

Lawn Care Business is Changing . . . Are You?

By STANLEY L. WEBER, Executive Vice President, Lawn Maker, Inc.

IT IS generally recognized that the custom lawn service segment of the Green Industry has grown very rapidly over the past decade and that this expansion will probably continue briskly in the foreseeable future.

As WEEDS TREES & TURF suggested in a recent editorial (July, 1975), homeowners have been especially receptive to the idea of paying a professional to apply the required seed, chemicals and fertilizer to their lawns as well as aerating and dethatching.

The development of specialized multi-function power equipment in the early 1960's, along with the adaption of spray techniques, made it possible for the properly equipped professional to offer an attractively priced, comprehensive application service which included all materials and labor for about what the homeowner would pay if he bought or rented the materials and necessary equipment and did the work himself. In addition to doing the job very economically, the conscientious professional was also able to get better results than the do-it-yourselfer.

Along with the advent of time and labor saving "one pass over the lawn" equipment, which made this concept possible and profitable, the other key to the explosive growth of the custom lawn service market was the use of modern, hard-hitting selling and merchandising techniques that made the homeowner aware of the value that awaited him and tempted him to try it.

Unfortunately, the professional was very slow to recognize the potential impact of this combination on the largely untapped and highly lucrative do-it-yourself market. Equally sad is the fact that, even today, a majority of professionals still view low-cost custom

application as a passing fad, hoping it will eventually go away. It hasn't . . . and it won't . . . and by ignoring a major marketing change that was taking place right before his eyes the professional has already forfeited a large part of a market segment that he should have been enjoying.

Back around 1960, it was the established lawn maintenance or landscaping operator who initially disparaged the idea that the average homeowner would ever simply buy an economical custom application program for his lawn, without the labor-intensive, time-consuming mowing, trimming and clean-ups that he thought was indispensable to attract and hold a customer.

The developers of the early multi-function equipment first offered it to the logical users, the professionals already active in the industry. They were turned down cold, because the equipment and the concept represented radical change from the time-honored (but less profitable) way of doing business. The developers tried mightily to change these long established habit patterns, and they failed.

Frustrated in their attempts to introduce their equipment to the professionals, the manufacturers went outside the industry and franchised it to laymen who were simply seeking new and promising business opportunities.

Because virtually all of these early custom applicators were recent laymen, without preconceptions or rigid opinions about marketing, they approached the subject openmindedly as businessmen. Their consumer literature; flyers, mailers, instruction sheets were professionally created, bright, lively, informative, attention getting and, above all, persuasive.

They gave away premiums and

souvenirs. They used doorknob hangers and posters. Their vehicles and equipment were attractively and professionally lettered and decorated. Every piece of paper they used in dealing with the public, including the service agreement signed by the customer, was designed to project a modern, efficient image.

The customer received clear, informative printed matter explaining exactly what program of applications he was purchasing, approximately when they would be made, their purpose and the precise cost. Misunderstandings were minimized in advance. The customer was advised clearly and forcefully of the results he could reasonably expect and, most importantly, what he should not expect. Special literature clearly advised him about the possible effects of unusual weather conditions and the need for proper watering practices. How many professionals have ever really taken the trouble to do this?

Above all, the new custom applicators advertised consistently, using newspapers, radio, television, direct mail, inserts and billboards that told their story in a lively, provocative way. A fair estimate would be that their annual advertising budgets at the start equalled at least 10 percent of their gross revenues and probably remain at that general level. Whether by accident or design, they succeeded in convincing the public that they were NOT landscapers or mowers of grass, but lawn application **specialists**.

It is ironic that their success stemmed largely from disassociating themselves from the old line professionals who, logically, should have been the users and beneficiaries of the new equipment and marketing concept in the first place.

Perhaps it was because they were

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unencumbered by the past that the new custom applicators paid careful attention to basic marketing details and elementary merchandising logistics. They kept their current and old customer lists up to date and frequently sent informative "Public Service" mailings to both groups. When they signed up new customers, they sent mailings to nearby neighbors, suggesting that the latter observe the results of their applications. This helped keep re-

newal rates high, salvaged "drop outs" and stimulated referrals to other prospects. The name of the game was "volume," and they understood how to achieve it.

