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Circle No. 150 on Reader Inquiry Card

Growing up in an adolescent market

Trendsetting Southern California lags in lawn care.
A Riverside firm looked to the Midwest to tap this potentially lucrative market

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor



This narrow strip of turf in front of Bourbonnais' Riverside office is a portion of the commercial real estate he maintains.

While Midwest-based lawn care companies like ChemLawn perfected their treatments in the late '70s and early '80s, Larry Bourbonnais didn't know there was such a thing as liquid lawn care.

His Riverside, Calif.-based firm, the Larry Bourbonnais Company, had specialized in professional grounds management since 1973; but he was, in his terms, one of a horde of Californians who call themselves "gardeners."

Liquid fertilization? He'd never heard of it. Not until 1980.

While attending a Southern California Turfgrass show, he strolled to a booth featuring liquid fertilizer.

He'd stumbled on something that would forever change his business.

He went from shorts and no shirts to three-piece suits in less than four years (although he admits he's still a casual dresser).

"I asked the guy 'what is this?' and he said that liquid spraying was a big deal in the East."

The 37-year-old Bourbonnais was miffed. "I'd never heard of it. I'd been in business for almost eight years. Well, the guy said he'd ask a consultant in Chicago to get hold of me," he says.

Bourbonnais flew to Chicago, a first for the California boy, to meet with the consultant, Jim Mello, owner of Nice'N'Green lawn care service. He saw his first spray truck. Impressed yet undecided, Bourbonnais prayed for guidance and was answered.

Spray Green

With Mello's assistance, Spray Green was born in the spring of 1981. Bourbonnais took the Midwest route into



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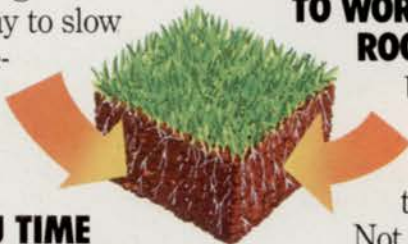
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lawn care. He and Spray Green said "hello" to the '80s.

The "Inland Empire," as Riverside, San Bernadino, and surrounding areas are called, was a market aching to be tapped.

Bourbonnais instituted a direct mail campaign. "Response was good," he says. Oddly, Spray Green trucks boosted interest in his business. People asked what they were.

"I'd never heard of it (liquid lawn care); they hadn't either. But they were fascinated by the truck," he says.

Curiosity and profits and two different things though. The locals didn't educate easily. "Most thought it was hydroseeding, some thought maybe we sprayed dye on lawns," he says with a straight face.

Today, his clients are a bit more sophisticated (as is Spray Green's application schedule), but education remains a top priority for Spray Green crews.

Here, Bourbonnais feels he can't compete with big lawn care companies. "Companies like ChemLawn and others have a lot more money than we do. They can spend the money to educate their customers," he says. "Sometimes I feel like the man from Mars when I talk to these people."

ChemLawn has moved into neighboring Ontario, he says, and is "expanding inward." He expects heavy competition from the Midwest-based giant in the near future.

A promising market

Larry Bourbonnais has the level personality needed to make it in the business world. A born-again Christian, he treats both employees and customers with respect, although he's the first to tell you he's short on positive feedback to his employees.

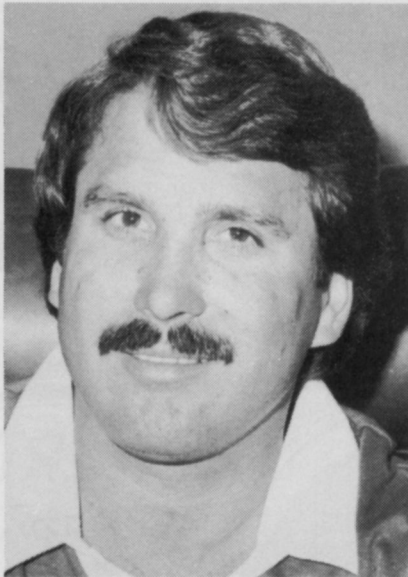
He will compromise. Example: Bourbonnais enjoys the comfort of an air-conditioned office. Company secretary Mary Steinkoenig, whose desk is located directly inside the front door, has an aversion to air-conditioning.

They reached an agreement. He leaves his office door almost closed (to trap the cool air) and she opens the front door (and keeps it open) to let in the sometimes smoggy Riverside air.

It's the same with the customer—a lot of give and take.

