

## Don't ask why,

# just do it!

**When you become the industry's 'ambassador' in your area, you might discover that good employees will find you**

BY PHIL FOGARTY

**W**hen I entered the lawn care industry in the early 1980s, the atmosphere was a little on the hostile side. For those of you who remember that era, it won't surprise you that in

my first spring of ownership I was in two different city council chambers for hearings on lawn care. The day after one of the hearings, my company was on the front page of a local daily newspaper (we had the contract for that city's park system) with pictures showing picket signs held by little blond-haired boys: "Please don't make us the guinea pigs!" they pleaded.

At the time, I thought it was a dirty trick to play on the new entrepreneur. I barely knew how to calibrate a spreader and I had people with television cameras asking me for comments. I stammered and swore I would never be that ill-prepared for a chance meeting with the press again.

Those dark days turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I reluctantly became an official representative, or ambassador, of my industry.

The political atmosphere has changed a bit but the advantage I gained by being thought of as the

official representative of my industry in my market has not. Ambassadorship is representation of a group, but it can be so much more.

This ambassador thing is amazing because it does so much good for so many people. It is a true win-win-win situation. Your industry benefits from your efforts — that's good. But let's be a little more self-ish here and also check out what it can do for your company and for you personally:

**1. Industry image**—Instead of allowing others to define your industry, you are out there promoting your profession. There are countless free opportunities to influence the public opinion. Is that important? Just ask Bill Gates, whose recent position in Gallup polls may have saved his skin (for now). Gates enjoys a 68% approval rating by consumers these days. He knows that presenting a positive image to the consumer will ultimately influence political opinion, which in turn decides much of the business climate in which he operates.

Okay, so political opinion may not be concrete enough for you. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to charge a little more for your expertise and time? Let's face it, John Q. Public doesn't think we are brain surgeons at this point. Our image is improv-

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## LABOR FACT

## The going rate for landscape

► U.S. average hourly earnings in dollars Nov. 1998 through Nov. 1999

Average: \$13.18 (include preliminary figures for Oct. and Nov.)

Average weekly earnings rose by 3.6%, seasonally adjusted, between November of 1998 and 1999. After adjustment for inflation, average weekly earnings grew by 0.9%. Before adjustment for seasonal change and deflation, average weekly earnings were \$463.68 in November 1999, compared with \$451.10 in 1998.

► 1998 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates

Laborers, landscaping and groundskeeping

Median hourly \$8.24

Median yearly \$17,140

(note: these are median figures; no average available)

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ing as our professionalism rises, but you can speed up the process exponentially by playing an active role and "selling" our trade and its benefits to everyone. Why isn't everybody standing in line to be the ambassador? Don't ask why!

**2. Company positioning** — So much of selling is trying to differentiate your company, service and product from the competition. "Industry representative" equals "industry expert" in the eyes of the public. You and your company are now pre-sold as the best in your area. What an incredible advantage when the biggest clients in town are looking for the solution to a prob-

## How to get started

- *Create a media database* complete with community service leaders and other influential people. Include these people in all formal communications and marketing efforts throughout the year. If you don't have a newsletter, start one this month.

- *Have a five- to 10-minute talk prepared.* There is ambassador training through RISE and PLCAA, as well as videos available to help create a format with which you are comfortable. Become familiar with the issues surrounding our industry so you can be the person others look to as a spokesperson. Don't hesitate to call another ambassador in another market for tips on how to structure your presentation. (PLCAA can help with names.)

- *For good practice and experience* with public speaking in general, become active in your local Toastmasters group.

- *Practice on your staff, family and friends.* Remember, selling is the transfer of enthusiasm from one individual to another.

- *Attend and speak* at every career day you can, especially at elementary and secondary schools.

- *Make yourself available* to radio stations and local print media. A simple letter introducing yourself and letting them know what you could offer in the way of tips for better landscape care or an article on a new way to improve a property may be all that is necessary. Offer to be a speaker at a local garden club or community service organization such as Rotary, Kiwanis or Lions. Leave the technical jargon at the office and talk enthusiastically about the emotional connection people have with your product or service.

- *Consider teaching* at a vocational or technical school in your area. Many community colleges are interested in industry experts as "visiting professors."

- *Take these one step at a time* and be patient with the results. If possible, solicit the advice of a local public relations expert to get you started.

lem or an alternative to business as usual.

And how about the best employees?

Who would they rather work for—a company that pays pretty well or the "industry expert?" (But you probably don't need to hire anybody these days.) What a recruiting tool! Why isn't everybody standing in line to be the ambassador? Don't ask why!

**3. Personal growth** — "This ambassador stuff sounds like a stretch of the abilities. I didn't sign up for any speeches when I decided to run this company — I just want to sell fertilizer, so leave me alone, will ya?"

In the world of selling, we know that what we are really selling is ourselves — every day, in every situation, all the time. By preparing yourself to sell your industry and your company (to a group or to the media), you move out of your comfort

zone fast. I am still uncomfortable with public speaking but I do not know of a better way to compete with the big guys and their multimillion-dollar marketing budgets. And by the way, the "big" companies also train their managers as ambassadors.

With so many advantages and so much to gain, why don't others assume the role? Don't ask why! Maybe they have convinced themselves that it isn't worth the time or the risk. It doesn't matter.

You now know what an incredible tool being an ambassador is. And someone in your market is going to assume the ambassadorial role. As the wise man said, "If not you, then who and if not now, when?"

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