

Combined TruGreen/ChemLawn operations are on fast track

UPDATE!

President Don Karnes and a lean management team steers the industry leader toward support of branch operations and field specialists.

■ Elvis, by most accounts, is dead.

Elaborate displays of flowers, most of them plastic, line the walkways at Graceland. They mark yet another anniversary of his untimely departure. The whispering and, on this steamy August morning, perspiring faithful shuffle single-file by his final resting place. Two days and 16 years ago, Elvis died. We think.

Drive 20 minutes along a freeway to east Memphis, Tenn., and enter a primly landscaped office park containing the ServiceMaster Consumer Services (SMCS) building. There are two things of note about this building that looks suspiciously like a glass-and-steel cracker box stood on end.

Number one: five SMCS businesses doing more than \$1 billion in sales in 1993 operate out of this single building.

Number two: There have been no Elvis sightings, not a single one, in the vicinity of the SMCS building. Ever.

But, a few short years ago, it seemed just as unlikely that TruGreen would buy and merge with its longtime nemesis ChemLawn. Yet it did in May, 1992.

And, grins Don Karnes who has yet to make a pilgrimage to Graceland, "lawn care is fun again."



'As I recall, we haven't sprayed one lawn out of our corporate office this year.'

—Don Karnes

Nothing fancy—Karnes is president of TruGreen/ChemLawn. His office is more than *just* an office, but not a whole lot more. Comfortable. Functional. A few photographs. Nice view of a parking lot. That's fine with him, says Karnes, a slender man, medium height, his brown hair flecked with gray.

After all, the real action is taking place on the approximately 1.2 million lawns and landscapes that TruGreen/ChemLawn specialists serviced in 1993.

"Our front-line people, that's where the rubber meets the road. And that's where we have to take care of our busi-

ness," he insists.

"As I recall, we haven't sprayed one lawn out of our corporate office yet this year. Not one. I don't think we will either."

(The idea that the business of lawn care begins on each single lawn isn't something that just popped into Karnes' head. He started his own career on the business end of a spray wand. He opened TruGreen's Grand Haven, Mich., office in 1979. Every lawn he sold that summer, he also got to spray.)

Smiles spread easily over Karnes'

lean, tan face these days.

Made in heaven?—The marriage of longtime business rivals TruGreen and ChemLawn—of which he had more than a passing involvement—is off to a good start. Made in heaven? Not even he will go that far. TG/CL, after all, had to resolve 121 franchise issues in the weeks and months following the acquisition. All but a few are now wrapped up, he maintains.

Considering that \$90-million-in-sales TruGreen gobbled up \$300-million-in-sales ChemLawn, most industry observers, even competitors, acknowledge that Karnes and his staff have a firm hand on the reins and are moving TG/CL forward. Pronto.

Indeed, the combination of TruGreen and ChemLawn looks more and more like a genuine fit. Specifically, ChemLawn offers its wealth of operational and technical expertise. TruGreen adds its considerable marketing know-how.

TG/CL sales will approach and maybe exceed \$430 million in 1993, making it about nine times larger than the next largest lawn care company in the United States. More tellingly, ChemLawn, now part of a bigger whole, is making money again.



Ron Anderegg started with TruGreen in '79



Dave Slott heads West Division

"This year we're exceeding any expectations our parent company (ServiceMaster) had," says Karnes. "We've had double-digit growth. Last year we made a profit. And we'll certainly make a profit this year."

(It's been since 1988 that the words profit and ChemLawn, then owned by EcoLab, appeared in the same sentence.)

Specialists respond—Karnes says the most fundamental reason why TG/CL exceeded 1993 sales and profit goals has been the on-going reinvigoration of its branches and their teams of lawn specialists. Productivity jumped 25 percent after specialists were freed of sales responsibilities and offered a new incentive package, claims Karnes.

The company's direction, he says, couldn't be clearer.

If you're on TG/CL's team, you're either improving clients' properties, or you're making it easier for specialists to deliver these services.

"The sole purpose of all of our staff people is to support the field effort. I don't want anyone walking around arrogant or cocky and thinking, well, I'm here in corporate, and they're down there in the field. That's just not going to happen," says Karnes.

