

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Fueling the fire



A skeptical banker lit a fire inside this hard-working Kentucky lawn care pro.

■ Before his son came along, Rob Harris could mow 16 acres and spray 30 lawns in one shift. That's how Harris Lawn Care began in 1989 and 1990—when no one believed in Harris as much as he did.

"The first banker I went to for a loan (to start the business) thought I was crazy," Harris remembers. "He guaranteed that I'd never make it mowing grass. He laughed in my face. And that sort of lit my fire.

"The second banker I went to, an older man, kind of liked that fire burning in me. He's helped me out a couple of times when I was in a bind."

With very little advertising, Harris Lawn Care has grown to service more than 300 customers in a six-county area around Campbellsville, Ky. One of the secrets—besides the unusual hours required by a one-man operation—is Harris's relationship with his customers.

"My customers are not just a name or a number," he says. "I know each one personally and care about them. They are like my family. I have eight or 10 customers I can call 'Mom' or 'Uncle Joe.' I want to have a one-on-one relationship with them. I get more reward from making a person smile than making a hundred dollars."

Here are some of the extra special things he does for his customers:

● Every Christmas, Harris signs each Christmas card and personally writes a little note to each customer.

● He has been known to spray a lawn for free, if not to engage a new customer, then just to bring a smile to the homeowner.

● When he picked up Campbellsville College as a client, he had to drop some of his smaller residential customers. But before he left them, he explained why, and found an alternate person willing to mow their lawns. "I told them that if the new person didn't work out, I'd come back and cut their lawns for free," Harris says.

● Five to 10 minutes are allotted each customer on his daily schedule. "Just to talk to them—whether it's about their lawn, their cats or whatever," he says.

Setting priorities—"I've always had that desire to be a winner," Harris says. "I've always told myself I was going to be the best. If there was a market for any business, I think I could make it work. But you've got to enjoy what you're doing."

It's nothing for Harris to be mowing lawns at 3 a.m., the headlights on his Grasshopper mower pointing the way through the dark. "Some of the police in

town call me 'Crazyman' because of the hours I work," he notes. Other nicknames bestowed upon him by friends and customers: Superman, Rocketman, Mr. Smily.

Yet, part of the reason you can see him mowing lawns long after the sun has set is because he has his priorities straight: church, family, business—in that order.

"I'm not a workaholic," he says. "I have a family day and I also teach a Sunday School class."

Happily married and the father of a 2½-year-old son,

Harris continually alters his work schedule to allow him time with his family. He does some of his work while they are comfortably nestled in their beds.

"My son throws a fit when I leave for work, and it hurts me inside," he admits. "So I've made some adjustments."

College substitutes—If Harris is working from a disadvantage—not having a college degree—it's not apparent. He has pooled a variety of resources, including his "hero," Dr. A.J. Powell of the University of Kentucky, who referred Campbellsville College to him. Harris routinely relies on Powell, along with the training he receives from attending every seminar he can, the various trade magazines, and even God—especially God, when the weather goes rotten.

Harris spent four years in the Navy, where he won a chestful of awards. But when he heard that his next tour of duty would be overseas, rather than re-upping he decided to become a civilian again. He started mowing lawns for his cousin and believed that he could make some money doing it himself. Thus the saga of Harris Lawn Care began, with a little help from

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Rob Harris: lawn care 'my way'

- 1) Have a personal relationship with each customer.
- 2) Be willing to go that extra mile.
- 3) Keep your priorities straight.
- 4) Use your resources to keep up to date.
- 5) Have pride in the job you're doing.

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that elderly banker-friend.

It's no coincidence that this summer he's training an assistant.

"The college, with its 50 acres, keeps me pretty busy," says Harris. "And the business keeps on growing. So I've got a

guy I'm training. He's 6-foot-7, 250 pounds and plays for the college football team.

"He's sort of like me, though: he's got a lot of energy, and he likes to work. It took me a long time to find someone who can almost (note: "almost") keep up with me.

My goal is to get one or two helpers and pay them well and train them and let them take over some of the accounts to give me some more time to be home."

The Campbellsville Police Department will believe *that* when they see it.

—Jerry Roche

Hand-held computers help Florida lawn care delivery

Technicians can track everything from client histories to production with these small units.

■ Field technicians at Aaron Pest Control weren't so keen on the idea of using hand-held computers on their pest control and lawn care routes. Some even referred to them as "babysitters."

Now, their enthusiasm for computer routing technology is growing. They're finding out it can help them save time and serve customers better too.

"We're 100 percent operational on it," says Phil Smith, general manager Aaron PC in Deland, Fla. Aaron technicians use the Norand Corp. 4000 series of automated route accounting systems. Smith expects this technology—more commonly used by package delivery firms and vending machine service companies—to become standard in pest control and lawn care service delivery also.

"We're fully automated. It's a long-term commitment, and in the long run it's going to save us money," says Smith.



"The men are now posting their own work," says Dawn Pinnataro, operations assistant. "It saves us an hour each morning, and that hour makes quite a bit of difference. It frees us up to spend more time with customers on the phone."

Previously, office staffers spent that hour key punching work orders for the technicians. Now that task is shaved to five minutes. Also, each Wednesday it used take three hours to program the schedule for the next week. "That was a wasted afternoon," Pinnataro recalls. "Now it takes 45 minutes start to finish."

Provides more time—Adds Smith, "we're better able to track our technicians' service time and non-service time. It's given our technicians a little more time to squeeze in another account or two in their day."

When a technician arrives for work in the morning and picks up the hand-held unit "it already has his day's work on it," says Smith. Information includes address, directions, the general nature of the treatment and, if it's a repeat customer, the account history.

As each stop is made, the technician immediately records the type of service, products used, amount of each, wind direction and speed, production time, any cash or checks received. A printer then produces a customer receipt.

The system also tracks production per hour and production per month. And because the technicians are paid on a commission basis, "it shows them how much money they're making," says Smith.

Any missed service stops are recorded, plus it provides the miles traveled and issues messages, such as "don't forget the monthly meeting." The system also generates a complete end-of-day report summarizing all activities.

Portable communications—"This information can even be transmitted from the technician's home, eliminating an unnecessary trip back to the office," says Cheryl Wery, communications man-



ager at Norand's headquarters in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

"Errors from misinterpreting handwriting and the high cost of keypunching are eliminated. Missed services are promptly reported, so they can be picked up the next day," she says.

The Aaron system is based in a Texas Instruments 386 PC with software from Pest Control Systems of Leesburg, Fla.

The communications network for the Norand 4000 Series system consists of a controller and docking stations for the hand-held computer. The controller monitors the nightly transmissions between the hand-helds and the host computer. The docking station recharges the hand-held batteries and also provides a data transmission connection for each hand-held unit.

During the communication session, information gathered throughout the day is transmitted from the hand-held to the host computer. The scheduling information for the following day is down-loaded into the hand-held, so it is ready and waiting when the technician arrives.

Smith says that technicians initially balked at using the system, calling it a "babysitter." Now, they appreciate what it can do for them.

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