

**C**hris Senske, president of Senske Lawn & Tree Care, still talks about the first time he sprayed a pesticide application at the ripe age of six. "I was so excited," he remembers. It was Father's Day, 1959, and Senske's father had taken him, Senske's two brothers and some of the employees from his weed and pest control service out to a local YMCA camp to spray for ticks and fleas.

Growing up in the family business exposed Senske to different aspects of the lawn care industry. This exposure has enabled him to grow a three-employee, one-location business into a company with more than 200 employees and six branches servicing eight communities in Idaho, Utah and Washington state. The company anticipates bringing in \$15 million in sales this year.

**HUMBLE BEGINNINGS.** Senske Lawn & Tree Care was founded as Chemical Weed and Pest Control in 1947 by Senske's father, Bill. At that time, he sprayed lawns for 40 cents a piece.

Taking over the family business was not originally in the plan Senske had for his life. He was finishing up a bachelor's degree in biochemistry at the University of Washington and planning on going for his master's at Duke University in North Carolina when a family emergency called him home. He agreed to help out with the business while his father recuperated from surgery.

Senske moved back to Spokane and divided his days between working in the field and running the family business and taking classes at a local college to complete his undergraduate degree. He says he was still in the mode of school, so learning the ropes of a business was a fun, yet challenging, endeavor. When his father returned to the helm, Senske moved 140 miles southwest to Kennewick to manage a second branch of the business. He took over as president of Senske Lawn & Tree Care in 1980.

**RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE.** Lawn care and pest control – the services Senske Lawn & Tree Care established itself with – are

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

Bill Senske founded the family business back in 1947 and Chris Senske took over as president of Senske Lawn & Tree Care in 1980. Senske says he hopes the family ownership will continue for the foreseeable future.

Senske says one of his reasons for wanting the company to grow is to attract his children to take it over once he's ready to retire. The most likely candidate is Senske's 23-year-old son, Ben. Senske says his son has spent time working in every department of the family business, from being a customer service representative to working on a tree pruning crew to aerating and mowing lawns during his summers home from college. "Right now he's a pest control technician," Senske says. "He's getting a good background,"

still at the heart of the business. "One of our strengths has been that we have been able to nicely integrate that residential quarterly pest control business into the company where other companies have really struggled in doing that," he says. "A lot of it is because our roots have been in a parallel growth of lawn care and pest control from the very beginning, so it isn't anything foreign to us."

With every business there are periods of growth and periods of no growth, and Senske Lawn & Tree Care was no exception. The company hit a growth plateau in the mid-1980s, right around the time that sales hit the \$1-million mark. "We had run out of talent, we had run out of ideas and we had run out of creativity," Senske explains, adding that he brought in consultants to help organize the company and aid him in developing plans to propel the business into the future.

That helped until recently, when Senske admits he feels the business has reached yet another plateau. "Getting over the first plateau was a real challenge and we're kind of in another plateau where growth isn't happening quite as fast. We're at a point where we're poised and ready to be able to grow, but it's not happening at the pace at which we'd like."

As a result, Senske is planning on bringing in more consultants to help him focus and solve the problem.

Senske Lawn & Tree Care's growth rate in the last few years has been 5 to 8 percent, but over the next 10 years, he'd like to grow the company from its 2003 revenue of \$13 million to \$30 million. "The capital cost of growth is pretty high," he says. "I've figured that it takes \$40,000 in cash to grow the business \$150,000 in sales."

In order to achieve the growth they want, Senske says it will require \$400,000 in cash up front, adding that he's currently brainstorming a plan to achieve this type of growth.

Another challenge the company is dealing with is competition and its effects on the industry. "The bulk of the competitors here, whether it's in chemical lawn care or maintenance, just don't know business," he says. "They go and work for wages as opposed to working to build capital and that causes problems for everybody. They just don't understand how to establish prices."

