

INDUSTRY IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

by Jerry Roche,
Editor-in-Chief

Sam Grassle couldn't understand what was happening. He hadn't changed anything about his lawn/landscaping business in 10 years, but his customers seemed to be deserting him one by one this spring.

He'd dutifully cared for every lawn on the route, painstakingly applied just the right mix of fertilizers and herbicides, and by the beginning of May he thought they were all looking pretty good. Yet 15 of his best customers had cancelled.

Mel Truturf, in another part of town, was also perplexed. His golf course looked better than ever: green, weed-free, immaculately groomed. Yet he was hearing initial rumblings of disapproval from some club members.

What Sam and Mel didn't realize is that, on an almost subconscious level, the public's confidence in synthetic fertilizers and pesticides could be slowly eroding. Sam's customers, especially, were worried about the effects of the materials on their children, most of whom weren't even born 10 years ago.

In today's America, one of your priorities should be heading off the confusion and despair created among customers by the media and environmental alarmists.

The green industry is facing an identity crisis. The public is confused over the conflicting messages it's getting from professional turf specialists on one hand and the mass media and environmental alarmists on the other. Homeowners and golf enthusiasts are even beginning to question the value of high-end land maintenance.

Radio commentator Paul Harvey hounds the golf course industry. The *Wall Street Journal* runs a headline that reads "Golf Courses Denounced as Health Hazards." *USA Today* exhorts its readers to "Be Wary of Lawn Chemicals."

As Dr. Frank Rossi of the University of Wisconsin told golf course superintendents earlier this year, "The media focuses on the controversial and the sensational...events that may be very isolated. And somehow this is filtered into a fair amount of confusion and despair.

"The impact of information about the environment and golf can be devastating, and it's caused us to rethink many of the things we do in this industry. The environmental literature—particularly the sensationalized media—have forced us to explore the benefits of what we're doing."

The dawn of the 1990s brought a more judicious attitude among professional users of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides—even though those products are, beyond a shadow of doubt, not harmful to humans when properly applied. Neither are they generally harmful to the environment; most biodegrade naturally after a few days or weeks.

IN THE
PUBLIC EYE



Landscape potshots—*Newsweek* magazine was one member of the media that jumped on the bash-turf bandwagon last summer with an article titled "The New Turf Wars: A Plague of Critics Bushwacks the Venerable American Lawn." In the article, reporter Malcolm Jones Jr. told readers: "Biologists, social critics and even gardeners are charging

that are effective at lower rates. Robertson reports excellent customer acceptance of products such as Barricade for crabgrass control, Merit for white grubs and Manage for yellow nutsedge.

"Without a doubt, we're doing more customer education than ever before," says Robertson. "We are telling our customers that we're trying to use the newest, most

course is an (environmental) asset," says Peter Leuzinger of The Ivanhoe (Ill.) Club. "Once you get involved with something like the Audubon program, it's just a matter of showing off. Eventually, your words

will spread. You want to set the tone of, 'We're lucky to have that golf course next to us.'"

Gordon S. White Jr., in the May 3, 1993 issue of *Business Week*, puts the Audubon's program in perspective:

"Instead of solving a temporary problem such as white grubs in the fairways by using...pesticides, [New York Audubon executive director Ron Dodson suggests the superintendent 'move some roses to another location on the property so that the white grub or Japanese beetle also moves.' People should think of alternatives to dropping that bomb [applying pesticides]."

Golf courses are becoming environmentally friendly in other ways. The Natural, located in Gaylord, Mich., maintains just 17 percent of its total surface area as manicured turf. The rest is undeveloped, untouched natural (not naturalized) land.

Skip Wade of the Cherry Valley Club in Garden City, N.Y., decreased the amount of fungicides he's using from 1000 pounds in 1987 to 240 pounds in 1992 by culturally controlling diseases. He's using biological products to control insects, too, and has

continued on page 10



that the billions we annually spend on lawn care and gardening waste water and petroleum, pollute the environment with pesticides and fertilizers, and destroy animal habitat."

To answer some of the critics, more lawn and landscape companies are letting customers define their individual levels of service, whether it's using strictly biorational (natural) controls, or just one application of fertilizer and weed control, or the whole gamut of five to six rounds.

"We apply broadleaf weed control only where there are broadleaf weeds," says Jack Robertson of Robertson Lawn Care, Springfield, Ill. "We're using about 20 percent of the pesticides we'd use if we were doing a broadcast spray.

"We want customers to know that it's okay to have a couple of weeds. If they want 100 percent weed control, we can do that, but it's basically a trade-off."

Another way to answer the public's skepticism is to use newer pesticide brands

advanced products that we can, products that are better for our applicators—who use them every day—and better for the environment."

