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## Turfgrass Photos Available Soon!

If you ever tried to find turfgrass photos for use in your marketing materials, slide presentations, etc. you know they are either non-existent or copyrighted with big usage fees. TPI has corrected the situation with a new CD, *TPI Turf Shots*, which will be available soon. The CD contains 48 total photo images including: group shots of warm- and cool-season turfgrasses together; separate group shots of warm- and cool-season grasses; and a close-up, medium range and cross-section views of harvested turfgrass for the 15 species.

The new *TPI Turf Shots* CD will also be available to the numerous consumer and trade press editors, as well as research scientists.

# BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

## Turfgrass Producers International

Birmingham, England—February 26-28, 2003

## TPI Midwinter Conference

The 2003 TPI Midwinter Conference in Birmingham, England will provide attendees the greatest opportunity ever to gain a global perspective on the turfgrass industry and the world's international culture! Both the scheduled and many unscheduled event opportunities promise attendees the most exciting and unique Midwinter Conference ever.

**Education** is a top priority because of the ever-changing turfgrass industry. Scheduled speakers from seven countries are sure to provide attendees with a wider insight than ever before offered. Among the topics planned are "Pricing for Profitability," "Global Water Issues," "Turf Info on the Internet" and "World Show & Tell Panel." Speakers include F.E. (Eddie) Seaward of The All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club (Wimbledon), Motivational Speaker John Simonett, and Carl Chinn who will provide in-depth UK tourism information.

**Pre- and Post-Conference Tours** options are so diverse and numerous it was decided Conference attendees would prefer to schedule their own. To review opportunities, contact Eagle Tours ([info@eagletours.co.uk](mailto:info@eagletours.co.uk)) for five-day tours of London, Bath and Stonehenge, or Stratford-upon-Avon, York and Edinburgh, as well as two half-day tours.

On Wednesday, February 26, the Conference begins with a tour of the equipment manufacturer JCB's state-of-the-art facility. In addition to lunch, this tour will provide some unusual, one-of-a-kind entertainment no one will soon forget. Due to safety, only individuals 16 or older will be allowed to attend.

**Exhibition with Lunch** provides attendees and exhibitors more time than ever to meet and discuss the latest product and service offerings, as well as concerns, industry developments and news. The first session is Thursday, February 27, from 12:30 pm to 6:00 pm. The following morning's breakfast session is scheduled from 8:00 am to 10:00 am.

**The 2nd Annual ITPF Banquet &**

**Fundraiser**, with the theme "England's Castles and Gardens" will begin with a tour of Warwick Castle—parts dating back to the Medieval Period of 1068-1485—before traveling to the Birmingham Botanical Gardens where the evening's reception and banquet will be held. Attendees will have opportunities to purchase balloon prizes, and participate in silent and live auctions as the evening progresses. Each of the meal's four courses will be accompanied with entertainment specific to the entrées.

### Important Planning Tips for Attendees and Exhibitors

- ✓ To **SAVE MONEY**, U.S. exhibitors sending materials through GEMS to Birmingham, England **must ship those materials to arrive at GEMS by February 13, 2003**. Contact Jeff Shutt at Tel: 407/438-5002, or Fax: 407/852-0286.
- ✓ Check your passport and/or visa expiration date to assure it will be current.
- ✓ Be sure to bring 220-volt converters for any personal electrical or electronic devices designed for 110 volts. Be sure any 220-v adapter is also a 220-v converter; otherwise, your 110 equipment will be ruined.
- ✓ Do not expect personal checks to be accepted as currency in England. Plan on using U.S. dollars, British pounds, Travelers' Checks, or credit cards. In addition to the above currency, TPI can only accept personal or business checks based on U.S. banks.
- ✓ For events which TPI provides transportation, do not leave any personal belongings on any bus at any time.
- ✓ Wear casual attire, even to the ITPF Banquet because you will want to be comfortable exploring Warwick Castle and, later, the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.
- ✓ If flying into London, the England, National Express Coach Service is recommended over trains. ([www.gobycoach.com](http://www.gobycoach.com))





