Curbing Callbacks
A guide to helping proactively improve customer satisfaction

Like most business owners today, there are very few lawn care operators (LCOs) who are NOT monitoring the economy and questioning the possible effect it may have on their companies in the coming year. In a service-driven industry like lawn care, many LCO businesses literally live or die with the economic health of their customers and are growing concerned about what 2009 may bring.

“When finances get tighter for our customers, things which may be perceived as ‘luxuries’—including lawn care—are frequently among the first things to be eliminated from a family budget,” said Chris Forth, regional manager with TruGreen® Lawn Care and Landscaping. “That’s why customer retention is especially important during these times, making sure the customer appreciates the services we provide and fully understands what is going on with his or her lawn. If there is a problem, or even the perception of a problem, customers may be more likely to question your work and more intolerant of less-than-perfect results.”

And often central to LCO customer retention? The customer callback.

When customers become frustrated with their lawn service, most pick up the phone and demand a repeat or special visit from their LCO to address the issue—what many companies describe as a service call or “customer callback.” This costly return visit not only interrupts the normal labor, scheduling, product inventory and revenue flow of the LCO business, but in many cases may be either preventable or even unnecessary.

Though every customer situation is different, by examining a few issues common to many callbacks, LCOs may be able to not only help reduce the amount of repeat service calls their company makes, but even find opportunities to benefit from these activities.

SureGuard® Herbicide has been well regarded among nursery professionals for its outstanding safety to plants while providing unmatched preemergence and postemergence control of broadleaf and grass weeds such as crabgrass, spurge, bittercress and groundsel. Now these same benefits are available to lawn care operators. SureGuard® provides consistent, highly effective and long-lasting weed control which is especially important in the labor-intensive lawn care marketplace. And a flexible application window lets you apply SureGuard® any time.

The LCO Solution to Control Tough Weeds on Your Schedule, Not Theirs.

New for 2009—Landscape Label for LCOs!
Meet SureGuard

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SureGuard lasts longer than other residual herbicides—meaning fewer sprays over the course of the season and, ultimately, helping reduce costly repeat visits for the LCOs. Additionally, SureGuard consistently performs under a wide array of conditions and settings to help ensure your customers are satisfied in the long run. In university trials, SureGuard significantly outperformed competitors on tough weeds like chickweed and groundsel for longer periods of time throughout the growing season.

In addition, SureGuard’s active ingredient, flumioxazin, brings a unique mode of action (MOA) to the LCO market. Valent Professional Products field market development specialist, Jason Fausey, said this MOA provides a new tool for controlling glyphosate-resistant weeds and providing an overall strong resistance management alternative.

“When mixed with glyphosate, SureGuard works extremely well to speed up the results and help control weeds that glyphosate alone does not,” Fausey said. “We’ve seen many cases where applications of glyphosate work, but by adding SureGuard to that program, the LCOs gained more effective weed control in a much shorter amount of time—along with the reduction in the total number of herbicide applications required.”

What is the Cost of a Callback?

At the heart of every callback is the added expense and lost revenue a repeat visit causes the LCO company.

“No question, a service call means not only added expenses from repeat product applications or unscheduled travel to the site, but that’s also money that is not coming in from another customer call,” Forth said. “It’s basically impossible to recoup the costs associated with resolving a situation like that with a customer. But ultimately, the most important thing is to make sure the customer feels better about the situation and that his or her issue has been resolved while protecting your margins as much as possible.”

Quantifying the cost of a callback can vary greatly based on the individual company workflow and the customer situation. However as shown in the sidebar, a few elements are core to every callback: administrative tasks, the actual service call, follow-up with the customer and associated expenses.

Calculating a Callback’s Cost

( an estimation)

Original billings from customer contract

— Additional administrative time: 1–3 hrs
  taking the initial call, scheduling the repeat appointment, processing paperwork

— On-site assessment/treatment: 1–2 hrs
  drive time, on-site assessment, customer discussions

— Follow-up: 1–2 hrs
  repeat calls/correspondence

= Net profit subtotal:
  (billings - cost of 3–7 hrs of company labor)

Additional Considerations:

— replacement product/inventory costs
— added fuel/equipment/maintenance/insurance costs
— possible replacement of customer turf/ornamentals

= Net profit subtotal 2:
  (subtotal 1 - additional expenses)

— Missed potential billings for the hour:
  $75 — $150/hr X 3–7 hrs

= Total Net Profit Significantly Reduced
Tips to Help Reduce Callbacks

For LCOs, some callbacks are inevitable, it’s the nature of customer service. However, there are a few common issues and practices which, if done correctly or addressed earlier in the customer relationship, may help reduce the risk of unsatisfied customers.

