

RESPECT FOR MARKETING INCREASES AS SOD GROWERS FACE TOUGH TIMES

By John Kerr, Associate Editor

"Who said beauty is only skin deep! A sodded lawn is not only beautiful, it's an investment with deep-down benefits that will save you time and money. Sod provides instant beauty and instant value. Within a few hours, sod will transform your yard from bare spots and weeds to a lush, living carpet of mature grass. Sod is an investment which will instantly increase the market value of your property from 5 to 10 percent. Sod gives you a soft clean surface for family fun. Your house stays cleaner inside and outside. Sodding saves you countless hours of your personal time; the time you would take from business or pleasure for seeding, watering, and constant attention. High quality sod produced by members of the American Sod Producers Association is grown from premium variety, disease-resistant seed which is best adaptable to your area. So for instant beauty and instant value, consider sod.

—ASPA radio tape, entitled "Deep-down benefits"

Marketing. The word sounds as foreign to some sod growers as topdressing would sound to Madison Avenue executives. Those who watch the sod industry say that up to 70 percent of growers do no marketing of their product. The realization that customers are no longer searching for truckloads of sod is changing that outlook for many sod producers.

Business had been growing steadily in the past two decades for those selling sod. Reliable customers such as landscapers and garden centers had consistently ordered and received a fine

quality product. Pleased homeowners with freshly sodded lawns would pass their supplier's name to neighbors and friends. These customers are still pleased with the quality of the sod. Unfortunately, many are discovering that they cannot afford it or do not have the water to keep it alive.

High interest rates and the accompanying sag in home building have seriously hurt the market for sod. Commercial building has not suffered as much, but does not use as much sod, especially when the site is the heart of a metropolis. Competition, in the form of hydroseeders, presents another force against the grower. Yet the force that has hurt more than anything else is one that the President, economists, and competition can do nothing about—the weather.

Water tables stand so low in some areas of the East that 50 gallons a day per person is the enforced limit. What choice do these homeowners have when it's between washing themselves and watering their grass? In parts of New Jersey, officials have banned all watering and spraying. Water restrictions also occur in the Rocky Mountain states. Growers in Iowa and Nebraska, where few irrigate, are getting little rain. The parts of the Midwest that have received ample rain lie in competitive markets, such as Detroit, Chicago, and Minneapolis.

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Promotional material used by sod growers varies from straightforward, informational pieces to light-hearted, humorous displays. Feedback from buyers often determines what type of angle growers will choose.

To counter this negative climate, the sod growers must initiate or boost promotion for his business and profession. The American Sod Producers Association (ASPA) has recognized this need with more presentations on marketing at annual meetings and with development of brochures, slide-cassettes, booklets, and the radio spot reel which consists of five 60-seconds tapes.

Aggressive growers use a full program to create identification for their product and a positive image in the public eye. Michelle Williams of Meredith Sod Farms spoke at the 1980 midwinter conference on the full-scale campaign her company uses to promote its sod. From the mass appeal tactics of billboards, radio messages, and newspaper ads to the personal touch of cups, handkerchiefs, and T-shirts, everything Meredith gives out highlights the company's symbol of a frog and their motto, "It's easy to be green."

"Sod farmers need to establish consumer identification" says Williams. Although the size and funds don't warrant large-scale marketing for every firm, the ones who have kept their image in front of the public are the ones who are grabbing business in these dry times.

Some growers have switched their land to vegetable crops. Others have lowered prices to regain some capital. This not only hurts the grower but also the other growers in his area who are subsequently forced to reduce their prices. In the long run, everybody suffers from this action.

WEEDS TREES & TURF talked to a sample of growers in various parts of the country about their marketing programs. Many people have purchased the ASPA spot reel tape, which they have adapted to their own local needs in many cases. All are doing more to promote business.

"I think it is the most important end of the business," says Eicky Mund, president of Alboa Co. in Needville, Texas. Mund's sod business, headquartered outside of Houston, serves a growing marketplace that extends 500 miles to San Antonio, Dallas-Fort Worth, and New Orleans. This expansive area enables shipping nearly all the time regardless of bad weather in some parts. Mund feels fortunate for this as he calls sod "the most perishable of all produce."

Mund has been growing sod for 23 years and considers marketing more vital now than ever. "If you are not in the marketplace, you're at the mercy of truckers or anyone else who buys sod," he says. If a farmer does not market and can not sell his crop, he will take a much lower price from a trucker for his sod.

Although this southern section of the country is flourishing, competition in selling sod has grown fierce and lack of rainfall has created a rough climate for business. Mund estimates that in the last five years the number of sod growers in his area has doubled. High interest rates affect home



Eicky Mund — "I have to step up marketing considerably to stay even."

building. And last year Texas experienced its worst drought in 20 years and the state was declared a disaster area.

