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inside the owner's head

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Lowballers? Forget about 'em

Everyone in the Green Industry knows lowballing is an unfortunate aspect of business that'll never go away. If that's the case, you'd think every business should develop a strategy for combatting lowballing, right? Wrong.

It seems a majority of landscape/lawn pros believe the best way to fight lowballers is to not fight them at all.

"I don't want to defeat the lowballer," says Dennis Barriball of Hemlock Landscapes, Chagrin Falls, OH. "There should be no strategy to beat these guys. Let them defeat themselves."

How will they defeat themselves? "By continuing to lowball," says Steve Corrigan, president of Mountainview Landscaping, Chicopee, MA. "Lowballers tend to do shoddy workmanship trying to make up for the mistakes they made in submitting a bid. Poor workmanship will catch up to a contractor quickly."

Choose customers carefully

But if there's a non-strategy out there, it's choosing your customers carefully and offering outstanding customer service.

"I tell all of my clients, potential and current, that we're not the least expensive guys in town, nor do we want to be," says Budd Perlman of Tex-Scape, Plano, TX. "We believe the value of our services is worth what people pay."

Andee Bechtold of Longhorn Landscape Creations, McKinney, TX, agrees that up-front communication with a client can do wonders in the client selection department. "Even when we were contacted to do work for a municipality, we met and explained that we were not a competitive

bid company," Bechtold says. But learning what the city's specific needs were resulted in winning the contract. "I feel if you are clear about who your client is, this is the best line of defense against the frustrating experience of lowballing," she says.

"My idea is, if I can't make money on you, then why would I want you?" says Bruce Sheppard of Tara Holdings, Tillsonburg, Ontario. "These bottom feeders will always be looking for the best price. I want customers that I can build a relationship with."

Once landscape/lawn care pros choose good customers, their next line of strategy is to "customer service them to death."

"We have customer service representatives who are solely responsible for seeing our clientele the day before the service," says Preston Ewing of Kimball Property Maintenance, Draper, UT. "Our customer reps help us overcome the problem of slow turn-arounds on problems and lack of relationships with vendors."



Preston Ewing sends customer service reps out to visit clients.

Focus on what counts

So, if you shouldn't waste time on trying to beat lowballers, what should you do?

"Stay the course of your existing business plan (one year) and strategic plan (three to five years)," says Barriball. "Know your market niche and who your competitors truly are."

Many landscape/lawn pros emphasize a focus on quality, but it takes time to establish a reputation for quality work. Some would then advise to a new company to make sure to do quality work from the start.

"Over time, you can develop a reputation

Tips for fighting lowballers

- Don't fight them; let them defeat themselves
- Choose customers carefully
- Focus on performing high quality work
- Know your market niche
- "Customer service" your clients to death



Ed Koenig says a good reputation will go a long way.

for quality, have referrals as the major source of new leads, and show outstanding products and projects in portfolios, flower shows, etc.," says Ed Koenig of Lifestyle Landscaping, North Ridgeville, OH.

Blessing in disguise?

Some view lowballers as a blessing to the industry. Since so many of them come and go, they frequently offer choice business opportunities for savvy business owners.

"Lowballers coming and going might fit your strategic planning in terms of acquisition opportunities," says Barriball. "Some of these guys are great technicians, and as they begin to flounder, there might exist a purchase opportunity, at least the chance to call them up and offer them a career."

— Information provided by *The Owners' Network*, a program created by JP Horizons, Inc. and sponsored by Weed Man. Visit the Web site www.owners1.com.

Minimize Mowing & Clippings with Controlled-Release Nitrogen

Richard Guzman realized there was something missing in home lawn care services that golf courses had always provided: topdressing. So he started his own business in 1998 offering deep core aeration and topdressing to homeowners and sport fields in the Atlanta area.

"Traditionally, lawn care companies just mow, fertilize and water," says Guzman, owner of Sandman Topdressing and Aerating, Inc. of Hoschton, Georgia. "When you add deep core aeration plus topdressing, all of a sudden the lawn looks phenomenally better. Our topdressing is mostly sand with about 10% organic compost."