With a wink, Bourbonnais tells you it's a lot more give.

"We have the best reputation in town but people don't call me and say



Larry Bourbonnais, owner of The Larry Bourbonnais Company of Riverside, Calif.

'I want you to bid on my property' or 'I want to hire you.' I have to call on people, I have to knock on doors," he says.

The cold-call strategy, however cumbersome, has been a boon. He landed his two largest commercial accounts (Bournes Inc. and Bear Medical) with cold calls.

In Riverside, they're just two in a market that could make Bourbonnais a rich man. Development is everywhere, laying a foundation for a million-dollar lawn care business.

Bourbonnais hasn't reached that point. He's looking at a gross of \$250,000 this year between the landscaping and lawn care divisions. That figure is doubled from 1980. It's a long way from the \$150 (used to buy a mower and edger) he started with in 1973.

With his usual candor, Bourbonnais says his growth is slower than anticipated.

"Riverside is a good market, but it hasn't taken off like I thought it would. The problem is that the area is growing tremendously, but you don't have the big bucks like you do in Orange County," he says, noting that most living in Riverside have emigrated from affluent Orange County.

The reason is obvious, he says. You can buy the same home in Riverside for half of what you would pay in Orange.

Locals want to save money. And that means many skimp on other costs, including lawn care.

"Most don't know much about

lawn care around here," he says. "They don't know how to water their lawns correctly during our hot spells. We had 17 days this past June and July over 100 degrees. Our environment (semi-arid) makes it tough on lawns."

An image

In laid-back Southern California employing a "gardener" is a status symbol but Bourbonnais bristles when discussing their merits.

"I never saw a gardener until I became one, and now everybody's a so-called gardener. This is casual California and there's guys here working on lawns in shorts with no shirts. I think it's horrible," he says.

"We have lettered trucks and I make sure they're cleaned and polished. Our guys wear nice shirts and clean pants.

"I think it's important especially with the commercial end. You have a company doing a half a billion a year and they don't want to see a bunch of losers hanging around with no shirts and long hair," he says.

He considers his commercial clients cake. He does 99 percent of his business with the individual homeowner.

He's lukewarm about the prospect of adding more condos to his client list, but says "there's going to be a lot more added to this area."

Typically, the Spray Green liquid fertilization and weed control program, designed for the Inland area, is a seven-step procedure.

It starts in February (fertilizer, potassium, and crabgrass pre-emergent control) and ends in December with fertilizer and potassium application. In between are more fertilizer (timed- and instant-release in May, July, and August) and broadleaf weed control applications.

There are no slow periods in sunny Southern California.

His two divisions are complementary. When it's raining, the grass is growing and the need for lawn care is high.

When it's dry (the norm in Riverside), maintenance booms. Maintenance and grounds management account for 75 percent of the firm's revenues.

Candid Larry says he wouldn't want to be in any other business. "I'm into grass," he says. "Even when I started I just liked to be outside mowing lawns."

That passion has developed into a business he hopes will gross \$500,000 by 1989. **WT&T**

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

Solving problems

Bob Clouten is a custom applicator seeking new ideas to old problems. His North Dakota firm is servicing 2,000 customers a year and that number is increasing.

The morning shower is somewhat of a ritual for custom applicator Bob Clouten. He doesn't just sing in his shower. As the water pelts his body, Clouten mulls what he can do to make his business—Fertilawn, Inc.—stronger.

By 6 a.m., Clouten, at his shop/garage well ahead of Fertilawn's 25 peak-season employees, is already in motion.

"Good service will always sell," says Clouten. "It's the key, whether you're talking lawn work or industrial application. You need to be competitive, but service is what builds long-term business."

Clouten feels long hours, hard work, and a creative approach in the custom chemical application business still pay off.

Early last spring, for example, Clouten worked to earn a contract to control all vegetation at Basin Electric Power Cooperative substations. The new business calls for year-round bareground control at 36 electrical substations, some located 500 miles from Bismark, home base to both.

Hard work pays

Clouten, 33, started the business seven years ago in his father-in-law's garage. Selling door-to-door and by telephone, he custom-applied fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide to about 200 lawns.

Last season, his company tended 800 lawns. For many, Fertilawn pro-



Bob Clouten, owner and operator of Fertilawn Inc. in Bismark, N. D.

vides complete lawn care—from spring power raking through season-long fertilization and pest control to regular mowing. "All told, we serve about 2,000 customers a year," says Clouten.

