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LIQUI-LAWN KEEPS ROLLING

Like the neighboring mountains near Lewiston, Idaho, Liqui-Lawn's profit line is rock-like. It's also painted black.

The banks of the Snake River lie just across the street and as the river rolls, so does Duane Saxton's Liqui-Lawn operation.

"Phenomenal" growth has been followed by some "mediocre" growth years of 20 to 30 percent for the Lewiston, Idaho, lawn care operator.

He combines a five-year-old chemical lawn care business with the company foundation—a pest control operation dating to 1947.

"Pest control is a far slower growth-type business. Lawn care has proven to be the fast-growth industry," says Saxton.

The pest control operation accounts for two-thirds of company revenues, he notes, but that figure is shrinking.

He entered the lawn care industry through granular application then switched to chemicals three years ago. In wide-open Lewiston, where the average lawn runs 7,000 sq. ft., the switch to efficient chemical applications has worked.

Saxton's three state-licensed applicators roam the Snake and Salmon River Valleys around Lewiston and neighboring Clarkston, Wash., where some homes feature 30,000 sq. ft. of turf. (Explorers Lewis and Clark are said to have set up camp in the area during their excursions to the Pacific Northwest in the late 1700s and early 1800s.)

The Liqui-Lawn lawn care program consists of five applications every 6-8 weeks, beginning in mid-March. Special care is given to billbug control and to decreasing the soil's alkalinity to a more neutral 6.5 or 7 with a granular sulfur application in the fall.

Liqui-Lawn was the first chemical lawn care company in the area and remains the largest. Two competitors



Owner Duane Saxton (right) and general manager Dennis Spickler have seen five-year-old Liqui-Lawn grow at least 20 percent each year.

have sprung up but neither poses a threat, says Saxton.

No maintenance for him

While Saxton isn't feeling much competition in chemical application, he says he would feel it in the maintenance end. That's why he stays away.

"We've decided not to get into maintenance because it's hard to compete with the Sunday guy with one truck and a low overhead," he notes.

Instead, he looks to other areas for growth and expansion. One such area is Walla Walla, Wash., some 70 miles to the west. (One wry Lewistonian noted the area's founding fathers liked the area so much they decided to name the town twice.)

Liqui-Lawn has an office there, run by general manager Dennis Spickler, that has demonstrated quiet growth in its two years.

Within a 15-mile radius of the Lewiston and Walla Walla offices, there are 100,000 people. That's more than enough for Saxton and his 10 year-round employees.

"The Lewiston area is a good market because more people are increasing their recreational expenditure levels which means they are hiring more services, including lawn care," says Saxton.

One problem is a potential lack of

water. The area receives just a scant 13 inches of rain a year. During an abnormally dry year, homeowners reduce lawn watering, making Liqui-Lawn's job no easier.

In some cases, Clarkston residents flat-out refuse to water lawns because of high water rates, says Saxton.

Even higher rates

While residents wrestle with high water rates, Saxton worries about even higher rates—his insurance premiums, which have risen 746 percent in two years.

