Fleet maintenance from the pros

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

Landscape companies can’t deliver services without motorized equipment like trucks, mowers, backhoes, and sprayers. The efficient use of these tools allow a landscape company to generate production which, in turn, produces revenues.

Considered from different perspective, production equipment (let’s include service delivery vehicles too) is often a landscape company’s largest capital investment. Does a grounds care operation need any better reasons to keep its motorized equipment maintained and repaired?

Michael Rorie, Groundmasters, Inc., Cincinnati, says fledgling landscape companies usually can’t afford a lot of hardware. “But once you get to a certain size you start to collect trucks and other equipment.” He says that business owners must then make a choice—whether to buy another truck and extra equipment for backups, or to invest in a maintenance facility and mechanics to extend the working life and keep present equipment in serviceable condition.

“Equipment is what we use every day. I, as the president of our company, don’t want to spend a lot of my time worrying about equipment,” says Rorie. He says most owners’ or managers’ time is better served focusing on sales and production.

A support role

Rorie and several other landscape professionals and equipment experts discussed fleet and equipment maintenance at the ALCA Conference this past November in Charlotte. This report was compiled from their comments.

First and foremost, a maintenance facility’s purpose is to support production. A maintenance shop’s "customers" are the company’s supervisors and production employees, say the panelists.

“We recognize the shop as an integral part of a successful team,” says Steve Glennon, regional manager for Cagwin and Dorward, a successful San Francisco Bay area landscaper. “It’s essential that our mechanics are flexible and that they have a strong sense of commitment to the organization and to the other employees.”

“Our job is to get the equipment out onto the job, working and making money,” adds Ken Railey, fleet and safety manager for the Ruppert Landscape Company, Ashton, Md. “When the trucks and equipment perform well, they (production people) are happy. If the trucks and equipment don’t perform well, they get frustrated and customer service

Tips for a productive shop

Ron Turley is a former fleet and safety director at United Parcel Service (UPS). He was responsible for 48,000 vehicles. Today he operates Turley Transportation Consultants, Dewey, Ariz. He consults with government and private industry, including lawn/landscape firms, regarding efficient fleet and maintenance shop operation.

Turley says that managers can only control four things: time, material, space and tools. The best managers know how to blend all four into an efficient system.

For a smooth running maintenance shop, Turley suggests:

▶ Develop a good preventive maintenance plan. This is always at the top of his list.
▶ Get good people and train them.
▶ Make employees realize that you expect 6.9 hours of effort for every 8-hour day.
▶ Strive to keep vehicle and equipment availability as high as possible.
▶ Standardize as much as possible—equipment, including vehicles, and parts. Items like tires, lights, belts, and filters.
▶ Allow 1 ½ service bays per mechanic.
▶ Provide employees with enough tools and parts to do their jobs without waiting or searching.

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To do this efficiently, says Mark H. Neidich, owner of Fleet Consultants, Cincinnati, each company must develop "a system" for performing tasks such as preventive maintenance and repairs.

**Monitor your system**

Any such system must be regularly monitored, emphasizes Neidich. This includes providing proper shop personnel training, the proper tools and parts, and vendor support. A workable system allows a shop to function efficiently. It also allows a company to keep up with its growth.

For example, Ruppert Landscape now has eight locations supporting 13 branches. To meet equipment needs at its eight locations, says Mark H. Neidich says a maintenance shop needs "a system".

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