

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANT HEALTH CARE PROGRAMS¹

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Many tree care companies are either involved in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) or would like to incorporate the IPM philosophy into their current spray programs. Often programs fail to expand, or fail completely, due to that lack of a clear implementation strategy. Different strategies for implementation of the philosophy exist. Plant Health Care (PHC) programs offer a holistic approach to plant maintenance. Implementation of PHC programs by commercial companies should utilize local market research in program design. Many decisions must then be reached regarding methodology of program implementation.

Client Education

Educating your client is in effect, "selling your service." "An educated consumer is our best customer" is a theme proclaimed by a local merchandiser in their advertising. The same is true for PHC programs. Communication by company personnel should convey knowledge to increase client understanding of how a PHC program will address problems specific to his property. In addition to highlighting client needs, a level of trust can be initiated allowing the client to feel that his property will be cared for by a professional. This is important in convincing your client that the additional money spent initially on a PHC program is justifiable and is in his best interest.

The benefits of a PHC approach to tree and shrub management should stimulate the interest of your best clients. The reduction in pesticide use and the positive effects of using materials with low toxicity in PHC programs offer an attractive contrast to traditional spray programs.

However, research commissioned jointly by ISA and NAA and conducted by Communications

Research Associates of Valley Forge, PA, found that the majority of potential tree care clientele in the U.S. exhibit an apathetic attitude toward the use of toxins in the pest control program. The comprehensive and holistic approach of a PHC program should be stressed.

An additional part of the client education process is the explanation of symptom interpretation and problem analysis. The interaction of plants, pests and environment is complex and expectations of instant client understanding are unrealistic. Equally as unrealistic are expectations that your clients will grasp the PHC concept with one brochure or personal visit. In our experience, constant reinforcement of the concepts and issues is imperative.

Building a Team

Team building is a serious concern for any company. Instituting a PHC program will make this process more difficult and will be far more important than routine hiring of employees. Staffing with individuals that have qualifications to adequately assess plant health, analyze growing environments, and accurately identify parasitic, saprophytic and beneficial organisms is no easy chore.

Clearly the leader of such a staff must be technically advanced, have the ability to manage people, and be able to communicate with and instill confidence in clients. Our experience over the last 6 years has been that a plant pathologist with an advanced degree suits the position best. Communication and managerial skills are often independent of technical knowledge and need to be assessed in a personal interview. A person with a combination of these skills can double as a

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto in 1990.

diagnostician. Depending on your local market, homeowners or other green industry professionals may retain your company's professional diagnostic services. One person is all that is needed during the initial stages of program development. That person may be selected with the idea of promoting him or her to manager once the program has grown sufficiently to afford an additional scout.

Selecting a scout may be a difficult task. Trade and scientific journals often have classified ads in which positions can be listed. Establishing contact with your local universities or colleges directly may be a good method to find potential scouts. We find that university systems have graduates willing and anxious to become involved in a technically oriented program. A variety of educational backgrounds have worked well for us including entomology, plant pathology, plant and soil science, horticulture and forestry. Basically, most people with a degree in a plant science and a willingness to learn can do a good job. However, the intricacies of PHC dictate that a technical director be involved.

Choosing Equipment

Equipment type and design has a direct impact on the number of clients your scout(s) can manage. In the initial stages of a PHC program, there often may not be an adequate client base to warrant the cost of sophisticated spray equipment. In the early stages of our PHC program we attempted to exclusively utilize our traditional spray truck. These types of units typically have a large tank with a 400 gallon capacity or greater. We found these units lacked the flexibility needed to efficiently operate a plant care program due to the variety of materials needed during an inspection/treatment visit. Traditional spray trucks may be needed for other target treatments. Their use for PHC spray programs may detract from the timeliness and effectiveness of traditional treatment applications.

During this difficult time, the use of several motorized hydraulic backpack units with a pickup truck for transportation proved adequate for us. These units have a 5 gallon capacity and are capable of spraying to a height of 10 feet with adequate coverage. The greatest drawback to this system is the extra time needed when applications of more than several gallons of any material are

needed. We determined that 25-50% more time is needed per property utilizing this type of equipment as compared to larger volume spray equipment. This directly influences either program cost or profit margin. The traditional rigs may be routed in, as needed, for shade tree treatment or high volume applications. The flexibility of traditional rigs can also be increased with backpack units.

When the number of clients on your program begins to reach the maximum your scout can handle, a specialty truck should be considered. Our choice was to design a unit with 3 separate tanks, pumps and hose reels. This design circumvents the need for mixing on site and avoids potential cross contamination of pesticides. Total capacity is divided between two-300 gallon tanks and a 100 gallon tank. The large tanks are quipped with 30+ gallon/minute pumps while a 10+ gallon/minute pump is used on the smaller tank. Pumps are PTO driven and can be simultaneously activated directly from the cab. A backpack unit is utilized if a treatment application is needed at an extended distance from the truck or if an additional material is required.

