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BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turfgrass Producers International

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A Mountain of Opportunities...

...await all members at the 2002 TPI
Summer Convention and Field Days!

Being able to experience firsthand the latest in equipment, supplies and services—and discuss needs and solutions with company representatives—is always the primary motive for attending this once-a-year event. And, with this year's revised format, there are even more reasons to attend. Consider, for instance, the following list of benefits.

From a business perspective, the event's format has been created to:

- ◆ Give attendees more quality time with exhibitors to discuss needs and solutions
- ◆ Increase the value of your convention dollars through more attendee/exhibitor contact
- ◆ Include more options for learning, networking and conducting business
- ◆ Provide excellent business expense for tax purposes

From a purely fun perspective, attendees can look forward to:

- ◆ An exciting carnival evening on the farm with food, fun and games for "kids of all ages"
- ◆ Numerous opportunities to renew acquaintances and make new friends from around the world
- ◆ Enjoy a western-style cookout up in the mountains while being entertained by a real cowboy poet and band
- ◆ ITPF Al Gardner Memorial Golf Outing—a tax-deductible, fun event
- ◆ Conference-related tours to the National Center for Genetic Resources Preservation, Colorado State University Gardens and Arboretum, Walker Mower Manufacturing, the Colorado State Turf and Horticulture Test Farm, and Anheuser Busch Brewery.

If you don't receive your TPI Summer Convention and Field Day registration package within the next few days, contact TPI. And by registering early, you avoid the last-minute hassle of reserving your hotel and events.



Tune In, or Be Prepared to Turn (Water) Off

Associated Press recently reported that roughly one-third of the U.S. is now suffering from drought conditions, with some cities in the eastern and western part of the country already tapping into their back-up supplies of water. Although not unique to North America, this situation should serve as a warning to turf producers everywhere to take a pro-active role educating their governments and general public about water conservation and turfgrass benefits.

Where do you begin, especially if you're not comfortable speaking to civic groups, the news media or government staff such as water-policy decision makers? Remember there is strength in numbers, so if you haven't already become part of a group (ie., other producers,

landscape contractors) whose businesses are threatened by reduced water use, now is a good time to join forces because of the collective wisdom and strength in numbers. Being pro-active in helping determine how water-use restrictions are implemented could impact your business' success.

What do you use for ammunition? As a group or individually, review your copy of the ITPF book *WATER RIGHT*, and select information you're comfortable talking about. Or, better yet, contact TPI for additional copies of *WATER RIGHT* to pass along to appropriate individuals.

In addition, as a TPI member you will soon receive a new *WATER RIGHT* CD to help you and your group. The CD contains easy-to-follow instructions

about how to use the *WATER RIGHT* PowerPoint presentations featured on the CD. And you'll find a section with high-quality electronic images of photos from the *WATER RIGHT* book. Turn to page four for details.



Big Roll Benefits Now on TPI Website

Because of the significant level of interest in marketing big roll sod, the *Turf News* article entitled "Getting Into the Big Roll Market" is posted on the TPI website under "Member Bulletins." The article can be downloaded, printed and used in marketing the big roll sod concept to prospective customers. Visit <http://www.TurfGrassSod.org>.

To Survey or Not to Survey . . .

Here's an experience that could apply to any business, including turfgrass producers. I took my wife's Suburban to a car wash. They did a horrible job. The first clue this was going to happen was when the attendant called me "Chief." Afterwards, I was given a survey that I filled out and, three months later, still have not heard back from them. The idea was great but not following up was ridiculous. Why did they even bother to do the survey?

Surveys are a great way to increase your business, if you are prepared to respond. You can literally make millions from feedback. But you must respond or not only will you lose clients, you'll also lose money.

A survey tells your clients you care and that you want to make sure they're happy. Happy clients are the most important element of a successful business because without them your business will fail as positive word of mouth advertising drops off. It's human nature for people to brag about the great deal or service they got from you. Word of mouth has helped Grunder Landscaping Company to grow from \$300,000 in sales in 1990 to over \$2 million in 1998.

When we conduct a survey, we really want to know what clients think. It is one thing to follow up on the phone or in

person—which we often do—but it is much easier to learn from their written surveys because your staff can see what the client liked or did not like. Often, an angry or disappointed client can become one of your most loyal fans if you make it right. In business and life in general, it's not so much what the problem is as how you handle it. Remember it's not what you say but how you say it.

At our company, we post good surveys around the office. Great surveys are rewarded with Grunder Bucks which the staff can use to purchase dinner gift certificates and other items. We also like to read great surveys to everyone in a meeting, as well as print copies to insert with paychecks.

A few more tips. Start out simple. Don't worry about complicated surveys that have numbers, etc. In fact, I know of one company that mails clients a letter thanking them for their business, along with a blank sheet of paper, a logo pen and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. They ask clients to use the blank sheet and write down what they think—it doesn't get any simpler than that.

