

Can information blitz keep 'anti's' at bay?

■ Here's a blueprint for starting a pesticide controversy in a community, any community.

1. **Inspire** a single person, then a small group of people to express concerns about the health, safety or environmental aspects of pesticide use.

2. **Ignore** and/or antagonize this group so that it becomes vocal enough to attract the attention of a larger audience.

3. **Argue** the controversy long enough to whet the interest of the media.

4. **Add** fuel to the issue, raising it to the level of public debate.

5. **Avoid** compromises so that the controversy lands on the doorstep of lawmakers—local, state or federal.

Now that ChemLawn Services Corp. has identified the life cycle of a typical community pesticide controversy—astounding how similarly they unfold—the company's management is more confi-

dent it can address them.

And the number one way it addresses them is with information.

Deb Strohmaier, ChemLawn's chief public relations specialist, told an audience of about 200 turf professionals at the Ohio Turfgrass Conference this past December that the nation's largest lawn care provider is continually increasing and upgrading the information it provides its customers.

Brochures, videos, fact sheets—your name it, ChemLawn can provide it.

"We have a positive story to tell on the issues and we've made it easy for our employees to tell it," says Strohmaier who's been with the company for five years.

Strohmaier made these further observations specifically about dealing with the media:

● Recognize that most reporters and editors probably know little about chem-

istry.

● Recognize that they're working under a deadline.

● What's the background of the reporter seeking your comments? What's his angle?

● If an interview is being arranged, it's to your benefit to find out in advance what the reporter wants to cover.

● If you can—and want to—answer specific questions, be truthful. Never lie.

● Don't guess or speculate about answers. Offer to find out.

● Avoid saying "no comment." It's much better to say, "I can't comment on that just yet."

● Present your point but don't argue or debate with the interviewer.

● Know when to duck and get out of the way. If the story is bigger than you, refer your interrogator to your business association.

"In years past ChemLawn did find itself speaking for the industry and we became the magnet for controversy. We've since discontinued the practice of commenting on generic stories," says Strohmaier.

Smart billing KOs cash flow crunches

by Ed Wandtke

■ Lawn care and landscape company owners often say, "If I can make it through the first quarter, I'll be all right with cash flow."

There are ways, however, to minimize—or possibly eliminate—your cash crunch.

1) **Convert your current budget to a cash flow budget**, detailing when all monthly expenses and income will occur. Planning the year this way will help you better forecast major purchases. In addition, the cash flow budget will show you when cash will be tight. Confer with your accountant the first time through; he or she should be able to thoroughly explain this cash management tool to you.

When you apply for the line of credit, make sure that you and your accountant do a thorough job of explaining the cyclical nature of your lawn service business. By doing this, you stand a much better chance at receiving the line of credit you

are applying for.

2) **Offer a five percent discount for pre-payment.** A discount of five percent is typically enough to get five to 15 percent of your current customers to pre-pay. Some firms approach this method of generating cash flow more aggressively, and have an astounding 40 percent of customers prepaid by December 31.

3) **Billing at the beginning of the month** can accelerate your collection period by as much as 30 days.

The "on-time" customer always pays his bill within 30 days. The "past-time" customer pays within 60 days. For March application, look at how the billing could effect cash flow:

Bill March 1: Collect customer on-time March 30
Collect customer past-time April 30

Bill March 30: Collect customer on-time April 30
Collect customer past-time May 30

4) **Bill commercial accounts monthly** to guarantee certain cash flows each month. Some companies have even set up a program with their residential customers in which they offer monthly billing instead of five or six larger payments. Both of these methods can be implemented on a very cost efficient basis.

5) **Send customer statements on the 15th and the 30th of application month.** Reminding your customers often of the need to pay on time will assist in more of paying as soon as the bill is left or mailed to them.

Don't abuse your customer by calling for a payment two days after you have rendered an invoice for the prior 30 days. If you need to do this for cash, review the suggestion above as to a better collection system for these type of customers.