'It makes me a better manager if I do some of the sales and application work myself.'

—Clouten

Fertilawn's services extend to other cities and towns in the region, including adjacent Mandan. The company holds its own against highly-promoted and franchised lawn care services.

The company's industrial division has enjoyed rapid growth.

"We work closely with manufacturers, conducting local experiments with new herbicides," he says. "We want to be known as the custom applicator with new ideas and products that solve problems."

Along with lawn and commercial chemical application, the crowded print on his business card also advertises: tree spraying; soil testing; ground sterilization; garden fertiliz-

ing; tissue analysis; lawn power raking, mowing and edging.

Lawn work at homes, businesses, schools and government institutions make up 75 percent of Fertilawn's business. Non-lawn industrial and commercial weed and grass control are increasing rapidly, he says.

The boom sprayer

Nineteen trucks equipped with solution tanks and a variety of application systems are used. For lawns, the company gains attention by using a small, hand-pushed boom sprayer with wheels. It's connected by a feeder hose to the service truck.

Fertilawn claims that greater fertilizer and chemical application accuracy are achieved with the boom, versus a single hand-held spray nozzle.

"People often call and ask if we're the lawn company with the boom sprayer," says Clouten.

Clean, attractive equipment and operators also are important, he says. "People comment about our clean trucks and uniformed men."

Homeowner invoicing also is innovative. Upon completion of an application, the Fertilawn operator leaves behind a handy pre-addressed envelope with the amount due included.

Clouten divides his time between selling, management, and application work. He often does all three the same day, changing from suit and tie to applicator uniform.



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Fertilawn's Brad Jossart uses the boom sprayer.

"It makes me a better manager if I do some of the sales and application work myself," he says. "I stay familiar with the problems. And for some of

our industrial work, I have the most experience." About 60 percent of his work time is spent on sales and management and 40 percent on applica-

tions. His usual work day during busy seasons is 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Business goals

Clooten credits his success to hard work, inventiveness, a positive attitude, and good employees.

Employee performance comparisons, meetings, individual conferences, job-related training courses, and incentive pay help maintain continuity.

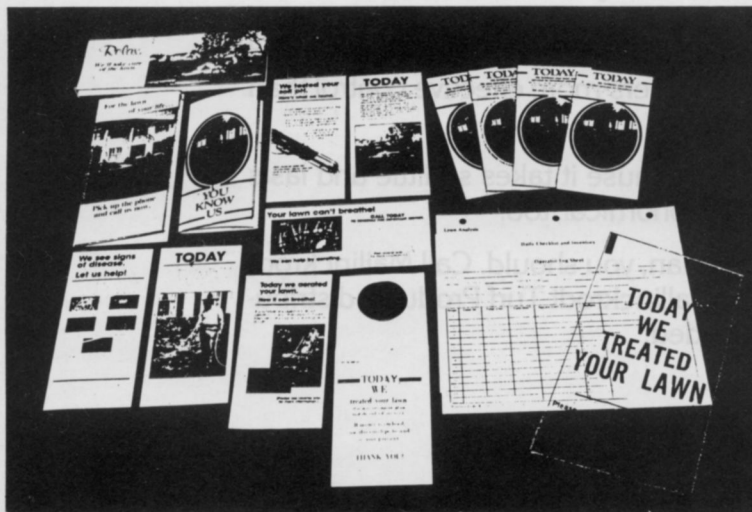
Fertilawn uses Du Pont Hyvar herbicide to achieve soil sterilization under hard-surfacing, such as in the case of parking lots. Karmex and Velpar herbicides are also applied at industrial and commercial locations.

"Setting business goals is vital," he says. "We look for referrals from present customers and a high rate of repeat business."

Can a custom application business such as Clooten's Fertilawn be sustained? "I'll make it go on," he answers. "I get up every morning with a positive attitude and make it grow."

"Taking my morning shower, I start thinking, 'What can I do today to make the business more productive than it was yesterday?'" **WT&T**

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LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT



Partners Mike Baty (left) and Tom Ayers of Chem-Spray, Stockton, Calif.

Thinking small

A Stockton, California, firm still services the first client it gained in 1975. Ten years growth hasn't led to a decline in attention to the little details.

Success as small custom applicators in the competitive weed control field was just a dream, back in 1975, for two young Californians.

Today the dream is a reality. And it's in Stockton, Calif., that Tom Ayers and Mike Baty first established and have now developed their quality-minded firm known as the Chem-Spray Co.

