

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

HAPPY CUSTOMERS

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HIGHER PROFITS



Margins just so-so? Exceeding customer expectations will help strengthen them, this landscaper says.

■ Statistics by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America claim the average landscape management firm is operating with a 2 to 3 percent profit margin. Clean Cut of Austin, Texas, quadruples that every year, by design.

"Too many times, the sales force for landscape firms becomes a price taker instead of a price maker," says Dennis Dautel, who combined with Rex Gore to launch Clean Cut in 1984. "Profit is not our only goal, but we like to operate at a margin of 8 percent or better."

How have they done it?

"Top people, the best available equipment, and work that exceeds the customer's expectations," Dautel says. "Theoretically, landscape maintenance is a no-profit business. It's easy to get into, and just as easy to get out of. So you're always competing with the low-price operation, many of which get into the business for a year or two and then disappear."

Clean Cut has a unique management system.

"We have to differentiate our service from others to sell at a profitable level,"

says Dautel. "It takes an intense effort to teach our people how to do that. But after eight years, we think we have the techniques pretty well determined."

The keys—Here are the keys:

● A new facility will include a training center for marketing as well as operational functions. New people will be taught how to set bid specifications and how to work with customers.

● Employees are involved in decision-making. Small groups meet frequently to discuss jobs and projects under way, as well as things that can improve the product.

● A new management operations program allows the "team leaders/partners" of the operating teams to build their own equity in the business by managing people and equipment efficiently.

● Special computer software ("SuperScope") developed by Dautel and Gore has been so successful that they're selling it to other landscapers.

● A profit-sharing plan, based on both long- and short-term margins, is determined from end-of-month and end-of-

High-profile complexes like The Park at Wells Branch provide Clean Cut the opportunity to provide 'work that exceeds the customer's expectations.'

year figures.

● People—both employees and customers—are a prime consideration. "Building value-centered relationships with customers makes for long-term contracts," Dautel notes, "and building good attitudes and relationships with team members makes for smoother, more efficient work results."

● The equipment fleet has been refined over the past two years. For instance, Clean Cut has used mid-sized riding mowers for the past three years, even on complex landscaped areas.

● Minimize equipment downtime by having a maintenance shop and doing most of their own maintenance.

Equipment plus people—"We used mid-sized walk-behind mowers to start with," Dautel observes. "Then, we tried one of the zero-turn-radius riding mowers on the market. Finally, we wound up using Walker mowers. Now, each landscape maintenance team has at least one Walker and some have two.

"Initially, going to riding mowers drastically improved our mowing time efficiency, but we weren't getting the quality we needed to leave a manicured look on customers' lawns. Now, though, we can get that quality look with the same amount of mowing time."

Another key is in the maintenance shop. "Our Walker mowers are probably in use a higher percentage of time than any other piece of equipment," Dautel states. "They just don't sit idle much of the time, and that's one of the keys to keeping equipment operations efficient."

In the last three years, Clean Cut has won nine Texas landscaping awards, five ALCA awards and two from the Professional Grounds Management Society. This year, it was named to *Inc.*

magazine's list of the 500 fastest-growing privately-held companies in the U.S.

From a first-year sales volume of \$167,000, Clean Cut now projects 1993 gross sales of more than \$5 million.

"You have to have the best machinery, then train your

people to get the most out of it, to do the type of precision work we like to see," Dautel says. "It all goes into the objective of giving the customers more than they expect. That's why we've been able to maintain our growth curve for more than eight years."

W. Va. grand jury charges LCO with arranging murder

Richard B. Huff allegedly tried to build a lawn care company the wrong way—with dirty tricks, insurance fraud, arson and, finally, murder.

That's why he may spend the rest of his life in prison.

Huff, 32, former manager of Custom Lawn Care of West Virginia Inc., has been charged with arranging the May 21, 1993, murder of a former co-worker, Jerry Powell, 28.

U.S. Attorney William A. Kolibash of Wheeling, W. Va., says Huff plotted Powell's murder. He did it to keep Powell from testifying about how Huff had sabotaged competitors' businesses over a period of several years, Kolibash says. Powell had briefly worked with Huff but, apparently, had nothing to do with the dirty tricks himself.

Powell was shot-gunned to death about 4:30 a.m. May 21 on an empty road north of Weirton, W. Va., while he was driving his van to work at the Ross Park Mall.

The federal grand jury that met to consider the killing returned a 20-count indictment also claiming that Huff:

- ordered "grass killer" sprayed on the greens of Pleasant Valley Country Club, Weirton, and the Woodlawn Golf Course, New Cumberland. Both were customers of another lawn care company.

- had two of his employ-

ees pour grass killer into the spray tanks of competitors' trucks.

- ordered employees to throw bombs at the home, business and equipment trailer of a competing lawn service.

- slashed tires and scratched the paint of competitors' trucks.

- obtained more than \$40,000 in settlements from fraudulent insurance claims.

Kolibash calls the case "one of the most bizarre and unusual cases I've ever seen in 20 years in this office."

Indicted along with Huff, were Daniel J. Wentz, 20, and William D. Bish, 24.

The indictment alleges that Wentz actually pulled the trigger of the 20-gauge shotgun (two blasts), but that Huff had sought the killing, and had written the check for the ammunition the day before the murder. Bish, the indictment says, accepted a check of \$1,500 from Huff as an advance payment for the killing of Powell. It was Bish who enlisted Wentz to kill Powell, the indictment alleges.

"It's like something out of a grade B movie," says veteran reporter Lawrence Walsh, who is covering the case for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Jury selection for the trials of Huff and Wentz is set for Nov. 8.

—Ron Hall

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