



Franchising's revival

Landscape service entrepreneurs find a growing number of franchisers eager to show them how to become a player

BY JAMES E. GUYETTE

In 1962, each U.S. resident ate four lbs. of french fries annually. Today, each of us, on average, eats 33 lbs. of french fries. This is one impact of McFranchising on our McWorld. Several Green Industry companies want to make a similar impact by franchising lawn care/maintenance services.

Franchising's impact on our economy is incredible. The U.S. Small Business Administration says 38% of all 2000 retail sales in the U.S. were generated by franchises — and the numbers keep rising. Some Green

Industry experts suggest that, by 2010, franchising will account for almost half of the lawn care marketplace. That might be a stretch considering there are only less than 10 major franchise firms serving the professional landscape and lawn care management industry today.

Nobody, however, disputes that franchising within the industry will grow.

"Franchising is going to be an important element in the Green Industry as it moves forward," says Jim Miller, director of franchising for Scotts LawnService, Marysville, OH.

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The franchise advantage

Franchising provides a new proprietor or prospective entrepreneur with a bank-friendly business plan, training, proven marketing and horticultural strategies, and a network of professional and personal support. Franchising allows a person to own a growth-oriented business without making mistakes common to most startups. It offers brand-name recognition, a marketplace niche and big-company backing while allowing the franchisee to retain a sense of independence.

Not for everyone

Of course, not everyone can or should become a franchisee.

People that like to run their own show or don't like the idea of paying someone a percentage of their revenues for support they don't think they need probably shouldn't hook up with a franchiser.



Phil Catron touts the "natural" program.

"You're not reinventing the wheel," says Janet Keen, co-owner with husband, Bill, of a NaturaLawn lawn care franchise in Providence, RI. "You know what trucks and equipment you need, and they give you a formula that has been successful."

Adds NaturaLawn president Phil Catron, "If an enterprise is well backed, the owner can direct his or her focus toward entrepreneurial pursuits within a given marketplace or an exclusive protected territory.

"We're not selling jobs; we're selling a business concept. The owner isn't working the business; he or she is growing the business," he says.

Each franchiser's emphasis is directed at a specific niche of the landscape services market, yet all say their goal is to build owners/managers, not owners/production workers. While some encourage mom-and-pop operations, others seek to attract more ambitious individuals.



Franchisers help with equipment needs.

"Our franchisees aren't pushing a spreader," says Kenneth L. Hutcheson, general manager and vice president of U.S. Lawns, Orlando, FL. "They're building sustainable businesses." In the U.S. Lawns model, franchisees build operations that produce revenues from \$750,000 to \$1.25 million annually, he says.

Franchise-friendly times

A tight economy and layoffs among individuals with management skills and some savings usually spark a surge in franchising interest, a fact that hasn't gone unnoticed in the Green Industry.

"The times that we had this past year are

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COMPANY	HEADQUARTERS	SERVICES	FRANCHISEES	START-UP COSTS (EST.)	CONTACT
DryJect	Wayside, NJ	injection/aeration	5	\$30,000 to \$60,000	800/270-8873 www.dryject.com
Lawn Doctor Inc.	Holmdel, NJ	lawn care	400	\$20,000 to \$50,000	800/631-5660 www.lawndoctor.com
NaturaLawn of America	Frederick, MD	lawn care	55	minimum net worth of \$250,000, of which \$50,000 is liquid	301/694-5440 www.nl-amer.com
Nutri-Lawn Inc.	Toronto, Ontario	lawn care	4 (in the U.S.)	\$50,000 to \$100,000	416/620-7100 www.nutri-lawn.com
Scotts LawnService	Marysville, OH	lawn care	45	\$75,000 to \$300,000	937/578-5615 www.scottscsco.com
Spring-Green	Plainfield, IL	lawn care	72	\$30,000 to \$80,000	800/435-4051 www.spring-green.com
TruGreen-ChemLawn	Memphis, TN	lawn care	67	\$100,000 to \$125,000	901/681-2008 www.trugreenchemlawn.com
U.S. Lawns	Orlando, FL	commercial landscape care	100	Under \$50,000	800/875-2967 www.uslawns.com
Weed Man	Scarborough, Ontario	lawn care	41 (in the U.S.)	\$45,000 to \$70,000	888/321-9333 www.weed-man.com



Scotts LawnCare is penetrating large markets.

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what we call franchise friendly," adds Hutcherson. "We've opened 24 new offices since June of last year ('01)." By mid spring '02 we had 100 franchises in 24 states.

Spring-Green continues to expand, now supporting 100 franchises in 19 states.

"Spring Green's startup costs and income potential fit my plan," says Roger Grose, Marietta, OH, who purchased a franchise after serving in the U.S. Army and holding positions as an air-traffic controller, a sales manager and a purchasing agent.

"I like having control of my future, my income and the hours that I work," says Grose. He says the franchiser provides the support but he supplies the "hard work and aspirations."

