CHERYL STEELBERG The author, marketing consultant for the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a Green Industry PR veteran. Reach her at csteelberg@wilson-oyler.com.

A look through the marketing glass

Having trouble talking with your marketing team? We may know why. The first question can make or break the interview. "What is it we're selling?" broke the ice.

"Why, it's beautiful spaces, healthy living and artful gardens," said the new-to-the-industry candidate experienced in marketing but whose wilted houseplants clearly meant landscaping was a risky career move.

"No," said the marketing director. "We're in the business of selling labor."

Even after years of selling and writing about beautiful spaces, healthy living and artful gardens, despite the time-and-materials caveat, one thing is true: Landscape companies and the people who seek to market or promote their services are not always on the same page.

Being able to create and execute successful, persuasive marketing campaigns means being able to understand the full range of perspectives that people hold. Creative people, said an art director friend, think and deploy in bursts. They solve problems they cannot see. Contractors think sequentially and in tangibles. We are, he mused, circles talking to lines.

Communication styles and geometry metaphors aside, there are other disconnects when it comes to why it's so tough to get traction and find magic in marketing; why companies think their marketing is broken; or why the quest for innovation and new approaches to old problems is never-ending.

To kick off a new year and inspire a new way of thinking about your own marketing efforts, your agency folks or the dynamics within your company between those who provide the bang and those who manage the buck, we've come up with a dozen takeaways guaranteed to provoke, irritate or comfort you, depending on which side of the marketing glass you're looking through.

1. Marketing is central to all you hope to achieve. It's not a value-add, add-on or one-off.

2. A clear vision and cohesive, goal-based marketing program will increase sales and revenue.

3. Marketing fundamentals—the business objective, knowing the customer, having relevant quality content and sense of community—plus tactics, communications tools and creative direction must be aligned with strategic business objectives.

4. When you can point to your marketing initiatives and know how they're helping you affect your key business goals, you're on the right track.

5. Marketing efforts should be quantifiable, prioritized, given a timeline and tied to an audience.

6. Your business plan should have a marketing component that addresses how you will promote and position your company, manage your reputation, sell your services, communicate with your customers, own your message and grow your bottom line.

7. Marketing your company is an ongoing endeavor and an energetic, perpetual-motion machine. It involves imagination, preparation, planning, organization, execution and a nimble IT infrastructure.

8. A marketing culture that's technologically up-to-date, social-media savvy and demographically attuned will give your company distinct advantages.

9. Backing into a marketing program without a game plan or measurable goals will ensure a frustrating experience and costly outcome.

10. Marketing has a cost. So does new equipment. Both affect revenue. Often it seems there's a better plan for the snowplow than for marketing. Get to know your marketing people just like you get to know your supply chain people so they understand the demands you have on the job.

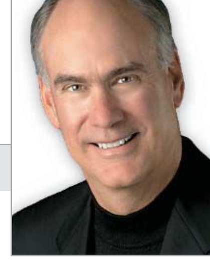
11. Brainstorming sessions can be great. They can be made greater and deliver better, stronger ideas with effective collaboration. Invite cross-functional teams to the table to share ideas in real time. Then triage, implement, track and measure.

12. In the absence of a single-source or in-house resource, bringing together outside freelancers—graphic design, content, social strategy, web development—and creating an integrated "ad hoc agency" team bundles collective energy for success; it improves project communication, delivers better, more integrated results and saves costs.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This month, Best Practices columnist Bruce Wilson asked his marketing consultant to take the pen. "In my conversations with contractors, marketing is easily the most misunderstood of all functional and financial priorities," Wilson says. Let's turn to Cheryl Steelberg for her take.

The author is owner-manager of 3PG Consulting. Reach him at frank@3PGConsulting.com. FRANK ROSS



Voila! You have a budget

OK, it's January. You should have your budget completed for this 2014.

You do, don't you?

Uh-oh, you don't, do you? Why is this budgeting thing always such a struggle? Would you ever go on a long trip without a road map? Would you ever contract a large job without an estimate? Of course not. And, it follows that you should never embark upon a year's worth of work without a business plan—i.e., a budget.

I've heard all the excuses not to make a budget: "*Frank, there are just too many variables. We don't know what jobs we're going to get. We don't know what the weather is going to be like. Heck, all our work could be with some !#?*?! general contractor, owner or architect. What about your dear budget then?!*

Another reason we don't plan is that preparing a budget is hard work. First of all, you have to get your head around the concept that a budget has nothing to do with prior year trends. Now, that statement is almost blasphemy. How can you possibly budget next year without knowing what we did last year? OK, I'll concede the point that some historical data is useful, but only if you'll concede that for most of us there's no year in our recent past that we'd ever want to repeat.