Last year was the first time that Mund's business decreased. When water was cut off to the homeowners, there was little he could do. He had increased his marketing budget about 15 percent from 1979. This year he is watching and going harder after the retailer. He has opened new locations to sell smaller quantities. "You can't build a business if you have too many valleys and peaks," Mund says.

Mund advertises twice a week in newspapers, starting in the middle of March. This, aimed mainly at the homeowner, will be cut if heavy rain falls. He also sends direct mail to new homeowners. By mid-April, he is advertising several times a day on radio with a tape his firm has produced.

The outlook for business in 1981 is fair, Mund says. With other members of the sod association, he shares ideas and finds an incredible amount of help. "We're becoming an industry now," he says. "It's a large investment."

Anthony Peca, Jr., assistant general manager of Batavia Turf Farms in Batavia, New York, and his father have made their company a solid business through strong promoting. They combine a style of personable public relations with cooperative advertising to achieve a close rapport with their wholesale and retail buyers.

Peca travels to Ohio, Vermont, and Philadelphia to talk to potential customers. If a landscaper wants to do something new, Peca will explain proper methods to do it. If a group, such as a Lion's club, is working on an outdoor project, Peca helps them with the installation and returns the next year to see how it's been maintained.

Batavia Turf uses some 25 dealers to sell its product. The company supplies the dealers with advertising material—newspaper and radio—which is customized for local usage. The dealers are reimbursed for advertising within a limit.

Another way the company helps its dealers is reimbursement for what Peca calls, "sod volume credit." For example, if a dealer buys 10,000 yards of sod one year, the company may be reimbursed .01 cent a yard the following year; for

80,000 yards, a dealer may get .03 or .04 cents a yard reimbursement. The company sets these programs up on the basis that bills are paid by December 15th.

Peca will also talk to his dealers and potential customers during the winter. He'll set up temporary headquarters in a hotel and call on people for a few days in a row. During the winter they have more time to talk and listen to what Peca has to say. He attends shows in these various locations, also.

All the travel still means marketing. Peca says his company is using cheaper forms of marketing and keeping their name and logo in the public eye. One way to do this is to watch the market carefully and pour more marketing dollars in areas that are doing the most business. In a thriving region, marketing could be tripled.

Like most growers, Peca's firm advertises in the Yellow Pages, newspapers, and on radio. He thinks he may use the ASPA spot reel tape to show he's in touch with the industry as a whole. An addressograph with 6,000 plates enables the company to send out eight to ten mailings during the year. The flashiest eye catcher, though, looms over the New York State Thruway—a huge billboard. Peca says his competitors often hear, "Are you guys the ones with the sign on the highway?"

Peca says that, having grown up in the business, he realizes how important marketing is. "My father was the original Barnum & Bailey when it comes to promotion."

In Henderson, Colorado, LBT Turf Nursery owner Lora Leech finds her best marketing tool to be door hangers. Her sales crew scours the nearby Aurora, Englewood, and metropolitan Denver area for bare yards and drops off flyers. Last year they distributed 2,500 between July and September.

Lora Leech — "We explain that bluegrass can use less water than native grasses."



Ms. Leech calls the Denver area the Los Angeles of the 1960's in terms of its growth. She thinks 1981 will bring good sales. However, business has slowed and the water supply is low. "When business gets slow, we cut out the old grass and do the laying and installing for new work," she says.

A problem the Rocky Mountain sod industry

has faced with the officials in Aurora has helped them unite and educate the public. The officials were limiting bluegrass planting in favor of natural grasses. Leech and other sod growers began teaching the public watering practices and ways of holding moisture in the soil. They also talked about the best ways of mowing. "We explained that bluegrass can use less water than native grass," she says.

"A lot of people are out of work without water so this is very important. If our growers hadn't done this, I would have had to do it myself. Since we've spoken together, it gives a little more strength to what is said."

In Sumner, Washington, where Emerald Turfgrass Farms is headquartered, general manager Bob Johnson and sales manager Richard Giffin market for fun as well as benefit. In each monthly mailing, Giffin includes a humorous card which has little to do with turf but much to do with marketing. It grabs the customer's attention, gives him something to look forward to, and makes the Emerald Turf name a pleasant one.

The ASPA tape in its straightforward message wasn't appropriate for Emerald's market, Johnson says. He prepared his own radio tape in conjunction with a station to hit a particular market. In the spring, he focuses on the homeowner; at times of grand openings or special events he focuses on the landscape contractor and home builder—those who sell sod and help develop a radio message.

Johnson aims advertising at the large buyer and picks special editions of newspapers and trade journals, which people will save, to include his company. The landscape contractor and home builder have been Johnson's main market for the past 20 years and he sees no reason to create new markets. "I look at opportunities to reinstate our name," he says. There is no set pattern or formula for this. "If I see it looks good, I jump in."