1. Overcommunicate from the onset: explain to the customer the treatment program, expected results

“You tend to assume the callbacks may be a product issue,” Forth said. “But sometimes it’s simply a communications breakdown.”

Many customers may make unnecessary callbacks because they do not understand the life cycle of a pest or the process LCOs are taking to address the problem. Take for example, scale.

Dr. Rich Cowles, an entomologist at Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station’s Valley Laboratory, has worked with numerous treatment programs to combat various species of scale. In the last few years, he has tested with Safari® Insecticide and seen fast results against elongate hemlock scale, a common type of armored scale.

“Safari is a highly systemic product which is taken up quickly into the plant when applied to the soil or trunk,” Cowles said. “Because of this it is transported throughout the plant, often resulting in better control than contact sprays.”

However, even the results of the most effective products should be communicated to the customer to help manage expectations.

“Because scales will propagate literally on top of previous generations, a tree may have layer after layer of scale throughout, which will remain for a long time. Even in trees treated with Safari, the scale will die very quickly, but the dead scale will remain on the tree until the needles fall off,” Cowles said. “To an unknowledgeable customer, this may appear as if there is an ongoing problem that is not being addressed, prompting a call to the LCO. Explaining this process on the front end can help reduce issues.”

2. Realize that by treating one issue, you could create another

Sometimes it seems that an LCO just can’t win. For example, a customer may have a clear problem with chilli thrips or armored scale. So an LCO may treat the pest with a contact insecticide, like bifenthrin, to address the issue. However, according to Cowles, contact products that are effective on one pest may inadvertently cause issues with another.

“For armored scale, many people may choose to apply a foliar treatment of a bifenthrin product thinking it will fix the problem. However, that bifenthrin application will also take out all the beneficial predators on that tree,” Cowles said. “That is why I caution LCOs to avoid using repeated application of pyrethroids as a foliar spray overall to interrupt pests—it will definitely work, but watch out for the consequences.”

Cowles urges LCOs to look at the entire ecosystem of possible pests before choosing a short-term solution with possible long-term ramifications.

“If beneficials are a concern, consider a soil or trunk applied product like Safari which is taken up into the plant and less likely to impact beneficial predators,” Cowles said.
In an effort to maintain high customer satisfaction and keep their return on investment strong, even the most seasoned LCOs examine and re-examine performance and labels to make sure they are getting the desired results from products.

Dr. Barry Troutman, technical services director for ValleyCrest Companies for the East Coast, said LCOs can’t just rely on a single situation to judge the quality and consistency of a product.

“You have to be absolutely certain you’re applying products properly and at the correct rates and timing,” Troutman said. “You can’t just say ‘this product doesn’t work’; you need to really review the labels to ensure you’re doing what you are supposed to do.”

A few years ago, Troutman had selected Arena® Insecticide to control the chinch bugs infesting his customers’ turf. But initially, his crew didn’t see the results he expected.

“We probably missed the benefits of Arena’s activity for about a year because we didn’t understand how it worked,” Troutman said.

“We were evaluating Arena about eight days after the treatments. The chinch bugs were dying, but were not what I would call ‘controlled’, ” Troutman said.

“Our inclination was to assume Arena wasn’t working. But when we started evaluating at 11–12 days as recommended, the bugs were gone. Arena seems to take a little longer to control, but when we evaluated it later, we appeared to get control for 10–12 weeks after application versus two weeks with pyrethroids.”

Arena is widely respected for its long residual activity and consistent performance on tough pests like chinch bugs, white grubs and billbugs—Arena consistently provided nearly 95-percent control of billbug larvae, compared to 73.6 percent with Merit and 47.2 percent with Talstar. However, this strong residual activity means LCOs need to examine Arena’s performance a few days later than other competitive products.

See page 6 for more information about Arena’s new lower price and lower summer preventive rate for white grubs.

The residual control of products like Arena can not only help consistently keep pests at bay throughout the season, but may also be able to help LCOs better serve their customers on a more streamlined schedule.

Arena’s wide window of application flexibility gives LCOs the chance to apply it as a preventive or curative treatment on grubs from May through September. This means LCOs have greater flexibility to treat grubs when schedules allow while maintaining confidence Arena will provide a consistent level of control to last for several months, even into late-season activity.
“Arena’s residual strength allows an LCO to apply their grub control treatment in April or May when they are applying a herbicide application,” said Todd Mayhew, Valent Professional Products field market development specialist. “So not only are they streamlining their activities and reducing the number of trips to a customer site, but they can feel confident with Arena their grub control will hold up through the summer.”

