

Turfgrass Producers International

Austin, Texas, February 1-3:

Midwinter Theme: 'Getting Down To Business'

Selling more turfgrass sod, faster, at a higher price and being paid on time is every producer's dream. While the 1995 TPI Midwinter Conference and Pre-Conference Seminar in Austin, TX, February 1-3 may not have a solution to every business and marketing problem faced by today's producers, the diverse program will address many of the largest

questions, with real-world, practical answers. Themed, "Let's Get Down to Business," the seminar and conference will feature eight presentations with a business focus during the three-day event.

Pricing, marketing, profits will be among the topics covered in the seminar, while issues such as marketing to homeowners, environmental myths, price-cutting and advertising will be addressed during the conference's educational sessions.

This year's speakers will include not only a wide variety of fellow TPI members, but also several nationally recognized experts such as Mike Jackson of the Agri Business Group; Jeff Ball, author of several "Yardening" books

who appears regularly on "Good Morning America," and Dr. Alan Stevens from Kansas State University.

In addition to business-oriented sessions, the program will also include several sessions on the latest in sod production agronomics and slide show tours of four member farms, as well as exhibits and social events.

Registration materials, hotel reservation forms and additional meeting details are in the September/October and November/December issues of "Turf News," as well as previous issues of the "Business Management" newsletter. Additional copies of forms can be obtained from TPI by calling the toll-free number, 800/405-8873, or from outside the U.S. by calling 708/705-9898.

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CDL Alcohol Testing Is Mandatory Jan. 1

Alcohol testing, in addition to drug testing, becomes mandatory January 1 for all Commercial Driver's License (CDL) holders. Previously, only companies with more than 50 CDL drivers were required to test for alcohol. Legal intoxication for drivers of vehicles over 10,000GVWR is .04 percent, half the limit in most states for passenger drivers.

In addition to random testing, these conditions will also trigger testing: post-accident, reasonable cause, return to duty after testing positive to alcohol and six follow-up tests in the first year after returning to duty from a positive test.

Employers should have a written policy on how random samples will be selected to avoid potential legal challenges.

The Federal Highway Administration's published procedures and formal requirements should now be available at state DOT offices.

Special Features Make the '95 Midwinter Event More Valuable

TPI's Midwinter Conference in Austin, TX offers registrants a wide array of valuable features not found at most other conferences. Included in this year's meeting are:

"Early-Bird" Reception
Wednesday evening, to "kick-start" the conference.

"Meet The Speakers" coffees
Friday and Saturday mornings are a unique opportunity to talk with the speakers before their sessions.

Exhibit Hall meals offer high-quality complimentary food and drinks Thursday, Friday and Saturday, allowing registrants to visit with the exhibitors and enjoy a meal, without added costs, hassles or time delays.

Guarantees—Tricky, But Profitable

Most turfgrass sod producers offer only very limited and perhaps even restrictive guarantees for their product because of the many different ways people have learned to kill it! But, according to Jay Abraham, editor of *Business Breakthroughs*, a "Better-Than-Risk-Free" guarantee (BTRF) can make a unique selling difference.

Abraham suggests thinking about what a customer wants or expects from a purchase and then developing a guarantee that your product will produce the desired outcome. For turfgrass sod producers this would most likely mean a

beautiful, mature and immediate lawn. Abraham believes that customers will feel rewarded for using a product with such a guarantee to solve his problem.

A properly worded guarantee can become a unique selling proposition that can distinguish your business from all of the competition. Even those that see your guarantee and say, "Me too." are way behind your initial offer.

While not without its problems and a potential for call-backs, a turfgrass sod BTRF guarantee might read something like this:

GUARANTEE

Real Fine Sod Farms guarantees that its cultivated turfgrass sod will create a beautiful, mature and environmentally beneficial lawn in just days, with only minimal care and attention by the owner.

Provided that the owner properly waters the newly installed turfgrass sod, Real Fine Sod Farms guarantees its sod will out perform any seeded yard in the creation of a useable lawn.

If you are not immediately satisfied with your turfgrass sodded lawn, Real Fine Sod Farms will work closely with you to assure you the results you desire.

