

"This year we're exceeding any expectations our parent company (ServiceMaster) had," says Karnes. "We've had double-digit growth. Last year we made a profit. And we'll certainly make a profit this year."

(It's been since 1988 that the words profit and ChemLawn, then owned by EcoLab, appeared in the same sentence.)

Specialists respond—Karnes says the most fundamental reason why TG/CL exceeded 1993 sales and profit goals has been the on-going reinvigoration of its branches and their teams of lawn specialists. Productivity jumped 25 percent after specialists were freed of sales responsibilities and offered a new incentive package, claims Karnes.

The company's direction, he says, couldn't be clearer.

If you're on TG/CL's team, you're either improving clients' properties, or you're making it easier for specialists to deliver these services.

"The sole purpose of all of our staff people is to support the field effort. I don't want anyone walking around arrogant or cocky and thinking, well, I'm here in corporate, and they're down there in the field. That's just not going to happen," says Karnes.

TG/CL emphasized this starting the 1993 season by shaving \$10 million from its corporate overhead.

Working with Karnes in operations are Counsel Bob von Gruben and Government Affairs Director Norman Goldenberg and Finance V.P. Michael Cook. Working with Karnes in Operations and heading up the East and West divisions respectively, are Ron Anderegg and David Slott. They each oversee six of the company's 12 regions. TruGreen has been the only job many of TG/CL's managers have ever had including Slott who started his career with TG/CL as a sales person in Kalamazoo, MI. Anderegg, a former school teacher, started



CL's former research center in Delaware, Ohio, continues to offer technical/research support for TruGreen/ChemLawn.

with TG in 1979, also as a sales person, and admits he has likely held every management post there is at TruGreen.

"From the original team we put together last May 1992, all of those regional people are still there," says Karnes. "That's been one of the keys in providing a consistent direction for the employees."

Branch managers—When TruGreen acquired ChemLawn in May 1992, the company found itself with 204 locations. By mid-August 1992 they numbered 168. Consolidation occurred in markets where both TG and CL had had competing branches, explains Karnes.

"We put the business back into the hands of our branch managers. They run their own businesses, and the average branch size is about \$2.5 million," explains Karnes. "We don't have a lot of people sticking their noses into our branches' business anymore."

TG/CL's president is openly optimistic about the company's future as the lawn care industry leader.

"I believe that more and more people have less and less time to do any of their home services, and they'll always be looking for a professional company to come in and provide these services," he says.

New trucks—To improve service delivery even more, Karnes says, TG/CL has already begun replacing its tanker fleet with smaller, more fuel-efficient diesel trucks. They're quite a departure for either of the former companies. They have enclosed tanks and hoses; they look a little like, and are smaller than, beverage trucks. The company's fleet of 3,500 production vehicles should be replaced over the next 24 months.

"We had some specialists crawl all over the truck, and we asked them about what's good and what's bad with it. It's amazing what you find out when you ask the person who actually uses the equipment," says Karnes. "And these trucks certainly look a little more friendly in the neighborhood."

Also, by the start of the 1994 season, some TG/CL specialists are likely to be spooling out and using a new dual-hose system with on-command herbicides for localized treatments.

"We're going to continue to be aggressive in the marketplace," adds Karnes. "But one thing we have to do for sure is to make sure we take care of our core business, and that's lawn and tree and shrub."

—Ron Hall

Losing the focus of lawn care sales

by Ed Wandtke

■ The principal concern of many lawn care companies is reacting quickly to ever-changing customer demands. Owners of lawn care companies comment to me:

● "Customers keep changing their minds about what they want."

● "Customers aren't as loyal as they

used to be."

● "Customers request more service than ever before."

Customers are not your enemies, but you constantly complain about them.

This adversarial attitude becomes apparent to customers when they ask a technician a few questions and receive nothing but a one-word answer. And this guarantees one thing: the company

will lose.

The opportunity for dissatisfaction starts at the time the customer becomes a customer. The lawn care company does not sell the customer; instead, the customer places an order for lawn care services.

Listening to the customer—Sales training should focus on teaching a salesperson to listen and learn what a prospect

expects to purchase. I have found that only a few lawn care salespersons really know what customers want or expect.

