

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

Selling aeration

Marketing aeration as an add-on service is a matter of show and tell. Your customers won't buy what they don't understand.

by Steve and Suz Trusty

■ The mid-summer doldrums strike again. You've been called out to one of the properties under your care to examine turf that's slightly off-color, seems to be thinning, and quickly shows signs of stress in high temperatures.

There's no evidence of insect or disease activity. Earlier soil test results indicated the need for a fairly standard fertility program, which has been followed closely. The crews are mowing properly, and rainfall has been adequate. Then why does the lawn look lethargic?

Core samples provide the answer. Thatch is average, but there are sparse, poorly-developed grass roots clustered near the surface, and a tightly-packed soil profile.

The lawn next door, another property under your care, looks good. A core sample shows its roots to be well developed, deep into the soil.

A look at the maintenance logs show the lethargic lawns haven't been aerated in the past two or three years.

Explain the benefits—The secret to selling aeration is proper client information. Don't assume the benefits of aeration to be common knowledge.

Simply listing aeration with other services you provide is not the answer. To sell aeration, create an understanding of what it is, what it will accomplish and why the customer's lawn needs it.

Use healthier lawns of neighbor clients as an example. If your company is maintaining a high-profile test plot for the Professional Lawn Care Association's Grasscycling campaign, add core aeration to the maintenance program. Develop signs to be posted on-site to explain the procedure and its benefits. If possible, as part of the signage, fill a small,



Make your customers come to expect aeration as a logical part of their lawn care program.

transparent receptacle with a few of the cores removed, so people can visually identify the size and shape.

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● If your company is selling its services through a booth at a fair or home show, develop a photo board showing a lawn on an aeration program, with before-and-after photos. Show sample cores from an aerated lawn, taken before and some time after the service is performed. This helps customers see the difference in root development and soil density.

● Add a brochure on aeration as a marketing tool. Use color photos and simple, descriptive text to deliver the same message you'd give in person. If possible, feature photos of another client's healthy, aerated lawn.

● Make sure prospective aeration customers know that the lawn will be covered with tiny holes for a couple days.

Include the brochure in the next mailing to your established customer list, or issue a special mailing. Use an introductory letter as well.

Let the neighbors know—Post a sign to let the neighbors know what service is being performed, and why.

● Feature the aeration brochure and a short sales piece offering aeration and related services.

● Prepare crew members to field basic questions of potential customer who may pass by.

● You may want workers to give the curious a brochure, or offer a full explanation and quotes on specific services.

● Include aeration as part of your overseeding program.

● Prepare a simple hand-out sheet to accompany the aeration brochure when "pitching" an overseeding job by mail, or develop a brochure specifically for overseeding that includes the aeration information.

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Aeration benefits run deep

LCOs, research scientists all agree on its value.

- It opens passageways in the soil, allowing air, water and nutrient movement.
- Water percolation and infiltration are improved. Additional pore spaces "soften" heavy soils. There's more space for root development and deep rooting is encouraged as new growth extends through the core openings.
- Lawn care professionals use core aeration to rescue turf from stress. During drought conditions, core aeration helps water reach thirsty roots. Where rain is heavy, aeration allows air to penetrate and dry up excess moisture.
- Core aeration amends heavy clay soil profiles. Compaction is relieved, nutrient uptake is improved.
- Aeration is "an important turf maintenance tool which helps turf stand up to stress," says Dr. Gil Landry, University of Georgia, and others. Ken Mrock, turf manager for the Chicago Bears, and Jesse Cuevas, of Nebraska's Rosenblatt Stadium, call it "the single most important procedure in the maintenance program."

Curing summer burnout

■ There's no heat quite as intense as a mid-summer Texas scorcher, claims Gary LaScalea, manager of A-Perm-O-Green Lawns, Dallas. Try pushing a spreader and lifting bags of fertilizer during one. "It gets so hot that people start to fall out by the middle of the summer. They can't take it anymore," he says.

That's when a lawn care company should show its employees extra consideration. From a practical standpoint, finding replacements in mid summer is uncertain, resulting in service disruptions as new employees learn

the ropes and gain their licenses. But, LaScalea says, the real reason for giving employees extra appreciation during summer's heat—it's the right thing to do.

"I think you really have to be involved with the employees in these conditions," he says. "You have to show them that you're behind them, that you know how hot it is out there and you appreciate their efforts.

"Maybe you can bring in cold drinks when you know it's going to be hot. Or you can put ice machines in the offices so the guys can fill their coolers in the morning."

Russell Schmidt, owner/operator of Schmidt Landscape, Hillsboro, Mo., says he loses an employee or two each summer. "It's not because they're not quality workers either," says Schmidt. "It's just that it gets so hot their brains get fried."

Russell says he opened an account at a local service

station/convenience store to supply his workers with ice for their coolers. Also, he says his office manager, sensing that employees were wearing down, closed the company over the July 4 weekend and told everyone to take some time off.

"Heat stress is a big issue, and I think we all have to keep educating our employees about heat stress," adds Schmidt. "We definitely have to keep an eye on them in the summer."

Beyond that, supplying employees with hats and the proper summer wear may help. "We're looking at a different company shirt," says Schmidt. "The mowing guys say the shirts they're wearing don't breath as much as they'd like, and I don't allow my guys to take their shirts off at the job site."

But, even with every precaution Schmidt admits, "the temperatures are playing havoc with our work schedules."

Generally, keeping help through summer's dog days seems to be a bigger problem with companies doing more maintenance and mowing rather than applications, several business owners say.

"The help situation hurt us the last two or three years," admits Roy D. Megli, Megli Lawn Care, Sterling, Ill., explaining why he's stepped back some of the landscape services his company previously did.

Joe Burns, Color Burst, Atlanta, Ga., thinks interns from local colleges make good summer employees. "They'll work for you for the time they're there, usually about three months. Then they're gone."

—Ron Hall



Russell Schmidt: advise your employees about heat stress.