Taking Care Of Business

By Mike Ward, Eastgate Sod
Loveland, Ohio

Hiring Practices

As we in the turfgrass industry look to the 21st century and beyond, employment issues will continue to be one of the most significant factors impacting our success and profitability. While there are no quick or easy solutions to the on-going problems associated with recruiting, hiring and retaining the right employees, the following is a list of basic steps in the hiring process that will greatly improve your ability to successfully meet your employment needs:

1. Job Descriptions & Requirements: "What Do I Need?"

The first step in hiring the best candidate is identifying the specific requirements of the job and the skills associated with successfully accomplishing those tasks. Without a clear definition of your needs and expectations, you cannot hope to consistently recruit and maintain the "right employees."

2. Recruiting: "Getting Them In The Door."

A key step in the hiring process is attracting qualified candidates to your company. There are a variety of methods you may utilize depending upon your budget and the skill level

required of your candidates/applicants. The following is a list of suggestions:

- a. Traditional newspaper/ classified advertisements
- b. Employee referral programs
- c. Job boards, bulletin boards, etc.
- d. Employment services
- e. Co-op programs (high schools and colleges)
- f. Street and truck signs
- g. Mass media (i.e. talk radio)

3. Interviewing: "Asking The Right Questions."

The interview phase is a critical step in selecting the right employee. The interview process can actually begin the moment the candidate walks through your door. With minimal training, your receptionist can initiate the screening process while providing the candidate with a job application.

Pay special attention to the questions you ask during the interview. Your questions should be designed to target your specific requirements and needs. Be careful to avoid phrasing your questions so that you don't "lead" the candidate to the correct answer.

Allow time in the interview for the candidate to ask questions of you. Be accurate with your responses

regarding their duties and responsibilities because misconceptions which result from the interview will only result in problems down the road.

Always check references of job applicants. At least, check with previous employers for accuracy of dates of employment and description of job duties.

4. Orientation: "Starting Out On The Right Foot."

Orientation and training are key components in grooming and maintaining the "right employees." Unfortunately, these steps are often under-valued or over-looked. Orientation facilitates the rapid incorporation of your new employee into your existing team, provides your new employee with an overview of your policies and procedures and allows you to set the tone for performance and attitude from day one. Proper skill training insures the success of your new employee and adherence to company standards.

5. Maintaining "Keeping Them Onboard."

Coaching, regular performance reviews and continuing education keeps employees motivated and "on-track," fosters development of new skills, and keeps you in touch with your employee's goals and progress.

PR Program Expands Consumer Contact

Homeowners across the U.S. are starting to learn more and more about turfgrass sodding as a result of TPI's public relations and education program and its increased emphasis on the consumer market. Just in the month of October, nearly 2 million newspaper readers and radio listeners were exposed to TPI's positive turf messages. 60 newspapers printed a total of 63 articles that had been prepared and distributed by TPI.

On the professional side of the program, 19 different publications have printed 25 articles, reaching 892,000 readers since July.

As a service to the members, TPI has begun to send monthly listings of the names and address of consumers and professionals who have requested information that live in the member's state. Those requesting TPI information are given a listing of all TPI producers in their state. Members are encouraged to contact these individuals to establish themselves as sources of reliable information and top-quality turfgrass sod.

A report on the PR program will be made during the Austin Conference.

'Turf News' Reprint Series: A New Direct Marketing Tool

Selling turfgrass sod should become a bit easier as a result of an innovative series of special articles now available as reprints from "Turf News" magazine.

"New Turf Developments to Meet Buyer Needs" started the series in the September/October issue. This will be followed in the November/December issue by an article on cost and safety benefits of sodding sports fields and then concluded in the January/February issue with a feature on how landscape architects and contractors evaluate the use of turfgrass sod.

Each of the reprints will be a four-page, two-color, glossy paper article, especially written by "Turf News" editor Dr. Wendell Mathews to assist turfgrass sod producers/ sellers educate their customers on the special topics identified by TPI's Public Relations Campaign Committee.

