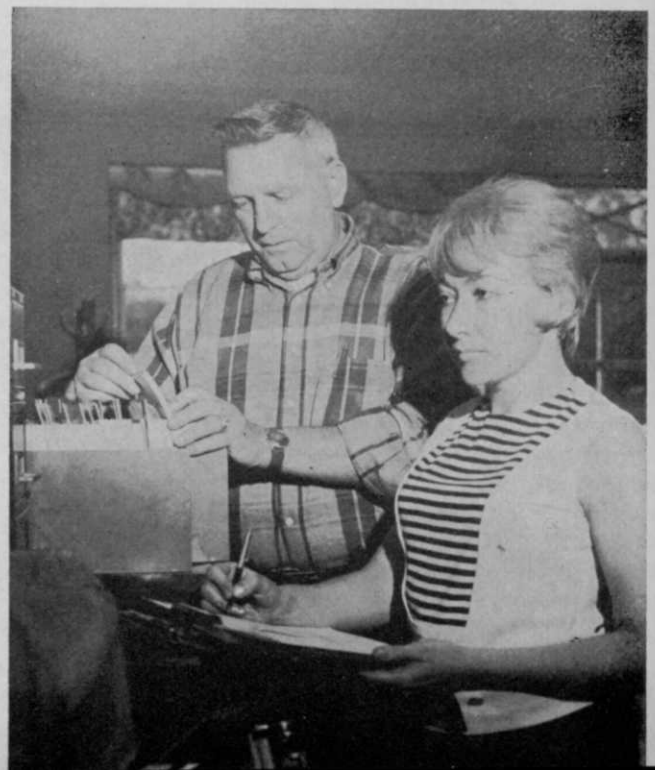
Free coffee also cuts unproductive hours. Dinsmore keeps a big coffee urn full of fresh brew for his crews; has it ready along with donuts or cookies a half hour before they leave on

Foreman Lives At Site of Nursery

Another shop time saver is housing one foreman, Harry Elkins, in a home at the nursery. Elkins does the tree digging with power equipment and is always on hand to help the driver load a tree. This saves sending an extra man along to pick up the usual tree. Also, if the wind is too high for spraying, Elkins stays on the job at the nursery. Here, there is always work filling holes and lining out new seedlings. Besides replacing trees in the nursery lost by sales, Dinsmore has been increasing his nursery tree stock at a rate of about one acre each year. This permits him to keep up with the increased demand.

Power equipment used to dig trees consists primarily of a Da-

Carl Hess, left, will shortly celebrate his 35th anniversary of service with Dinsmore Tree Service. Assisting him in checking scheduling is Mrs. Charlotte Allen who has become a specialist in handling telephone customers.



vis trencher with hillside attachment. Dinsmore says a square trench is dug some 6 to 8 inches greater than diameter of the ball will be. Once trenching is done, roots are fine cut with a sharp spade and the ball hand shaped round with the spade.

Finally, Dinsmore follows the practice of keeping well-trained men as the hard core of his business. These men are hired on a full-time basis and guaranteed year-round labor. Part-time help is hired for seasonal work.

Probably more important than the productive hours saved by Dinsmore's management practices is his business acumen. He uses the best principles now available to the small businessmen. An auditor furnishes him a monthly report. This report, drawn by the auditor from book-keeping entries supplied by Dinsmore's Girl Friday, gives costs of sales, a statement of condition of the business, and a profit-and-loss statement. He uses this monthly information on which to base his prices. Dinsmore operates on the theory that you can't wait the better part of a season to learn whether the small percentage increase being paid for materials is affecting the profit structure. He doesn't believe price is the key factor in gaining and holding customers. Most of the private customers who make up 80% of his business, and the remaining 20% who are commercial accounts, are more interested in service and reliability than in a few dollars less on the cost of a job.

Clients Select Own Trees

Another business practice aimed at client satisfaction is making sure that trees planted by the company fit the location and surroundings and give the effect which the purchaser is seeking. For this reason, Dinsmore shows his nursery trees by appointment. In the case of a homeowner, if he isn't familiar with the homesite Dinsmore makes arrangements to pick up the husband and wife. This lets him assess the situation and later guide them in selection at the nursery. Some 99% of his customers tag their own trees at the

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nursery. Dinsmore selects trees only for commercial accounts and a very few longtime customers. Occasionally he will select a tree for a client after making it clear that once the tree is planted it cannot be returned. Through the years this practice has paid dividends in customer relations. He finds that once customers have selected a tree and have it planted at their home, they are always pleasantly surprised at how much greater in size the tree appears. This is a plus factor common to the business. If a customer questions price of a tree, Dinsmore frankly appraises them of the fact that the arborist is primarily selling time, meaning the time to grow the large, carefully nurtured shade tree.

