

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Tips on recognizing opportunity when next faced with a drought

Develop the strategy before an emergency to give your company focus and direction while competitors struggle.

■ Your customers' lawns and landscapes will probably be damaged by the next drought. Chances are they will survive; they can be repaired. Will you be able to say the same about your company?

Ask that question now. Develop a drought-survival/opportunity plan. It doesn't have to be intricate. It can be as simple as a checklist. It will be your roadmap and guide your company through the next drought and deliver it intact, and allow you to offer profitable repair or renovation services at emergency's end.

Build your plan optimistically, with an eye to harvesting opportunities.

There's often good news at the end of a drought. The 1988 Midwest drought led to unprecedented customer demand for property reseeding and renovation later that fall and throughout 1989.

Develop the strategy before an emergency begins. This will give your company focus and direction while competitors struggle. After all, drought and water shortages (bans) are recurring problems.

Realize that aiding customers' lawns/landscapes is just one aspect of a water emergency.

Your plan must focus on the bigger picture:

- 1) keeping your company functioning,
- 2) retaining customers, and
- 3) sustaining employee morale.

Here are some drought survival/ suggestions to address these concerns:

Customer education—Do you have literature ready to give to your customers as the next water emergency approaches? Handouts? Brochures? Can your technicians speak convincingly to your clients about:

- ✓turfgrass dormancy,

✓proper lawn/landscape watering practices,

✓higher mowing heights in summer,
✓limiting traffic on stressed turfgrasses, and/or

✓your company's role in building the overall vigor of the customer's lawns/landscapes to survive a water shortage (using more slow-release nitrogen sources, or fertilizers with less nitrogen and more potassium in summer)?

Customer retention—Some customers won't allow you to put anything on their lawns during a drought. Sometimes it's better that you don't.

That doesn't mean you can't inspect customers' properties anyway. Remember, your customers aren't paying you to make applications even though that's how you bill them. They're paying for results, healthy and attractive lawns/landscapes. Perhaps you can offer spot seeding later in the season at a reduced rate, provided they stay on your program. Be flexible.

Employee retention—While you fret over lost applications and lost revenue, your employees fret over the possibility of lost wages. If conditions won't allow them to

make applications, can they provide clients with flower bed weed control and turf aeration? When

A drought or watering ban can brown a customer's turfgrass, but it doesn't mean you lose that customer.

the emergency is over, you and your customers will need experienced technicians to repair the damage.

Leadership—Equipped with your knowledge of lawns/landscapes and armed with your plan, garner a reputation as a problem solver by speaking at local service or garden club meetings. Or, if you're comfortable with it, become a source for the media.

Keep your message positive. Emphasize how your company and the industry can help customers during and after the drought emergency.

Cooperative effort—Water boards ban lawn and landscape irrigation because they can get away with it. Usually, the green industry doesn't respond as a group until it starts to hurt, even though it has solid information that lawns/landscapes aren't water wasters. Lawns prevent runoff and erosion; landscapes enhance the environment.

Your plan should recognize the need to cooperate with other green industry professionals so that water boards and, hopefully, the public gets the facts.

—Ron Hall

