

LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

A change in priorities

■ Just barely into his 30s, Tim Doppel admits it's time to slow down. It's not that he can't keep up any more. He's just refocusing his efforts, he maintains.

That's because Tim and his wife, Alice, are busy with their three children—ages 10, 8 and 4. Second comes the business: Atwood LawnCare, Sterling Heights, Mich.

Then—and this is a switch from just a few years ago—Doppel says he'll help out with any industry affairs that he can. But, he's definitely casting a sharper eye to the time he can devote to industry affairs.

In 1984 Doppel, then just two years out of Michigan State University, bought Atwood LawnCare. Since then, in addition to starting a family and running the business, Doppel served on the board of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), participated in the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation, and was the managing director of the Lawn Sprayers Association of Michigan. He also keeps close ties with MSU and is a frequent, and entertaining, speaker at the Michigan Turfgrass Conference in Lansing each January.

"Now I'm doing Cub Scouts, and baseball and all those kinds of things," he laughs. That, and running Atwood, keeps Doppel on his toes.

"The lawn care business around here is incredibly competitive. The last time I looked, metro Detroit had close to 500 licensed lawn care applicators. It's beyond being a real challenge now."

Tim started with Atwood LawnCare several years before he bought it from its founder who had decided to move to warmer climes. A student at MSU, Doppel worked weekends each fall and spring and

'The days of easy lawn care are over,' claims this suburban Detroit LCO, but geographical considerations help keep his company thriving.



Manager Scott Brunais, left, and President Tim Doppel, Atwood Lawncare, Sterling Heights, Mich.

full time in the summer. Atwood LawnCare had been started in 1970 and was named after a resort lake in Ohio, and because it would appear near the beginning of the listings in the Yellow Pages. Nobody by the name of Atwood ever worked at the company, says Tim. "When somebody calls up and asks for Mr. Atwood, I know it's either a sales person or

an irate customer."

Atwood's headquarters are about a 35-minute drive northeast of downtown Detroit. It carries 15 employees through spring and 10 to 12 in the summer and fall.

The company offers a full range of lawn care services, excluding mowing, and tree/shrub fertilization to a 30-mile radius of customers, mostly in the northern and

eastern Detroit suburbs. It does little work within the city itself. "Detroiters seem to prefer to buy from Detroiters," he says.

"I prefer to get tighter in the areas that we're already in rather than expanding geographically. We've been sticking to that strategy and it seems to be working for us," he says. The acquisition of a smaller company helped to make last season, 1993, strong, he adds. "It helped fill in some areas where we were relatively weak. And we were able to up sell some of these customers aeration and tree service, too."

Doppel admits that national companies like TruGreen/ChemLawn and Barefoot maintain a strong presence in the Detroit market.

"I don't worry about them because they're always going to be there. We can sell well against them," says Tim. "The companies that are about my size are the ones we have to watch. There are about six of them within

about a five-mile radius of here," he says. When you add the large but unknown number of tiny unlicensed lawn applicators, the pressure to keep prices low is intense.

"I guess they figure that as long as they've got \$20 in their pocket they're making money," adds Doppel. "They don't
continued on page 34

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10 most common LCO violations of EPA's rules and regulations

■ Politics—not science—drive pesticide use regulations.

"Estimating risk is a proper scientific task, but scientists don't write laws," Jim Lorah believes. "The guy who writes the law listens to the public, and the public perceives pesticides as dangerous and poorly evaluated."

Lorah, compliance monitoring coordinator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Philadelphia region, spoke at last fall's PLCAA Conference in Baltimore.

"When emotion dominates, perception becomes flawed. Flawed or not, it can't be ignored," stressed Lorah. He assured the 50 LCOs in the room that each of them "has been scrutinized by somebody" in the past year or two, probably by a state inspector. Here are the 10 most common problems examiners find during an inspection, he indicated:

- 1) Invalid business or applicator license—expired, wrong category, not valid in that state.
- 2) Label violation. Didn't look at label recently. Following directions on specimen label, not container label.
- 3) Improper mixing.
- 4) Didn't survey site prior to pesticide application.
- 5) No preparation for "worst case" occurrence. Applicator has a spill and leaves the site.
- 6) Drift complaints, usually due to hurried applications.

DOPPEL from page 33

complying with the laws. They may only do a couple hundred accounts and the chances of the ag department finding them are almost zero," he adds.

Doppel, a Detroit-area native, doesn't foresee any major changes in the Detroit market soon, just ever-increasing competition. Atwood is responding by strengthening its winter and early spring telemarketing.

"People accept telemarketing. They expect it. But I'm not comfortable with calling up and saying, 'Hi, this is Atwood LawnCare. We want to do your lawn for 29 bucks.' That's not the way I want to be treated in my house," says Doppel. "I don't like those kinds of calls. Instead we offer to give estimates. If we can get out there and talk face-to-face with a homeowner, we've got a good chance of helping that homeowner and making that sale."

Although Doppel says he won't be able to be as deeply involved in industry or association affairs while his family is growing, he insists he will remain active in both national and local groups.

"I guess it's like a two-way street," says Doppel. "You give and you get back. I've learned a bunch from being on PLCAA or with MTF. I can point to half a dozen things that are different in my business because of experiences I've had on these boards."

"The days of easy lawn care are over."

—Ron Hall

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