

Oct./Nov. 2002



BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turfgrass Producers International

TPI Midwinter Conference—Birmingham, England Offers World of Opportunities


A "world of opportunities" awaits both TPI members and non-members in Birmingham, England February 26-28, 2003, when TPI's Midwinter Conference is conducted outside of North America for the first time in the group's 35-year history.

"New equipment and new ideas will highlight this conference," said TPI Vice President Ed Zuckerman. "I'm excited about getting to England and seeing some equipment we never see in the U.S. Plus, this is a genuine opportunity to meet turf producers from around the world and exchange ideas. Even though I'm prejudiced because I'm conference chairman, I think the total program...education sessions, exhibits, tours, social times and the setting will be superb."

The Hyatt Regency Birmingham, in the heart of this renewed city, will be TPI's headquarters hotel, with the education sessions and exhibits being held in the sky-bridge connected International

Convention Center. **Hotel reservations must be made by January 12** to take advantage of the TPI group room rates. Advance meeting registration is also encouraged to ensure faster check-in and a complete package of meeting materials.

In addition to TPI sponsored events, an independent tour company known by many TPI members...Eagle Tours...will be offering pre- and post-conference tours. The Feb. 21-25 pre-con tour will visit London, Bath and Stonehenge, while the Mar. 1-6 post-con tour will have stops in Stratford-Upon-Avon, York and Edinburgh. Eagle Tours will also offer half-day tours from Birmingham during the TPI conference. All tour arrangements must be made directly with Eagle Tours.

For up-to-the-minute information about the Winter Conference frequent visits to TPI's website are recommended. That site address is:  www.TurfGrassSod.org.

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Presenting: The NEW TPI Big Roll Marketing Brochure

The new "Turf Big Roll Installation Guide" brochure is now available on the TPI website www.TurfGrassSod.org. Once there, click on "Press-room," and then "Brochures & Fliers" where you will see the "Turf Big Roll Installation Guide" listed first. Just click on it and follow instructions to download and print it in any of three PDF versions in whatever quantities you need. Three versions are offered to accommodate an inkjet, laser or commercial printer which is explained in each PDF—the primary difference is a low-res version that has no color background which allows better readability when faxed.

ITPF Auction Needs Participants

The industry's only foundation dedicated to the specific research needs of turf producers will be hosting its annual midwinter auction during a special "Castles & Gardens" banquet in Birmingham, England. However, to be truly successful as a fund raising event, the serious participation of many members is required. Both item contributors and bidders are needed.

Already, several TPI members have volunteered to contribute items ranging from a unique stepplechase weekend in New Jersey to hunting and fishing trips. As a very special item, ITPF has acquired a one-of-a-kind hand-hammered silver bowl dating to the 1830s. This unique bowl was discovered in a small, out-of-the way shop in Birmingham and could well become one of the most talked about and treasured items at the banquet and auction.

Members are encouraged to be creative in their thinking and contribute an item to the auction that would be appealing to a wide and diverse group of buyers. It might include the use of a vacation home, tickets to a sports event or other unique items. Contact the TPI office for details about contributing to the auction. 

TPI Files Methyl Bromide Application...now we wait!

With the mailing of approximately one-pound of paper, TPI has filed a formal application for the critical use of methyl bromide after the 2005 phase-out.

It could be upwards of two years before TPI learns if its application for 1.5 million pounds per year of methyl bromide is approved for U.S. turf farm use.

Leadership Development—An Ongoing Effort

As my business has grown from a staff of one (myself) to 35 people, I became aware of many things that are important to success but none more so than the development of the employees. In order to develop your people you must first invest in yourself. Over the years I have attended many seminars and training sessions to learn and grow in my own leadership abilities. During the last several years, I began using consultants and specialized training classes to improve my leadership skills.

Our company's overwhelming theme is to continue learning and never stop growing. We use a number of systems to grow and develop our people and ourselves. Following are some of those systems and how we use them.

Training

In the green industry, training is all too often an important missing link. For a company to grow, it is necessary to have competent, well-trained individuals. We always struggled with finding the time to train when we needed it the most. In the spring when we had more new employees we were the busiest and always put it off.

About three years ago we joined "The Training Challenge" conducted by Jim Paluch from JP Horizons, a green industry consulting firm. The gist of the challenge was to consistently train each week for 52 straight weeks. By training consistently the same day at the same time, our company has developed a training culture. We start the week at 7:00 am with an optional training session to allow for cross-training. At 7:30 am we have a main session which includes a safety message and a seasonal topic. Our training goal for the remainder of this year will be to improve organizational energy and excitement, and to have our foremen and managers lead the training independently. With a well-trained and motivated staff, growing the business is a whole lot easier.

Goal Setting

We strive to teach our team members goal-setting, from the time they are hired. In preparation for the winter performance review, we ask each employee to look at and revise their goals for the

next year. During this review we check for whether the goals are specific, measurable, realistic and attainable, and we coach any improvements or changes necessary. At the next three quarterly reviews, we review the goals to determine how the team member is progressing.

