

COVERING THE COUNTRY

Company improves and expands distribution through its Stores-on-Wheels approach. BY JOHN WALSH

During the early 1970s, LESCO had a problem with its distribution system. What the company did to remedy that problem changed the way it did business for good. To this day, no distributor or supplier delivers golf course products to superintendents the way LESCO does on a national level. That way is the Stores-on-Wheels vehicles.

As the company was expanding from Northeast Ohio to Michigan and Pennsylvania, it was having trouble shipping materials to its customers on time. Bob Burkhardt and Jim FitzGibbon, co-founders of the company that started in 1961, realized 300 miles was the furthest they could travel delivering products in a timely manner weekly. When the company entered the Chicago market, materials never got there on time, according to Burkhardt.

Then, in 1975 at the GCSAA Conference and Show, FitzGibbon met a distributor from San Francisco who was using a beverage truck to deliver products to superintendents at their courses, however, he was only covering the San Francisco market. There was also a distributor doing the same thing covering the San Diego market.

"The beverage trucks worked because the weather was nice, but we knew we had to have a truck that people could get in and out of," says Burkhardt, who's director emeritus of LESCO's board of directors and a consultant to the company's management team.

The company ended up using a one-ton pickup truck with a 32-foot cargo trailer that had electric brakes. The trailer held enough supply for deliveries for one week. The original trailer truck, which contained parts, accessories, pesticides and fertilizer, lasted two or three years. Then the company switched to gas mobile-home toters. In the 1980s, the company began using mid-range, diesel, single-axle trailers.

Burkhardt and FitzGibbon chose to expand their distribution with the cargo trailer in Florida because of the number of golf courses in the state and the fact they could conduct business 10 straight months.

"In 1976, we put the first truck and trailer in Florida with a guy who had been in the industry, but he didn't work out because he was using the truck as a warehouse instead of driving around to the courses," Burkhardt says.

That first sales rep in Florida was replaced by Ed Williams, who worked for the company in inside sales. Williams worked in Florida for a year, then Phil Gardner, now manager of international and national accounts, replaced him. The original sales route, which still exists today, was a three-way turn in which the sales rep would visit all three areas in his territory every week but visit different customers in each area.

"Nobody had it like the way we eventually did it with routes and territories," Gardner says.

When the first Stores-on-Wheels truck started in Florida, the only other thing that was going on similar to that was in California where a LESCO customer was carrying various products around in small vans, Gardner says, referring to the distributor FitzGibbon met at the GCSAA Conference and Show. At the time, conventional sales reps were driving around in station wagons or pickup trucks but didn't have the selection Stores-on-Wheels offered, and few carried a complete package, according to Gardner.

Shortly after the Stores-on-Wheels concept worked in Florida, FitzGibbon put a truck in Ohio and sales improved quickly, according to Gardner. Stores-on-Wheels also entered markets in Chicago; Erie, Pa.; and the Carolinas.

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The Stores-on-Wheels approach to sales started in Florida before expanding throughout the country.





The Stores-on-Wheels concept exceeded the expectations of the company's co-founders, Jim FitzGibbon (left) and Bob Burkhardt.

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"That market was tremendous," Gardner says about the Carolinas.

After the company's sales reps started using the Stores-on-Wheels trucks, they noticed a spike in business, according to Gardner.

"Jim's idea was to cover the country and open brand new territories," he says. "Back then, we didn't have a lot of support from plants and warehouses."

Continuing its growth, the company put two Stores-on-Wheels trucks in California, one in Phoenix and one in Denver during the mid-1980s. However, the trucks and reps didn't have the support they needed from warehouses, so the company brought back the two trucks from California and

the one in Phoenix and added new territories back east in Georgia and the Carolinas. At that time, the Northeast was already filled in, according to Burkhardt.

"Most of the outer areas didn't have much support," he says. "We had fertilizer plants in Wellington, Ohio; Windsor, N.J., and Sebring, Fla. But we would never be able to expand the Stores-on-Wheels if we didn't use the warehouses. Warehouses in Ohio, New Jersey, Florida and Dallas covered the country. Throughout the years, smaller warehouses were opened in North Carolina and Alabama."

The growth of Stores-on-Wheels happened quickly at times, according to Burkhardt. For example, LESCO bought a liquid fertilizer company in Marietta, Ohio, in the late 1970s, and that purchase gave the company a foothold on the East Coast and into areas it wasn't distributing.

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SUCCESSFUL REPS

Overall, the growth of Stores-on-Wheels exceeded FitzGibbon's and Burkhardt's expectations. Producing sales; being dependable, consistent and convenient; carrying a wide variety of products and having knowledgeable sales reps contributed to success. But that success wasn't easy.

"Sometimes it took 10 calls to get a customer because they wanted to make sure you were going to be around," Burkhardt says.

Being successful was challenging because the

company's competitors claimed it was turning sales reps into truck drivers, so the company countered with advertising, beating the bushes for the right sales reps and word of mouth, according to Burkhardt.

"In fact, there have always been a number of Stores-on-Wheels reps who are former superintendents," he says. "As we developed along the way, we hired very few established sales reps from other distributors because they didn't follow our model. They were used to doing things their way."

"Historically, Stores-on-Wheels reps were chosen based on their golf course experience, providing them with a good feel for what the hot buttons are and what products and services superintendents are looking for," says Richard Doggett, senior vice president of sales. "And that's still a goal today."

Throughout the years, the company has had successful sales reps that didn't have turf degrees and a lot that did, according to Gardner.

