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COVID-19

4/1/2020

Coronavirus Best Management Practices for the Green Industry

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While we have gained a basic understanding of this novel coronavirus, we are still in the earliest stages of the outbreak, and we do not have a clear idea as to what the net impact of this virus will have on our business, community, state, or country. As a member of the green industry, you are approaching the most critical period of the year for your business to generate revenue. The declared pandemic has changed the playing field, and business uncertainty is clearly on the horizon, so you need to be prepared for this uncharted territory.

The CDC has posted a page called Interim Guidance for Business and Employers. It provides business owners and operators with science-based information that can be used to guide your business during this outbreak.

As a landscaper, grounds manager, greenhouse operator, and/or turfgrass professional your financial success is quite dependent upon your ability to recruit, train, and retain a healthy and robust workforce. The old adage, “Profitability starts with peoples” may be perceived to be a little dated, but no business succeeds without good people working for them. While I am not a medical professional and have never owned a business, I have worked with or was employed by the green industry for the past 46 years. My goal with this article is to provide you with links to a few resources and some best management practices or BMPs that I feel you should employ to keep your business running through this difficult period.

1. Frequent handwashing is the first line of defense against COVID-19. As an industry, we have never emphasized personal hygiene when training our employees. The first step is to download this handwashing poster from Penn State Extension. It was developed for the foodservice and produce industry, but it is relevant in our battle to limit the spread of COVID-19. The poster is in English and Spanish and can be printed and displayed throughout your shop, lunchroom, restroom facilities, and in your trucks.
2. The second step to place hand sanitizer dispensers throughout your operation and to make sure that anti-bacterial soap and single-use towels are stocked in every bathroom. If porta-potties are being used ensure that single-use towels, water, and hand soap are available for worker use. Make sure that all trucks have basic hand sanitation supplies including water (for handwashing), antibacterial soap, and single-use towels. At the very least keep a supply of hand sanitizer on each landscape truck.
3. Common workplaces like the breakroom, locker room and restroom are great places for workers to pick up diseases like COVID-19. Make sure that these common workplaces (like restrooms and breakrooms) and work surfaces (doorknob and tables) are cleaned and sanitized regularly. Your

business should develop cleaning schedules and cleaning protocols for your work facility. A few dollars spent on cleaning your facility each day may prevent your entire workforce from contracting COVID-19.

4. There are multiple print resources and posters that have been developed by the CDC (Center for Disease Control) that can be downloaded and posted at your place of business. Download these materials for free from the CDC. Please post them throughout your place of business to keep your employees and even customers informed.
5. Many landscape companies send out large coolers containing drinking water for their employees. These drinking water containers should be sanitized daily and workers should be told to properly wash their hands before accessing the cooler. Workers should also be provided single-use cups that can be disposed of after getting a drink. While it has been years since I worked on a landscape crew, we frequently drank from the spout of a communal orange drink cooler. Our hands were rarely sanitized and in some cases, our mouths brushed against the spout on the cooler. While we were all brothers and sisters in the workplace, this was decades before SARS, MERS, and COVID-19. Today this communal practice could facilitate the spread of COVID-19 through your entire workforce.
6. Employers should insist that employees come to work with clean clothes on each day. Clothes that are soiled are more likely to carry human pathogens including COVID-19.
7. Many landscape workers live paycheck to paycheck and will not call-off work if they are feeling ill. Some people infected with COVID-19 may not feel bad enough to be bedridden so they could come to work with a low-grade fever and what they believe to be are cold symptoms. In order to protect your entire work crew, you should encourage all workers irrespective of job title, or your work deadlines, etc. to call-off if they are dealing with any illness. While it may put constraints on your business temporarily you will not be able to continue to operate if your entire workforce has to self-quarantine from COVID-19 for 14 days. If possible, see if your business can offer some form of sick leave to your workers to hopefully discourage their attendance when feeling ill. If no sick leave is offered expect some of your employees to show up for work sick. Stay strong and send them home.
8. As a landscape crew member in the early 1980s, we would send out 10-12 landscape workers to a single job site to get the job completed as quickly as possible. The gathering of such a large workforce today in a breakroom/meeting room at the shop or even on a job site could put your entire crew at risk if one worker is carrying COVID-19. To protect your business operation, I would consider reducing your crew size and would strive to keep the same crew members working together each day. I would also consider staggering the arrival and departure times of my crews to minimize contact between crew members. While this may seem like an over-reaction, I have seen workers share cigarettes, drinks, and even finish each other's breakfasts at the shop and on job sites. Smaller crew size, in my opinion, is a means to compartmentalize the workforce into smaller isolatable segments that can mitigate worker risk of contracting COVID-19 from each other.
9. Most green industry businesses have a diverse workforce that may include workers that may be more susceptible to developing serious complications from a COVID-19 infection. Workers over the age of 60 and those that have underlying medical issues are expected to be the most severely impacted by this COVID-19 outbreak. If possible, consider offering these workers an alternative assignment that may minimize their exposure to the coronavirus from other crew members. Perhaps consider sending the higher risk workers out on the road with the water truck or have them tackle landscape maintenance projects independently as a single person crew.
10. Worker interaction with clients will occur on job sites. While we do not want to discourage this practice,

encourage workers to maintain a buffer or space between the client and themselves.

11. Worker safety training often occurs in larger group settings. During this outbreak consider setting up individualized worker safety training sessions on laptops with sanitized keyboards in offices or rooms that have been cleaned/sanitized between use.
12. Consider developing an emergency plan for your business operation if key managers become ill with COVID-19. Ask yourself who will assume payroll responsibilities if your payroll clerk becomes ill or who will manage workflow, landscape bidding, or day-to-day operations if these key individuals become incapacitated in any way? Your business should prepare a plan before a crisis develops and then hope that you never need to enact the emergency plan that you developed.

For additional information on Green Industry issues, please contact me at tgf2@psu.edu.