

## Growing in all directions

A Kalamazoo, Mich., company blends a lawn care operation with its pest control operation. And it's working. That versatility has lifted gross revenues to \$2 million.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

When ChemLawn offers you the chance to become a franchisee you take it, right?

Today perhaps you would but, in the early 1970's, Linden Griffin said "no" to the giant's offer. His company, Griffin Pest Control of Kalamazoo, Mich., was strictly into pest and termite control.

At the time, he didn't catch the natural connection—the use of pesticides in both fields.

"It seemed kind of strange at the time," he recalls of the offer. "I thought, 'boy, they're emphasizing chemicals.' I didn't think that was a positive PR move."

In retrospect, Griffin says he should have accepted the offer.

"It was probably two or three years later before I really even considered getting into lawn care," he says. "At the time of their offer, I was really into making pest control a success. I still owed my parents money from my purchase of the business (1973)—that's why I was reluctant."

Within a short period, Griffin solidified the pest control operation and realized the natural relationship the field has to lawn care.

Three years later he began his own lawn care division with the help of a capable employee, Wayne Bro. "He is a young man who we thought could handle that kind of challenge," says Griffin.

With Bro providing guidance, Griffin Lawn Care traveled a bumpy road to profitability.

"We got 220 customers (from the pest control client list) and decided we'd better learn what we're doing," he says.

Griffin Lawn Care progressed from nursery school to graduate school in a period of months. Branch offices are now located in Battle Creek and



Griffin headquarters in Kalamazoo, one of three Griffin offices.

Grand Rapids, in addition to the home base in Kalamazoo.

### The right approach

"We'll do \$500,000 this year," says Griffin of the lawn care division.

That figure climbed sporadically as lawn care in his area has experienced "years where growth was flat."

Griffin will tell you he's made mistakes along the way.

He did a lot of television and radio advertising in 1982.

"It was a disaster," he says. "I think TV and radio advertising are impulse purchases. It didn't help us grow at all."

Instead, Griffin prefers phone solicitation. "We've been more successful with our phone solicitation program than with any other. That's the most cost-effective way of reaching the customer," he says.

Barely two years old, the program

netted 1,629 new customers in 1985, says Griffin.

With a week to go in the latest 10-week sales period, phone solicitation has recorded a gross intake of \$261,301, says Griffin, pointing to a sales chart in the corner of his office.

"Any lawn care company loses 20 to 30 percent of its customers each year," he says. Even when you consider that and other loss factors, he says, phone solicitation has been a boon for his company.

"We sold \$261,000 to get \$130,000," he says, figuring losses with gains. "That's not bad considering (hired lawn care) is discretionary income for a lot of people."

### Room for growth

Perhaps most encouraging for Griffin is the potential for growth. Three Griffin offices lie in markets totalling a million people. That's a lot of lawns.



Linden Griffin, owner of Griffin Lawn Care and Pest Control, Kalamazoo, Mich.

Grand Rapids, a market Griffin entered just five years ago, has a population of 500,000. It offers the best potential of the three because of the numbers.

In Kalamazoo, Griffin has reached a "saturation point," but remains a stronghold in the industry.

Battle Creek, with just 125,000 people, has brought in steady income but lacks the numbers to become a wind-fall area.

A state unemployment rate hovering around 10 percent doesn't help

matters. "In Michigan, we haven't been under a 10 percent unemployment rate in the last decade," says Griffin. "In Michigan, you have to work hard to make your business grow."

Another factor related to Griffin's bottom line is the cold southwestern Michigan winter. His lawn care employees are sent onto the streets with their snow plows, sometimes working up to 14-hour days.

Snow removal doesn't generate much income, says Griffin, and takes a quick toll on equipment and personnel. He doesn't recommend it as a winter alternative.

The days of ice and snow can seriously damage a cyclical business, he says, adding, that the company's bottom line "looks like a giant roller coaster," over a year.

He's made an attempt to remedy winter's cash flow woes by implementing a pre-pay (or pre-bill) system for lawn care customers. It sometimes aids sagging cash flow. "\$40,000 in cash is helpful in January and February," he says.

### The total package

Among the three Griffin divisions, gross revenues of \$2 million are pro-

jected for 1985.

In Linden Griffin's first year at the helm (1973), revenues totalled \$180,000 (without lawn care, began in 1977).

Griffin almost missed out on a million dollar gross revenue figures.

He had no intention of following his parents into the bug business.

His parents, Linden Sr. and Irene, founded Griffin Pest Control in 1929 and their son worked on-and-off for 20 years beginning in 1954.

Linden Sr. became ill in the early '70s and reached an agreement with his son for the purchase of the business.

After a few months as president, Linden Jr. realized he had underestimated his parents.

"When I graduated from college (Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo), I felt I could do a better job running the business," he says. "After a year-and-a-half, my parents became a lot smarter."

Pest control was then and is today the cornerstone of the business. It accounts for 60 percent of gross revenues, while lawn care has reached 25 percent in just eight years. Termite control, always a small part of the operation, accounts for 15 percent.

In five years, he says, the company "may be out of the termite business."

Pest control continues to grow though not at the pace set by lawn care. "Lawn care has an excellent growth potential because it's in its infancy. It has more growth potential for us than pest control," says Griffin.

He predicts lawn care will provide 40 percent of the company's revenues in five years.

Currently, the company is carrying 3,000 lawn care customers.

### Pre-notification

Griffin is concerned about Michigan's notification question, requiring prior notification of the use of petro-sensitive chemicals to any sensitive person within a 2,000-foot radius.

In Michigan, Senate Bill 65 (pre-notification) is pending and Griffin, as local governmental affairs representative for the Michigan Pest Control Association and Professional Lawn Care Association of America, is lobbying for its defeat.

"I think states should have primacy over the use of pesticides," he says, agreeing with the recent Wauconda (Ill.) decision.

With a nod of his head Linden Griffin admits he enjoys speaking to gatherings of his peers. He sometimes practices for an hour, achieving just the right voice inflection or gesture.

It's the same care he puts into running his growing business. **WT&T**

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