Our Survey Procedure

1. When an invoice is processed, that generates a survey.
2. Approximately two weeks after the

invoice is mailed, the client is sent an original, personally addressed letter with survey form and a prepaid-postage return envelope.

3. When the survey is returned: A) If there are unfavorable comments, the president or a sales person immediately follows up with either a personal phone call or letter acknowledging the issues and describing whatever action will be taken. This may be accompanied with a credit voucher that the client can use against future work. Or B) If the comments are favorable, a second letter is sent to the client thanking them for the response.
4. The surveys are reviewed for any action to be noted for follow up—site visit, additional quotes, etc.—and the action is noted in the client's contact record and scheduled accordingly.
5. Surveys are also checked for any comments to use in future newsletters—with permission from the client.
6. Surveys are routed to front office staff.
7. Surveys are copied and/or posted for team members as appropriate.
8. Finally, the copy is placed in the client's file for future reference.



Five Sales Killers You Must Avoid

Most sales efforts concentrate on learning how to make sales. Just as important is learning how to avoid some common ways of killing sales.

Sales trainer John Graham has identified some attitudes and assumptions that can keep you from achieving your potential. Are you a victim of these "sales killers?"

☒ "I know more than my customers." Because you're an expert on producing turfgrass sod, you may think you're more knowledgeable about all aspects of your product than customers.

Danger: Although you'd never intentionally demean or talk down to them, unintentionally you may sound condescending and, without realizing it, make customers feel uncomfortable—even ignorant—and drive them away.

☒ "My customers know more than I do." Do you assume customers know a lot more than you do? In fact they may feel uneasy or even inadequate, although they may cover the situation with a bravado that fools you.

Danger: You may hold back the full benefit of your knowledge and experience, leading to limited sales.

☒ "This account is solid." Do you believe customers automatically turn to you? If you've served them well, it's easy to expect repeat business.

Danger: No account is ever safe. Don't let competitors in the door because you take customers for granted.

☒ "That particular customer is small change." Do you categorize customers by sales volume?

Danger: They sense how important they are to you. Don't treat them as second-class citizens.

☒ "I know my customers have confidence in me." Just because they order from you doesn't necessarily mean they have full confidence in you.

Danger: If you assume they do, you stop trying to earn their confidence. You'll do the same level of business with them forever because you're not working to develop the account.

These killers stem from how you perceive customers and how they interpret your actions. Being aware of how customers see you can help maximize your sales.



Marketing Tip

By David Millar
Red Hen Turf Farm, Inc.
New Carlisle, IN

How to Unravel the Mystery of Turfgrass Marketing

Finally, I understand what marketing turfgrass is all about. It began several years ago when I came to the realization that growing good turfgrass is simply not good enough. I needed better marketing but wasn't sure how to go about it. I read books, attended numerous presentations by "marketing experts" and talked to many other turf growers. I learned a lot and heard hundreds of examples that helped provide a basic foundation.

However, the true understanding of what marketing really is, and how to implement it, continued to elude me until I read a short article in *Turf News*. That one article on page 49 of the November/December 2001 issue, by John R. Graham, turned on more lights, bells and whistles in my head than I could believe. It was the simple and direct writing, combined with what I had learned in the past, that finally made marketing turfgrass clear and understandable. Find that issue and read it along with the rest of this article and I believe you will gain a better understanding of what marketing is all about.

There are three significant points to the article which I would like to expand upon. **First**, Graham lists eight ways to evaluate marketing results—I interpret these as guidelines for asking some important questions. For example, in question number one, Graham notes that an effective marketing program differentiates a company from its competitors. I found it helpful to turn that into a several questions: Who or what is really your competition? What makes you different? Make a list of your competition and how your company or your turf is different. For my competition, I listed other turf farms and hydroseeding operations. It was then easy to list how my farm and turf differs from competition.

Second, begin to think of your potential customers as targets, each with different needs you can fill. I divided my customers into different categories such as landscape contractors, homeowners and athletic fields. It soon became clear that my competition for each customer category is different. For instance, I compete with other growers for landscape contractors but I compete with

hydroseeders for homeowners. Although I hope to sell turf to customers in each group, I realize each buys for different reasons. I try to find out what is important to each type of customer and then tell them how my sod will fill their needs. For landscape contractors, I stress on-time delivery. For homeowners, installing sod means the homeowner will not have to clean their dog's feet off each time after it is let out.

Sending a survey to each type of customer is a good way to identify what their needs are. When you have identified each target type and what you want to say about turf benefits to them, the next step is to decide the best way to present it. Cable TV ads work well for homeowners, but a direct mailing works for landscape contractors. Yes, this is advertising but it ties in with marketing. And by all means, try to be creative.

