

Even if you've been a lawn care professional for a long time and have spent years streamlining procedures, it seems like you still have to frequently go out

do the same work twice no matter what. Weeds, of course, can be stubborn.

Unfortunately, repeat service calls are part of the business. But there are some simple things you can do to reduce callbacks, which will lessen your labor costs and enhance your bottom line.

Communication 101

Callbacks happen when a customer feels that a service provider hasn't done an adequate job. More often than not, the customer's unrealistic expectations due to a lack of knowledge are at the core of the problem.

"The principal cause of callbacks is the difference between perception and reality," says Tom Speirs, President of Agro-Lawn Systems, Inc., Vienna, VA. "You have to understand the process of weed development and weed control throughout the different seasons. The problem is, the customer doesn't understand. He has the perception, 'Hey, I'm paying for weed control...why do I still have weeds?'"

Ideally, both the service provider and the customer would make time to discuss the realities in advance. But it's not always that simple in the real world.

"The key is communication at the point of sale so that customers will start out with more realistic expectations. The better you can explain how the process works, the better your chances are of eliminating a lot of

Reduce

Strategies to help you streamline your lawn care operation and keep your customers smiling

BY MICHAEL RILEY



callbacks," Speirs says. But other factors come into play. For example, during the busy spring months, even a properly trained sales staff is doing all they can to keep up with inquiries. The calls move along more quickly — the staff is overloaded, running down leads, giving estimates, and there's not enough time to offer customers enough education.

"On the other hand, people hear what they want to," Speirs points out. "They just want to know how much it's going to cost and whether you can take care of their problems. So, oftentimes, the reality is that you have to educate as you go."

Application efficiency

Although customers can sometimes misperceive the situation, they can also be correct. Mistakes happen. The best way to avoid them is to recruit the best people for the job.

"One of the root causes of callbacks is the individual making the application," says Todd Graus. "If we don't hire people who take pride in what they're

doing, the chance for misapplication increases."

Graus, President of Green Turf Landscapes, Worland, WY, stresses the importance of screening job applicants and offering ongoing training to ensure happy customers.

"When they first come in the door, we



Misapplications can happen if individual applicators don't take pride in their job.



callbacks

prefer to hire people who are already certified by the state," Graus says. "We do regular training and provide financial incentives for them to improve their skills, with raises tied to education. If they want to make money, they'll come up to speed as fast as they can."

Understanding products and procedures, weather conditions, the status of the current plant pallet, and how to handle contingencies — if a mowing crew arrives right after an application has been put down, for example — are all part of the ongoing training for Graus's crews.

He also suggests setting up a system to monitor the amount of product use to better ensure proper application.

"One thing we do is compile production reports at the end of the day telling us whether we're over or under on the amount of herbicide we should have used," Graus says. "It gets us more in tune with what we're actually doing and sets up an environment of accountability. The more that we understand our operation, the less callbacks we have."

Along with keeping track of usage, applying the best products to get the job done is also a prime consideration. Kevin Johnson, President of All-American Turf Beauty, Van Meter, IA, recommends keeping up on new product development.

"Part of our strategy for reducing callbacks is using newer products or better

Callbacks: main causes and remedies

- ▶ **Unrealistic customer expectations** — Often, a client doesn't understand what's involved in weed control. Communication is key. Explain the service you intend to provide and what to expect, including that you'll address each problem promptly as it appears.
- ▶ **Inadequately trained crews** — State certification is only the beginning; people require ongoing training to do their jobs well. Check their work often and point out areas where they may be falling into a pattern. It's human nature to develop habits, but you can help your crews stay alert with positive, regular reviews of their work.
- ▶ **Product selection** — Keep apprised of new chemicals, and be open to changing the products you use when something better comes on the market. A small investment in enhanced products could result in big labor savings from reduced callbacks.
- ▶ **Things you can't predict** — Weather changes, what the customer does when you aren't there (such as watering and mowing), and indigenous factors (earthworms, etc.) are just some of the things you can't control. Again, the key is customer education and prompt response when an uncontrollable factor comes into play.

"Get right on it, and build the cost of callbacks into your pricing. Whether it's misapplication, weather, customer ignorance, or whatever, you're going to have to contend with callbacks."

— Tom Speirs

products that may cost more initially but achieve better control," says Johnson.

"It's less costly to spend a little more up front for the better products if necessary than to cover the labor costs of having to go back.

"It's trying to solve the problem before you have it. Everybody's got their own standard products, but sometimes they may not give the best control on

some of the things that cause callbacks."

Even if you've streamlined your customer communication skills, trained your crews to peak efficiency, deployed top-of-the-line products, and closely monitored usage levels, you're still going to have callbacks. Why? Because you can't control Mother Nature.

"You can't do everything under ideal circumstances. You've got production de-

mands that have to be satisfied," says Spiers. "Say the forecast is for rain. But the reality is, half the time they're calling for rain, it doesn't. So you go out and do the job and, 20 minutes later, the skies open up and negate the herbicide application. The point is that we understand that there are some circumstances under which we might not be successful, and those would require some follow-up work."

Kevin Johnson agrees. He advises his customers that, in the event of rain, another treatment will be applied in a certain time frame — usually about two weeks. "Again, it's about keeping very good lines of communication open," Johnson says.

There's no single "best" method for handling callbacks. But one thing that all



Kevin Johnson



Tim Doppel

companies should have is a contingency plan to let the customer know right away that they'll be taken care of.

Handling customer complaints is a delicate business, especially because people tend to be irate when they call. Tim Doppel, President of Atwood Lawncare, Sterling Heights, MI, recommends an effective approach that remedies the problem quickly and eliminates the customer's irritation.

"A timely response is vital," says Doppel. "Our experience is that when a customer calls in a complaint, they're typically going to be very rude and angry on the phone — especially if they're a new cus-

tomers, because they assume that they're not going to get service unless they rant and rave. The important thing is to be very accommodating, listen and write down what they're saying."

If you do get a callback, the best thing you can do is put yourself in the customer's position. How would you want it handled if the roles were reversed?

"We try to perform our services in the same manner we'd like to receive them if we were the paying customers," says Johnson. "If I were the customer calling in a complaint, I'd want someone to follow up right away and follow through." **LM**

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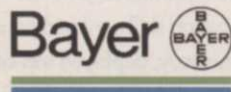
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