TG/CL emphasized this starting the 1993 season by shaving \$10 million from its corporate overhead.

Working with Karnes in operations are Counsel Bob von Gruben and Government Affairs Director Norman Goldenberg and Finance V.P. Michael Cook. Working with Karnes in Operations and heading up the East and West divisions respectively, are Ron Anderegg and David Slott. They each oversee six of the company's 12 regions. TruGreen has been the only job many of TG/CL's managers have ever had including Slott who started his career with TG/CL as a sales person in Kalamazoo, MI. Anderegg, a former school teacher, started



CL's former research center in Delaware, Ohio, continues to offer technical/research support for TruGreen/ChemLawn.

with TG in 1979, also as a sales person, and admits he has likely held every management post there is at TruGreen.

"From the original team we put together last May 1992, all of those regional people are still there," says Karnes. "That's been one of the keys in providing a consistent direction for the employees."

Branch managers—When TruGreen acquired ChemLawn in May 1992, the company found itself with 204 locations. By mid-August 1992 they numbered 168. Consolidation occurred in markets where both TG and CL had had competing branches, explains Karnes.

"We put the business back into the hands of our branch managers. They run their own businesses, and the average branch size is about \$2.5 million," explains Karnes. "We don't have a lot of people sticking their noses into our branches' business anymore."

TG/CL's president is openly optimistic about the company's future as the lawn care industry leader.

"I believe that more and more people have less and less time to do any of their home services, and they'll always be looking for a professional company to come in and provide these services," he says.

New trucks—To improve service delivery even more, Karnes says, TG/CL has already begun replacing its tanker fleet with smaller, more fuel-efficient diesel trucks. They're quite a departure for either of the former companies. They have enclosed tanks and hoses; they look a little like, and are smaller than, beverage trucks. The company's fleet of 3,500 production vehicles should be replaced over the next 24 months.

"We had some specialists crawl all over the truck, and we asked them about what's good and what's bad with it. It's amazing what you find out when you ask the person who actually uses the equipment," says Karnes. "And these trucks certainly look a little more friendly in the neighborhood."

Also, by the start of the 1994 season, some TG/CL specialists are likely to be spooling out and using a new dual-hose system with on-command herbicides for localized treatments.

"We're going to continue to be aggressive in the marketplace," adds Karnes. "But one thing we have to do for sure is to make sure we take care of our core business, and that's lawn and tree and shrub."

—Ron Hall

Losing the focus of lawn care sales

by Ed Wandtke

■ The principal concern of many lawn care companies is reacting quickly to ever-changing customer demands. Owners of lawn care companies comment to me:

● "Customers keep changing their minds about what they want."

● "Customers aren't as loyal as they

used to be."

● "Customers request more service than ever before."

Customers are not your enemies, but you constantly complain about them.

This adversarial attitude becomes apparent to customers when they ask a technician a few questions and receive nothing but a one-word answer. And this guarantees one thing: the company

will lose.

The opportunity for dissatisfaction starts at the time the customer becomes a customer. The lawn care company does not sell the customer; instead, the customer places an order for lawn care services.

Listening to the customer—Sales training should focus on teaching a salesperson to listen and learn what a prospect

expects to purchase. I have found that only a few lawn care salespersons really know what customers want or expect.

Even the lawn analysis form provides customers with only technical information (weeds found, diseases present, grass types). The technician then tells the customer how the lawn care program will solve the problems identified in the analysis. But taking additional time to ask questions about what the customer expects is just not being done. Instead, because the customer asks how much the service will cost, the salesperson assumes that price is the major concern.

Learning what customers expect is critical. Only when you ask a customer, "What do you want your lawn to look like?" will you learn what it will take to satisfy the customer.

Too many technicians complain that sales are difficult to obtain, and that customers are leaving every year. If the technician or salesperson routinely asks customers what they expect when making the estimate, you would not have to worry about routes shrinking during a season.

