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Be a good 'scout'



▲ Have a procedure in place for an owner or manager to check a customer's lawn when the applicator is unsure of the problem.

Train your applicators to diagnose and solve lawn problems before they get out of hand and make your customers unhappy

BY CHRIS LEMCKE

The procedures you put in place to evaluate customers' lawns, uncover potential problems and diagnose developing problems are the heart of any lawn care program.

They determine the timely and judicious use of fertilizer and pest control strategies — both chemical and non-chemical — by your trained employees.

Some companies refer to this process as scouting, while others refer to it as monitoring. Whatever you call it, do it consistently well and you'll differentiate your company and your program from competitors. Preventing problems on clients' landscapes and promptly correcting them builds customer satisfaction and boosts customer retention.

Top companies, in fact, provide all field employees with the basic knowledge to become lawn scouts. This requires ongoing training, but it's doable. Your technicians can be taught to recognize common lawn

diseases, plant-damaging insects and improper cultural practices.

What are the standards?

Beyond that, they must also be able to recognize when treatments are necessary to deal with a particular problem. Generally, treatment decisions are based on standards that your company has established for pest damage. At what threshold does pest activity threaten the lawn? Is overall turf health threatened? Is the infestation throughout the lawn? What are the patterns and the rate at which turf problems are spreading? These are some of the questions the technician must answer before deciding upon a treatment strategy.

Sometimes that strategy doesn't involve a chemical application. For example, just because a customer notices a few grubs while digging in a flowerbed doesn't necessarily mean that his entire lawn is at risk.

When the problem does require an application, many lawn care companies now use

low-risk products at their lowest label rates. They've trained their employees to apply them at the right time — when the problem is at the stage when it's easiest to control. Again, this is the value of training.

Procedures are a must

Occasionally, your technician (applicator) will be unsure of a particular problem or management strategy. Do you have a procedure in place to set up a service call so that the owner or manager can visit the property to assess the situation? The owner/manager can then share the results of the service call with the technician as a follow-up.

You may also want to encourage customers to become scouts for you. Tell them to call if they notice any lawn prob-

5 steps to successfully treat lawn problems

1 Proper training. Train your technicians to recognize specific turfgrass problems common to your area. They should also know the best strategies to deal with these problems, whether it's the application of a pest control product or a change in cultural management practices such as mowing or watering.

2 Regular monitoring. Make every technician a lawn scout, looking for signs of potential problems and, equally important, keeping customers



informed about what your company can do to improve their property.

3 Set a procedure for handling customer calls. Respond promptly

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◀ **Train your staff to recognize specific turfgrass problems in your area.**

to customer concerns. The longer it takes to see a customer, the greater the chance that a problem can worsen and cause more damage.

4 Have a price list. Can your technicians give specific prices for treatments while at the customer's site?

5 After-treatment evaluation. Set up a date to go back and check on the success of an application or change in cultural practice — and to make sure the customer is happy.

lems between visits. It's better to visit the property and identify the problem and solution than to try to diagnose and solve it on the telephone.

Once a decision has been made to treat a problem, respond promptly. The longer it takes to see a customer, the greater the chance that a potential pest can cause further damage. Establish a standard or procedure to inspect a customer's lawn for any concerns the customer may have within a certain period of time. A service guarantee will promise clients that you'll be there to evaluate any situation that pertains to the lawn's health.

After all this, make sure that the owner/manager or technicians evaluate the success or failure of any treatment. Establish a date to check on the success of an application or change in cultural practice — and to make sure the customer is happy. Keeping the customer informed and educated on his lawn is one of the most valued services lawn care companies can provide.

Customers want companies that can give them value. Often, that value is in what lawn care companies can provide over and above their programs: the management

of pests, identification of problems, monitoring for problems, treatment of any problems and evaluation of any treatments to make sure the turf is healthy. **LM**

— The author is a Technical Coordinator for Weed Man USA. He can be reached at 416/269-5754 ext. 107 or clemcke@aol.com.

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Circle 121

Gear up for graduation

Experienced grounds managers tell how to put extra color into the biggest weekend of the year on their campuses BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR



Masons fix the main center island marker at UNC for graduation.

Every spring, grounds managers on college campuses see it coming like a monster thunderstorm, its towering purple thunderheads causing feelings of both excitement and dread. The event — graduation weekend.

This exciting time gives grounds managers the opportunity to showcase their handiwork to a large audience. But it's also stressful because so many additional chores are added to the regular, daily workload of maintaining the campus.

