

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.



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



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

■ 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

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-

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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