Large Accounts Usually Advantageous

Big, new commercial developments are tempting to the arborist. The chance to bid and win the big account is usually advantageous, but for only one year. This may be good, but it can usually be handled only by sacrificing service to regular accounts. When Dinsmore was one of four St. Louis tree companies invited to bid on the huge, new St. Louis Northwest Shopping Center tree program, a center which is one of the largest in the world and which has probably spent more to beautify the area with trees than any, he first considered the effect this one-season project would have on his business. As a result, he got together with the three other companies invited to bid and suggested they pool their efforts and resources and submit one bid. This proved to be satisfactory with the developer and a happy arrangement for the arborists. Result was that the four divided the 600-tree job both dollarwise and by numbers and each was able to supply the type of trees most available to him via his nursery or other channels. In this way, all were able to handle what has proved to be a masterful accomplishment and at the time protect service to their regular customers. Dinsmore regularly handles a number of large

commercial accounts including McDonald Aircraft, Monsanto and others.

A business practice available to any arborist is that of studying the practices of others in the business. Dinsmore reports that through the years he has carefully studied large operators, applying some of the principles to his own business. For example, he has moved when necessary. He found that increased taxes made his warehouse and tree sales lot too valuable a property for these purposes. So he purchased a site about one mile from the original office and warehouse and built a new 4000 square foot building to fit his operation. He maintained his headquarters and office at the original site and built five additional store buildings which he rents to suburban Ladue retail outlets. Also, he has bought and sold nursery acreage and at the same time retained the most valuable portion of his original nursery.

Equipment must be kept busy to be profitable. Dinsmore buys equipment as needed, but will not purchase equipment which he cannot justify despite the temptation. He says it is impossible to justify the price of a crane since it cannot be used on a regular basis. When the need arises, he leases a Bucyrus-Erie crane with 90' boom. Cost including an experienced operator is only \$20 per hour. This is used to take down large trees and to plant trees on terraces, permitting the firm to take jobs which originally could not be handled. Also rented as needed is a low-boy truck since this is another piece of equipment seldom used.

Dinsmore originally started his career in 1928 as a tree man with the Davey Tree Company. After a short training period, he started working with Davey at Portland, Me., and later at Boston, Mass. He started on his own in a small way in 1931. Dinsmore believes that establishing a nursery was probably the big step toward success and growth in his business. Prior to this he had to locate available trees and cart his customers to them. He started the first trees at the

nursery in 1935. All are planted in three or four rows on 12'x12' squares beside 20' roadways. This permits easy access for care and removal. Dinsmore now has about 70 species of deciduous trees in the 110-acre nursery, all of which is not yet in trees.

Associated with Dinsmore in the business is his brother, W. T. Dinsmore, who owns a minority

share and is also a longtime arborist. W. T., known among arborists as "Red," lives on a farm 24 miles southwest of the Ladue office and maintains a small tree nursery along with working actively on a full-time basis in the business.

For the future, Dinsmore predicts an acceleration in business

for the industry. More people with greater appreciation for tree beauty will continue to increase the demand. Dinsmore points to the growth of garden clubs, the moving of businesses from railroad sidings to highways where they are developed into showplaces, and overall strength of the economy. These factors, he believes, are keys.

Dinsmore Shop Time Savers

1. Zoning the area served to save backtracking by crews.
2. Annual service contracts for advance scheduling.
3. Direct mail to regular clients as reminders for coming seasonal work and to help increase advance scheduling.
4. General tree work handled during slow periods.
5. Company coffee to eliminate enroute coffee stops.
6. Housing located at nursery site.
7. Maintaining hard core of year-round experienced men and supplementing with part-time labor.

Dinsmore Business Principles

1. Use of monthly audit report on which to base many business decisions.
2. Assuring client satisfaction by getting buyers to select and tag own trees.
3. Protecting service to regular private and commercial clients by careful selection of new and large commercial accounts which might jeopardize company's record for customer service.
4. Studying business practices of other arborists, particularly large operators, for principles applicable to his own business.
5. Leasing equipment which is expensive and necessary only for infrequent jobs.
6. Maintaining own nursery.

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