"We've had guys with a lot of technical background but didn't have the personality," he says. "Superintendents want to spend money with someone they like and someone who appreciates their business."

Unlike 30 years ago, sales reps nowadays have the support of Service Centers, and many work out of them because they can stock their trucks daily if needed.

Training also contributes to the success. Stores-on-Wheels operators receive product updates through e-training, according to Jeff Rutherford, president and c.e.o. The reps also receive regional training from Stores-on-Wheels and service center managers, and some training is conducted in partnership with major suppliers.

"Stores-on-Wheels reps are selected based on their understanding of a particular marketplace – market by market and region by region," Rutherford says.

STILL GROWING

The Stores-on-Wheels concept still is growing 30 years after its inception. A new style truck was unveiled in February 2005 at the Golf Industry Show. Until last year, the Stores-on-Wheels vehicles were tractor trailers. The new trucks have evolved and include air conditioning and heat in the trailers, are easier for superintendents to enter and exit, and are easier to navigate around golf courses.

"We're improving their shopping experience," says John Schmidt, zone vice president of the Southeast who has been with the company for 25 years and who drove a Stores-on-Wheels vehicle for 10 years. "We're always looking at the product line, such as fertilizers and pesticides

that change based on the turfgrass superintendents are managing. We continue to evaluate the products and take things off the truck that become obsolete."

Currently, there are 114 Stores-on-Wheels trucks nationally, 14 of which are in Florida and cover every golf course in the state. Last year was a big year for growth because the number of trucks increased from 75 to 111.

Presently, the company's growth is more deliberate, and it's increasing its focus on servicing customers. Three new Stores-on-Wheels vehicles have been added this year: one servicing central Virginia, one servicing Minneapolis, and one servicing Western Iowa and Eastern Nebraska.

Also, one truck was relocated from Connecticut to New Hampshire and Vermont.

As new golf courses are built each year, the company re-evaluates the size of each territory because a truck can only handle so much, according to Schmidt.

Looking toward future growth, additions to LESCO's fleet transpire based on market needs.

"We'll be circumspect about it," Rutherford says. "From a capital perspective, it's not an issue. It's leased trucks and inventory. We add them if markets really need them. We're currently settled into getting the 114 we have operating effectively." ■

FROM THE BEGINNING

One of the first Stores-on-Wheels representatives grows with the company. BY JOHN WALSH

Thirty years ago, Phil Gardner was a golf course superintendent looking to move to Florida. LESCO gave him that opportunity.

Gardner, now manager of international and national accounts, started with LESCO in 1976. For 10 years before joining the company, he was the golf course superintendent at Blackhawk Golf Club in Galena, Ohio, and Minerva Lake Golf Club in Columbus, Ohio.

While a superintendent, Gardner developed a relationship with Jim FitzGibbon, the co-founder of the LESCO. FitzGibbon accompanied the company's sales representative that called on Gardner and attended the Ohio Turfgrass Conference & Show and several turfgrass field days in the area. They talked and hit it off.

At the time, Gardner wanted to move to Florida. FitzGibbon told him about his idea of delivering various products to golf course superintendents with a truck.

"Jim explained the Stores-on-Wheels concept to me, and it was interesting," Gardner says. "At the time, there was no showroom of products for superintendents. You always went through the manufacturer. There was no place to look around and shop. The reason why I went to Florida was to see about breaking new territory with the truck."

Before Gardner went to Florida, FitzGibbon already had a sales rep there, but he didn't work out because he used the truck as a warehouse instead of visiting courses with it, according to Gardner.

"At that time, we didn't know if the truck would work," he says. "I wanted to go to Florida, but I didn't know much about warm-season grass. So I figured if working on the LESCO truck didn't work out, I would learn about warm-season grass and go back to being a golf course superintendent. But in the first three or four months, we knew it would work, and there was no turning back."

Gardner spent 10 years in Florida. His territory started out as the entire state. He spent three years on the truck and started calling on way too many golf courses – 200 or more a month. Once superintendents started buying products, they wanted to do so more frequently, so Gardner

needed to make more stops. The Florida territory eventually was split in two, and Gardner became a regional manager.

When Gardner was regional manager, the company built a fertilizer plant and warehouse in Florida to support its business. He oversaw the operations of both.

"There was a lot of competition in the state, so the truck, warehouse and plant gave us advantages," he says. "The advantage of the truck was that you could sell odds and ends right there in front of the superintendents, then work your way up to selling them pesticides, fertilizer and controllers."

Gardner says the key to making the truck work now is the same as making it work back then – consistency.

"You need to keep a route of consistency," he says. "Every two weeks, I'd always be back to the same courses regardless of what the superintendents were buying. I always believed a salesman who didn't make it on the truck didn't follow that consistent path."

Gardner believed that even though some superintendents might not buy much, or anything at all, that shouldn't deter a sales rep from consistently visiting them. The course might find new money or the superintendent might move on to another course with a much larger budget. Either way, building a relationship was the key.

After his success in Florida, Gardner was asked to relocate to Cleveland to work in the corporate office.

Gardner has been with the company for so long because he enjoys the work, has worked hard to develop many relationships throughout the country and loves the company.

"One of the things during my 30 years with LESCO is that I was fortunate to be with the company when it was in a growing mode," he says. "I did a lot of different things, such as work in plants, service centers, the lawn care division, and my job never became boring. One key to my success is that I always remember who the customer is and who the important people are."

In short, he never forgot his roots as a superintendent and those early days pioneering the Stores-on-Wheels.



Gardner