The new applicators somehow found the time to check back on each customer's lawn between programmed services, leaving individualized comment forms advising the homeowner of the lawn's progress and condition, doing "touch-ups" and suggesting better watering

and mowing procedures, if needed. What they lacked initially in turf care experience, they more than made up for with business sense. And droves of new customers soon gave them the experience.

In short, the newcomer quickly projected an image of professionalism and the feeling that he really cared about and valued his customer. By educating his customer about the pitfalls and vagaries of residential lawn care, he was able to take full credit for the results he did achieve without raising the homeowner's level of expectation beyond what he could produce.

Amazingly, despite the tremendous past progress and obviously promising future of custom lawn application, and the substantial inroads it has already made into the business of many traditional residential landscapers and lawn maintenance people, most of the entrants into the field continue to be non-professionals.

The records of Lawn Maker, Inc. show that over 65% of sales of multi-function power lawn combines over the past two years were to non-professionals. From all indications, the automated lawn service franchisors also continue to attract a high percentage of previously inexperienced people to their ranks.

WEEDS TREES & TURF was "on target" when it advised that "The time has come when direct mail to key prospects, advertising in local newspapers, and perhaps some TV and radio spots can pay dividends." Equally appropriate was its conclusion that, "As an industry, we know these ideas are not new. But we also know that many in our industry are not capitalizing on these money making areas of their business."

Perhaps WEEDS TREES & TURF was too gentle in its prodding. Despite the great advances that are continually being made through agronomical research, improved chemicals, more efficient equipment and better seed, etc., too many professionals are sadly lacking when it comes to selling their expertise. Having valuable hard-earned field knowledge and experience is not a surefire way to fatten a bank account if you don't let the potential buyers know what you

(continued on page 28)

Horticultural Perlite...

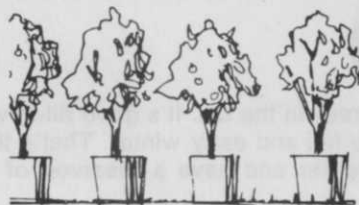
The multi-purpose soil conditioner for turf, containers and propagation.

Professional landscapers and grounds maintenance men have long made Horticultural Perlite one of their main 'tricks of the trade'. It's an ideal soil conditioner that helps promote "a sea of green velvet". You see, by preventing compaction, it keeps the soil loose enabling more oxygen to reach and help nourish the root system. And because Horticultural Perlite also retains three to four times its weight in moisture, it keeps the root network moist long after watering. The result is a beautiful blanket of green growing on a thick healthy, robust root-system that not only keeps grass beautiful, but prevents **golf courses, institutional and campus**

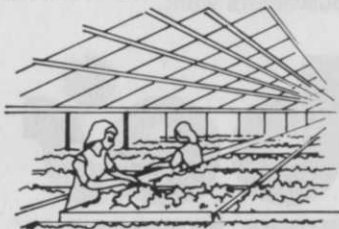


lawns and residential lawns from getting soggy, mushy or soft underfoot.

Nurserymen find Horticultural Perlite practically indispensable for **container grown plants and shrubs** because of its ability to retain around the root environment loose. It is also a great "starting mixture" for transplanted stock as it helps reduce the incidences of transplant shock. And because Horticultural Perlite is sterile and non-toxic, it won't rot, decompose, disintegrate or break down. Nor will it help promote insect life. Being light in weight, Horticultural Perlite makes container moving light work and shipping costs a lighter expense. It's not only ideal for your plants—Horticultural Perlite is ideal for your business.



For **plant propagation**, Horticultural Perlite soil mix is almost as important as sunlight. Because of its water-retention characteristics, this mixture maintains an even distribution of moisture to stimulate fast root development in cuttings and to speed seed germination. Most important, by keeping the starting mixture loose, Horticultural Perlite permits a freer flow of oxygen to help nurture the new growth. This also makes transplanting easy; without root damage; and without undo shock. Horticultural Perlite is inert matter that can last indefinitely in your seed beds. It is sterile, odor-free and can't promote insects or bugs. It is a



great asset for the new beginnings of plant life.

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CUSTOM LAWN (from page 16)
have to offer and then help them appreciate your efforts.

Much as each businessman should periodically take inventory of his physical assets, we should also take realistic stock of our promotional ammunition, meaning our own ability to "package" our service so that a positive overall message is conveyed to our customers. If you know that promotion and merchandising are your weak points . . . get help! This is the age of specialization and paying a promotional expert is preferable to paying a bankruptcy lawyer. Hiring a professional advertising agency or counselor may be one of the best investments you can make, just as you tell your customers that they will receive special knowledge and skills when they retain you.