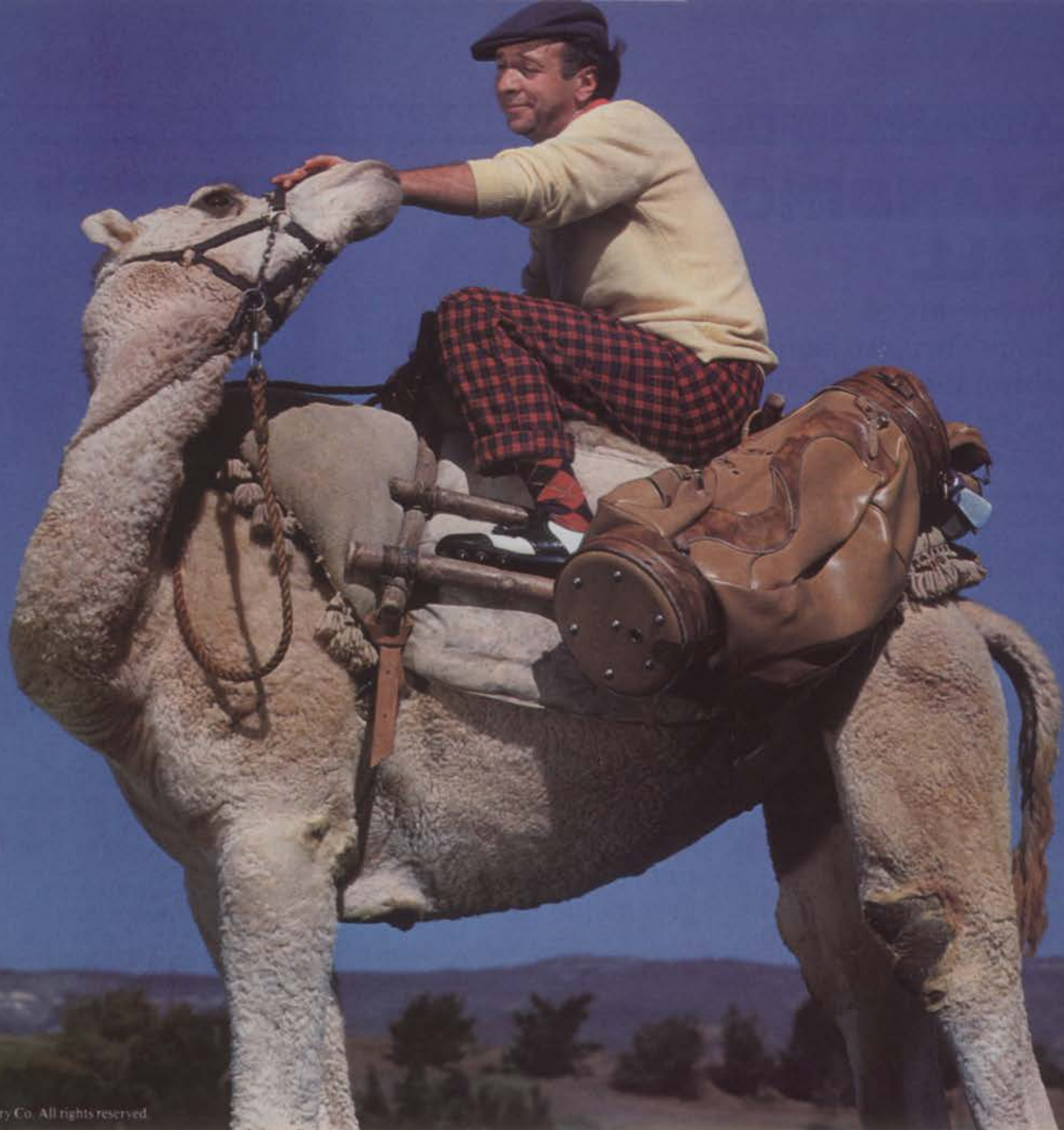
"One company would have handled the whole thing (pest control and lawn care) but they required a \$50,000 premium," says Saxton.

Instead Saxton was fortunate enough to find a company that requires just a 40 percent down payment. He finances the remainder on a monthly basis.

Saxton has been a member of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America since 1981. He's also a member of the National Pest Control Association.

"I believe you have to stay ahead of the people who want to see us doing something else for a living," he says. **WT&T**

—Ken Kuhajda



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STANDING TALL

The owners of Chem-Turf also stand behind their work and behind their customers. That's unique.

The introduction of George Meeley and Frank "Buzz" Cowdery to the chemical lawn care business was, in many ways, typical of the entrepreneurs in this still-young industry.

Back in Palatine, Ill., Cowdery saw a ChemLawn truck making its rounds. "To make a long story short," related Meeley, "we bought a ChemLawn truck. When we started, all I knew was that when you put sod in, it went green-side up."

Chem-Turf of Anaheim, Calif., has come a long way. After two years of 77-hour work weeks that resulted in gradual growth, the company bought out three smaller companies during the next four years.

