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THE BENCHMARK

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Manage your capital, banker

The big winners in 2013 and 2014 will be companies with access to capital. While the stock market is trading at all-time highs and the press is talking about economic recovery, let's not forget we're living in a higher tax environment and still have Obamacare costs looming. Remember: Net profit dollars drive your business and the costs mentioned above will have an impact.

I'm not trying to temper the improved sales performance we're seeing or a general feeling of optimism among companies, because the phone *is* ringing. But the fact is, profit is where it's at and costs will continue to rise. Do you have a plan? Is your banker on board?

Winning companies need to rely more on internally generated cash and at the same time solidify their banking relationships with a solid story. As a result, these companies will have access to relatively inexpensive money when they need to purchase assets, buy a company or simply fund accounts receivable during peak season. This is a huge competitive edge.

There are only three sources of capital: your profits, your bank or an equity investor. For most firms, equity money is either too expensive or simply not available. This leaves profits and bankers. And today more than ever bankers want you to prove that you don't need the money before they lend it to you. Therefore, you must find a banker who buys into your growth plans. Here's what you need to do to solidify your story.

Demonstrate to yourself and your bank that you have the ability to cash flow new and current debt obligations.

▶ Take the time to update a mid-year rolling pro forma projection that focuses on your income statement. Use your year-to-date 2013 actuals plus forecast on a monthly basis your remaining revenue, direct costs, indirect and selling, general and administrative expenses to generate a projected net profit for 2013.

▶ Look at your current amortization schedules on existing debt and spread the remaining 2013 required principle payments against each month's net profit.

▶ Take the amount of any new loans you're trying to get approved and put the details into an amortization schedule. Add the expense against the bottom-line profit and on top of the existing principle debt payments.

▶ Look at your monthly net income and annual net income after backing out the principle payments on the "old" and "potential" new debt. What's the ratio? Is your profit versus debt 1.5:1 or better? Are you upside down? If so, "the numbers" don't cash flow. Keep in mind a 1:1 ratio puts you at broke; 1.5:1 or better is the target.

▶ Lastly, look at the results of the above exercise. You may need to revise how much money you ask for in a loan or try to cut operating costs. You may need to try to refinance existing debt.

Check all three of your credit reports.

Pull your credit reports from Equifax, Experian and Transamerica. Review your score and any negative comments or incorrect information. Address any negatives with your banker. Note that a score of 650 or less makes things difficult. Take action to clean things up prior to a midyear checkup with your bank.

Know what collateral you have available.

To get any new capital, what assets will the bank lien? The first step is to know which assets are or are not encumbered. Next make sure the free asset values mesh with the requested loan amount. No collateral, no loan!

Take this approach prior to your midyear visit with your bank. It will impress your banker and help set your own expectation on where you stand.

Lastly, don't forget that even when credit markets are slow, lending money is every bank's business. They must do it. Do your homework, make the plan and hunt for the best source of capital. It's perhaps the most important business strategy for the coming year.



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Cutting edge

There's no need to wait for the future of commercial mower engines.



Equipment dealer Colten Wright says his customers save money and fuel with EFI mower engines.

Most of Colten Wright's landscaping customers "can barely remember a time when their car or truck didn't have electronic fuel injection."

Wright, who owns the Tool Shack, an outdoor power equipment dealership in Gulf Breeze, Fla., tells his customers that a similar evolution is happening with commercial mower engines.

"What I explain to our end users is that EFI [electronic fuel injection] represents the future of small engines," Wright says. "And there's certainly no reason to resist the technology. In the long run, it'll be beneficial for everybody."

Landscape contractors don't have to wait, though. A number of Wright's customers are already enjoying the improved fuel economy and ease of use delivered by KOHLER Engines' EFI technology.

"My customers have seen firsthand that these engines can add money to their bottom line," Wright says. Using lawn mowers powered by KOHLER's closed-loop EFI engines can help cut gas-line costs by up to 25 percent compared with similar-size KOHLER carbureted engines under comparable loads and duty cycles.

EASY TO MAINTAIN

In addition to the money-saving benefits delivered through the fuel efficiency of KOHLER's closed-loop EFI technology, the easy-to-maintain design of the engines also helps landscapers to minimize downtime.

In the event that a KOHLER EFI engine experiences an issue, the company's proprietary diagnostic software helps the Tool Shack to respond quickly and accurately. The software is able to pinpoint areas of concern and identify them with the same codes used by automotive mechanics—all with the simple point-and-click functionality of a PC.

Wright is quick to mention that KOHLER has even provided several training sessions on the troubleshooting software and other unique aspects of its closed-loop EFI technology.

