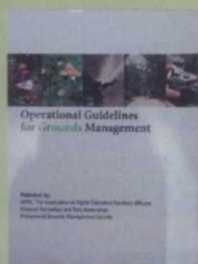


Info Center

VIDEOS AND LITERATURE FOR THE GREEN INDUSTRY

Loads of information on grounds management... can be found in "Operational Guidelines for Grounds Management," jointly published by PGMS, APPA and NRPA. It's organized to allow managers to build operational and staffing-level plans



that can be the basis of discussion with all grounds management stakeholders. Chapters include "Environmental Stewardship and the Green Industry" and "Contracting Out Your Landscape Operations." Cost for the 160-page manual is \$125. Members of the contributing organizations only pay \$75. Send payment to PGMS, 720 Light St., Baltimore, MD 21230, fax: 410/752-8295, e-mail: pgms@assnhqtrs.com.

Get language tutoring... through the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association's four-part Interactive Language Tutorial in both English and Spanish. It provides an easy way to improve communication skills, whether the "native" language is Spanish or English. Package includes a CD-ROM, audio tapes, phrase dictionary and flash cards. Cost for ILCA members is \$216.66; non-members pay \$302.06. Send check payable to ILCA to 22625 Butterfield Rd., Ste. 204W, Oak Brook, IL 60523. Fax credit card info to 630/472-3150.

Comprehensive construction lessons... are contained in "Landscape Construction, Vol. 3 – Earth and Water Retaining Structures," by C.A. Fortlage and E.T. Phillips. The four volumes cover all aspects of hard landscape building and construction work for professional landscape designers and landscape design students. Cost is \$79.95. To order, call 800/535-9544 or write to: Ashgate, 131 Main St., Burlington, VT 05401-5600.

Insecticides, herbicides and fungicides... can be accessed through Thompson Publications' 2001 Quick Guide. Products are listed by their different trade names and what pests they control, then by U.S. registered

crop usages. To buy a copy contact Thompson Publications, P.O. Box 9335, Fresno, CA 93791 or call 559/266-2964 or fax 559/266-0189. Cost is \$21.95 each plus tax, if applicable, plus \$4.50 shipping and handling.

LOOKING FOR A NEW CASH COW?



Well Hook Up the Milking Machine!

With the Express Blower, you can expand your services and increase your market opportunities to take your business to a higher level. Get more for the services you provide by saving time and increasing your profit margins through one of our seven Express Blower models.



800-285-7227 www.expressblower.com
Express Blower is a division of Rexius Forest By-Products, Inc., Eugene, OR

