

Utility vehicle makers find their select niche in the golf industry marketplace

By Kit Bradshaw

There's a buzzword going around the halls of marketing and advertising lately: niche marketing.

Basically it means finding the niche or corner of the market that's not being served and filling that niche with a product or service.

But don't tell the manufacturers of utility vehicles that this is a new idea. For them, it's their modus operandi. If there is anything consistent in the world of utility vehicles, it's providing a product for a particular niche of the market.

Utility vehicles, as mundane as they may sound, can be pretty alluring to a golf course superintendent. They range from modifications of golf cars designed to hold a few people and a small amount of payload to tough workhorses that resemble small trucks. What makes utility vehicles so interesting is their versatility.

Some of them are sheer people movers, and they are found in various configurations on golf courses, resorts, enclosed communities and even manufacturing plants. Most of these people movers also have small cargo boxes, designed to tote equipment, tools, fertilizer or whatnot from one side of a complex to another.

Some jazzier versions of these utility vehicles are designed for the golf course superintendent himself, as his personal course vehicle, if you will, and can be electric or gas-powered.

Other, more rugged utility vehicles come with a vast array of accessories. They can be equipped to do spraying, top dress greens, move greens mowers, or seed an area of the course. Most of these utility vehicles come in gas or diesel-powered models, which give a lot of service before they need to be refueled.

Their payload is greater, compared to the smaller, people mover type of vehicle because of their accessory package, and they most likely have some type of optional hydraulic equipment to make life easier for the grounds crew.

If there is a "Top Gun" in the utility vehicle showdown, it has to be Cushman. Cushman, Inc., now a division of Ransomes America Corp., has been wheeling through golf courses since 1964, the longest of any utility vehicle company. Its Turf-Truckster is probably considered the standard in the industry — tough, reliable and multi-purpose.

Marv Jacques, Ransomes America Corp. director of engineering and technology, says the Truckster had an immediate following when it was introduced in 1964, and it became one of the big product lines for the company.

"There was tremendous call for it. Initially, it was designed to carry around people and equipment," he said. "Then, we began improving it and adding implements, such as seeders, top dressers, spreaders, sprayers, and that made it even more popular. We developed a pin

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— Rick Cairns
The Toro Co.

disconnect system, which meant that you could attach and reattach the implements quickly. The pin-disconnect system, the power takeoff, which allows you to run the implements from the engine, and the dump box were all improvements on the original three-wheeled Truckster."

Recently, Jacques said, the company has added a fifth-wheel hitch system, which offers four different items that can be part of this fifth wheel system: dump trailer, top dresser, fifth-wheel sprayer, large area aerator. The fifth-wheel system allows the use of higher capacity accessories.

And although the Truckster, with its 2,500-pound rated capacity is still the workhorse of the line, Cushman has also branched out into lighter duty utility vehicles.

The GT-1 Series is designed for moving people and lighter loads. It comes in a gas model, with both eight- and 14-horsepower engines, and it can be accessorized with a unit for picking up balls on a driving range.

The GT America is a similar unit, but, according to Jacques, it is a little more upscale, and comes in both gas and electric models. Its target is the superintendent or club manager.

There's also a lighter-duty version of the Turf Truckster,



Cushman has long been the standard-bearer of utility vehicles. This is its 1992 Turf-Truckster.

the Turf Runabout, which is what Jacques calls an "in-between" vehicle. It doesn't offer implements and has a lower payload capacity. The Turf Runabout is designed for people and equipment moving only. There's a new model of the Runabout which was unveiled at the GCSAA Convention and Show, a four-wheel model with a water-cooled engine and fold-down sides and tailgate.

Cushman is aware other companies are gunning for it. At the show, Cushman unveiled a concept vehicle, called the UTV 2000, with a multitude of options and accessories.

The UTV 2000 isn't in production yet — it was designed as a prototype to generate feedback from the superintendents at the show.

As Jacques said: "We must be market-oriented in our products. We want input from the superintendents so we know if the features on the UTV 2000 are the ones they want, and if they have other ideas."

Cushman is probably wise to be looking over its shoulder these days. There's a lot of competition nipping at its heels.

Rick Cairns of The Toro Co. does not hesitate to say the company's new utility vehicle line, which replaces the Workmaster, is targeted toward the Cushman Truckster market.