Part of the reason for Chem-Turf's success has been its dedication to customers.

"If anything makes us unique," says Meeley, "it's that we stand behind what we do, and we even stand behind what our customer does or doesn't do to the lawn."

The California market, about a decade younger than the industry itself, is not all that competitive, but much more problematic than other markets back east.

For instance, housing is so expensive (\$125,000 average, third in the nation) that both husband and wife must work. Sure, free time is more valuable, making a lawn care sale easier. But these families usually have a "gardener" to do most of the yard work. And, with nobody home during regular working hours, it's virtually impossible to make weekday sales.

Family relocations also cause a big turnover.

"More than half of our cancellations are from customers moving," says Meeley. "I think it's a misdemeanor for anyone to live in



Bill Schaeck, former owner of one of the smaller companies bought out by Chem-Turf, now works for Chem-Turf.



Chem-Turf's George Meeley: "We'll do virtually anything to make a customer happy—even if he's dead wrong."

'When we started, all I knew was that when you put sod in, it went green-side up.'

—George Meeley, Chem-Turf
Anaheim, Calif.

one house for two years and a felony for living in one place four years."

No work ethic

There are other problems, one of which is personnel. Chem-Turf had no employee turnover for three years, but there has been a rash since.

"It's almost impossible to find good people," says Meeley, a native of Philadelphia. "There's something back east called a work ethic. It hasn't spread this far west yet."

Top weed problems are kikuygrass and crabgrass, which thrive because of what Meeley calls the "Santa Ana condition." A pressure front develops over the desert around Christmas. With low soil temperatures, crabgrass "germinates whenever it pleases." And "you can almost rest assured that by May or June, you'll get a second generation." Meeley says he uses Betasan, but gets barely satisfactory results.

Bug problems are confined to occasional grub breakouts, but even those are complicated by the state of California, which does not allow Oftanol applications. "We use Proxol, irrigate five times a day, and then we pray," says Meeley.

Chem-Turf uses benomyl on summer fusarium, and extra nitrogen helps prevent rust in cool weather.

The owner of one of the smaller companies bought out by Chem-Turf, Bill Schaeck of Chem-Green, now works for Meeley and Cowdery. Schaeck started an aeration service earlier this year.

"Our first year was phenomenal," Schaeck claims. "We aerated more than 500,000 sq. ft. in April, May, June, and July. It was no more than putting out a letter and—my God—they just bombarded us. They came out of the woodwork."

This year, one employee and one Ryan Lawnaire IV handled all the work, but Chem-Turf might be forced into expansion soon.

Health problems have plagued the owners, but they've still grown at a 20 percent clip. Meeley had polio as a child. Though he was walking lawns two years ago, he has since kept pretty much behind the desk. Cowdery, too, has spent his share of time in the hospital recently.

"If we can keep our growth at 20 percent, we'll be in good shape in a couple of years," Meeley concludes.

—Jerry Roche

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LOCATING THE CUSTOMER

In order to grow efficiently, lawn care operators must determine those most likely to seek lawn care services. Traditional methods of pinpointing potential customers are undergoing some variations.

by Rudd McGary and Ed Wandtke

One of the pressing questions asked by lawn care operators is: "Who are my potential customers?"

One tool used to measure the marketing effectiveness of lawn care companies, large or small, is their answer to that question.

Let's discuss some methods of determining how to profile your potential lawn care customers. They may be slightly different from those you are now using.

Several key points should be used to profile customers. They can be applied universally.

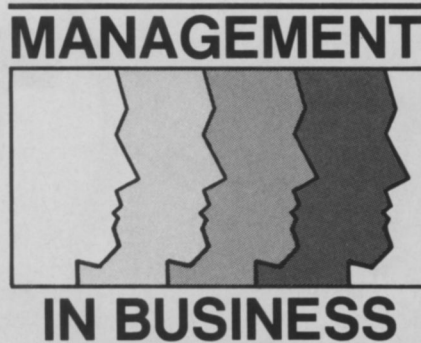
1. The traditional method of drawing a basic profile is through income. The rule of thumb: a person making \$25,000 is considered a potential customer. The figure has dropped to \$20,000 in recent years.

