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BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turfgrass Producers International

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Have You Received Your New TPI Directory and Website Code Words?

Featuring a great photo of the Green Velvet Sod Farm hosting the 2003 TPI Summer Convention, the latest *TPI Membership Directory* has been mailed to all paid members. If you did not receive yours, or if you need an additional copy (cost of \$10/copy), contact the TPI office.

Website code words, specifically the user name and password, allowing access to the Member-Only section of the TPI website have been changed. If you do not have this information, please call TPI right away.

Employee Recruitment & Retention, A Year-Round Task

Finding and keeping great employees is not the result of good luck. It takes a concerted, year-round effort, but it can pay great dividends, especially when (like most turf farms) you are heavily reliant on seasonal labor.

The obvious starting place is to retain your best employees...both permanent, full-time and temporary, part-timers. Ways to help ensure this include:

- ♦ Agree on duties, training and expectations
- ♦ Stay competitive with wages and benefits
- ♦ Offer employees ways to advance or improve their position
- ♦ Keep employees aware of changes in the operation that could impact them
- ♦ Quash rumors as soon as they start

While often over-looked, a key to quality retention is the elimination of those employees who aren't carrying their weight or are a source of problems in other ways. Nothing kills morale faster than knowing that you're working beside someone who is just sliding along or working the system. Having the knowledge and courage to fire those folks will only help those who are working and at the same time demonstrate that your company standards are real and enforced.

Recruitment is another matter altogether, but if your retention program is effective, you'll be ahead in the recruitment the game.

Current employees who are happy with their positions can be your best recruiters. (Obviously, the opposite is also true and negative word-of-mouth can deter potential employees from even coming onto the farm.)

To expand your company's reach, consider a "recruitment bonus" for those employees who help identify great candidates. This bonus might be a nice dinner or a \$50-bill, paid only after the recruit proves to be a great new employee.

Another source of potential employees is the local high school or vo-tech school. Not everyone wants to go to college and there are some very talented and hardworking young people looking for entry-level positions that may offer them a future.

For strictly seasonal workers, especially during the summer peak, talk to the area's football or wrestling coaches. Not only can you offer a way for the athletes to stay in great physical shape, they can earn some summer spending cash or save for school.

Look for specialization in your staff. While it's probably sexist to say, a lot of folks say that female mower operators are great. They are easier on equipment than many males and their temperament is really great.

WinCon Seminar

For other ideas and some technical assistance, don't overlook the special Pre-Conference seminar TPI is hosting in Santa Barbara. Labor consultant Angelo H. Mino will focus on the confusing and complicated issue of H-2A and H-2B migrant employees, as well as other topics. Pre-registration is highly recommended to avoid a sell-out seminar.



Water Crisis Resource Guide Available

A new website, www.wateractionguide.org, focuses on water crisis and ways green industry professionals can be more effective in dealing with water shortages in their areas. The site was created through the efforts of the recently formed Green Associations Water Conservation Council, of which TPI is a part. Information from the site can be downloaded in Microsoft Word and PDF formats.

Making Marketing, Sales and Management Work in 2004

If we listen to half the politicians, everything is coming up profits in the year ahead. Other polls paint a darker and far less optimistic picture.

An economic environment may be emerging in which there are no overall really good times or totally bad times. Some sectors will be stronger than others, but nothing really "sizzling" for most everyone at any time. So where does this leave us for getting where we want to be in the year ahead? What are we to do? What should we watch out for? What steps should we take if the economy turns out to be unfriendly? Here are a handful of thoughts and suggestions:

1— Stand with your customers.

Don't fall for the "glass is half-full" nonsense. The point being: don't be soft-headed, and don't listen to the politicians. Most important, don't be caught short. Prudence is always the best guide.

This isn't about optimism and pessimism; it's about reality. Example: Xerox's strategy with one customer segment is reality-driven. Instead of trying to sell the latest and greatest equipment, Xerox is working with customers, even suggesting they buy the equipment at the end of a lease to save money and to delay new equipment purchases until there is greater business certainty... and Xerox will be there to make the sale.

2— Don't keep trying to sell more to current customers because it's often present customers who are cutting back! In the recession of the late eighties and early nineties, many companies tried to load up their customers—a disastrous strategy for those who found themselves drowning in debt.

3— Only do business with those who take time to understand what you're up against. Understanding your business is helpful, it's not a core issue. It's figuring out where you are, grasping what isn't going well, and figuring out ways to fix it to be effective.

A marketing services firm was called in by a long established, well-known manufacturer with sales problems. Initial analysis revealed serious marketing deficiencies, including the company's inability to distinguish between features and benefits, and a seemingly incorrigible

tendency to talk about itself instead of focusing on the customer. Fancy brochures, a glitzy web site, e-mail campaigns and stepped-up advertising aren't going to solve these fundamental problems. It's by understanding what a particular customer is faced with that makes a difference.