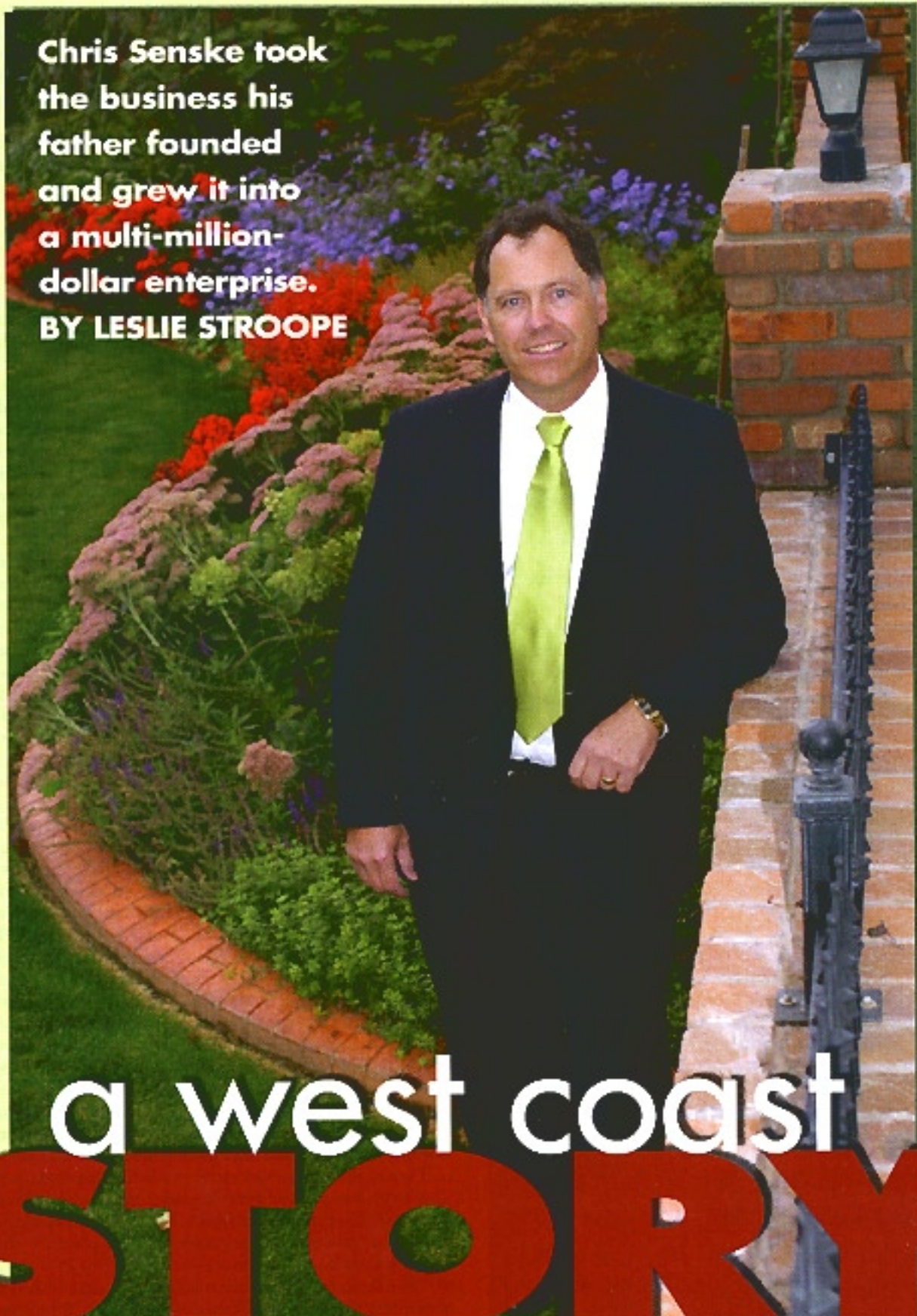
"Part of it is the barrier to entry in this business is so low that anybody can do it," he adds. "To try to continue to add value to a service that most people are trying their hardest to make a commodity is difficult."

Senske says he tries to set his company apart from the competition by providing good service and by having professional-looking people, equipment and advertising. He also tries to capitalize on word-of-mouth generated by doing little extras for clients, such as spraying curb lines for weeds that grow in the street, as well as doing quality control inspections of the properties on which they do lawn and tree care.

Senske also tries to provide his customers with year-round reasons they should look to his company to meet their needs. For instance, since Senske Lawn & Tree Care's inception, Senske has been trying to find ways to fill the November 1 to March 1 winter season. Senske says he tried everything from insulating contracting to storing and servicing lawn mowers. Senske began looking into holiday lighting and found it was a valuable enough service to warrant adding to the business seven years ago. Shortly afterward, the company also added interior holiday decorating, mostly for commercial properties.

**THE GOLDEN RULE.** Part of Senske's success comes from his commitment to honesty and integrity – both with employees and with customers.

Chris Senske took the business his father founded and grew it into a multi-million-dollar enterprise.  
BY LESLIE STROOPE



a west coast  
**STORY**

"We have adopted the use of the Golden Rule as an evaluation as to how one should conduct themselves," he says.

