

Trends tending toward future 'polarization' in products

By Kit Bradshaw

There are two major trends in the utility vehicles market. One is the demand for more versatility, reliability and durability and the other is what Rick Cairns at The Toro Co. calls a "polarization" of the industry.

In the equipment area, gas and electric-powered vehicles predominate, but Jim Byrnes of Jacobsen/ Textron, which makes a diesel engine model, said he sees the diesel models growing in popularity because they provide a power source that can be used to operate several different options.

Don Smith of Smithco adds that although his company offers a four-wheel-drive vehicle, he doesn't see a movement toward four-wheel-drives in all utility vehicles.

"Generally speaking," Smith said, "you don't need four-wheel-drive for a golf course. It has very limited use. What I do see, however, is the movement toward larger tires to help protect the turf, especially with the larger equipment, and a trend toward water-cooled diesel engines."

Clair Peterson at Deere & Co. said he sees increased multi-purpose uses for these vehicles.

"They basically started out as people movers, and then they had equipment attached to them to make them do a number of jobs. Sometimes you compromise the ability of the machines to function by adding these attachments, because they were designed for one job, and they then were required to do others.

"What we've done, for instance, is to make a design that will specifically handle three different jobs—spreader, sprayer and utility hauler—and made sure that the traction unit can accommodate all of these uses. You don't do everything at once on a golf course, so you can get one traction unit, and the three separate



Top dresser attachments show versatility for some utility vehicles, like this 2315 Diesel Truck made by Jacobsen.

accessories, and you don't compromise the machinery's ability to function because the unit is designed for these jobs."

Ron Skenes at E-Z-GO pointed out that the customer primarily wants versatility and durability. "The buyer wants something that will run hard for a long time," he said. "The trend is to offer as many attachments and options as possible, which adds to the versatility. But at the same time the vehicle must be made durable, because this is a key requirement as well."

Michael Alexander at Club car added that ease of service is another key factor to keeping the buyer happy. And, he noted, "I don't think that the market demands that the units be quiet. But if you can offer this amenity as part of the equipment, then the superintendent gets an extra benefit."

Service is the key, according to Cushman's Doug Frey. "There are a lot of companies in the utility vehicle

market," he said, "and there have been for some time. But we feel that our support programs, and the service the customer gets is one of the keys to our success."

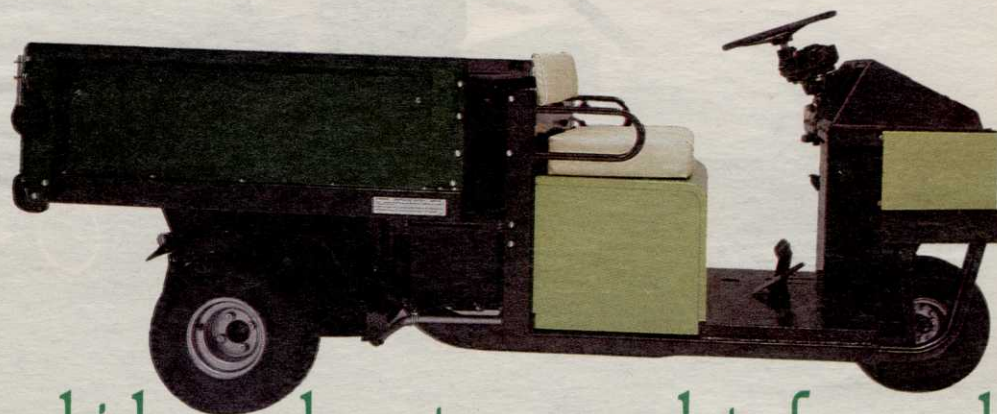
With all the companies involved in making a broad range of utility vehicles, there is a second trend, according with Cairns.

"If you look at trends in the market," he said, "there seems to be a lot of interest in the lightweight utility vehicles because of the price of these units. Even with this trend, there is still plenty of market left. There is also a trend toward the heavy-duty type of vehicles.

"I'm not saying that there isn't room in the middle of these two types of equipment, but there does seem to be a polarization in the industry."



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