

When things go wrong

Three Green Industry veterans explain how to turn tragic business events into triumphs

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

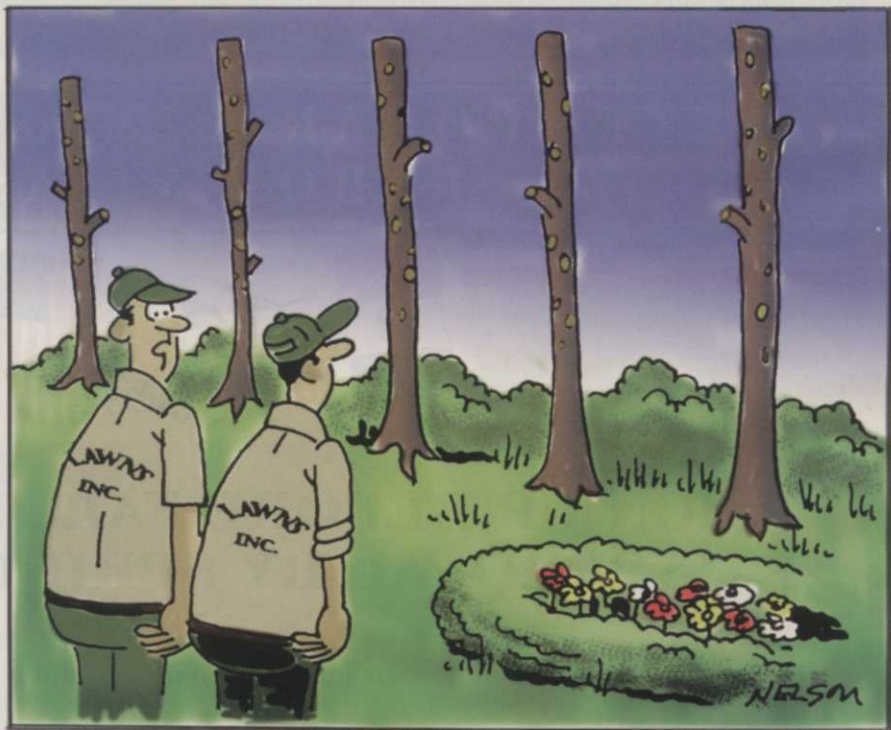
It's the "Age of Customer Satisfaction," and your customer isn't happy. Something has gone wrong, and the customer is blaming you. What do you do? How do you make things right? More importantly, how do you make things right in a way that repairs the all-important customer relationship?

Three real world stories from actual Green Industry professionals who've been there will answer those questions.

Damaged lawns everywhere

Russ Frith has quite a tale about how things went wrong for him. About 10 years ago, Frith's hard-won business reputation of 30 years was threatened by a contaminated batch of insecticide that damaged nearly 600 of his customers' lawns.

Frith is the CEO of Lawn Doctor, Inc., Holmdel, NJ, the largest franchised lawn care company in North America with 400 franchises in 40 states and gross revenues of \$61 million in 2000. His firm is a weed-and-feed lawn care applicator but also offers related services such as tree and shrub care, pH balancing, seeding and aeration. Here's his horror story:



"When you give Joe instructions on pruning, you have to be very specific."

Russ Frith: "About 10 years ago, several of our franchisee owners purchased a private label product — an insecticide from a reseller — that was contaminated," Frith says. "The formulator had used his tanks and mixing line to formulate atrazine which is used principally to control cool weather grasses in warm

season turf. The problem was that he didn't properly clean the lines before formulating the insecticide we bought. Later, when we tested the insecticide, we found that it was atrazine-gram contaminated at 22,000 ppm, or one-third of a pound of active ingredient per gallon."

Landscape Management: "Is that a lot?"

Frith: (laughs) "It sure as heck is! It damaged 564 cold climate lawns!"

LM: "And how did you find out that the lawns were damaged?"

Frith: (laughs again) "Well, they started to die! The customers (principally upscale residential customers in the Northeast) were calling our franchisees, who in turn called us. Somebody also called the local television station's Mr. Fix It because we wound up on the five o'clock news!"

"In response, we sent out our operations and technical services people. We had a suspicion of what the contaminant was, but unfortunately the reseller/manufacturer didn't come forward and accept responsibility until after we had the product tested. At that later point, the formulator admitted to the problem. In the beginning, they offered a small amount of technical assistance, plus a small amount of money to pay the homeowners to intensively water their lawns and pay for some charcoal applications to mitigate the effects of this chemical on the lawns. After a five-year legal battle, they ultimately accepted legal responsibility."

LM: "What did Lawn Doctor do to repair the damage and keep these customers in the fold?"

Frith: "We promised the customers that we would make things right, no matter what that would take. Specifically, we took a group of Lawn Doctor employees from a retail branch of ours, as well as members of our operations and technical field support team, and visited every customer face-to-face. We began to reseed into spot areas, which was the appropriate remedy. For the larger areas, we contracted with a landscaper to have many of the lawns — roughly 200 — stripped out and resodded.

"The manufacturer of this product eventually did come forward and pay significant

sums of money toward the remediation of the customers. But because we're a franchise operation with two levels of customers — the end customer and our franchisees — we initiated and paid for a lawsuit on behalf of our franchisees. Five years later, in a settlement worked out literally on the courthouse steps, a distribution was made to the three franchisees affected and to us."

