

Getting the most **BANG** for the **BUCK**

PLCAA board member Larry Messina got where he is by being an astute businessman—and that means watching where the dollars go.

by Jerry Roche
Editor-in-Chief

■ Larry Messina doesn't belong to a buyer's cooperative. He doesn't need one.

Messina, owner of Lawn Cure of Southern Indiana, does all his company's buying. His expertise at haggling has enabled the company to grow to 2500 customers in five Indiana and Kentucky counties.

"My forte is buying," says Messina. "I'm a good purchasing agent and get good value out of every dollar I spend."

Messina's secret is that he maintains "partnerships" with his key suppliers. Not surprisingly, they're all on a first-name basis with him.

"I shop around and make certain that I get a good deal," says Messina. "We just bought some Triumph for grub control and I made sure to check prices with three suppliers. I sometimes get as many as five or six different quotes and compare price and quality of products."

"I normally buy the lowest price, but not all the time. With the Triumph, I ended up getting an excellent price from the Andersons."

The bottom line, of course, is that any money lost by not making prudent purchases comes out of the owner's pocket.

"When I called up one of the suppliers about the Triumph, it was \$8.9 a gallon higher than another. And when you're buying 100 gallons, that's a substantial savings," Messina observes.

It's the same with equipment. When he needed new trucks, he immediately requested quotes from the fleet sales departments of about 20 dealers all across Indiana and northern Kentucky.

"I probably had about 20 faxes from various Ford dealers—all the new trucks we buy are Fords—and ended up buying from a dealer in Indianapolis" 100 miles to the north, Messina notes.

He says he's gotten used to the ribbing he takes from his friends on the Indiana State Lawn Care Association, of which he's a past president. "Those guys used to tease me because I shop so much, but they also

was a store manager at Diamond Centers before starting Lawn Cure in 1978.

"I wasn't all that happy in the auto business," relates Messina. "I hated retail, too, because the work is mostly on week-ends and nights. I've always wanted to own a business with repeat sales involved."

Messina's lawn, at the time, was being sprayed by his friend, Paul Decker of Louisville, who also installed and repaired sod. It didn't take long for the light to go off in Messina's head.

"I thought that if Chem-Lawn could do that, I could," he remembers. "So I took out a second mortgage on my house and bought a spray truck and I was off and running three months later. It's amazing how the thing took off."

Yet, if he had it all to do again today, things would be different.

"Another division that we started in 1987—industrial weed control—we call No-Gro Chemical Trimming. I piddled with it for three or four years before getting serious," Messina observes. Special services include weed control in fence-line gravel and—a big money-maker—treating rip-rap rock along the banks of the Ohio River.

"Now No-Gro accounts for 20 percent of our annual revenues, and we run two trucks full-time. If I moved to another part of the country, I wouldn't start a lawn care company, I'd start an industrial weed control company. There is a niche to be filled."

Key employees—Teresa, Larry's wife of 28 years, has always been supportive of whatever he's done.

"I can remember back in the first year of the business when I hurt my back and couldn't walk the lawns," Messina recalls. "I had 50 lawns to do, so she volunteered to push all 50 lawns. She was a real trooper."

Today, Teresa is office and computer manager while Jeff Smith, who was



Teresa (left), Larry Messina's wife of 28 years, pushed 50 lawns in one day by herself in the early days of Lawn Cure of Southern Indiana.



Jeff Smith (left), who worked part time as a student for Lawn Cure, is now in charge of all lawn care production at Lawn Cure.

used to call me to find out where I was buying," says Messina, with a satisfied smile. "I have a good reputation among our suppliers, too, because I'm a tough sell and I'm demanding, but I also make sure I pay everything on time."

Much of Messina's early job history was in sales, so when he's talking to suppliers, he knows whereof he speaks. He spent five years working in an auto dealership and

Messina's first employee, is service manager and production manager on the lawn care side of the business.

Messina's business degree from the University of Indiana has paid handsome dividends. In 1991, he was able to buy out a competitor, Surgreen. On a hunch, he kept Surgreen's name and it has responded by growing from 235 customers to 375.

"It's like one company competing against another," says Messina, "and there are some advantages. When it comes to commercial bid work, a lot of times we can go in with two independent bids, and with Surgreen we can also have a New Albany phone number which seems to attract loyal New Albanians."

Messina now considers himself a bona fide businessman—for life.

"I see myself not ever selling my business," he says. "I see myself bringing on a general manager and I'll be like a chairman of the board and he'll be like a president. If I sold the business and paid the capital gains tax (28 percent), it wouldn't afford me enough money to live the rest of my life."

The worst place for Kentucky blue

■ "Kentucky is the last place you should use Kentucky bluegrass," says Larry Messina of Lawn Cure of Southern Indiana, which has clients in two Kentucky counties in and around Louisville. "Now, everybody's recommending turf-type tall fescue."

His company, however, does not include seeding, sodding or mowing in its list of services. Lawn Cure personnel have to maintain whatever's on the property.

"The biggest problems in this part of the country are annual grasses like foxtail, crabgrass and goosegrass," says Messina, "so my biggest concern has always been buying pre-emergence herbicides."

Lawn Cure uses Barricade as part of its first round at its highest recommended rates. "We want to get a head start on chickweed and henbit as soon as possible, so we schedule a granular fertilizer and pre-emergence weed control

treatment around Feb. 20th because it's too early to make a liquid application for weed control at that time," Messina says.

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