



Professional Image and Service Build

Lawn Care Business

By Edward G. Dickson

THE day that Astronaut John H. Glenn, Jr., became the first American in orbit, Feb. 20, 1962, was the day that Ronald W. Collins started in the lawn spraying business in the area around Cape Canaveral, now Cape Kennedy.

Space-age engineers and other technicians employed in this Florida missile center were "crying for" service to halt chinch bug inroads on their St. Augustine lawns. R. W. Collins Lawn Spraying, Inc., was in demand from that first day. The business thrived almost immediately.

But Collins was interested in more than just the ready money to be earned. He was in the missile area "to stay" and was determined to sell a "professional image" of his firm.

He put shining-clean trucks on the roads. He put his sprayers in white uniforms, with red headgear. He put low-key canvassers into the residential areas to explain his services and answer

questions about lawn care, with no quick signing of contracts.

Most significant, Collins believes, was the professional role which the company assumed. A concrete spraying program was offered, and with it, an attitude that "we are the specialists in this field, the professionals—we'll tell you what you need in a spray program."

Most of the homeowners in the Cape area were engineers or in some other professional type of work, and Collins feels that they respected his organization for its professional approach.

He has continued to stress the professional image during the growth of the company, which now has some 8000 customers under yearly contract and conducts up to 3000 single custom sprayings in a year. From the headquarters in little Indian Harbour Beach — one of the coastal missile communities—R. W. Collins Lawn Spraying, Inc., has spread in a band across

central Florida to the west coast around St. Petersburg. Some of this expansion has come through purchases of existing spray companies; part of it has been by development of new branches. Collins says frankly that he hopes to become statewide in his operations.

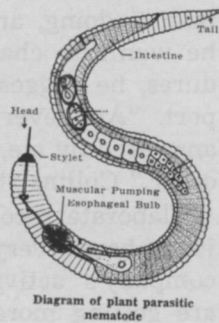
Varied Contracts

Already, he has been able to meld different types of spraying operations into an organization which can oversee and control these differences. For example, the primary business around Cape Kennedy is in yearly \$60

Owner Ronald W. Collins spends considerable time on telephone and in travel in managing business.



Some Facts On Turf Nematodes



R. W. COLLINS LAWN SPRAYING, INC.

Booklet produced by Collins explains nematode problem and helps in selling nematode control accounts.



Collins horticulturist Ron Wetzel inspects drainage ditch preparatory to making contract bid.

contracts for chinch bug control in the summer and fertilizing in the winter. The standard contract calls for three chinch bug sprays and three fertilizer applications. But, in the St. Petersburg branch (one acquired by purchase) almost all of the sprayings are custom applications. Lawns in this area are mostly Bahia, and are chinch-bug free. But they need fertilizing and other pesticides, and Collins provides them as required for maintenance.

Treatment of nematodes in lawns, and various types of weed control, both in residential lawns and in industrial areas, are becoming increasingly prominent in the Collins program. Other specialized applications are available, such as fungus control; for mole crickets, army worms, sod web worm; tree and shrub spraying; and citrus spraying.

On weed control, for example, Collins recently handled a \$13,000 contract for the city of Rockledge for clearing drainage ditches of weeds. Another \$13,000 contract with a public utility company was for a soil sterilization program at the utility's distributing stations.

Nematode control has been built up by distribution of a special pamphlet explaining nematodes and the damage they do. Collins uses this pamphlet as a

stuffer in bills to his regular customers, since all contract customers could be prospects for this special treatment. In addition, the pamphlet goes to other prospects on his direct mail list—names which have been acquired by canvassing and from other sources.

Collins feels that the company's internal policies have had much to do with the success in building a professional image in the communities served.

Good Communications

Communications is emphasized. For every employee, there is a written definition of what his job is, what he is supposed to do and how to do it, and what the company wants to do for him. Every situation which can be anticipated is considered and written instructions are provided.

"I want every decision in this company to be made at the lowest possible effective level," Collins explains. "And I want no overlapping of responsibilities. You have to have faith in the people who are doing the work and expect them to make the right decisions."

The series of manuals, which starts with an employees' handbook and works upward in the management to include operations and training manuals which

spell out all policies and procedures, is the product of the company's experiences over more than six years.

All employees are expected to follow their manuals to the letter. But they are not shut out from suggesting change. Suggestions are encouraged as part of an "open door policy," Collins says. A lot of the regulations and policies included in the various manuals have come about as a result of such suggestions, he explains.

An illustration of how this system of manuals works: in developing a training program, Collins and the men who instruct new employees found, by experience, that if a man in training for spray work is exposed to his duties four times on each subject, he will have absorbed it. Thus, the training program calls for four sessions of instruction on any particular subject, and detailed records are kept to be certain this new man has had his proper allotment of instruction.

