

STANDING TALL

The owners of Chem-Turf also stand behind their work and behind their customers. That's unique.

The introduction of George Meeley and Frank "Buzz" Cowdery to the chemical lawn care business was, in many ways, typical of the entrepreneurs in this still-young industry.

Back in Palatine, Ill., Cowdery saw a ChemLawn truck making its rounds. "To make a long story short," related Meeley, "we bought a ChemLawn truck. When we started, all I knew was that when you put sod in, it went green-side up."

Chem-Turf of Anaheim, Calif., has come a long way. After two years of 77-hour work weeks that resulted in gradual growth, the company bought out three smaller companies during the next four years.

Part of the reason for Chem-Turf's success has been its dedication to customers.

"If anything makes us unique," says Meeley, "it's that we stand behind what we do, and we even stand behind what our customer does or doesn't do to the lawn."

The California market, about a decade younger than the industry itself, is not all that competitive, but much more problematic than other markets back east.

For instance, housing is so expensive (\$125,000 average, third in the nation) that both husband and wife must work. Sure, free time is more valuable, making a lawn care sale easier. But these families usually have a "gardener" to do most of the yard work. And, with nobody home during regular working hours, it's virtually impossible to make weekday sales.

Family relocations also cause a big turnover.

"More than half of our cancellations are from customers moving," says Meeley. "I think it's a misdemeanor for anyone to live in



Bill Schaeck, former owner of one of the smaller companies bought out by Chem-Turf, now works for Chem-Turf.



Chem-Turf's George Meeley: "We'll do virtually anything to make a customer happy—even if he's dead wrong."

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—George Meeley, Chem-Turf
Anaheim, Calif.

one house for two years and a felony for living in one place four years."

No work ethic

There are other problems, one of which is personnel. Chem-Turf had no employee turnover for three years, but there has been a rash since.

"It's almost impossible to find good people," says Meeley, a native of Philadelphia. "There's something back east called a work ethic. It hasn't spread this far west yet."

Top weed problems are kikuygrass and crabgrass, which thrive because of what Meeley calls the "Santa Ana condition." A pressure front develops over the desert around Christmas. With low soil temperatures, crabgrass "germinates whenever it pleases." And "you can almost rest assured that by May or June, you'll get a second generation." Meeley says he uses Betasan, but gets barely satisfactory results.

Bug problems are confined to occasional grub breakouts, but even those are complicated by the state of California, which does not allow Oftanol applications. "We use Proxol, irrigate five times a day, and then we pray," says Meeley.

Chem-Turf uses benomyl on summer fusarium, and extra nitrogen helps prevent rust in cool weather.

The owner of one of the smaller companies bought out by Chem-Turf, Bill Schaeck of Chem-Green, now works for Meeley and Cowdery. Schaeck started an aeration service earlier this year.

"Our first year was phenomenal," Schaeck claims. "We aerated more than 500,000 sq. ft. in April, May, June, and July. It was no more than putting out a letter and—my God—they just bombarded us. They came out of the woodwork."

This year, one employee and one Ryan Lawnaire IV handled all the work, but Chem-Turf might be forced into expansion soon.

Health problems have plagued the owners, but they've still grown at a 20 percent clip. Meeley had polio as a child. Though he was walking lawns two years ago, he has since kept pretty much behind the desk. Cowdery, too, has spent his share of time in the hospital recently.

"If we can keep our growth at 20 percent, we'll be in good shape in a couple of years," Meeley concludes.

—Jerry Roche