Manufacturers tweak products

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the same reliability, quality and value for price as models currently on the market.

"I don't think you could say we are moving away from new technology," Wright said. "It is just a matter of reading when the industry is ready for a big jump. There are a lot of things that can be done, but you have to have an economic model in place to make new technology viable."

Larry Jones, product manager for fairway and rotary mowers for Textron Golf and Specialty Products, agreed.

"We are challenged with creating the latest in technology but also focusing on the customers' needs and wants," said Jones. "But at the end of the day it has to be in the field."

With that value proposition in mind, manufacturers are making incremental improvements to existing product lines.

"There is a significant risk from the manufacturing standpoint in moving too quickly with breakthrough technology," said Gregg Brennigmeier, director of sales and marketing for John Deere golf and turf. "So it is not surprising this year to see new products being different iterations of current technology."

JACOBSEN'S NEW LF 1880

Textron's new Jacobsen LF 1880 lightweight fairway mower features patented new floating lift arms that allow for more vertical movement while keeping cutting units in the same plane. According to Jones, the new mower can handle more undulating surfaces while delivering the same quality of cut.

"It keeps the cutting units from spreading farther apart and leaving uncut grass," he said. "We will be adopting this technology to our rotary mower lines."

The company also made minor improvements on its AR 2500, 9510 and 5111 rotary mowers.

TORO IMPROVES ROTARY MOWERS, ERGONOMICS

Toro also made improvements to its Groundsmaster 4500- and 4700-D rotary mowers by adding cutting decks from the Groundsmaster 3500 and the engine from the Reelmaster 6000 series.

"If you can use things that you have already developed or introduce fine-tuned products into the market, then your customers are not starting over with a new machine," said Wright. "The idea here is to have innovation with limited newness."

The company also improved ergonomics and operator comfort on its Greensmaster 3150 greens mower.

JOHN DEERE EXPANDS B-SERIES LINE

John Deere's new B-Series walk-behind greens mowers have also been improved for this year.

"We have made a good product better," said Brennigmeier. "We have made it easier to adjust the reels and to take them on and off. We also added a true 18-inch machine and a new 26-inch machine to the line. They are the lightest walk-behind greens mowers out there."

Brennigmeier said that a major new product is in the works for release next year, but gave no other details other than it would be "riding mower."

FOCUSING ON FOCUS GROUPS

According to manufacturers, these product tweaks and developments are largely a result of feedback sessions and focus groups.

Jones said the LF 1800 was tested on golf courses for two years before its release this season. "Superintendents put the unit to the test and the final design is a result of their input," he said. "This allows us to ensure the reliability and value of the machine when it goes on the market."

In a market where innovation can equate risk, this strategy will be key to the introduction of any new products or changes.

"Toro has the largest install base out there to pull from," added Wright. "We will continue to tweak our products as we learn from our customers about the changes and modifications they would like to see. We will also gauge their response on new products and prototypes."

Another important factor in the decision-making process is the equipment demo. A one-week demo should be enough for a superintendent to see how it performs under their course conditions.

During the demo process, it is critical to get input from assistants, mechanics and seasonal staff. First have the technician do a total inspection and set-up. Make notes on advantages and disadvantages so when the next brand rolls in, comparison will be easier. Next, select the staff members that will be using this machine the most, and have the equipment technician perform the proper training. The unit should then be put to the test in all conditions (wet, dry, etc.) over different terrain (flat, hills, etc.).

When each demo is finished, have a brief meeting with the operators to discuss the machine's performance and make notes for future reference. After all machines have been evaluated, have a final meeting for staff input, and review the notes for each. Using the demo information with the aforementioned selection process factors, a superintendent can then evaluate their equipment selection with confidence in making the proper decision.