

# A good idea isn't enough... even if it works

*It takes planning, financing, patience and humility to turn a good idea into profits*

BY KIT BRADSHAW

**T**om Wait is a man filled with ideas. The ideas pop up everywhere. . . on airplanes, on golf courses, in the middle of a good night's sleep. Once he gets an idea, he can hardly wait to act on it. It becomes an obsession.

But Wait admits this obsession can sometimes get in the way of good business sense, it can push aside legal advice, wiser counsel. And it can bring about great success. . . but also create costly mistakes.

Wait's company, Donut Trimmer Equipment Inc. in Pompano Beach, is involved with several golf course maintenance products, all invented by Wait: Donut Trimmer, Level-Eez, Aqua-Quick, and a greens encroachment barrier system.

Each of these devices has met with success in the golf industry.

Incredibly, none existed before 1987.

"In 1984, I started a landscaping company, PSU Property Maintenance," Wait recalls. "We received the contract to maintain all the landscaping for the city of Boca Raton, and also worked at some condominiums on their landscaping maintenance.

"At the condominiums, they had cement donuts for sprinkler heads, and we had to trim them by hand every month as part of our maintenance routine. After doing this for awhile,, I thought there had to be a better way. I came up with a metal blade which attaches to a Weedeater. You drop the metal blade over the donut, and it trims the sprinkler heads. You can do 200 heads an hour, as opposed to 200 heads a day by hand."

Originally Wait thought the device could be sold to landscapers but a friend told him that golf courses also had sprinkler heads. Lots of sprinkler heads.

"The blade on our Donut Trimmer was only 7 inches in diameter. The golf course sprinkler heads were 8 to 11 inches in diameter. The theory about dropping the blade over the top and trimming around the sprinkler head wasn't going to work. But by tipping the Donut Trimmer at an angle, we found we could trim around any head, from 8 to 80 inches. It didn't matter. With a little further experimentation, we discovered the trimmer could edge anything on the golf course, including the bunkers."



KIT BRADSHAW

Tom Wait with some of his inventions.

Wait went on the road with the Donut Trimmer. He went to the 1988 GCSAA convention and show and talked to golf course superintendents. With their positive response, Wait decided to market the product, putting ads in trade publications. The ads brought tremendous response.

But, he says, "We had to show how the Donut Trimmer really worked under exacting conditions. We decided to contact Eagle Trace, home of the Honda Classic, and volunteered to do all the detail work on the course — sprinkler heads and bunkers — for free, just to show what it could do under tournament circumstances. It was a success, especially with the caddies, who could see the yardage markers more easily."

The Donut Trimmer show moved west. Wait contacted a marketing firm in Fresno, Calif., Growth Marketing, whose owner Nick Dvorack arranged

for a demonstration at Hillcrest CC.

"There were several of the best golf course superintendents in the state there for our demonstration, and after seeing it, they too were sold," Wait said.

The young businessman was also able to secure a distributor in California, Pacific Equipment, the first distributor of the Donut Trimmer.

Business was good, but Wait says it was here that he made several mistakes.

He now admits he should have stopped, concentrated on the Donut Trimmer, its manufacturing and its marketing instead of developing more devices in quick succession.

Dvorack tried to develop a marketing program.

"But I was young, aggressive and egotistical," Wait said. "I wouldn't listen to him. It was one of the biggest mistakes I made."


Despite his mistakes, his youthful eagerness and inventiveness did produce several additional devices to help golf course superintendents.

"When I was at Hillcrest, the golf course superintendents were all talking about encroachment of grasses onto the green. There were several methods used to control it, but many courses were edging the greens by hand every day.

"On the plane home, I opened up a pack of gum. . . yes, a pack of gum. . . and it gave me an idea. If there were a way to design a barrier between the green and fairway grasses, you could then imbed in the barrier 350 pieces of fishing line and each day pull the line, like the string on a pack of gum. Then you could edge the green very simply."

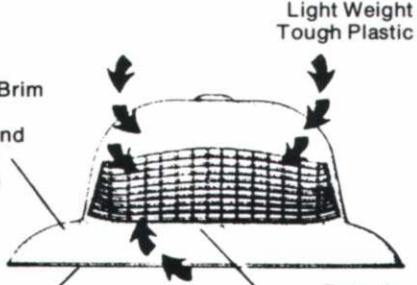
Wait had met Paul Latshaw, former superintendent at Augusta National GC a few months before and Latshaw became a mentor and informal consultant.

