

INNOVATIONS IN THE TREE CARE INDUSTRY¹

by W.M. Black

Let's review a series of seemingly unrelated trends, which have become apparent over the past decade. These trends are important because, as a group, they have resulted in creating a niche for businesses that take a somewhat-different-than-traditional approach to tree care.

TREND #1. Prior to the onset of today's high interest rates, there was a housing boom of sorts in the 60's and 70's. Middle to upper class America left the urban areas for the greener pastures (or lawns) of suburbia. As a result, the highest concentration of homeowners, who have the discretionary income to afford tree-care services, live in a suburban house built less than 25 years ago. Such homes are usually surrounded with few (if any) mature trees which require the traditional services of an arborist such as trimming, felling, bracing, cabling, or cavity work.

TREND #2. Everywhere you look you find evidence that people are attempting to return nature to their urban environment; from their high-fiber cereals, to their landscapes. This lends itself especially well to solving the suburban problem of look-alike houses. It turned out that the best way to both live in a more natural setting and to distinguish your home from your neighbors was accomplished through landscaping, through arrangement and appearance of the trees, shrubs, and lawn surrounding the house. This trend toward care and pride in one's landscape has been accelerated with insurance payments and tax deductions for damaged ornamentals, as well as recognized improved real estate values for "attractively landscaped" houses.

TREND #3. Many Americans are now turning over to professional service companies a number of household tasks they used to perform themselves. Homeowners are also discovering more tasks that should be performed routinely to insure the upkeep of the house and landscape. They franchise these tasks, not only to maximize

their own leisure time, but also because a professional has the knowledge and technology to do the job better and more efficiently than the homeowner.

TREND #4. Americans are a nation of people divided by their "common" causes. We cheer for pennant winners, worry/rejoice over nuclear power, want to save the whales, and each of us wants to spend more/less on our military might. Within our society there are people fanatic about given causes who are best termed "crusaders." Fueled by such widely publicized incidents as New York's Love Canal, Vietnam's agent orange, and California's malathion/medfly controversy, some Americans are becoming crusaders against the use of all pesticides in all situations. It's best termed a pesticide paranoia.

Combining these 4 specific trends provides a general description of the tree care industry's best clients for the 1980's. Essentially they describe the majority of the middle- to upper-middle-class portion of our society. He/she is living in a 5-25 year old house, has a pronounced appreciation of what woody ornamentals do for the aesthetics and value of their residence, desires professional services around the house to maximize leisure time, but is cautious about the image of those professional services especially where pesticides are involved.

Filling these needs and expectations of the consumer is the key to expanding our industry in the 1980's. Businesses that can fill these needs will not only create a small niche for themselves, but also will generate additional income for the more traditional tree services. They can also contribute to the goal of continually upgrading the image of our industry in these critical times.

That all sounds good. But what does it really take to achieve that goal? Reaching the consumer who can afford our services requires a slightly different, or innovative, approach than has been widely employed in the past. After all, the goal of a

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newer company attempting to build a niche in the industry is not to take away traditional business such as trimming, cabling, etc., from established firms; but to create or amplify business where only a small amount previously existed. In essence to add business to our industry.

In the sequence of events from the homeowner's viewpoint, let's look at a slightly different way to secure and satisfy today's suburban homeowner.

Marketing

The goal of all advertising is to create an awareness that a need exists. If the service advertised is valuable, the need has always been present but the public has not been widely aware of the need. To expand a small portion of a larger industry, the first task is to create an awareness of need where only a minimal amount now exists.

Let me use an example. Everybody has always known the value of the dentist. (I didn't say appreciate!) But 50 years ago that value was limited to emergencies such as cavities, extraction, etc. However, through an extensive marketing campaign the American Dental Association has created within us a need to visit the dentist every 6 months. By making us aware of the need/benefit the ADA has tremendously expanded business within the industry.

Within the tree care industry the primary advertising medium is the yellow pages. That won't do it alone. Yellow pages are what a consumer will use to satisfy a need that already exists. To create a need advertising materials must attract attention, look professional, and present a believable message. In short, expanding the need for tree-care in suburban areas requires colorful, well-written, and educational marketing materials.

