

Giving employees autonomy and encouraging risk-taking

You can't steal second base without taking a big lead off first. If handled properly, over the long haul, the risks are worth taking.

by Jerry Roche
Editor-in-Chief

■ Senske Lawn & Tree Care of Kennewick, Wash. plays a symphony every day. At 7 a.m. sharp, 115 employees dash to 67 trucks at three branches and one satellite office. And it's all music to the ears of Dan Warehime, vice president of operations.

"It's a symphony orchestrated by the branch managers and their supervisors," says Warehime. "We are highly specialized within our departments at each branch. Integrating those departments is the responsibility of the branch managers."

Growth of 20 percent for each of the past five years has been the result of a loose but well-defined management style.

"We give our stores (branches) a fair amount of autonomy," says Warehime. "We try to make it a fun place to work. The corporate philosophy is to give a guy enough rope to hang himself. Everyone is encouraged to be a risk-taker and make their own decisions. There's a lot of self-confidence that comes with working here."

The owner, Chris Senske, still keeps a close eye on expansion.

"I like to have a plan with a line drawn in the sand where the idea will work and where it's not going to work," Senske explains. "When one of the stores wants to try something new, like snow removal, I need a plan. I did not support that particular idea at all, but the branch wanted to do it, so I made sure they had a good plan. So far, it's been successful."

The music has not always been sweet. But by 1994, Senske Lawn & Tree's 48th year, its revenues were more than \$5 million.

"Some things that we've tried have been very unsuccessful," admits the company's second-generation owner. "In the mid-'70s we tried energy improvement insulation contracting. It failed. In the late '70s early '80s we made our first stab at grounds maintenance, and that was a failure. But we re-evaluated it and won at it in the '90s.

"Those have been the learning experiences. Most of the things we've done, though, have been very successful—like adding tall tree pruning and aeration,

of the entire company's gross revenues.

Some of the confidence-building ideas Talkington has implemented in his four years with the company:

- He purchased route schedules from the local Post Office and built his service routes off them. If the Post Office routes are so efficient, why not copy them, he thought.

- Truck maintenance schedules are determined by hours run rather than miles travelled. Some spray trucks, he reasons, are running without moving, creating accountable wear on the engines.

- Snow service is provided like insurance. Area snowfall research showed that the company would normally plow eight times a year (snowfalls of more than two inches). Customers buy a package that pays for 10 plows, but are told that the company will plow up to 12 times if necessary. It sounds like a real deal to the customer, but the system gives Senske snow jockeys a chance to increase their margins.

Talkington and the other branch managers must divvy up work among employees in four different profit centers.

Senske's Application Division—lawn care, including weed control, and tree care—provides 55 percent of the company's \$5 million annual revenues. The Maintenance Division—pruning, mowing, irrigation repair, etc.—accounts for 18 percent. The rest of the income is from the Construction Division (14 percent) and the Pest Control Division (12 percent).

Company thrust—Key words—the ones the branch managers consistently hear from corporate headquarters—are "integrated grounds maintenance," "quality," and "response to the customer."

"We've also learned how to become very efficient at delivering precise amounts," says Warehime. But because the company

continued on page 22L



Vice-president Dan Warehime (left) gives branch managers like Tom Talkington plenty of room to innovate and grow.

which are both closely related to what we do best."

Dominating—Senske Lawn & Tree, thanks to a long history and the aggressive managerial style of retired Army colonel and branch manager Tom Talkington, is the "dominant player" in the Spokane market. That branch provides about 50 percent