For employees, that means inexpensive, yet meaningful perks, such as periodic barbecues at branch offices where employees can grab a bite off of the grill during work breaks or at the end of the day.

This also means providing overtime when necessary, but also keeping it in line so it doesn't get out of control. Senske charges his branch managers and supervisors with the task of controlling overtime. He says that some branches are so well managed that even during the peak part of the season they accrue only 15 to 20 hours of overtime per month total.

"He's very fair in salary and all of his dealings," says Mike Davis, sales and marketing manager of Senske Lawn & Tree Care. "He's got a lot of integrity and cares about his employees. When I started here, I asked him, 'What exactly do you want me to do?' And he said, 'At the end of the day, I want you to do what's in the best interest of the company and me.' That has been incredibly helpful and has really guided me."

## TEAM PRACTICE

By the time Chris Senske turned 30 he says he was a father, a business owner and in need of creative input. Inspiration came in the form of a friend who took him out for a late-night rally race down a logging road. Senske says the motor sports bug bit him so hard that within a week he had bought his own roccocar and was off to Reno to compete.

He says eventually the racing circuit schedule kept him away from home too much and he decided to compromise by taking his children go-kart racing. Senske says the lessons he learned on the race track and in his roles as a youth hockey coach and referee have been applicable in his business, as well.

"No matter what level, whether it is go-karts, Indy cars, hockey or business, teamwork is a critical element of success. No individual can do everything the best. Contributions from all team players are needed to win a game. To be successful in racing takes practice and trying new ideas every time you go out on the track. It is the same in business. If you aren't constantly trying new ways of doing things and coming up with new ideas, you'll be left behind in the back of the pack."

Incidentally, the racing bug bit his daughter, Sara, 26, as well. Senske says she is a prize-winning driver as well as having the honor of having driven the pace car for the Indianapolis 500.

For customers, Senske's commitment to the Golden Rule means receiving value-added extras such as spraying the curbside for weeds that grow in the street and regular inspections of properties to ward off any potential customer service problems before they arise.

"We are the higher-priced service compared to our competitors," he says. "You can't do quality work and be the cheapest — it's not possible. We want to provide a high-quality service, be a little more selective of our customers and be proud of the work that we do."

If a customer does have a complaint, the company's policy is that it is resolved within 24 hours. If customers have questions about the products going to be applied to their lawns, they are given information right up front, from MSDS sheets to labels and anything else they might ask for.

The company's lawn care customer retention rate is 70 percent. The company's customers are 70 percent residential and 30 percent commercial, which Senske defines as industrial, government and institutional facilities.

Senske says they've taken the active approach to getting on the government contractor bid list, which means instead of waiting for local governments to find Senske Lawn & Tree Care's number in the *Yellow Pages*, they make calls. "Almost all government work is a competitive bid situation," Senske explains. "You need to be on that bid list. It's a constant process of making phone calls and finding where the various lists are. It's challenging."

Each Senske Lawn & Tree Care location services a 30-mile radius. Senske says they've expanded that radius by developing a group of subcontractors to serve their chain accounts that have stores out of their branch's service area.

**STAYING ON TOP.** When it comes to marketing, Senske believes in top-to-bottom coverage — staying true to the roots of his business and trying to stay on top of potential customers' minds.

"Some of the lessons we've learned are to stay close to our core business," he says. "We'll introduce new products to our old customers or a new product to the same market we serve, or we'll take our old products to a new market that we don't serve and try to make our company grow that way."

Direct mail has been the most effective method of advertising for Senske Lawn & Tree Care. "We've utilized direct mail to create a top-of-mind awareness," he says. The company creates individual mailers for lawn care and pest control. They've tried fancy lithograph letters to increase response at the cost of 20 cents per mailer as compared to the 3 to 12 cents for postcards. When they send the postcards, Senske says they target people who have expressed interest in their services in the past as well as people in neighborhoods in their demographic and density targets.

Senske likes direct mail because of its ability to be tracked. He says he's had clients keep postcards for years before a truck reminds them to call and they ask about an advertised special the company ran several years before.

The company has also tried several unusual marketing methods in the past, from bug coloring newspaper supplements to hiring a clown to hand out ladybug lapel pins at home shows.

One of their more successful marketing methods has been to give away free pairs of leather gardening gloves with estimates. Senske says he got the idea from a lawn care company in Denver, Colo., that gave away a free garden hose as a premium for accepting an estimate.

