

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Patrick J. Norton, our choice for 1992 'Person of the Year'

■ Patrick J. Norton describes the lawn care business as both "tough and fair."

Norton, president and chief executive officer of Barefoot Grass Lawn Service, Inc., is our 1992 "Person of the Year." Both he and the company he's helped guide the past 13 years represent many of the best aspects of professional lawn care to the public and competitors alike.

Barefoot Grass's continued growth and acceptance by American homeowners—especially the past couple of years when most lawn care companies struggled just to stay even—reaffirms what everyone in any service business knows but sometimes has trouble translating into action: provide quality service, charge a fair price, earn an acceptable profit.

Quality service—Barefoot Grass prides itself on its well-trained service force of more than 750 fulltime employees which delivered premium lawn services to more than 300,000 customers this past season. The company, unlike many of its competitors, exclusively uses dry, granular fertilizers in a two-step application process. Its technicians apply weed and insect controls only as needed.

Headquartered in Worthington, Ohio, the company gets a fair return for the extra time and care its technicians spend on clients' properties, its prices being in the upper half of the industry scale.

Its seemingly always clean service vans are common sights in more than 60 metropolitan areas, particularly in the



Patrick J. Norton, left, insightful CEO of Barefoot Grass, accepts 'Person of the Year' plaque from LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT publisher Jon Miducki.

Midwest, Mideast and East. Barefoot Grass operates in 22 company-owned locations, while the other locations are either franchises or "branchises." A branchise is, basically, a franchise managed by the parent company according to well-defined management agreements.

This season Barefoot Grass, now the second largest lawn care company in North America, will total more than \$65 million in sales systemwide.

Focused and committed—The company, in some very real ways, mirrors the personality of its president, Pat Norton: competent, focused on the market, committed to customer service.

Norton, 42, came to Barefoot Grass in

1979 after working as a certified public accountant in Arthur Anderson & Co.'s Cleveland office. After two years as company finance director, Norton became Barefoot's general manager in 1981, and in 1985 company president.

Barefoot Grass itself was founded in 1975 by Marvin Williams, a former employee of O.M. Scott & Sons Co. It took off in the 1980s, growing 40 percent in both 1984 and 1985 with sales continuing upward in a steady though less dramatic pattern since. It went public late in 1991 and its stock is now traded on NASDAQ.

Still optimistic—Norton, with his strong financial background and outlook, has helped build Barefoot into one of the most market-targeted, tightly managed lawn care businesses in the nation. But a company that retains much of its entrepreneurial spirit.

Although you'd never describe Barefoot's president as an industry cheerleader, Norton remains steadfastly optimistic about the future of the lawn care industry. This has been particularly apparent for the past two years as he's served as a director for the Professional Lawn Care

Barefoot to acquire Ever-Green

■ **COLUMBUS, OH**—Barefoot, Inc. announced on November 23 that it has entered into a definitive purchase agreement whereby its Barefoot Grass Lawn Services, Inc. subsidiary will acquire ADT Limited's Ever-Green Lawns Corporation. The acquisition is expected to be finalized on or about January 1, 1993.

Ever-Green, headquartered in St.

Louis, services about 100,000 customers in nine markets. Barefoot currently carries 315,000 customers in 68 markets, including franchises.

All of Ever-Green's markets are currently serviced by Barefoot, according to Patrick Norton, Barefoot's president and CEO, who says the purchase "will be synergistic and will have a positive impact on next year's earnings."

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CUSTOMER SERVICE TIPS

Training to communicate

by Ed Wandtke

■ One activity you need to do this winter is train your employees to better communicate with customers.

All too often, companies in the green industry focus their winter training on technical knowledge, equipment familiarity, vehicle safety and building maintenance or clean-up. None of these help deal with the source of revenue: customers.

Face the challenge this winter and implement a customer communications program. Here are some topics I've found to be very helpful:

1. Asking customers for a referral;
2. Getting neighbors of customers to become customers themselves;
3. Reinforcing the quality of service when talking to customers;
4. Handling difficult questions;

5. Ending conversations without offending customers; and/or

6. Explaining the differences in service programs.

Training your employees to communicate is necessary, but many owners assume their employees are already effective.

Try getting your more experienced employees to stand up in front of other employees, and train the latter to answer the above questions.

Don't be surprised to see some reluctance among employees. Not all are good communicators.

Have a professional trainer polish your personnel. The profits from investing in effective customer communication will be seen this spring as your employees go back to working with that most important person in your business, the customer.

—The author is a principle at Wandtke & Associates Management Consultants, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231. For more information, phone (614) 891-3111.

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Association of America.

"I'm proud to have been a director of PLCAA because I think it does a great job of representing the best interests of all lawn care companies, both large and small," says Norton.

On a personal level, business associates, including competitors, appreciate his wit, which can be warm or sharp—but always insightful. They value his observations and thoughts on the industry which he shares with other lawn care business people, particularly through his involvement with PLCAA.

"Its been an awful lot of fun and an experience I wouldn't trade for anything," says Norton of his involvement with lawn care.

Both he and the company he helps direct—Barefoot—do the marketplace, the industry, and themselves proud by delivering quality, customer-appreciated lawn services at a price that's fair to everybody.

Previous "Person of the Year" award winners: Jerry Faulring, 1984; Richard Lee Duke, 1985; Ron Giffen, 1986; Bill Fischer, 1987; Jim Marria, 1988; James Fitzgibbon, 1989; James Brooks, 1990; and Marty Erbaugh, 1991.

—Ron Hall