"These new vehicles have a significant load capacity, and provide reliability and maneuverability in a four-wheel vehicle," Cairns said.

"Since we are targeting right at the market where Cushman has a leadership share, we know there are a lot of Cushman attachments in the barn, so to speak. So we have designed these new vehicles to accept more key Cushman attachments — sprayers, top dressers, spreaders — including the fifth wheel attachments. What we tried to do is provide a system so that golf course superintendents who have made an investment in another attachment can use our product as well."

Cairns said that normally, these attachments only use two-thirds of the Toro capacity. So Toro has designed a separated bed area which adds this one-third capacity to the vehicles. This separated bed area, which is right behind the operator, can be equipped with scissors power lift for the tree trimming.

In addition, Toro provides attachments that are specifically designed for these new vehicles. "For instance," Cairns said, "our full-size sprayer is a 200-gallon sprayer, but because of the larger tire sizes and options, it has the same tire footprint as a lighter vehicle and it won't damage the turf."

Cairns said several factors were considered in designing these new vehicles.

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As more competitors enter the utility vehicle

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achieved that goal by designing our own trans-axle power train and a superior suspension system."

Where Cushman and Toro came into the utility vehicle industry from the workhorse side, Deere & Co. started in the lawncare industry. Its entry into the utility vehicle arena began five years ago, and Clair Peterson of Deere says it was a natural extension of 25 years in the lawncare field.

"The utility vehicles that Deere & Co. build are manufactured by the same division that is involved in lawn and grounds care," Peterson said. "We've been involved in lawn and turf care for years, so the development of the utility vehicles to serve the professionals in these areas was a natural."

The company's AMT 626 is designed to carry two people and up to 600 pounds of cargo, he said, and is targeted toward the market that needs this specific type of equipment.

"The big news, however," Peterson said, "is that we have introduced a brand new utility vehicle, the 1800, and this has been designed from scratch to be nothing but a utility vehicle."

"This first generation of the 1800, which replaces our 1500 model, is being introduced as a sprayer, using the Broyhill a 200 U.S. Gallon Sprayer. But down the road, it will accommodate a utility bed and spreader system. It features a 21-foot spraying width, a breakaway boom, front and rear, a four-cycle liquid-cooled Kawasaki engine and hydrostatic transmission with oil cooler. The four-wheel stance gives it a low center of gravity without sacrificing ground clearance," Peterson said. "As far as we're concerned, it's a big step forward in utility vehicle technology."

Don Smith, vice president of Smithco, Inc. in Pennsylvania, says his company offers two different utility vehicles.



Kawasaki feels it has aptly named its Mule 500.

The Red Rider is a three-wheeled vehicle, powered by a nine-horsepower Kawasaki air-cooled engine. According to Smith, it's designed strictly for transportation of people and equipment.

"This is at the lower end of our price spectrum," Smith said, "and it is the type of vehicle you would use on a course or a school property where you just needed to move an operator and his mower from one place to another."

Smithco's other vehicle, the Bandit, is at Smithco's high end in price, but it brings with it a four-wheel drive, an unusual feature in utility vehicles. With a 23-horsepower engine and a 1,500-pound payload, the Bandit is designed for more rugged terrain, such as construction areas.

In the same tough and rugged category is Jacobson/ Textron, which has the 2315 model, a three-wheeled 23-horsepower liquid-cooled diesel engine model that offers five-speed transmission. The same model also comes in a 20-horsepower gasoline engine design.

Standard on the 2315 model are a complete hydraulic package, including a dump bed, independent PTO, lights, and full instrumentation.

"We have both hydraulic- and engine-powered top dressers, spreader, sprayers, and aerators," said Jim Byrnes of Jacobson/ Textron. "The model comes with a universal mounting kit, so the superintendent can use attachments from Cushman or Smithco that they may already own."

The company also makes a runabout model, the 810 Express, which is gas-powered, and the 610 Express that is electric-powered. Both have their advocates, according to Byrnes.

"Most courses choose the gas-powered model," he said, "but if the superintendent is at a course where they are very sensitive about noise, such as a residential course, then choose the electric model."

Byrnes said the Express models are people and equipment movers, and do not come with attachments.

Two names in the golf car industry have also targeted the utility vehicle market. They are E-Z-GO Textron and Club Car.

