

Heeding His Father's Advice



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Looking for some lawn care marketing strategies? Jack Robertson tells you what works for him.



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PHOTO: ROBERTSON LAWN CARE

"Have two of everything you need," Jack Robertson's father advised him. Robertson was in his senior year in college, majoring in agronomy at the University of Missouri. It was 1978, and he had worked summers for his brother-in-law's lawn care company and thoroughly enjoyed working outdoors and interacting with clients.

"It got too much for him to handle because it was just a part-time business," Robertson recalls. So when the opportunity came up to buy the business, Robertson decided to take the plunge. Both his father and mother had their own businesses, so entrepreneurship was in his blood. His father helped him obtain a loan for twice the cost of the business.

"I tried to tell him that I didn't want to carry that much debt, but he insisted. He looked at me and told me that I had just borrowed enough to pay the loan back," Robertson recalls. "It was probably one of the best decisions ever in the business. That gave me enough to cover payroll and other expenses while I accumulated enough capital to pay off the loan."

Robertson Lawn Care in Springfield, Illinois, is now well entrenched in the state capital, making its presence known through many channels. With a shrewd combination of marketing, acquisitions and superior customer service, Robertson has grown the business to a comfortable, efficient level.

"I'd say we're a small to mid-sized company," Robertson says. "We have about

10 full-time employees with about three or four part time. We run six to eight trucks a day during our busy times.” Through its 38 years in business, the client base has grown by word-of-mouth and by acquiring four smaller companies, each with about 200 accounts.

“I would say our general growth has been 3 to 8 percent annually,” Robertson says. “The business hummed along during the Great Recession. Our business was pretty consistent until 2012, when we had a major drought. It just stopped everything. People didn’t want summer applications; they just wanted to wait and see what was going to happen,” Robertson recalls. “But this year was just the opposite of that. It’s been a tremendous year for healthy turf and great for us.”



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During the drought of 2012, most clients stopped summer applications. But this year has been a great year for healthy turf.

PHOTO: ROBERTSON LAWN CARE

It’s all about marketing

Beautiful lawns mean happy clients who tell their friends and neighbors and develop long-term loyalty to Robertson Lawn Care. But Robertson is not content to simply ensure the best customer service possible. He enjoys engaging clients with promotions throughout the year.

Robertson loves to market and promote his company. In June, he hosted a “Great Grill Giveaway.” A shiny new Weber kettle grill was awarded daily to Facebook customers who “liked” the page and answered the question of the day. Approximately 250 people responded every day for the week-long promotion of giveaways.

“We don’t really know how much business our Facebook presence drives,” says Robertson. “I put a help wanted ad on it and got several responses. But I think we got a better response from our newspaper ad. We’ve done a lot of contests on Facebook though. It’s fun.”

Even more fun is a pumpkin pie giveaway in the fall, a week before Thanksgiving. “We started this promotion about 15 years ago,” Robertson recalls. “We went to Bakers Square, which is around the corner, and ordered 100 pumpkin pies. We sent our 100 best clients a certificate for a free pie to pick up at Bakers Square. We had 82 people pick up a pie. That’s a tremendous return.”

The program has grown, and now the pies are distributed from his office. “We want people to come to the office and see where we are,” he says. Employees wear special shirts, and people can either drive up and pick up a pie or come in to say hello.

“That pies are going to sit on their Thanksgiving tables, and they are going to tell everyone where they got those pies,” Robertson says. “You can’t buy

that type of exposure.”

During the promotion, a popular local radio show broadcasts from his site to entice even more clients and potential clients to drop in. There is no “catch” to the pies, but Robertson Lawn Care brochures are available for anyone to take as they pick up pies. Robertson looks at the pie giveaway as a means to express his thanks to the community for his successful business. “It’s not a selling time of year; it’s a thankful time of year,” he says.

He says that investing in advertising on the top radio morning show has returned the best results. “Obviously, the newspaper isn’t the same as it used to be. If you’re doing radio or TV, there are about 300 different channels you can be on,” he says.

“You need to micro-market to your chosen demographics,” he adds. “We use the sports radio channel and the No. 1 morning show in the Springfield area to reach potential clients.”

Robertson carefully records the results of his firm’s marketing and promotions. “We have history for the last 10 to 15 years on every call we receive every day,” he says. He bases his marketing and selling messages to those media and events that generate the most calls. “Why would you spend your money on anything else?” he asks.

All calls are entered into spreadsheets. “I can tell you what days people cancel. I can tell you the number of estimates we do and how many have sold. I have a lot of information about what goes on in the business every day. I can predict what’s going to happen from the data I’ve collected.