High-tech sales—Many lawn care companies are finding telemarketing to be a cost-effective method of reaching more prospects. Telemarketers, however, are discovering that many individuals find it easier to say "yes" to a phone call than taking the time to decide what the caller is contacting them about. You must make certain that—when you meet with the prospect—you not only make the sale, but find out what the customer expects his or

her lawn to look like.

Hands-on—The most profitable and successful companies tend to service the customer the same way they operate their businesses—hands on. I believe there is no better way to service the customer than seeing customers and truly listening to them.

Companies that operate like this have three things in common: high employee morale, high profitability and excellent customer retention.

You might say, "It takes too much time to deliver all of that personal attention customers expect." But I say: spend time now working with the customer and the number of renewals will be surprisingly high. Yes, customers will pay for high quality service.

A new approach—You cannot change your sales approach overnight. Technical aspects have probably been the principal focus of your sales training. This was necessary to help you learn what products control a particular turf problem. But recognizing that a lawn has henbit, plantain, spurge or oxalis doesn't mean much to customers. You need to tell them that you can control or eliminate these weeds.

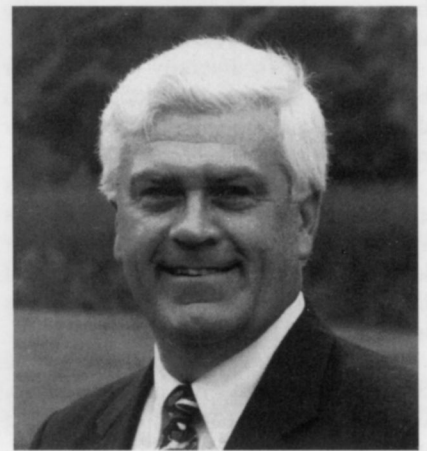
Refocus your sales pitch to emphasize what you can and cannot do. This approach is more easily understood by the customer, but it will take a great deal of effort.

Salespeople and technicians usually say a new approach to sales will not work. Most of them simply do not want to change. They find that asking a customer

what they expect and then listening to their response is a real pain.

The results—The one surefire way to success is to find out what the customer expects. Service each customer like he or she is your only customer. Remember, there is always a price for everything worth having. Only by knowing what a customer wants or expects will your company be able to deliver that level of service.

Try this new approach. You will have to train everyone to ask customers what they expect, and then decide if you can deliver it. Choosing your customers this way may surprise you in the years to come. But customer retention will increase and, along with it, your company's profitability.



—Ed Wandtke is a principle in Wandtke & Associates, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231; (800) 966-3546.

Labor problems are cropping up all over, LCOs say in surveys

Most eligible labor lacks trainability, commitment, work ethic, according to our survey.

■ Steve Bailey, owner of Grassroots Lawn & Irrigation, knows he's a lucky guy.

He says he usually doesn't have much trouble finding good seasonal help because his business is based in Upper Arlington, Ohio, just blocks from

The Ohio State University and its 50,000-plus students.

"The last two or three years, it's worked out pretty good for us," says Bailey. "We had a crew that started with us when they were sophomores. They were all good friends and a good group of guys. If one of them couldn't work, then others could."

But Bailey acknowledges that a business can only grow so large, relying so heavily on part-time help.

"I'm in kind of an in-between situation," he admits. "I'd like have to have

some more people to count on all year, but I have a hard time paying them competitive wages. Providing health care benefits is pretty expensive, too."

To be able to afford more full-time help, Bailey believes he has keep building his company and expanding its service offerings.

His plight isn't uncommon in the green industry where much of the work is seasonal, and entry-level employees receive anywhere from minimum wage to \$8-\$10/hour, depending on regional

employment markets. Both factors contribute to high employee turnover. It's one of professional lawn care's biggest headaches, business owners said over and over again, according to LM's "State of the Lawn Care Industry" survey.

Keeping people—Lou Wierichs of Pro-X Systems in Appleton, Wis., credits a mower service he added to his company several years ago for helping, somewhat, to keep key employees year-round. For a fee, Pro-X will retrieve a customer's lawn mower, tune up, and sharpen the blade. Pro-X promotes this service during the off-season.

