

COMPOST MARKETING INNOVATIONS

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Waste Streams**

Source Separation Strategies

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MAINSTREAM NICHES

INNOVATIONS IN COMPOST MARKETING

This analysis examines what it takes to accelerate the trend that is making compost a household word and a mainstream horticultural and agricultural product.

Ron Alexander

Blending for growing media (left) and golf courses (right) reflects an increased understanding of customer needs and applications.

Photos courtesy of R. Alexander



AS COMPOST becomes more of a household product, the number of successful marketing programs has greatly increased — especially where management of a quality product and its distribution are taken seriously. In the case of biosolids compost, for example, it's estimated that 80 to 85 percent is being successfully marketed. To understand the trends and innovations of the present, it is important to evaluate the challenges that impacted the history of compost marketing.

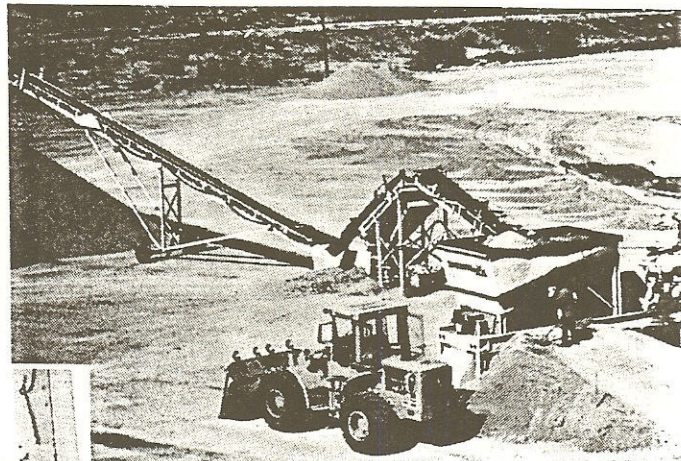
By far, the two biggest reasons why programs failed in the past are because of lack of product quality and lack of effort. Although a quality product does not assure it will be effectively marketed, poor quality makes success unlikely. Furthermore, different end users and applications have different requirements as far as compost characteristics, and therefore a usable product for one customer may not be a usable one for another. To assure the development of a long term market, your product must not only be of high quality, but must also be consistent

in nature. The other major reason for marketing program failure is a lack of effort or resources being provided for its development. With any start-up program, proper resources and effort must be made to assure a stable base is developed from which to work. As the program grows, in a period of two to four years, the effort necessary to improve and maintain the program is much less than when initiated. Other problems which have

affected compost marketing are lack of market planning, lack of green industry (end user) knowledge, not following basic marketing principles, regulatory barriers, and to some degree, product stigma.

FEEDSTOCK VARIETY

One of the biggest trends today deals with the variety of new feedstocks being utilized to produce compost. Aside from yard trimmings, animal manures, biosolids and mixed solid wastes, substantial quantities of source separated organics, various agricultural by-products and industrial/commercial by-products are now being manufac-



tured into compost. These new feedstocks have in some cases caused new process challenges, but have also generated products with some very specific and unique characteristics. Included are coffee grounds, by-products from the dairy, pharmaceutical and food processing industries, cotton gin trash, etc. These new feedstocks often have allowed for greater public acceptance and enable corporations to recycle more organic by-products through composting.

Product diversification within specific facilities has increased as an understanding of customer needs and applications have become clarified. This is being done through blending with other products, various refinement steps and by varying the composting process itself. Both public and private

composters have developed diverse product lines, but private composters are more likely to get involved with blended products because of the potential liability and investment into the blend components. It is commonplace to find yard trimmings composting facilities producing firewood, biomass fuel, and mulch as well as compost. This trend illustrates how compost facility operators are beginning to see themselves as product manufacturers and not waste managers.

