

Be a good 'scout'



▲ Have a procedure in place for an owner or manager to check a customer's lawn when the applicator is unsure of the problem.

Train your applicators to diagnose and solve lawn problems before they get out of hand and make your customers unhappy

BY CHRIS LEMCKE

The procedures you put in place to evaluate customers' lawns, uncover potential problems and diagnose developing problems are the heart of any lawn care program.

They determine the timely and judicious use of fertilizer and pest control strategies — both chemical and non-chemical — by your trained employees.

Some companies refer to this process as scouting, while others refer to it as monitoring. Whatever you call it, do it consistently well and you'll differentiate your company and your program from competitors. Preventing problems on clients' landscapes and promptly correcting them builds customer satisfaction and boosts customer retention.

Top companies, in fact, provide all field employees with the basic knowledge to become lawn scouts. This requires ongoing training, but it's doable. Your technicians can be taught to recognize common lawn

diseases, plant-damaging insects and improper cultural practices.

What are the standards?

Beyond that, they must also be able to recognize when treatments are necessary to deal with a particular problem. Generally, treatment decisions are based on standards that your company has established for pest damage. At what threshold does pest activity threaten the lawn? Is overall turf health threatened? Is the infestation throughout the lawn? What are the patterns and the rate at which turf problems are spreading? These are some of the questions the technician must answer before deciding upon a treatment strategy.

Sometimes that strategy doesn't involve a chemical application. For example, just because a customer notices a few grubs while digging in a flowerbed doesn't necessarily mean that his entire lawn is at risk.

When the problem does require an application, many lawn care companies now use

low-risk products at their lowest label rates. They've trained their employees to apply them at the right time — when the problem is at the stage when it's easiest to control. Again, this is the value of training.

Procedures are a must

Occasionally, your technician (applicator) will be unsure of a particular problem or management strategy. Do you have a procedure in place to set up a service call so that the owner or manager can visit the property to assess the situation? The owner/manager can then share the results of the service call with the technician as a follow-up.

You may also want to encourage customers to become scouts for you. Tell them to call if they notice any lawn prob-

5 steps to successfully treat lawn problems

1 Proper training. Train your technicians to recognize specific turfgrass problems common to your area. They should also know the best strategies to deal with these problems, whether it's the application of a pest control product or a change in cultural management practices such as mowing or watering.

2 Regular monitoring. Make every technician a lawn scout, looking for signs of potential problems and, equally important, keeping customers



informed about what your company can do to improve their property.

3 Set a procedure for handling customer calls. Respond promptly

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◀ **Train your staff to recognize specific turfgrass problems in your area.**

to customer concerns. The longer it takes to see a customer, the greater the chance that a problem can worsen and cause more damage.

4 **Have a price list.** Can your technicians give specific prices for treatments while at the customer's site?

5 **After-treatment evaluation.** Set up a date to go back and check on the success of an application or change in cultural practice — and to make sure the customer is happy.

lems between visits. It's better to visit the property and identify the problem and solution than to try to diagnose and solve it on the telephone.

Once a decision has been made to treat a problem, respond promptly. The longer it takes to see a customer, the greater the chance that a potential pest can cause further damage. Establish a standard or procedure to inspect a customer's lawn for any concerns the customer may have within a certain period of time. A service guarantee will promise clients that you'll be there to evaluate any situation that pertains to the lawn's health.

After all this, make sure that the owner/manager or technicians evaluate the success or failure of any treatment. Establish a date to check on the success of an application or change in cultural practice — and to make sure the customer is happy. Keeping the customer informed and educated on his lawn is one of the most valued services lawn care companies can provide.

Customers want companies that can give them value. Often, that value is in what lawn care companies can provide over and above their programs: the management

of pests, identification of problems, monitoring for problems, treatment of any problems and evaluation of any treatments to make sure the turf is healthy. **LM**

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