

## Safety first

In a down economy, clients cut back on many services, but they often don't cut back on anything related to health or safety. One landscape company learns how to capitalize on that fact.

**W**HEN CLIENTS BEGAN cutting back on their services from Fischer Environmental, owner Robert Kunst knew he had to act fast. He wanted to add a division that would bring value to his clients and would become recession-proof. Recognizing that even in hard times clients were still willing to spend money on services involving health and safety, the company turned to two of its local emergency care locations to find out what brings people to the doctor. The answer they received became the catalyst for a profitable new division: fire ants.

### THE ANTS COME MARCHING

Making their homes in the South and other areas that do not freeze in the winter, fire ants are red-colored insects that not only sting but deliver a type of venom into the skin. A fire ant bite can bring on swelling, itching, puss-filled blisters, and potential scabs. But even more serious, those who are allergic to the venom may have difficulty breathing or throat swelling. In Kunst's region of Mandeville, LA, he found it's a real concern for young children playing in the grass. It was clear his target market was expectant couples or young families with children. Mothers were particularly interested. Kunst immediately began marketing the service through his 11,000 existing customers, informing them the company was now offering an annual fire ant program. He had his salespeople call existing clients and pitch the new service. He also sent out mailers. Those simple efforts paid off.

In addition, word of mouth spread among neighbors and soon he was able to add new clients to the tune of

Fire ants are a health and safety issue for many Southern states.



1,280 fresh faces, primarily because they saw value in a service that would protect their children. Kunst says because he already had the equipment needed to disperse the product, the investment was minimal: product and labor. As a result, it's been an easy source of revenue for the business.

### OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The biggest hurdle Kunst faced in adding a fire ant division was from the same clientele that embraced it. "The moms, who are protective of their children and don't want them crawling around with fire ants, also worried about them crawling around in chemicals," says Kunst. "Fortunately, we had selected a product that was known for being a low toxin so we developed a sheet that showed why it was an excellent chemical. And we started addressing the issue with our sales calls to begin with, before it was even brought up as a concern."

What has also helped overcome any concerns is the company's involvement in the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program (PESP), which helps ensure human health and environmental safety in pest control. "We've been named under Gold tier membership, meaning as far as the EPA is concerned we've reached the highest level of ethics," says Kunst. "So now we can send our customers a direct link to the EPA website. That's been a big benefit. I would highly recommend other companies looking to enter or are already in the pesticide industry join PESP. It may seem contradictory, but sometimes running toward the regulators — instead of away from them — can be a benefit."

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY NAME:** Fischer Environmental Services

**HEADQUARTERS:** Mandeville, LA

**WHY FIRE ANTS?** It was a service customers could see value in, even during a recession.

**INITIAL INVESTMENT:** If you're already in the lawn care and pest control business, to get into the fire ant business costs almost nothing. You already have a fertilizer or seed spreader and that's all you really need to disperse the granules. The product is the only purchase.

**INVESTMENT RECOUP TIME:** Immediately, considering it's just product, labor and existing equipment.

**WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT:** Safety. That's really the bottom line. People want to protect their health. Mothers, in particular, want to protect their children.