

Off and Running



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Indiana Lawn Care owner keeps learning and growing

You never know how far a kind word goes. For John Right, it was compliments from neighbors that led him to change careers and start a lawn care business. It wasn't his first career change, but it's one that he now says suits him perfectly.

Indiana Lawn Care

Founder & President: John Right

Founded: 2008

Headquarters: Indianapolis, Ind.

Employees: 4 and growing

Services: Lawn care, light landscaping, core aeration, leaf removal, gutter cleanout, tree and shrub pruning, mulching, mowing, trimming, pruning, edging and snow removal

Website: www.indianalawncare.com

From 1998 to 2003, Right was in a partnership in a concrete company. After that, he went back to school and got a degree in accounting and finance from the Kelly School of Business at Indiana University, and then worked for about a 18 months doing corporate tax accounting. "But I hated being stuck inside a cubicle, and I just wanted to get outside," he recalls. "I had so many people driving past my lawn at home asking me, 'What did you do to make it look good?' So I decided to start my own lawn care company."



Indiana Lawn Care uses a fleet of John Deere zero-turn mowers and Exmark walk-behind units to mow roughly 85 lawns (split about evenly between residential and commercial).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF INDIANA LAWN CARE.

That was three years ago, and since that time Right has grown Indiana Lawn Care from a one-man operation to a successful company with four employees and about 85 lawns to maintain. Right says he began with a little knowledge from doing research on topics such as aeration and fertilization for his own lawn. "But now I look back on that and laugh," he says of how much he's learned since then.

Learning the basics

For starters, he now has an applicator's license to apply lawn pesticides. "That was one of the first things I did when I got into the business, because I knew that was going to be very important," right explains. He credits classes through Purdue University with helping him understand the more technical aspects of caring for turf.

Now that he feels he's knowledgeable about lawn care, he's busy gaining a customer base. He started out "by going after every account I could, throughout the whole Indianapolis area. I wanted to take everything I could get. I knew I would probably have some serious drive times between my accounts, but I knew that as time went on new accounts would fill in," he recalls. "And that's largely what has happened."

In that first year of business, Right says he took on one particularly large commercial account. The prospect was daunting, but he credits that experience with really helping him to get established in lawn care. "I told them my background, and I told them I would do whatever I had to do to get that account," says Right. "If I was in their shoes, I'm not sure I would have hired me. But they did, and I promised I would take care of them."

He thinks that his professional approach helped win him the account, even if his lawn care experience and equipment arsenal were lacking. The first time he mowed the 20-acre property the grass was extremely tall, and he did it by himself with a 52-inch zero-turn mower. "I think it took me about four days to get it all done. I had to go over it twice," he recalls. That experience prompted him to purchase a second mower and hire his first employee. "That was the account that really made it for me my first year," he says. Indiana Lawn Care still maintains that property, and today has the people and equipment to complete the entire property in less than seven hours.



Crew Member Ronald Hargo operates a spreader/sprayer. John Right says he wants to do a better job of cross-selling these types of services to customers, many of whom may not realize all of the services that Indiana Lawn Care provides.

The right equipment for the right services

For residential accounts, Right relies on 52- to 54-inch zero-turn mowers and 36-inch walk-behind units that help get through gates and provide access in tighter areas.

"For commercial accounts, we just bought a 72-inch mower and that's really

helped us out a lot," says Right. The walk-behinds are Exmark, and the riders include a new fleet of John Deere models, purchased after Right had a chance to visit that company's facility in North Carolina and demo some mowers there. "It was a fantastic experience. I really came away impressed. The Deere riders are just built so well." he explains.

Right continues to do a little mowing himself, but focuses most of his own time on what he calls "special projects," which include putting down mulch, operating his Bobcat on landscape projects, pruning, trimming and other assorted tasks. He also does weed control and fertilization. He now has four employees to help him in the field, and even so says it's still a constant challenge to keep up with the workload.

