

# Building a lawn care business

*Millard C. Dailey, president, Liqui-Green*

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In the spring of 1951, the idea occurred to me that liquid fertilizer could be sprayed directly onto lawns. In order to test my hypothesis, I applied some liquid fertilizer to my own lawn with a common sprinkling can. Much to my expectations, the results were fantastic and thus the foundation was laid for what was to become a most successful endeavour: Liqui-Green Lawn Spraying.

Determined to transform my idea into actual practice, I visited several nurserymen, a wholesale fertilizer establishment, and an independent businessman. Unfortunately, none of them shared my enthusiasm and rejected my idea on the premise that customer reception would be inadequate. Convinced that they really did not understand, I continued my campaign and went to an engineer. His affirmative response to my question, "Is it possible to build a truck with agitation and pump a liquid through 300 feet of  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch hose in order to apply fertilizer to lawns?" was the inspiration that

spurred me onward. Very soon afterward, we went ahead and built such a truck that worked — but just barely. At the time, we did not have an electric reel, a gun designed for tree spraying, or lightweight hose (we were using rubber hose, which when filled with liquid, was like dragging a river around). Yet, crude as it may have been, it was a start.

The next obstacle I had to overcome was obtaining customers. Ironically, while I was having the truck lettered, a man happened by and inquired what the truck was for, because the wording on the side of the tank indicated it was for lawns and had aroused his curiosity. I explained my procedure to him and we agreed on the spot to spray his lawn — my first customer! That afternoon (without a teacher) I sprayed his lawn and once again, as I was working, I aroused the curiosity of a neighbor who was willing to try it also. Now, 26 years later, I still have both people as customers. Although one has moved several times, he

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always takes us with him. The business that was once only an idea grew to its present magnitude through proven end results, a lot of hard work, neighborhood curiosity and plenty of door-knocking.

From its very conception, I believed that an essential concept to follow was: to do a better job than the homeowner could do himself, at a cost which would be nearly what he would expect to pay for comparable materials. With this in mind, we established such a pricing method and have maintained it through present operations.

During the first year of operation, I was primarily concerned with teaching myself how to fertilize — then came weed control. Initially, we mastered this with a very bulky spray cart that required two men to function — one to push the cart and one to pull hose. It eventually became apparent that the first truck was not totally functional and the weed cart was less than tolerable. As the saying goes, "Necessity is the Mother of Invention,"; thus, I engineered a new piece of equipment for fertilizing purposes and went from a weed cart to open gun spraying, with the help of spray additives to reduce drift. Today we are using spray additives that are easier to handle, convenient and more efficient.

During the time that we were making equipment modifications, we were also upgrading our professionalism and image. In the lawn spraying business, I felt that this is our most important asset.

Today, our trucks are mounted with specially built 1200 gallon tanks and pumped by Power Take-Off Units with all gallonage metered. This is coupled with an attachment which allows the professional applicator to unreel the hose himself, and as he opens his spray gun, the engine speed is automatically increased to a predetermined level. Then, as the operator closes the gun, the

engine speed decreases to a slow idle. Also, the trucks are equipped with injectors which allows various products to be applied to a lawn from a single truck. This makes it possible for two or three lawns, side by side, to receive different treatments as they are needed.

In the area of weed control, we have maintained pace with the times by offering a wide variety of materials to handle special problems, such as knock-down, total kill or bare ground, fence-line control, selective control and brush control. We can even go up to the point of totally killing a lawn with a new product called Round-Up which allows seeding to follow immediately. That is, by taking a tall, fescue-ridden lawn that is intolerable, kill it along with whatever else may be growing in it, and then seeding into the killed lawn.

This allows the homeowner to have an entirely new lawn at a fraction of the cost of tearing out the old lawn, replacing it with sod, and then eventually ending up in the same predicament that originally caused the problem.

The homeowner, is aware that more is involved than just fertilizing and killing weeds. We have grown with the market and offer many other items such as crabgrass preemergence control, soil conditioners, insecticides, micronutrients and liquid lime.. In growing with the turf industry, we were confronted with yet another problem: fungus. In the beginning, very few products were feasible to apply from the standpoint of cost versus results. However, the suppliers have now developed combinations that must be used in a good maintenance program to insure professionalism in the turf-spraying industry.

Another subject we had to accommodate was trees. This came out of necessity because most of the clients believe that the sprayman is also an agronomist, entomologist, pathologist and tree expert. Therefore, we had to become familiar with all these areas. At first, we just did spray-

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ing and feeding of trees and shrubs. But a resistance to the sprayman's techniques emerged in the homeowners as a result of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*; then came the E.P.A. and laws. Fortunately, just about this time a company developed a tree injection system called Mauget, which allowed us to do almost the same thing we had been doing with the spray, so we immediately adapted to this method. From the beginning, we have constantly been looking for new and better ways to satisfy the tree and turf industry. We found that by listening to the universities, manufacturers, reading many trade journals and building our own library, we were able to stay abreast of the times and will continue to do so.

After accumulating over 20 years of experience and knowledge, I decided that since our procedures had been tested and successfully proven, why not offer this equipment and opportunity to others? In 1972, we started to franchise the entire operation, offering a full-service company. In order to maintain professionalism in our dealings with our customers, all operations are confined to within 150 miles of home-base. We work very closely with each franchisee, passing on information and continually training him to be a professional. We currently have many franchises throughout Illinois, Iowa, and Pennsylvania.

As in the beginning when we stimulated curiosity and recognition from our customers, we also became attractive to the manufacturers and universities.

We still make up a large portion of the total market. It is estimated that the turf industry has a gross volume of over 12 billion dollars; I believe that this is only a drop in the bucket compared to its potential dimension ten years from now.

For the industry to continue to grow we must be professionals and offer a wide variety of ser-

vices to the homeowner and industry. Federal laws will help all of us in the trade by making each of us aware of what a particular material will do and where it should be placed. Owners of such businesses will have to provide extensive services in the future with more and better trained personnel. Entirely too many operations have cropped up seemingly out of nowhere and have caused problems from the standpoint of image and professionalism.

Many customers still wait to be serviced, mainly because they are not aware of services offered. One of the greatest problems for the spray man is customer education. By informing the public, the sprayman can make more intelligent analysis of a particular turf problem and be accepted as a professional. In order for the sprayman to do his work well, he must be at all times the doctor, and the customer must be the nurse maintaining the lawn between applications.

Liqui-Green is going ahead every year in producing more turf specialists, with a high degree of professionalism by franchising the spray industry, standardizing procedures, tested and proven for results, and dealing in all problems of turf and trees. Our projections for the future are unlimited. □

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