

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Lobbyist says to keep those cards and letters (to legislators) coming

PLCAA passes the hat and prepares for Feb. 24-25 'Day on the Hill' pilgrimage to meet with Washington, D.C. legislators.

■ Josephine "Jo" Cooper says the lawn care industry, this past year, finally joined the real world. Got in step. Became part of the process.

She's referring to the political process.

Cooper, a small woman with a soft southern voice, is founder and senior principal of Capitoline International Group, Ltd., an issues management firm located in Washington D.C. It's the lobbying firm that the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) employed to chart its course on Capitol Hill this past year.

"PLCAA decided that rather than simply responding and waiting for things to be done to you, the organization would become very much more active," says Cooper.

Active? Indeed. After Cooper delivered the keynote address at PLCAA's 1991 Convention at Tampa in November, outgoing PLCAA president Neal DeAngelo, like a tent revivalist rattling a collection plate, commanded PLCAA directors to the speaking hall doors to collect the pledges of departing listeners.

There were no other exits.

This level of legislative/regulatory earnestness has characterized PLCAA ever since word got out this past mid-spring that several U.S. Senators had drafted



Josephine Cooper helping PLCAA make some friends on Capitol Hill

national lawn care legislation. PLCAA, which represents about 1,000 lawn care companies, has, since then, been exhorting members to:

1) on one hand, give money to its Federal Issues Management Fund and

2) on the other hand, become acquainted, vocal and—at least—recognizable to their legislators—on all levels.

The national legislation that ignited this flurry is dormant, maybe dead.

The PLCAA exhortations for members' money and time on behalf of legislative matters have only increased, though. These calls literally rose to a wail with the June 1991 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that any of the nation's 80,000 political subdivisions can—if they don't conflict with federal or state laws—draft their own pesticide use regulations.

Cooper says PLCAA is on the right

track by demonstrating to legislators that it's not inflexible, that it accepts "reasonable regulation" and sensibly drafted notification and right-to-know laws.

She also makes these points about today's legislative/regulatory climate:

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is unloved and untrusted by just about everyone and will increasingly see its mandate as more regulations and increased enforcement.

- The media will intensify its coverage of environmental issues. "Most of the reporters involved with environmental issues are not so much objective journalists anymore as they are advocates," says Cooper.

- The environmental activist community, and much of the public, is convinced some of the products on the market shouldn't be there. They wouldn't be available, these critics feel, if the EPA did its job properly.

- Most legislators don't know very much about the lawn care industry nor, probably, about pesticides. "We found that some very limited anecdotal situations, specific situations, formed the legislation that had been drafted, were driving that legislation," says Cooper.

With 23 years experience in environmental matters, some of it with the EPA and as a staffer on Capitol Hill, Cooper says that she's convinced that calls and letters from constituents to legislators do sway legislative opinion.

She also urges PLCAA members to participate in its "Day on the Hill" activities in Washington, D.C. Feb. 24-25.

—Ron Hall

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Determining customer wants

Do your front-line people spend 'quality time' on clients' lawns? That's one of the services most customers want.

■ It's no secret what your customers want, says Gary Clayton of Sandoz Agro North America Inc. It's how you *deal* with customer wants-and-needs that makes your company a success or a failure.

"You can't truly separate wants-and-needs and customer satisfaction," says Clayton, a 12-year green industry veteran. "So satisfying customers should be integrated into a company philosophy or mission statement."

Clayton says, historically, research has proven that customers in the green industry want:

- a green, healthy lawn,
 - treated by a trained, informative company
 - at a competitive price
 - offering additional or full services
 - implementing current technology.
- "You must commit to develop a strate-



Gary Clayton: front-line people are best resources

gy," Clayton says. "And it must be a full-time effort. You also need a system to measure customer satisfaction."

Too many times, lawn/landscape services concentrate on the target, or product: a green, healthy lawn. But what's expected by the customer is *more* than that, Clayton says: materials, good service and company responsibility. What's *possible* is another factor in the customer satisfaction arena: unusual actions of service, demonstrations of concern, and civic support.

"We have to generate that wide-scope focus," says Clayton. "Typical wants-and-needs are timely applications, by the same technician, professional application, respect of personal property, professional appearance and attitudes, leave-behind

notes and guides, and spending time on the property."

However, to go that one step further, says Clayton, businesses that are really in tune with the customer add these personal *exceptional* services:

- notes detailing special problems;
- information in the mail or a telephone follow-up;
- helpful office staff;
- service visits without requests;
- immediate response to problems;
- exceptionally courteous front-liners;
- inspection and evaluation of the entire property;
- spending "quality time" with the customer; and
- a "sixth sense" of what the customer wants-and-needs.

There exist plenty of opportunities to determine customer wants-and-needs, too, says Clayton. These include point of sales, each application, each phone contact and/or a customer survey form.

"We're at a point in our industry where we have to get back to the basics," Clayton notes. "When you grow, you have to determine whether it's attributed to the sales and marketing function, or whether it's because you've (accurately) determined customer wants-and-needs."

"The bottom line in growth is how we communicate with our customer."

—Jerry Roche

More competition, fewer entry-level prospects through the 90s

■ Meet Mr. Middle Management. His large corporation is downsizing. Pretty soon he will be out of work.

