

## 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