

# LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

## Bio Green believes in quality service; making the sale, too

**Northern Virginia firm growing in spite of being on high end of prices.**

■ Until a customer signs the check, you really don't have a customer.

That's true even in lawn care—especially in lawn care—believes David Schrader who's keenly aware of the cosmic connection between getting paid and staying in business.

"You have to look at lawn care from two ends at once—quality service and sales. You need both," says Schrader.

Some other Schrader tenets include:

● **Charging enough to make a profit.**

"There probably are only one or two companies in our market more expensive than us," he says.

● **Giving customers exactly what they want.** "We offer organic programs, pesticide-free programs and traditional programs, but 99 percent of our customers still want nice, green lawns," he says.

● **Having the same technician treat the same lawns whenever possible.** "How else is a technician going to know that that same south-facing, sunny slope in a client's lawn is going to have that grub problem," he says.

Schrader and Mark Stoeckel operate Bio Green Lawn Care which, this season, will treat more than 2,000 home lawns in addition to providing tree/shrub care and sprinkler services to several hundred other northern Virginia property owners.

Of the two, Stoeckel has more lawn care experience. He worked with several other firms prior to helping start Bio Green Lawn Care six years ago. Schrader, a 1984 University of Maryland graduate (agronomy specializing in soil conservation) likes sales. It shows. He thinks \$1 million in sales is realistic for Bio Green this season. It served about 2500 lawn and shrub customers in 1992.

"We try to drill the concept of quality, quality, quality into our company. Certainly, we want our customers to recognize the quality of our service, but we've still got to sell and sell," says Schrader.

That means no estimates dangling from door hangers. No vague price quotes over the telephone.

The best way to sell a quality, higher-priced service, says Schrader, is face to face. "If a prospect isn't going to sit down for 15 minutes and talk with us, they're not going to hire us," he says.

In other words, if Schrader walks a lawn with a potential client and gives them



David Schrader, left, likes sales, while Mark Stoeckel oversees production.

all the reasons why they should hire Bio Green, then he's most definitely going to ask for the check.

Similarly, Bio Green technicians develop friendly, workable, face-to-face relationships with customers, to the extent that time and schedules allow anyway.

"People hire lawn care companies because they don't know what to do," says Schrader. "That's why our technicians always try to do three things with each customer. We tell them what we did. We check off what they should do, and we tell them what's supposed to happen.

"That's always a lot better than leaving behind a computer printout of your visit."

Schrader's optimism is genuine and growing. His older brother, Steve, until recently a restaurateur, is joining Bio Green. "He's going to be pushing a spreader. We want him to get to know what we do," says Schrader with a wicked grin.

Also, the company, with offices in Manassas and Ashburn, eyes an expansion south into Fredericksburg, Va., in 1994.

—Ron Hall



BioGreen Lawn Care staff must be able to give clients a 'menu' of programs.

## Extension service program to educate homeowners about proper lawn care is a winner in Va.

■ Bio Green Lawn Care cooperates with the Prince William (Va.) Cooperative Extension Service's Water Quality Program.

Program specialist Marc Aveni says the program is educating homeowners about the impact of fertilizers and pesticides on the environment, specifically the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

"We want homeowners to know what they're doing before they use fertilizers and pesticides," says Aveni. "We're really looking at non-point source pollution."

The extension service conducts three two-hour field days in the fall and four two-hour field days in the spring on vari-

ous lawn/landscape care topics.

It's also enlisted 60 volunteer lawns. The homeowners have agreed to follow all program recommendations. Information on the amount and type of materials they use is being recorded, along with their results.

After a season, some of these homeowners will allow their lawns to be used as "demonstration lawns." Aveni says there are about 10 now.

This effort is jointly funded by the USDA and extension.

"As our name implies, we design our programs using as few chemicals as possible," says Bio Green's David Schrader. "But we're not extremists so we do make judicious use of pesticides when necessary. After all, there are a lot of environmental benefits to having a healthy lawn."

Partner Mark Stoeckel says lawn care professionals can help themselves immeasurably by keeping in touch with their local extension personnel.

"We've always come to them as a



source of information whenever we run into problems. They've helped us tremendously in our business," says Stoeckel.

Aveni, for his part, thinks the professional lawn care industry—and he singled out Bio Green—has been supportive of the Water Quality Program.

