

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Aeration still undersold to public

When lawn care professionals educate their customers to the benefits of aeration, a third or more will pay for it.

■ Many home lawns would be healthier, more attractive and more valuable to their owners if they received periodic aerations.

But many home owners and property managers—those people who ultimately sign the checks to pay for professional turf care—still don't know what core aeration is, or what it's supposed to accomplish. This is particularly true of non-golfers. Most golfers have seen either an aerator in action, or the turf just after it's been opened up with tines.

Some lawn care company owners claim aeration hasn't been sold to potential clients, not really *sold* to them. But to sell you have to educate first.

"I think you have to be a little more intimate with your customer for them to appreciate core aeration," says Richard Ficco, Jr., president of Partners Quality Lawn Service, Boston.

When a company finally commits to educating and selling aeration to its customers, as many as 25 percent accept it.

Ficco says about 27 percent of his customers in 1991 accepted aeration as part of their programs. (Generally, almost 30 percent of Partners' new customers include it in their programs.)

"But I don't think you can come in with the hype that this is the best thing



Ficco: Aerate in circular patterns, save time of stopping and turning



Van Noord: Leave-behind information 'stops some of the phone calls.'

ever," says Ficco. Recognize aeration service for what it is, he says, "a fine add-on service that can supplement the income of an existing business."

In the Boston-area market, \$24 to \$25 per 1,000 sq.ft. is what most residential customers expect to pay for aeration. Professionals elsewhere would love to get that. Some charge as low as \$10 per 1,000 sq.ft.

counts, coupons, mailings, etc. Aeration is also prominently mentioned in Partners' Yellow Pages' advertising.

But it really *sells* aeration through person-to-person contact, says Ficco.

"We explain the problem, write it down on the invoice and follow up. If the people don't call us back within 72 hours, we're back on the lawn in person, or sometimes we make a phone call, to follow up on what we've already suggested," he says.

Steve Van Noord, Weed & Feed Lawn Care of Byron Center, Mich., offers aeration as part of W&F's regular program—four applications and an aeration. "If we really believe it benefits lawns, why are we marketing it as an option?" he asks.

Van Noord says W&F aerates about 60 percent of its customers from year to year.

"This (aeration) is the type of service you have to continue selling," says Van Noord. "When we do an aeration, we leave behind lots of information, information that answers questions like, 'will I see long-term or instant results?' and 'do I pick up the cores, or mow right after an aeration?'"

Whereas Ficco's company does most of its aerations in the fall, usually in conjunction with applications of lime, fertilizer

SAMPLE RESIDENTIAL PLAN

	Existing customers	New customers	Total
Customer base	500	125	625
Cancels	50	10	60
Net customers	450	115	565
Buying aeration	15%	20%	
Price (1,000 sq. ft.)	\$18	\$18	
Avg. lawn (sq. ft.)	7000	7000	
Revenues	\$8820	\$3150	\$11,970

Under-charging is risky. Aerator maintenance, with its down-time and related costs, can be high. "Aerators, as part of their repair instructions, use terms like crowbar and sledge hammer," jokes Ficco.

The Easton, Mass., businessman offers aeration as one of several turf-building, extra-charge services in addition to fertilizer and weed control. The company sells it through a combination of seasonal dis-

ELSEWHERE

DC firm offers service 'menu', p. 80

Dr. Beard predicts turf's future, p. 82

High/low volume: the pros and cons, p. 82



Marino: wants to build home owner awareness in southwest Missouri.

and seed, Van Noord's W&F tries to slip in as many aerations as it can during the dog days of summer, on those days when wind

or other conditions don't favor fertilizer or chemical applications.

"We follow basically the same routes as we do for the other rounds," says Van Noord.

George Marino of Greenlawn Fertilizer of Springfield, Springfield, Mo., says this season he'll add an optional two rounds of aeration to his basic five-application program.

Says Marino. "I think the message I want to get across is for them to realize,

yes, this needs to be part of the program and it (aeration) will help the other things that we're doing benefit them more."

