

Focus of lawn care in 1990s: customer, employee education

Well-trained, responsible employees are a company's best resource but consider newsletters, videos, and radio too.

by Brad Johnson

■ Leaving customer expectations to chance is risky business.

That's because the uneducated customer often builds unreasonably high expectations. No wonder. Some lawn care companies advertise that all customers have to do for a beautiful lawn is to mail them a check every two months. When the lawn doesn't live up to these expectations, customers, particularly new customers, don't perceive professional service as having value.



Brad Johnson: education must go hand in hand with service.

Lawn care business people now realize they *must* educate customers as well as treat their lawns.

They must educate them concerning the value they're receiving.

It benefits both parties. Customers must often work *with* the lawn professional to secure an attractive, healthy lawn. For instance, lawn professionals need continuing customer cooperation with mowing and watering. That's when a customer begins to receive real value from the lawn professional's service.

The professional provider builds on



A professional lawn care company is only as good as its employees. Brad Johnson is proud of his green up! team in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

customer education and communication *in addition* to attempting to deliver a "weed free" lawn, one that is always greener than the one across the street—often while using less pesticides and fertilizers. This is a tall order, but that's what we're working toward.

Building bridges with your clients may not be as difficult as you think. Let's look at ways you can educate your customers and turn them into partners.

Newsletters—A newsletter is fun and fairly easy to do. Most customers will glance through it. Some will read it cover to cover. You can produce simple newsletters in-house for a fairly modest cost. However, to really attract customer attention, use a professional marketing firm.

Leave newsletters with customers with every application. You can also mail them to customers, but this is more costly.

Use newsletters to increase sales of add-on services. Be fair. Don't produce newsletters that have substantially more advertising than helpful information. You want

your customers to learn something valuable about their lawns and landscapes while looking through your newsletters.

In addition to newsletters, you might consider:

Videos—We tried customer manuals, but customers often don't read them. This season we began using a professionally produced customer education video, "Side by Side."

The 15-minute video shows clients how to properly water and mow lawns. It also deals with two particularly frustrating problems for lawns in the transition zone, winterkill and spring dead spot. (You may want to customize your video to deal with other issues.)

When a new customer signs up with us, we send them a welcome card, do their first application, and leave a copy of the video in their invoice bag.

We also include a short survey for them to fill out after they watch the video. To answer the survey, they have to watch "Side by Side," since answers to the ques-

Little things mean a lot

- Little things your people can do every day add up to better-educated, loyal customers.
 - ✓ Take the time to talk to customers, either in person or on the phone.
 - ✓ Call customers to ask if there are any questions about their lawn or your service.
 - ✓ Write personal notes on invoices each time an application is done.
 - ✓ If the customer is not watering and mowing properly, tell him or her, and leave information on proper watering and mowing.
 - ✓ Leave fact sheets on special problems a lawn may have, such as soil compaction, disease, thin turf, etc. Follow these up with phone calls.

—B.J.

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tions are in the text of the video. When they return the video in a postage-paid mailer, we give them a coupon good for \$5 off of an optional service.

Radio—This past year I began co-hosting the KRMG-AM (Tulsa, Okla.) Lawn and Landscape Show, a one-hour, Saturday talk show.

Many of our customers tell us that they regularly listen to our show. Several fellow lawn care owners even remarked that the information is helpful for their customers, too. Of course, the do-it-yourselfers really appreciate the tips.

We usually have guests on the show such as arborists, irrigation experts, university professors, and nurserymen. We feel the show is a great opportunity to teach the public and lawn service customers about lawns and landscapes.



Many LCOs now use professionally produced newsletters to keep their clients informed.

Our employees—All the video, newsletters and radio shows, will have limited effectiveness without quality, well-educated, motivated employees. There is no substitute for just good, old-fashioned face-to-face communication.

That's where we need to spend the most time and money, in encouraging and educating our employees first. Employees can then begin to educate our customers.

Market saturation, increased regulation and pressures from anti-pesticide group is, a more demanding customer base—these are the reasons why we must educate and become partners with both our employees and our customers.

—Brad Johnson is president of *green up!* Lawn Care Services, Tulsa, Okla. For more information about customer education videos, contact him at (918) 250-3898.