Rewards

Part of an effective employee development program is rewarding those who have performed at a high level. We have several different programs in this area. During their four performance reviews each year, we review basic elements of performance to arrive at a percentage of their salary as a quarterly bonus. We pay out a bonus three times per year, with the last being the largest bonus. The biggest challenge is conducting the reviews and then recapping them in written employee records on time.


Safety

When we were a small operation and everyone appeared to have a lot of good experience operating equipment, safety was not really a problem (maybe we were just lucky). As the company grew, there has been an increased need to focus

on safety. We informally talk about safety whenever it is appropriate as well as each week at our training meetings. The safety of our organization directly affects our worker comp rates which could fluctuate as much as \$60,000 per year. More important is the need for everyone to go home healthy each day.

Advanced Education

As a company we attend several industry conferences per year. These sessions help give attendees a sense of what is out there and get them excited about the industry. We hope they return with a couple of good ideas that can be implemented, as well as something that contributes to their personal growth.

We also look for long-term growth programs to continue their learning. So often it is difficult to really determine the "take-home" from a seminar or conference. The long-term programs tend to do a better job of creating real change. We will begin working with an on-site consultant this fall with the objective of planning and orchestrating long-term growth. This should help insure we are on the right track with all of our programs. 

The Best Response to "No"

Sales can be an enjoyable challenge, although some days it can be tougher than others. You prospect, making numerous cold calls, follow up, make presentations and submit bids and hopeful modifications. Then, despite your best effort, the prospect decided to go with someone else.

Losing a big one is tough, especially when you've really put your heart into it. But how you or any of your sales people respond can render all of the hard work either a complete waste of time, or a solid foundation for future business opportunities.

To prevent those efforts from going to waste, consider this plan:


1— Listen. The prospect will probably admit to liking the product but felt compelled to choose someone else for very specific reasons. Listen carefully to

those reasons to gain some honest tips on how to improve the next bid or call.

2— Express your disappointment with dignity, such as, "Well, I must say I'm disappointed..." This not only shows grace in defeat but also a commitment to the prospect.

3— Compliment the customer on the choice. Never bad-mouth the competition because it'll make you look small and it insults the prospect's judgement.

4— Leave the door open. You know the prospect's choice isn't the best. Eventually, the prospect will realize that as well.

Make sure you remain the prospect's next-best choice. Close with comments such as, "If I can help, please contact me anytime. Meanwhile, I'll check in with you every now and then." And don't forget to follow up. 

Marketing Tip

By David Millar
Red Hen Turf Farm
New Carlisle, IN

Push'n and Pull'n for Sales

Normally, your big red, green, yellow or blue tractor comes to mind when you think of your most powerful pushing-and-pulling tool. However, when it comes to a powerful sod marketing tool, a digital camera out-performs any tractor. It's part of the technology that has slowly but surely changed how people buy products in today's marketplace. The internet makes it easy to tell people about your turf farm, the digital camera makes it simple to show them your turf. We're in a visual era and it's important to show people your turf. It's similar visiting your equipment dealer. You pick up a brochure and look at the pictures first because they tell a story. So why not use pictures to tell your "sod story?"

Digital cameras make it cheaper and easier than ever before to take good pictures. Good digital cameras have dropped to very reasonable prices. And there is no film to develop—no waiting and no further expense. In fact, as soon as you take a picture, you can review it and decide whether it's a keeper; otherwise, delete and keep shooting.

It's always a good idea to take more photos than you plan to use, shooting from different angles, close and far, etc. Later, when you transfer these electronic photos to your computer, you can perform minor miracles by cropping out unwanted portions, lightening or darkening the overall shot and more. I save folder images in different folders with names like "Harvesting Sod" or "Nice Houses" and such.

Once you have a supply of photo images, it's easy to figure out other projects that could be made better by incorporating them. I even have some great shots of a seeded lawn that is eroding soil onto the street. With those shots, I made a brochure that shows and tells homeowners about the risks of seeding, especially on hills, and helps them make the best choice of seeding or sodding. From those pictures we'll update our website this fall.

Our website is where the camera helps do the pulling. I'm quite surprised how many people visit our website and how many of its pages they look at. To encourage people to call, we don't include sod prices on our website. When

they call, we always ask if they need more information about our sod and, more often than not, they say, "No," because they are looking at our website as we speak. The illustrated site pulled people to call me. It works!

Along with pictures of our beautiful sod, we're providing our landscape contractor customers with brochures to help them make sales. It's amazing how a few pictures can add impact to a sales brochure.

You can modify brochures for different seasons of the year. In the fall, your brochure can point out to homeowners the long "muddy" wait for a seeded lawn to take hold; in the summer you can highlight weeds competing with seeds. When a landscape contractor or your sales people are promoting sod, I call that pushing for sales. Although subtle, the pictures you choose for pushing-and-pulling will be a little different.