Even the lawn analysis form provides customers with only technical information (weeds found, diseases present, grass types). The technician then tells the customer how the lawn care program will solve the problems identified in the analysis. But taking additional time to ask questions about what the customer expects is just not being done. Instead, because the customer asks how much the service will cost, the salesperson assumes that price is the major concern.

Learning what customers expect is critical. Only when you ask a customer, "What do you want your lawn to look like?" will you learn what it will take to satisfy the customer.

Too many technicians complain that sales are difficult to obtain, and that customers are leaving every year. If the technician or salesperson routinely asks customers what they expect when making the estimate, you would not have to worry about routes shrinking during a season.

High-tech sales—Many lawn care companies are finding telemarketing to be a cost-effective method of reaching more prospects. Telemarketers, however, are discovering that many individuals find it easier to say "yes" to a phone call than taking the time to decide what the caller is contacting them about. You must make certain that—when you meet with the prospect—you not only make the sale, but find out what the customer expects his or

her lawn to look like.

Hands-on—The most profitable and successful companies tend to service the customer the same way they operate their businesses—hands on. I believe there is no better way to service the customer than seeing customers and truly listening to them.

Companies that operate like this have three things in common: high employee morale, high profitability and excellent customer retention.

You might say, "It takes too much time to deliver all of that personal attention customers expect." But I say: spend time now working with the customer and the number of renewals will be surprisingly high. Yes, customers will pay for high quality service.

A new approach—You cannot change your sales approach overnight. Technical aspects have probably been the principal focus of your sales training. This was necessary to help you learn what products control a particular turf problem. But recognizing that a lawn has henbit, plantain, spurge or oxalis doesn't mean much to customers. You need to tell them that you can control or eliminate these weeds.

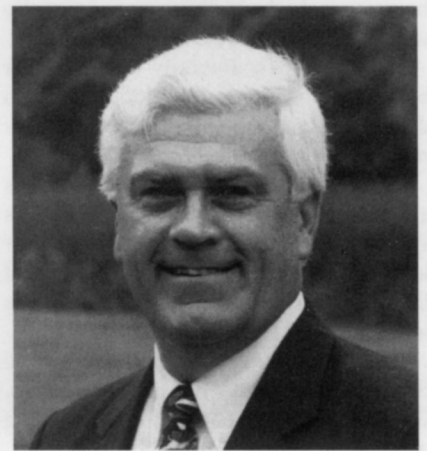
Refocus your sales pitch to emphasize what you can and cannot do. This approach is more easily understood by the customer, but it will take a great deal of effort.

Salespeople and technicians usually say a new approach to sales will not work. Most of them simply do not want to change. They find that asking a customer

what they expect and then listening to their response is a real pain.

The results—The one surefire way to success is to find out what the customer expects. Service each customer like he or she is your only customer. Remember, there is always a price for everything worth having. Only by knowing what a customer wants or expects will your company be able to deliver that level of service.

Try this new approach. You will have to train everyone to ask customers what they expect, and then decide if you can deliver it. Choosing your customers this way may surprise you in the years to come. But customer retention will increase and, along with it, your company's profitability.



—Ed Wandtke is a principle in Wandtke & Associates, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231; (800) 966-3546.

Labor problems are cropping up all over, LCOs say in surveys

Most eligible labor lacks trainability, commitment, work ethic, according to our survey.

■ Steve Bailey, owner of Grassroots Lawn & Irrigation, knows he's a lucky guy.

He says he usually doesn't have much trouble finding good seasonal help because his business is based in Upper Arlington, Ohio, just blocks from

The Ohio State University and its 50,000-plus students.

"The last two or three years, it's worked out pretty good for us," says Bailey. "We had a crew that started with us when they were sophomores. They were all good friends and a good group of guys. If one of them couldn't work, then others could."

But Bailey acknowledges that a business can only grow so large, relying so heavily on part-time help.

"I'm in kind of an in-between situation," he admits. "I'd like have to have

some more people to count on all year, but I have a hard time paying them competitive wages. Providing health care benefits is pretty expensive, too."

To be able to afford more full-time help, Bailey believes he has keep building his company and expanding its service offerings.

His plight isn't uncommon in the green industry where much of the work is seasonal, and entry-level employees receive anywhere from minimum wage to \$8-\$10/hour, depending on regional