

JOB TALK

Working within limits of customer budgets

This New Jersey landscape maintenance company follows a standard chemical program to keep customers happy.

■ In a sour economy, customers sometimes ask landscapers to cut corners. If they do, they usually end up regretting it. Less-than-expected results almost always bring howls from customers, no matter how accommodating the landscaper was trying to be.

The key for landscapers, then, is to give customers the most



Steve Stys and Rhone-Poulenc's Rick Fritz discuss new techniques to manage weed infestations.

“bang” for their buck, while continually educating them on the vital role that products such as herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers play in plant health.

This is the approach taken by Steve Stys, president of Leonard Reinhardt Inc., a commercial landscape maintenance company in Clifton, N.J.

“Unfortunately, we are now in a situation where customers are looking almost exclusively at the cost of work, and are not giving enough consideration to what the results will be,” says Stys. He believes the current recession is largely responsible for creating “brutal” competition among landscape companies.

“We usually deal with large clients such as condominium management groups which have set budgets. Out of necessity, I have learned to make sure their budgets cover the costs that are needed to ensure they have a beautifully managed landscape area.

“I’ve been called into several jobs midway through completion because the customer wasn’t happy with his landscaper,” Stys continues. “When I study the existing program, it’s easy to pinpoint



Steve Stys believes in educating his customers, rather than just providing services and sending out bills.

important steps that were eliminated to lower the cost of the job. But when I try to set up a new program that will provide the desired result, the bottom line still seems to be money.”

In order to meet customer needs, Stys developed customized maintenance programs for each client and began explaining the plans to customers in terms of long-range savings. “Many people still don’t understand the need for chemicals and therefore are hesitant to pay for them. Often, all they know is what they hear on the news,” says Stys.

“I think it’s better to teach people about pesticides and how they are used rather than simply presenting them with invoices for completed work. It takes extra effort, but it makes for a happier customer. It’s good business sense.”

Stys has developed a standard chemical program which is written into his customers’ contracts. This program begins with a spring clean-up and pre-emergence granular herbicide application. During the season, Stys applies a minimum of four fertilizer applications, two applications of Sevin insecticide, two additional herbicide applications, and—depending on individual sites—applications of Chipco Aliette fungicide as needed. During the fall, he completes the program with lime applications.

“I have found it is important for customers to understand what we are doing and why it is necessary,” Stys says. “Many times, they don’t have enough experience with pesticides to understand what you are telling them, so you have to explain the basics, including proper application techniques.”

Stys prefers to use granular formulations when available to control his pest problems. Because he believes people are often concerned about liquid spray formulations drifting, he tries to avoid them. “I simply set the spreader settings, open the bag and pour it in. I don’t have to worry about employees mixing liquids,” says Stys.

For pre-emergence control of particularly troublesome crabgrass, dandelion, chickweed and nutsedge, Stys uses Chipco Ronstar G herbicide to control young weed seedlings during germination.

For Stys and other landscapers in his area, the challenge of providing top-quality results for clients with shrinking budgets is likely to remain for some time. But by combining customer education with the use of control products, they are taking a large step toward securing a niche in a very tight marketplace.