As custom lawn application services become even more popular with ex-do-it-yourself homeowners, it seems inevitable that the number of profit minded laymen attracted to this field will increase because the investment required to get started is relatively small and superficial know-how can be acquired in a short time. This has been the case in

COACHELLA (conclusion)

this combination can be programmed into our flexible irrigation system, which has been designed with this combination in mind."

McGehee points out that the New Zealand grass gets more watering because there is no retention mulch on the fairways, as there is on the greens. During May the fairways got 30 minutes of watering every 24 hours (three inches a week) and 20 minutes for the greens. The entire 125 acres are watered at night in 13 hours. Slightly longer watering periods were anticipated as the weather got hotter in the summer.

The course opened on schedule April 30, and golf superintendents are watching with great interest the 125-acre experiment at Ironwood. If the New Zealand grass proves to be a good, year-around grass, it will mark a milestone in desert golf course history.

Unfortunately, if the new grass does survive well the year around, it will not help already established golf

the past and it's a good bet that the trend will continue, particularly with the large number of capable people who have lost jobs in the past two years and are seeking security in their own businesses.

Even though the opportunities in this field presently are still vast, at some point in the future the competition will become keener. By that time many of these promotional minded newcomers will have gained extensive practical experience and staked out strong competitive positions in their markets.

Today's complacent professional who ignores the handwriting on the wall and does not sharpen his promotional skills with as much care as he devotes to his equipment runs the risk of experiencing a harsh financial jolt in the not-to-distant future. Knowing how to identify and control insects, fungi and weeds is, of course, indispensable to the conduct of a professional lawn service, but this knowledge can be obtained rather quickly. Knowing how to identify and control a customer in a rapidly changing market may be more important in the long run to the financial health of the professional. □

courses that have been using bermudas. They could hardly afford the shut-down time required to kill off the bermudas before reseeding with the new grass. But any additional courses built by the existing golf clubs could take advantage of it.

Additions to courses are constantly being made in the Coachella. Although Ironwood has a ways to go before it sells out the condominiums and lots associated with its country club, it already has plans to add a nine-hole executive course, and, south of the clubhouse, an additional 18-hole course that will be shorter and less difficult than the present one. Then, too, seven acres have been set aside for a par three short course.

Since last year the Coachella golf growth has looked something like this: Ironwood has completed its first 18. Indian Palms has added another nine. Sunrise and Sun King each has added another 18. Palm Desert Country Club has added a nine. And so it goes. The Coachella continues to get greener and greener. □

REDUCING (from page 22)

"We start our fairway program about March 15 to April 1 with RZ, sometimes in combination with chelated iron," Santoianni explained. "That first application usually takes care of leaf spot. Our last application depends on the weather, but you have to spray sometime for snow mold. One year, we made our last application just before Christmas."

Santoianni's preventive four-season treatment usually amounts to 36 to 44 fungicide applications per year. Besides the regular treatments, Santoianni and his assistants check the turf regularly for disease problems that may have come on since the last regular spraying. "There are a couple key spots I always check, where disease always starts first," the 27-year grounds-keeping veteran noted. "But usually, the only time we make an extra spraying is when we find Pythium."

Getting the most value out of any chemical depends on proper timing, Santoianni said. He'll reschedule a routine fungicide or fertilizer application if the weather conditions aren't right. "Knowing when to use any product is the secret of getting effective results," he said. "Your most effective products — including fertilizer — can be ineffective or actually damage the grass if they're applied under the wrong conditions. Then you've not only wasted your money, but you may have done harm rather than good."

Santoianni has experimented with still another innovation that he thinks will make for more timely and economical insecticide use. "I tried a sample of Diagnostic Aid last year, and it really will help you find out what kind of insects are present," he said. "Different insects are present at different times of the year, and you need to get your insecticide on at the day of hatching. Diagnostic Aid can really help you target your applications. I plan to use it next year, spot-checking a few greens about every two weeks."

Santoianni considers his program of increased efficiency and budget-consciousness a return to "the old way." But with increased golfer traffic on most courses, and the looming threats of recession and inflation, a program that trims the fat from the operating budget may be more of a glimpse into the future.