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# THE BENCHMARK

KEVIN KEHOE

The author, owner-manager of 3PG Consulting, is a 25-year industry veteran. Reach him at kkehoe@questex.com.

## Selling small jobs

**W**e all want to increase sales, but too often we complicate the process. This is especially true of the small job sale. I am referring to a job that takes a day or less to install. The standard approach is to meet the customer, take notes (or not), return to the office, produce an estimate, send it to the customer, then follow up or forget about it.

The problem here should be obvious. First, the process is costly. Including drive time, meeting time and computer time, it can take three hours to bid a three-hour job. At an hourly cost of \$100 for a salesperson's time, that's \$300. For a busy salesperson, this approach is a huge time waster.

Second, the process is frustrating for the customer. You appear and they get excited. You disappear and they wonder when you will return. They call you and you promise to get right on it. Then they give up and call another guy. For the customer, this approach is a big source of dissatisfaction.

Why do we do this? We do it because we must put everything into our "system," and we don't have the confidence to price it on the spot because the boss will kill us if we sell too low.

So, how should it be done? Simple: Price it and get a decision on the spot. This will make the customer happier, save you time and conserve computer server space.

### Simple minimum pricing

Set up a pricing model based on a minimum quarter-day, half-day and full-day install. Figure 1 provides an example for a typical planting job, with formulas for calculation.

In the example, a typical quarter-day job would be priced at \$445 for a two-person crew, given the

FIGURE 1: JOB PRICE CALCULATION

Factors	Numbers	Formula
A Day part (quarter day) hours	2.5	
B Crew size	2	
C Labor price/hour	\$35	
D Labor cost/hour	\$12	
E Labor cost	\$60	A x B x D
F Material/labor ratio	2.00	O / P
G Material cost	120	F x E
H Material markup	125%	
I Labor price	\$175	A x B x C
J Material price	\$270	G x H
K Job price	\$445	I + J
L Job cost	\$180	E + G
M Gross profit	\$265	K - L
Gross margin	60%	M / K

standard estimating factors for labor and materials for this company. I use 2.5 hours for a quarter day, 5 for a half day, and 10 for a full day to arrive at the standard price. This type of price will cover 90% of your small job bid situations.

### Simple maximum closing

While you are asking the customer questions, you "draw up" the job and material list on your Company Contract duplicate copy form, an example of which is seen in Figure 2. Then you assess crew size and time required to demo, haul, grade, plant, feed, water and clean, and write the price on the bottom of the form and hand it to the customer. If he or she blinks at the price, hold firm. If necessary, cut to the chase and cut 10% from the price (you already have a 60% gross margin in the job), ask for a signature and wait until the customer tells you "yes" or "no." If yes, get a check to start. If no, both parties will waste no further time.

Sitting in an owner's office a few years ago, I noticed a basket full of paper. He said it was all the bids he had yet to get to. There were 40 opportunities in that basket. Fully 25 were one-day jobs or less. I suggested the system outlined above. He sold 30% more that year by closing on the spot.

Remember, customers want to feel the process went smoothly and they got a good deal. Make it happen, and you will close more small job sales.

FIGURE 2: TYPICAL P&L

Formula	Factors	Numbers
N	Revenue	\$1,000,000
O	Material	\$350,000
P	Labor	\$180,000
Q	Total job cost	\$530,000
R	Gross profit	\$470,000
R / N	Gross margin	47%
O / P	Material/labor ratio	1.94



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# Lawn care's

Industry leaders share their best advice on adapting to the push for more sustainable services and practices while also overcoming the challenges from an increasingly regulatory environment. BY CASEY PAYTON



# new frontier

**W**hile the economy seems to be improving, a lot of companies are still playing it safe as client spending isn't back to where it once was. But the industry seems to be adapting and is responding to a storm of issues, including

not only a rocky economy, but increasing regulations and a greater demand for sustainable products and practices. Chemical manufacturers say that in order to succeed, lawn care operators (LCOs) are going to have to be willing to adjust their business to meet these changes. It's a matter of "adapting to survive," and it's something the manufacturers say they're already working on themselves with efforts toward more education and a stronger focus on sustainability.