MAINSTREAM PRODUCTS

Integrating compost into mainstream products is allowing for greater market penetration. Various composts have become components in commercially marketed growing media, topsoils and specialty blends. Animal manure compost has even been used as a base for fertilizer products. The trend of integrating compost into mainstream products has increased in both bagged and bulk products and for those products marketed on both a retail and commercial level.

Niche marketing of compost possessing unique characteristics has improved to a great degree. Through research and practical application, the industry has identified the preferred characteristics for compost used by particular end users for specific applications. More and more compost producers have taken advantage of this understanding and concentrated their marketing efforts on a specific end user group (e.g., farmers, golf courses, nurserymen) or application which particularly suits their product (e.g., topdressing, mulch, potting media). Other compost producers and marketers have varied their composting process to affect product characteristics or have utilizing additives to create a product which meets the needs of a particular application. For instance, a compost can be finely screened for use as a topdressing. Nutrient rich feedstocks, such as manures or food by-products, could be composted to the point of stabilization, or until odors have been significantly reduced, but not fully stabilized in order to retain a higher quantity of nutrients. This trend of niche marketing will continue to grow as new products and new uses are developed and as an understanding of which products are best suited for particular applications are determined.

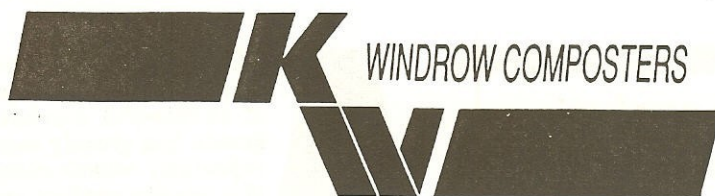
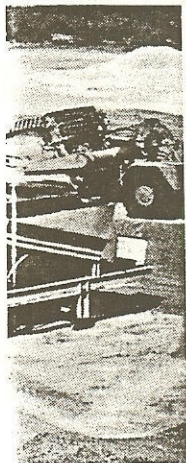
HOMEOWNER MARKET

A most important segment which has continued to expand at a rapid pace is the homeowner market. *Organic Gardening* magazine has estimated that 27 million gardeners are now using compost — purchased in both bulk and bag form through a variety of sources. Most popular feedstocks tend to be manure, yard trimmings and biosolids based products which are thoroughly composted, finely textured, with minimal odors and

physical contaminants.

Topsoil blenders and companies that produce custom soil blends have increased their use of compost. Topsoil and other custom blended products are being marketed around the country from between \$25 to \$45 per cubic yard picked up at the blending sites. Garden soils, potting media, golf course and athletic field mixes also are being produced with compost. Environmental applications have increased to a great degree. For example, compost is used in erosion control. Finer composts are being applied in liquid suspension (hydroseeding) and coarse products blown and bulldozed onto slopes. Composts are used in wetland mitigation, biofilters, and

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UTILIZING COMPOST ON PLAYING FIELDS

ATHLETIC turf construction and maintenance represents a growing market for high quality compost, according to researchers and producers. "We feel there's such lousy topsoil being sold on the market that you are better off amending a soil substrate with compost," says Andy McNitt, turfgrass project associate at Pennsylvania State University. "It's less expensive and you get a better result."

He has found that success has been achieved with composts made from biosolids, brewery residuals and mushroom substrate. "Any compost that is high in organic matter and does not have objectional size particles is probably suitable," McNitt explains. Pure yard trimmings compost is less desirable for turfgrass because of its low organic matter content, he adds. Likewise, an unscreened biosolids compost with jagged wood chips would be inappropriate for an athletic field.

Agresource of Amesbury, Massachusetts, is pursuing markets for athletic field application of compost. The company purchased a four cubic yard Mill Creek topdresser to expand the customer base. The company rents out the topdresser, and provides custom

compost blends to universities, municipalities and golf courses. "We recommend soil testing, and we make up a blend according to their needs," says Tim Gould, compost marketing specialist at Agresource. "In most athletic fields, organic content should be around six percent." Additives include sand and clay.

