

## Turfgrass Producers International

### Sell Quality With TPI 'Sod Specs.'

What are your customers buying when they purchase your turfgrass sod? Do you and they have a clear understanding and agreement? According to members of TPI's Public Relations and Marketing Committees, every member already has a ready tool to help them and their customers...TPI's "Guideline Specifications To Turfgrass Sodding."

This 16-page booklet, which was sent to every TPI member last fall, contains six model specifications on everything related to turfgrass sodding, from subsoil

preparation on through after-installation maintenance. But perhaps of greatest use to turfgrass sod producers is the section titled, "Specifying the Class/Grade and Composition of Turfgrass Sod."

Three different approaches to defining turfgrass sod quality are presented, allowing the producer to select those definitions that best suit his marketing plan and customer needs. Adopting or modifying these definitions and using them as part of the sod-selling process will help customers understand what they are purchasing and the ranges of quality that may be available to them.

#### "How To" for Homeowners

"Sod Specs." can also be used as a "how to" manual for homeowners (and even professional landscape contractors) who may not be totally familiar with all aspects of successfully installing turfgrass sod.

By providing a copy of the "Sod Specs." to customers...either while they

are considering a purchase or when they place an order...they will be more confident of the steps they should take, or at least consider to achieve the long-lasting and low-maintenance lawn they want.

While additional copies of the complete booklet are available from TPI for just \$2 each or 10 for \$15, the booklet can also be photocopied as is or even modified by using a word processor. Altering the pages so they appear to be the exclusive material of the sod farm can be easily achieved with just a bit of editing and some advance planning.

For example, a farm could incorporate its sod quality definition directly into the model specification for "Turfgrass Sod Materials," so there would be no question about what was being offered or purchased. Other pages of the model "specs" could also be "personalized" to the farm, its available sod varieties, the area climate, soil types or any other unique characteristic.

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### Putting The Results To Work: Publications Feature Sod

If you don't already have several copies of "Remodeling Ideas For Your Home," "Gardens, Decks & Patios," (both Spring, 1996 editions) and the February issue of "Landscape & Irrigation," you may want to get some...fast! These magazines each contain excellent articles about turfgrass in general and sodding in particular. Having them on display and available to consumer and professional customers will not only help you close the sale, but will also provide great information and ideas that might otherwise be missed.

TPI, as part of its public relations and education program, worked with the editors of these publications over the course of several months, providing

them information, additional resources, slides and photographs.

Additional consumer magazine articles can be expected in the coming months, including possible items in "Woman's Day Garden Planner," "Country Living Gardener," and even "Popular Mechanics" and "Home Mechanix." While no editor is prepared to promise when or even if an article will appear in their magazine, they are all expressing tremendous interest.

**Readership Over 4.4 Million!** At least 4,475,000 professional and consumer publication readers have been exposed to TPI's positive articles about turfgrass and sod. In the first seven months of this fiscal year, 85 different consumer publications have printed a total of 88 articles!



# Taking Care Of Business

By Chris Hope, Manderley Sod  
North Gower, Ontario

## Employee Training

In our continuing series on employee relations, we have covered sourcing, interviewing and hiring. Now, I hope to help you with a few suggestions on what to do with that new employee once they are in the door.

1. Make the new hire welcome, introducing him/her to all the others they will be working with. Although this would seem to be a common courtesy, it often gets overlooked when you are short-handed. You should also make the person feel comfortable in their new work environment.

2. Outline the new employee's duties in addition to company policies, safety

requirements, etc. Above all, make sure the employee knows exactly what is expected of them.

3. During your training process, be careful in how much information you unload on the new person. Only so much information can be retained at any one session, so it's important to review important areas again to ensure that it is absorbed.

4. Continue training a small amount over time. If you continue to build your employees over time, you may be surprised at what their true capabilities are. When asked, most long-term employees are eager to take on greater challenges.

5. Through the process, be critical of yourself as well as the employee when evaluating the results of your training. Make sure that no questions that the new hire may have are left unanswered.

And once you are finished with your initial training sessions, train some more. We here in North America are guilty of ill training our workforce. Many other countries spend large amounts of energy and time on their people. For example, Japanese companies typically invest up to 25% of their payroll in training their workforce. It is time well spent, as the better equipped your people are to handle their work, the more efficiently and effectively they work, and the larger the dividends for your company will be.

## Business Update:

### How to prevent and identify employee theft in your business

Employee theft can be a problem for any size business, but it often hits small companies the hardest. Here are some tips for preventing and identifying employee theft.