The best thing that LCOs can do right now is to accept changes are occurring in the industry and try to get ahead of the curve, says Alan Whitney, marketing services manager for Agrium Advanced Technologies. While many might not like the changes, being disgruntled does nothing to advance business. "LCOs should continue to look for eco-responsible solutions that increase their efficiency and effectiveness, while ensuring their customers and communities are aware of these efforts," suggests Whitney.

Sustainability is certainly a hot button issue that's not going anywhere, and the industry's manufacturers are responding by inventing new formulations to meet those needs. "The reason for this is that there is a growing sense from customers/homeowners that they are becoming more aware of what is being used on their lawns," reports Reinie Drygala, manager of lawncare and agriculture sales for Petro-Canada Lubricants Inc. "Homeowners are becoming more aware of the impact they have on their

surroundings, and as a result are starting to ask more questions about control products and asking what they can do to reduce their impact."

"I believe most manufacturers realize sustainability initiatives are important to their customers as well as themselves," adds Roger Storey, vice president, turf and ornamentals, SePRO Corp. "Making a formulation more sustainable could be achieved in many ways. Some examples of a more sustainable formulation could be using recycled materials for granular carriers, reducing the active ingredient necessary by improving the formulation efficiency or reducing off target dust or drift."



**"Lawns need to be defended—they protect our environment from erosion and nutrient run-off, filter water and air, and cool the environment."**

**DAVE HEEGARD**

*Lebanon Seaboard Corp.*

## Proper use & training techs

Of course it's not just the product itself that contributes to sustainability. It's the practice as well. Proper use of products is an important component. "We stand by the 4R's set forth by the 4R Nutrient Stewardship," says Carrie Doza, senior manager marketing and communications, AGROTAIN International. "This best management practice includes: Right source- use the right product for the application to ensure proper nutrients for that area; Right rate-conduct a soil test to make sure the appropriate rate for the job is being used; Right time-make

your application decision based on stage of plant uptake, nutrient loss risk, soil supply and of course local regulations; and Right place-applications should stay on the target property where they are intended and not on non-growing surfaces in order to deliver the most value to the customer."

Many manufacturers have taken a proactive approach to helping their users apply product correctly and follow such guidelines. Companies like Dow AgroSciences LLC, say they work hard to develop clear and easy-to-understand label directions. Others like Agrium Advanced Technologies say they've actually worked with some of the environmental organizations to encourage proper understanding of current and pending legislation. And some are even taking advantage of opportuni-

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE CUSTOMER

With regulatory control on the increase and an industry shift toward sustainability, educating customers is critical. LCOs have an opportunity to give customers the scientific facts about lawn care. Here are the Top 5 things chemical manufacturers wish LCOs would tell their customers.

**1 Healthy turf contributes to a healthy environment.** “Lawns need to be defended—they protect our environment from erosion and nutrient run-off, filter water and air, and cool the environment,” says Dave Heegard, GM professional business, Lebanon Seaboard Corp.

Weed control is an essential part of overall healthy lawn plan, adds Patrick Bell, product manager, Dow AgroSciences LLC. “Weeds compete with plants and grass for nutrients and water. An effective weed control product can reduce the competition and help create and maintain a healthy lawn.”

**2 Organic or natural is not always better.** “Mercury and asbestos are natural and organic,” points out Russ Mitchell, marketing director for Quali-Pro.

And while everyone wants to practice sustainability, the definition of sustainability can be broad. “You could use one of the new herbicides that claims residual control of broadleaf weeds and at first glance fewer applications equals more sustainable,” suggests Brian Rund, director, branding & marketing services for Nufarm. “Look a little deeper, you find the clippings from lawns treated with it can’t be composted, which is most definitely not a ‘sustainable’ philosophy.”