While Sandman's customers enjoy their thicker, plusher lawns, they often complained that the grass color faded a month or so after topdressing. "Our Southern turfgrasses require more nitrogen than bluegrass and other northern turf," explains Guzman. "We knew we could put down straight nitrogen and get green grass, but didn't want to bring on a surge of growth and get excessive clippings and added thatch."

A year ago, Sandman was searching for the best fertilization solution for its patented Sandman Application System® when the company discovered Nitroform®

Controlled Release Nitrogen from Nu-Gro Technologies, Inc. Nitroform contains more than two-thirds water insoluble nitrogen, providing extended nitrogen release for 8-12 months. Unlike other nitrogen sources, Nitroform has a 1:1 ratio of nitrogen to carbon. When microorganisms break down the nitrogen in Nitroform, carbon is used as an energy source for microbes. An increased microorganism population results in healthier turfgrass.

Cut More Leaf, Less Stem... "Nitroform constantly releases small amounts of nitrogen so the turf stays green and never goes hungry," Guzman notes. "Once we started applying Nitroform, our customers' lawns and sport fields were near perfect all summer long. We found people were mowing less often - cutting more leaf and less stem when mowing. Nitroform is transforming our business dramatically for our customers and franchise operations."

Sandman continually educates its customers about the benefits of controlled-release nitrogen. They tell them that excess clippings and surges of growth are real negatives.



Cut More Leaf, Less Stem

"We promote returning the clippings to the soil," says Guzman. "By removing the clippings, you're losing 30% of your fertilization. Just mowing and leaving clippings where they lay is the best thing for the turf. By promoting controlled growth, you mow less often, compared to every other day with fast-growing lawns."

Sandman crews topdress throughout the growing season, from mid-March through the end of October. They first deep core aerate, then apply Nitroform at the rate of 200 to 300 pounds per acre, then topdress and drag the material into the soil with Sandman's patented drag-mat screeds.

"Topdressing eliminates thatch, helps percolation, increases the efficiency of fertilizer intake, reduces moisture requirements and develops a healthier root zone," explains Guzman. "Nitroform encourages organic matter and promotes controlled leaf growth. Our customers notice the difference two months and beyond because there's no drop off in feeding, no surge of growth and fewer clippings."

Other Nu-Gro Nitrogen Products... Other controlled-release nitrogen sources available from Nu-Gro Technologies include Organiform® and Nutralene®.

Organiform provides intermediate nitrogen release lasting 16 to 24 weeks. It contains 55% water-insoluble nitrogen, allowing sustained release when plants need it most. Organiform builds up beneficial soil bacteria, even in soils naturally low in microorganisms.

Nutralene provides nitrogen nutrition lasting from 12-16 weeks. It contains 14.5% water insoluble nitrogen, and releases nitrogen both by hydrolysis and through microbial activity. This dual-release of Nutralene provides a two-fold advantage: hydrolysis releases nitrogen quickly, giving plants a boost at the beginning of the growing season, then microbial activity releases nitrogen more slowly through the rest of the season.

"Many homeowners spend time and money mowing much more often than necessary," says Guzman. "They can fill up 20 bags of clippings from a 5,000 square-foot lawn. They spend time filling up the bags and then have to dispose of them, too. By mowing less, they save time, use less fuel and put less wear and tear on their equipment. The best part is they also have a more beautiful, deep green lawn."



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Circle No. 112



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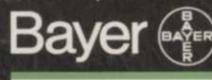




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Circle No. 114

Many companies don't try to **PROVE** to prospects why they should **select their company** with evidence that's convincing.



Give them reasons to buy

A question you should always be asking yourself is, "Why should someone select my product and/or service over my competition?" The answer won't only tell you what prospects are thinking when they consider doing business with you but also if the reasons you give are convincing.