#### • An ounce of prevention

Probably the best way to prevent theft is to start with honest employees. Checking references may seem like an obvious safeguard but many employers still overlook this important step. In addition to the usual reference check, consider asking each reference to refer you to someone else the applicant has worked with.

Once an employee is on the job, theft is often a crime of opportunity. To eliminate the opportunity for financial crimes such as embezzlement, make sure your business has strong financial controls. For example, don't allow the same employee to prepare checks and reconcile the checking

account, and don't give sole signature authority to an employee who also prepares checks. The person who signs checks should also verify that original invoices are attached and that all payees are familiar.



To prevent theft of property, don't allow the same employee to place and receive orders for inventory, supplies, or business equipment. Review the physical layout of your workplace with an eye towards eliminating easy opportunities for theft. For example: Move a hidden supply area into open view; Keep employee parking area away from shop-area and gas pump; Inventory your tools and supplies regularly and watch for unexpected short falls.

#### • Where there's smoke...

Unless you catch an employee red-handed, it can be difficult to prove that someone is stealing from your business.

But dishonest employees often send out warning signals, and you should become alert for some of the most common ones.

For example, you might want to take a closer look at an employee who makes major changes in habits or lifestyle. It is important to remember the individualized nature of this point, because what is considered a 'major change' will differ from person to person. Such changes in spending habits might include: major car repairs or purchases; jewelry or clothes; and even vacation destinations. Any spending which reflects an marked increase over what might be expected of a person in a given income-range should be considered as a possible red flag.

Finally, pay attention to your instincts. If an employee strikes you as a "troublemaker," find out if that person has easy opportunities for theft. Changes in inventory (i.e. tools, gas, supplies, etc.;) lower than normal cash flow; and missing, late or partial payment complaints from vendors should each signal you to take the time to investigate the cause immediately.



## Shrewder Computing

**Software upgrades are available** even if your company does not have an earlier version of a program. Manufacturers offer *competitive upgrades* at a far lower cost than the full price of a new program. These packages allow users to buy at the upgrade price if they have any of a variety of similar programs listed on the outside of the box. Even if you do not have any of the listed programs, you can buy an older version of one of them, plus the upgrade, for less than the cost of the full-price version of the program you want.

**Type Lightly.** Studies show that employees type on computer keyboards *five times harder* than is necessary to register their keystrokes. A link between this practice and a variety of disabling medical disorders, particularly carpal tunnel syndrome, as possible, though not yet proven. Companies should urge employees to type *lightly* as a no-cost precaution that may avert medical problems, medical plan expenses, and excessive equipment 'wear and tear.'

## Personalize Direct Mailings

Direct mail is the second-most common way turfgrass sod producers advertisers. (Yellow pages are the number one way.) To improve the effectiveness and cost-return of direct mailings, try these proven techniques:

\* **Think niches, not masses** - select a few targets that have real potential and concentrate your resources on them.

\* **Personalize the message** - think like the person you're mailing to when you write the message. If one niche is landscape contractors and another is new homeowners, use different messages for each niche.

\* **Type or hand-address envelopes** - computer generated labels say "mass!" while typewritten/hand addressed says "personal, we care."

\* **Use first-class stamps** - like mail-

ing labels, postage meter or bulk permits creates a "one in the herd" look.

\* **Use quality stationery** - your company's image is projected from the first sight of any mailed piece. Lost appeal won't be recaptured from savings made on cheap paper.

\* **Select distinctive type** - the design and size of type are important elements of any mailing.

\* **Follow-up with the phone** - mailing can be effective, but even the best pieces offer limited returns, unless there's a personal follow-up by phone.

Tying these techniques together should result in a quality mailing that truly reflects your operation. Any single mailing should go only to as many prospects as you can follow-up with by phone in a week after the mailing.

## Include A Surprise With Every Load

Getting several pallets of turfgrass sod delivered is an exciting thing for most homeowners, but that's in fact what they paid for. What if you also delivered a surprise with every full load?

Including a new sprinkler or 50-foot of garden hose, maybe both, with a home delivery will be a pleasant surprise that can be put to use and help ensure a good installation result. The cost would be minimal, the impact powerful.

## Marketing Tip

By Rob Stephens, Stephens Turf Farm  
Little Rock, Arkansas

### Is Your Advertising Working? Here Are 10 Ways to tell:

1. **Leads.** Are you getting prospective customers to place orders, stop by your farm or at least call you?