But not all new services accomplish this. For instance, Wierichs says Pro-X is getting out of snow removal, partly because nobody in the company really wanted to do it anyway.

"You want to diversify to keep your business growing, but you don't want to diversify so far that you're not doing your main business extremely well."

Sudden and unexpected labor problems are probably the hardest to deal with, says Wierichs who, when a key office worker left, found himself behind the keyboard of the company computer. "It kind of left us in the lurch," says Wierichs.

No commitment—Most LCOs like Scott Sallee of Scott's K-Lawn in Durango, Col., decry the lack of commitment among younger employees.

"It's not so hard to find people, but it's hard to keep them," Sallee says. "There are so many other things to do around here; they all want to go mountain biking or kayaking or one thing or another. We try

to pay more and give bonuses, but it doesn't seem to help much.

"I went through 14 people this year to fill a mowing crew of four. Then, when customers see new people out there mowing every time, they start to get suspect."

Tim Pickering of IPC Lawn Service, Raytown, Mo. agrees.

"There seems to be a real lack of people taking pride in their work and committing to their job, especially the young guys who are most able to do this kind of work," Pickering says. "The biggest reason I haven't grown faster is the employee issue. We're to the point where we need 10 or 12 men we can count on, and we've got six."

Pickering may hire legal aliens—Mexicans—through an employment service in Texas. The service, Pickering says, guarantees the labor.

Paul Cronin of Cronin Landscaping in Northampton, Mass. says school-age kids are not an option in his market.

"I can get high school kids to work, but they can only work a certain amount of hours—after school and summers," Cronin says. "You can't get them to work every day and not the whole summer. When you *do* get them, they don't show up. The work ethic isn't there.

"I don't know why this generation doesn't want to work; when I was a kid, I was always working."

Defining services—Michael Zeller of Zeller Landscape & Tree Care in Lykens, Pa. has had to formulate his business around a lack of employees.

"I can't grow in the directions I want because the people aren't available,"

Zeller says. "So I try to get away from labor-intensive work. I'm into roadside and utility brush control, IPM, pest control, turf management, environmental testing. They're labor-intensive, but they're technical.

"NAFTA will mess things up big, too, because they'll take the factory jobs and ship them out, and all that'll be left is basically unskilled labor."

David Clark of Clark's Landscaping in Telford, Pa. has another solution to the labor problems especially evident in the East.

"We can't compete against bigger companies," Clark admits. "They're taking ethnic labor and billing at \$12-15/hour and we have to bill at \$20-25/hour. Our \$8-10/hour pay is fair, plus we're paying full benefits. So we're getting commercial jobs like retirement communities where customers want...people they can speak to...on their property."

Robert Welker of Lawn Manicare in St. Louis has had "big time" employee theft and attitude problems this summer, even though he has but three employees.

He says everything's back to normal now. And even though problems will continue to crop up, Welker sees a stronger green industry in the future.

"Manufacturers will be going abroad for cheaper labor," Welker notes, "so the remaining service industries will be strong, especially since they use both men and women in the workforce."

—Ron Hall, Jerry Roche, Terry McIver

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LM GRAPEVINE

Michigan State University professor **Dr. Joe Vargas** has released the new, second edition of "Management of Turfgrass Diseases" through Lewis Publishers. A caller to **LM** said it was full of excellent photos and charts, a valuable reference as a field guide or textbook. "It reads the way Joe talks," the caller—who didn't want his name published—said. The book is available by calling Lewis Publishers at (800) 272-7737. Cost is \$59.95.

The move to grass is back in the great Midwest. Word comes that the Kansas City Royals will install natural grass, as will the University of Missouri. The Royals' field—under the direction of **Chip Toma**—will be in place by the start of the 1995 season. Meanwhile, the Missouri effort will be led by **Dr. Dave Minner**, who is on the university's turfgrass staff and is an active member of the Sports Turf Managers Association. The MU change was precipitated by the school's alumni, who voted for natural grass by a margin of 26-1. We received a copy of the *Missouri Alumnus*, which conducted the fax poll, from former **LM** managing editor **Heide Aungst**. Athletic director **Dan Devine** says the university will install grass—either over, or in place of, the existing Omniture—in time for the 1995 season. The move will give Mizzou the only natural grass playing surface in the Big Eight Conference.