# Taking Care of Business

By Joe Land, MS, MBA, JD, COO  
Town & Country Landscape  
Supply/H&E Sod Nursery  
Markham, IL

## Dealing with the "Homeowner from Hell"

As a turf producer, dealing with the "homeowner from hell" can be turned into a business opportunity, with focus and determination on your part. Turfgrass, like any other product, will have quality control issues. Even if you and your employees are blameless, Mother Nature and the landscaper will supply enough variables to tilt the scales against you from time to time. The key to turning even the worst complaints about quality into an opportunity is to: 1) Stay focused on *who your customer really is* (i.e., the landscaper or contractor); and 2) Treat problem resolution as an important element of your *marketing strategy*.

When dealing with an angry homeowner, the goal is not to "win" an argument with anyone. Rather, your goal in dealing with the "homeowner from hell" is to demonstrate your competence in handling a difficult situation to your customer, the landscaper. Problem resolution should be a part of any company's marketing strategy. Your customers need to know that you will be there for them when they have an irritated homeowner in their face, that you will never "hang them out to dry" and that you are a dependable back-up when the crisis hits.

Problem resolution is not for the faint of heart, but I maintain that armed with a few of the following principles, anybody—no matter how non-confrontational you may be—can stick to a planned approach. You will not only get through it but turn what looks like a crisis into an opportunity to enhance your relationship with your customers. Remember it is your responsibility to take control of the situation and set the tone of any meeting to resolve a crisis. Certain members of my staff may want to break my coffee mug for letting you in on my approach, but here are some points to consider that will work well in nearly any crisis situation:

**Meet the Landscaper at the jobsite.** Do not meet with the homeowner alone. This serves two key purposes: you have a witness to what is said, and the landscaper (your customer) gets to see you handle the situation for him.

**Keep your "Cool."** No matter what the other party throws at you, refuse to be engaged in a heated exchange, and do

not get personal in your remarks. It sounds cliché, but the fact remains that if you get angry, you lose control of the situation. Your job of problem resolution is to stay in control of yourself and the situation. Staying calm and focused when your verbal assailant throws his best shot at you will leave him, or her, confounded and will tend to throw them on the defense.

**Never blame the Landscaper.** The Landscaper is your customer in this job, and many others. If the landscaper is at fault, discuss this with him in private, but never in front of the homeowner. Your marketing strategy is to support the landscaper, "no-matter-what," it is not to hang him out to dry.

**Keep the key issues separate.** Identifying what is wrong with the turf in question and what to do about it, are separate issues—keep it that way. The angry homeowner who is insisting on total replacement is trying to confuse what should be separate issues of cause and treatment, and wants to drag you directly to his or her desired, and expensive, result. Limit the discussion to probable causes and then use your technical knowledge to control a separate discussion of recommended remedial choices.

**Do not admit fault.** This may not sound intellectually pleasing, but the moment you admit fault, you will not only be on the defensive, but you will have given an irrational homeowner your own words to use against you if legal action results. Find a way to identify and discuss problems in the turf without admitting fault.

**Be "Big."** You don't have to give away the farm to kick in remedial items at your expense. Do so without hesitation. The benefit to your reputation and relationship with your customer is lost if you have to be beat over the head to come up with solutions. This is not a negotiation. This is a marketing strategy.

**Be "disarming."** Act pleasant but concerned. If you remain gracious under fire, you will maintain an air of confidence and competence. This is a powerful tool at your disposal. Use it.

**Never blame your own employees.**

It is amateurish to blame the guys on the farm for problems with your turf. Never, never, blame people in your own company, to an outsider. This portrays internal conflict and lack of management to others—not good. In the final analysis, their faults as employees remain your failures as a manager, so don't publish this to the world.

**Don't send just anybody.** If you cannot go on-site to deal with the situation, train someone to do so. This must be your personal representative who can be trusted to handle the situation calmly, capably, and according to the specific guidelines that you have laid out in advance.

**Do what you say.** This is vital. Do not rely on memory; set up dates in your calendar for any remedial procedures you have agreed to do, and follow through.

