

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Nice guys sometimes finish first

J. Martin Erbaugh's work with PLCAA, willingness to share with industry make him our 1991 'Person of the Year.'

■ Need proof that not all nice guys finish last?

J. Martin "Marty" Erbaugh, president of Lawnmark, Div. of Erbaugh Corp., is *Lawn Care Industry's* 1991 "Person of the Year."

"He's one of the most respected people in lawn care," says Jerry Faulring, president of Hydro Lawn, Gaithersburg, Md.

"He's easy to know, makes friends easily, and he's never been afraid to share what he knows about the business of lawn care if he thinks it'll help the industry overall."

This openness and readiness to work beyond his own business interests figured heavily in our choice of Erbaugh.

After all, his Akron, Ohio-based company was only six months old—and almost two years away from turning a profit—when, in June 1979, he and 22 other people, most of them small business owners, agreed to start a professional lawn care association.

They were among the growing number of would-be entrepreneurs wanting to make a living, if not a very good living, in the lawn fertilizing business. ChemLawn had shown that this type of service could be made affordable for homeowners and profitable to providers. ChemLawn was—to one degree or another—their model. Or their target.

Erbaugh was among the group of energetic newcomers recognizing opportunity.

Not that the concept of lawn care was foreign to him. After studying religion at Denison University, Granville, Ohio, and law at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, he worked for a while at Davey Tree Co. in Akron. The family of his wife Lynne, whom he'd met at Denison, was involved in the company.

In fact, Erbaugh helped Davey Tree's entry into lawn care.

But there was no lawn care industry as such, not then.



Marty Erbaugh says Lawnmark will remain a player in residential lawn care market.

Nor was there a forum for lawn company owners to share ideas or remedy common concerns.

In fact, for months after these business people met at Fort Mitchell, Ky., and summarily formed the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), they weren't convinced if anybody, other than themselves, saw the lawn application people as capable of coalescing into a recognizable industry.

It wasn't until about 700 other LCOs showed up for PLCAA's first conference and show—and surprised suppliers with orders—that the word *industry* took on any meaning.

Erbaugh was a part of this.

"A lot of the people taking part in these initial meetings were young and entrepreneurial. They were independent. That's why they were in the business. They had egos," recalls Faulring.

"Marty was particularly good at listening to these discussions—there could be some shouting—and then bringing all the points together."

Erbaugh became PLCAA's second president in November 1981, succeeding Faulring.

It was a memorable year for Erbaugh in other respects as well.

Earlier that year, competition drove his Lawnmark from the Milwaukee market

Hindsight always being 20/20, Erbaugh said in a recent interview: "If I had it to do over again, I would be more careful in my assessment of the competitive situation."

He refocused Lawnmark in Akron, Ohio, and in Rochester, N.Y., and by 1983 Lawnmark had turned the corner, he knew. This year Lawnmark will exceed \$12 million in sales, just over half coming from operations in New York, a state with strict lawn care regulations.

But Erbaugh's a pragmatist, not a Don Quixote. Lawnmark adapts to regulations, he says. That's business. (Note: Lawnmark was one of 10 lawn care companies which contributed several thousand dollars this past spring to start a "Federal Issues Management" campaign under PLCAA's umbrella.)

Says Richard White, ServiceMaster LawnCare: "Whatever happens, Marty seems to have the attitude that, well, we'll just find a way to overcome the problem. He just never seems to be daunted."

White also credits Erbaugh with being one of the top lawn care marketers he's ever met. "He never looks around at what everybody else is doing. He comes up with fresh ideas, his own ideas," says White.

Bob Earley, group vp of Edgell Communications and former editor of *Lawn Care Industry* magazine, says Erbaugh realized early on that lawn care was something customers wanted and that he, Erbaugh, could build a company to deliver it and make a fair profit too.

"He seemed to say to all of us that, 'hey, this is a real business and we can make money at this, but we have to approach it as a business, take care of the financial aspects, promote it.'"

At 43, Erbaugh says Lawnmark will remain focused on residential lawn care. Lawnmark's goal is \$20 million in sales by 1995, he says.

Erbaugh is the eighth person to be named *Lawn Care Industry* "Person of the Year." The others have been: Faulring (1984), Richard Lee Duke (1985), Ron Giffen (1986), the late Bill Fischer (1987), the late Jim Marria (1988), James I. FitzGibbon (1989), and James Brooks