

GARFIELD WILLIAMSON DOUBLES PROFESSIONAL SALES IN FIVE YEARS TO NEW YORK METROPOLITAN AREA

The ability to respond promptly to the needs of the consumer is the most critical quality of a distributor for John Zajac, the vice president and general manager of Garfield Williamson, a distributor of seed and allied products in Jersey City, NJ. "Flexibility is what gives us our place in the market," he stated in a recent interview with *Weeds, Trees & Turf*.

The key to maintaining flexibility to Zajac is keeping the company a manageable size. The larger the company, the more layers of management a customer must wade through to have a request fulfilled. At Garfield Williamson, the customer doesn't have far to go for a definite answer. "As opposed to a large corporation, there is only one step in our organizational chart between the salesman and a definite yes or no," Zajac pointed out. Garfield Williamson's seven salesmen, covering the New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut territories report directly to Zajac, who then contacts his staff members in the office.

The company has been service oriented since its inception one hundred years ago. The founder, Garfield Williamson, was among the first to tap the industrial market, approaching businesses and factories with the idea of beautifying their grounds.

The company was purchased in the 1930s by the Wagner family, who still control it today. The market remained more or less the same until the mid-forties. The business swung sharply toward retail after World War II as New York City dwellers spread out to the suburbs, creating the sprawling bedroom communities on Long Island, New Jersey and Connecticut. Acres of well kept lawn were being supplied by a new specialized retailer, the lawn and garden center, who was in turn being supplied by Garfield Williamson.

The retail market nearly had the full attention of the company until, with the increasing affluence of the region, golf courses began sprouting up and homeowners turned to professional landscapers.

Service has become even more essential as sales to professional users grow in comparison to the retail sales. "In the last five years professional accounts have grown from 20% of our business to at least 40%," estimated Zajac. "With an activity as weather dependent as seeding, servicing the professional sector is a demanding job. We are able to prepare and deliver 700-lb of a special mixture in two days."

As part of this service, customers are asking the distributor to take their burden of inventory off their shoulders. Because of uncertain cash flow, they are letting the distributor act as their warehouse. Business cycles have proved the distributor can warehouse more cheaply because it has better inventory control. This requires more work from the distributor. A customer's initial order used to be the biggest portion of his needs. Now he requires frequent deliveries of smaller orders.

Zajac feels that the high value that the customer has placed upon his time also benefits Garfield Williamson. The increasing prevalence of a "time is money" attitude has pushed professionals to invest in the high grade proprietary grasses he sells. Zajac claims, Eclipse Kentucky bluegrass sells equally as well as conventional types of bluegrass although it costs almost three times as much. The contractor justifies the higher priced specialty grasses as insignificant monetarily when compared to the overall cost of the job.

Even the retail consumer has learned to appreciate special formulations and varieties of both seed and chemicals. A more informed public is now approached in much



GW vice president and general manager John Zajac (left), office manager Bill Lind (center), and warehouse superintendent Peter Matu.

the same manner as the professional. Advertising and packaging, using the names of the specific seed varieties, is being used for the first time on the consumer level. Garfield Williamson now advertises its Wonderlawn brand of consumer products in local print, TV, and radio as well as providing retailers with point-of-purchase aids.

Despite Garfield Williamson's success in both professional and retail markets, it is now competing with a growing trend where professionals form groups to buy directly from the manufacturers. Zajac dismisses this as a fad, although the activity is growing in the New York and New Jersey areas. "These groups are big enough to buy from the manufacturers, but not big enough to demand the kind of service they may need in the height of the season. Distributors may be able to help, but we are bound to take care of our regular customers first. This will probably cause a ripple in the industry and then even out."

Zajac is sure the position of the distributor is secure in the green industry as long as he doesn't over-extend himself. "If your area gets too big, you can't effectively act as a distributor. We prefer to cultivate the 250-mile radius around New York city, our main market, more intensely than go further outward." **WTT**