

# Fish

where they're bitin'

**How one manager found all the 'good' people he needed to succeed in the lawn service business**

BY BILL HOOPES

In my management training experience, the single most surprising discovery I've made and confirmed many times is that managers simply will not recruit. Not can't recruit — won't recruit.

My earlier article (*LM* September 1999) emphasized seven keys to management success. Number 6 involved the need for a human resources strategy — a plan for finding, hiring and keeping people. This article expands upon that and offers a plan that every manager can use to find, then hire, the people you want.

### He's really you

You need to know that Max Terrier is real. He is a successful lawn service manager whose real identity I'm protecting because that's the way he wanted it.

Max became a "superstar" while managing a lawn service branch in south Texas. He boasted no business degree, only some prior experience working in the fast food

ILLUSTRATION: BOB LYNCH



business. And Max wasn't particularly lucky. He learned the most effective process for hiring and managing people by trial and error.

He did possess some important traits that I refer to as the "Terrier Factor." Max had the ability to do two things that helped him succeed:

\* He learned to focus on a *well defined objective*.

\* He played the business game with *dogged determination and discipline*.

Together, that simply means he focused his energy on the most important targets and believed in himself to the point that he was able to ride out temporary setbacks and keep working.

### Just an average manager

At first, Max was like many managers — consumed by lots of little fires and working endless hours to keep up. To Max, the 'recruiting plan' amounted to a message to the office manager, telling her to "run the ad again, Sheila." And it never seemed to work. But Max, like lots of us, ran the ad anyway. After all, you have to get the word out; you have to 'fill those chairs.'

Without going into the oft-repeated details of our shrinking labor pool, let's review the lessons Max learned.

After hours of planning and thinking about how he would pull off a successful season, Max went about his hiring as always — tapping the labor pool he could easily reach in the classifieds. He was like the rest, returning to the local classifieds again and again when time was short and creative thinking absent. On the spring that changed him forever, he came up short, hiring five of the seven people he needed. Still, he plunged into spring, sure he'd find a couple of guys somewhere.

On one particularly bad weather week

in March, two technicians walked just when he needed them most. And, as you already know, he was unable to replace them. In four weeks, Max lost over \$30,000 in much needed revenue. But it wasn't just the revenue shortfall that stung; Max was behind during the most competitive time of the year. And with every passing day, more customers threatened cancellation if they didn't receive service.

He thought about the old lawn care adage: "When you blow it early, Round One never ends." Max did what he always did and reached for the Maalox.

Why did this happen again? Two management mistakes caused the problem:

1. Max made poor hiring selections. With less-than-adequate candidates to choose from, he settled for losers; and
2. Max didn't know how to replace those that left. Both problems are recruiting failures. Max knew he had to solve these problems, but he needed a plan.

### The light bulb goes on

Sitting in his office one evening when he'd rather have been at home, Max picked up a copy of *Field & Stream* magazine. Flipping through the pages, he noticed an article titled, "Get Smart: Fish Where They're Bitin'." The article described a strategy fishermen use to quickly and consistently locate large schools of fish. It explained how successful fishermen bring in a great catch every time.

He thought about it all night. The next morning, when his office manager dutifully reported, "the ads are in," Max thought again about the article and knew his message (the bait) wasn't where it should be. It wasn't where they are biting.

In the next few days, while the phone remained silent, Max accepted that he

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## Max's recruiting plan of action

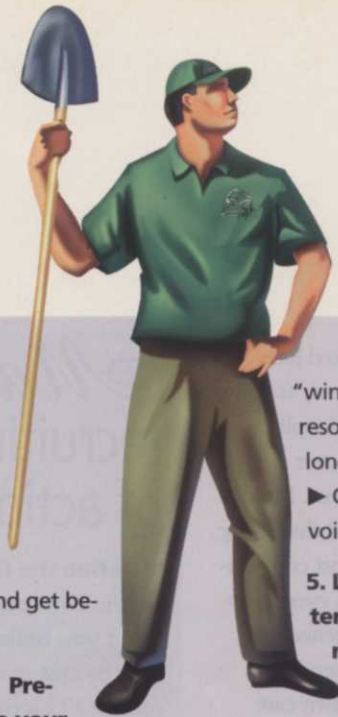
**1. Define the fish you want to catch: Find people who believe what you believe.** Max realized he had the best chance of succeeding if he could staff his company with people who were interested in his job vs. any job and felt comfortable with his philosophies, values and procedures. He had to consider them in terms of:

- ▶ **Experience** — what did he want new hires to know?
- ▶ **Skills** — what did he expect new hires to be able to do quickly?
- ▶ **Personal values/ethics/standards** — are they consistent with his?
- ▶ **Development potential** — how much growth did he expect?

**2. Fish where they're bitin': Identify high potential recruiting sources for the kind of people you want to locate.**

- ▶ Involve yourself in local community college/technical school projects or activities as a sponsor. Your marketplace needs to know you are alive.
- ▶ Visit local high school vo-ag or vo-tech classes and JVS programs. Get to know teachers and counselors. Communicate your need.
- ▶ Sponsor community environmental improvement projects for publicity. Word of your company will travel fast.
- ▶ Write to a list of certified applicators in your area (lists available from your state's department of agriculture).
- ▶ Check state and local extension ser-

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vice training and re-training programs. Many are looking for placement destinations.