The benefit is obvious; it generates business where none existed. The risk is also obvious. Such advertising is expensive and there's no guarantee that the public will read, or accept its message.

Selling

This is probably the most critical stage. Now that a need has been created we have to prove the service can fill that need. The trick is to sell;

not oversell. There are a few points to be made (or myths to be banished).

(1) If we're going to provide a professional service we have to recommend a *program*. From a professional, the public expects to be *advised* on what should be done. To simply quote prices and allow the homeowner to pick-and-choose spray applications from a shopping list makes our industry appear as nothing but a "chemical delivery service." We as tree professionals know what needs to be done (or not done). Why turn that decision over to the layman?

(2) The public will accept the truth. Admitting up-front your limitations will result in your business increasing, not decreasing. For example, informing the client that *perfect* disease control will not result from just one application, and that *perfect* disease control is not essential for the health of the tree. This avoids over-expectation on the customers' part, and creates an appreciation for our professionalism.

(3) Providing a professional service, within a limited scope, actually enhances the tree industry in general. As an example, ChemScape is a tree business specializing in spraying and fertilization. Customers realize that ChemScape does not install landscapes, take-down dead trees or limbs, etc. Yet as horticulturists we often recommend that these services are needed on a given landscape, and are asked by our customers whom we'd recommend to do this type of work. We pass along the names of respected ISA member-firms in the area (often along with their phone numbers). In one metropolitan area we referred over 350 homeowners to other tree and landscape firms. That's creating business for the industry that, otherwise, may not have existed.

Personnel

The most important part of satisfying the needs of today's homeowner is the people you put on their landscapes. It is people, more than the written word or the fancy equipment, that portray professionalism and determine a business's success. We are all aware of our part-time competitors who send untrained people out to butcher trees and drift unknown pesticides down city streets. Placing such people on landscapes can destroy in an

hour a reputation that took the industry years to build.

To be and to project the image of a professional service that attracts the business of today's homeowner, we need well-trained, dedicated, articulate, and thinking people on the landscape. People who not only know how to do something, but why. Such people can be found in many places, but one primary source has often been overlooked in our industry: our colleges.

Too often one or two bad experiences cause a tree company to give up on the thousands of people who graduate yearly. I've heard many tree-people lament that college grads "won't sweat" or "wanted to run the company in six months." Some I'm sure, but not all. You'll find today's college

grad in urban forestry, horticulture, etc., to be a dedicated, hard-working, career-oriented individual who can provide the professionalism needed in the industry to generate new business.

Colleges are certainly not the only source of quality personnel, but a source that appears to have taken a backseat within the industry.

In summary, today's economics are making it more difficult each day to run a profitable business in most industries. But homeowner trends are creating an opportunity which, through professionalism and innovation, can mean increased business within the tree care industry as a whole.

*ChemScope Division of ChemLawn Corporation
Atlanta, Georgia*

ABSTRACT

FEUCHT, JAMES R. 1981. **How to detect soil sterilant damage in ornamental trees and shrubs.** *Am. Nurseryman* 153(3): 9, 94-97.

Many times sterilant damage goes undetected, because it is mistaken for something else. This is especially true where newly established plantings are involved. Two things should be remembered about sterilants. First, they have great longevity in the soil. Therefore, it is quite possible for these chemicals to contaminate planting areas or cause severe tree damage years after being applied. Second, only extremely small amounts of these chemicals need be present in the soil to produce disastrous results. Sterilant damage to plants occurs most frequently in and around areas where the chemicals have been used under asphalt. Records show that plants near paved surfaces like parking lots, driveways and tennis courts under which sterilants have been used are highly susceptible to damage from the chemicals. Some sterilants cause problems when they are washed into the root zones of trees. However, at least in Colorado, damage has resulted more often when roots extend into treated areas than from the movement of chemicals into root zones. Symptoms of sterilant damage in plants often mimic those of nutritional disorders and drought stress, making it difficult to arrive at an accurate diagnosis. After the initial damage occurs, the plant seems to recover and take on new growth. However, once sterilant uptake resumes, the plant gradually weakens and dies or succumbs to secondary problems like canker disease or borer attack. Do not rule out sterilant damage, even if the injured plants are some distance away and the paved area is several years old. Remember, the roots of trees can extend well beyond the drip point and into treated areas.