

Building loyalty, even in adversity

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

All your painstaking efforts to cultivate a responsible and caring image for your company repay you when calamity strikes.

Lawn care operators Terry Kurth and Steve Hyland shares how to build customer loyalty—even in the face of adversity.

Kurth, president of Lawn Care of Wisconsin, knows the technical side of turf. Yet he claims that successful companies must develop two other equally important attributes: "a caring attitude" and "communication skills."

A mishap put Kurth's belief to the test.

In 1993, his company—through no fault of its own—treated customers' lawns in the Green Bay/Fox Valley market with a product contaminated with atrazine, which kills cool-season grasses. The problem came to light when a customer called to say that her lawn was dying.

An initial investigation suggested a chemical burn. Kurth sought the advice of a friend who was also a plant pathologist. The friend suggested atrazine damage.

Kurth turned to his supplier for help. The manufacturer was cooperative and flew in an expert a few days later. After conducting lot checks and a short investigation, the supplier discovered that atrazine had unknowingly accumulated in its con-

veyor system. Some had fallen into the bags of fertilizer that Kurth's company had used.

"We realized we had a problem even before most of our customers knew what had happened," says Kurth. "We immediately started communicating to those who had been affected."

Kurth and his managers emphasized that both their company and its customers were victims. But more vital (from the customers' standpoint, anyway): his company was going to restore the lawns.



Steve Hyland kept his customers informed.

Review your recovery plan

Successful companies have recovery plans that include:

- ▶ An awareness of high-risk areas with training in crisis simulations.
- ▶ A crisis team of trained, knowledgeable and empowered personnel.
- ▶ A company spokesperson of high rank.
- ▶ An external communications mechanism to inform and reassure its customers.
- ▶ A system for internal communications that keeps employees onboard and moving in the right direction.
- ▶ A regular update of the plan as the company grows and the variety of its services increases.

—R.H.

"You're going to work with us. It (remediation) is going to come through us, and we're going to monitor it," Kurth says his firm stressed to clients.

Kurth's company acquired a large tank truck and employees sprayed each damaged lawn with an activated charcoal slurry to neutralize the atrazine. It did whatever



Terry Kurth insisted that his company take care of all customer concerns caused by the accident.

else required to bring the turf back.

At season's end, after the lawns had been repaired, his company hand-delivered a 10-pound box of steaks (paid for by the manufacturer of the tainted product) to each of the customers. "I hope this leaves you with a good taste in your mouth," a note with the box said.

Only five customers cancelled service because of the mishap.

Hyland Brothers Lawn & Tree Care of Ft. Collins, Colo., used a similar strategy in the spring of 1991, says President Steve Hyland.

For four straight days, an employee over-applied pre-emergence herbicides to 136 lawns. Within several days, the lawns started to look stunted.

"Right away we began spraying activated charcoal, aerating, seeding, sodding—anything we could do to get these lawns to grow again," recalls Hyland.

Meanwhile, in its newsletter, the company explained to all its customers what had happened. "We were hearing rumors about us that weren't necessarily true," says Hyland.

While employees increased their efforts, management took special efforts to keep customers informed.

"The public image and the good reputation that we'd developed helped us get through this," says Steve. "We responded in a way that our customers perceived to be professional and proactive."

Hyland says he lost just two customers. □