Thus, I give you zero-based budgeting. Actually, Jimmy Carter brought the term "zero-based" into vogue when he was running for president in the 1970s. It didn't work so well for President Carter, but it can work amazingly well for us.

So, where do we start? What's the most important line item on your income statement? Profit, of course! That's where you start—at the bottom and work your way up. Don't start with, "How much revenue will I do this year?" We simply don't know the answer to that question. The real question is, "How much revenue *must* I do to meet or surpass my profit goals?" So, I give you this process:

STEP 1: Determine how much *profit* you must make to cash flow the coming year.

› How much debt must you retire?
› What capital expenditures do you plan to make?
› What working capital do you require for operations?
› What's your tax exposure?

STEP 2: Plan each *overhead* expense in detail. This is the zero-based concept. Detail every overhead expense account as to what will be spent during the year and when. Just this simple awareness of how you spend money will give you new knowledge of what's happening around you and reap amazing cost savings.

Add steps 1 and 2 together to determine the minimum *gross margin* goal for the year.

STEP 3: Determine your capacity to perform work. You're in the service business, which means you sell labor. In this step you'll plan for the number of people you can effectively manage on your payroll with your existing supervisory structure. What raises do you anticipate? What benefits? How many hours will you pay your workers for billable activities versus those you do not bill for? How many of those hours will be paid at an overtime rate? This process will be the blueprint with which you'll manage the coming year's production labor force.

STEP 4: Determine what backlog you have by type of work for the coming year. Backlog is the work you've sold less that which you've performed. In installation, you should have estimates for the cost to complete this work along with the remaining gross margin to be earned. In maintenance, this will be your renewal jobs less an estimate for attrition. Either way, with this step you'll calculate how much of your margin goal (steps 1 & 2) you've already sold.

STEP 5: Determine what new revenue you must generate to cover your remaining margin. Based upon how you price your work, you'll now calculate how much additional work you must sell to cover your net profit requirement and your budgeted overhead expenses. Add this work program to your backlog and *voila!*, you have a budget.

It's simple, really. Our focus is to determine how much work we *have* to sell—not what we will sell. It's a completely different mindset.

COMMON DANDELION

Taraxacum officinale

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

› This perennial overwinters as a small rosette of leaves. Seedlings grow from a taproot and begin to emerge in early spring, when soil temperatures reach 50 F.

› Solitary, bright yellow blossoms grow on the end of leafless, hollow stalks that emit a white milky sap when broken.

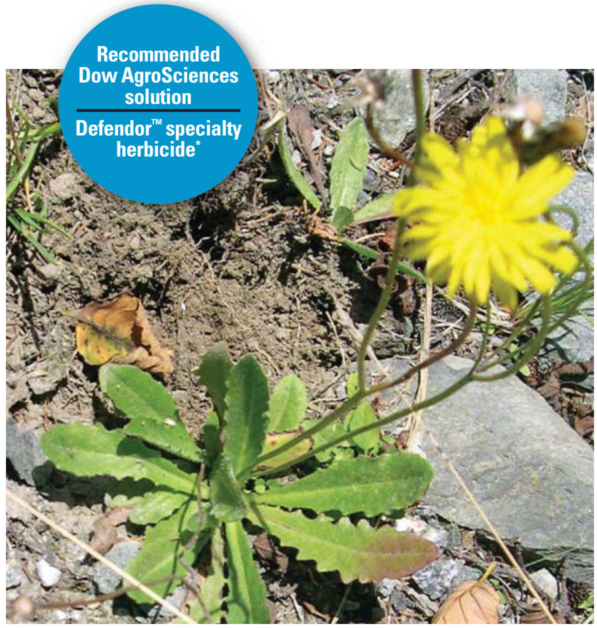
› It produces a puffball seedhead shortly after mowing, and seeds are easily dispersed by wind.

› Dandelions prefer moist conditions and soils, but thrive in weak, thin turf.

CONTROL TIPS

› For early-season control of weeds that overwintered, apply a postemergent herbicide containing florasulam to turf early in the spring, when temperatures are cool and the dandelions have not yet bloomed.

› Thick, healthy turf is important for managing this weed species. Properly mow, water and fertilize lawns to encourage healthy growth and minimize thin turf.



FALSE DANDELION

Hypochaeris radicata

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

› Also known as cat's ear/catsear or flatweed, this perennial weed closely resembles common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*).

› Leaves are arranged in a basal rosette; they are densely hairy with toothed or irregularly lobed margins. This is in contrast to common dandelion, which has highly divided, hairless leaves.