This is not a good measurement to use because \$25,000 isn't a big salary in many eastern states. It may be a comfortable middle-range salary in other areas of the country.

Don't use a constant, such as simple income.

Generally we like to look at the top 40 to 50 percent of the incomes in the area, not at a specific income figure.

This helps eliminate any regional



Two-income families are usually better potential customers than single-income families.

income differences.

2. House value is also a key. Examine what percentile of the population falls into which house value. Don't consider an absolute dollar figure.

If you have someone whose income is in the 30th percentile and whose house is in the 30th percentile of your geographical area, you have a strong potential customer.

Generally we don't like to go much below the 40th percentile on house value for ranking potential customers.

3. The median age of the customer also has a bearing on the way people buy. Often the lawn care customer is 30 or older.

Median age depends a great deal on geographical area.

4. Two-income families are usually better potential customers than single-income families. Busy working people usually like outside services to

perform a variety of jobs around the home.

A word of caution: you must correlate the income percentile to the two-income statistic to make this work.

For example, if there are two wage earners in the home and they are in the lower 40 percent of income in your area, they aren't good potential customers.

5. Lawn size generally should be above 5,000 sq. ft. (If you have a "mini" price below this you can also do very well if your customers are grouped near each other.)

In certain parts of the country, lawn size is smaller, usually in older cities.

6. Some simple parameters to consider: are there single-family dwelling units in the area; do they feature some sort of lawn; are they in areas that you can reach cost-efficiently?

Where do you find these facts?

The U.S. government has printed a lot of information on demographics. In addition, you should examine marketing research companies and mailing houses. Many contain current demographic information.

The keys are to determine who your customers can be, to make sure your information is accurate, and then to assemble a marketing plan that is both professional and unique.

Whether you choose direct mail, telemarketing, electronic media, print media, referral systems, bonus systems, or a combination, you must have the correct information on your target.

Without this you may grow, and grow well—but you won't know why. With it you can control your marketing costs, track your progress, and be able to adjust your marketing plan from year to year.

Only companies that pay attention to detail are going to grow as the competition and government regulation become more complex.

WT&T

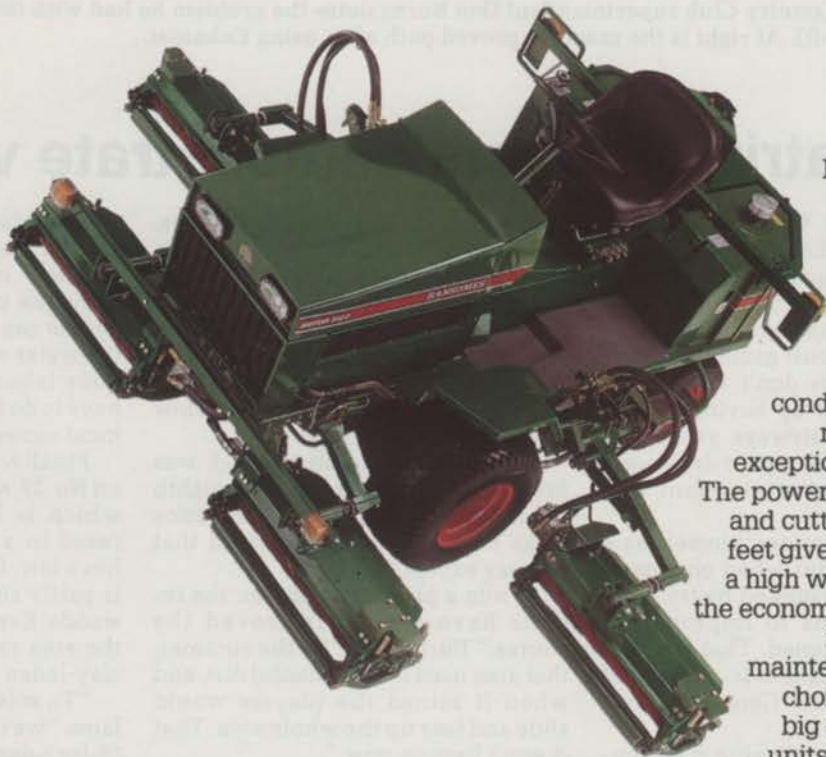


Wandtke and McGary are senior consultants with All-Green Management Associates in Columbus, Ohio. Dr. McGary focuses on marketing and management issues. Wandtke focuses on operations and financial questions.



