

## Turfgrass Producers International

1996 TPI Midwinter Conference, February 1-3:

### Seminar to Focus on Business & Financial Issues

The 1996 TPI Midwinter Conference & Exposition being held in Austin, TX, February 1-3, has been planned with your business in mind. Of particular interest at this year's program is the TPI Pre-Conference Seminar entitled: "Successful Sod Business Financial Planning for Profits," which is slated for Thursday, February 1.

Mike Jackson, agribusiness consultant, author and speaker will present this highly interactive, day-long program designed to improve your financial management skills. Mr. Jackson will cover such topics as: volume/cost analysis (the implications of lowering price,) profitability, return-on-investment, break-even analysis, current asset management.

Seminar attendees will learn the skills and be provided with the worksheets needed to analyze the financial impact of various decisions they make once they return home.

Mr. Jackson holds a degree in Ag Economics, and is co-author of the standard textbook on agricultural selling, entitled Agri Selling.

The 1996 TPI Pre-Conference Seminar is an optional event held in conjunction with the TPI Midwinter Conference. The registration fee for the first attendee from a firm is \$75.00; additional attendees from a firm may register for \$50.00. Attendance is limited for this event, so make plans now to take part in this important program.

#### ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

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*Pre-Conference Seminar to be held on February 1, 1996.*

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*Two articles that discuss worker classification codes, and ways to reduce the impact of increased insurance costs in the future.*

Attendees can expect Mr. Jackson to use sound financial concepts and realistic case studies to answer such questions as: How much more will you have to sell to make up margin-dollars lost to lowered price? and; How will other strategies help you move your sod without radically changing your bottom-line?

#### PR Program Encourages Member Involvement

Supplied with three camera-ready articles describing the benefits of turfgrass and the immediacy of turfgrass sod, TPI's members are learning how to have an increased local media impact. Additional benefits of direct membership involvement in TPI's extensive public relations and education program include greater potential exposure for the local producers and increased consumer knowledge.

TPI's international members have been asked to expand the PR media database by providing the office with the names and address of suitable trade publications that information can be sent to by the staff. Previously, TPI's U.S. members were invited to provide the office with listings of local consumer publication editors and writers. TPI currently has nearly 1,800 contact names in its database, plus access to thousands more from its public relations agency. Monthly mailings to all or select portions of this listing present new information to the writers and encourage editors to

consider more articles about turfgrass sod in their publications.

#### **Program Reaches 10 Million**

Since the start of its PR efforts, TPI has placed articles in at least 80 magazines and newspapers, reaching an estimated audience of more than 10 million readers. Recent radio interviews and increased efforts to place articles in consumer publications are expected to double the number of consumer contacts in the coming months.

In addition to contacting their local media to offer articles and information, TPI members are urged to advise the TPI office of unique or large turfgrass sodding projects they undertake, and to send both positive and negative articles to the office the same day the item appears.

TPI's public relations and education program is funded by a special assessment on class A and B members in the U.S. and voluntary contributions from others.

# Red Flags Spot Poor Marketing Programs

Evaluating a turfgrass sod farm's marketing strengths and weakness can be difficult without a set of guidelines. John R. Graham, president of a marketing services and sales consulting firm, offers the following red flags to help spot potential concerns:

**1. Price is the driving force in getting sales.** Graham suggests that the clearest indication of an absence of marketing is using the lowest price to beat the competition. Deep discounts, special concessions and constant, "special deals" are primary indicators that the company is perceived by its customers as a vendor in the distribution process. Customers fail to perceive any value in doing business with a firm other than getting the lowest possible price.

**2. Your farm can't be differentiated from your competitors.** Without a special identity that distin-

guishes your farm and/or products from your competitors, there will always be a fundamental weakness in the process. Playing a look-alike game will most often lead to losses of market share.

**3. A steady stream of sales gimmicks.** If you offer a "price gimmick of the month," your customers will soon come to expect gimmicks and they won't buy at other times. We've all seen the televised carpet store ads that always offer sales of one type or another. Can you imagine anyone truly believing that store has real non-sale prices?

**4. Sales force strategies that are constantly changing.** A marketing-driven company, according to Graham, has a unified plan for communicating its message. It is continually presenting itself in effective ways to customers, prospects, the trade press and the public.

As a result of consistent marketing support, the sales operation moves forward with clear direction. The opposite of this, and a real red-flag, is a firm that directs its sales force with changing monthly contests, free trips and constantly changing sales quotas.