› Each leafless stalk has two to seven bright yellow ray flowers. Leaves and flower stalks emit a milky substance when broken.

CONTROL TIPS

› As with any turfgrass weed, proper cultural maintenance of the lawn will greatly reduce false dandelion's prevalence and presence. Properly mow, fertilize and water lawns to encourage healthy turf.

› When false dandelion is actively growing, apply a postemergent, systemic herbicide, such as florasulam, that will move from the treated foliage throughout the plant and into the extensive root system to provide control.

PHOTOS: F.YELVERTON (LEFT); TOM HEUTTE, USDA FOREST SERVICE, BUGWOOD.ORG

Dimension® 2EW SPECIALTY HERBICIDE

Defendor™ SPECIALTY HERBICIDE

CALLBACKS DAMAGE RELATIONSHIPS.

Callbacks are more than an inconvenience; they're costly and can destroy your business. Fifty percent* of customers who call to complain about dandelions will eventually end up canceling your service. Defendor™ specialty herbicide helps reduce callbacks by providing early season control of dandelions, clover and other winter annual and perennial weeds. For proven crabgrass and broadleaf weed control, apply Defendor when you make your first applications of Dimension® 2EW specialty herbicide. So spend time building relationships and keep the honeymoon with your customers alive. To learn more, visit **www.DowProvesIt.com**.

DOW® **Dow AgroSciences** *Solutions for the Growing World*

*Jefferson Davis Consumer Research 2012. ®™Trademark of The Dow Chemical Company ("Dow") or an affiliated company of Dow State restrictions on the sale and use of Defendor and Dimension 2EW apply. Consult the label before purchase or use for full details. Always read and follow label directions. T38-337-012 (01/13) BR 010-60828 DATOTURF2068

Scan this code for more information at www.DowProvesIt.com.

All systems

While visiting with his neighbor one evening in the mid-1980s, Roger Mongeon ventured down to the man's basement office to take a look at his business. The neighbor ran a two-truck Weed Man franchise from his home in Ajax, Ontario, outside of Toronto.

Mongeon, a chemical engineer with an interest in owning his own business, was fascinated.

"He was doing $110,000 in sales and his bottom line was $55,000," Mongeon said. "I said, 'Wow. I didn't realize you could do this with lawn care.'"

After months of analysis and research, Mongeon "felt good" about his decision to leave his decade-long career at Union Carbide Corp. and purchase a Weed Man franchise. In 1987 he moved his family to his hometown of Ottawa, Quebec, to own and operate his first territory in Hull, just across the river from Ottawa.

For his foray into lawn care and franchising Mongeon created a 10-year business plan—a practice he refined working in marketing and facilities planning at Union Carbide.

"My initial concept was to have a $700,000 lawn care company and live happily ever after," he said. "I felt that would be my life. I'd stay there and develop that franchise. I never would have dreamed it would have turned out to be what it has."

How has it turned out? In addition to owning multiple Canadian Weed Man franchise territories, Mongeon and his team, including daughter Jennifer Lemcke, have helped many other lawn care professionals flourish since they acquired the rights to sell Weed Man license agreements in the U.S. through the firm Turf Holdings Inc (THI).

With a combination of top-tier talent and solid business planning practices, THI has grown Weed Man USA to more than $60 million in total franchise system sales in 2013 since acquiring the rights to the U.S. in 1996 and developing an expansion strategy in 1999.

» WEB EXTRAS

Weed Man USA lives and dies by its systems. Visit the Web Extras section of **Landscape Management.net** to download the following resources from Weed Man USA:

- Goal-setting chart
- Hiring evaluation sheets
- Staff daily, weekly and monthly checklists
- Sample business plan/ budget creator

Entering the U.S. market

Though Mongeon's team is the Weed Man franchis*or* in the U.S., it's also a multiunit franchis*ee* in Canada through Turf Management Systems, which did $27.3 million in 2012 sales. Mongeon's Canadian-owned operations all started with that initial franchise in Ottawa 27 years ago. His first year there he grossed $123,000 in sales, losing $8,000. The second year in business, that location doubled its revenue and made about $50,000 in profit.

"That's when I realized it was going to be a great opportunity," he said.