In other words, do what Max finally did and get beyond the classifieds!

### 3. Use the right bait: Prepare to communicate your message effectively:

- ▶ Develop catchy, easy-to-read recruiting literature. There are plenty around to use for ideas.
- ▶ Print up concise job description/ career opportunity sheets for use in quick two-minute interviews (when you meet a potential candidate).
- ▶ Use business cards with a benefits-oriented recruiting message.
- ▶ Rewrite your hiring ads to emphasize a good work environment, controlled hours, vacations, benefits, recognition, team activity and fun — not just tasks. Your message must 'sell' your company.

### 4. Go fishin' in new waters: Get the word out:

- ▶ Try weekly tabloid papers vs. the daily publication.
- ▶ Move your newspaper ad out of the classifieds (try the sports section).
- ▶ Give your ad a new, interesting heading ("Tired of empty promises?" or "Want to know what you've been missing?").
- ▶ Advertise in community colleges, career centers and technical school papers.
- ▶ Try drive-time country radio (saturation 10-second spots for two weeks).
- ▶ Offer a finder bonus to current staff

"winners." Referrals are a great resource and they stay with you longer.

- ▶ Canvass customers with in-voice stuffers.

### 5. Learn to set the hook: Interview effectively and make better selections.

- ▶ Confirm you have a positive "drive-up" first impression. Don't let them drive away — it happens.
- ▶ Confirm your staff is acting and looking professional. Candidates believe what they see is what you are.
- ▶ Let your staff know when interviews are scheduled.
- ▶ Provide a friendly welcome.
- ▶ Be ready for a private, uninterrupted interview. Clear your desk.
- ▶ Rehearse the interview; don't 'wing it.'
- ▶ Opening — explain the job, requirements, rewards. Confirm understanding (5 minutes).
- ▶ Probe with careful, open-ended questions (10 minutes).
- ▶ If you like what you see and hear, make a hire/no hire decision without wasting more management time.
- ▶ If positive, answer candidate questions (10 minutes).
- ▶ End the interview with a challenge: "If I put you on my team, will you give me your personal commitment to stick with us for at least six months? It will take me that long to really teach you the position."
- ▶ If you get a 'yes,' ask the candidate to go home, think about it and call you at 8:00 a.m. sharp! Some do, some don't. Those that don't, you don't want.

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would need to learn how to go fishing again. He knew he had bait, but perhaps not the right kind for the fish he needed to attract. And just maybe Max was fishing in the wrong part of the lake.

### A new day, a new fishin' hole

These are the steps Max Terrier took to rework his recruiting/hiring strategy:

**1. Reset management priorities.** Max understood that he, and only he, could be the fisherman. The process could not be delegated to his assistant and it would not happen without him. Max had to make time to 'go fishin'.' This meant he had to reorder his time use priorities.

**2. One hour per day.** He set aside a minimum of one hour each day for recruiting. No matter what, Max worked on recruiting for an hour, in addition to paying regular recruiting visits to career days and local events where prospects might be found. He decided the best hour for him was immediately after the crews went out in the field in the morning. That became the time he took no calls or interruptions, and he devoted himself to building his company team.

Max worked through a process of evaluating the recruiting possibilities in his town. He made contacts, learned how to get visibility, where to be and when to be there. All this took Max one hour a day, which is not unreasonable when you consider that the goal is to find and attract the most important management resource of all — employees to strengthen your firm.

**3. Commitment to his plan.** Max made huge progress when, after a lot of thought, he decided to accept the level of personal discipline required to make the process work. For him, a psychological tool he'd

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read about called "auto suggestion" made it easy. He made up two posters on which he wrote these slogans: "People first, everything else second," and "I'll spend 1 hour each day recruiting."

Max placed the posters on the wall where they would be impossible for him to avoid: directly across from his desk.

#### 4. Program yourself to make it happen.

It may sound simplistic, even naive, but this process of recommitment to a new approach worked for Max as it will work for you. Once you *think* something is a good idea and make a mental/emotional commitment to making that thought a part of

your life, you begin to *program your subconscious mind to make it happen*. Max used this technique to make the necessary changes in his thinking and routine and he succeeded in developing, and implementing, a much improved recruiting strategy.

It all began for Max when he decided to reset his priorities: Put people first. Then, he acknowledged that more time should be devoted to staffing, including a long-term commitment to the process.

#### You need people to make a team

The sidebar beginning on page 37 presents Max's five key steps to improving recruiting effectiveness. In the process, Max

learned that people take lots of time, but people are also your most precious resource. No manager can succeed on individual effort alone. Like Max Terrier, you need a motivated staff. And the sooner you accept the need to place the highest priority possible on recruiting, the sooner your staffing problems will go away.

Max Terrier learned you never stop recruiting! **LM**

*The author is director of training and development at Scotts Lawn Service in Marysville, OH. He says Max Terrier is a composite of two real people who worked for him in Texas.*

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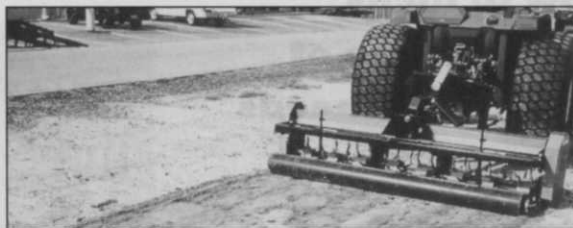
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