**3 Regulations aren’t new.** Roger Storey, vice president, turf and ornamentals, SePRO Corp., says he’d like LCOs to make sure their clients realize an important fact. “Plant protection products are regulated

by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and have been tested thoroughly for effects on human health and the environment.”

**4 Chemical manufacturers wish LCOs would tell their clients not to be afraid of chemistry.** “It’s in nearly everything we touch and when used properly, yields great benefits to ourselves and the environment around us,” says Brian Lish, business manager, BASF Professional Turf & Ornamentals.

It drives home the importance of customer education. Lish says LCOs should also be open with their clients.

**5 If customers are doing any of their own applications or maintenance, LCOs should ensure customers know what they’re doing.** Reinie Drygala, manager of lawncare and agriculture sales for Petro-Canada Lubricants Inc., recommends educating customers on their role in producing healthy turf. “Follow up with them and find out what’s working and what’s not,” he adds. “Work with the customer to find a solution that works for both of you.”

ties that technology offers. FMC Professional Solutions has used videos that show the proper use of new measurement chambers on the company product, and Petro-Canada Lubricants Inc., hosted a webinar led by some of the leading academics on the company’s product. Part of that webinar included detail on most effectively using product. It was recorded so that it can be repeatedly watched on the company’s website.

These are just some of the many efforts manufacturers are making to help with proper application. Still, it’s important that this information doesn’t only reach the business owner, but the technician as well. Dan Steltz, market manager, lawn & landscape, for Syngenta, says that the company makes every effort to communicate not only the importance, but the legal obligation of users to read and follow label instructions. He hopes that information is properly conveyed



**“We have a number of initiatives, including participation through Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE), that help us provide sound scientific information.”**

**BRENT RENFROW**  
Monsanto Co.

to the technician. “Business owners should be consistent with the training and licensing of their technicians and vigilant with continuing education on new products and application techniques,” he says. “And LCOs should also remember the best source of information about a product is the manufacturer. Don’t hesitate to ask for support for the products you buy. Good manufacturers provide good support for their products.”

And while it seems obvious, chemical manufacturers would like to remind users about the importance of following label instructions. It may seem simple, but many fail to do so. “I compare it to my own personal experience of recently getting a new company vehicle,” says Dr. Doug Houseworth, technical service manager, Arysta LifeScience Corp. “The thing is loaded with technology and I spent three or four nights reading

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## SUSTAINABLE LAWN CARE

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through the brochures and playing with the controls in order to maximize what I've invested in. It's similar to all the new pesticides coming out on the market. They're more technically evolved and in order to maximize the ROI for buying these things, you have to make sure you know what the capability is and how to extract that benefit. Take time to read through the company information on a product and make sure you understand it and how to apply it. Products are really expensive, and you can't afford to waste what you're buying."

Passing that information to technicians is also critical. Matthew Bradley, lawn & landscape market lead/herbicide marketing product manager with Bayer Environmental Science, recommends a hands-on approach. "It is important for lawn care business owners to train their technicians by actively engaging them in the daily business practices and making them feel they



"We stand by the 4R's set forth by the 4R Nutrient Stewardship... **right source, right rate, right time, and right place.**"

**CARRIE DOZA** AGROTAIN International

are part of the overall company," Bradley says. "For example, owners should encourage technicians to participate in CEU programs or invite them to seminars the owners are attending. Taking the technicians out of the field for a day to learn the ins and outs of the business, and see why it is important to use the products properly, and to be stewards for their companies can encourage technicians to properly use the products." LM

*Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.*



## LAWN CARE INNOVATOR PROFILES //

A quick look at top products and some timely advice from some of the most experienced suppliers in the Green Industry.