While Dr. Vargas has already come out with a new version of his turf text, another well-known turf personality is still working on his. **Dr. Al Turgeon** of Penn State University is working on the Fourth Edition of "Turfgrass Management," due to be released in middle to late 1995. "The second and third editions involved relatively light revisions; however, the fourth edition will be extensively modified and reorganized," he tells **LM**. The current edition is available through Advanstar Marketing Services, phone number (216) 826-2839.

TruGreen/ChemLawn could begin offering lawn care franchises within a year or two, says President **Don Karnes**. "There are an awful lot of lawns out there in smaller communities," he told **LM** this past August. "We'd love to have franchises in them."

Larry Holkenborg Nursery, Sandusky, Ohio, sent six employees to "A Gift to the American People" at Arlington National Cemetery Oct. 16, says **LM** senior editor **Ron Hall**, who visited the nursery while working on an article. In all, about 250 volunteer tree care professionals—under the auspices of the National Arborists Association—pruned, fertilized and cabled trees in the cemetery. Holkenborg is an NAA past president.

Dr. Jim Watson has been honored by his former employer, The Toro Company, which will underwrite the Dr. James R. Watson Fellowships. The Minneapolis-based equipment manufacturer has agreed to a minimum of \$100,000 in support for the GCSAA scholarships over the next four years. Dr. Watson, now in semi-retirement, has been in the turf industry for 40 years. He is the mentor of a vast number of professional turfgrass managers, a longtime friend of the **LM** editorial staff, and perhaps the most respected person in the turf industry. Way to go, Dr. Jim!

Heated ballfields? Now we've heard everything. According to a press release received in the **LM** offices, the next trend in sand-based athletic fields is heating the fields. So says **Chuck Dixon**, president of technical operations for Turf Diagnostics & Design, Olathe, Kans. "Heating fields will make them safer during the periods that the field would normally be frozen," Dixon says. "It will also increase the performance of the surface by providing better footing for athletes."

READERS! Got an item for "LM Grapevine?" Call us at (216) 826-2830 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m., Eastern Time.

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GOLF 'SCAPING

Buying specialized equipment

Here are some concepts to consider when hunting for that 'dream machine' that does exactly what you want it to do.

by Steve and Suz Trusty

■ As turf care has become more exacting, the equipment used has become increasingly specialized. To intelligently purchase a piece of specialized equipment, you must consider function, productivity, durability, minimal downtime, and innovation.

Specialized equipment must be innovative enough to invoke the "oh yeah" response—as in, "Oh, yeah, that's what I was looking for" or "Oh, yeah, that's how to tackle this problem."

It must perform a certain function or set of functions more effectively than cur-

rently-available equipment.

It must increase productivity by making turf care easier, faster, more efficient, less costly—or any combination of these benefits.

It must be durable, able to hold up during the kind of use for which it was designed even when operated under the worst possible circumstances.

It must have minimal downtime.

Problem-solvers—A major attribute of specialized equipment is its ability to solve an existing problem.

A persistent problem for golf course superintendents is turf wear and soil compaction caused by regular mowing on greens. A solution: the cutting unit design for a triplex that is offset to the left, allowing the operator to reverse the clean-up cut. By mowing in the opposite direction from the previous cutting pattern on the green, the tires travel across a different area, minimizing turf wear and ground compaction.

Other features you might want:

● Reel mower technology with an electro-hydraulic control switch to easily and quickly raise and lower the cutting units.

● Turf groomers or conditioners that pop up out of the way when they're not needed, and pop back into place when they are.

● Utility vehicles with bench seats to accommodate operator and a passenger.

● Full pressure lube systems with standard oil filters to maintain the oil pressure under various conditions.

● Effective overall operation, including stability, maneuverability, sure-footedness, quality of cut, quiet engine that is liquid-cooled for long life, high horsepower-to-weight ratios, and fuel efficiency.