Manuals for Instructions

By outlining duties and procedures, the manuals represent Collins' communication of instructions to his men. His men, in turn, communicate to him on how things are going with a series of reports.



Ron Wetzel, firm horticulturist discusses spray needs with customer at Indian Harbour Beach, Fla.



Evidence of chinch bugs is found by route man Roy Bickey and fertilizer and insecticide mixed.



Branch Manager Tom Mincey, left, works with Less Saterwhite in on-the-job training program.

Each branch manager and each supervisor compiles a monthly report covering his jurisdiction. In it he tells what each man is doing, and how well. If he wants to change any procedures, he suggests it in the report. "And every suggestion is answered by me, one way or another," Collins states.

Elaborate records are kept of just about every phase of the company's activities and these are getting more involved and, Collins believes, more important to effective management as the company expands.

The company now has six distinct operations, or branches, including the headquarters at Indian Harbour Beach. Two of these branches were acquired by purchase of existing firms, and Collins hopes to expand into other parts of the state through more purchases. At the same time, he is advancing his experienced men to develop new territories for him as part of the expansion. One, for example, is Ken Hudson. He started as a sprayman. He built a territory up to 1500 customers. Now he has been put in charge of developing a branch in the Winter Park area.

With the exception of Ron Wentzel, all the Collins people in key positions today have been advanced from the ranks. Wentzel, a graduate horticulturist, came to the firm as a professional. He is in charge of the weed control program, both in sales and in procedures. Some of his other duties are training men to take the state's licensing exam for pest control operator certificate, and keeping supervisors abreast of new developments in the insect control field.

Collins has incentive programs for both spraymen and branch managers.

Bonuses for Associates

One sprayman, Dick Osborne, has earned more than \$1000 in bonuses in four years, with an

over-all average during that time of having to re-spray less than half of one percent of the lawns he had serviced. Each month, the company awards \$50 to the sprayman with the lowest percent of re-sprays during the month. For the year there are additional awards ranging from \$150 down to \$25 for the best percentages. Collins is planning to replace this incentive system with one giving an award every month to each sprayman achieving a certain record on re-sprays. This system would not restrict the bonus to the best performer, but to any sprayman making a commendable record.

Branch managers and area supervisors are eligible for bonus payments based on the gross business they handle. In the formula by which this is calculated, there is provision for a penalty for each re-spray required in that man's territory.

Collins uses canvassing in building new business, but these men are not paid on a commission basis. They are paid either by the hour or by salary. Often it is the area supervisor or the branch manager who conducts this low-key selling, Collins said.

The canvassers answer questions, suggest possible services, give home-owners tips on how to maintain their lawns, and almost never sign up a customer on that first call.

"We want these prospects to seriously think about the spray service before they sign a contract for \$60," Collins says. If they really want the service, they will call and ask for it.

Advertising Used

Collins uses newspaper and radio advertising to build business, and once a month has a direct mail distribution. Some of the direct mail pieces are news-letter type, telling the home-owner how to care for his lawn. When Collins decided to go after a big volume of business in the Winter Park area recently, he arranged

for a special newspaper supplement of eight pages, and color on front and back pages, to be distributed by the Orlando SENTINEL-STAR in that part of its territory which Collins was most interested in. The supplement and its distribution, as part of the Sunday edition, cost about \$1100.

In the territory he serves, Collins has an average of 12 percent of the homes as his customers. He says he can ride through an area and come out with an estimate, which later proves accurate, of the amount of business he can develop in the area.

One of the phases on which the

Collins has standardized on 1000-gallon tank trucks, with 225-gallon drop tanks. The pumps are 25-gallon per minute, driven by the power take-off. Bodies for the trucks are custom built, mostly because each one is changed or improved in some respect, Collins explains.

Two men handle the scheduling for the routes immediately around Indian Harbour Beach. They make up the routings at night, to be able to incorporate the orders for special sprayings which have come in during the day. Thus, most of the special applications are taken care of within 24 hours. Wednesday is



Typical contract spraying application by R. W. Collins unit at Eau Gallie, Fla. Because of weight, trucks are always parked on street rather than using driveways.

Collins company places much stress is complaints. No sprayman is permitted to handle a complaint by himself. His supervisor must be notified and is responsible for taking care of the complaint. Remedial action must be taken quickly. "A complaint honestly handled right away probably will cause no great problem," Collins states. "But if it's not quickly handled, it may become a real problem." He follows the same principal in handling complaints within the company.

weed control application day. This work is concentrated into one day so that tanks need to be flushed out only at the end of the day. As many trucks as are required can be earmarked for the Wednesday assignments.

Regular employees receive two weeks paid vacations, five paid holidays, twice-daily coffee breaks. The company is soon to go into a group insurance plan, covering life insurance, hospitalization and major medical, for its 40 employees.