“We’re not ‘sophisticated,’ but we’re pretty darn sophisticated!” he adds, laughing.

Calls regarding estimates are always handled promptly. Competition is fierce, but Robertson refuses to compromise.



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Every fall, Robertson Lawn Care hosts a pumpkin pie giveaway to thank its clients, as well as market to new customers.

Photo: ROBERTSON LAWN CARE

“There have always been lowballers; they’ve been around forever,” he says. “But some of our competition tries to get an edge with blanket pricing.”

In this case, any yard in a given area, no matter how large or small, is given the same price on the phone. “They don’t look at it to give you a price. We always visit the property to make a fair estimate. You can’t determine a price on the phone or with Google Earth. The size and condition of the lawn will affect the price.”

In spite of the competition, he is happy with his company’s growth. “We’re

doing well and holding our own," he says. "We still do things the old-fashioned way, but that's how our clients like it. Our client retention rate is one of the best in the country. That's what my job is."

The employee equation

While researching and cultivating new business is an ongoing goal in his company, Robertson also works hard to keep clients and employees happy. "Retention of long-term employees is key. Retention of customers is imperative," he notes.

Three employees have been with his company for more than 20 years. Once new employees complete training with an established co-worker, they are given a bit of leeway in their schedules. "If they need to get off early to see their kids play baseball, they get it," he says. "They love the flexibility. And they are going to get their work done if you are flexible."

"Our normal hours are 7:30 to 4:30, Monday through Friday – that's it," Robertson states. "We don't work longer hours or weekends during our busy time in spring. Five o'clock and we're gone. That really separates us from the rest of the companies out there."

A Lesson In Preparedness

The headline, "Disaster Strikes," on the March 13, 2006, edition of *The State Journal-Register* said it all. Business was humming right along, in spite of the unstable weather. "We really get going on March 1 here in central Illinois," Robertson says. "We were just getting into peak time – rocking and rolling."

That was until a rare pair of tornadoes moved through Springfield that Sunday night, and Robertson Lawn Care's office and equipment space was directly in their paths. "It took down our building," Robertson says. "It was gone."

Instead of stopping and lamenting about his bad fortune, Robertson got to work regrouping, and the response from the community was breathtaking. "Family and friends and even our competition lent a hand," he says. "There were a lot of positives that came out of it."

Customers offered to lend him their cars to do business. A friend offered space for his office and equipment.

Fortunately, his computers were salvageable. "We were set up and doing lawns out of an office by Wednesday morning," he says proudly. "It was really a pretty cool situation."

Robertson rebuilt the business location in the same spot. "It's a pretty high-profile area and we wanted to stay near our customers," he says. "Our office location is actually a big plus for us. It's not just an old warehouse that's hidden away."

And the big lesson he learned from the tornado of 2006: "Check your insurance

often and be sure you have enough," he says. "Review it. It's out of sight and out of mind and it's easy to overlook. But when I needed it, they came out and brought big checks to us, and we had no financial worries from the first week on. When you need it and use it, you realize that it's well worth the money spent."

He estimates that 80 percent of his clients are within a 10-mile radius of his office. "That means we can keep an eye out on our properties because we're driving by them all the time," he says. "And if a customer has a problem, we're right there."

Employees especially enjoy doing the driving because all Robertson Lawn Care trucks are 3 years old or less. "It's important for our image to have nice, new trucks," he says.

Despite weather cooling, work is still busy during the winter. "We work until the first week of December," he explains. "Then we start working on the equipment. I review the database, and we look ahead to January, which is when our renewal letters go out. Unless there's a lot of snow on the ground, the guys are out doing estimates, troubleshooting and any other jobs that are required. Truthfully, they get kind of bored in the winter. Some of them take time off."

Salaried employees enjoy paid vacations and holidays, and health insurance is provided. "If someone can get it cheaper through a spouse, they'll go that route," Robertson says. "But we provide it if they need it."

One thing Robertson shares with many business owners is the challenge of recruitment. "Finding young employees can be challenging," he says. "Young people with education want to be golf course superintendents. Our business can have an image problem. Our company's image is first-class. We're in the image business."

Besides paying strict attention to the image you project, Robertson has a few other tips for new business owners. "Know your limitations. Treat employees and customers with respect," he says. "Keep a nest egg so you have financial banking if you need it."

Robertson says he is not considering retiring any time soon. "I have a plan on paper if something happens to me tomorrow," he says. "But I like what I'm doing. I want to hang out here."

Robertson still credits his father for setting his business in the right direction. "Have two of everything you need," he says. "That's probably the best advice I've ever had."

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