Some call these reasons "unique selling propositions" (USPs), some call them "compelling reasons to buy," and yet others call them "benefit statements." The problem is many companies don't try to prove to prospects why they should select their company with evidence that's convincing.

Here's an example of a good and bad way to prove you're the best choice for a prospect's job:

First, the bad example. ABD Landscaping, "River Valley's Best Landscaper." This slogan on the company's proposal is all the proof it offers that it's the potential customer's best choice.

Now, the great example. ABD Landscaping, "River Valley's Landscaping Company of Choice (based on the 2002 River Valley News Consumer Choice Awards)." That slogan and footnote were on the proposal, and included with the proposal were the following:

- 56 testimonial letters from happy clients
- A copy of five newspaper stories that mention the company
- An audio cassette tape River Valley produced featuring interviews with nine happy clients
- Pictures of those nine jobs talked about on the audio tape showing smiling clients
- A copy of the company newsletter
- A picture of the team at River Valley Landscaping smiling with the caption, "Here's why we can

do what we can to make clients happy and excited to work with River Valley Landscaping."

■ A letter from the company president with the guarantee offered to clients of River Valley Landscaping. In this company's case, their warranty is for life if you agree to have them take care of the landscape once it's installed. The letter closes with some strong words from the president: "At River Valley Landscaping, I want you happy. If you're not happy, we're not happy, and you have my word we'll work with you until we've exceeded your expectations."

■ A fine gourmet brownie.

Here's a summary of what occurred in the great example and the reason why I want you to get to this point.

Testimonial letters. Why 56 of them? You can't provide a prospect with too much proof to do business with you.

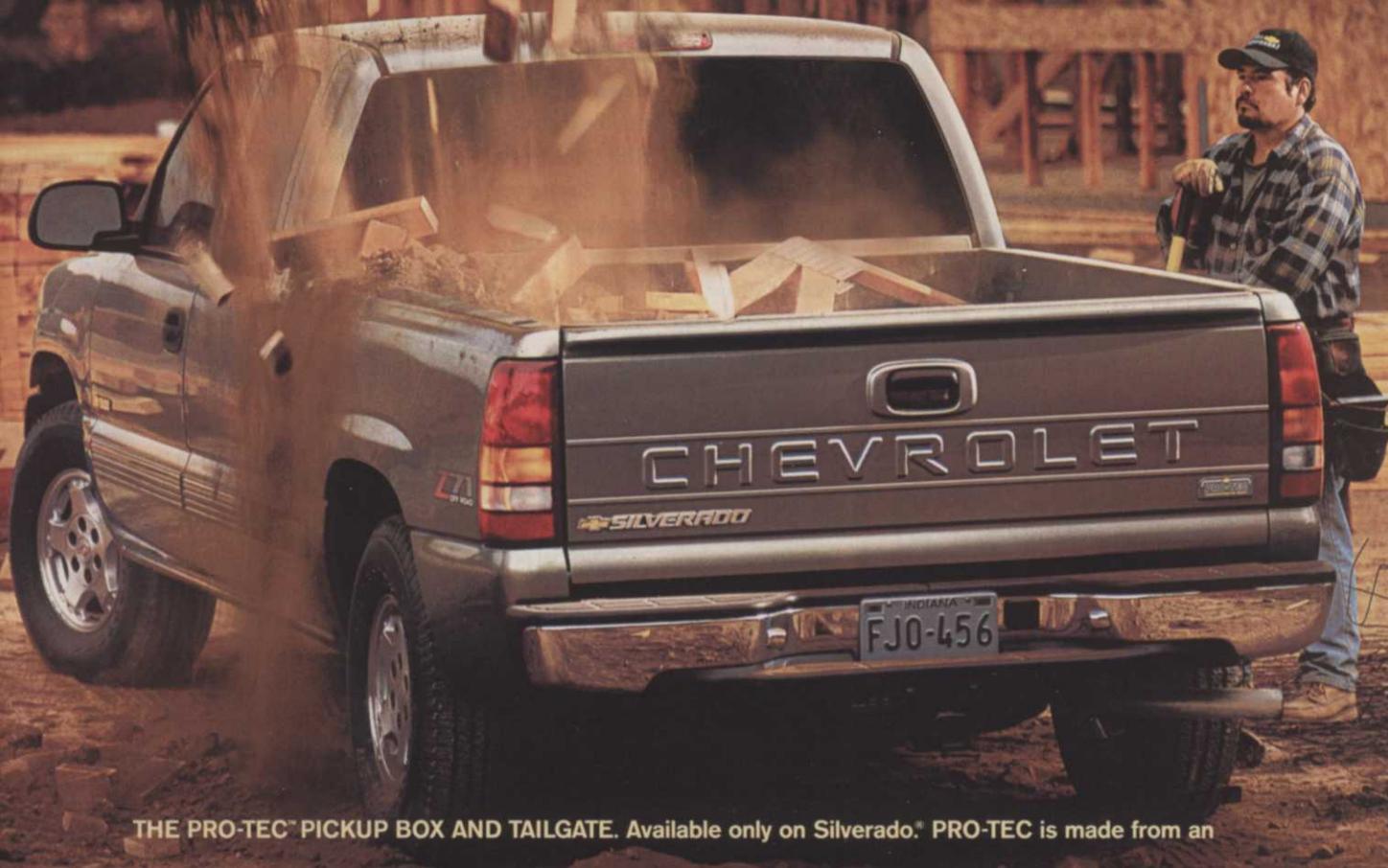
Copies of articles from the paper. A news story speaks the truth and gives you instant credibility.