Because it's so easy now to create a brochure, this medium is a great way to keep your name in front of both current and potential customers. This year we collected enough pictures to send several different brochure mailings to the same type of customers and prospects. This simple act reflects two suggestions made by marketing experts. John Graham, on page 49 of the November/December 2001 Turf News, pointed out the importance of reminding our customers "we are present and we have a product that will solve their problems."

Dr. John Haydu, at a TPI Midwinter Conference, advised that marketing should be consistent and that we should hit hard and often. Three or four brochures that have a progressive theme with pictures will help remind people what you can do, because builders and developers are too busy with their own business to remember what sod can do.

Most powerful tools work best with some accessories and a digital camera is no exception. Printers are better and cheaper now than just a short time ago.

If you think a powerful tool must be painted red, green, yellow or blue (or whatever color your favorite big tractor is), I guess you could always paint your camera!



Shrewder Computing

Writing for the Web

A brochure, document or statement that reads well in print (hard-copy) doesn't necessarily read well on-line. That's why a particular writing style has evolved for on-line content

The basic rules for writing still apply. Grammar, spelling, punctuation and all of those other often-forgotten English rules must be followed on every webpage. The difference between print and on-line content is the use of the active voice to draw readers into the site. For example, instead of writing, "Purchasing the company's sod will assure landscape customers satisfaction of quality," try "Purchase our sod for quality satisfaction!" It's not only shorter but also includes a call to action.

In addition, it's important to speak directly to the reader by using pronouns such as "you," "our" and "we." Referring to your company in those terms, you "humanize" the content by adding a seemingly live personality to the site.

Your site's "tone of voice" should also reflect your company's image. If it's a trendy image, you can probably get away with more casual language. It's important to gear your language toward your readers.

Because most readers tend to scan web pages instead of viewing every word, you should shorten your text and break it into smaller paragraphs set off by headlines and sub-headlines. These visual elements help the readers scan more easily to the information they're looking for.

If more than one person contributes to your website, consider creating an on-line style guide. A style guide should your company's preferred spelling, punctuation, proper use of trademarks and a list of reference books to consult in case of discrepancies.

Having a guide will make it easier to prepare documents for posting, reduce the time required to edit those documents, and ensure consistency and professionalism throughout your site.



TPI Action

Nominees Sought For '03 TPI Board

Potential candidates for TPI's Board of Trustees are now being sought by Nominating Committee Chairman Tom Keeven. The committee is working to identify TPI Class A (producer) members who are interested in becoming Trustees (for 3-year terms), as well as 1-year terms for Secretary-Treasurer and Vice President. The committee invites all TPI members to recommend themselves or another member by contacting Tom by mail, (Emerald View Turf Farm, PO Box 215, Columbia, IL 62236) fax (618/281-8123) or email (emview@wholenet.net). Other members of the TPI Nominating Committee who can be contacted for more information are Earl V. Slack, Ed Zuckerman and Daniel Huggett.

New Membership Directory Coming Soon

The 2002-03 TPI Membership Directory is now in production and should be mailed to all current members in the next few weeks. The updated directory lists complete contact information for all members, as well as information about TPI's benefits and programs, historical facts and dates for future meetings.

Water Right Books Remain Available to Members

More and more TPI members who are confronting outdoor watering restrictions or turf-restricting ordinances are learning the value of the ITPF book, "Water Right -- Conserving Our Water, Preserving Our Environment." As a benefit to TPI members, ITPF will send free copies of the book when requests are accompanied by a simple list of individuals or firms intended for distribution. The 64-page book helps to educate both water-policy decision-makers and consumers on this important topic, in a reader-friendly, yet scientific bases.

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

Communicating Water Conservation to a Community

- ✓ Keep your message clear, simple and apolitical—make it easy to understand
- ✓ Cultivate in-kind services from member organizations to leverage funds.
- ✓ Learn from each other to refine the message. For example, early xeriscape programs urged minimal turf usage, whereas current programs emphasize the strategic use of high-quality turf areas.
- ✓ Encourage involvement and contribution from all players to make everyone feel valuable.
- ✓ Encourage networking within the organization—helping each other freely benefits all.
- ✓ Whenever possible, use existing systems such as neighborhood newsletters, trade associations, 4-H, etc. to spread your message—more exposure generates more requests for programs and information.
- ✓ Take advantage of moments of opportunity—for example, GWWC supported the creation of the Georgia State Xeriscape Demonstration Gardens.
- ✓ Establish your group as one that gets things done prevent competition for moisture and nutrients
- ✓ Communicating conservation requires a sustained effort. 

Business Management

Turfgrass Producers International
1855-A Hicks Road, Rolling Meadows, IL 60008
e-mail: info@TurfGrassSod.org

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