The Scotts Company, Marysville, OH, has become one of the more active lawn care franchisers. The number of Scotts LawnService franchises jumped from 25 in March '01 to 45 by mid-March this year. Sixteen were in some of the nation's biggest lawn care markets. The company plans to offer franchises in 200 additional markets within the next five to 10 years.

"Brand recognition is something consumers are looking at," says Scotts' Jim Miller. "The response we get in any market is incredible. We really didn't become aggressive about it until last year."

Branding's the game

All of the major franchisers count on branding and customer recognition to carry

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their message from one market area to another and across geographic boundaries. This is important when dealing with customers with multiple locations. Distinctive uniforms, signage, promotions and marketing literature separate the franchisers, sometimes more than the programs their franchisees offer to customers.

"We're expanding our reach pretty rapidly," says Scott Frith, marketing director of Lawn Doctor, Holmdel, NJ. "We've seen a lot of development in the south and southwest and we want to continue that."

"We have programs tailored to any particular region."

— **Scott Frith,**
Lawn Doctor

Lawn Doctor, like most of the other franchisers, provides ongoing training — both business management and agronomic — to its franchisees. "We have agronomic programs tailored to any particular region," he says. Also, the company hosts an annual meeting and trade show for more than 600 of its people that features Lawn Doctor's approved vendors and custom turf care equipment.

Toronto-based Weed Man has 41 locations in the United States and 131 in Canada. An aging population of homeowners and busier "do-it-for-me" lifestyles bode well for the next 20 years, believes Jennifer Lemcke, director of franchise development. She believes the industry is strong enough to absorb a healthy influx of franchised operations. "There has been a lot of acquisitions in recent years, so there's room enough for all of us," she says.

Choose a good match

Just as all fast food franchises have their own particular menus, so it is within the Green Industry. Pick a franchise that



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matches your personal goals and philosophies, including your horticultural leanings.

For example, Nutri-Lawn, owned by Toronto-based FirstService Corp., seeks

franchisees that like its "natural" approach. That firm recently incorporated a "natural" herbicide into its program produced by Greener Pastures Corp., Minneapolis, MN,

from sugar beet waste and soybean oil (see August '01 LM, page 25).

These services, marketed as more eco-friendly than traditional lawn care, attract customers who would otherwise avoid professional lawn care, say franchise promoters. "There's a whole segment out there that did not buy lawn care because they don't like pesticides," claims Nutri-Lawn president Larry Maydonik.

"We're working with the passion of the owner/operator."

— Ken Hutcheson,
U.S. Lawns

While companies like Nutri-Lawn discourage people seeking a franchise for a retirement occupation or as a mom-and-pop operation, others encourage small-time operators in markets. All franchise operations said they prefer franchisees with an entrepreneurial spirit and some business knowledge because they believe it's easier to teach them agronomic or horticultural skills.

Weed Man is asking for both in its franchisees since it's adding many of its lawn care operations to existing landscape companies, enticing maintenance operations to add lawn and ornamental application services for a full-service sell to their clients. Irrigation and structural pest control companies are



Des Rice's Weed Man sprouts in the U.S.

warming to the concept, too, says Lemcke of Weed Man. "There's quite a bit of cross marketing a company like this can do," she says.



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Ready to buy — don't get lazy now

Interested in investing in a franchise? Do your homework and "trust your gut instinct," says Charlie Elliot, general manager of The Bison Franchise Network, a Louisiana-based marketing organization. "If you go to see a franchiser and it doesn't feel right, you're probably correct," he says.

Check into the company's business track record and franchisee turnover rate, along with evidence of any lawsuits filed against the firm. "The company should also have enough cash in the bank to carry it through," says Elliot. Compare the pricing of the franchisers and what they offer. Find out which services you pay for and how much they cost over time.

"It's not like a stock where you call your broker and it either goes up or down. This is a life-changing decision," says Elliot. "I'm amazed at how lazy some people are when they look at franchises. If you're lazy when you look at a franchise, you'll be lazy when you run one. It takes hard work to run a franchise."

One of Weed Man's most vocal and visible proponents has been Phil Fogarty, Cleveland, OH, co-owner of one of the company's regional U.S. franchises. "As an independent, I could go all over town and make as many mistakes as I wanted," he says. "I paid for that freedom with a lot of missed opportunities."

U.S. Lawns, owned by Environmental Industries, Inc., Calabasas, CA, concentrates on attracting franchisees that provide full-service maintenance and application services for commercial accounts.

"Our model demands customer intimacy and service excellence," insists Hutcheson.

He believes the landscape maintenance marketplace is so huge that a quality operation can gain as much as 2% market share

in any sizable market and still return an acceptable profit to a franchise owner.

"We're working with the passion of the owner/operator and the support of a very large company," he adds. "That's hard to beat in a local market."

Along with the advantages of centralized

buying, franchisers also tout the efficiencies of special techniques or equipment.

For the Green Industry entrepreneur looking for support, there has never been more franchise choices. **LM**

— The author lives in Cleveland, OH, and is a frequent contributor to LM.

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