Testimonials from happy clients. You can talk all day long about yourself and not sway someone to choose your services. But get a third party to talk about you and your company, and you'll really turn some heads.

A guarantee. Get a good one. If you aren't willing to stand behind your product with a clear, easy to understand warranty, I suggest you get out of the business.

— The author is founder and president of Grunder Landscaping Co., Dayton, OH, and the founder of The Winner's Circle, a consulting company. Contact Marty by calling 937/847-9944 or visiting www.grunderwinnerscircle.com.

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industry almanac

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Harper Industries acquires Goossen

HARPER, KS — Harper Industries, Inc., acquired Goossen Industries, Beatrice, NE, and its product line of straw blowers, chippers/shredders and power plate skid-steer adaptors.

Drew St. John joins Symbiot

SALT LAKE CITY, UT — Symbiot Business Group has added Drew St. John to its management team as vice president. St. John, immediate past president of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), joins Steven Glover, Symbiot president, and board members John Allin, Rod Bailey, William Braid and Bruce Wilson.

Shindaiwa awards Challenge groups

TUALATIN, OR — Shindaiwa awarded prizes to Beautiful Landscapes, Issaquah, WA, Houston Landscapes Unlimited, Sugarland, TX, and Lawn South, Roswell, GA, for completing their first 52 weeks of consistent training in Round 1 and 2 of The Training Challenge, a training program created by JP Horizons Inc.

Rockscapes moves headquarters

CHATSWORTH, CA — Rockscapes, LLC has completed the move of its commercial and residential landscape lighting manufacturing and headquarters operations to an expanded facility in Chatsworth, CA.

Minnesota limits phosphorus fertilizers

Adios phosphorus. Hello weaker turf, uglier lawns and more pollution. That will be the payoff if Minnesota legislators keep picking on the chemical lawn care industry, says Jim Skillen of Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE), the Washington-based lobbying group that represents fertilizer and specialty chemical users.

On April 3, the Minnesota House passed (116-16) a bill to restrict the use of phosphorus in turf fertilizers applied to lawns. The bill would allow no phosphorus-containing fertilizer to be used on home lawns, commercial properties or public properties in the seven-county Twin Cities area, and no more than 3% phosphate in fertilizer (0.3 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.) used on lawns elsewhere in the state.

The bill exempts agriculture, sod farms golf courses, and starter fertilizer use in the first year of a seeded or sodded grow-in.

