

Top Dawg



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When James Campanella founded Lawn Dawg in Nashua, N.H., in 1997, the goal wasn't simply to be competitive in the regional market. "My plan was to become the dominant lawn care business in the Northeast," he states plainly.

It was a bold plan, but not an unrealistic one given the experience that Campanella had gained earlier in his career working for a number of local and national lawn care companies. He says he used that experience when starting and growing Lawn Dawg, which specializes in fertilizer applications, weed and insect control, soil testing and related lawn care services.



Lawn Dawg specializes in lawn care services such as fertilization and weed and insect control applications. The company briefly experimented with adding mowing and landscape installation, but quickly returned to its roots in lawn care services.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAWN DAWG.

Climbing the ladder

Campanella got his start in the green industry in 1983 working as a lawn technician for Old Fox Lawn Care in Chelmsford, Mass. He eventually worked his way up to a management position with that company. In 1987, after Old Fox was sold to Tru-Green, Campanella helped the former owner, Dr. Jim Wilkinson, start a Lawnmark franchise in Portland, Maine. "That was a great learning experience, being able to start a business from scratch," Campanella recalls. "In just a few years we were able to build that business up to become the largest lawn care company in Portland." He credits Wilkinson, a former turfgrass professor at Ohio State, with helping to teach him the science of caring for turf. "I was very fortunate to learn from the best," says Campanella.

In 1993, when Wilkinson sold the business, Campanella went to work directly for Lawnmark as a regional manager based in Albany, N.Y. "This really allowed

me to learn about the marketing side of the business. Lawnmark was a marketing machine and really knew how to drive new customers to the business," he says of his time in that role.

Two years later, Lawnmark was sold to Barefoot Grass, which was the second-largest lawn care company in the country at the time. Campanella was moved to New Hampshire as the Northeast regional manager. "Barefoot was a public company, and there I really learned the financial end of the business," he recalls. Not long after, though, Barefoot Grass was purchased by Tru-Green, which already had a Northeast regional manager, leaving Campanella to ponder his future path.

"At that point, I had already had an opportunity to learn all of the major aspects of the business," Campanella explains. "I felt I was really ready to give it a try on my own." So he started Lawn Dawg in southern New Hampshire with, he says, "zero customers." Now, just 15 years later, the company has about 20,000 customers serviced by about 100 employees in 10 different locations across the Northeast (New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York). And that growth looks to continue. It's proof that Campanella's initial vision of building the dominant lawn care business in the Northeast wasn't far-fetched. "And it remains our goal," he emphasizes.



Campanella, who along the way served as national president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA), says that his early career spent moving around the Northeast with various lawn care companies gave him an opportunity to learn different geographic markets, and to meet knowledgeable, influential people in various locations. "When I started opening branches, it's no coincidence that I now have branches in Portland, Maine, and Albany, N.Y., and in Connecticut and Massachusetts – all of the places that I worked or had responsibility for within my region," he explains. "I'm pretty confident [about identifying] the places that will work for us, and where we can be successful." He opened one branch a year for the first seven years after he founded the company.

Overcoming obstacles

In spite of the impressive growth, Campanella is quick to point out that there have been many lessons learned as the company has evolved. For starters, Lawn Dawg has had to adjust its expansion strategies over the years. "It was easier to start up a location from scratch before the 'Do Not Call Registry' was passed. We were very good at telemarketing – excellent at it – so we were able to grow a business pretty quickly with the exact customer accounts we wanted," recalls Campanella.

Since the advent of the Do Not Call Registry has limited telemarketing, he says it's now easier for Lawn Dawg to buy its way into a market by acquiring an existing company and work to grow that customer-base. Not that that's an easy prospect, either. "It's not just a matter of finding a business for sale. It has to be the right fit, it has to be the right people that fit our culture and our team, and it has to be a good, well-run business. We're not

interested in buying someone's problems," says Campanella. He feels fortunate that in three of the four acquisitions he's made, the previous owners have stayed on board to manage the new branches. "They loved lawn care, just not so much running the business," Campanella summarizes.



James Campanella started Lawn Dawg in New Hampshire in 1997 and used his prior experience in the green industry to dramatically expand the company. He now services 20,000 customers at 10 branch locations throughout the Northeast.

Another challenge that Lawn Dawg faced in the mid-2000s was a failed foray into adding additional landscape maintenance services such as mowing and landscape design/construction and even irrigation work. "We took a pretty hard hit to our cash reserves," Campanella says of the investment involved in mowers and other equipment needed to get these additional services up and running.