Don't pity Mr. MM. He won't be idle for long.

In fact, he might become the newest competitor to your lawn or landscape service business.

Two of every three former corporate climbers re-enter the job market on the *small business* side of the equation, says Gerald Sweda, the corporate training manager for O.M. Scott & Sons, Marysville, Ohio.

"The playing field is changing," says Sweda. "The rules of the game are changing." And many of these rule changes impact the growing importance of small business—which is both proliferating and failing at an astonishing rate—in America's economic picture.

Explains Sweda:

- Big business is dropping middle managers at record levels (over 2 million let go during the 1980s, and the pace is accelerating.) Many of these former professionals are fed up with the commute, they're fed up with downtown parking, they want to be their own bosses.

- The pool of basically unskilled workers is falling in relation to the industries needing them—in 1990 4.5 million fewer entry-level candidates than in 1980.

This translates into more entrepreneurs, would-be entrepreneurs and potential competitors, but fewer people willing to go out and actually do the labor.

"Small business has to learn some things from big business," says Sweda, but foremost, it has to learn how to compete. The days of trading customers with several friendly competitors, or running a classified ad and attract-



Gerald Sweda: small businesses need more sophistication

ing reliable hourly workers, is becoming just a warm and fuzzy memory to lawn and landscape care providers in many markets, says Sweda.

Small business operators are going to have to become as sophisticated as big business in the operation of their companies, he maintains.

Says Sweda, one of every six small businesses will fail in 1992, and, of the survivors, most can expect to lose almost 1/3rd of their customers each year.

"Suddenly customers are consciously aware of this service thing. We've made it such an issue that it's on everybody's lips now and every customer wants service," says Sweda.

"If you don't respond, they (customers) simply leave."

—Ron Hall

O.M. Scott bidding to be top player in municipal yard-waste recycling

■ Green industry professionals will benefit from O.M. Scott & Sons Company's drive to be the nation's municipal yard-waste recycling leader.

That company opened its 11th yard waste facility in mid-October, this one at its company headquarters in Marysville, Ohio. This site, like the others, is accepting lawn and landscape wastes. The disposal costs are significantly cheaper than at landfills, assuming the landfills still accept such material, claims a company official.

Other Scotts' sites are located in California, Texas, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Virginia.

The newest Ohio site, nearly 22 acres, will process 50,000 tons of Franklin County grass clippings, leaves and brush each year. That's about one quarter of all yard wastes in the metropolitan Columbus area.

This particular facility is operated under contract to the Franklin County Regional Solid Waste Management Authority.

Here's how it works: yard waste from golf courses, city and village work crews, landscapers, tree companies, utility companies and lawn care professionals is taken to one of five transfer sites. Then the regional



The Wildcat Turner allows air to circulate through developing compost at the Scotts/Hypoxex site in central Ohio.

authority transports the wastes from these collection areas to the Scotts' site.

At other compost locations, the material—either loose or in recyclable paper bags—is brought directly to the site.

"We are totally recycling this material," George Martin, manager of composting for Scotts/Hypoxex, tells *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT* magazine. "We're taking something that was previously considered waste and disposed of in landfills, and we're recycling it and using it."

Scott's uses the compost resulting from the recycling operations as an ingredient in its Hypoxex soil conditioners and top soils, says Martin. In addition to Hypoxex bag products, the company also did about \$7 million in bulk compost sales. (Overall, the Hypoxex organic product line reportedly

accounted for about \$130 million of O.M. Scott & Sons' \$380 million in sales last year.

Martin says ever-tightening landfill regulations are driving the yard-waste/compost issue. Concurrently, some communities that had started composting services are discovering that they haven't the money nor the expertise to operate them. They're looking to private industry for help.

Backyard composting by homeowners may grow, but it's unlikely—because of the effort required to do it correctly—to become widespread, believes Martin and other compost authorities.

Martin says green industry professionals benefit from the Scotts/Hypoxex facilities because yard wastes can be disposed of there far more cheaply than at landfills.

—Ron Hall

Maryland offers video training

■ Money can't buy happiness, but \$120 can buy a pretty good start on your pesticide applicator training program.

That's the cost of a six-part video series that businesses can use to help train non-certified employees who handle and apply pesticides. The Cooperative Extension Service, Maryland Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, is offering the series which was funded in part by a \$30,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"We developed this series in response to the needs of employers," says Amy E. Brown, Extension pesticide education coordinator. "The videos offer a convenient, inexpensive alternative to developing and conducting a training seminar every time new workers are hired."

Topics covered include:

Module 1: Pesticide Laws and Regulations.

Module 2: The Pesticide Label.

Module 3: Protecting the Pesticide Handler.

Module 4: Guidelines for Proper Pesticide Handling.

Module 5: Pesticides and the Environment.

Module 6: Integrated Pest Management.

The series includes on-screen tests and comes with printed discussion guides and sets of questions and answers to help employers insure that their employees understand essential information.

Contact: Amy E. Brown at (301) 405-3928. To order, send a check or money order payable to the University of Maryland, c/o Video Resource Center, 0120 Symons Hall, College Park, MD 20742.

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