**Communicate.** Confirm the results of your on-site meeting with the homeowner and landscaper with a follow-up letter. Include conclusions about the causes, the remedial steps agreed to and who is responsible for each step. Stay in communication with your customer after you complete your action items. You must always let your customer know what you have done for him.

**Accept Criticism.** I mention this for your own sake. Criticism is worth far more to you—both personally and as a business person—than praise, so accept it with grace and style, and pay attention.

Never forget that your customer, and his client, are both taking their "cues" on what to think about you and your company, from you. When faced with problems to solve in a confrontational manner, remember what you are there to do, stay cool, and stick to the planned approach.

OTPI

### When Calling Inactive Accounts...

...remind them of what you did for them in the past and mention something you're offering that they might be interested in. Do not begin by pointing out they haven't bought from you recently—that would sound like a negative accusation.



## Marketing Tip

By Greg S. Douglas  
Sod Solutions, Inc.  
Mt. Pleasant, SC

### Boutique Farming

In the last several years, as I've become more and more involved in the marketing aspects of turfgrass sod, it's become clear to me that many farmers are working harder and harder to maintain the level of business they had in the mid-1990s. I've observed many farms that experienced unprecedented growth during the economic boom of the '90s and, today, are left desperately searching for customers. When the demand for turfgrass softens, as it does from time to time, even in a growing economy the farmer is left with large inventories and increased competition from other overstocked farms. The result, as everyone knows, is most often a price war.

Because in a price war there are usually no winners—including the consumer who is often stuck with less than high quality turfgrass—how can farmers avoid this deadly spiral of over production, high inventories, and softening prices?

One answer might be what I call "Boutique Farming." Boutique Farming is simply producing what you know you can sell for a given margin. The concept is not new and certainly not original, although I do think my name is unique. Several farms I've personally visited are either boutique farming now or have plans to do so in the near future. Naturally, boutique farming isn't for everyone, especially the larger "corporate" turfgrass farms, but it may have elements that others might want to try.

The premise of boutique farming is this: If I can produce a certain amount of turfgrass and sell it for a given margin, it's easy to know what my profit will be. Thus, by altering the amount of turfgrass produced, or the margin you receive, or both, you can quickly establish a formula for covering operating expenses and netting a profit you're comfortable with. Typically, in an attempt to increase profits, farms increase production acreage, even while they're lowering the price of what they're currently selling. Boutique farming moves away from the "higher volume/lower margin" business model and stresses a "higher margin/adequate volume" approach.

For boutique farming to work, there are several elements that are critical:

- ♦ The products or services you pro-

vide must be worthy of higher margins—in other words, you must distinguish your farm from your competition in a way important enough for a customer to demand your offerings (high demand turfgrass varieties, superior service, unmatched quality, etc.). We must always remember that price isn't the only important consideration in a buying decision; however, if it is with your customers, work to find better ones, or go around your customers to the person that's interested in the product...not just the price.

- ♦ Always strive to increase your margins—often times, producers don't make full use of production advantages available to them. By reducing production costs, for instance, margins can be increased. Since several "non-commodity" turfgrasses are priced at a premium, you may be able to couple production efficiencies with a higher-priced product, giving you the "Holy Grail" of margins.

Before you dismiss this idea as ivory tower gobbledygook, give it a real thought. Think about how your farm might employ this concept. Who knows, in a few years you may find yourself driving the truck to the "boutique" each morning.



### Customer Service Laws

- Treat your customers as though they're prospects
- View customers as partners
- Consider recruitment as serious business — and hire only the best
- Give your staff the tools they need to develop professionally, and evaluate them on what they accomplish, not hours worked
- Prepare for the inevitable customer conflicts with this thought: "It's how you handle problems that sets a professional apart"
- Invite customer complaints (and comments) instead of just responding to what comes in
- Nurture idea exchanges among your staff to get their views on how to better satisfy customers, and test what you think works, even your best programs

## Shrewder Computing

### Managing Customers Electronically

Electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) is critical to the success of any business with an on-line component. How well you respond to customer questions or handle orders is a big factor in ensuring repeat sales.