"We thought, 'Hoses are too bulky to deal with — let's find something that's small and easy,'" Senske says. "After some brainstorming, we found the solution in gardening gloves."

Senske found a vendor offering gloves at a decent price and had a local printer imprint their logo on the glove. He says the cost to the company, not counting postage, is about \$3.50 a pair, with 5,000 pairs of gloves per year being given away with the program.

"We have customers periodically call us back and say, 'I need a new pair of gloves,'" he says. Senske says that they normally give them to them, particularly if the requesting party is an active customer. "It's a few bucks," he says. "That's pretty cheap for client retention."

**TECHNOLOGY AND TURF.** Senske Lawn & Tree Care is trying to merge old-fashioned person-to-person sales with technology. This serves dual purposes. It provides the personal touch that a single operator in a small company has when he can walk up to the door, give an estimate and say, "I can do it right now."

"We have a salesman who can't necessarily do that and so we want to be able to get to, within the next year or so, hopefully, for the salesman to send the order right to the nearest technician and have them come do it that day so that we can alleviate that problem of arriving at a door and seeing multiple estimates and not being able to act on it faster."

The company has also harnessed the benefits of technology to make it even easier for customer interaction. For example, three years ago they streamlined their call center by creating a centralized location in Kennewick where all calls originate. Customers receive a consistent message because the training is uniform and it takes pressure off of the branch managers who were struggling with phone coverage when employees were sick or on their lunch breaks or the office didn't have enough staff to handle the call volume.

Senske says the system cost \$150,000 to put in place and the company spent about \$20,000 on software licensing fees, in addition to the labor costs to employ people to answer the phones. All in all, Senske estimates it costs them \$3 per incoming call to operate the system.

Senske says the tracking data from the call center technology they use has allowed them to make sure when their customers need them, they are there. For example, phone center statistics were showing that the company was receiving enough calls on Monday holidays, such as Labor Day, to warrant staffing the call center on these holidays to make sure customers' calls were being answered.

Senske says it has worked so well that they have been able to streamline the number of call center employees from 17 to 11 and actually provide better service.

"We've also tried to do some of that with our Web site where our customers can buy service, pay for service, pay on services that have been completed, see when services are scheduled to be done and also soon be able to schedule their own services," Senske says. "So, if they don't like the date that we've told them that we were going to be out, then they can change it themselves online."

The Senske Lawn & Tree Care Web site, launched one year ago, has an average of 250 customer interactions per day. The company introduced online services to the site last January.

"The fun part is to see how it has worked," he said. "Our guys in the field through their cell phones report that their job is done through the Web site and it's posted right to the Web site within about two minutes of when they complete the job. Then, the customer can go pay for it online. We have had customers do that, and in less than an hour the whole transaction has been



Chris Senske (second from the left) and some members of his business team. Photo: Leif Luglan

completed. The work's done, they've gone and looked at the site, they've paid for it and the money's in our bank."

Senske says that more than 50 percent of their customers want to be notified in advance of when they are coming to do a job. In the past they've relied on sending postcards or calling them, and now they are trying to notify customers of an upcoming visit by e-mail, a program that has been quite successful. He says that they have 20,000 active customers and 10 percent have an e-mail address in their database.

"My goal with setting up that Web site was to do as much as I could to allow customers to have many possible ways to contact us and take care of their business with us. I want customers to be able to help us help them as much as possible. We want to make sure we're giving them the best possible service on the front end."

The cost of the Web site maintenance is less than using regular mail to communicate with customers, Senske points out. He estimates that, with labor, printing and postage costs, sending service notification by mail costs 30 cents per postcard, at the rate of 150 to 200 postcards per day. Though this isn't something the company can completely give up doing since there are some segments of its client base, such as seniors, who have responded that they do not have Internet access and would prefer to receive notices via regular mail.

**FORECASTING THE FUTURE.** When it comes to the green industry, two things cause Senske concern. One is the water shortage in the West. Senske predicts this will have a major effect on his business and may force his company to focus on services like xeriscaping.

Senske's second concern is increasing difficulty of making a profit. He says instead of customer satisfaction resting on things like whether or not their lawn is green and weed-free, customers are now concerned with smaller details like whether or not their name is spelled right on the mailings, and how the company answers the phone. Add to that the "shop around for a better price" mentality created by big box retailers and clients are getting harder to please.

But when it comes to the future of his business, Senske is optimistic. "I want it to grow not just for growth's sake," Senske says, "but to be able to continue to be vibrant and attract quality people." **LCP**