Circle 115

ONE CUSTOMER SAID THE WAVE OF **TRUCKS** AND TRACTORS

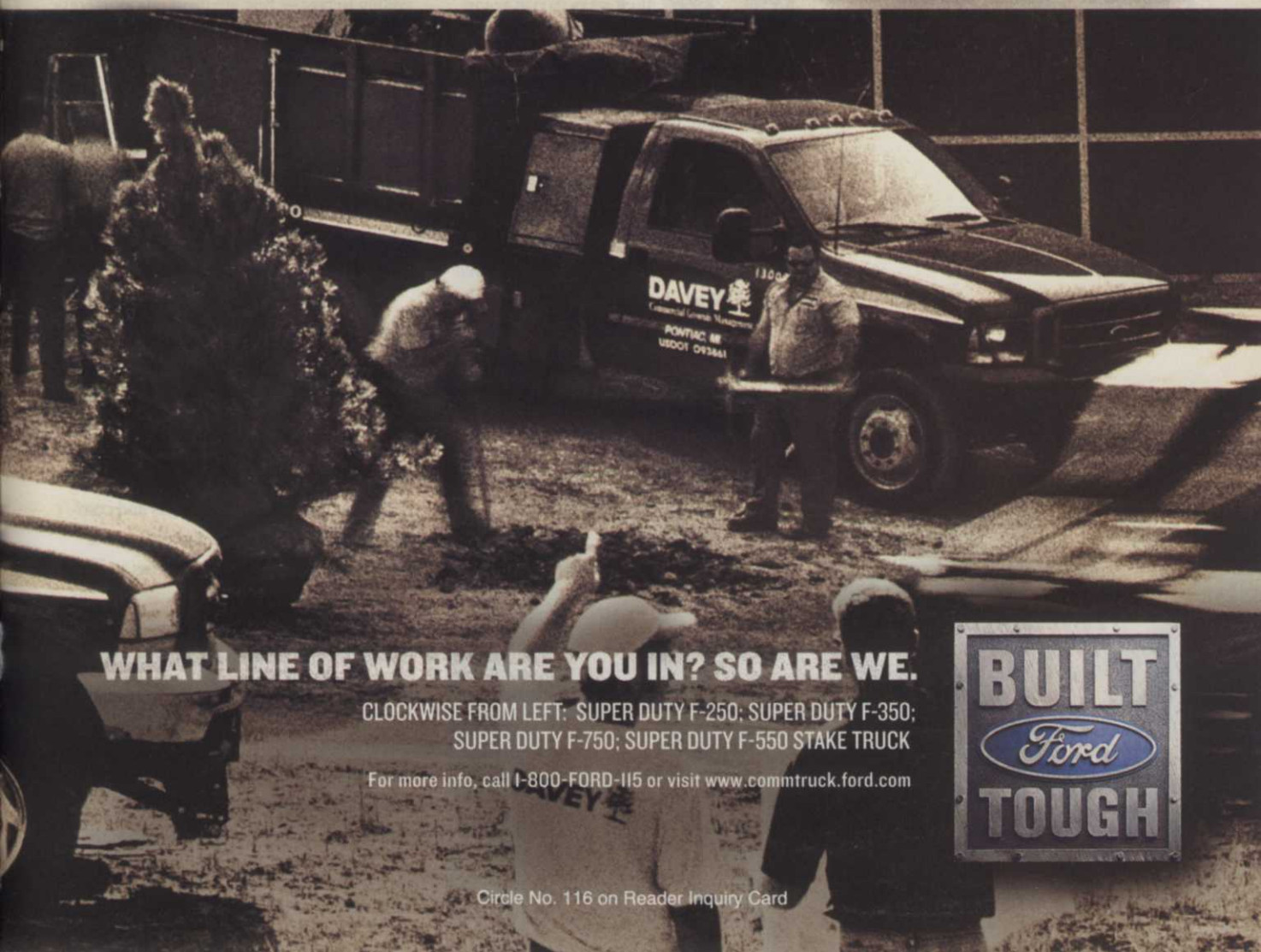


**COMMERCIAL
LENDING
SERVICES**



LOOKED LIKE THE NORMANDY INVASION.

IT TAKES A LOT OF MEN AND EQUIPMENT TO MAKE THINGS LOOK BEAUTIFUL. AND NATURAL.
ON SCHEDULE. WE PLAN CAREFULLY. AND WE WORK WITH THE BUILDERS TO COORDINATE OUR
EFFORTS. BUT OUR BIGGEST ASSET IS OUR IRONCLAD COMMITMENT TO *GETTING IT RIGHT.*



WHAT LINE OF WORK ARE YOU IN? SO ARE WE.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SUPER DUTY F-250; SUPER DUTY F-350;
SUPER DUTY F-750; SUPER DUTY F-550 STAKE TRUCK

For more info, call 1-800-FORD-115 or visit www.commtruck.ford.com



Organic's elusive promise

Promoters of commercial bio lawn care say the public likes their message, and they think the industry is missing an opportunity

BY RON HALL/SENIOR EDITOR

Organic landscape/lawn service providers claim the public's acceptance of their services is growing. Concerns over the safety of synthetic lawn care products and ongoing regulatory activity will continue to drive demand, they're convinced.

"It's the future of the lawn care industry," says Paul Drake, owner/operator of Organicare, Portland, OR. "When I started in business here (1988), nobody offered an organic program. Now a lot of people do."

Drake's assertion is disputed by many landscape/lawn company owners, who insist

that the vast majority of customers don't need or want these services. They say customers expect results — at least at a price they're willing to pay — that are most efficiently provided with the use of traditional chemical tools, particularly in turf care.

Understandably, they bristle at claims that the products they use pose safety or environmental risks, and they point to the rigorous testing these products undergo prior to being released into the market.

But, safety is just part of the equation, say organic service company owners.