Additionally, Arena brings LCOs broad spectrum control of both soil- and surface-feeding insects—helping reduce the number of insecticides applied and potentially the number of trips LCOs will have to make to a customer’s site. And better residual control from the beginning will mean fewer breakthroughs—and possibly customer complaints—throughout the season.

See page 6 for more information about Arena’s new lower price and lower summer preventive rate for white grubs.

But don’t forget, in many cases speed and systemic activity matter

Though residual activity is critical for season-long control, some pests—especially the more troubling invasive species like chilli thrips and ficus whiteflies—require a product that works quickly throughout an entire plant or tree to stop the unrelenting attacks. Often these pests quickly cause noticeable destruction, drawing the attention and frustration of customers.

Troutman has many customers deep in the heart of invasive pest territory: Florida.

“There are some really distinct advantages to using systemic soil applications: fewer issues with wind, or people, or pools,” Troutman said. “These systemics will get throughout the entire plant quickly—the underside, the top of the leaves, the stems—and get some long-term control without the additional issues. You just can’t do all that with a foliar application.”

Cowles added that systemics can help address pests that are particularly challenging to reach physically with a foliar, slower-acting product.

“Scale is a great example of the value of a systemic,” Cowles said. “A Maskell scale will settle in at the base of the fascicle where a foliar treatment simply cannot reach. Also, there may be layer upon layer of scale on a tree, but stylets of the scale are sunk into the leaf stem itself, right where the systemic product will be located.”

Troutman agreed. “We’re on the cutting edge of knowledge on these invasive pests, it is changing every day,” Troutman said. “But we think systemics have a place in this fight and therefore continue to work with them with much hope and much interest.”

“Some of the pests here are so aggressive, there’s really no chance to ‘rescue’—if it is at all salvageable, you have to literally ‘save’ the plant any way you can as fast as you can,” Troutman said. “For example, thrips may have as many as 20 generations every year.”

Though Troutman continues to explore systemic products like Safari, he sees a benefit with the way systemic products work, especially when applied to the soil.
Additional Tips on Handling Customer Relationships

View a callback as an opportunity
Chris Forth, regional manager with TruGreen® Lawn Care and Landscaping, says his company takes customer relationships very seriously and even views a possible negative situation as a chance to build a rapport with customers. “Sometimes just spending the time with the customer and explaining the situation can help them feel like they have someone to listen to their concerns.”

Get out from behind the desk
Both Forth and Dr. Barry Troutman technical services director for Valley Crest Companies for the East Coast, said their companies will conduct regular, internal service audits with their staff to ensure they are following proper procedures for everything from customer interactions to product application. Some of the results were surprising, educational and even affected change within their organizations. “It helped us see if we were applying product at the correct rates or mixes,” Troutman said.

Seek out the expert opinions
“There are a wealth of resources that you can rely on to help make better customer decisions,” Troutman said. “You should make it a point to meet and get to know your local extension agent, know when he or she is holding sessions, and then attend those sessions. Chances are you’ll make better decisions for your customers when you learn what is working in your area and what isn’t.”

Never underestimate the importance of proactive personal contact
“We tend to have the most callbacks from the folks we don’t always have the chance to see and build collaborative relationships with,” Forth said. “Every LCO is unbelievably busy, but making that personal effort as often as possible on the front end may help manage situations when issues do develop.”

Understand how much you are willing to give
“Sometimes you have to make decisions on a count-by-count basis,” Troutman said. “You have to look at the value potential of that customer and that can affect the decisions you have to make. You may have to say I’m going to bite the bullet and do this for this customer because you know, in the long run, the benefits outweigh the current costs.”

Additional Valent LCO Product Spotlights

**Arena Insecticide**
*New for 2009: Arena now features a new lower price and lower summer preventive rate for white grubs—a total savings of 25%—making it a better value that helps you control costs, too.*

**Safari Insecticide**
*Safari Insecticide, a super-systemic insecticide with quick uptake and knockdown, controls a broad spectrum of voracious, ferocious and invasive pests, including aphids, hemlock woolly adelgid, wood boring beetles, whiteflies, lacebug, mealybug, leafminer and numerous species of armored and soft scale—some of the most costly pests that affect trees, shrubs and herbaceous ornamentals in the lawn and landscape market. With two formulations, Safari is super-flexible when it comes to application.*

For more information, contact your distributor or local Valent territory manager:

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