Chem-Spray targets its operations at the industrial customer. The firm controls weeds and grass on plant sites, fence lines, roadsides, parks, school sites, housing developments, curbs, ornamental plantings, and similar areas.

Much of its business is close by, in California's central valley but a good chunk is also as far away as Reno, Nev. (200 miles east), where a difference in climate means an extended treating season for Chem-Spray applicators.

Humble beginnings

The small firm began as a boot-strap

organization, with \$1,000 invested by each partner and a \$13,000 stake from a friend (which took five years to repay).

But Chem-Spray has grown, because Ayers and Baty know that chemical weed abatement is more economical than pulling weeds manually or controlling them mechanically.

"We had an idea," reflects Ayers. "It was to give a one-year guarantee with every job we do.

"We started out selling weed control—not weed treatments. We've developed satisfied customers by delivering performance. In the first year, we had only 50 customers and we grossed about \$30,000.

"Today we've got over 600 customers, many with multiple sites that need annual care. A few of these customers ask for help on good-sized areas—up to 100-150 acres, for example. But the average is quite small—a few acres or even less. And we still serve our very first customer, a custom-builder of looms," says Ayers.

The Chem-Spray partners recall their early days when they shared the use of a single spray rig they had built themselves.

Today their three rigs are operated by Chem-Spray employees, men who have joined the business to work on an incentive system, so that precise application results in few call-backs and added compensation for the employee. It's a system that's built loyalty and stimulated results.

Ayers and Baty handle sales, paperwork, and management. They get along without secretarial help. "We aim at maintaining quality at reasonable cost," say the partners.

They've used a wide array of herbicides, both residuals and contact materials, and have kept intricate records with various products and rates.

Computerization

But it was in 1983 that Chem-Spray took two big steps that have helped build business success at a faster rate than in earlier years.



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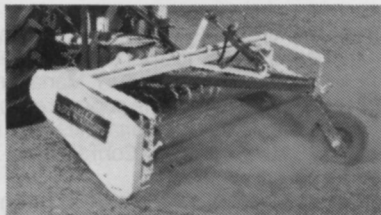
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The Tagalong sprayer, designed by Ayers and Baty, is used for fertilizer application on garden apartment turf.

First, the partners switched to a computer system to handle the records. "We use our computer to schedule work, to bill our customers, to keep records and file reports," says Ayers.

"It helps in a bid situation, giving us confidence we're working on an economic level. It tells us when to check up on specific jobs and when to follow-up on customers for another year's business."

Ayers notes the company has a computer program geared specifically toward small business needs in industrial weed control.

"It saves time every day. Initially, we indexed the computer to help evaluate our herbicide experience with various problem weeds and guide us on application rates. The idea was to point the way toward the right products in repeat applications."

Secondly, Ayers and Baty took a look at some early trials with Dupont's Oust herbicide.

Chem-Spray reports this new herbicide has been effective in controlling a very wide range of tough weeds.

In addition, the few "escape weeds" from Oust are easily controlled. Says Baty: "With Oust, you also get a much broader application window than with the earlier residuals. We treat in California from October to March, and we've found that by working with Oust, we've reduced our call-backs for follow-up contact treatments by well over half."

Innovation

Chem-Spray has developed specialized equipment for applying

herbicides and also fertilizers (a minor part of their business).

A "Tagalong" spray rig, for example, can be hooked up with a three-wheeled Honda or with a four-wheel pickup.

The spray boom is controlled by the light switch on the Honda. The vehicles are very maneuverable, and hence they're ideal for tight turns and small jobs.

Bare-ground weed and grass control is a standard customer expectation on most Chem-Spray jobs.

In the West, local lawmakers consistently set up tight specifications on weed growth to minimize or avoid fire hazards in the summer, when vegetation dries up on unirrigated land. So the "clean look" in a vacant yard or open-air storage facility means no heavy vegetation stands during the winter growing season.

One product

It's problem species like ryegrass and Russian thistle that have often triggered two or more chemical treatments in years past. One herbicide spray took care of the winter weeds; another, the summer species.

"Now, we can get away from that routine," Baty says.

"We've been able to use Oust at a number of different rates, on a single site, depending on what we have to control. We always survey our new sites before we start with any weed control program. Then we set up the treatment on our computer and our team follows through. We've never stopped thinking small. It's helped us grow," says Baty.

WT&T