"Over time most of the biology in the soil is killed or suppressed by the repeated use of pesticides," claims Todd Harrington of Harrington's Organicare, Windsor, CT. "The lawn becomes chemical dependent."

Harrington's message — like that of similar services — is to build the health and tilth of the soil using organic fertilizers and composts, and combating turf and plant woes with an assortment of compost teas and bio products.

It's difficult for turf/landscape company owners to ignore the claims of organic competitors, even though the concept of organic turf/landscape care is hardly new.

Who wants it?

Several established traditional lawn care companies have, in fact, offered alternative ser-



PHOTO COURTESY: ORGANICARE/OREGON

More natural herbicides on the way

A natural organic herbicide to control weeds in turf was largely a dream until Dr. Nick Christians, a professor of horticulture at Iowa State University, accidentally discovered the herbicidal properties of corn gluten meal in 1986. Corn gluten meal is a by-product of the wet-milling process of corn and is sold as feed material for cattle, poultry and fish.

Christians patented his discovery in 1991, and by the end of the decade sales of the natural herbicide (which, because of its 10% nitrogen content, serves as an excellent organic fertilizer, too) had topped \$1 million annually. The product is now licensed to 17 companies across the United States, and its use continues to grow in turfgrass and in some food crops.

Lawn care company owner, entrepreneur and self-described inventor Mark Miles, Greener Pastures, Minneapolis, MN, claims to have developed the second natural pre-emergent herbicide and also the first natural post-emergent. Like Christians, he isolated a protein from an agricultural crop.

In 2000, after getting the results from a test at the University of Missouri Turfgrass Research Center, Miles began using his organic herbicides on the public grounds of the City of Roseville, a suburb of Minneapolis.

Erik H. Ervin, Ph.D, monitored that test and reports that he applied two products from Greener Pastures in mid-spring 2000 and compared their results in controlling smooth crabgrass with Scott's



Goose and Crab along with an untreated control. Ervin, now an assistant professor of turfgrass at VPI, Blacksburg, VA, says that on Aug. 11, 2000, he reported that the Scott's product gave 90% control, Nature's Weed Control provided 38% control and Nature's Weed and Feed, the post-emergent, 62% control.

"The city was afraid that it (the herbicide) was going to fall on its face. I was afraid we were going to fall on our face," Miles admits. "Then we ended up in a drought and we found out that it needs soil moisture and actively growing plants to work. But those are the same things that chemicals require."

Even so, Miles says that officials at both Roseville and the nearby Minnetonka School District, where he also used the products, were pleased with the results.

Miles is ramping up production of the organic herbicides at two plants located in Minnesota, and is eyeing a third.

To learn more about Dr. Nick Christians and corn gluten meal, visit the Web site www.hort.iastate.edu/gluten. To learn more about Greener Pastures and its natural products, visit www.greenerpast.com.

services only to find consumer demand lacking, particularly in regard to lawn care. In the late 1980s, ChemLawn, owned by EcoLab then, promoted this type of a program but it didn't find widespread customer acceptance. Did they miscalculate the public's mood? Were they ahead of their time?

Probably both, respond today's organic services providers. Add a third reason — lack of acceptable products, which they say is no longer the case.

"There are so many more materials on the market, and homeowners know that and are wondering why more professional companies aren't using them," says Drake.

Cost may be one reason, but it's an increasingly smaller reason, he says. "I'd say we're about 10% more in cost than our competition. A lot of people expect it to be more expensive than it is."

Adds Mark Miles, owner/operator of Greener Pastures, Minneapolis, MN: "The chemical companies repeatedly tell me their customers won't pay \$10 more per lawn for our services. They're right. But they're talking about the wrong customers.

"You want the customer who isn't already giving anybody a check, and that's the 85 out of 100 homeowners who don't have any lawn care. Many of them simply don't want chemicals on their properties."

Phil Catron, co-founder of NaturaLawn of America, based

in Gaithersburg, MD, agrees that the demand for professional landscape/lawn services, both traditional and alternative, will continue to grow. He points to middle-aged Baby Boomers as the reason. They have the money but not the time to do lawn care.

Catron's also convinced that most new customers can be educated to take a "reasonable" approach in selecting professional landscape and lawn services.