Potential uses for the reprints would include the following:

1. Mailed directly to current or prospective clients, either with a business card or a full-fledge business-sales letter, directing their attention to a particular section or topic;

2. Sales-call handouts that can start conversations or be left behind as a reminder with additional information;

3. Exhibit booth handouts that address customer concerns or serve to answer questions that arise;

4. Fliers distributed to homeowners in new development areas, sharing information with them and providing your company as an excellent source for information and turfgrass sod;

5. Inserted in a company newsletter to provide up-to-date information on topics that take too long to personally research, write, design and print.

The reprints are available to TPI members the month they appear in "Turf News" magazine. An order form for the September/October "Turf News" reprint is on page 30 of the issue, with the actual article on pages 25-28. The cost of 35-cents per reprint, regardless of quantity, includes postage and handling.

Your orders can be placed by fax (708/705-8347) with a credit card, or by mail when paying by check.

Marketing Tip

By Chip Lain, Pine Island Turf Nursery
Sussex, New Jersey

Recommendations Can Increase Sales

I recently received a bid request from a local Parks and Recreation Department to supply sod for a local soccer field. Besides the bid, they were also interested in other recommendations that we could provide on proper installation of the turf and care/maintenance afterwards.

We went to the field location to get an idea of what the area looked like before preparing our bid. This visit helped to convey our sincere interest in the project and allowed us to give appropriate advice for installation and maintenance of the project area.

We then prepared a proposal from "start to finish" which included both the project bid, and our installation and maintenance recommendations based on our site inspection.

Two other local companies were given the same bid proposal that we were. When the results came back, we had been awarded the project. What is of particular interest here is the fact that we were not the lowest bid, we did however "follow through" by providing our recommendations based on a first-hand inspection of the project site. The other companies only submitted a price per square foot.

When dealing with schools, youth organizations and parks departments, we always include recommendations in addition to our project bids. This practice does give an edge over other companies in our area. An integral part of our proposal is a care-chart which gives the proper maintenance procedure to follow throughout the year.

In a competitive business such as ours, we feel it is essential to provide service as opposed to relying upon the lowest price to make the sale. Service, like our site inspections and recommendations, build customer loyalty in a way that "the lowest price" never will.

TPI Action

The following is an update on some of the significant U.S. federal issues are being acted upon by TPI or closely monitored:

Workers' Compensation Remedy (Adams Fruit Supreme Court Case): After 5 years of effort by TPI and others, President Clinton has signed a permanent reversal of the Supreme Court decision, once again making workers' compensation the exclusive remedy for work-place accidents.

Guest Worker Program: TPI has joined the National Ag. Employers Council (NCAE) in seeking legislation to create a program that will assist farms overcome shortages of qualified workers. Hearings and floor action are expected in the near future.

Crop Insurance For Sod: The Federal Crop Insurance Corporation is now seeking TPI's input in consideration of establishing a sod-specific crop insurance program. TPI members who want to contribute comments should contact TPI.

EPA's Special Atrazine Review: TPI will submit additional comments to the EPA regarding the importance of this chemical's continued availability to turfgrass sod production.

TPI's AREA CODE CHANGES IN JANUARY

Effective January 20, TPI's area code will change from 708 to 847 as a result of new area codes and added subdivisions within the Chicagoland's phone system. The change will affect both the standard phone and fax service which will become: Phone 847/705-9898; Fax 847-705-3847. TPI's toll-free phone number (800-405-TURF) will not change.

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFIT ADS: "Turfgrass, First-Aid For the Earth"

TPI's full-page, four-color advertisement will be appearing in the following publications in the coming months. Alert your customers:

"Erosion Control" — November/December

"SportsTurf" — January & February

"Landscape Architect & Specifier News" — February

Trucker Expenses May Be Taxed

If you pay your truck drivers a cents-per-mile reimbursement for travel expenses they incur while away from home, you may be creating a Social Security tax liability for your company or the driver.

A court recently held that although expense reimbursements are generally tax-free, a cents-per-mile reimbursement approach is actually a taxable wage. The court's rationale was that without a clear correlation between the amount of reimbursement and the actual travel expenses, the payment was a wage and therefore subject to Social Security taxes!

1996 TPI Midwinter Conference & Exposition Feb. 1-3, Austin, TX

Featuring:
Education, Exhibits
and
LARRY GATLIN
at a special TPI banquet!

*Don't miss the December 21
Early-Registration Deadline
...Save \$25.00 per attendee!*

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

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