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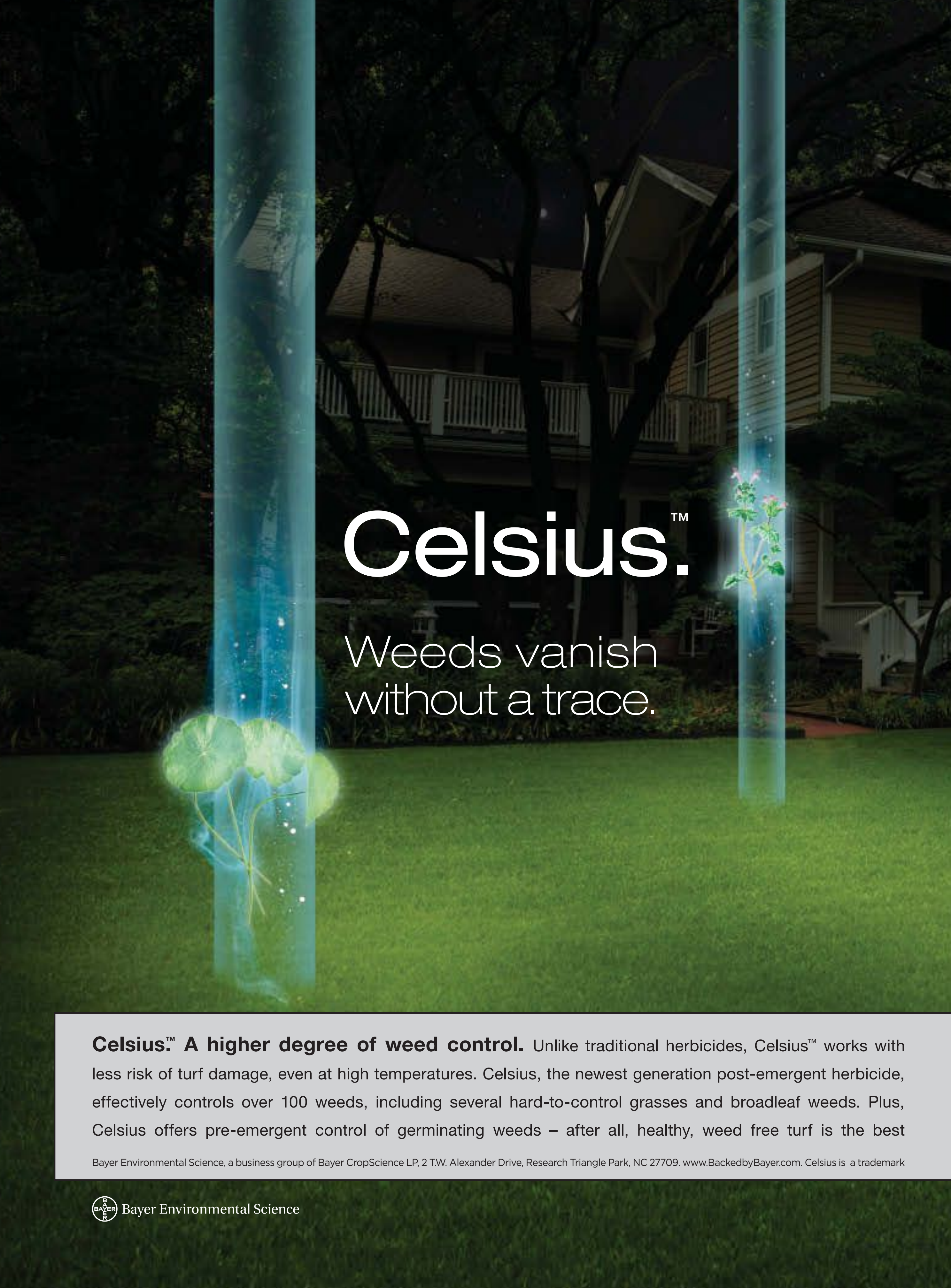
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KEVIN KEHOE | The author is the owner-manager of 3PG Consulting. Contact him at kkehoe@earthlink.net.

Memo: The rules have changed

I like watching professional poker on TV. It is especially interesting to me that the young guns consistently beat the experienced pros. I think it's because the younger guys are not playing the same game as the older guys, and somehow the old pros missed the memo explaining the rules of the game had changed.

Something similar is happening in landscape contracting. The rules of the game are changing. Yet too many contractors insist on playing by the old rules.

The research on pricing is clear: In almost every market, prices have fallen by nearly 25% over the past five years. The forecast is for an additional 20%. This one reality — driven by declining commercial and residential spending and an increased supply of contractors — will affect every contractor's planning, budgeting and management processes. Everyone will need to relearn how to make money in this kind of business environment. The old rules provide little guidance. Here's my take on the new ones.