"They will want a nice lawn and not necessarily a perfect lawn. They will want to feel good about what they're doing," he says. "A big part of our program is educating the consumer to know that a few weeds are not an issue, a few insects are not an issue and that diseases are always going to be there. After all, all of us get colds from time to time."

"The people who want an organic program are pretty knowledgeable, but the philosophy still requires a lot of education because people are used to doing things by a certain method," adds Mark Gile, co-owner of In Harmony Organic Based Landscape Services, which serves Seattle, WA, and the surrounding region.

"You develop a certain customer base when you have an organic system," adds Harrington in Windsor, CT. "They're the people that recycle.

They're also people who will accept a few weeds on their lawns. It's a select group, but there are more and more of them every year."

Organic defined

But what exactly is "organic" lawn/landscape care?

"Organic don't mean good. It doesn't mean safe. It doesn't mean anything other than that it's a term," says Miles in Minneapolis. "The message I give to my customers is, 'If it can't be eaten, it's not being used on your lawns.'"

NaturalLawn's Catron also be-

lieves confusion often surrounds some of these terms. And not just the term "organic." Consider the word "pesticide," he says. Anything that kills a weed, insect, disease or whatever is, technically, a pesticide. And that's whether it's synthetically produced, a biological agent like a nematode or a biorational like horticultural soaps and oils.

Indeed, it's often difficult to look beyond marketing in describing an organic service inasmuch as most of these operations use some of the same pesticides as their so-called chemical competitors. The difference, they explain, is the degree to which they limit the use of synthetic products and their continuing focus on soil and plant health care.

"Pesticides are the last resort for us," says Gile in Seattle, echoing several of the company owners we interviewed. "Sometimes, you have to control a problem until you get the soil tilth to where it needs to be."

Gile says about half of his company's 1,000 lawn care customers opt for a completely organic program "and will tolerate some insects and weeds."

Likewise, Drake in Portland, OR, and Harrington in Windsor, CT, say between 50 to 60% of their clients select "all-organic" programs.

Nature's little helpers

Organic landscape/lawn services that use biological and biorational products to control turf and landscape insect pests realize their "windows" of control are small, and they must be well acquainted with both the products and the problems for which they're used.

To start with, biologicals are host-specific. Also, timing is critical. Most bios work best against the susceptible, juvenile stage of an insect pest. Other factors such as proper storage and handling, and soil moisture and temperature are vital in wringing the maximum benefits from these bio products, which are generally more expensive than traditional chemical products.

Commonly used alternative products include:

- Neem, made from a derivative of the neem tree for a variety of insect pests in greenhouses, nurseries and on trees.
- Insecticidal soap derived from fatty acids for controlling soft-bodied insects, mites and powdery mildew on shade and ornamental trees, turf, foliage and flowering plants.
- *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt). Targeted turf, tree and ornamental pests such as larvae (caterpillars) ingest the bacteria, which then kills them.
- Milky spore disease specifically targets Japanese beetle grubs and, once in the soil, continues to control them by producing spores that remain in the ground.
- Insect parasitic nematodes. *Steinernema carpocapsae* use an "ambush" strategy and work well against pests moving around on the soil surface.
- Heterorhabditids search for hosts deeper in the soil.

For an excellent discussion of insect parasitic nematodes and their role in combating turf insect pests, visit the Web site www2.oardc.ohio-state.edu/nematodes maintained by Dr. Parwinder Grewal, Dept. of Entomology, Ohio Agricultural Research & Development Center.



Careful inspection precedes treatment.

PHOTO COURTESY: ORGANICARE/HARRINGTON

Setting standards

Efforts are underway in some markets to establish standards for commercial companies that offer this type of turf/landscape care.

In Long Island, NY, for example, 16 of the 66 members of the Long Island Organic Horticulture Association (LIOHA) have qualified for its "Organic Landscaper Listing Program." To be listed, company owners demonstrate their knowledge of organic products and procedures before a board of directors, and signed an eight-page contract saying they would adhere to 100% organic methods on clients' properties and submit to periodic inspections.

"The response to this has been positive," says Beth Fiteni, spokesperson for Long Island Neighborhood Network, a non-profit environmental and government reform organization that publicizes and distributes the list.

"The companies that are

Mark Gile, left, and Ladd Smith say organic care is growing around Puget Sound.



doing it are really committed, and the people who call us will know they're getting a 100% organic program," she says.