"KOHLER has been great in supporting the product and getting the word out to dealers about how closed-loop EFI works and how dealers can provide support to the end user," Wright says.

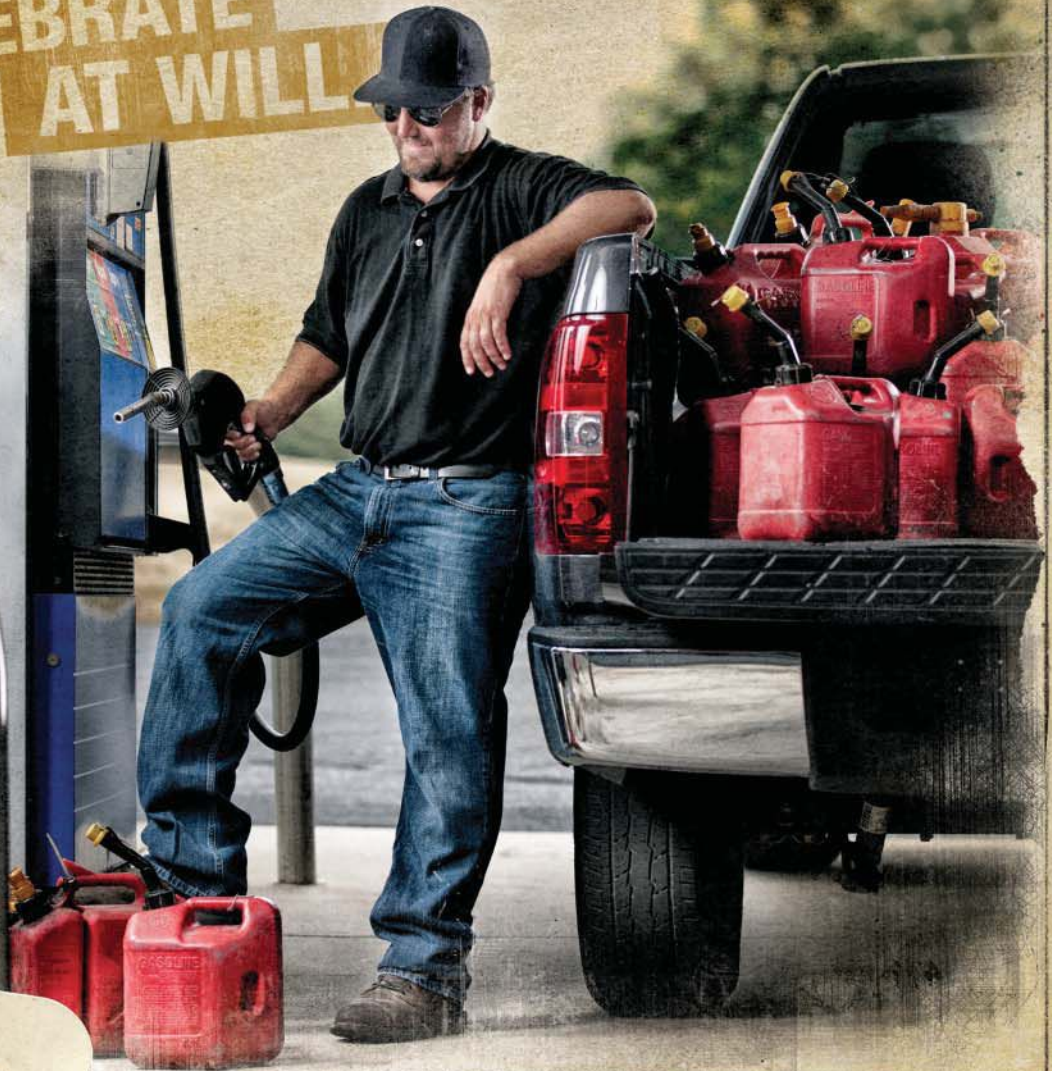
EASY TO CONVEY

Although EFI technology is relatively new to outdoor power equipment, most people have been enjoying the benefits of EFI in their cars and trucks for several decades. That's made it easier for Wright to convey the benefits of KOHLER's EFI engines to his customers.

"In the 1960s and 1970s, if your car had 50,000 miles on it, you'd better keep a toolbox around," Wright says. "In our modern automobiles, it's not even a thought until a car has well over 100,000 miles on it. If a person does proper care and maintenance on an EFI engine, they'll see a significant increase in the life expectancy of the engine, much like we've seen in our automobiles."