Taking action

The House took the action to slow the decline of the state's lakes and ponds, their reasoning being that phosphorus stimulates blue-green algae growth, reducing oxygen for fish and more desirable aquatic plants.

"The purpose of this bill is to bring some uniformity across the state in the use of phosphorus and to provide educational information so that consumers can know when they ought to be using it and when they shouldn't be," said Rep. Peggy Leppik, the bill's sponsor. She said testing has shown that soils in many parts of the state have enough phosphorus, and that additional phosphorus would only end up in lakes and streams.

RISE's Skillen, however, disputes that

lawn care chemicals, including phosphate, are the bad guys in the water quality issue. "There is absolutely no scientific foundation for this legislation," he claims, adding that research has shown just the opposite — that healthy and well-maintained turfgrass prevents runoff and reduces pollution into lakes and streams.

"The legislatures don't have science to support the position they have taken," echoes Christiane Schmenk, director of environmental stewardship, The Scotts Co., a supplier of consumer turfgrass fertilizer. One bright note

in the legislation is a clause calling for additional research on the subject, she adds.

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, fearful that its agricultural members could be targeted next, lent its weight to RISE and the lawn care industry in opposing the restrictions. However, unless there is a change of heart in the Minnesota legislature, the restrictions will go into effect January 1, 2004.

"There is no scientific foundation for this legislation."

— Jim Skillen, RISE

[CLIPPINGS]

West, South growing most

The 10 states with the largest projected increase in population 1995-2025 (in millions):

State	1995 population	2025 estimated
California	31.5	49.3
Texas	18.7	27.1
Florida	14.2	20.7
Georgia	7.2	9.9
Washington	5.4	7.8
Arizona	4.2	6.4
North Carolina	7.2	9.3
Virginia	6.6	8.4
New York	18.1	19.8
New Jersey	7.9	9.5

New CEO plots LESCO's future

BY RON HALL

NEW YORK — Less than a week after being named Chief Executive Officer of LESCO (NASDAQ: LSCO), Michael DiMino laid out his management team's vision of the company's future.

In a presentation to shareholders and the investment community here on April 9, he described LESCO's new direction as "back to basics," and called on a return to the philosophy of company founders Jim FitzGibbon and Bob Burkhardt.

A vision of the future

DiMino, who spoke for about an hour, said that LESCO, because of new measures to control costs and grow revenues, is on the road to a profitable '02. He also presented a revamped sales and growth strategy that, he said, will boost same-store sales and allow LESCO to compete more effectively.

He stressed the company's person-to-person customer service style won't change.

"One of the things that LESCO is very good at, and is a core competency of our company, is that we deliver agronomic expertise to the experts," said DiMino. "We help them grow grass. We help them keep their jobs. We help them keep their businesses."

LESCO, he said, remains committed to its basic business model that consists of its:

- ▶ drive-thru service centers that offer products and advice for lawn care and landscape pros,

- ▶ unique Stores-on-Wheels (a fleet of tractor-trailers operated by salesmen trained in turf care management) concept for the golf course market, and

- ▶ desire to continue to nurture its Independent Marketing Program in those areas of the country it can't reach with service centers or truck stores. (Its first such partnership with Wilco Farmers in Oregon's Willamette Valley has resulted in sales of \$80,000 in LESCO products, he said, and has enabled Wilco to penetrate the golf market in its region.)

"We want to unleash the value that this model provides," said DiMino.

Realigning sales efforts

Key to that, he said, is the realignment of the company's sales efforts with personnel dedicated solely to selling and facility managers focused on the stores and servicing customers. Both, he stressed, will continue to offer agronomic advice.

"Right now we have a problem where our sales and service people have overlapped," he explained. "They have sort of become one job function."

Another initiative is the development of a "hub and spoke" distribution system to make sure that each store (some will be consolidated into "super stores") has products that customers need when they need them. He said that the company is considering adding more service center stores.