A similar effort is underway under the aegis of the Massachusetts and Connecticut chapters of NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Assn.). To gain accredi-

tation, commercial operators must complete 40 to 50 course hours in organic methods, then pass a test, says Harrington, who is on the standards committee. The standards are almost ready.

"The people who go through the course will receive an emblem they can use in their litera-

ture and their sales," says Harrington. "But they will have to keep up their credits annually."

Apart from these regional efforts, there doesn't appear to be a widespread effort to define and

standardize organic turf/landscape care.

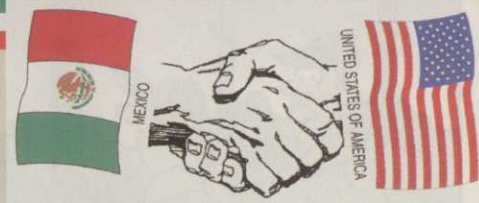
While competing traditional companies don't, as yet, feel the majority of their clients and potential clients need or want these services, owners who provide alternative services say demand keeps growing.

"I was the first here (Minneapolis) and I clawed my way through here," says Miles of Greener Pastures. "Now more companies are carrying on." **LMI**

RESOURCES

For more information on LIOHA and its listing program, visit the Web site www.longislandnn.org/LIOHA. To learn more about Harrington's Organicare, visit www.organicare.com. For NaturalLawn of America, visit www.naturalawn.com. For In Harmony Organic-Based Landscape, www.inharmony.com. And for Paul Drake's Organicare, Portland, OR, go to www.organicareinc.com.

TEMPORARY / SEASONAL LABOR VISAS



SIGN UP BEFORE FALL 2001 FOR APPROVAL BY SPRING 2002*

Call now for information packet and a quote.

Foley Enterprises

Austin (512) 282 3237

Fax (512) 282 0958

Toll Free (888) 623 7285

*Duration of permits is based on eligibility and subject to governmental processing delays

Circle 117

When things go wrong

Three Green Industry veterans explain how to turn tragic business events into triumphs

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

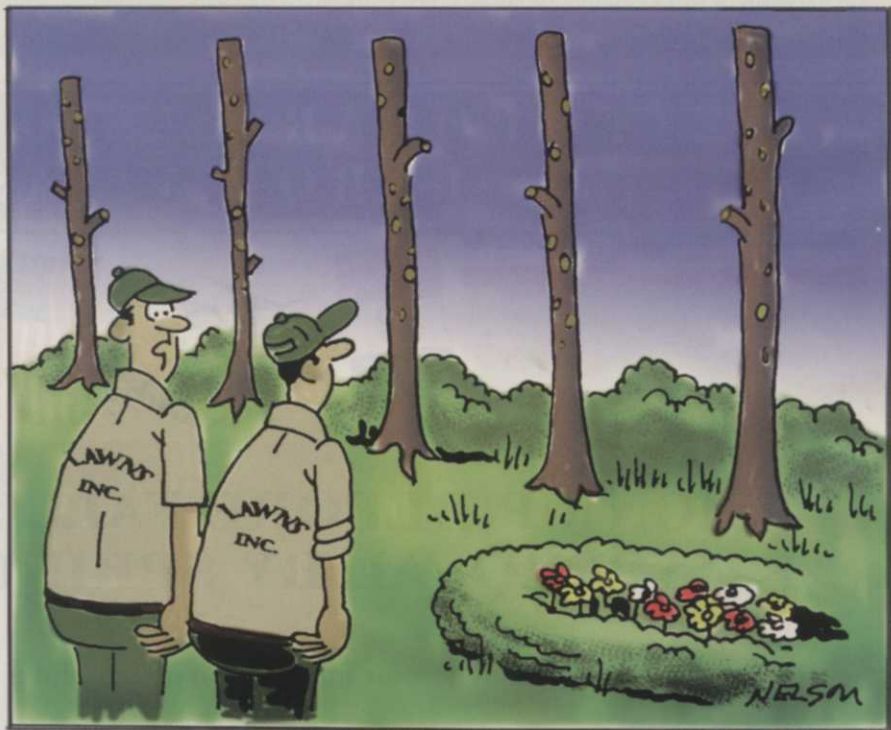
It's the "Age of Customer Satisfaction," and your customer isn't happy. Something has gone wrong, and the customer is blaming you. What do you do? How do you make things right? More importantly, how do you make things right in a way that repairs the all-important customer relationship?

