

# LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

## Russell J. Frith, 1993 'Person of the Year'



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Lawn Doctor's president and CEO is in the forefront of efforts to promote the industry's image and message on the political front.

■ Twenty-two men and women sat around tables arranged in a square dominating a first-floor meeting room in an Alexandria, Va., hotel. This was an unlikely group, the only common thread among the participants being some expertise or agenda concerning pesticides. Some objected to their use. Others defended their use.

One of the 22 is a big man with a round ruddy face, blondish-gray hair, and a loud, clear voice. His name is Russell J. Frith, and guess which side of the fight he is on.

Frith, 50, president and chief executive officer of Lawn Doctor, Inc., is LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT's 1993 lawn care "Person of the Year."

The meeting we refer to took place last February and dealt with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

efforts to develop "guidelines" for individual states on pesticide-related issues such as pre-notification, the establishment of chemical registries, etc. (As it turned out, the EPA had pretty much settled on guidelines already—a fact that Frith firmly took issue with at the time.)

While EPA representatives guided the meeting from the north end of the huge table, Frith and several other pro-lawn care spokespeople formed a loose coalition to their left, facing, about 15 feet away, several of the industry's harshest critics.

A strong voice—Actually, this was the second, and final, meeting of the so-called EPA Lawn Care Pesticide Advisory Council. The first had been in Annapolis, Md., in May 1992. Frith had been at that one too, and just as vocal.

At both meetings, his rational defense of lawn care issues (he certainly wasn't alone) visibly altered the agenda of industry critics who, it seemed, had come to the table viewing the lawn care industry as an easy target. They discovered—after going

face-to-face with Frith, other lawn care proponents and several product manufacturers—that the industry is both proactive and, for the most

part, united.

They also learned that it isn't easily intimidated. Pro-industry spectators at both hearings considered this to be the bigger victory.

Frith's involvement on this committee isn't the sole reason why we've chosen him as "Person of the Year." It is, though, one of many telling episodes in his 16-year involvement with the lawn care industry.

In fact, lawn care is an industry that Frith, through his company, has helped grow. Many small business owners (about 300) wouldn't be in lawn care today if it weren't for Lawn Doctor and its remarkable dealer retention record. Lawn Doctor is the industry's leader in franchised lawn care.

What's lawn care?—Frith admits that as a youngster in a working-class Philadelphia neighborhood he never dreamed of directing a lawn care company. In fact, if there was a lawn care industry, it was microscopic. Lawn Doctor itself didn't exist until 1964 when the late Tony Giordano, owner of a hardware store, and

friend Robert Magda opened a lawn care operation. The company was called Auto-Lawn then; it became Lawn Doctor in 1967. Giordano died in 1984. Magda is a vice president with, and remains active in, Lawn Doctor.

Frith joined Lawn Doctor in 1978 as director of franchise sales. In 1979 he became vice president of marketing, and in 1980 executive vice president. He's been company president and CEO for the past 12 years.

Frith probably would have been successful without any further involvement in industry-wide issues. But that appears to go against his out-going, sometimes-ebul-

lient, sometimes-challenging nature.

Not only is he a past president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America, but he also served as president of PLCAA's Educational Foundation and remains active on its Government Relations Committee.

**Enjoying his role**—As the president of the nation's leader in franchised lawn care (locations in over 30 states), Frith has made it a point to maintain a high profile in Washington D.C. affairs as they relate to the industry. Actually, he seems to enjoy it.

He also regularly commits Lawn Doctor staff and resources to support industry causes, while he urges the com-

pany's independent franchisees to become involved in local, state and regional political and regulatory actions too.

Frith is married, and he and his wife Margaret have two sons, both in college. Frith attended LaSalle University where he earned a B.S. in Accounting and Marketing.

Previous "Person of the Year" award winners: Jerry Faulring (1984), Richard Lee Duke (1985), Ron Giffen (1986), Bill Fischer (1987), Jim Marria (1988), James Fitzgibbon (1989), James Brooks (1990), Marty Erbaugh (1991), and Patrick J. Norton (1992).

—Ron Hall

## Wierichs, big man for big job

### New PLCAA president to remain active in GIE negotiations, wants association to reach out to members

■ Lou Wierichs brought the cigars. They were good ones, from Tampa.

This could only mean one thing. The out-going president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America, in this case John Robinson of Calgary, Canada, gets to light up, prop his feet on a table and relax. PLCAA's incoming-president, in this case Wierichs of Appleton, Wis., gets to lazily contemplate the coming year through the lingering blue smoke of a fine stogey. One last time.

This ritual marks what is sure to be a hectic year in the life of Wierichs who describes himself as a practical person. A nuts-and-bolts kind of guy. A commonsensical man ("If there is such a word.").

But associates describes this mountain of a man (6-foot-5 and about 280 pounds) as out-going and hard working. He can be all business, or fun loving. It just depends on the situation. "But, you always know when he's around," jokes one peer.

"I know being president of PLCAA will take a lot of my time. But when you have something that's worthwhile, you find the time," says Wierichs, operator/majority owner of Pro-X System Lawn Care, a company he and two partners founded in 1986 as a ServiceMaster franchise.

After all, Wierichs points out he's successfully managed to grow his business while maintaining perfect attendance as PLCAA board member the past two years, and as an officer in the Grounds Management Association of Wisconsin. When Terry Kurth, Barefoot Grass of Madison, initiated the idea for the pro-industry Wisconsin Industry for Sound Environment (WISE), Wierichs joined in too.

Wierichs says one of his main goals as PLCAA president will be to help in Green Industry Expo negotiations. Representatives from PLCAA, the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), and the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) have until June 30, 1994 to hammer management of future GIEs. Presently, PLCAA manages the Expo.

"I was going to go off the (GIE) board, but the PLCAA board felt I should stay on as one of its three representatives during the negotiations with ALCA and PGMS," says Wierichs. "I feel very comfortable with what's going on."

Wierichs insists he's pro-GIE. "I understand the importance of staying together."

In an unrelated matter, Wierichs says he wants to see PLCAA more aggressive in reaching out to members again. That's because so there are so many small companies in PLCAA. Lou says about 70 percent of PLCAA membership reports gross sales of \$600,000 or less. ("Hey, I'm one of these guys," he points out.)

"A lot of those members need the how-to's," says Wierichs. "This year I think we're going to implement six educational road shows. PLCAA was at its strongest when it reached out to its membership."



**Wierichs: believes in information network between companies.**

Along these lines, Wierichs says he would like to see a PLCAA help line set up so that when a member has a question concerning a specific problem, that member can dial an 800 number and talk to somebody who has dealt with and resolved similar problems.

For his own part, Wierichs says PLCAA has allowed him to build up an information-sharing network of non-competing lawn care company owners, both in Wisconsin and across the country. "That's the number one benefit of participating in any professional association," says Wierichs.

Former restaurant manager, interstate truck driver, loan officer and, for the last eight years, small business owner. Lou Wierichs is certainly big enough to guide PLCAA for the coming year.

—Ron Hall