

# LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

by Daniel Dorfman

## Granular application — The Lawn-A-Mat story

When I founded Lawn-A-Mat Chemical & Equipment Corp. on Long Island in 1961, there was no lawn care industry as it is structured today. Those landscape gardeners who specialized in applying fertilizer, seed and control chemicals to residential lawns did most of the work manually, and, of course, had to charge for their labor, raising the cost to the homeowner so that their services were affordable only by the relatively affluent.

The development of the multi-purpose Lawn-A-Mat combine, towed by a small tractor which could aerate, roll and dispense several dry materials uniformly, accurately and simultaneously, was only the first step in this revolution. Almost as important were the marketing methods we pioneered.

It should be noted also that the Lawn-A-Mat combine is equipped with spray capabilities so that liq-



*Above, the all-purpose combine can cover irregular properties with relative ease and can be backed into corners when necessary. Below, the rig is transported to the job site by a trailer then backed off in a matter of seconds.*



uid applications can be made on a selective basis where necessary.

We realized early in the game that the best piece of equipment on earth will not bring in a single customer if it is not merchandised properly. Our selling theme then, as it remains today, is that we will deliver and apply top quality products to a customer's lawn for approximately what it would cost if the customer bought equivalent products at his local garden center, carried them home, and had all the equipment to do the hard work of applying them to his lawn.

The multi-purpose combine, unique and efficient as it is, was simply the vehicle that dramatized this key point. We believed then, and we still do, that the American public is brand name conscious, and wants assurance that he is getting all that he is paying for. Therefore, from the very outset, we have emphasized the fact that the Lawn-A-Mat customer is buying guaranteed Lawn-A-Mat products with our brand name, "Lawn-A-Magic".

The other major factor which loomed importantly in our planning was who would actually be delivering and applying these products to the customer's lawn. My options at the very outset were clear. I could embark on a program of company-owned operations, with many employees and the inevitable red tape and personnel problems that would arise as I expanded, or I

could franchise my equipment and concept.

I chose the route of franchising, because I believed, and still do, that few employees will ever do the kind of conscientious job or render the caliber of personalized, thoughtful service that the concerned, owner of his own business can offer.

Regardless of whether the actual applications are liquid or granular, the human element cannot be eliminated from the lawn care business. The most technically ingenious spray nozzle ever designed to dispense precise droplets of water at exact rates of flow will not prevent the human applicator from holding it in one place an instant too long and burning it or missing an area entirely. Until such time as computerized, automated robots actually handle the spray equipment, the danger of human error is always present.

Even our automated Lawn-A-Mat combine, which has undergone constant improvement and upgrading over the years and which I believe to be the finest piece of equipment of its kind, is subject to human error despite any amount of training given our franchisees. If the operator is careless enough not to steer it in the prescribed patterns, the applications will not be uniform.

However, with granular materials which are formulated for controlled, timed release, any possible damage from operator negligence is minimized.

We have always emphasized and driven home the point that the Lawn-A-Mat man is a local businessman who has to live in the community with his customers for a long time, and not some faceless cog of a large distant company. Because of this, we believe he can and does do a more careful job.

Right here on Long Island, where we started, soil conditions can vary considerably within two miles of a given location. I'm sure this can apply to most sections of the country. The local franchised operator understands the specific needs of his operating area. He doesn't come in with a broad spectrum application program designed for a large region

and apply it indiscriminately in his local area.

The Lawn-A-Mat man is taught to work closely and personally with his local extension service agent so that he may constantly keep abreast of all developments affecting lawn care in his specific bread and butter territory. How can a company using a generalized approach equal such neighborhood-tailored expertise, regardless of the high powered research and advisory staff it may have at some distant office? We, too, retain highly regarded turf advisors, but there is no substitute for a knowledgeable local operator.

Then, there are the little extras that are so important. The Lawn-A-Mat man has a first name, and his customer knows it. The Lawn-A-Mat man can be talked to, and will personally tell the customer why he is applying certain materials and not applying others.

The landscape gardener thinking about going full-scale into the lawn care business should also consider the cost of acquiring customers. Any way you slice it, he will have to make a sizeable investment in equipment, and, in order to justify a large capital investment, he will have to generate a high volume of business relatively fast.

This involves a combination of sophisticated marketing techniques. It is no longer enough to pass out a few leaflets in a neighborhood, which is often all that is necessary to obtain customers for mowing, clean-ups and hedge and shrub trimming. A many-pronged advertising and promotional program must be undertaken, and this costs money too. What your advertising says, how it says it and the media in which it is placed can be all important and make or break an independent start-up operator.

