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Sod producers are growing a wider variety of turf, trying to convince customers that not all grasses are equal, and trying to squeeze the most out of the bonds with their best customers. BY RYAN DEZEMBER

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P R O V E N S O L U T I O N S



It's a great time to build client loyalty

Everybody wants a deal these days. Let me rephrase that. Everybody *expects* a deal these days. A discount. An introductory coupon. An extra perk. A free service. That's the new price of attracting customers and buying loyalty in this new normal economy.

Can you remember another holiday season like this past one in which every retailer discounted or offered special deals ("doorbusters") every day leading up to Christmas?

Consumer uncertainty and bargain hunting define our new normal, and it might last two, three, perhaps four years. Who knows?

Recognizing that, most of us might be content to hold serve in terms of revenue this season despite a recovery that's starting to creep in on a fraction of a percentage point at a time. (Is anybody else as sick as I am about the term "green shoots" as it applies to the recovery?)

Hold the champagne

Amid this new postrecessionary normal, government economists (I understand thousands are on public payrolls.) predict the U.S. economy will grow 2% to 3% next season. Growth, any growth, is welcome, but this hint of recovery is suspect. It's hardly enough to spur the level of demand for our services that we experienced prerecession.

It's evident to all of us acquiring new customers is more difficult than ever. The prices we charge for

our services are stagnant (at best) and will remain so. What's new, right?

Competitive pressures have kept most of us from raising prices for years. Despite that, many of us maintained acceptable margins by delivering new services and products to our customers, increasing productivity and aggressively controlling costs these past two years.

All of that kept us going in the right direction in terms of margins, but it probably won't be enough in this new normal in which just about everybody has become a bargain hunter. Who can blame them? The recession hammered homeowners, property managers, and commercial and institutional managers. They're financially bruised, and they're wary.

We're in this together

We must be more aggressive about learning clients' needs and desires. This means getting to know as much about our customers (and their businesses, assuming they're commercial clients) as we can. Then we're going to have to be much more creative in meeting and exceeding their stated and observed needs and wants.

Beyond that, most of us would do well to improve our customer communication and hand-holding. We need much more of both.

Let's adopt a "we're in this together" attitude, especially in terms of clients' landscape budgets. What we do now can earn clients' loyalty for additional services and products when they're more confident of their financial prospects. Let's not get carried away, though.

Rather than slash prices, which could diminish our service quality, the better option might be to reduce services temporarily, continue to provide great service, and offer customer-loyalty bonuses.

Obviously, neither great service nor perks accomplishes much unless we inform clients (tactfully) of how their loyalty to us is beneficial to themselves. In other words, give a little extra now; earn back much more when our new normal is better.

Rather than slash prices, which could diminish our **service quality**, the better option might be to **reduce services** temporarily and offer customer **loyalty bonuses**.

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Reacting to America's housing bubble burst, sod producers are growing a wider variety of turf, trying to convince clients not all grasses are created equal, while squeezing the most out of their bonds with landscapers and key developers. » » »

EXPANDING INTO NEW TURF

BY RYAN DEZEMBER
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



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Workers harvest Magnum rolls of Tifton 419 Bermudagrass at CraftTurf Farms in Foley, Ala. The 30-square-yards of sod were bound for the Magnolia Grove Golf Course in Mobile, AL.

they're counting on close bonds with their best customers, generally landscape professionals and commercial accounts. And they're encouraging designers, builders and homeowners to think about front yards as they might ceiling fans or windows.

It wouldn't be surprising to see an architect call for Hunter fans or Pella windows in their plans, but not many specify boutique sods such as Bella Bluegrass or Celebration Bermudagrass, says Tobey Wagner, president and owner of Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions, which contracts with farmers throughout the world to grow the aforementioned sods.

U.S. homeowners spend about \$6.4 billion on their lawns each year, according to The Lawn Institute, a non-profit advocacy group. So, sod growers ask, 'What's a little more to make sure the most suitable sod is used?'

Dwindling demand

Sod farmers recently sold grass as fast as they could grow it. Deacue Fields, an agricultural economist at Auburn University, studies the turf industry in Alabama, where sod rivals cotton as a cash crop. In 2003, there were 69 growers. In a 2007 survey, Fields cited 97 producers because more farmers took up sod farming. But since the housing bubble burst, many of those growers are retreating back to row crops.

That pattern is reflected throughout the country. Farms that are sticking with sod are rethinking their business strategies. Craft Turf Farms has put more emphasis on renovating ball fields and golf courses and offers custom sprigging and seeding — niches offering expansion opportunities in a shrinking market, Craft says.

An old saw in the sod business is you don't put new grass around an old home. But by challenging that adage, growers

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IMAGINE BUYING a new house without faucets. Or suppose it didn't have a garage door. Maybe the front yard was simply a patch of dirt. The first two scenarios seem preposterous. But it wasn't long ago the third was reasonable.

In 1976, Robert Craft was looking for ways to expand his small sod farm business in Foley, AL. A builder in nearby Mobile hired him to lay a ribbon of sod around a subdivision's four model homes and sprig their yards.

"I went to the developers and said, 'I'll give you the grass to sod the front yard of these model homes if you'll allow us to offer that as an add-on to your product through you or to the customer directly,'" Craft says. "I don't think there was another home in there that didn't sod."

Growers in other states must have taken similar initiatives because sod

farming grew from a \$97-million industry in 1974 to a \$1.3-billion one by 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Much of that growth can be pegged to the housing boom. And the next government survey almost certainly will show shrinkage as a result of the sod producers who plowed under centipede and fescues in favor of soybeans and corn.

To make up for lost business as a result of the housing bubble burst, growers are focusing on producing and marketing grasses developed because of specific traits, such as appearance and maintenance. More than ever,

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COVER STORY

continued from page 8

and landscape contractors might be able to stir up more residential business at a time when few homes are being built.

Picture a neighborhood where a dozen houses sit for sale. In newer subdivisions especially, there might be little to set one home apart from the others.

“If you invest \$1,500 and make your lawn look better, your whole house will look better,” says Rusty Stachlewitz, program director at The Lawn Institute.

An industry's evolution

Above all, sod growers are counting on the evolution of their business to carry it forward.

“When this first started, there was Bermudagrass, centipedegrass and some St. Augustinegrass, and that was the turf industry,” says John Chapman, general manager for Craft Turf Farms. “In the mid '90s, many new varieties came out.”

Universities and private companies

have scoured the globe to identify grasses with specific traits, often spending years to hybridize and test patent varieties before releasing them to farmers who pay a royalty for each square yard sold.

Now, there's Bermudagrasses that can tolerate shade, centipedegrasses that won't redden, and a bluegrass that can be sprigged and will flourish from Georgia up into Canada. Next year, Sod Solutions plans to introduce its Discovery Bermudagrass, which requires almost no mowing.

“From the onset, we recognized any type of consumer good goes through stages,” Wagner says, citing the evolution of Nike running and athletic shoes. “Ornamental plants, trees, shrubs — they've all gone through that. We have to do the same with lawns now.”

In the sod realm, there are grasses that only grow sideways, grasses that survive linebackers' cleats, grasses that

remain lush in almost complete shade. And as much work as it has been to develop say, Discovery Bermuda, which blends an Australian variety with one from the Netherlands, growers aren't finished because they have to let their customers know new varieties exist.

“That's one thing landscapers just don't know,” Stachlewitz says. “You're not stuck with the regional grass of choice. There's more choices out there.”

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Tobey Wagner, owner of Mount Pleasant, SC-based Sod Solutions, contracts with sod farms across the globe that grow all types of boutique varieties.



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