In 1989, Mongeon and partners expanded into Montreal with seven territories. Four years later, with Weed Man's Canadian territories already sold out, Mongeon assembled a group of shareholders made up of family and friends to acquire multiple existing franchises in Ontario. That year Lemcke decided to join her father's business (despite telling him at one time, "I'm not ever going to join Weed Man"). She took on a yearlong management trainee

GROWING LIKE A WEED

Weed Man USA officials projected to have 148 license agreements and 316 territories by the end of 2013. Here are some key growth figures.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 (projected)
Revenue	$34.1 million	$38.6 million	$44.3 million	$53.4 million	$66.5 million
Revenue growth	n/a	13%	15%	21%	25%
Customer #	72,000	81,000	93,000	106,000	135,000
Customer # growth	n/a	13%	15%	14%	27%
Production vehicles	228	241	259	296	336
Production vehicle growth	2%	6%	8%	14%	14%

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

BY MARISA PALMIERI

GO

Weed Man USA's strategy banks on planning, processes and people. How you can learn from its model.

Despite telling her father Roger Mongeon, "I'm not ever going to join Weed Man," as a teenager, Jennifer Lemcke is COO of Weed Man USA/Turf Holdings Inc.

PHOTO: BRIANTIETZ, BRIANTIETZ.COM

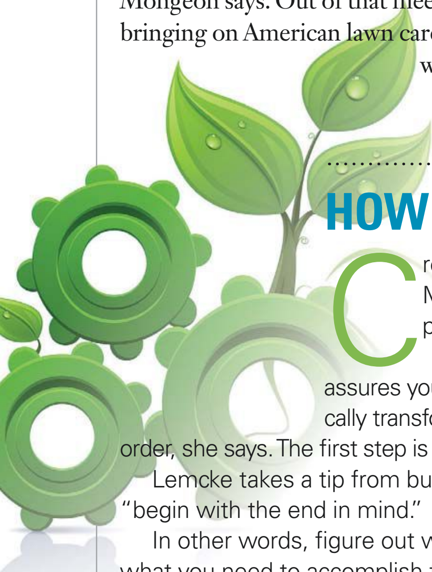
Weed Man
PROMISES KEPT

position in Ottawa, eventually being promoted to manager of that location. She and her husband, Chris, grew it from less than a half a million dollars to $2 million in annual revenue in six years. Today, Chris Lemcke is national technical director of THI, managing vendor relations and product testing for all Weed Man USA materials.

By 1996, Mongeon's sights crossed the border, and he struck a deal with Weed Man founder Des Rice to acquire the U.S. franchising rights. Several years later Mongeon connected with Terry Kurth, a former Barefoot Grass Lawn Service franchisee, who was under a three-year non-compete agreement after TruGreen-ChemLawn's 1997 acquisition of Barefoot. Mongeon didn't yet have a strategy for entering the U.S. market, but he knew Kurth from the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA, now part of PLANET) and wanted to pick his brain.

"I said, 'Come up to Canada, our treat, and we'll talk about some concepts,'" Mongeon says. Out of that meeting came the idea of a subfranchising model: bringing on American lawn care veterans to sell, setup and support franchises within their own territories.

continued on page 20



HOW TO CREATE SYSTEMS

Creating business systems—a linchpin of Weed Man USA's success—sounds like a complicated process fit for a business school grad.

Jennifer Lemcke, COO of Weed Man USA, assures you it's not. Systemizing your business can dramatically transform the culture from one of chaos to one of order, she says. The first step is knowing where to start.

Lemcke takes a tip from business guru Stephen Covey, suggesting you "begin with the end in mind."

In other words, figure out what you'd like the outcome to be. Next, define what you need to accomplish that goal, document the process, determine what metrics will reflect success and follow up to ensure employees are using the system.

For instance, when Weed Man USA franchisees began asking about how other locations were getting customer referrals, Lemcke set out to create a formal referral process. After identifying the goal ("create a system for obtaining referrals"), she began to work backward to achieve it, gathering information from multiple sources. "What's our process in Canada? What are our top 10 franchisees doing?" are the questions she began asking.

She discovered most franchisees receive about 4.5 percent of business from referrals, but some "superstars" have more than double that amount at 9 percent. How could all units get to that level?

She collected all the referral-related marketing collateral she could, analyzed existing data about referrals and brainstormed this topic from the customers' point of view. The conclusion was it's all about the technician, as that's the relationship clients cherish the most. Now, there's an entire process laid out for technicians. It details how to ask for a referral, what materials to use and how to follow up (with a thank-you note asking for another referral).

In December, when Weed Man USA franchisees attended the company's national conference in Florida, they went home with a list of best practices and ready-to-go marketing materials such as door hangers.

"We just work backward," she says.

THE SUB WAY

Turf Holdings Inc. (THI) counts its move in 1999 to recruit American lawn care veterans to be subfranchisors as one of Weed Man USA's keys to success. These are the subs who've helped build the business. THI itself serves as the subfranchisor for the regions not covered below.