Third, the last few evaluation questions of Graham's article deal with company image and customer relationships. Every company has a personality, whether planned or not. As owners, we tend to think growing a good product is enough. Employees and customers both want to be associated with someone who appreciates them—that is the human side of a business and I call it "personality." A good company personality is worth its weight in gold. Decide on your company's personality and promote it.

For instance, before you give a landscape contractor a hat, thank him for his past business and let him know that even if he buys a small amount of sod, you appreciate him. This hits points three, seven and eight of the article. You can't and don't need to hit every point with every customer interaction.

Handing out pens won't show how smart your company is but a good website will. When you learn who your customers are and what they need, you will be able to predict the best opportunities for increasing sales. Then, allocate your marketing money by selecting the best medium to reach your customers. Targeted, specifically designed advertisements will produce bigger results than ads that just say "buy my sod."



Shrewder Computing

Stay Safe On-line

A recent survey indicated most Internet users are aware they should take cybersafety precautions but many do not. This latter group assumes they are less likely to encounter security problems because they aren't famous or a member of a targeted group. Most believe the biggest threat to their security is through downloads or e-mail.

To help us avoid the most common cybersecurity pitfalls, a "Stay Safe Online" campaign has been formed by the U.S. Federal Government, in conjunction with the U.S. Chamber, tech companies and Internet security groups like CERT Coordination Center, with these tips:

Tips for Staying Safe

- ✓ Change your passwords regularly and don't leave them taped to your computer. Don't choose an obvious word like your pet's name or your favorite sports team. Passwords should be longer than six characters and contain letters and numbers.
- ✓ Use anti-virus software and keep it updated. Even though 86 percent of computer users protect themselves, 14 percent do not. That's just one of many reasons why viruses spread.
- ✓ Install a firewall—a protective layer between your computer and the outside world.
- ✓ Don't open e-mail attachments from unknown sources, or even from known sources but with unrecognizable suffixes.
- ✓ Back up your computer frequently and have an emergency start-up disk available.
- ✓ Check the security settings on your computer at least twice a year.
- ✓ Disconnect from the Internet when you are not using it.

These tips won't eliminate threats entirely but they will drastically reduce your chances of getting a computer virus or being attacked. For more information, visit <http://www.staysafeonline.com>.

TPI Action

'03 Portugal & Spain Study Tour

TPI's members in Spain and Portugal have enthusiastically supported the idea of a Fall, 2003 study tour. Many have suggested visits to their turf farms or other ag operations, as well as sights any group would want to visit. Details for a two-week tour will be developed in the coming months, passed by the local hosts for suggestions and then the TPI Ambassadors/Study Tour Committee for final review. Reservation forms and complete details should be available in late summer or earlier.

TPI Renewal Notices

For the third consecutive year, TPI membership dues rates will remain unchanged, while benefits and services continue to increase. All current members will be sent a 2002-03 renewal notice in the coming weeks, with the suggestion that they be returned immediately. Prompt payment will ensure that no benefits are delayed or missed.

Update all membership information when renewing to ensure that listings in the TPI directory and website are accurate and complete. Be sure to list email addresses and company websites that may be new or changed.

WinCon '03 Set for Birmingham, England

TPI's 2003 Midwinter Conference will be conducted February 26-28 in Birmingham, England. Crossing the Atlantic for the first time with this meeting will provide North American producers a unique (and tax advantaged) opportunity to see new areas, while at the same time making the meeting more feasible to European members.

Taking advantage of the location, a special *Afternoon & Evening in England's Castles & Gardens* will be hosted by ITPF, in addition to TPI's special education programs, exhibits and equipment tours. A post-conference tour is being planned as well.

To receive additional information on any of these items, Contact the TPI Office

Tel: 800/405-8873 or 847/705-9898

Fax: 847/705-8347

e-mail: info@TurfGrassSod.org

Website: <http://www.TurfGrassSod.org>

Water Awareness

Drought Practices —To Maximize Landscape Appearance

1. **Withhold fertilizers**, particularly nitrogen, on turfgrass; however, small amounts of potassium will aid in developing more efficient roots.
2. **Reduce mowing frequency** to minimize shock to turf areas.
3. **Reduce traffic on turf areas** as this will minimize wear and possible soil compaction.
4. **Adjust automatic timers** of in-ground irrigation systems to meet the plant's seasonally changing water needs.

—If Dormant Turf Appearance is Acceptable

1. **Eliminate all traffic on turf areas** including mowing, which will probably not be necessary because of the extremely slow growth rate.
2. **Adjust automatic timers to manual** or use hose-end sprinklers to apply approximately one-quarter-in. of water a week. The dormant lawn will turn tan, golden or light brown; light/infrequent watering will sustain life in the grass plant's crowns during this period.
3. **Minimize water applications** for all plant materials to the essential amounts needed to maintain plant vitality.



Business Management

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