A common sense approach

At Illinois State University, graduation ceremonies are held inside, but that doesn't let Director of Grounds Operations Mike O'Grady and his crew off the hook. Before and after the ceremonies, people spend a lot of time outdoors, so the whole campus has to look sharp.

"We cancel vacation time prior to graduation," O'Grady says. "We work two to three hours overtime each day two weeks prior to graduation, sometimes three weeks depending on the growing season.



Mike O'Grady

All of this is done to detail the campus to a degree we'd like to keep it all the time. Hours and manpower, however, don't allow it."

The biggest problem with the overtime is the budget, says O'Grady, especially after a tough winter like this past one. "My overtime budget includes snow removal time, so if we've had a tough winter that budget is depleted," he says.

Student help during the weeks leading up to graduation isn't much of an option, says O'Grady, given that the students are

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Sprucing up mulch beds prior to graduation at UNC is a must.

Grounds managers show off their handiwork during graduation.

continued from page 46

busy studying for finals. "We also don't have the number of students we used to because we don't pay them a lot of money," he says.

Another challenge for O'Grady and his staff is installing flowerbeds in Illinois in mid spring. Frost is always a possibility. "We're not safe to plant until May 15, and graduation this year is May 7 through 10," O'Grady says. "We're really taking a gamble with the flowers we plant around the buildings used for the ceremonies. We plant those at the last possible minute."

The rest, O'Grady says, is simple maintenance. He calls it an "orchestrated method," where his staffers work in zones. But the number of crew members per zone isn't hard and fast. O'Grady will move them around for the sake of catching up on certain tasks. It all comes down to doing what needs to be done.

"If we see that some areas of campus are being used for activities that need addi-

tional cleanup, we'll let other areas go in favor of those," O'Grady says.

Time to impress

Graduation is definitely a time to impress for grounds managers, especially because you have alumni revisiting the campus and parents who might be considering sending their children there some day. In that regard, Chris Fay, Grounds Superintendent for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, looks at the role of grounds manager as gracious host.

"I try to take a little extra time to visit the campus and talk to the visitors and even offer them rides in my golf cart," Fay says. "As a grounds manager, it's a great feeling to hear how nice they think the campus looks."

At Fay's school, alumni weekend coincides with graduation, which means six to eight classes, some who graduated 50 years ago, will be there to inspect the campus.

With so much work to be done, Fay is thinking of his strategy months beforehand. The list of tasks from the previous year is updated from January on, based on monthly meetings with a supervisor. "We



Chris Fay

get information generated through different offices that tell us when and where the independent graduation ceremonies are," Fay says. "We also identify the places where families gather to take photographs and make sure those areas are well-groomed."

Fay's staff alone can't possibly handle the trucking in and spreading of the 90 cubic yards of mulch needed for the ceremonies, so he subcontracts that out.

PR bonanza

"It's our biggest public relations tool," is how Michael Loftus, Director of Facilities for the University of Delaware, says of graduation weekend.

Commencement is held outdoors at the school's stadium. Since it takes a week to set up all the chairs, the field has to be ready at least a week before the ceremony. That requires some special turfgrass care.

"We spray growth regulators to keep it (the turfgrass) from growing," Loftus says. "Then, once the commencement is over, we're mowing right behind them as they're taking the chairs down."



Michael Loftus

Individual colleges at the University of Delaware will have their own convocation ceremonies at a dozen different locations, so Loftus tries to identify these sites ahead of time.

Like O'Grady, Loftus divides the campus into zones with different crews responsible for each zone. He lets each crew do its own prioritizing, but once the graduation schedules are revealed, the priorities are adjusted.

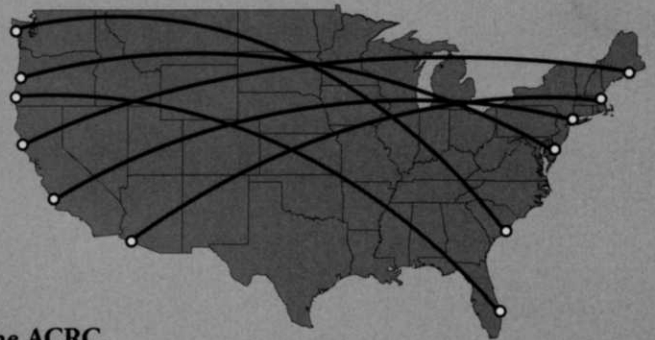
"This is definitely the biggest event of the year," Loftus says of graduation. "Spring is sprung, and to top it off you're trying to get ready for commencement." **LM**

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