Steve Russell and Chuck Russell
Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Southern Illinois
Brothers and owners of Eradico Services, a Michigan-based provider of pest control; lawn, tree and shrub care; and holiday lighting services.

Ken Heltemes
North Carolina, Georgia
Former multiunit franchisee for Barefoot Grass Lawn Service.

Terry Kurth and Andy Kurth
Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Northern Illinois
Father-son team; Terry Kurth is a former multiunit franchisee for Barefoot Grass Lawn Service.

John Sanders
New Jersey, Eastern New York, Eastern Pennsylvania
Former independent lawn care firm owner; sold to ServiceMaster.

Phil Fogarty
Ohio, Western New York, Western Pennsylvania
Former independent lawn care firm owner; sold to The Scotts Co.

Bruce Sheppard and Brandon Sheppard
Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., Delaware, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Northern Florida
Father-son team; Bruce Sheppard is a former lawn care industry supplier and independent lawn care company owner.

Jon Cundiff
Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Northern Texas
Former independent lawn care company owner.

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

The Power of Value.

You know the power of Prodiamine and the value of Quali-Pro. Together, that power gives you new Prodiamine 4 L — the easy to measure, mix and spray solution for outstanding quality control of crabgrass, goosegrass, small-seeded broadleaf weeds and more. Pour on the power of new Prodiamine 4 L. To learn more visit quali-pro.com.

QUALI-PRO
Quality Turf & Ornamental Products

Basically Better.

continued from page 18

What was the draw for the subfranchisors, many of whom had already operated—and sold—successful lawn care companies of their own? "If they own a part of it and get a chunk of the royalty payments, they'll be inside Weed Man (USA), but it will be their own business," Mongeon says of the idea. "That's how we sold it: An opportunity to leverage their expertise in a way they couldn't on their own."

This strategy resonated with many of the lawn care professionals Mongeon and Kurth approached to join the company, and it set Weed Man USA apart from the existing franchise systems in the market. By 2001, THI added as many subfranchisors as it wanted to, peaking at 13. THI has since bought back three subfranchise areas, with those former subs staying on as franchisees.

"Terry's Rolodex was very important," says Mongeon, as were his own acquaintances from PLCAA. Although, every potential sub his team approached initially wasn't a good cultural fit.

"For us, the selection process was very key to our success," says Lemcke, who today serves as COO of THI.

PHOTO: BRIAN TIETZ, BRIANTIETZ.COM

Systems, plan are the secret

As a franchisee in Canada, Mongeon's business grew fast, fueled primarily by passion, Lemcke says. But that approach only works for so long. "There's a time you get tired and say, 'I don't know if I can do this.' You have a choice of going backward or stopping growth, but that's not where we wanted to go," she says. "We wanted to continue to grow our business."

The tipping point for Mongeon's Canadian franchise group came around 1998. It needed to institute standard processes or risk burnout or stalled growth. Lemcke was integral to creating these procedures for business areas such as hiring, door-to-door marketing and more. (See sidebar, "How to create systems.") Today those processes, coupled with the annual business plan template Mongeon first developed, are the hallmark of Weed Man USA's operations.

"If you start off with great people and you stick with your commitment to taking care of your customers—what Des Rice brought to Weed Man—and then you instill this cultural way of looking at your business through a business plan, that's the heart of the franchise system we brought to the U.S.," Mongeon says. "Through that we use people and systems to make sure once you develop the business plan, you can execute the plan."

More about that plan: It's a document each franchisee creates during a two-and-a-half-day meeting in the fall for the following year. It's not merely a budget. It includes a zero-based budget, marketing tactics, hiring, equipment buying and more—all laid out with a schedule for the year.

"Our franchisees are totally committed to it," Mongeon says. "They look at the business plan and systems as being the core."

HISTORY OF WEED MAN USA

1970
Des and Brenda Rice found Weed Man in Canada.

1976
Weed Man begins franchising in Canada.

1986
Roger Mongeon purchases first Weed Man franchise in Hull, Quebec.

1989
Mongeon adds seven more territories in Montreal, Quebec.

1992
Weed Man sells out territories in Canada.

1993
Mongeon leads a group of family-and-friend shareholders and expands into Ontario, acquiring multiple franchises. Future Weed Man USA COO Jennifer Lemcke joins her father's Ottawa, Quebec, location.

1996
Weed Man awards Mongeon's Turf Holdings Inc. (THI) the master franchise rights to the U.S., creating Weed Man USA.

1999
THI adopts a subfranchising model to expand into the U.S.