"They know that what's good for the environment is also good for business," says Aveni.

—Ron Hall

## Enhanced microbial degradation—it's real!

**Soil micro-organisms are 'hungry, relatively immobile and ready to reproduce,' says Purdue educator.**

■ Soil microbes are hidden, but they're real. You should know about them.

Indeed, there may be as many as 500 million micro-organisms (7,000 to 10,000 different species) in one gram of soil, typically clustered in small clumps or micro-colonies on/near food sources, says Purdue University microbiologist Dr. Ron Turco.

Turco describes them as "the powerhouse in the soil, the driving force controlling what really goes on in the soil system."

No wonder then that the chemical industry has a term for what they do to pesticides: enhanced biodegradation.

Soil micro-organisms, through their amazing reproductive abilities, can develop populations capable of rapidly breaking

down some chemical compounds.

The more a particular compound is used, the more likely microbes are to adapt to it. As the populations of these "adapted" microbes increase, the compound's survival in the soil decreases.

The problem arises when the chemical compound is degraded before it controls the pest it was applied for.

"When you apply some pesticide to the soil, bacteria view that pesticide as a free lunch," says Turco. "They're very happy to see the arrival of the chemicals. It's a much more readily available material than what they're normally living on which is the slow decomposition of organic matter in the soil."

Turco says to reduce incidences of enhanced biodegradation:

- rotate different chemicals in different classes, and
- limit the use of soil-active prophylactic chemicals.

In other words, when

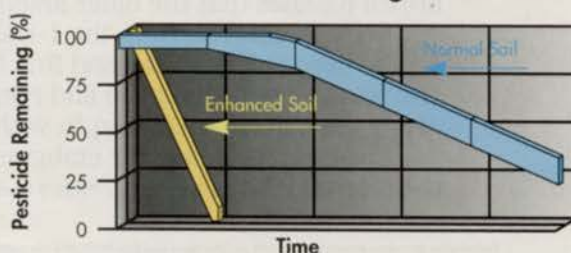
chemicals are used to treat problems as they occur, rather than making blanket preventive applications, they stand a much smaller chance of accelerating the biodegradation process.

Turco presented much of the above information at the Golf Course Superintendents Association America Conference in Anaheim, Calif., this past January.

In answer to a question from the floor, he said the potential for enhanced biodegradation is just as significant in thatch as it is in soil.

—Ron Hall

Enhanced vs normal degradation



## 'Moments of truth' separate the good, the bad, the ugly in service

**Doing only what the customer expects, even if you do it well, will get you only a 'C' from a client.**

■ Why are some lawn care companies able to charge more for their services and still build market share while competitors struggle?

Service. They make it easy for customers to do business with them. That's what Ron Zemke, a nationally known business consultant, says.

He also says that businesses that place a premium on service:

- 1) charge, on average, 10 percent more for their basic products and services.
- 2) grow market share at 6 percent compared to 1 to 2 percent for those who don't.
- 3) have a return on sales of about 12 percent compared to 3 to 4 percent for those who don't.

Zemke this past February led about 250 green industry professionals through the building of "service-centered" organizations at the Associated Landscape Contractors Association (ALCA) Executive Forum in Tucson, Ariz.

Crucial to service success, says Zemke, is how well an organization manages the "moments of truth." He describes a "moment" as *any* time a customer comes in contact with some aspect of your business and has an opportunity to judge your company's service quality.

### *First in a series on Zemke and quality service*

If your organization does everything a customer expects, that client gives you only a "C" on their report card. If the client has an experience with your company that annoys them, then your company gets a "D" or "F" grade, he says.

Your organization must develop and put "enhancers" into its service to develop a loyal and satisfied client. Give clients more than they expect to get an "A."

"The only way you learn about these moments of truth is by setting down and asking the right questions of your customers," says Zemke.

- ✓ What is it you expect from us?
- ✓ What is it you've experienced from our organization?
- ✓ What has made you unhappy with our service?
- ✓ What has been an exceptional experience you've had in dealing with us or someone like us?
- ✓ And, what did we do to make that a memorable experience?

For information about Ron Zemke: Performance Research Associates, 821 Marquette Ave., Suite 1820, Minneapolis, MN 55402; (612) 338-8523.

—Ron Hall



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