**5. Most leads come from the sales staff.** While the sales staff should be expected to generate a considerable number of its own leads, they cannot be the exclusive or major source of new business. A well-developed marketing program will create an identity for the company that is understood and respected by customers and prospects, so that the sales force can enter the picture from a position of strength.

Successful marketing is not created overnight, nor is it static. Consistent review and attention is needed.

## Taking Care Of Business

By Dale Barrie, Tuf Turf Sod Farms Ltd  
St. Albert, Alberta, Canada

### Employee Sources / Pools

When looking for employees for your farm, you may want to break-down into classes the types of employees you want. For example:

A: Career - office staff, manager, foreman, sales people.

B: Full Time & Seasonal - truck drivers, equipment operators, irrigation help, retail sales center, stackers, office overload.

Type A employee sources/pools would include local colleges or universities, especially those with turf programs. These schools could supply you with 2-4 years worth of summer help which you could then mold into a career position for post-graduation. Trade magazine want ads also will attract career people and people looking for a career change.

Type B employee sources/pools would again include colleges or universities, but only for students looking for summer jobs to aid in financing their education. These students would likely have little or no interest in pursuing a turf career.

Your local unemployment office, farm labor pools and newspaper job listings can each often attract a lot of applicants. However, the local unemployment office offers the advantages of being both inexpensive/free, and immediate.

A very effective source/pool is other companies such as construction, concrete, trucking and oil field companies. These firms often get qualified applicants which they are unable to hire at the time. Sometimes, with the permission of the company and the applicant, you may interview these people for your firm.

Immigration offices may also be a helpful resource for locating prospective workers. Other sources/pools for seasonal employees include:

- Snow-plow drivers
- Logging truck drivers
- Hockey/Ice arena workers
- Winter resort workers
  - ski hill groomers
  - snow-makers
  - hotel/lodge staff

In each of these instances, and others which will apply in your particular area, "think seasonal." Consider which businesses are gearing-up for business as you are winding-down.

Finally, another source/pool you may want to consider would include friends and relatives of people who are presently in your employ. Word-of-mouth is perhaps the best method of finding applicants with built-in references.

## Worker Comp Codes Confusing for Many

In the U.S., the National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI) has the responsibility of assigning specific code numbers to each occupation and these in turn are available to insurance companies for reporting claims and establishing premiums. At least that's the theory; however, in practice, turfgrass sod farmers and insurance agents continue to find the entire issue very confusing.

The current NCCI "Scopes of Basic Manual Classifications" assigns the following codes that may apply to various turfgrass sod operations:

**0005 Farm: Nursery Employees & Drivers** applies to sod dealers who do not grow sod.

**0037 Farm: Field Crops & Drivers** applies to sod growing and harvesting operations

**0042 Landscape Gardening & Drivers** applies to sod installers.

Insurance rates vary widely between codes and insurance companies. Producers are encouraged to carefully compare quotes for insurance and to know that mis-classifications can be the basis for disallowing claims.

## Workers' Comp Insurance May Rise

Workers' compensation insurance premiums, while being slightly lower in recent times, may begin to trend upward again, according to several industry observers. Turfgrass sod producers may want to consider taking actions now to contain these costs.

According to insurance analysts, streamlining of state regulatory systems allowed many premiums to drop; however, increased workplace illnesses such as stress and an older and larger non-English speaking workforce may result in greater claims and therefore increased premium costs for all firms.

To lessen the impact of increased insurance costs in the future, here are a few steps producers can consider:

1. Increase safety training and daily practices. Make sure that all workers truly understand how to safely operate the equipment they are responsible for. Place multi-lingual directions and warnings where needed.

2. Coordinate health-care options so that the farm takes a lead role in treating injuries and encouraging the prompt return to work, even if it's at a modified or transitional assignment.

Personally taking an injured employee to the farm's preferred medical service provider helps to keep the owners in the loop and reduces the likelihood of fraud.

3. Monitor and analyze injury frequency and causes to identify the farm's problem areas. Take corrective steps that are needed. Knowing both the number of accidents and days off the job caused by accidents can be significant in identifying where improved safety habits and training are required.

4. Encourage all employees to be safety conscious by offering some form of reward or bonus to individuals who identify or correct a potential unsafe practice. Rewards might be a cash payment or something as simple as an inexpensive dinner or even pizza for the safest crew.

Although a TPI farm safety survey showed that turfgrass sod farming is not particularly accident prone, the costs for workers' comp insurance can rise uncontrollably as a result of even a minor accident, or one that while taking place on the farm is not directly related to the farm operations. Falling off a ladder while painting can be a very expensive workers' comp claim!