Basic manufacturers are getting into the act, too. DowElanco (which markets such materials as Dursban, Balan, Team and Gallery) bought a four-page supplement in the July, 1992 issue of *Flower and Garden* magazine. Its title was "The Pesticide Decision," and its purpose was to present scientifically-proven facts to homeowners about DowElanco's products.

Rough on golf—More golf course superintendents are letting roughs and out-of-play areas "go natural" and adding environmentally-friendly features like birdhouses and nesting areas. More than 400 courses have signed into the New York State Audubon Society's Cooperative Sanctuary program, including all 11 TPC courses.

"You've got to reach out to the community and remind them that your golf



Frank Rossi:
Green industry still not reaching the public.



Jack Robertson:
New brands, lower rates.



Peter Leuzinger:
Show off!



Skip Wade: More cultural control.

decreased his insecticide use from 460 pounds in 1987 to a low of 18 pounds in 1990.

Wade doesn't schedule treatment for some problems like leaf spot disease. "Don't panic," he advises other superintendents. "Learn to live with it. I'm not the greenest course in the world, but the membership is fully supportive.

"We've only got about five more years to make our courses environmentally friendly."

What to do—Education and research are the keys, say experts.

"It's essential that every person become aware of environmental issues and do everything possible to enhance the environment," says USGA Green Section director Jim Snow.

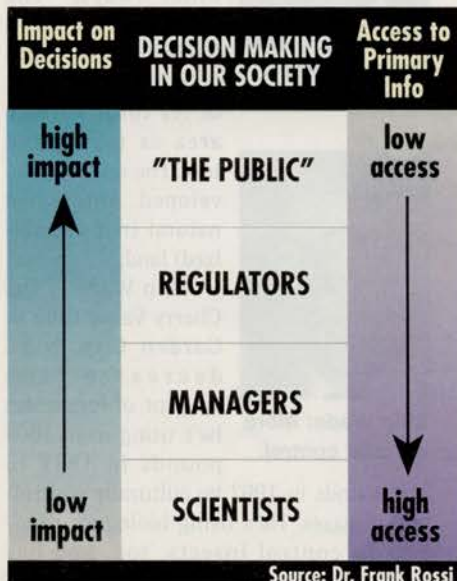
He believes the public has four main concerns—most of which apply not only to golf courses but also to home lawns and landscapes:

- use of some water resources;
- pollution of water;
- loss of natural areas; and
- effects of fertilizers and pesticides on people and wildlife.

"We have a more environmentally-aware industry," observes Snow, who says the USGA Green Section will concentrate even more effort and money on examining the effects of golf courses on wildlife. "We've come a long way, but we haven't reached the top of the hill yet."

Rossi believes that the green industry is not yet reaching the public with the right information.

"Up to recently, we have had very little impact on the decision-making process,"



What you can do:

- 1) Apply 'synthetic' fertilizers and pesticides only when and where needed. If individual customers voice a concern, offer biological alternatives, but let them know in advance that biocontrols take longer, are generally less effective and cost more than synthetics.
 - 2) Give your customers/members more information about what materials you apply, and when you're applying them.
 - 3) Use written materials to tell your customers/members about the benefits of aesthetically pleasing, well maintained lawns and landscapes. Cite corroborating literature from leading turf and ornamental scientists, but make it easy to understand.
 - 4) Design or re-design landscapes, if possible, to incorporate more 'natural' areas that include native, adapted and low-maintenance plant materials.
 - 5) Use, when possible, the new generation of improved products that offer more control with less active ingredient per acre.
 - 6) Participate in local organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, Parent Teachers Association and garden clubs. Let them know that you're an environmentalist, too. Spread the word—if you don't, nobody will.
- (Got any more suggestions? We'd like to hear from you. Call the author at 216-826-2830.)
- J.R.

says Rossi. "We still have a public loaded with *USA Today*, [which has] a very large impact on the decision-making process.

"Environmental issues are not at the top of the list nationally; taxes, crime, welfare and jobs are. This doesn't mean that you can stop worrying. A lot of information needs to be put in a format that the public can understand. Our job is to take the complex and make it so people can understand it."

Rossi likes to quote William Reilly of the Environmental Protection Agency: "Huge sums of money are spent on hypothetical risks experienced by a few people while ecological matters affecting millions of people are being overlooked."

The bottom line? Ha!—Michael Fumento, author of the book "Science Under Siege," sees environmentalists (which he calls "Greens") as the real opponent, not the media.

"The Greens blindly trust Mother Nature and blindly contest anything made by man," Fumento contends. "They are trying to blame every evil on the planet to technology, [so] I have proposed the banning of all environmentalists to the North Pole where they can spend the rest of their lives contemplating the ozone hole."

Realistically, that may not be the answer. But it brings a smile to the faces of those of us in the green indus-



try who are trusted with maintaining the environment on a daily basis—even though this crisis of identity is not at all a laughing matter. **LM**