



Dr. Bob Wesely (standing) emphasizes the importance of good customer communications throughout the year.

Small-town niche helps lawn care

by LYNNE VOPAL

Every spring, nearly 40 Midwestern teachers, policemen and bankers become self-managing lawn care operators for K-Lawn, a part of Kugler Co.

Located in towns from Nebraska to Oklahoma with populations of 5,000 or fewer, their profits are driven from a niche market demand for local, service-oriented lawn care.

Kugler has a unique training program for these small-town operators, headed by Dr. Bob Wesely, a turfgrass specialist.

"Ninety-nine percent of our dealers are single-person operations owned by those who love the outdoors, but generally have a limited background in turfgrass management," says Wesely. "They are all contracted to buy Kugler liquid fertilizers. But the tough stuff—teaching them the ins and outs of the lawn care business—is handled in our annual training sessions."

After recruiting from educational directories, high school coaches' shows and referrals, K-Lawn positions the new LCOs as "local experts."

"These are respected members of rural communities, where most everyone wants a hometown person for their lawn care service," Wesely explains. "As a result, almost half of K-Lawn's dealers are teachers, who are more visible in these areas than just about anybody."

LCOs first learn how to acquire and retain

customers, sales approaches, pricing structures and basic agronomics.

In the second session, LCOs receive their equipment package, including a 320-gallon sprayer that is normally used to treat 1-4 million square feet a season. Training includes recommendations for applications, projecting chemical needs and proper safety. K-Lawn follows up with several on-site visits the first year, and meets annually with new and existing LCOs.

"The camaraderie between the dealers [LCOs] is the best part of the roundups," Wesely remarks. "They learn from each other. We have a 'Dealer Spotlight' presentation, too, where we highlight a dealer's business practices and success rate."

Kugler offers chemical and nutrient recommendations, "develops a pricing structure and tries to keep [LCOs] up to date with new technology and products."

"Last year, a representative from Sandoz came in to discuss the fundamentals of Barricade pre-emergence herbicide," Wesely says. "He discussed the product's features: it's non-staining formulation and 26-week residual. That's very helpful, because without that one-on-one contact, [LCOs] might not get the opportunity to explore the product options that are out there."

"Kugler company supports the [LCOs'] efforts to communicate with customers on an ongoing basis. We provide them with advertising materials for their local newspapers and also help develop bulletins, brochures and newsletters to use as leave-behinds with their customers," Wesely says.

"You have to know what you can do. You can normally improve the color and density of the turf; you can control the weeds and insects to a good extent. You can provide a good service. You can develop a professional image. You cannot control only what cannot be altered—the climate, the soil and, most times, the turf."

"K-Lawn dealers aren't just the owners, they are the applicators, the record-keepers and the accountants. We do what we can to see that they excel in all of these." **LM**

—The author is a Milwaukee-based writer for the turfgrass industry.