1 Volume is more important than gross profit margin percentage.

Too many contractors fixate on gross profit percentage when bidding work, when the game has shifted to gross profit dollars. The new game calls for:

› Rebuilding your pricing model to work on lower margins on some services and higher margins on others;

› Addressing your product and service deliverables by refining scope and frequencies; and

› Investing more in marketing and sales.

2 Reduced overhead staffing is required for new revenue volume.

In other words, what once required three people, two must now handle. Too many contractors are locked into inefficient structures where people wear too many hats. The new game calls for:

› Reconfiguring your organization chart;

› Creating more, not less, job specialization, to establish clearer and greater accountability; and

› Migrating to performance-based pay schemes that hinge on closely tracked revenue and gross profit dollar volume.

3 There is simply too much paper — and too little information — in most contracting businesses.

The only way to reduce staffing requirements is to lighten the administrative workload of sales, service and operations management people. The new game calls for:

› Identifying the "Three Key Reports" that enable managers to manage;

› Upgrading software to SQL database systems that have superior integration of information and easy-to-manage, real-time reporting; and

› Investing in a customer relationship management (CRM) system to aid the sales force in managing the sales cycle.

As much as we hanker for them, we are not returning to the "good old days" — this year or next. We must all learn the new rules, no matter how scary and different they might seem.

The alternative is to resist these changes, and like the old poker pros, consistently get beaten by the younger guns. The good news, though, is that learning new tricks can be immensely rewarding — even for old dogs.

The good news, though, is that **learning new tricks** can be **immensely rewarding** — even for old dogs.


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LM'S OPERATOR OF THE MONTH » **BY RON HALL**

For more than 30 years, Spring-Green has been beautifying America's neighborhood lawns and landscapes — and **Ted Hofer**, who soon will take over the reins as CEO of his family's business, says he is proud to stand behind his company's work. "We take our commitment to our community seriously," he says. "That includes offering the highest-quality service performed in an environmentally responsible manner by trained, licensed technicians."

Ted, you were two years old when your father acquired and began operating Spring-Green's third franchise in 1977. What are your earliest memories of the lawn care business? "My earliest memories probably deal more with the business than specifically lawn care. The commitment by my dad and mom from the beginning was amazing. I was able see firsthand the life investment it takes for a start-up business to succeed. Working nights and weekends was the norm. It's amazing to think about the life lessons that were learned at such a young age."

Tell us about your formal education, and how that prepared you to own and operate a UPS franchise location and, now, to lead Spring-Green Lawn Care. "I have a degree in finance from the University of Illinois. My degree has really helped me at Spring-Green as I drive initiatives to improve the independent unit economics. Since I've been here, we've become committed to focusing our support on the bottom-line performance of our franchise owners.

"My time as a UPS Store franchisee showed me the importance of finding the right balance between financial planning and operational execution — the strongest plan in the world isn't worth much if it's not executed properly. My financial background will be very important as I begin my new role at Spring-Green, but I've found through my time in various companies that regardless of the size of the business, its success will come down to how well the organization executes its plan."

Was there a defining moment or incident that convinced you that returning to the lawn care industry was the right path to take for you? "As a franchisee in another system, I felt my experience would add to the Spring-Green Support Center staff. But it was Spring-Green's recommitment to growth through its independently owned franchises that was very attractive to me. I also really looked forward to getting back into lawn care and the opportunity to be part of a scalable business that gives franchise owners the chance to enjoy the benefits of being part of the lawn care industry: the flexibility of schedule, the high customer retention rates and high profit margins."

Describe your management style as the leader of Spring-Green, and what the company's franchisees can expect from you. "During my dad's last few years as CEO, he set a clear course for Spring-Green's long-term vision. I plan to continue down that path, focusing on maintaining and further building a world-class franchising organization. At Spring-Green, my style has been to empower our employees. We have an incredibly knowledgeable staff composed of both industry veterans and outside thinkers. In addition to this, our franchise owners can expect the continuation of my dad's open-door policy."

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY: Spring-Green Lawn Care, headquartered in Plainfield, IL

FOUNDED: 1977

TITLE: Vice President; On July 1, will become CEO

NUMBER OF LOCATIONS: More than 75 franchisees who operate 120 territories in 26 states; there are also five company-owned locations

SERVICES OFFERED: Lawn fertilization, weed control, tree/lawn care and more.

HOBBIES: Golf, watching movies and sports (he's an Indianapolis Colts season ticketholder). "I have been driving with my dad from Indy to Chicago for Colts games for 19 years."