The advertising must not be misleading. Many consumers these days are quick to report apparent misrepresentation or extravagant claims to the local consumer fraud bureau office. In a highly competitive situation there is a great temptation to promise the customer a lush, thick, richly green lawn virtually before the sun goes down on the day of the first application.

Some spray operators, because their method of application does



# Lawn-A-Mat

produce rapid cosmetic results, are sometimes tempted to do this. In the long run, this can debase the credibility of our overall industry. Thus, spray companies with an eye to the future, are of course careful to avoid misleading overstatement of this kind.

And then we have the question of aerating (spiking) and seeding.

Although there seems to be no uniformity of opinion about the benefits of spiking, most respected authorities agree that it can do no harm at the very least. There are those who feel strongly that timely spiking can help control thatch build-up, may play a significant role in reducing the odds against certain kinds of fungus infestation and contributes significantly to the passage of air, moisture, nutrients, lime, etc. into the soil.

The new spray operator should consider that most of his first time customers will have poor lawns to start, often neglected and heavily thatched. How do the water-borne nutrients and control chemicals get down to the root zone in places where they cannot seep through the thatch? Does the new spray operator recommend mechanical de-thatching prior to his applications? Does he "farm out" the de-thatching job or does he do it himself?

The spiking, we have found in our almost 20 years of experience around the country, significantly enhances the results of both bare spot seeding and overseeding on established lawns, because the holes act as catch basins for some of the seed, reducing washing away and contributing to a higher germination percentage.

Our franchisees are taught how to present the benefits of a planned total program of aeration, seeding, feeding and chemical controls at timely intervals in a way that is clearly understood by the homeowner. This is extremely important if the lawn application specialist is to build a long-term business on a solid foundation.

The level of expectation of the new customer must not be made unreasonably high. The customer must understand that building a healthy

sound lawn takes time and any landscape gardener seeking to market himself as a lawn specialist should be very careful not to oversell and make the customer expect more than he and Mother Nature can deliver.

We have found that the best way to maintain a constructive long-term relationship with any customer is to de-emphasize the idea of service. We concentrate on the idea that good products, properly applied at the right time will produce the best possible results . . . if we have help from the homeowner himself and cooperation from Mother Nature.

If the homeowner does not mow and water properly or if unseasonal weather creates problems, our experience shows that no amount of effort by a lawn applicator can produce perfect results every time. Otherwise, there would be no need for the continual search for new and better control chemicals and improved seed varieties.

We learned this from long experience. Some of our franchisees have attempted at times, contrary to company guidelines, to emphasize service, in the process suggesting to the customer that service alone will produce magical results. They learned to their despair, after a particularly moist spring followed by an unusually blistering summer, that their best service efforts fall short of producing the expected results because of these factors beyond their control.

Strong, hard-hitting advertising can produce new customers who will give a new applicator a try. But the customer must be educated properly so that he expects only what is reasonable, if the applicator is to build a solid long-term business.

Pricing is another factor. We have economy programs and we have what we call our comprehensive Greenskeeper Care Program, to suit the standards and wallets of different types of customers. Even with our complete Greenskeeper Care Program, we are careful to explain that we are not guaranteeing a picture lawn overnight but the customer can expect a healthy good looking lawn in a reasonable time.

Although our franchisees are not obligated to purchase materials

from us (most do), they are required to use materials that have been tested and found to be equivalent to our own "Lawn-A-Magic" products. It is our insistence on quality control that helps give the homeowner in all parts of the country where we operate the confidence that he is getting what he is paying for. This in turn bolsters our reputation and the credibility of our name and, in the long run, means more business and greater profits for our franchisees and us.

Another hazard avoided by the use of granular materials is wind drift. We know of no spray equipment which completely eliminates this danger. Aside from the possible damage to nearby ornamentals, windy days often mean lost work time, usually during the busiest season for the lawn applicator. This is a consideration which would not be minimized. Heavy rainstorms which can cause rapid run-off of materials are also more of a factor with liquid applications than with granular.

Throughout the country there are many families with two generations of Lawn-A-Mat customers; where the parents started with us almost twenty years ago and their children later bought their own homes and became customers. We think this is the best testimonial to the staying power of the concept of dry applications, reasonably priced and carefully and conscientiously done by a local entrepreneur.

You need not own a Lawn-A-Mat franchise to do it our way. By now our methods, programs and general procedures are well known and have been adopted by quite a few others.

Although the Lawn-A-Mat name is a potent marketing asset in many parts of the country, it is not indispensable to operating a profitable healthy applicator business and those who are contemplating full-fledged entry into this specialized field should consider our "dry" record carefully before discarding this time-tested approach. □

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