CRM elements range from telephone responses, to e-mails and website transactions. Most websites include an e-mail address to contact for more details and information or to place orders. Who answers that e-mail? Is that person trained to respond in a professional manner? Are his or her grammar, spelling and punctuation up to par? The quality of the response customers receive directly impacts their satisfaction and will help determine whether they recommend your company or warn others to look elsewhere.

Timeliness of the response is also important. Consider setting up your company's e-mail with an auto-responder that lets the customer know his or her questions has been received. It also gives the CRM designee time to find the right answer and possibly include text to cross-market company information.

Should you respond with a "text" or "HTML" e-mail? Plain text isn't pretty—no bold, underline, italicized, color, etc.—but it ensures every customer will be able to view your response exactly as you intended. HTML, however, allows you to use the "pretty text" as well as the ability to track click-throughs to determine which portions of your website are used.

Keeping track of the types of requests that are made is a good basis for developing a useful "FAQ" section for your website to reduce the flow of redundant e-mails.

Be sure to test your website's customer interface component on a regular basis to ensure it is functioning properly. Otherwise, lost sales and angry customers are the only indicators.

How well you pay attention to e-



## TPI Action

### U.S. Census of Agriculture Requires Completion

If your U.S. turf farm has not received a copy of the 2002 USDA Census of Agriculture form, expect one by year's end. This mandated survey provides the country (and particularly TPI and producers) a key indicator of the strength of the industry and historic trends. It is the only nation-wide marketing survey that reports the number of farms, turf acres and total sales.

TPI uses this statistical information when lobbying Congress, addressing market issues and projecting both membership trends and industry growth.

### Consider an ITPF Contribution, Especially If You'll Miss the England Conference

ITPF, the turf industry's only organization focusing on the specific research issues of sod production, relies on contributions from its members to fund important projects. This winter, there are two on-going campaigns that members can consider. The first is the "Annual Campaign," based on contributions equal to \$2.00 (U.S.) per acre. The second is the ITPF Banquet & Fundraiser Auction that features both a live and silent auction of items contributed by members.

All contributions to ITPF are tax deductible because of the Foundation's exempt tax status, but the beauty of either contributing or bidding on an auction item is that the deductible value can also result in a wonderful memory and useful item.

Because not everyone attends the Midwinter Conference, ITPF would encourage non-attendees to contribute an original or unique item to the auction. This might be the use of a vacation condo, a piece of art from a recognized artist, transportation in a private plane or other creative and fun non-farm related items.

For further details about making a contribution, contact TPI's Kirk Hunter via any of the numbers listed below.

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](mailto:info@TurfGrassSod.org)

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

## Water Awareness

### How Much is One Inch of Water?

One inch of water a week is generally recommended for maintaining a viable landscape (turf, trees, flowers and vegetables). To help explain just how much one inch of water is (applied or rainfall), consider that amount applied to each of the following surface areas:

- ♦ **1,000 square feet** = 624 gallons or 5,200 pounds
- ♦ **One acre** = 27,200 gallons or 200,000 pounds
- ♦ **One square mile** = 17.4 million gallons or 145 million pounds

#### One gallon equals:

- 128 fluid ounces, 8.337 pounds, 3.782 kilograms
- 15,100 drops, 16 cups, 8 pints, 4 quarts
- 321 cubic inches, 0.2337 cubic feet
- 0.83262 British or Imperial gallons
- 3,785.4 milliliters or cubic centimeters

**One cubic foot (ft.<sup>3</sup>)** = 7.48 gallons, 62 pounds

**One cubic yard (yd.<sup>3</sup>)** = 202 gallons, 1,685 pounds, 764.5 liters \*

**One cubic meter (m<sup>3</sup>)** = 264.2 gallons, 2,002 pounds

**One acre-foot (12-inch depth across 43,560 square feet)** = 325,851 gallons, 2.7 million pounds

## Business Management

### Turfgrass Producers International

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