4— Don't be timid. The pain of the last three years won't be forgotten as quickly as we may think. With so many others holding back, you are given an excellent opening. Drive through. "In Lean Times, Big Companies Make a Grab for Market Share," stated the *Wall Street Journal's* lead page-one headline. The sub-head put it to bed: "Opportunity Knocks." Come out and do it.

Is it accidental that Schick brought its new Quattro shaving system to market when it did? Schick is David attacking Gillette, the great Goliath of shaving with 80 percent of the market. Does Schick harbor illusions about beating Gillette? No way. But a pre-emptory strike that gives the company an uptick in market share is an achievable goal.

5— Give them a reason to want you. "Did you get our proposal?" "Could I stop by for 20 minutes and tell you about our company?" Such phrases generate the question: "So what?" Instead of ads that shout the name of your company and how long it's been in business, draw upon your expertise and your company's years of experience to help customers. You'll be welcomed because you bring something that's useful.

6— Don't fall for the simple, the easy, the cheap, like e-mail "blasts." Don't reject what takes time, effort and planning just because it takes time, effort and planning. Either-or thinking gets us in trouble. The Pew Internet and American Life Project study found that "wired baby boomers" split between hardcopy newspapers and on-line news sources. There's a place for print advertising and electronic advertising.

Or, take the "bash" staged by Harley-Davidson in honor of its 100th anniversary. It drew more than 300,000 visitors to Milwaukee where the company introduced its 2004 line of "bikes." Hundreds of thousands of tee shirts can now be

seen all around the globe. It was a PR event that took years of preparation and costs millions of dollars but was selected because it was the most effective approach for building the brand.

7— Dig out the gold by reading as many business and trade journals as you can get and not just those of your own industry. Reading the contents, you'll find the real gold in hot topics (often challenges) where if you can come up with solutions that make sense, you'll have a leg up in attracting customers.

8— Don't get seduced by your own ideas—or the ideas of those around you. Most companies are poor marketers because they are preoccupied with their self-perceived image. Look through your marketing materials to determine how much information is about customer benefits, compared to how much is about "the company." If it isn't all about the customer, it's worthless.

9— Guard the brand. Difficult times and pressure from above or somewhere else may mean taking chances.

10— Don't live vicariously. Forget about the "23 behaviors of the most successful sales people," because business isn't about imitating others with great images; it's about being real... being yourself. Even consultants have all the right answers... until something goes wrong and then they bring out a new book!

11— Tend to the details. When the Boston University Chancellor, Dr. John Silber, joined a campus tour for prospective students and their parents it implies the head of the nation's fifth largest private university understands the value of taking care of the details. If we skip taking care of the little things, we'll be faced with dealing with the big problems.

12— Watch out for deflectors. Reasons for not taking action, such as a new idea introduced in mid-stream can misdirect a well thought out marketing program, causing delay or misdirection, resulting in nothing happening, or like Motorola's delay in getting its photo cellular phone to market and still playing catch up.

For more information, visit www.grahamcomm.com



Marketing Tip

By Nancy Aerni
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Branding: A Key Marketing Element

Given much thought to what is branding? Branding, simply put, is recognition. *Webster* says the word brand means, "an identifying mark or label."

In the ever expanding proliferation of varieties in the turfgrass seed and sod business, branding is the key element to survival in this millennium. The product itself becomes the *company spokesperson*, with less emphasis on the components of the product, and more emphasis on the benefits of the total product experience.

Kleenex®. Here's an example of becoming synonymous with the product! Do you ever give thought or have you cared about what is in the Kleenex box, or how it was made? No! You just know when you purchase Kleenex, you are getting ultra comfort facial tissue! Now, that's branding at its' best!

Brand architecture is more than just naming a product, giving it a logo and deciding to sell it; it's the strategic organization, distribution and alignment of a firm's portfolio of brands (and sub-brands), according to Brand Theorist David Aaker.

What are we doing to put recognition in the minds of our clients? When branding is successful, customers walk through the door and ask not for a bluegrass lawn, or a tall fescue lawn, or a bermudagrass lawn; instead, they ask for a "brand" which to their perception embodies the best lawn they can buy for their area. Recently, several turfgrass sod producers combined forces to promote an interstate "brand" for their product lines. This includes multiple products of cool- and warm-season grasses, all sold under one popular brand identity.

Branding Expert David A. Shore maintains that you are not in the turfgrass business; rather, "you are in the trust business." He also says, "The company or brand that owns trust, owns the marketplace." With "faith, integrity and honesty at an all time low," he noted the emphasis on trust is primary.

"A brand minus trust is just a product or service," Shore emphasized. The marketplace expects competence, and competence and quality are only an auxiliary to a brand presence.

It's important to maintain the steward-

ship of your brand. Pay attention to details, answering the ever present who, what, when, where and why. Once we recognize these identities, we are in the process of creating a road map, creating a synergy for our Brand. Considerations have to be given in the turfgrass seed and sod business since we are unique in dealing with agricultural products, rather than manufactured items. We have an express duty to know what is going on in the marketplace—from pricing and product availability, to improvements and advancements—and what is being worked on for future development years down the road. Additionally important is maintaining trust and integrity in your products while constantly seeking new and improved products to keep your turf above reproach from the competition.