At a glance

Headquarters: Strongsville, OH

2001 sales: \$504.3 million

Service centers: 227

Stores on Wheels: 77

Founded: 1962 by Jim FitzGibbon and Robert Burkhardt as the Lake Shore Equipment & Supply Co. Entered Lawn Care Market in 1974 and went public in 1984, changing name to LESCO, Inc.

Markets served: Professional landscape/lawn care, golf course maintenance, pest control

Primary competitors (chemicals, fertilizers, seed): Anderson's, Simplot Partners, Lebanon, Scotts, ProSource One and United Horticultural Supply

Primary competitors (equipment): John Deere, Textron, Toro, Scag, others

In line with that, the company is upgrading its store systems, he said, taking advantage of software to precisely track the flow of products from manufacturers to customers and gauge customer satisfaction.

"We have to go real time with that transaction so that we know instantaneously that we just sold something and what inventory has been dedicated to what customers," he said, adding that program should be in place by year's end.

"We're going to focus on customer loyalty and satisfaction," added DiMino. "We want to build shareholder value. We want to improve profits. . . This really is a new day at LESCO."

New bermudagrass book

Anybody serious about managing warm-season turfgrass should check out a new book by L. B. "Bert" McCarty, Clemson University, and Grady Miller, University of Florida. "Managing Bermudagrass Turf" is a 220-page hardcover book devoted to the selection, cultural practices and pest management strategies of bermudagrass. For more information call 800/487-2323 or visit the Web site www.sleepingbearpress.com.



Scotts asks for science in FQPA

BOWLING GREEN, OH — Christiane W. Schmenk of The Scotts Company asked U.S. Rep. Paul Gillmor (R-OH) to urge the U.S. EPA to use “accurate, real-world data and sound science” in implementing the next phase of the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA).

The FQPA, passed by Congress in 1996, regulates the nation’s use of pesticides. Schmenk was one of several people representing professional pesticide users before the Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials here on March 28. Rep. Gillmor is chairman of the subcommittee.

“Scotts is concerned that the impending August 3, 2002 deadline for the cumulative risk assessment of organophosphates may not allow the Agency (EPA) to fully utilize all available data in decisions and that we will lose the use of important pest management tools,” she told Rep. Gillmor and other staffers.

She pointed out that the voluntary cancellation of residential uses of chlorpyrifos and diazinon harmed Scotts, both financially and in terms of customer perception. The cancellations were caused by registrants’ fears that they couldn’t meet “incredibly high theoretical hurdles set by EPA” when faced with impending deadlines, she said. “These were broad-spectrum pest controls for which

there were no good substitutes available,” she continued. “More applications of more varieties of pesticides are necessary to achieve control, which costs 25 to 50% more.”

She added The Scotts Company remains concerned that, in recent years, decisions about registered pesticide uses of pest control products may not have been based entirely on science.

“Anti-chemical emotions seem to have caused science to be disregarded in certain instances,” said Schmenk. “We ask for your help in ensuring that approved uses of safe and reliable pest management tools are not lost, and that all

decisions made are based on scientific evidence. “Consider and incorporate all available data into the tolerance reassessment process, even though there is an August 3 deadline.”

Bailey Wood, in Rep. Gillmor’s Washington D.C. office, said the hearing’s purpose was to inform the Congressman of the issues surrounding FQPA. “There hasn’t been any oversight on the bill as a whole,” said Wood. “We wanted to make

“We ask...that all decisions made are based on scientific evidence.”

— Christiane Schmenk,
The Scotts Co.

sure the issues are out in the open. Rep. Gillmor said he realized FQPA “is not a perfect bill” but that it does give the public confidence the government is monitoring the quality and safety of its food supply.

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WHAT'S NEW ON-LINE

- “Ask the Expert” section coming soon — review previously submitted questions and answers, and submit new ones!
- Features from the May issue of LM
- LM Week in Review — Sign up today!
- Green Industry news
- Link to BASF’s “Growing Trends” newsletter
- Link to Turfgrass Trends articles — coming soon!



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