Three real world stories from actual Green Industry professionals who've been there will answer those questions.

Damaged lawns everywhere

Russ Frith has quite a tale about how things went wrong for him. About 10 years ago, Frith's hard-won business reputation of 30 years was threatened by a contaminated batch of insecticide that damaged nearly 600 of his customers' lawns.

Frith is the CEO of Lawn Doctor, Inc., Holmdel, NJ, the largest franchised lawn care company in North America with 400 franchises in 40 states and gross revenues of \$61 million in 2000. His firm is a weed-and-feed lawn care applicator but also offers related services such as tree and shrub care, pH balancing, seeding and aeration. Here's his horror story:



"When you give Joe instructions on pruning, you have to be very specific."

Russ Frith: "About 10 years ago, several of our franchisee owners purchased a private label product — an insecticide from a reseller — that was contaminated," Frith says. "The formulator had used his tanks and mixing line to formulate atrazine which is used principally to control cool weather grasses in warm

season turf. The problem was that he didn't properly clean the lines before formulating the insecticide we bought. Later, when we tested the insecticide, we found that it was atrazine-gram contaminated at 22,000 ppm, or one-third of a pound of active ingredient per gallon."

"Communicate with everyone involved. First, find out what the institution's traditions and expectations are so you can be proactive in satisfying them."

CGM, Director of Grounds for Dwight Englewood School, Englewood, NJ, & President of Sports Field Management Systems



Van Haasteren

"We promised the customers that we would make things right, no matter what that would take."

CEO of Lawn Doctor, Inc., Holmdel, NJ



Frith

"You may wind up taking responsibility anyway — either because you want to keep the customer or can't stand to look at the disastrous results of someone else's error."

CEO of Lori Spielman Landscaping, Inc., Ellington, CT



Spielman

Landscape Management: "Is that a lot?"

Frith: (laughs) "It sure as heck is! It damaged 564 cold climate lawns!"

LM: "And how did you find out that the lawns were damaged?"

Frith: (laughs again) "Well, they started to die! The customers (principally upscale residential customers in the Northeast) were calling our franchisees, who in turn called us. Somebody also called the local television station's Mr. Fix It because we wound up on the five o'clock news!"

"In response, we sent out our operations and technical services people. We had a suspicion of what the contaminant was, but unfortunately the reseller/manufacturer didn't come forward and accept responsibility until after we had the product tested. At that later point, the formulator admitted to the problem. In the beginning, they offered a small amount of technical assistance, plus a small amount of money to pay the homeowners to intensively water their lawns and pay for some charcoal applications to mitigate the effects of this chemical on the lawns. After a five-year legal battle, they ultimately accepted legal responsibility."

LM: "What did Lawn Doctor do to repair the damage and keep these customers in the fold?"

Frith: "We promised the customers that we would make things right, no matter what that would take. Specifically, we took a group of Lawn Doctor employees from a retail branch of ours, as well as members of our operations and technical field support team, and visited every customer face-to-face. We began to reseed into spot areas, which was the appropriate remedy. For the larger areas, we contracted with a landscaper to have many of the lawns — roughly 200 — stripped out and resodded."

"The manufacturer of this product eventually did come forward and pay significant

sums of money toward the remediation of the customers. But because we're a franchise operation with two levels of customers — the end customer and our franchisees — we initiated and paid for a lawsuit on behalf of our franchisees. Five years later, in a settlement worked out literally on the courthouse steps, a distribution was made to the three franchisees affected and to us."

Frith reports that most of the residential customers stayed with Lawn Doctor, and, over time, only two of the franchisees left.

"That rescue effort took quite a lot of doing on our part, but it was definitely worth it to make the effort and protect and repair those customer relationships," Frith says. "What else do you have? You're in a service business dealing with customers who have choices. Plus, the level of customer expectation from all kinds of businesses is substantially higher than it was twenty years ago, and still spiraling upwards."

Construction blues

Repairing customer relationships is still worth it even when what goes wrong is not your fault or when the customer is to blame. According to Lori Spielman, CEO of Lori Spielman Landscaping Inc., Ellington, CT, you may wind up taking responsibility anyway — either because you want to keep the customer or can't stand to look at the disastrous results of someone else's error.