Record Keeping

A record keeping system is only as good as its ability to handle the volume of information involved in your program. With an average property size of 125 plants and a scouting load of 150 properties, the scout has up to 18,750 potential records to handle each scouting cycle. Even the brightest individual would have a difficult time remembering all the pest levels and plant problems that require special attention. Also, each client should receive a written scouting report for each visit identifying all problems that were found and whether or not the problems required treatment. Recognition of all existing problems is necessary.

Our experience has been that a manual record keeping system is far too time consuming. A manual system adds labor hours to each visit. This restricts the number of clients a scout can handle and therefore reduces profit margin. We have found that a computerized record keeping system is the key to efficient and professional data reporting. The most important factor in an inspection report is client friendliness. Reports should be easy to understand yet comprehensive and professional. Our

Green Guardian© software system provides the plant identification number and plant code so that a client can locate plants on a separately generated computerized map of his property. This allows the client to follow the progress of our PHC program during the growing season. The terminology used is designed to help in the client education process. Recommendations to improve plant health along with a comments column provide support information or indicate other non-pest problems. Additional information kept by our software program includes plant inventory and analysis, growing environment analysis and plant vitality ratings.

The use of a hand-held computer for field data entry further simplifies the record keeping and reporting process. Information collected in the field can be down loaded into an office PC with an inspection report generated directly. Timely receipt of written inspection reports by clientele is important to maintain customer satisfaction. The use of a hand-held computer can reduce office time needed to process inspection reports. This reduces total man-hours per property and therefore directly influences profitability.

Marketing

As stated earlier, the reduction in pesticide use is often not the most influential factor in selling a PHC program. However, it should be a definite part of your sales equation. A more important component is the intensity of the plant care program. In our experience, clients believe that the intensity of the program will effectively eliminate pest populations. Convincing clients that not all insects are plant pests and that an endemic pest population is acceptable requires constant reinforcement by the scout.

Your program may be constructed to only sell scouting services. Initially that was our approach. Clients buying horticultural services are not accustomed to paying for horticultural knowledge. Some clients reacted harshly. We responded to this objection by including all pesticide applications in our program but still met with resistance. The inference was that our program did not provide enough value for the cost. By including scouting, pesticide treatments, foliar/granular fertilization

and incidental pruning, our program is now well received by our clients.

An additional marketing advantage is that our program includes recommendations for pruning, cabling, mulching and many other cultural practices. The recommendations report serves as a powerful sales tool. By addressing these recommendations in follow-up communications, a salesperson may respond to previously identified needs. The combination of scout and salesperson recommendations works effectively in tandem. This report has given us the opportunity to help fill our pruning schedules during the winter season.

Positioning

The most important issue to remember in determining program parameters is that your program and business are client driven. Your clients have to be able to afford your program/service. One of the major parameters that will need to be addressed is the frequency of scouting visits. A 2-or 4-week scouting cycle appears to be the most common in the industry. Although a 2-week cycle offers more flexibility in delivery of a PHC program, not everyone can afford to have a professional arborist on the property at this frequency. Program cost and degree of customer acceptance have to be in balance to sustain a PHC program. Based on these factors we chose a 4-week scouting interval. Although some compromises are needed in terms of product use (use of slightly more persistent products), effective management of plant problems are obtained while maintaining a horticulturally sound program. Supplemental visits can be built into program pricing for particular plant problems (e.g. disease control) for which a more frequent treatment cycle is desired.

Client Retention

Client retention for any service or product is based on value received. That value may be real or perceived. Much of the value that will keep a PHC client coming back year after year is perceived. Professional reports, a knowledgeable and professional staff, healthy and vigorous plants, and an assigned person for consultation all relate to perceived value.

Getting the clients involved in their own land-

scapes through your PHC program can be very helpful. Clients, when calling with a question, often will refer to the plant number and cite report information corresponding to plants on the computerized map we have sent to them. Prompt and professional responses to clients' questions are essential.

Conducting a year end meeting with each client to review plant problems shows concern by the company. Discussion should include the current status of plant health on the property. Services provided during the season should be verbally highlighted. Specific plans and strategies for next season should be addressed along with special concerns of the client.

Summary

Plant Health Care programs can be successfully integrated into an existing business with proper planning and attention to important criteria. Implementation of a PHC program will be influenced by the socio-economic conditions in your market area. Compromise may be needed to insure acceptance and success. Although program cost may still be a major factor in customer acceptance, it may not be the overriding consideration. Perceived value plays the vital role in both customer acceptance and retention.

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