

Technology: People and Machines

by CHARLES CLARK / Customer Information Service Manager, DowElanco

While there's no doubt that computer technology is rapidly changing the way we do business, it's important to add that hardware, software, megabytes, networks and servers provide only the medium for this revolution. The tools that enable today's almost-instantaneous communication and data retrieval are still only as good as the minds that use them.

At DowElanco, we're currently designing an integrated approach to using these tools that will ultimately benefit all of the people we serve, from the scientist in the laboratory to the customer in the field. This sounds quite lofty until one considers all of the new questions and real world challenges that arise.

As manager of DowElanco's Customer Information Service, I lead an interdisciplinary team of seven company experts. Together, we are evaluating potential uses of the Internet for our many clients. This work is urgent. Our concern is connecting with important audiences and providing better service than ever.

We are committed to serving the information needs of our clientele, and understanding how to harness current and emerging technologies. How can we best meet those goals through electronic communication? To answer that, our team has been looking hard at the material that's already "out there" in cyberspace. We're also looking inward to evaluate our current customer response systems and how these can be streamlined.

Already, we are implementing a



sales force automation plan based on laptop computers. This system will enable our sales representative to access technical or sales information to respond immediately to customer questions. But that's just the beginning.

All of our analysis leads to the Internet, a global computer network.

This "Net" is revolutionizing the way information is managed. For the first time, an individual can readily access information from sources all over the world. That same capability allows an individual to communicate with all other users "linked" on "the Net."

This new network of information will accelerate change in our core business processes.

For example, the Internet reinvents the entire notion of customer service. First, information is more immediately available than ever—one second after the last keystroke, to be precise.

Second, individuals can access that

timely information in greater numbers than was previously possible.

Third, the interactivity of the medium will take what was once a "mass message" and customize it to individuals. The customer is now in charge of his or her information search.

It's too early to gauge the total impact of all this on customer service. The Internet is still in its infancy and we've merely scratched the surface of its potential. But I think it's safe to say that we'll know even more about our customers

and their individual situations. And they will know more, expect more and get more from their supplier partners.

As a tool, the Internet holds great promise for bringing all of us in the lawn care and landscape industry "closer together" in real time. But even more critical is our responsibility to communicate with each other and the commitment to do it well. And that can and will happen as we both learn to operate in the new world of connectivity.

I invite your suggestions and opinions. What would be useful to you?

Respond by e-mailing me at acclark@DowElanco.com. Fax me at (800) 905-7326.

Or, even do it the time-honored way. Write a letter to me c/o DowElanco, Customer Information Service, 9330 Zionsville Road, Building 308/CA, Indianapolis, IN 46268-1054.

And yes, DowElanco will be on the World Wide Web soon...