● Versatility for multiple uses.

For example, attachments for a bunker rake that are designed to tackle specific tasks, such as an aluminum front blade to increase the width for more productivity; a blade attachment for leveling dirt; and a blade that can be set at an angle for windrowing cores after aerating a green.

Serviceability—Serviceability is a major consideration. Equipment users must know the answers to questions like:

✓ How easy is it to service?
✓ Where are the service points located?

✓ What must be removed?
✓ What tools are needed?
✓ What must be done to gain access to the major components?

✓ When problems occur, how much time will it take a technician to diagnose them?

✓ How long will it take to get parts?

Commonality, using the same design features in multiple applications throughout an equipment line, makes diagnosis and repairs easier. It also helps keep parts prices down.

Re-design by committee—Understanding that equipment users are

continued on page 40



It's this type of in-depth examination you should make before purchasing specialized equipment. Here, a greensmower gets a complete once-over during a special program sponsored by John Deere Co.

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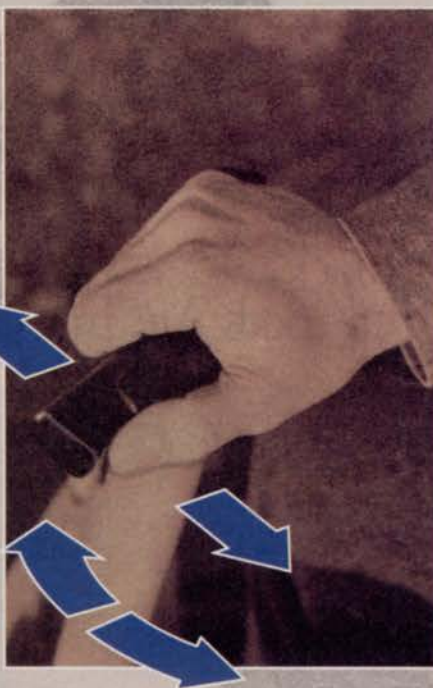
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EQUIPMENT from page 38

the best consultants, companies like John Deere are starting feedback programs. In August, five groups of superintendents from across the U.S. and Canada plus distributors and overseas representatives from the Pacific Rim and Europe met at Pinnacle Golf Club in Milan, Ill. for 1-1/2-day sessions. Equipment in various stages was tested by the end users, who then provided feedback on performance and suggestions for improvements. As a direct result, Deere engineers relocated the ignition switch on the 2243 greensmower and simplified the directional marking for raising and lowering the cutting unit.

These programs prove that it pays for end-users like golf course superintendents to speak up when they have ideas. Open communications help the entire industry develop specialized equipment that truly fits specific needs.

—Steve and Suz Trusty are freelance writers specializing in the green industry. Their office is in Council Bluffs, Ia.

Spin grinding is better, says LM reader

■ To the editor:

I am writing in response to the article "Grinding, sharpening blades" on page 36 of the August issue.

No longer is lapping a normal procedure for sharpening reels, except when spin grinding is not possible. Spin grinding takes about 10 minutes per reel, and when properly adjusted will last about five or six weeks.

Once you lap a spin grind, it defeats the purpose of the grinding, not to mention creating excessive wear on the reel and bedknife. When you grind the reel and bedknife, you put a sharp edge on each one. Why should you have to do anything more?

Also, when purchasing bedknives and reels, I suggest buying original equipment. It will let you go for a longer period of time before having to grind again, and you will receive a far superior quality of cut. The money you save from buying aftermarket parts is just not worth it.

Three important points to consider:

- 1) Get a good understanding of the history and theory of reel mowers.
- 2) There should be no reel-to-bedknife contact on your mowers.
- 3) Think about purchasing a spin grinder and bedknife grinder to do the work yourself. If that is not possible, then have someone (like Lee Heckman at Express Reel Grinding, phone 407-778-2909) do it for you.

For more information on grinders or the history and theory, you can contact me or Heckman, or you can call your local Express Reel dealer and ask about setting up a presentation.

Jay Rogers
TPC at Eagle Trace
Coral Springs, Fla

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