In mid-September, 1996, Agresource prepared 500 cubic yards of compost for application on 15 acres of fairways at a golf course. Gould estimated that spreading a quarter-inch layer of compost over damaged parts of the course would take a week. In most cases, however, Agresource rents the equipment for one to three days, depending on the acreage needing topdressing.

Use of compost on athletic fields is growing, Gould explains.

"We have been given the green light by university researchers. Athletic fields often need more organic content, and they typically suffer from compaction. We recommend aeration in conjunction with topdressing." A biosolids compost is used, because of research showing its beneficial disease prevention qualities. "We don't guarantee the outcome," Gould says, "but we feel there is sufficient evidence that

biosolids compost is a good product for turf."

Golf course superintendents are generally aware of university research showing disease suppression benefits. On the other hand, they are a conservative group in terms of trying new products, Gould explains. Athletic field turf managers are less versed in the research but more open to new products. "We do demonstrations, applying about four cubic yards over a small area," he says. "This has resulted in orders."

FIELD RESTORATION

Topdressing is a good method of restoring the "crown" on a football or soccer field, says McNitt. That is vital for drainage so that puddles do not form on the field. He recommends a "total package" that includes topdressing of a quarter-inch of compost, followed by aeration and seeding. Seeding is almost always recommended, unless the field already has complete grass coverage (which is rare for an athletic field).

One of the biggest mistakes that a turf manager can make is to apply too much compost, he adds. A good mixture of soil and compost is required for seeds to germinate. "Some people figure 'the compost is cheap, let's add lots and lots of material.' That's when you run into trouble," McNitt says. A topdresser for compost works great if the athletic field owner — often a school or municipality — can afford it, McNitt says. Otherwise a manure spreader can do the job.



Photo courtesy of Agresource

In Massachusetts, Agresource is expanding their customer base by providing topdressing of custom compost blends to athletic fields.

Through research and practical application, the industry has identified the preferred characteristics for compost used by particular end users for specific applications.

storm water filtration. Some applications require compost products possessing specific characteristics and for that reason demand a higher value. The agricultural industry also is increasing its usage of compost in a slow but steady fashion as the benefits of organic matter are being understood once again. Compost is used by row crop, small fruit, as well as tree fruit (orchards) farmers. These products are used as soil amendments, low grade fertilizers, mulches and fungicides.

INCREASED VALUE

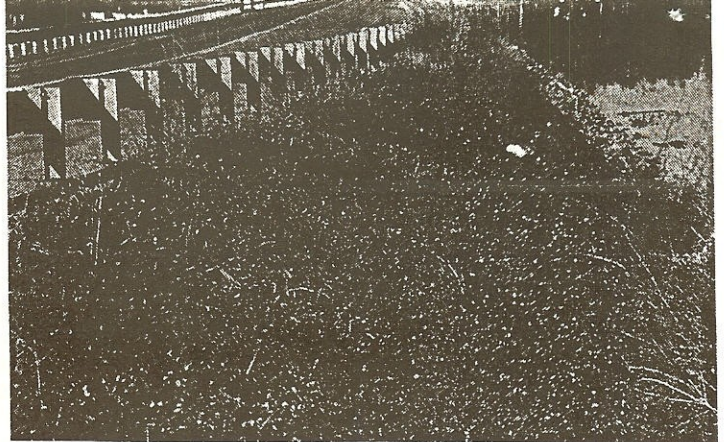
As knowledge of positive results spreads, the value of compost should increase. Many topics previously cited, such as improved quality, niche marketing and creative applications for compost, have all been established not only to market compost but also to improve its value. While price varies widely — predominantly based on product quality, competition and customer type — overall, the price of compost has increased. On a nationwide basis it appears that com-

post value is greatest on the West Coast and in the Northeast.

