

Public relations through community education

Providing information on lawn chemicals to children, adults and community groups is a smart PR practice.

by E.T. Wandtke

The competitive nature of the 1990s requires landscapers and lawn care companies to be more service-driven and to deal with public concern regarding chemicals and their effects on the environment.

Some companies see regulation and environmental concerns as something that will hurt business. The smart companies see this trend as an opportunity to gain a new competitive advantage.

How can you use this trend of increased regulations and environmental concerns to your advantage? With public relations—providing information and/or service to a community or group of individuals.

Today, companies often return a little of what they receive to the community. But imagine the decrease in hassles if the market was educated and really knew what you were doing when you provided your services.

Educating the public is the best possible public relations strategy. You should target your efforts in three areas:

1. Educate children on the dangers of misused chemicals and the importance of proper safety procedures.

2. Educate adults on typical control products and their environmental effects.

3. Contact and inform new arrivals in the community.

Educating children—When considering your company's future, it is easy to see that today's children are tomorrow's customers. By remembering this principle, you will be preparing for future success.

What better way to attack misconceptions before they develop than to educate the source?

You should visit schools and discuss the following:

- Playing safely: crossing the street, playing around vehicles, explanation of lawn treatment signs and what to avoid;

- Chemical safety: household products and products typically found in garages or basements.

Plan well and make sure you bring plenty of props. By bringing actual examples (i.e., handouts, stickers and even prizes), you can maintain the children's interest longer since their attention span is typically short.

Educating adults—Adult education is different than that of children, since you will need to concentrate more on specifics. I suggest you visit the PTA, women's league, church groups, garden clubs, and

other groups. Preparation is again important, because typically, these groups express the most concern about the environment. Have a take-home brochure for them that explains which chemicals are dangerous, the steps lawn/landscape companies take to protect the environment, and the environmental effects of homeowner misapplication.

Educating new arrivals—This is perhaps the easiest: all you do is provide them with an information on what chemicals are used to service lawns in your market.

Special event publicity—Another effective method of securing publicity for your company is to run a special event in your community. Events can range from open-house tours to sponsoring community events. If these events are run correctly, they can increase your presence in the community.

If having a special event appeals to you, remember that planning the event is extremely critical and requires a high amount of coordination and forethought. Do not undertake this type of event for promotion if you have not read a book called "Publicity Power." Learn the ins-and-outs from experts who earn their living running special events.

Using the airwaves—Another public relations effort that is effective in many markets is participating in weekly call-in programs on turf and ornamental care.

At first, this may seem extremely challenging, but you might be surprised at how basic the questions can be. You do not need to know the answer to each question as it is posed; rather you need to know where to get the answer and how to execute the solution to given problems.

This is not for people who are not comfortable in verbally explaining and talking in clear and concise terms. Radio or TV can make or break a company. If you are scared, you should train, prepare, and wait for the right opportunity.

Community involvement—Many companies are finding that becoming involved in the community through existing organizations can be very helpful. The Rotary or Junior Achievement are but some of the types of organizations which meet specific community needs.

Community service is a good way to pay the community back for buying your services, and at the same time, secure additional company recognition.

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Fred Hower, right, "The Ohio Nurseryman," gives lawn and garden tips on "PlanTalk" airing over seven Ohio radio stations. At left is Dave Finley, program facilitator.