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HORSEWEED

Conyza canadensis

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ Also known as maretail, horseweed is sometimes mistaken for dogfennel.
- ▶ The immature rosette (pictured) looks much different than the mature plant. Seedlings develop a basal rosette and young leaves are egg-shaped with toothed margins.
- ▶ Mature leaves are hairy, slightly toothed and crowded along the stem. Full-grown plants have leaves without petioles, and they become smaller farther up the stem.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ A postemergent herbicide containing clopyralid alone or clopyralid plus triclopyr will clean up existing horseweed.
- ▶ This annual weed can produce more than 200,000 seeds per plant, so preemergent herbicides may provide the best option for control.
- ▶ Apply a preemergent herbicide containing dithiopyr prior to germination in fall or early spring or in tank-mixtures with a postemergent herbicide containing clopyralid.



DOGFENNEL

Eupatorium capillifolium

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This short-lived summer perennial is commonly found in the South and along the East Coast.
- ▶ Unlike horseweed, dogfennel's leaves are divided into thread-like segments, resembling a fern. Leaves will emit a foul odor if broken.
- ▶ The stems are reddish, hairy and grow from a woody base. Small, white flowers grow from branched panicles.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Apply a postemergent

herbicide containing clopyralid, which will translocate throughout the plant, controlling the dogfennel—roots and all.

- ▶ For preemergent control of dogfennel, apply an herbicide containing isoxaben prior to germination or in a tank-mix with a postemergent herbicide labeled for dogfennel control.

- ▶ Dogfennel will not thrive in thick, established turf. Because of its upright growth habit, it will not tolerate low mowing. Properly mow, fertilize and water to encourage dense turf.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GENERAL LIABILITY INSURANCE.

BY ITS VERY nature, landscaping is a risky business. That's why it's so important to be properly insured. General liability insurance is designed to provide protection against third-party insurance claims as a result of alleged bodily injury, property damage or personal injury. John Hodapp, CPCU, senior vice president of Hortica Insurance & Employee Benefits weighed in on what landscape contractors should know about their general liability policies.

General liability insurance may come as part of a package—that's when two or more types of insurance are grouped together. The most common grouping is general liability and property insurances, Hodapp says. "A property could be anything from an office to a storage garage," he says. "Property insurance would provide protection against your risk to that property. It makes sense to package this with general liability because there's a discount to bundle—maybe as much as 10 to 15 percent. If you're going to buy both, it makes sense to buy them both from the same company so you can get that discount."

Hodapp says that it's also a good idea to have general liability and auto

insurance written by the same company to avoid uncertainty. While some situations are straightforward—for example if you're driving a truck and there's an accident, the auto insurance would cover it—there is room for confusion.

"For instance, say you're not driving the truck, but you're unloading it—that's a gray area between general liability and auto," Hodapp explains. "Having the same insurance company write both of those policies takes away that gray area."

Other coverage

As part of general liability coverage, landscape contractors also want to make sure they have products liability and completed operations liability coverage. Claims or lawsuits resulting from injuries or damage to property caused by products you sell are covered by "products liability." In addition to the products sold, businesses also create potential liability exposure as a result of the work they do—known as "completed operations."

While these are some key coverage opportunities that should be added to a general liability policy, there are other optional liability coverages to consider. Hodapp says the most important is pesticide applicators coverage.



"It's important to realize that a general liability policy excludes pollution," Hodapp says. "But as a landscape contractor, it's likely that part of your job may be to apply chemicals. If you don't opt for any additional coverage, then you're not covered if something goes wrong—since the general policy excludes pollution. You need pesticide or herbicide applicator coverage, which amends the pollution exclusion of your policy."

This is an important point, as problems with chemicals may arise, Hodapp says. "Say you spray a yard and the residents downwind claim their property was damaged from the chemical traveling into their yard. It wasn't your original client, but you would be liable for that, making specialty coverage an important addition to your policy."

Some landscape businesses also may consider adding employment practices liability. "If allegations of wrongful discharge or harassment arise, this

would be the coverage that handles those situations," Hodapp explains.

Many Green Industry businesses also inquire about umbrella liability policies. This is a policy that "sits above" your general liability and auto insurance, he says. "With an umbrella policy, if you have a big loss that exceeds the limit of your policy, the umbrella may be available to provide liability coverage beyond those limits," Hodapp says. "It's an important option and is how you protect companies against the worst-case scenario."

While all of this coverage can add up expense-wise, Hodapp says companies that emphasize loss control will have the best success in keeping their rates down. Have good practices in place and focus on managing claim costs by emphasizing safety.

"You always want to make sure you're well covered," adds Hodapp. "Claims and lawsuits can easily cost much more than insurance coverage, so being well protected is critical."