When you buy a new vehicle or other piece of equipment, do you take a 12 payment per year plan? Why take a 12 payment per year plan when cash is coming in for only eight to nine months of the year? Ask the financier next time if you could pay for this purchase on an eight-month schedule. This will help prevent you from paying out money when none is coming in. Remember it can never hurt to ask, because often the financier is happy to
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work with you.

6) Slow down your first quarter payments. Many purchases are made during the first quarter, but the payment for these purchases can be scheduled for the second and third month of the second quarter. Suppliers will work with you when you negotiate these payments in advance,

rather than after you have purchased the items. Often, the interest a supplier charges for extending payments is slightly higher than the interest a bank would charge, but you do not use your line of credit up at the bank when you can negotiate this type of payment plan.

Ask for a deferred or extended payment

terms, and you will be surprised how accommodating some of your suppliers can be. Prior payment performance will be the basis upon which a supplier will decide if they are willing to carry your bill for a deferred payment system.

—The author is a senior consultant with PC Systems, Inc., Columbus, Ohio.

Snow thrower safety: don't put your hands where you shouldn't

■ The biggest chance you have of injuring yourself while operating a snow thrower is by putting your hands where you shouldn't.

More than 4,000 people require emergency room treatment every winter because of injuries from snow thrower-related accidents, reports the Consumer Products Safety Commission. These injuries are usually to the fingers, hands and arms.

George R. Thompson, III, director of corporate communications for Briggs & Stratton Corporation, offers these snow thrower safety tips:

- Stop the engine before attempting to

unclog the machine.

- Use a wooden block to clear a clogged passage. "Even if the snow thrower is turned off, operators must make sure all moving parts have completely stopped before they attempt to unclog the machine," says Thompson.

- Read and understand all operating instructions.

- Don't touch hot mufflers, cylinders or fins.

- Don't fill the gasoline tank while the engine is running. Allow the engine to cool before adding fuel.



- If gasoline is spilled, move the machine away from the area of the spill and avoid creating any source of ignition.

- Don't wear loose clothing that could be caught in moving parts of the equipment.

The marketing plan

As the Cheshire Cat told Alice, it doesn't matter what road you take if you don't know where you want to go.

by Rudd McGary, Ph.D.

■ A big misconception in many green industry companies is that advertising equals marketing. But advertising is only one part of the marketing matrix.

The idea that advertising can make up for other marketing inadequacies is a fallacy. When several companies I know severely curtailed or eliminated their advertising for a whole year, the overall effect was actually *positive*. They saved money on advertising and, in addition, attracted new

customers through other means.

Marketing plans usually take at least a year to fall into place, since they contain many parts. Impatient management is the greatest impediment to a marketing plan's success.

Here are some key elements to a successful marketing plan:

1) The consumer—What does the customer want to buy? How much will they pay for it? How are you going to determine this information?

One of the factors in planning is that not everyone buys lawn care, nor tree work, nor design/build services, nor irrigation. Each segment of the population buys different services in different ways.

Ask the consumer what he/she wants. It's always best to ask in person, second-best to ask by phone, and third to ask by mail.

2) Control—If you're going to spend money in advertising/promotion, you should have a way of determining whether

or not you get a return on the money you've invested.

3) Sales staff and management—You need to understand what the sales force is to do, how it is to be managed, and how the rest of the marketing activities fit in with the sales force actions.

4) Mix of services—Have a clear focus. I've worked with many companies that have branched into areas that don't exactly fit into their original mission. The classic line is that "we went into (fill in the blank) because we had someone who could do it." Make sure your customers want it first.

5) Outside influences—How will reports on 2,4-D affect the lawn care business? What will a down economy do to the buying patterns for services? Regulatory, economic and environmental issues are as important a part of planning considerations as any of the internal issues.

6) Owner needs—What is satisfying to the owners of the company? For instance, in a small company, the owner is probably also working; in a publicly-held company, there may be thousands of owners peering