Emerald sends direct mailings to builders, home and commercial landscapers, and landscape contractors. The company's contact with homeowners comes through the Yellow Pages and referrals from landscapers.

A distinct logo, "ET," provides solid name recognition. The logo goes on hats, pens, matches, and decals for customers' trucks. Emerald Turfgrass has also made a short movie about lawns that's enjoyable for viewers.

Johnson says business is good in the Puget Sound area. Competition is tough but hasn't caused a drastic impact on his shipping. Uniqueness and good naturedness seem to keep the company apart from others.

On the other side of the country in Sussex, New Jersey, Charles Lain, owner of Pine Island

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Turf Nursery, has been affected by competition but hurt badly by the lack of water. "It has pretty much shut the market off with restrictions," he says. Nevertheless, Lain's goal is to educate people why they should have sod and he does this with advertising.

Charles Lain — "Every person should build a little into marketing and bring their price up."



"Too many are unaware of the importance of marketing," Lain says. "There's no comparison between the American farmers and any in the world in his ability to produce." Yet Lain estimates that 90 percent of agricultural farmers need to promote their business more and 70 percent of sod farmers don't do enough, if any, advertising.

Since the drought has hit, Lain has put half his acreage into vegetable crops to build up cash

flow. He nearly doubled his marketing budget in 1980 and experienced 15 to 20 percent less sales. He doesn't blame it on his marketing techniques, having been in the field 10 years with Weyerhaeuser, but on the water restrictions. "I have no restrictions on irrigating on this end, but they are heavy on the other end."

Residents in Lain's New Jersey area are allowed 50 gallons per person per day. There is a \$10 fine for each time this limit is surpassed. Towns are enforcing it and promoting it through local papers. "I'm being a realist," says Lain about his change to vegetable crops. "The production of food has to take precedence over watering plants."

Lain will return to former marketing plans when water returns to his soil. In the meantime, he fears that some new growers who have not done much promoting will sell their sod cheaply.

He used to send six to eight mailings a year, which he thought were extremely successful in keeping his name in front of customers. Every letter told the value of sod over a seeded lawn. He also sent popular articles with information on sod, and belonged to many groups.

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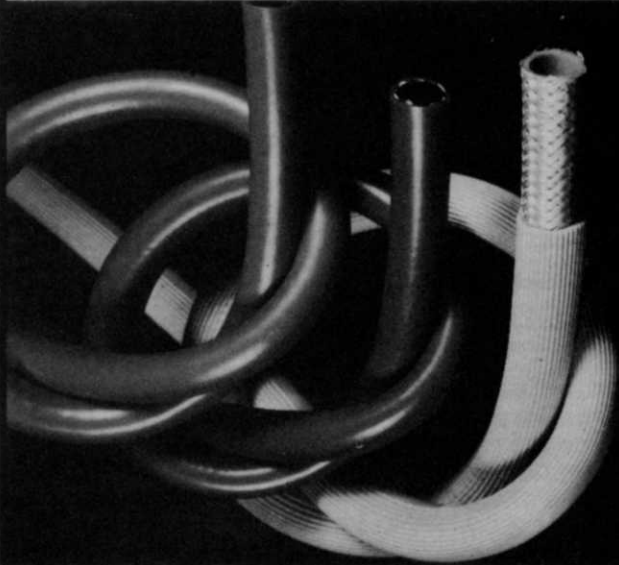

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"We're producers," he says. "It's time we realize it's up to the grower; we're the ones to promote it. We should be doing it on a national basis to show the value of sod. We're selling instant beauty, a perfect yard year-round."

"There is tremendous potential in the market, but we have to develop it. Too many farmers think of it (marketing) only when times are tight.



The largest eye-catcher Batavia Turf Farms uses stands off of the New York State Thruway. Competitors often hear, "Are you the ones with the sign on the highway?"

Nobody wants to see the sod industry go the way of the automobile industry in this country. However, when economic times are rough, people find substitutes for what seemed to have been always essentials. These are the times that consistent service and steady promotion become especially memorable in consumers' minds.

"You have to market when sales are down," says Bob Garey, ASPA's executive director. Garey says that in the good years many growers have not taken marketing seriously because they were afraid of getting calls for sod they didn't have to sell.

"Promotion is very critical," Garey continues. "Progressive companies are advertising earlier. There's a lot of impulse buying, homeowners looking." He doesn't see to much adverse effect from present conditions. Although housing is way down, large commercial buildings that will be finished soon will require much sod.

Steve Dearborn, a sod market representative for O.M. Scott & Sons, thinks that in the long term the slowdown will help sod growers by increasing their efficiency and boosting their marketing. Because of the slowdown and new competition, Dearborn says marketing is "the key to the future of the business." **WTT**

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