FAMILY: Single, living in Chicago. Dad (Tom), Mom (Sue), sister (Laurie), brother-in-law (Mark) and two nieces (Emily and Mia) all live in Naperville, IL.

WEBSITE: Spring-Green.com

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DOLLARWEED/PENNYWORT

Hydrocotyle spp.

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- Green, glossy leaves, round in shape with scalloped edges.
- Long, slender petiole is attached to the center of the leaf, forming an umbrella-like appearance. Not to be confused with dichondra, in which the petiole is attached to the edge of a kidney-shaped leaf.
- Clusters of white flowers form in summer.
- Plants reproduce from rhizomes and seeds.
- Most often found in moist to wet sites or anywhere moisture is in excess.

CONTROL TIPS

- Minimize irrigation. Most turfgrasses can survive with less moisture than dollarweed can.
- Apply a post-emergent granule or liquid herbicide when dollar-weed is actively growing.
- Dollarweed is a difficult weed to control for an entire growing season. Repeat spring or fall applications may be necessary.

SMOOTH CRABGRASS

Digitaria ischaemum

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- This summer annual germinates when soil temperatures reach a consistent 55° F.
- Offers prostrate growth habit, with leaves and sheaths that do not have hairs. Rolled vernation.
- It can be distinguished from Large crabgrass (*Digitaria sanguinalis;* see page 24 of the February 2010 issue) by the absence of hairs on the leaves and sheaths. Both species will grow under close mowing, but smooth crabgrass can survive and set seed at heights as low as 1/4 in.
- Seedhead features two to six finger-like spiked branches.

CONTROL TIPS

- When soil temperatures reach 55° F in the spring, apply a pre-emergent grass herbicide.
- Choose the formulation that works best for your operation. There are several liquid, granular and fertilizer granule options.
- Consult the appropriate product label for recommended rates for your area, as well as reseeding and overseeding recommendations.

PHOTOS COURTESY: SHAWN ASKEW (LEFT); RONALD CALHOUN

For more information regarding these and other turf weeds — and related control technologies and tips — please visit www.DowProvesIt.com or call 800/255-3726.

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BRUCE WILSON | The author is a partner with the Wilson-Oyler Group consultancy. Visit www.wilson-oyler.com.

Change management key to progress

Over the past 18 months, we have seen dramatic changes in the economic and political environment. These seismic shifts have affected all types of businesses, and changed the way we will be doing business in the future. They also are forcing companies to reluctantly incorporate changes into their organizations.

For many companies, change is difficult — and for good reason. Companies have worked hard to develop cultures and values that are widely supported by their employees and customers.

Many companies are being forced to examine their business practices and adjust them to the emerging market. Examples include:

› Companies with construction-based business are faced with shrinking or shrunken markets, so sales are down and workforce cuts must be made. This affects not only labor, but creeps up into management and administrative positions. Many company cultures reward longevity and loyalty. Employees can see layoffs, for example, as a changing culture and value system.

› Companies have had to reduce labor to help offset reduced prices. Employees often associate labor cuts with quality cuts, and therefore believe the company is no longer quality-focused.

› Employer perks go away. Little things like less doughnuts for the office, reduced office parties, no bonuses, etc., are necessary to cut costs. But because they are highly valued by employees, they are seen as culture changing. "It's not the same company."

To owners, the changes are necessary for the health and survival of their companies — but so are their employees and customers. How does a company manage this apparent conflict? Here are some suggestions:

› Communicate a consistent vision of where the company is going and why the changes are necessary not only for the company, but also for the employees. A simple message of having to cut costs to save jobs, if delivered correctly, can help employees better understand the appearances of a changing culture.

› Realize some habits the company developed were actually bad habits. They did not appear that way in a robust economy because they were hidden by a good business environment that did not punish waste and other bad practices. This must be communicated in a positive way.

› All of the changes must lead to a winning strategy. Employees must be able to "see the light at the end of the tunnel." You must be able to articulate to the employee how this is better for him or her.

› You must walk the talk. It's not a good time to buy a new car, for example, for the contradictory message it might send. However, it could be a good time to buy equipment because the industrial market is depressed. If you do that, though, you must openly communicate the thought process and again explain why it is good for the company and employees.

The good news is some companies already have taken this tough pill and are glad they did it. They saw it not only as a humbling experience, but also one that will be good for the company in the long run. And they vow never to make the same mistakes again.

The good news is some companies already have taken this **tough pill** and are glad they did it. They saw it not only as a **humbling experience**, but also one that will be **good for the company** in the long run.

So, as owners and managers often have repeated in the past, with every challenge there are opportunities. Now is a great opportunity to fix things that just don't feel right.