"Paul told me there were several problems with the methods being used



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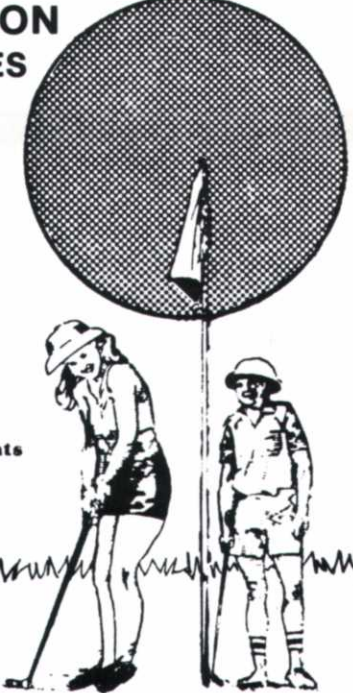
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to keep the fairway grasses from encroaching on the greens," Wait says. "Even with a barrier, once the turfgrasses hit the barrier, they would grow right over it, and attach themselves to the green. If we could develop a barrier that would eliminate this problem, then it would be a boon to golf course superintendents."

Another problem was minimizing damage during installation.

"After all, you couldn't go to a club and say, 'Well, I need to put this barrier around your greens and we'll have to shut down your course and disrupt the area to do it.'"

Wait learned about a company called Line Ward, owned by Gene Ward of Buffalo, N.Y. He and Ward met, discussed the problem, and Ward said that his machine could be adapted to cut the trench and pull the plastic barrier into place at the same time. It was still Wait's concept to have the ground crew pull a steel leader each day to trim the green edge with the fishing line.

By August 1989, Wait had developed the plastic barrier, and Ward brought his machine to South Carolina for a demonstration at the Carolina CC. The implanting of the plastic worked perfectly.

"We were able to have the machine pull 200 feet of the plastic barrier non-stop around the green," Wait said. "In four hours, we had installed the barrier, rolled it, and were ready to imbed the steel leader into the plastic barrier's center groove.

But there was a problem.

Simply put, Wait's fishing line idea didn't work.

"Gene was watching this disaster. Finally he said that if we gave him a week, he could develop a system that would work. So we continued onto the golf courses that wanted the barrier installed. . . Plantation CC, Loxahatchee, The Falls, and put in the

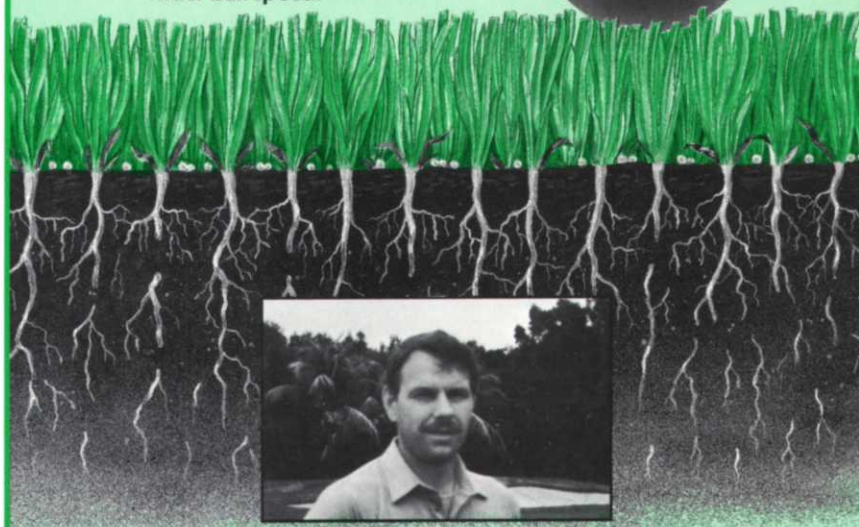
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plastic barriers. We promised them, that we would be back with a device that worked with the barrier."

Within a week, Ward had come up with a tool with two guide wheels and a blade, dull side up, that slipped into the groove and allowed the superintendent to clip the bermudagrass easily.

Eventually, Wait added a simple chemical control drip system to this tool at the request of superintendents. The problem had been solved. The tool created by Gene Ward worked with Wait's barrier design.