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Biltmore Forest Country Club superintendent Don Burns notes the problem he had with the cart path on the number 8 hole (left). At right is the much-improved path after using Enkamat.

Geomatrix products demonstrate versatility

Biltmore Forest Country Club in Asheville, N.C., has shown a drastic improvement in quality since experimenting with some technologically advanced materials several years ago.

"Golf is a difficult game to master, and our members don't want to be further frustrated by having to deal with worn-out fairways and soggy areas that result from poor drainage," says Biltmore superintendent Don Burns.

Burns characterizes himself as a "traditionalist." But when one member of the club suggested he try more modern solutions to improve the course, Burns listened. That member was Palmer L. Skoglund Jr., director of BASF Corporation's Geomatrix Systems.

The products Skoglund recommended included Enkamat, a soil-reinforcement matting; Enkadrain, which is used to keep moisture away from subsurface walls; and Enkadrain H, a drain matting that can be applied to soggy areas to drain off excess water.

"I was skeptical about these products at first," Burns admits. "But now you can count me as a believer."

One of the first problems club management faced was a wet, damp pro shop basement. When a new patio was added, the foundation was dug up and Enkadrain was installed. That solved the problem and allowed a previously unusable part of the shop to become a

shoe shine and golf club storage area.

Enkadrain is a matting designed to relieve hydrostatic pressure, one of the primary causes of basement water problems. Placed against foundation walls with the filter facing away from the structure, Enkadrain blocks out sediment and channels water flow down to a drainage pipe.

Enkamat, on the other hand, was first used on the fairway of the eighth hole. Since then, no maintenance tasks have been performed on that fairway except aeration.

"From a player standpoint, the results have greatly improved the course," Burns says. "In the summer, that area used to turn to solid dirt, and when it rained the players would slide and tear up the whole area. That doesn't happen now."

He even used the black nylon material—which absorbs heat—on top of the ground as a heat sink to germinate grass on the banks of a pond at the third green. Grass seed can be sprinkled on top of it, and it grows through the mesh. The procedure is especially effective during heavy spring rains when it's difficult to get grass to germinate. Foot traffic that would normally destroy the grass has no impact on the geomatrix material, which protects and supports young grass plants.

Enkamat has also helped Burns deal with erosion problems. It has been installed on steep banks around the practice tee, preventing wash-

And it's also been used on banks along a creek that runs across the course.

"Now we have nice, even banks along the creek and the maintenance people can go right up to the edge of the water with mowers. It's a tremendous labor-saver because we don't have to do the whole area with a small hand mower," Burns claims.

Finally, a serious drainage problem on No. 17 was solved with Enkadrain, which is Enkamat completely encased in a filter fabric. The fairway has a low, flat area near the creek that is partly shaded by 50-foot-tall hardwoods. Even during long, dry periods the area remained soaking wet. And clay-laden soil clogged drains.

"To solve the problem," Burns relates, "we cut a series of 250-foot long, 18-inch deep, 6-inch wide ditches and put down plastic pipe with holes in it on top of a layer of gravel. We covered the pipe with a filter fabric to keep the pipes from getting clogged."

"We put additional gravel on the pipes and then inserted Enkadrain H. It blocks all the soil and clay and prevents them from getting into the drainage system."

To fill the trenches, a thin layer of soil was placed on the Enkadrain H and the original sod was replaced.

Burns and others foresee increasing use of geomatrix products because they're lightweight, easy to handle, and can be put down quickly with a minimal disruption of play. **WT&T**