In spite of the turfgrass industry's familiarity with aeration and its benefits, Marino doesn't think home owners have gotten the message yet.

"I think a lot of our market is still uneducated when it comes to aeration," he says.

—Ron Hall

Adaptable DC-area firm offers virtual 'menu' of lawn services to customers

Partners Dan Henneberg and Bern Bonifant say it would be nice to be 'all natural,' but you've got to make a living, too.

■ Good lawn care programs, good name, good new location: these are some of the reasons Dan Henneberg and Bern Bonifant feel *good* about 1992.

Henneberg is president and Bonifant vice president of Natural Lawns, Inc., Fairfax, Va. They've been together since founding Natural Lawns in 1986. Last year, recession or not, was the company's best ever.

What they, through NL Inc., do—and do well—is offer clients a choice of programs. Then they deliver the type of service the customer wants.

They feel that, as a small company, they have to be flexible to compete in the Northern Virginia residential market. Or be squashed. The competition includes most of the industry's national heavyweights, and several top-flight regional companies, too.

Henneberg and Bonifant aren't intimidated though. They're too busy.

When potential clients get a Natural Lawns' brochure, they almost get a lawn care menu. The partners know their suburban D.C. customers, for the most part, are educated professional people. But these same people also probably don't know the subtleties of keeping green, healthy lawns during the area's hot, humid summer. That's one reason all NL programs are listed and explained in easy-to-understand language.



Bern Bonifant, left, and Dan Henneberg are proving that the Northern Virginia lawn care market is still strong.

Prospects can choose from an "All Natural Program," a "Modified-Organic Program," a "Lawnplus-IPM" offering, or, perhaps, a "Zoysia Program."

Says Henneberg, "we'll even make adjustments *within* a program."

Adds Bonifant, "some customers don't like the cookie cutter approach. They may want one aspect of a program customized to address some particular concern they have."

In spite of the company name, no more than 10 percent of the company's clients choose an all natural lawn care program.

"The more research we did, the more we realized that—sure—it would be nice to offer strictly all-natural lawn care," says Henneberg, "but we have to make a living too."

He says most NL customers choose a modified organic program, consisting of a soil pH test, the use of high-quality, slow-release fertilizer, application of a pre-emergence crabgrass control, and spot weed and insect controls, if needed. A winter application of lime (a common feature

of all NL programs) provides the sixth round for this program.

The company also offers a shrub care program, core aeration and seeding (mostly done together in the fall), overseeding, and a small amount of mowing.

Henneberg and Bonifant are digging deeper into the Fairfax-area market. In fact, they started 1992 by moving their headquarters from Falls Church to Fairfax County, about a 25-minute MetroRail southwest from downtown Washington, D.C.

"This puts us absolutely in the center of the Northern Virginia market," says Bern. "We think this is going to help us keep our routes tight. I know it's not always an easy thing to do, but we intend to concentrate on small areas and still expand our customer base."

Adds Henneberg, "many households have both parents working and they just don't have much time for lawn work, but they still want a nice lawn."

—Ron Hall

Dr. Beard views future of turf management

■ Dr. James Beard outlined 10 trends he felt vital during a presentation at the Michigan Turfgrass Conference, just a few miles from Michigan State University where he taught from 1961 to 1975.

"Some of the things I say will probably be wrong, but the challenge is to think of the future," said Beard who was visiting from Texas A&M University.

1. More computer use in turfgrass management. "You're going to come in and turn that computer on and you're going to get a series of readouts that there is a high probability of this disease in the next four days, or the prime time for winter overseeding is coming up, or a period of root stress is approaching," he notes. Computers, networked to libraries, will provide an immediate source of information for turfgrass managers.

2. Reduced pesticide use. More corrective and fewer preventive applications. More pesticide applications will be target-specific.

3. More emphasize on pest management approaches. The key to solid turfgrass management?—"understanding and manipulating the environment in favor of the growth of the turfgrass plant, and minimizing the chances of stress," says Beard.