E-Z-GO has had a utility vehicle since the late 1960s, and, according to Ron Skenes of E-Z-GO, the vehicle was designed specifically for turf maintenance applications.

"The neat thing about utility vehicles is that they are multi-purpose," said Skenes. "For instance, you can start with our smaller vehicle, the GTX 804, which is similar to a golf car, with four wheels, but a 1,000-pound payload capacity. You can use it for moving bags of fertilizer or you can fit it with attachments, such as a sprayer."

"If you need a bigger vehicle, then you can look at the GXT 1500, which has five-speed manual transmission and a 1,500-pound payload. This is a big, heavy-duty type of



Vehicles meant to play a round don't work.

marketplace, more specific niches are filled

vehicle, attachments, such as a top dresser or sprayer. It has a 20-horsepower gasoline engine. Although it can reach speeds up to 24 miles an hour," Skenes said, "speed isn't really a consideration.

"We offer gas-powered engines because of the work these types of vehicles must do. In many applications, gas-powered engines give the superintendent and his crew the range they need to operate on the course, and although electric-powered vehicles now have longer range, they still can't match the gas-powered models in a lot of applications.

Skenes added that the models come with a lot of variations, making them even more multi-purpose. These include options with the cabs, lights, types of sprayers, aerators and loading ramps.

"By accessorizing to suit their needs, superintendents can make these models multifunctional," Skenes said.

One of the newer kids on the block in the utility vehicle market is Club Car, which began in 1985 with the Carryall II. Michael Alexander of Club Car said that at the time, "The Carryall II was a wedge between the high-end heavy-duty work trucks and the low-priced converted golf cars."

Alexander said the Carryall II drew customers from the lower-priced market because of the quality and durability associated with the Club Car name.

Yet it also attracted those who had heavy-duty utility vehicles but needed to broaden their fleet.

In what Alexander terms a "reverse move," Club Car then began offering the Carryall I in 1987, after the Carryall II was introduced. This Carryall I vehicle replaced the converted golf car, and provided basic transportation for people and equipment.

Club Car has taken niche marketing to a whole new dimension.



Toro's new turf vehicle is designed to haul more bulk and weight capacity.

The Carryall II comes in a flatbed or cargo bed model, with the cargo bed model being the most popular among golf course superintendents. Carryall II also comes as the Carryall II Plus, either as a pickup or flatbed, and offers about three miles per hour extra speed. It is designed for improved surfaces, but not for public roadways.

For 1992, Club Car's Carryall line has a new power train, with a four-cycle, nine-horsepower overhead valve engine, equipped with a standard oil filter cartridge and RPM limiter. This engine also has a "Quiet-Tone" muffler and promises quieter operations, according to Alexander. "Fuel economy and durability have been improved," he said. A fuel gauge and power-ribbed tires are also new standard features.

And the list goes on.

According to Alexander, Club Car's Carryall line has one of the largest lists of optional equipment available.

"Different locations have different wants and needs," he said. "We developed our optional equipment to allow a

superintendent to custom order a Carryall to fit his exact needs." Club Car offers a hydraulic dump unit, tailgate loading ramp, light packages and canopy tops with or without weather enclosures. In addition, there is a driving range protective enclosure and a portable refreshment center for on-course beverage and snack sales.

"On the heels of the Carryall I, we saw a need for an independent line of personnel carriers. So we developed the Tourall Series," Alexander said. "The Tourall Series vehicles are designed to move people... They are personnel carriers. They move four people easily from one part of a complex to another.

"Now, however, we are expanding this type of market with the Trans-Sender, which can carry up to eight people, and the Trans-Porter, which can carry five people plus their luggage. The Trans-Porter is an alternative to areas which would normally transport people in vans, or with vehicles that had trailers attached for the luggage."

There seems to be no end in sight for utility vehicles. Each one has a specific niche, and within that niche they are multi-functional. But all the companies that offer utility vehicles have one thing in common. They all are listening to the customer.

This is a picky customer, particularly the golf course superintendent. He demands reliability, durability, multi-purpose applications, and good service.

Thirty years ago, this superintendent couldn't have imagined the wealth of utility vehicles that would vie for every need, even some needs he may not have been aware of just a few short years ago.

And the engineers at these manufacturing companies are working feverishly to fill every need, either through improvements on current models or the introduction of new models. Now, that's niche marketing.



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