Branding follows through from the seed purchased and made available for sale, to marketing the sod and protecting your loyal customers. Some of our clients have their trucks painted, others always have their team members wear clothing reflecting their flagship brand. One trick I gleaned from a member of TPI is that he leaves a special "branded" yard ornament on each and every sod or turf order. Now customers ask for the sod with the "butterfly ornament"! Be in the forefront of your clients' minds with an identifying mark.

By creating a brand in the turfgrass seed and sod business, you also create the flexibility to keep your product on the cutting edge of technology. As improved varieties of seed become available, you don't have to put effort in introducing a "new line," you already have brand recognition.

In the end, by branding, your clients grow to trust you to make decisions for them. Their reality can become that they depend on you—trust you—to make them look good, smart, knowledgeable, cutting edge. Their job is made easy—another value-added attitude.

So, ask yourself again, what are we doing to put recognition in our clients' minds? (How will your competitor answer that same question?)

A customer is the only thing a business has. Every decision must be based on customer awareness.



Shrewder Computing

Privacy Made Simple

Assuring your website customers and visitors that the site is secure will help them to feel more comfortable giving their contact information and making purchases. Implementing top-notch privacy practices is not difficult, according to the *Privacy Made Simple* handbook, which is downloadable (PDF, 787K) free at www.uschamber.com. According to the book's summary, here's how to begin your privacy-praiseworthy business:

Step 1: Read the *Privacy Made Simple* handbook.

The Better Business Bureau and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce sponsor the do-it-yourself guide to on-line privacy management to help companies create their own quality privacy policies. The book offers a comprehensive look at the issues companies face and provides realistic solutions to real-world problems. Take an assessment quiz to determine your privacy quotient.

The *Privacy Made Simple* handbook covers:

- Introduction—Managing Privacy So Everybody Wins
- Assessment—How's Your Privacy Quotient (PQ)?
- Privacy 101—Notice, Choice and Security
- Privacy 201—Enforcement and Children's Privacy
- Privacy 301—Access and Onward Transfer
- A Review of Federal and State Privacy Laws
- U.S. Privacy Enforcement Agencies
- European Union Safe Harbor Principles

Step 2: If (when) your website is privacy compliant, tell it to the world!

Research shows that nearly nine in 10 consumers would be more confident making an on-line purchase from a company that displays a Better Business Bureau On-Line Privacy Seal on its website.

TPI Action

Methyl Bromide CUE Decision Put-off

Unable to reach a decision at their Nairobi meetings in November, the international group deciding the fate of methyl bromide use in the U.S. agreed to hold an extraordinary in March.

Frustrated by the lack of movement and political-based actions, there's a movement in the House of Representatives (HR 3403) to put more control back in the hands of the U.S. For more details about this legislation and how to get involved, contact the TPI office.

Labor Reform Legislation Needs Member Push

All TPI members are being strongly encouraged to contact their Senators and Representatives to seek passage of reforms to the seasonal worker laws. S-1645 and HR 3142 are the formal bill numbers. Contact TPI for complete details.

Update on TPI's PR Efforts

Getting the "turfgrass" message out was more effective in September 2003, judging by media placements which tripled from 2002. Because September typically is a slower time of year for placements, the numbers were analyzed to determine what made the difference. Results indicated the key was the timing of two critical articles in the consumer segment. Read more about this unique response in the January/February issue of *Turf News*.

TPI Awards To Be Presented

Winners of the newly expanded TPI Awards Program will be announced during a special ceremony at the 2004 TPI Midwinter Conference in Santa Barbara, CA. Four highly deserving individuals will be honored during the ITPF Banquet, Friday, February 20 at the famous Firestone Vineyards.

'02 U.S. Ag Census Results Expected in Spring '04

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

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Water Awareness

Is "Big Brother" Watching

The *U.S. Water News Online* newsletter included an article about satellite images being used to tip off state water regulators to individuals who may be irrigating with water they don't have a legal right to use. The Idaho Department of Water Resources is using satellite imagery—not so detailed that it can make out a house or a person standing in the yard, but it can show irrigated tracts of land.

Computerized water rights maps are layered over satellite images that display irrigated land as bright red shapes in a patchwork of greens, whites and yellows. Any red areas not surrounded by a water right boundary are red flags for water managers. From there, an inspection may begin, and citations can follow.

According to a water resources spokesperson, prior enforcement was driven mostly by complaints about improper water use, but now water managers have, at their fingertips, images of the thousands of acres of irrigated farmland across the Snake River Plain.

The department's water master for groundwater use on the north side of the Snake River in the Magic Valley said that some people think of it as "big brother," but most have been pleased illegal water use is being stopped; it can be a relief for people who don't want to report their neighbors.

Business Management

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