2. **Qualified Prospects.** Are you getting responses from potential sod purchasers or just information seekers? If you are trying to attract a prince and you get frogs instead, something is wrong with your advertising.

3. **Target Demographics.** Are your ads placed in the right media? Are you trying to attract homeowners or landscape contractors, but are advertising in *The Mud Wrestling Gazette*? Spend your advertising dollars where you'll get the best exposure

4. **Brand Image.** Your advertising should create an image that separates you from the rest, i.e. if you sell produce, avoid green men that say "Ho, ho, ho."

5. **Continuity Between Ads.** Do your ads resemble a legal notice one week and a Jackson Pollock painting the next? All your ads should have a family resemblance.

6. **Product Value.** A Mercedes for \$39.95 is a value. A kingdom for a horse is a value. Pickled pig's feet at any price is no value. Whatever the ad, it must create a sense of high quality at a fair price.

7. **Employee Pride.** Why are your employees snickering behind your back? Could it be "bad advertising?" If the ads

are great, your employees should be proud to say they work for you.

8. **Results Go With Dollars Invested.** McDonalds didn't make it to the top by running two-inch ads in *The Hog Wallow Gazette*. Don't expect a teeny-weeny ad to get more than itty-bitty results.

9. **Repetitiveness.** 'Say something once, don't say it again,' doesn't cut it. Repeat your ads over and over at different times to get results.

10. **Excellent Production.** Yes, Olaf does a meticulous job hand-lettering your every brochure, but monks are not exactly on the cutting edge of technology...Your ad agency and your ad should be!



# TPI Action

## **TPI MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL UNDERGOES IMPORTANT CHANGE**

TPI members are encouraged to act promptly when they receive their 1996-97 renewal notice. Starting this year, rather than receiving three or four renewal notices from April to August, current TPI members will now receive an initial notice in May, followed by a final notice in early July. Anyone who has not renewed by July 31 will be dropped from membership. To register for the July 25-27 Summer Convention at members rates, dues for 1996-96 must be paid.

**Directory Information Changes/Updates** will also be an important part of this year's renewal processing. In addition to the traditional contact information details of name, address, phone and fax, etc., Class A members (turfgrass sod producers) will also have an opportunity to update or expand their sod variety listing and add new information about the different forms of harvested sod they have available and whether or not installation is available from the producer. As part of TPI's PR Program, all consumers and professionals who request any information from TPI is also given a complete listing of producers in that state. These listings are taken from the directory information and thus, should be as up-to-date and complete as possible.

## **SPACE IS AVAILABLE ON OCT. 18-27 ENGLAND STUDY TOUR**

Although the April 15 sign-up deadline is rapidly approaching, TPI members can still reserve a place on the group's eight-day tour of London and turfgrass sod farms in England. Informative fliers were sent to all members in early February, and additional copies can be obtained by calling the TPI office at 800/405-8873 or 708/705-9898. The cost of the tour is \$1,600 per person in shared accommodations or \$2,000 per person not sharing. Included in the trip will be a day-long London tour and extended visits to Tip Top Turf and Inturf Farm, as well as the Sports Turf Research Institute and other sites between London and York.

## **SUMMER CONVENTION MEETINGS REMINDERS**

In making travel plans for the July 25-27 TPI Summer Convention in Sacramento, CA, the following special meetings/events should be kept in mind:

**Wed., July 24:** International Member Breakfast, Pre-Convention tour

**Thur., July 25:** Committee Meetings, Education, Business Meeting, Exhibits

**Fri., July 26:** Committee Meetings, Demonstration Day

**Sat., July 27:** Committee Meetings, Farm Tour Day

## **1996 Midwinter Conference Seminar Workbooks Now Available**

A workbook developed in conjunction with the 1996 TPI Midwinter Conference Seminar is now available to TPI members for only \$25.00. This popular workbook entitled, *Successful Turfgrass Sod Business Financial Planning for Profits*, covers such issues as changes in the marketplace, planning for profits, improving operating results and using volume cost analysis.

To place your order, call or fax Terri at the TPI office: Phone: 847/705-9898, FAX: 847/705-8347.

## **1996 TPI Summer Convention & Field Days July 25-27 Sacramento, CA**

**Featuring:  
Education, Exhibits,  
Farm Tours and  
Equipment Demos**

*Watch for more details in  
future issues as well as  
"Turf News" magazine!*

## **BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

**Turfgrass Producers International**  
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