### AGRIUM ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES

**HEADQUARTERS:** Loveland, CO

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. Spread it & Forget it DRIVEN BY DURATION CR Controlled-Release Fertilizer
2. POLYON Controlled-Release Fertilizer
3. XCU Slow-Release Fertilizer

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

"Become more efficient. Fuel prices are continuing to rise with no end in sight. As you know, overhead costs make up the largest portion of any LCO's budget and fuel plays heavily into these costs. LCOs need to try and find greater efficiencies in their day-to-day operations. From route mapping and maximizing each visit to researching

and properly applying the most effective products and, overall, reducing the number of times needed to visit a specific site for routine landscape maintenance.

— Alan Whitney, marketing services manager



### AGROTAIN INTERNATIONAL

**HEADQUARTERS:** St. Louis, MO

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. UFLEXX
2. UMAXX
3. HYDREXX

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

Choose products based on economic, environmental and agronomic value, not just price. Do your research, talk to your distributor representative, manufacturer representative, university researchers, and don't forget to ask your colleagues. There are many online resources and forums to interact with other lawn care operators throughout the country. This is a great way to learn about firsthand experiences regarding use of different products or share your own experience. Utilize all of these resources to choose the right product for you.

— Carrie Doza, senior manager marketing and communications



### ARYSTA LIFESCIENCE CORP.

**HEADQUARTERS:** Cary, NC

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. ALOFT insecticide (four different formulations)
2. DISARM fungicide (four different formulations)

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

Watch what the competition is doing and stay ahead of them. Make sure you look at the latest technology and be aware of what it may be able to do for you.

— Dr. Doug Houseworth, technical service manager



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## SUSTAINABLE LAWN CARE

### BASF PROFESSIONAL TURF & ORNAMENTALS

**HEADQUARTERS:** Research Triangle Park, NC

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. Onetime herbicide
2. Drive XLR8 herbicide
3. FreeHand 1.75G herbicide

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

Position yourself for growth and diversify yourself to minimize any setbacks by finding additional service offerings for your customers that don't stray too far from your core competencies while providing additional value and revenue.

— Brian Lish, business manager



### BAYER ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

**HEADQUARTERS:** Research Triangle Park, NC

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. Specticle – herbicide
2. Celsius – herbicide
3. TopChoice – insecticide

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

The most important business advice for a lawn care operator this year is to continue to provide a high level of service in order to retain current and attract new customers. The economy will make it difficult for many customers and lawn care operators need to show their value and what they've accomplished over the past few years to help them grow their business.

— Matthew Bradley, lawn & landscape market lead/ herbicide marketing product manager

### CLEARY CHEMICAL CORP.

**HEADQUARTERS:** Dayton, NJ

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. 3336
2. Protect
3. Affirm

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

You need to focus on customer attention and provide a service that keeps the customer interested. To do that, look for new things and new ways of doing what you've already been doing.

— Bill Bewlay, CEO of Cleary Chemical Corp.

### DOW AGROSCIENCES LLC

**HEADQUARTERS:** Indianapolis, IN

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. Dimension specialty herbicide
2. Snapshot specialty herbicide
3. LockUp specialty herbicide

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

My best business advice would be to look at ways to expand their service offering. Add services like weed

control in plant beds to reduce the need for hand weeding. It takes twice as much energy and resources to land a new customer than it does to keep an existing customer, so look for growth opportunities with current customers.

— Patrick Bell, product manager



### FMC PROFESSIONAL SOLUTIONS

**HEADQUARTERS:** Philadelphia, PA

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. Talstar
2. Dismiss
3. Solitare

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

There are a number of new products (new actives and new combinations) available that will change the weed/insect control spectrum, increase the speed of control, and save time and money. Hence, LCOs need to try new products and evaluate how they can improve their business' bottom line.

— Adam Manwarren, turf & ornamental product manager



### LEBANON SEABOARD CORP.

**HEADQUARTERS:** Lebanon, PA

**TOP BRANDS:**

1. ProScape
2. LebPro
3. Woodace

**BUSINESS ADVICE FOR LCOs THIS YEAR:**

Differentiate and communicate. Make it easy for end users to see what's different about your offering.

— Dave Heegard, GM professional business



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