Frith reports that most of the residential customers stayed with Lawn Doctor, and, over time, only two of the franchisees left.

"That rescue effort took quite a lot of doing on our part, but it was definitely worth it to make the effort and protect and repair those customer relationships," Frith says. "What else do you have? You're in a service business dealing with customers who have choices. Plus, the level of customer expectation from all kinds of businesses is substantially higher than it was twenty years ago, and still spiraling upwards."

"Communicate with everyone involved. First, find out what the institution's traditions and expectations are so you can be proactive in satisfying them."

CGM, Director of Grounds for Dwight Englewood School, Englewood, NJ, & President of Sports Field Management Systems



Van Haasteren

"We promised the customers that we would make things right, no matter what that would take."

CEO of Lawn Doctor, Inc., Holmdel, NJ



Frith

"You may wind up taking responsibility anyway — either because you want to keep the customer or can't stand to look at the disastrous results of someone else's error."

CEO of Lori Spielman Landscaping, Inc., Ellington, CT



Spielman

Construction blues

Repairing customer relationships is still worth it even when what goes wrong is not your fault or when the customer is to blame. According to Lori Spielman, CEO of Lori Spielman Landscaping Inc., Ellington, CT, you may wind up taking responsibility anyway — either because you want to keep the customer or can't stand to look at the disastrous results of someone else's error.

That's what happened when Spielman did the landscaping for a new commercial building being constructed in Ellington.

Spielman describes what went wrong:

"The building contractor kept dragging his feet, particularly on the exterior aspects of the job. The people doing the grading would show up and do a little work, then disappear for months. It was getting frustrating for us, so we went in with our bulldozer, cleaned the retention pond and finished what we could for landscaping. But the whole thing snowballed into a mess.

"At one point, the building owner, also

acting out of frustration, took it upon himself to fertilize and lime the exterior grounds. He entrusted the task to someone who had no experience or knowledge of fertilizing. The result was horrible — green streaks across the ground, weeds everywhere. As of December 2000, there was a poor stand of grass.”

Spielman knows all too well how it looks — the property is in the middle of town, and she has to drive by it every day.

To keep the customer and eliminate an eyesore, Spielman took soil samples and put the property on a corrective program.

Tradition, tradition

In the world of institutional grounds management, the customer is not a “customer” in the commercial sense but someone you have to please anyway. That’s the experience of George Van Haasteren, CGM, Director of Grounds for Dwight Englewood School, Englewood, NJ, and President of Sports Field Management Systems, a company specializing in athletic field maintenance and renova-

tion. His prior post was grounds manager at Columbia University in New York City. He is currently president of the Professional Grounds Management Society.

Things went wrong for Van Haasteren when he was at Columbia University. The prestigious Ivy League university had certain traditions which, as his customer, it expected him to uphold.

“The first challenge had to do with the university’s winter lighting,” Van Haasteren recalls. “The campus traditionally had these lights up and functioning from Thanksgiving into February. The contractor installing the lighting was not doing it the way his predecessor had, which caused a lot of dissatisfaction.”

“We also had some technical problems. For example, we found that squirrels liked to chew on the outdoor wiring, and until somebody with experience suggested we apply a deterrent spray made in part with cayenne pepper, the squirrels caused havoc with the lights.”

“My second challenge was snow removal. The university operates seven days a week, 24

hours a day, 365 days a year, and it expected the campus to remain open through winter.

“As it turned out, my first year at Columbia was one of the worst snow years in recent decades. On top of that, when we got our first snowfall, three of my principal pieces of snow removal equipment broke down.”

Van Haasteren’s advice to anyone managing the grounds of an established institution?

■ Communicate with everyone involved. Find out what the institution’s traditions and expectations are so you can be proactive in satisfying your customer.

■ Communicate laterally with other institutional service departments with the object of picking their brains and developing allies.

The experiences of our three Green Industry professionals suggests that Murphy’s Law is correct — things will go wrong, and it’s just a matter of time before they go wrong for you. These experiences also suggest that when disaster strikes, the right kind of effort may straighten out the mess — and keep your customer happy. **LM**

ALCA Presents Specialty Education...

ESSENTIALS FOR SUCCESS

Two Concurrent Tracks, focusing on...

BUSINESS BOOT CAMP: Learn from one of the leaders in the industry the basics of operating a successful exterior and/or interior landscape company. Business owners and managers will get cutting-edge advice and tips of the trade on basic business knowledge. *Speaker: David Minor, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX — former owner of Minor’s Landscape Services*

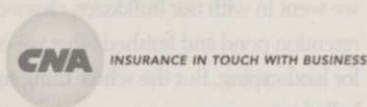
TECH KNOWLEDGE: Geared to interior landscape technicians and supervisors, this seminar will provide basics of indoor plant care, troubleshooting pest and disease problems and tips on quality customer service. *Speaker: Virginia Powers, Editor of Tropical Plant Technician, an interior training publication, and Owner of Garden Tapestry, an interiorscape company*

DATES AND LOCATIONS:

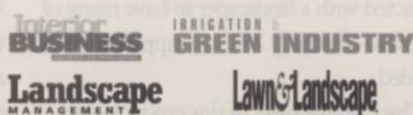
September 26, 2001 • Baltimore, MD

October 6, 2001 • Chicago, IL

MAJOR SPONSOR:



MEDIA PARTNERS:



For more information and registration details, contact ALCA at 1-800-395-2522 or visit the web site at www.alca.org.