Right doesn't promote his company's services for landscape installations, but when customers approach him about making significant changes on their properties, he partners them with a local landscape architect. "I've subbed a lot of jobs out to her for designing it, and then we submit a proposal for doing the install," he explains. "We don't get into anything too fancy. We'll do some light hardscape work, but primarily it's mulch, plants, trees, shrubs."

He estimates that mowing makes up about 60 percent of the company's business; fertilization and weed control is another 15 percent; landscape installations about 10 percent; and snow removal another 15 percent. When it comes to mowing, the accounts are split roughly evenly between residential and commercial, says Right. "I know a lot of people are focused on getting more commercial accounts, but I think commercial work can be a little more cutthroat. I'm not going to underbid somebody just to get the job. We have to make a profit," he explains.

Business background pays off

When it comes to managing the business, Right says his financial background is paying off, from budgeting to understanding payroll issues. "I can look at the financial statements and really understand exactly what they're saying. So when I talk with my accountant, we can have a very intelligent conversation and I understand what's going on with any potential issues," he says.

Right's business background is also evident in the billing systems he has implemented. Customers can pay their invoices electronically, for example. "We've done that almost from the very start," says Right. "In the beginning, through QuickBooks Pro we were able to use the integrated PayPal link to bill customers through their email addresses. Now we send a link that takes customers to our website so they can pay their bill online and also see a list of the other services we offer.

"I love paying my own bills electronically, and I just assume that other people do as well. I think there's an advantage to offering these services," says Right. He adds that another benefit of offering electronic payment is that customers tend to pay these bills when they receive the email, resulting in quicker payment. "A lot of people will just pay the bill right away, which

is fantastic,” he says. For customers who may not feel comfortable paying over the Internet, or for one-time customers, Indiana Lawn Care is set up through WorldPay to be able to take credit cards numbers over the phone.



Steps to get ahead

One aspect of the business management Right feels he needs to improve is bundling his services. Presently, each of the services – mowing, aeration, etc. – is priced individually. “I think that a lot of our customers just don’t know all of the services we offer. Sometimes I’ll get an email asking if we provide a certain service. I have the assumption that people already know everything we do, but clearly they don’t,” he explains. “I need to do a better job of cross-selling to my customers.”

Right says the biggest challenge to implementing new selling strategies is the same that he faces in improving every aspect of his business: a lack of time. “I just wish I had more time to do everything!” he says. Another big challenge, he notes, has been finding good employees willing to work for a reasonable wage. “I’m sure I’m not the only one who faces that,” he says.



John Right (on right) discusses maintenance of a residential account with Perry Lambert, his crew leader. Right formed Indiana Lawn Care three years ago, and since then has built a successful company.

Snow services also in demand

In the winter, Indiana Lawn Care offers snow removal services. His first year in business, Right offered snow removal to residential customers using a two-stage walk-behind snowblower. “I had a two-wheel-drive truck, and just entering the business I didn’t have a lot of cash to invest in a new truck and plow,” he recalls. “And I didn’t have that many commercial customers at that time.” By last winter, he was using a truck and plow but was doing the work alone and putting in some 14- to 15-hour days. This winter he anticipates working with one employee to serve both residential and commercial snow removal accounts using two trucks with plows, as well as snowblowing concrete driveways (to avoid scratching) and sidewalks.

Growing pains

Right says there have been growing pains, but if he had to do everything over there isn’t much he would change. Now that he has three years in the business and a growing company to manage, he does have a bit of advice for those just getting started: “There are way too many people out there who give the industry a bad reputation. We’ve picked up a lot of accounts because other people were doing the job and they were sloppy. They might have underbid the job and they’re trying to cut corners to make up for it,” says Right. “I really think the most important thing is to be as professional as possible in everything you do.”

Patrick White is a freelance writer and editor who has covered every aspect of the green industry in the past 15 years. He is based in Middlesex, Vt., and is always on the lookout for unusual stories. You can contact him at pwhite@meadowridgemedias.com.