4. Water conservation. Expect less

water available for turfgrass use, higher water costs, increased use of effluent water, government control or allocation, says Beard, noting that the industry has had a hard time convincing the public that



Beard: Predicts more tolerant turf.

turfgrass is actually vital in preserving and protecting groundwater.

5. More use of controlled-release fertilizer products. The presence of nitrates

in groundwater will continue to be an issue. He asks for improvements in slow-release fertilizer carriers.

6. Less energy waste. Expect steadily rising costs for petroleum-based products and internal combustion machinery, causing turfgrass managers to plan their programs with energy savings in mind.

7. Improved stress tolerance in turfgrass cultivars. Plant breeders will accelerate their efforts to develop grasses that provide quality turf while requiring less energy, water, fertilizer, and pesticides.

8. Innovative rootzones for turfgrass getting lots of traffic. Beard refers to a mesh element system in place in the upper six inches of turfgrass rootzone at the 14-acre Santa Anita (Calif.) Race Track. He said it significantly reduced divoting and improved turf at the track. Systems based on similar principles might be developed for golf tees/greens and sports fields.

9. Growing focus on employee safety. Employee training programs will focus on safety practices, use of equipment, product safety, etc.

10. More education needed to keep abreast of technological advances. Turfgrass managers will *have to* be well versed in turfgrass, and also in cost control, system organization, personnel management, budgeting, etc.

The heart of his message? "Efficiency through better management of water use, pesticide use, energy use, equipment use, labor use, and fertilizer use," says Beard.

—Ron Hall

High vs. low volume: still sparks controversy

■ Maybe you can *still* spark a hot little argument concerning liquid versus dry lawn applications.

Maybe.

Or how about high volume versus low volume?

Consider this instead: a separate company, a low volume or granular company, *in addition* to your present company? Perhaps you can even retrain and staff the new venture with some of the same personnel you already employ?

Bruce Jacobs, an agronomic specialist with DowElanco, posed the questions during a presentation at the Michigan Turfgrass Conference.

Jacobs cautioned, however, that before making any significant changes in an operation business owners should satisfy themselves that they can answer the following three questions:

1. Will the change improve the company's long-term profitability?

2. Will the change improve employee motivation?

3. Will the change improve the company's service to its customers?

Until just recently—into the 1980s, really—the public embraced high volume liquid applications at least in part, claims Jacobs, because the service was new and novel.



Bruce Jacobs: weigh long-term profit picture when considering liquid vs. dry.

"People said, 'Hey, I can't do that. Hose down my lawn next'," says Jacobs of the first professional applicators, some of whom used converted oil tank trucks and put down as much as 10 gallons of material per 1,000 sq.ft.

"Now I think the homeowner is saying, 'Give me the service because I don't have

continued on page 84



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HIGH VS. LOW VOLUME

Advantages of high volume:

- ✓ One-step application. You can mix products in the tank.
- ✓ Excellent to good coverage of the lawn.
- ✓ Less chance for phytotoxicity, streaking.

Disadvantages of high volume:

- x Large, heavy trucks.
- x Hard to operate in downtown areas, lack of mobility.
- x In event of spill, potentially more material to contain.

Advantages of low volume:

- ✓ Smaller, easier to operate, easier to keep up vehicles.
- ✓ Better mobility.
- ✓ Fewer gallons of material on the road.

Disadvantages of low volume:

- x Generally demands more experienced applicators.
- x Greater likelihood of phytotoxicity and streaking by technicians.
- x Spills are usually of more concentrated material.

High vs. low from page 82

time to do it for myself," says Jacobs.

Jacobs says the lawn application industry is moving toward low volume (1 to 1-1/2 gallons per 1,000 sq.ft.) and granular programs, but some high volume liquid operations are still profitable and healthy.

So instead of stripping off the tanks from your big chemical trucks and selling them as flatbeds, or reinventing the company image, he suggests, start another operation, maybe even with a different company name and different image in the marketplace.