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## CENTRAL FEATURES

# Supply and Support

*by Tom Crain*

### Conklin Company offers a lawn care business model

Don Sauter is operating what many believe to be the fastest growing family-owned lawn care company in America, but no one outside of his five-county region has heard of it. Low Cost Lawn Pros maintains 150 lawns including residential, schools and athletic fields, without ever having delivered a flyer to a single doorstep. Operating in Arlington, Minn., a town with a population of 2,000 and four times as much acreage in corn than turf, Low Cost's growth is growing at about 30 to 40 percent annually.



Brian Benfer is a Conklin independent business owner and is one of a handful making a good living at it.  
*Photos courtesy of Brian Benfer.*

Sauter, a biology teacher, began spraying the athletic fields at his school to supplement his teacher's salary in the off-season. A few years later, the community took notice of the superb condition of the fields, and dozens of people asked Sauter if he would take care of their lawns. Today, he also supplies other lawn care companies throughout Minnesota with his own private label of personally concocted "miracle spray" products and lawn care equipment.

Sauter can't wait to retire from his teaching job this year so he can go full-time in building his

lawn care business. "I don't want to keep turning business away," says Sauter. "When school is in session, I have to work 16-hour days to keep up with demand. I will now be able to focus on supplying other lawn care companies by adding at least 10 more per year."



Brian Benfer is owner of EnviroCare Turf Management in New Columbia, Pa., and started his business after attending Conklin Company's lawn care training program.

The fertilizer in Sauter's "miracle spray" is supplied by Kansas City-based Conklin Co., better known for its agricultural crop management products for farmers and roofing materials for commercial builders than its lawn care products. With a major manufacturing and warehousing facility in Minneapolis, Conklin supplies Sauter with the fertilizers, slow-release nitrogen fertilizer additives, wetting agents and adjuvants, plant growth regulators and seed emergence aids he uses to maintain his clients' lawns. When necessary, he also uses other suppliers for insecticides and herbicides, which he adds directly to the liquid fertilizers.

Conklin's lawn care products aren't organic, but Sauter, an environmental educator, believes his lawn care business is still "greener" than most, because the number of standard applications is reduced from five or six per season to two. "Not only is this more cost-effective for my customers, but it also minimizes environmental impact by more than half," he explains.

### A unique business model

Conklin also offers a network marketing opportunity for the lawn care clients it supplies. Brian Benfer, who started his lawn care business, EnviroCare Turf Management in New Columbia, Pa., follows the network marketing model that Conklin offers.

Benfer started with Conklin part-time as a Conklin IBO (independent business operator)

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Brian Benfer's equipment consists of a used pick-up truck with attached trailer, along with a golf cart with twin-mounted, 200-gallon spray tanks.

selling lubricants, cleaning and health products—three of Conklin's six other product lines. Four years later, he attended Conklin's lawn care training program, starting his own lawn care business the following month with a used pick-up and attached trailer, along with a golf cart with twin-mounted, 200-gallon spray tanks.

Benfer now provides lawn care treatments for about 300 customers per season. He is one of a handful of Conklin lawn care professionals making a good living at it.

### Network marketing hard for lawn care division

Even though the company has been a Better Business Bureau accredited business since 1973, there could be a few factors working against the network marketing of Conklin, green industry experts say. First, the personality profile of a lawn care business owner is typically more laid back and nonaggressive—certainly not the personality profile identified as being successful in network marketing. Also, pushing a lawn care business model like Conklin's takes a lot of extra time and effort.

However, what many familiar with the Conklin lawn care program say is that the lack of marketing resources is the real problem. According to Tim Carlson, Conklin's agriculture marketing specialist, Conklin's agricultural marketing focus remains in crop production for farmers with their better-known AgroVantage product line, and not lawn care for consumers. "We [Conklin's Lawn and Plant Care division] are still considered a 'tag-along' to AgroVantage," explains Carlson. "For now, we're leaving it up to our individual IBOs to develop the lawn care business for Conklin."

One of the few corporate-sponsored marketing efforts for Conklin's Lawn and Plant Care division includes a booth at a couple of major industry trade shows for the past two years. "We've received a lot of traffic at the booth and our IBOs have gotten good qualified leads there," says Carlson.

Carlson says that about 500 individuals have gone through Conklin's three-and-a-half-day intensive corporate training. Of those that have completed the training, about 50 percent were already involved in the lawn care business, 25 percent wanted to add lawn care services to their existing business, and 25 percent were new to the industry. "Of the 500 that have attended training, about 200 are still doing something with us and about 50 are making a living at it," says Carlson.

"I believe Conklin's lawn care program is a great opportunity for this entrepreneurial industry, especially during this current recession when so many people are looking for alternative options for work," says Judy Guido, principal of Guido & Associates, a California-based leading consulting firm for green industry professionals. "Any company that offers a contractor or consumer an option to provide good training, supplies proven products and equipment combined with start-up costs well within reason, and provides a pool of mentors to ensure that mistakes are minimized, should be a successful model in this industry."



Brian Benfer applies fertilizer with his golf cart equipped with twin-mounted, 200-gallon spray tanks. He now provides lawn care treatments for about 300 customers per season.

Guido confesses that she and her colleagues have not been aware of Conklin throughout all their years attending green industry trade shows and leading seminars for the industry's trade associations, and approximates that less than 5 percent of the industry is aware of Conklin and its offerings. "They need to increase their marketing tactics tenfold to promote this wonderful opportunity to consumers and contractors alike," she suggests.

Meanwhile, Benfer has introduced driveway sealing to his outdoor services mix, representing another Conklin product line, and he is well on his way to fulfilling his business goal.

*For the past 20 years, Tom Crain has been a regular contributor to B2B publications, including many in the green industry. He is also a marketing communications specialist for several companies in the travel, agriculture and nutrition industries.*

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