## Marketing Tip

By Bill Campbell, Fairlawn Sod Nursery  
Lynden, Ontario, Canada

### Build Visibility to Build Sales

One way to gain greater visibility for your sod operation is to host a meeting of the local landscapers organization at your farm. A possible schedule of events might look like this:

- 5 pm Attendee arrival at farm
- Farm Tour
- Social Hour
- Buffet Meal
- Question & Answer Session
- Guest Departure

On a larger scale, you could work with your state landscape organization to plan a field day at your farm. This allows landscape workers to compete and show off their professional skills.

Some events could include:

- a) Sod laying competition judged on speed and quality of site preparation and finished work.
- b) A timed wheelbarrow race over and through obstacles with the wheelbarrow filled with water.
- c) Attach a tablespoon to a backhoe scoop and pick-up and move three raw eggs, and place them in a carton.

- d) Have a "pipe throw" with a 20 foot length of irrigation pipe for frustrated javelin throwers.
- e) Have a 25 yard golf shot competition, closest to the pin.
- f) Bring in some landscape plants from a co-operating nursery to be identified by both common and scientific name.

Additional events are limited only by your imagination. Get the local media involved. The visibility for your farm is tops.

Building visibility builds sales... make plans now to help your business grow!

# TPI Action

## TPI SEEKS BOARD NOMINEES

Nominating Committee Chairman Louis Brooking, Brookmeade Sod Farm, Inc., Doswell, VA (phone 804/883-6338), is asking all members to recommend potential TPI Board candidates to his committee. For the 1996-97 annual business meeting, the committee will be naming candidates for vice president, secretary-treasurer and two 3-year trustee positions.

Qualifications for these positions require that the individuals be Class A members (turfgrass sod producers), who have some level of prior involvement in the organization and are interested in serving. Board members typically serve as committee chairman, participate in four board meetings a year and have overall responsibility for the organization's finances, programs and benefits.

Interested individuals, or those who would like to recommend another member are encouraged to call Louis as soon as possible. The committee is scheduled to meet Wednesday, January 31 in Austin, TX, just prior to the Midwinter Conference to begin the candidate selection process.

## MEMBERS ENCOURAGED TO BE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Five of TPI's open committees will be holding meetings in Austin, TX. All current members are invited to join one or more of the meetings to help decide and direct the organization's future.

Anyone interested in participating in the meetings may either call the chairman or simply attend the meeting.

*Wednesday, January 31, 1996 Meetings, 3 to 6:30 pm*

| Committee            | Chairman      | Phone        |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Business Management, | Chris Hope    | 613/489-3318 |
| Conf. & Convention   | Wayne Thorson | 402/624-6385 |
| Marketing            | Tom Keeven    | 618/281-6050 |

*Friday, February 2, 1996 Meeting, 7 to 8:30 am*

|                   |            |              |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| Magazine Advisory | Chris Hope | 613/489-3318 |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|

*Saturday, February 3, 1996 Meeting, 7:30 to 9 am*

|                  |              |              |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Legal & Taxation | Ben Copeland | 912/482-3131 |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|

Members who are unable to attend the meeting, but who would like to have an item placed on a committee's discussion agenda should contact the appropriate chairman or the TPI office at 800/405-8873.

## Ciba Program Now In Full Swing

Ciba Turf & Ornamental Products is beginning to compile forms being returned to them by TPI members participating in the 2nd-annual "On-the-Green" program. On the basis of TPI-member purchases of Award, Banner, Pennant, Primo, Subdue, Triumph and turfPak, Ciba will make a contribution to TPI.

Full details and program participation forms were mailed to all U.S. class A (producer) members on September 20. Last year, based on the participation of just 12 TPI members, nearly \$13,000 was donated to TPI. There is no cost for participating, and your product costs are not affected by this program.

Take a few minutes to complete the form and return it with a copy of your invoices to Ciba. Anyone requiring new or additional forms, or further information, is encouraged to call Tom Ford at the TPI office: 708/705-9898 or 800/405-8873.

### '96 TPI Midwinter Conference & Exposition

*Feb. 1-3, Austin, Texas*

*Featuring: Education,  
Exhibits and LARRY GATLIN  
at this year's special banquet!*

## BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

**Turfgrass Producers International**  
1855-A Hicks Road, Rolling Meadows, IL 60008

FIRST CLASS MAIL  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Rolling Meadows, IL 60008  
Permit No. 662