That's what happened when Spielman did the landscaping for a new commercial building being constructed in Ellington.

Spielman describes what went wrong:

"The building contractor kept dragging his feet, particularly on the exterior aspects of the job. The people doing the grading would show up and do a little work, then disappear for months. It was getting frustrating for us, so we went in with our bulldozer, cleaned the retention pond and finished what we could for landscaping. But the whole thing snowballed into a mess."

"At one point, the building owner, also

acting out of frustration, took it upon himself to fertilize and lime the exterior grounds. He entrusted the task to someone who had no experience or knowledge of fertilizing. The result was horrible — green streaks across the ground, weeds everywhere. As of December 2000, there was a poor stand of grass.”

Spielman knows all too well how it looks — the property is in the middle of town, and she has to drive by it every day.

To keep the customer and eliminate an eyesore, Spielman took soil samples and put the property on a corrective program.

Tradition, tradition

In the world of institutional grounds management, the customer is not a “customer” in the commercial sense but someone you have to please anyway. That’s the experience of George Van Haasteren, CGM, Director of Grounds for Dwight Englewood School, Englewood, NJ, and President of Sports Field Management Systems, a company specializing in athletic field maintenance and renova-

tion. His prior post was grounds manager at Columbia University in New York City. He is currently president of the Professional Grounds Management Society.

Things went wrong for Van Haasteren when he was at Columbia University. The prestigious Ivy League university had certain traditions which, as his customer, it expected him to uphold.

“The first challenge had to do with the university’s winter lighting,” Van Haasteren recalls. “The campus traditionally had these lights up and functioning from Thanksgiving into February. The contractor installing the lighting was not doing it the way his predecessor had, which caused a lot of dissatisfaction.”

“We also had some technical problems. For example, we found that squirrels liked to chew on the outdoor wiring, and until somebody with experience suggested we apply a deterrent spray made in part with cayenne pepper, the squirrels caused havoc with the lights.”

“My second challenge was snow removal. The university operates seven days a week, 24

hours a day, 365 days a year, and it expected the campus to remain open through winter.

“As it turned out, my first year at Columbia was one of the worst snow years in recent decades. On top of that, when we got our first snowfall, three of my principal pieces of snow removal equipment broke down.”

Van Haasteren’s advice to anyone managing the grounds of an established institution?

■ Communicate with everyone involved. Find out what the institution’s traditions and expectations are so you can be proactive in satisfying your customer.

■ Communicate laterally with other institutional service departments with the object of picking their brains and developing allies.

The experiences of our three Green Industry professionals suggests that Murphy’s Law is correct — things will go wrong, and it’s just a matter of time before they go wrong for you. These experiences also suggest that when disaster strikes, the right kind of effort may straighten out the mess — and keep your customer happy. **LM**

ALCA Presents Specialty Education...

ESSENTIALS FOR SUCCESS

Two Concurrent Tracks, focusing on...

BUSINESS BOOT CAMP: Learn from one of the leaders in the industry the basics of operating a successful exterior and/or interior landscape company. Business owners and managers will get cutting-edge advice and tips of the trade on basic business knowledge. *Speaker: David Minor, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX — former owner of Minor’s Landscape Services*

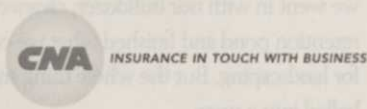
TECH KNOWLEDGE: Geared to interior landscape technicians and supervisors, this seminar will provide basics of indoor plant care, troubleshooting pest and disease problems and tips on quality customer service. *Speaker: Virginia Powers, Editor of Tropical Plant Technician, an interior training publication, and Owner of Garden Tapestry, an interiorscape company*

DATES AND LOCATIONS:

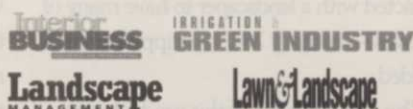
September 26, 2001 • Baltimore, MD

October 6, 2001 • Chicago, IL

MAJOR SPONSOR:



MEDIA PARTNERS:



For more information and registration details, contact ALCA at 1-800-395-2522 or visit the web site at www.alca.org.