

Growing up in an adolescent market

Trendsetting Southern California lags in lawn care.
A Riverside firm looked to the Midwest to tap this potentially lucrative market

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor



This narrow strip of turf in front of Bourbonnais' Riverside office is a portion of the commercial real estate he maintains.

While Midwest-based lawn care companies like ChemLawn perfected their treatments in the late '70s and early '80s, Larry Bourbonnais didn't know there was such a thing as liquid lawn care.

His Riverside, Calif.-based firm, the Larry Bourbonnais Company, had specialized in professional grounds management since 1973; but he was, in his terms, one of a horde of Californians who call themselves "gardeners."

Liquid fertilization? He'd never heard of it. Not until 1980.

While attending a Southern California Turfgrass show, he strolled to a booth featuring liquid fertilizer.

He'd stumbled on something that would forever change his business.

He went from shorts and no shirts to three-piece suits in less than four years (although he admits he's still a casual dresser).

"I asked the guy 'what is this?' and he said that liquid spraying was a big deal in the East."

The 37-year-old Bourbonnais was miffed. "I'd never heard of it. I'd been in business for almost eight years. Well, the guy said he'd ask a consultant in Chicago to get hold of me," he says.

Bourbonnais flew to Chicago, a first for the California boy, to meet with the consultant, Jim Mello, owner of Nice'N'Green lawn care service. He saw his first spray truck. Impressed yet undecided, Bourbonnais prayed for guidance and was answered.

Spray Green

With Mello's assistance, Spray Green was born in the spring of 1981. Bourbonnais took the Midwest route into

lawn care. He and Spray Green said "hello" to the '80s.

The "Inland Empire," as Riverside, San Bernadino, and surrounding areas are called, was a market aching to be tapped.

Bourbonnais instituted a direct mail campaign. "Response was good," he says. Oddly, Spray Green trucks boosted interest in his business. People asked what they were.

"I'd never heard of it (liquid lawn care); they hadn't either. But they were fascinated by the truck," he says.

Curiosity and profits and two different things though. The locals didn't educate easily. "Most thought it was hydroseeding, some thought maybe we sprayed dye on lawns," he says with a straight face.

Today, his clients are a bit more sophisticated (as is Spray Green's application schedule), but education remains a top priority for Spray Green crews.

Here, Bourbonnais feels he can't compete with big lawn care companies. "Companies like ChemLawn and others have a lot more money than we do. They can spend the money to educate their customers," he says. "Sometimes I feel like the man from Mars when I talk to these people."

ChemLawn has moved into neighboring Ontario, he says, and is "expanding inward." He expects heavy competition from the Midwest-based giant in the near future.

A promising market

Larry Bourbonnais has the level personality needed to make it in the business world. A born-again Christian, he treats both employees and customers with respect, although he's the first to tell you he's short on positive feedback to his employees.

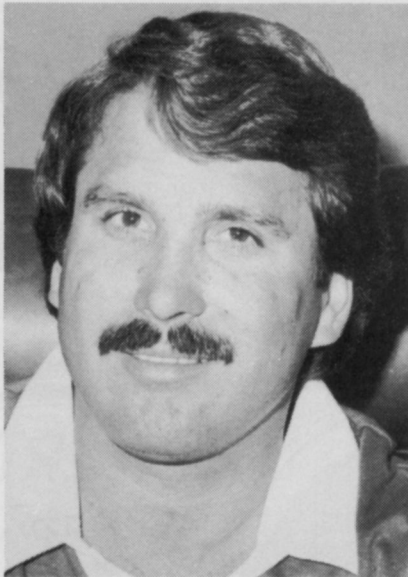
He will compromise. Example: Bourbonnais enjoys the comfort of an air-conditioned office. Company secretary Mary Steinkoenig, whose desk is located directly inside the front door, has an aversion to air-conditioning.

They reached an agreement. He leaves his office door almost closed (to trap the cool air) and she opens the front door (and keeps it open) to let in the sometimes smoggy Riverside air.

It's the same with the customer—a lot of give and take.

With a wink, Bourbonnais tells you it's a lot more give.

"We have the best reputation in town but people don't call me and say



Larry Bourbonnais, owner of The Larry Bourbonnais Company of Riverside, Calif.

'I want you to bid on my property' or 'I want to hire you.' I have to call on people, I have to knock on doors," he says.

The cold-call strategy, however cumbersome, has been a boon. He landed his two largest commercial accounts (Bournes Inc. and Bear Medical) with cold calls.

In Riverside, they're just two in a market that could make Bourbonnais a rich man. Development is everywhere, laying a foundation for a million-dollar lawn care business.

Bourbonnais hasn't reached that point. He's looking at a gross of \$250,000 this year between the landscaping and lawn care divisions. That figure is doubled from 1980. It's a long way from the \$150 (used to buy a mower and edger) he started with in 1973.

With his usual candor, Bourbonnais says his growth is slower than anticipated.

"Riverside is a good market, but it hasn't taken off like I thought it would. The problem is that the area is growing tremendously, but you don't have the big bucks like you do in Orange County," he says, noting that most living in Riverside have emigrated from affluent Orange County.

The reason is obvious, he says. You can buy the same home in Riverside for half of what you would pay in Orange.

Locals want to save money. And that means many skimp on other costs, including lawn care.

"Most don't know much about

lawn care around here," he says. "They don't know how to water their lawns correctly during our hot spells. We had 17 days this past June and July over 100 degrees. Our environment (semi-arid) makes it tough on lawns."

An image

In laid-back Southern California employing a "gardener" is a status symbol but Bourbonnais bristles when discussing their merits.

"I never saw a gardener until I became one, and now everybody's a so-called gardener. This is casual California and there's guys here working on lawns in shorts with no shirts. I think it's horrible," he says.

"We have lettered trucks and I make sure they're cleaned and polished. Our guys wear nice shirts and clean pants.

"I think it's important especially with the commercial end. You have a company doing a half a billion a year and they don't want to see a bunch of losers hanging around with no shirts and long hair," he says.

He considers his commercial clients cake. He does 99 percent of his business with the individual homeowner.

He's lukewarm about the prospect of adding more condos to his client list, but says "there's going to be a lot more added to this area."

Typically, the Spray Green liquid fertilization and weed control program, designed for the Inland area, is a seven-step procedure.

It starts in February (fertilizer, potassium, and crabgrass pre-emergent control) and ends in December with fertilizer and potassium application. In between are more fertilizer (timed- and instant-release in May, July, and August) and broadleaf weed control applications.

There are no slow periods in sunny Southern California.

His two divisions are complementary. When it's raining, the grass is growing and the need for lawn care is high.

When it's dry (the norm in Riverside), maintenance booms. Maintenance and grounds management account for 75 percent of the firm's revenues.

Candid Larry says he wouldn't want to be in any other business. "I'm into grass," he says. "Even when I started I just liked to be outside mowing lawns."

That passion has developed into a business he hopes will gross \$500,000 by 1989. **WT&T**