Compost brokers are typically paying between \$1.50 to \$19.00 per ton for compost, while professional end users are paying between \$2.00 and \$27.50 per cubic yard. Retail customers are purchasing product for between \$4.00 and \$35.00 per cubic yard, picked up. Bagged product is being marketed for between \$1.50 and \$4.00 per bag by mass merchandisers as well as local garden centers. It is also common to see several lines of compost based products marketed in the same store. More "designer" type products are available on a regional basis as are those with strong local name recognition.

Many new tools have been developed to improve the marketability of compost. The Composting Council is preparing to release several new publications such as the "Field Guide to Compost Use," "Compost Enhancement Guide," "Farmers Guide to Compost Use," and a compost use video.

Overall, the markets and value of compost



are in a growth mode. We now better understand the needs of specific markets and requirements of specific end users. We are investing more time and the resources necessary to produce high quality products. Greater creativity is being shown in the manufacturing and marketing of products. As these trends continue, marketing success will continue to expand.

However, several marketing related challenges do still exist. They often arise where up front planning and market research have not been completed and where poor quality products are offered. Typically, however, compost marketing is most challenging at the time of facility start-up or after a significant expansion has been completed. Overall, compost procurement laws developed by public entities (federal and state) have

proven to be ineffective and from time to time facilities are still found "dumping" product onto the market at a price far below its value. This affects product value and marketability in that whole geographical area.

These challenges, however, are far outweighed by the successes we are seeing on a national basis. Today, it is much easier to start and operate a compost marketing program. This is mainly due to the fact that education has helped to reduce product related stigmas and because research has proven that compost is a valuable and versatile product. Compost is starting to become a household name and a mainstream horticultural/agricultural product. ■

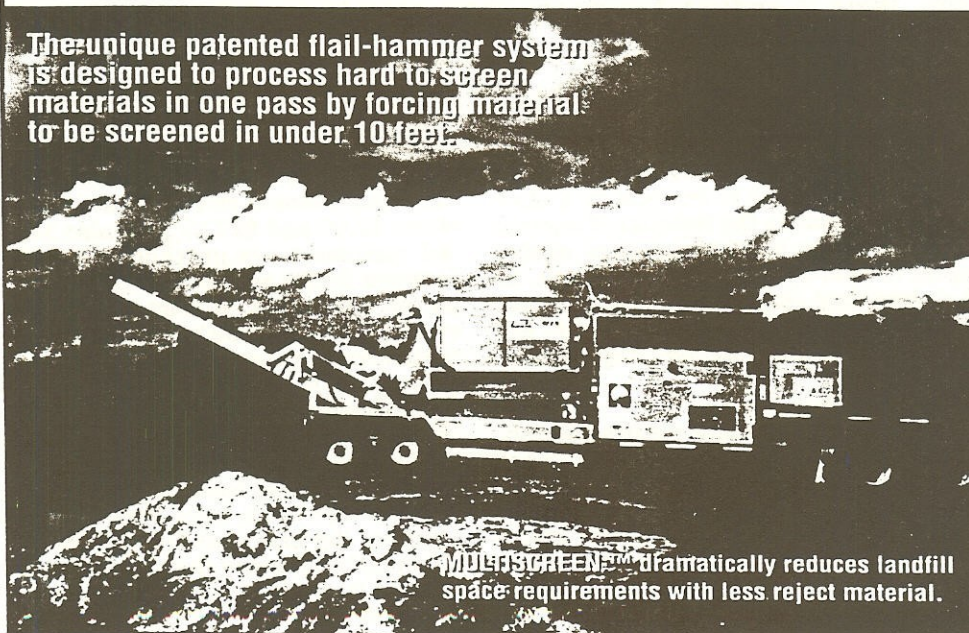
Ron Alexander is with E&A Environmental Consultants, Inc. in Cary, North Carolina.

The blended mix applied for erosion control (left and above) is an example of the increasing use of compost for environmental purposes.

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