Since developing the Donut Trimmer, Wait also had developed the Aqua-Quick, a device which enables superintendents to bring water anywhere on the course and Level-Eez, which raises the sprinkler heads to grade without digging.

To use the Aqua-Quick, the superintendent pops the drive assembly out of the coupler valves in the sprinkler head, installs the Aqua-Quick, locks it with a snap ring, and puts a hose on the device. This, according to Wait, can be done in less than a minute.

Raising sprinkler heads was another challenge.

"On most golf courses, you have a swing joint connected to the sprinkler head, and you have to probe to locate that swing joint before beginning work. Then you have to dig by hand, and this

## Undercapitalization is often the culprit

Undercapitalization is the chief cause of small business failures, according to Randy Cravey, business analyst with the Small Business Development Center at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

Cary Lewis, now golf course superintendent at Orlando Country Club, knows firsthand about poor financing. He and John Seid were partners in an infrared photographic service to the golf industry — Remote Sensing, Inc. — that had a brief life in Florida and may now be resurrected in Arizona.

"We could photograph golf courses, lakes, drainage, and could identify subsurface problems through this infrared photography," Lewis says. "We could find drainage lines

put in 10 years ago; we could find pine trees in decline from too much water, before their problems were evident to the naked eye. It was a great concept."

But as Seid notes, the business was underfinanced, and that led to its decline.

"After giving it a try for more than a year, we parted company. We're still close friends." Today, Seid is still promoting the concept, and from his base in Tucson, Ariz., he has teamed up with a new partner who is developing financing sources for the project. He is confident that proper financing will make his infrared aerial photography business a success.

According to Cravey, Remote Sensing's problems were typical.

"Most people have an idea about their business," says Cravey, "but they don't have a business plan, and they don't have the financial or management expertise to run a company."

"They may not know their market potential or have an adequate cash flow to continue to run the business." Cravey adds that from the early stages of developing the business, the owner needs to establish a relationship with a qualified attorney and an accountant.

"These professionals can help you make the decisions that will affect the business throughout its lifetime. They can help you develop the business plan that spells success rather than failure."

can take an hour or more with a skilled irrigation technician doing the work. Once you've raised the sprinkler head, you've created an area what looks like you exploded a land mine. The damage is incredible.

"As a landscaper, I've installed a few

trees in my lifetime. After you dig a hole, fill it with water and put the tree in, if the tree is too low, you raise it with the help of water and soil. I woke up in the middle of the night and realized that this same principle could be used

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with sprinkler heads.

"Right there, I drew the idea on paper."

Wait said he created a system to get water and soil into the ground under the sprinkler head to raise it. First he locates the swing joint by probing it. Then he injects water around the sprinkler head. After removing the drive assembly, he locks in the Aqua-Quick and a threaded rod. Using a platform puller and two landscape logs for leverage, he turns down on the rod and slowly the sprinkler head is raised. The water and soil slip under the head. There is less damage to the ground and the area can be repaired with topdressing.

Even with a measure of success from his inventions, Wait says that the company was — and to some extent remains — underfinanced.

"The landscape business brought in money which we used to finance the Donut Trimmer," Wait said. "Several personal friends also put money into the business. But this isn't really proper financing."

Wait sees potential for his products, as he regroups and develops a stronger business plan. Precision Small Engines in Pompano Beach is his national distributor and he feels this relationship will help increase his chances for success.

And he is now using good legal advice, something which he ignored in the early days of product development.


"If you talk to a lawyer, and he says it will cost \$1,500 to do the paperwork, it sounds like a lot of money, especially when you are starting out," Wait says. "But it's a matter of pay now or pay later. From my experience, I should have had good legal advice. It would have saved money. It would have saved friendships with those involved with my inventions.

"Now I have a good lawyer. I don't make a move without him. And I usu-

ally do what he says. I don't let my ego get in the way. I guess I was so excited about each invention that I wanted to get them going, and I didn't want to stop and do a business plan or seek proper legal advice.

"At this point, I have to stop, look at my mistakes, and do now what I should have done two years ago," Wait says. "I

have to work on the business plan, create strong marketing with good advice, listen to my lawyer when he tells me that a contract is workable or it's not. We are still underfinanced. But I've learned from my mistakes and from the money I've lost in the process of building the company name.

"I'm on the right track now." 

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