

# Sleeping giant on the verge of awakening

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*The chemical lawn care industry is a large, sleeping giant. The dramatic growth demonstrated by a few companies, while an index to the rapid growth of the entire market, reflects only minutely, the growth potential for an industry which must serve more acres in lawns than are in farmlands in the entire U.S.*

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Today less than 5 percent of some eight million acres in home lawns in the United States have been touched by lawn care businesses, now in a dramatic upward growth spiral and accounting for some \$668,325,900 in trade.

Formerly a service under the aegis of chemical, oil and tree service companies, or performed on a small scale by landscapers and one-truck operators, the specialty market in this area is now thriving.

While the post World War II

home building boom and the push into the suburbs turned many Americans into novice gardeners, and pushed home and garden supplies to a healthy \$4.5 billion in 1960, the desire for labor saving devices paved the way. First for the use of power tools at home, and later for the development of complete services for the home premises.

According to The Wall Street Journal, May, 1961, sales of power gardening equipment alone rose

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## Sleeping giant

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from \$75 million in 1950, to some \$400 million a decade later.

The transplanted frontiersman, now a suburbanite, was determined then as now to do it himself even if he had to spend with a free hand to get the job done.

In search seemingly of a panacea for blighted or less than luxuriant front lawns, Americans coughed up approximately \$500 million in 1960 for fertilizers, insecticides and weed killers. Home and Garden Supply Merchandiser, a trade publication, reported.

A 1976 statistic from U.S. Home and Garden Supply Merchandiser shows that nine billion dollars were spent by Americans on home and garden supplies, an indication that a significant number of homeowners, perhaps, are still do-it-yourselfers.

Precisely when it became clear that there was a living to be made in approaching the homeowner, chemicals in hand, and offering to refurbish a damaged lawn, or when it became apparent that a frustrated homeowner might relinquish control of his well-won half acre, it is difficult to say.

Landscapers who had long tended and pruned ornamental plants and shrubs for those who could afford it, and groomed lawns for many, were the logical heirs to the great volume of business in chemical application. It was right at their fingertips.

But most landscapers were not convinced that the dollar potential was sufficient to justify the costs they would incur in acquiring of new machinery and supplies. Many were reluctant to change practices developed through generations of experience.

Oil companies, who had the built-in capability of performing basic fertilization and weed control in a spraying application, were perhaps the first to try the lawn care market with modest success.

Tree service companies, whose techniques and equipment were also well-adapted to the emerging chemical lawn care market, were

perhaps the antecessors of the traveling liquid-application service as we know it today.

These were the pioneers within the industry. Their efforts in lawn care as a specialty, or as an exclusive function, are documented as early as 1915. However, it was not until the mid-fifties that the technological know-how was blue-printed, with the assumption that chemical lawn care services could be rendered to homeowners, at a cost which would be lower than a trip to the garden center and some diligent man-hours.

But it was not mastered, and the modern lawn care service did not evolve until the early 1960s.

Strangely, the visionaries were not the people who were working within the industry. Rather, they were market-wise businessmen who saw the growth potential of a concept, invested the requisite capital to develop necessary machinery, and projected the dollars and cents they might realize. And they were right.

The most prolific dreamer was a kid from Brooklyn who thought that somehow he could apply the principles of farm technology to lawn care, thereby dramatically cutting labor costs and rendering efficient service to the homeowner.

After some experimenting in the mid-fifties, Daniel Dorfman, who describes himself as a "tinkerer," perfected the design for a machine capable of simultaneously rolling, fertilizing, aerating and seeding a lawn in one pass with an unskilled operator at the controls.

The result was Lawn-A-Mat, incorporated in 1961 as the first automated lawn care service company and the prototype for many of the services that cropped up in high densities in Long Island, more generally in the Boston-Washington corridor, and elsewhere in the following ten years.

Dorfman began selling Lawn-A-Mat franchises in 1962 and found enough takers to handle some 300 franchises by 1967, with an average volume per dealer of approximately \$75,000, in a broad range from \$20,000 to \$400,000 per annum, covering a geographic spread encompassing New York to Hawaii to the west, and Canada to Florida to the south.

According to the Washington

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Post, August 13, 1969, Stanley J. Gordon Jr., who signed on as a Lawn-A-Mat franchisee in 1965, reported a gross income of \$310,000 for the first six months of 1969 as Lawn-A-Mat of Metropolitan Washington, Inc.

Success stories abound. Anthony Giordano, briefly a Lawn-A-Mat dealer in 1963, set out to build his own business. He founded Lawn Doctor, in Wickatunck, N. J., and began franchising in 1967. Today Lawn Doctor outfits are located in some 23 states, the dealers numbering 110, with an estimated total volume of approximately \$6 million. Giordano projects that Lawn Doctor will take in \$8 million in 1977.

Franchise operations are not necessarily doing all the business in lawn care. Chem-Lawn, the thoroughbred of the industry, began a slow, measured-growth endeavor in lawn care in 1969. On a company-owned basis, Chem-Lawn opened dealer offices and looked to a personalized, on-call service program to build business.

Headquartered in Atlanta, Chem-Lawn now maintains 70 dealers throughout the U.S., representing a volume of approximately \$36 million.

For 1977, they are projecting a volume of \$52 million.

According to The New York Times, Sunday, April 11, 1976, few complaints have been registered about lawn services with the Suffolk and Nassau County Departments of Consumer Affairs, both located on Long Island, an area where business for consumer lawns is highly competitive and reportedly the biggest market in the country for mechanized lawn services.

If anything troubles consumers about the new wave of lawn care services, it is probably not the costs. Pricing frequently is assessed according to the number of square feet serviced, the number of visits of the serviceman, and the overall health of the lawn when the customer initiates the service. While there have been some allegations that square footage has been overassessed, with a resultant increase in costs to the consumer, variables in pricing are generally explained to the customer and there are few surprises.

According to Money Magazine,

March, 1976, season-long care, on a typical 5000 sq.-ft. lawn costs the customer between \$150 and \$200 dollars a year for a service that generally included four applications of fertilizer, two treatments with an aerator, reseeding at least twice, plus pesticide, weed killer, fungicide, crabgrass control and lime as needed. The charges were based on a nominal per-square foot charge of three or four cents.

While many companies offer an annual contract which outlines the services they will perform for the customer at a per annum rate, some companies service accounts on an "as needed" basis. Others price on a per application basis.

Chem-Lawn, generally regarded as the cheapest service available to the homeowner, charges customers on a per application basis, the average cost to a customer coming to approximately \$130 in a year, accounting for variance in the size of the lawn, and the amount of service required to keep it healthy.

Lawn Doctor offers tailored programs providing for five to nine visits annually to a home lawn. The service is contracted annually and costs a customer approximately \$165 to maintain a lawn of 10,000 sq. ft.

Lawn King, a franchise operation headquartered in Fairfield, N. J., offers a firm annual contract to the customer providing for eight visits at an approximate cost of \$220 per account.

The only limiting factor in the future of the lawn care industry could be its lack of organization, a consequence perhaps of rapid, almost overnight growth and insufficient monitoring of the dimensions of that growth. □

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