

BECKMANN TURF AND IRRIGATION PROVIDES PRESENT AND FUTURE NEEDS IN THE ST. LOUIS VICINITY

Despite the growing cost of sales calls, Bruce Beckmann, president of Beckmann Turf and Irrigation Supply of Chesterfield, Missouri, expects his sales staff to make seven to eight calls per day when they are not giving demonstrations.

These aren't always sales calls, they are service calls too. "We make frequent calls on the customers," Beckmann says, "to develop a rapport and gain their confidence so that we can recommend products to fit their long-term growth."

To Beckmann, distribution is a one-on-one business. With direct mail advertising and a new catalog that goes out to 1800 landscape managers each year, it is the personal contact that is most productive. "It is probing by the salesman that determines what the customer's needs are," said Beckmann. "Once we have an exchange of ideas we can begin to help satisfy his needs by demonstrating equipment in order to determine its efficiency in comparison to what he already has."

On the day the *Weeds Trees & Turf* visited Beckmann Turf and Irrigation, one salesman had just returned from a demonstration of a Dedoes aerator for the superintendent of a 27-hole municipal golf course. During the course of the demonstration the salesman and superintendent figured out that the Dedoes would cut 75 man-hours from the traditional method of aeration. To Beckmann's sales staff each demonstration is an opportunity to sell.

Once a piece of equipment is sold, Beckmann then concerns itself with three other phases of the transaction: setting the equipment up, servicing it, and educating the customer to get maximum efficiency from it.

In effect, many sales calls are an offshoot of the deep commitment Beckmann feels towards its customers. "The service end of the

business is as demanding as any part," said Beckmann. "Some customers don't have the expertise to continually update their specialty equipment to achieve the productivity demanded by their budgets." He added that while those calls are expensive to make, it is important to satisfy the needs of the customer in order to grow with his maintenance program.

Some recent trends have reinforced Beckmann's philosophy of customer commitment, particularly with irrigation and specialty equipment. Beckmann has watched the distribution of chemicals become the domain of specialists whose expertise lies in low pricing.

Many distributors are shrinking their lines and expanding their marketing region as shipping methods become more sophisticated. Beckmann suggested with products that require little service or follow-up, price is often the definitive factor. Beckmann carries a full line of chemicals and seed as a service to his customers, but there is clearly a concentration on irrigation and specialty equipment.

An important reason for this concentration is the industrial market's need for better-manicured turf.

It can take 7 months to more than a year before a client can get final approval for a piece of equipment.

More and more landscape contractors are serviceing the industrial market," said Beckmann. "Condominiums, apartment projects and industrial complexes are being maintained more like golf courses." While 10 years ago it was accepted that turfgrass had dormant periods, today turf is expected to be maintained 12 months a year.



President Bruce Beckmann.

Although Beckmann's territory lies smack in the middle of the transition zone with its four extreme seasons, the attitude is "it can be done." "With," Beckmann added, "modern irrigation and maintenance equipment, improved chemical products and the ability to apply those products with the new equipment."

Being in the transition zone causes the grass to have two heavy growth periods—March to June, and September to November. Beckmann sales would peak in spring and fall and drop in summer and winter in the past. The growth of the company's irrigation business however, has levelled out the summer trough and extended the fall peak into December or as late as installations are still feasible. Chemicals move well in the summer, largely because the weather has the cool season grasses under stress.

"Budgets at schools and government agencies come due in June and July," said Beckmann. "Most golf course budgets come due in the first quarter. Equipment is now selling on a nine to ten month basis, not just in the spring."

Beckmann's irrigation division has been a prime beneficiary of the trend towards better turf. By his estimate, 70% of keeping good turf is adequate water supply. "For the



Field service representative loads mower for repair at service center.

first five years (of the irrigation division) we had to convince the commercial/industrial market that good turf was attainable," said Beckmann. "Now that it's established, they are opting for improved watering systems to maintain the turf." Manning the irrigation division is a sales manager, an architect/engineer and a designer/contractor.

In the off-season Beckmann sponsors training meetings for selected contractors. They involve marketing, design, advertising, promotion, service, and application of equipment. The residential and light industrial markets have grown significantly over the past six years, according to Beckmann. Improved irrigation systems are increasingly being specified for athletic field and golf course renovations, although new golf course construction has been off.

In line with most successful businessmen, Beckmann sees the tight economic conditions as an opportunity for his staff to exhibit their expertise and commitment to their customers. Beckmann stresses the "life cycle cost" of equipment, not simply the purchase price. "The cheapest piece of equipment is often short-lived and requires high maintenance," noted Beckmann. "Turfgrass managers can't afford down-time." With labor costs being such a large part (50-60%) of maintenance budgets, superintendents are opting for cost-efficient equipment.

"Toro equipment is the best engineered equipment I have ever seen in the industry," exclaimed Beckmann. "They have taken a leadership position. About 10 years ago they redesigned their equipment and came out with a life cycle and

low cost that the industry needs."

"Our specialty equipment is designed for broad applications in maintaining turfgrass," said Beckmann. "To justify the cost of the equipment, you can point to the number of jobs it can perform. We're selling 'greater versatility.'"

Beckmann started out in his family's lawn and garden supply company. It was the model of a two-step distribution system, i.e., receive it in a box and send it out in a box. Accordingly, it was a lot easier to service customers. "The transition from two-step to one-step distribution was difficult because of the increased demand for service after the sale," said Beckmann. "If a customer buys equipment and doesn't use it properly, all

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the investment in time and service goes down the drain."

Beckmann recently hired a field service technician to expedite his customer service. The field service technician makes periodic visits to offer help in structuring preventive maintenance programs and in effect, teach the customer what can be done to extend the life of his machine. As a jack-of-all-trades, the field service technician can fix equipment on site, make an educational service call, or haul damaged equipment back to the shop. Beckmann noted that his next personnel addition will be another field service technician.

Beckmann currently has a staff

of 21: 6 in service, 4 in turf equipment and supplies sales, 3 in irrigation sales, 3 in parts, and 5 in administration. The warehouse facility includes a 12,000-sq. ft. warehouse, 7200-sq. ft. service facility, and an 8000-sq. ft. office/display area. The display area is reminiscent of a lawn and garden store, not an industrial distributor. "People like to look at what they are going to buy," said Beckmann. "Since we have the room, we set up the equipment and let them kick the tires. We're in a marketing business and we have to merchandise the equipment." Beckmann added that it can take seven months to 1-1/2 years before a client can get final approval for a piece of equipment. "So, everytime we can expose him to it helps."

The current trend in the bureaucracies is to let level upon level of management scrutinize big purchases (like specialty equipment). With the frequency of selling equipment somewhat limited by their longevity, Beckmann views each meeting with the customer and corporate structure as another chance to sell the advantages of his product. The sale, however, can be lost at any level, often after a considerable investment of time and salesmanship. Beckmann continually battles the corporate gremlins that simply pick the least expensive piece of equipment.

Beckmann's mixture of customer commitment and service has proven successful, yet demanding. Particularly in a sales territory with a 300-mile radius. Expanding further, while still providing full service, proved to be a problem for the company. A solution came in the form of a return to a modified two-step distribution.

Recently Beckmann has begun setting up a commercial dealer operation in the outlying areas of his territory. This has benefitted the company by providing the Beckmann brand of service and education on a day-to-day basis by an affiliated dealer in the customer's locale. "The dealer network will give full service to outlying areas that were difficult to reach," said vice president Bob Tegethoff. "It is also a way to reach customers that like to spend their money locally." **WTT**