Beyond that, he also soon realized that some of these services required a completely different business model than the lawn fertilizer/chemical applications he had built the business around. "Despite people thinking they're similar in nature, they are very, very different and require completely different models. So we went back to our core business, what we're good at. That will remain our focus and only focus," says Campanella. The only category of the new services that he decided to retain is tree and shrub spray services. "They are a pretty easy add-on to lawn services," he points out.

Managing multiple sites

In the majority of cases, Lawn Dawg has started new branches from scratch. In four locations, however (mostly after passage of the Do Not Call Registry), it was able to acquire existing lawn services companies. In most of these cases, he used a broker to help identify such opportunities. Often it's a small but successful company where the owner doesn't have the financial resources or the expertise or, perhaps, the desire to grow the business larger. "It comes to a point where taking the next step requires a tremendous investment in infrastructure," says Campanella. "A one- or two-man operation can get to about \$250,000 to maybe \$300,000 in annual revenue ... through referrals or knocking on doors. After that, to get to next level – north of half-a-million dollars a year – you really have to invest in infrastructure and marketing and create a business plan."

Whether a new branch is started from scratch or purchased as part of an acquisition, having a capable manager on site is extremely important, says Campanella. "We actually tried to run a couple of satellite branches, where a branch manager would oversee the office from an hour or two away and it would only be field staff in that location. On paper, it looks great because it's a profitable model, but in application it doesn't work. You need a boss who is in charge and onsite every day running the business," he says. Campanella says that Tom Bucci, Lawn Dawg's vice president of operations, visits each location on a regular basis (a different branch each week) to meet with the

site manager and staff and ensure things are running smoothly.



The use of custom-designed vehicles, most notably Unicell enclosed van bodies, allows Lawn Dawg crews to operate efficiently in the field. The vehicles also serve as rolling billboards and play an important marketing role.

While each office is run as a standalone profit center and a standalone business, there are several key ways in which efficiencies can be realized in running the different branches. Most notably, says Campanella, is the fact that all sales, customer service, billing, etc., is done through the company's central headquarters in Nashua, N.H. This office serves as something of a nerve center, with all customer calls being routed here and staff in Nashua using that information to send out bills to customers and work schedules to each branch. "That way customers are talking to a specially trained customer service representative and every customer is getting a response that is consistent, honest and polite," he explains. "It allows us to provide the best quality customer service with the most efficiency."

Campanella credits the use of Real Green System's Service Assistant software with helping Lawn Dawg to manage so many customer accounts in so many locations from one office. "It's a fantastic program," he says. "We send out 70 routes a day which are handled by two routing managers here at the headquarters. We've built a great network, so they can print right to the printers in our branch offices. It makes us very efficient." Even more important that the technology, though, is the executive management and marketing team and headquarters staff that really make Lawn Dawg's model work so well, Campanella emphasizes.

Operating numerous branches also allows the company negotiating strength when purchasing products such as fertilizers and pesticides. It also allows Lawn Dawg to create one large company account with vendors and get better rates on everything from vehicle oil changes at Jiffy Lube to company uniforms. "We also get great deals on our trucks and equipment," Campanella adds. "For example, we have a credit line with General Motors and reached a certain limit with them that allows for some really substantial discounts on trucks."

Beyond improved buying power, Lawn Dawg uses its multiple branches as an opportunity to improve efficiency through uniformity. One example was the design of a special Unicell custom-built box body on a Chevrolet van chassis. "We customized the body inside with a ramp so that we can drive our Z-Spray [from L.T. Rich Products] ride-on spreaders right onto the truck," says Campanella. The interior is also customized so there's an organized place for every tool and product needed on the job. And by using an enclosed vehicle, the company is able to use the exterior as a driving billboard to help with marketing.

Putting the same vehicles and equipment at every branch, and ensuring that all employees look neat and professional in matching uniforms, helps to ensure consistency, which is critically important in multilocation businesses, says Campanella. "Lawn care owners often ask me how I make the

business work at multiple locations without being there,” he reveals.
“Really, the answer is all about systems. All of our branches run exactly the same way, because we have a system or a policy for everything.”

Fast Facts about Lawn Dawg

Owner: James Campanella

Founded: 1997

Headquarters: Nashua, N.H.

Markets: Throughout the Northeast

Services: All aspects of lawn care, and tree and shrub services

Employees: 100 (at 10 locations)

Website: www.lawndawg.com