

Sign of the Times



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Lawn care pro moves into turf marker marketing

Brett Melanson has owned and co-owned several different lawn treatment companies in Florida, including his current enterprise, Plant-It-Earth (www.plantitearthflorida.com). Over the years, no matter the company name or location (he's operated companies in both Orlando and Tampa), one thing has stayed constant for Melanson: a knack for marketing.



Brett Melanson, owner of Plant-It-Earth in Florida, created customized die-cut lawn markers with a distinctive alien logo to help his company stand out. Now, he is offering others in the turf industry a similar marketing opportunity through his TurfBrands company, which specializes in custom lawn signs.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PLANT-IT-EARTH.

Stand-out signs

When he moved from Orlando back to his hometown of Tampa several years ago to start up Plant-It-Earth, Melanson was looking for a way to stand out in the marketplace. "In late 2009, I came up with a custom die-cut posting sign to stick in the yards I serviced," he explains. "Until that point I had been sticking the same thing that 99 percent of my competitors were sticking in the yards they worked on: a standard, 6-inch-by-6-inch sign that was either white or yellow, the two colors the industry has used forever."

Not only was the color of Melanson's new sign – what he calls a "turf marker" – unique, so was the shape and look. Instead of a standard square sign, he opted for a die-cut sign in the shape of an alien. "I decided to form a taller 8.5-by-11-inch alien sign. It's eye-catching, and it doesn't look like the normal sign, so immediately everyone started to take notice," he recalls. "I also put the alien image all over my truck and on our flyers. I basically said, 'If I'm going to stick this out in the yard, I might as well let

everyone in the community know who I was.'"

At Plant-It-Earth, Melanson found that coming up with an attention-grabbing sign was important, but so was the placement of that sign. "I would hold 30-minute meetings with my crews that focused just on the placing the turf markers in a lawn properly," he says. "I don't want them sideways; I don't want them leaning over; I don't want them parallel to the road, I want them perpendicular. They're double-sided, so I want them in a place where people can see them coming and going. And I want them out on the edge of the lawn, right out by the road so people can see them."

Business is booming

Before long, Melanson began hearing from people who were seeing his alien signs all over the city, and business began to boom. "We were very aggressive marketers already. We're very serious about using flyers and knocking on doors," he states. As the alien turf markers and truck banners started to really garner attention, Melanson says his company's sales took off. "I started to understand as a business owner that this was a very powerful marketing tool that I was implementing," he states.

Before long, Melanson says, Plant-It-Earth stopped the other advertising campaigns it had been conducting and focused all of its efforts on the turf markers. He began to expand this new marketing approach by leaving signs not only for customers, but also for their neighbors. "They were identical signs, the only thing that was different was the message on the back," he explains. "It said: 'Attention homeowner: We did NOT treat your property today, but while servicing your neighbor we decided to leave you information about our company. We would like to help you with your lawn care services.'"

The signs were 8.5 by 11 inches, the same size the flyers Plant-It-Earth had traditionally left on doors, but these signs were left on a stick by the mailbox. "We pointed the message up so that when the homeowner went to check their mail box, the message was displaying in their face. At first, people might see the sign and think we treated the wrong house, but once they read it, they understand it."

It proved to be more creative and effective than leaving flyers on the door alongside any number of other companies from various service industries. "It was specific, targeted marketing in a way that it had never been delivered before. People remember it more than something they got in the mail or left on their door. This was really powerful – it's the thing that really took off," says Melanson. "We actually had to stop doing it, because we went from 60 sales a week to 125 or 150 sales a week. We're not a huge company that could handle that kind of growth."

Quickly, it became apparent that the use of the distinctive lawn signs was proving to be the company's most powerful marketing tool. "Every time a new customer would call in to Plant-It-Earth, when we filled out an estimate form and got their name and address, we would also ask them, 'How did you hear about us?'" Melanson explains. "I knew the turf markers were a big part of our success, but as I sat down and started going through those forms, even I

was blown away by how many of them said, 'We saw your signs, or your 'flags.'" He adds that the timing of the growth made the impact of the signs all the more evident. "At a time when everyone was talking about how bad the economy was, we were growing our business," he says.

Launching TurfBrands

Around this time, though, Melanson noticed that the cost of his turf markers was rising. He says there are only two major, national manufacturers of these signs for the turf industry, providing little competition in the market. In response, he met with the local printing company that had printed his flyers in the past to see if they might be able to produce turf marker lawn signs. "I showed them my alien sign and they said, 'We can make that, and we can make it better.' So I watched them print them and saw the huge sheets coming out of their large presses," he says.

Impressed by the technology involved and the quality of the finished product, Melanson realized there was an opportunity to help not only his own lawn care company, but also others in the industry. With that in mind, he created TurfBrands (www.turfbrands.com), which specializes in "custom-shaped, large-format yard flags for marketing." Melanson began by calling some of his competitors, including large lawn service providers in Florida, regionally and nationally, to see if they would be interested. Many of them have placed orders within the last several months. "They didn't have any problem ordering from me," says Melanson. In fact, he says, the TurfBrands company is completely distinct from Plant-It-Earth. "I'm just trying to help others in this business," he adds.

Those who order turf markers have an opportunity to customize the shape and look just as Melanson did originally with his alien signs. "Every one of them is custom. If someone has a company logo of an eagle, we can shape the sign as an eagle," he explains. While the focus is mainly on the lawn industry, the approach is also catching on with service companies in other industries. For example, a pest control company in Atlanta recently ordered lawn signs die-cut in the shape of a large black widow spider.

Typically, it's been lawn chemical and fertilization companies that have traditionally used signs (and, in some cases, been required to post the lawns they treat). "This used to be considered a nuisance. When the state started requiring you to put a sign out after a lawn had been serviced, people saw it as them having to spend 20 cents a yard to put a flag out there," says Melanson. Really, though, it's a great opportunity for marketing, he says. The turf markers offered by TurfBrands are printed on a heavier-than-normal 24-point polyboard that won't fade or bend and will look good for the time they're installed in a yard.

Melanson says that mowing companies should also be marketing themselves this way. "If they're out mowing four times a month, why not put up a sign at least one of those visits displaying their name, brand, logo and contact information to the community?" he asks. "Especially in this economy, you have to take advantage of every opportunity to market yourself."

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