

BUYER . . . BEWARE

*Products without
active ingredients
may not be active!*

by STANLEY J. ZONTEK

CONSIDER THIS STORY. You're sitting in your office and you don't feel well. You go to your local drugstore to find something that you hope will make you feel better. You stand at the shelf and pick up a product called "Makes You Feel Good." Next to it is another product called "Makes You Feel Very Good." What is your first impulse? You read each label to check their active ingredients. You base your purchase decision on what is contained in the product. This is being a smart consumer, and it makes good common sense.

Consider this story. You're sitting in your office and your turfgrass is under stress. It does not feel well. In walks a salesman with a product or series of products that, according to the salesman, will solve your problem and make your grass perform better.

You ask the salesman, "What's in your product?" The answer could include any number of materials that sound interesting or even logical. You look at the label. Sometimes there is a list of items or benefits like "complex carbohydrates, bio-stimulants, all-natural ingredients, stimulates beneficial microbes," etc. Sounds good, but does it work? While there may be a list of ingredients, are *active ingredients* and nutrient percentages clearly stated or defined on the label? There is a difference.

Think about this for a second. *If no active ingredients are claimed on the label of a product, there may not be anything active in the product!*

You ask, "Who else has used this material?" The salesman responds with a long list of turf managers (usually at the best courses in the area) who have purchased the product and who are, according to the salesman, raving about how well it performs.

Your next question may be, "Has your product been tested by a university?" This is where it can get interesting. Normally, some sort of diplomatic answer is given like, "Well, no, but," or "We are trying to interest a few universities in doing some research." (Believe me, almost any university, for a fee, will test any material.)

You are concerned about the health of your grass, so why not give it a try? You reason that it won't hurt anything; after all, it is natural and just maybe it will help your grass.

All too often, a decision to use a product is based upon testimonials, claims by the salesman, and/or a list of interesting ingredients without clearly knowing how the product actually functions. This may not be wise. It can also be expensive.

I am seeing a trend in our industry to use more and more "feel good" products, many of which claim no active ingredients. Yet, these products have a long list of claims on the product label — claims, by the way, that do not have to be proven because there are no active ingredients. Let me repeat this point. There seems to be a proliferation of materials available to the turf manager that claim any number of benefits on the label, but actually con-

tain no active ingredients! Think about it.

One respected plant pathologist calls these products *muck and magic* materials. In the past, these materials were simply referred to as *snake oils*.

The purpose of my opinion article is simple. I want to remind you, the turf manager, that:

A. One of the most common sales techniques is to use testimonials, not science. It is easy to claim that a product improves turf quality or solves a problem. However, independent university testing under varied conditions is needed to verify these claims.

B. Active ingredients are just that; they are chemicals that do a job. Don't confuse a simple list of ingredients with a list of *active ingredients*. I am constantly amazed, when reading labels, how many claims are made without a list of active ingredients! I once heard a fellow say, "But will it do any harm?" The answer is, "Probably not." The real question is, however, "Does it do any good?"

C. When looking at a list of ingredients, it is important to know how much material is actually contained in that product. This is especially important for nutrients. When the need exists, is it more cost effective to spray calcium, for example, onto grass at a rate of only several pounds per acre, or apply lime or gypsum at several hundred to several thousand pounds per acre? It may be a lot cheaper and more effective, in the long term, to use tried-and-true bulk materials versus products that contain only a few pounds of material on a per-acre basis. Are we losing sight of the basics?

D. The final purpose of this opinion article is to remind the turf manager to always remember the basics. Never try to do with a *feel good* chemical what aeration, topdressing, balanced fertility, good water management, and reasonable mowing heights can accomplish.

The late Professor Lawrence S. Dickinson, from the University of Massachusetts, said it best: "Let grass grow, don't make it grow." Those are good words to live by. You cannot find this wisdom in a bottle, especially one without any active ingredients!

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