

Making Heads Turn

Steve Bizon is an aggressive 28-year-old who knows it takes innovation, commitment and new ideas to make a fledgling maintenance company a winner.

The condos at Charbonneau are a testament to the kind of service Bizon delivers.

by Ron Hall, assistant editor



Aerial view of Charbonneau condominium complex in Oregon. Photos by Larry Kassell.



Steve Bizon behind the Toro tee mower he modified to a walk-behind.

When complaints start zinging around the room during a meeting of a condominium board they can often pierce the hide of even the toughest maintenance contractor.

Steve Bizon, the 28-year-old owner of Bizon Maintenance Company near Portland, OR, tries to blunt the barbs with a simple formula; and although his ideas have yet to stand the test of time (he's been in business just five years), he's off to an encouraging start.

"Some of the other maintenance companies are already starting to copy some of the things we do," Bizon claims.

Young and aggressive, he attacks potential problems before they get to the gripe stage, then he makes sure word gets back to where it counts—to the condominium board, a philosophy that has worked beautifully in the 1½ years his company has held the maintenance contract for one section of the classy Charbonneau condominium complex on the banks of the Willamette.

Charbonneau, just outside of Portland, is practically a community unto itself, a 600 acre, 764-unit complex with an 18-hole golf course, tennis courts, swimming pools, and shopping center.

Bizon holds the maintenance contract for the Charbonneau Greens Town Home section of Charbonneau, with 49 units, the smallest of the the three associations.

As small as it is, it's not without a bite.

It gave the previous maintenance contractor the heave ho.

Bizon is determined not to let that happen to him.

All important image

Charbonneau, even though condominiums make up just 20 percent of his business (the remaining 80 percent is strictly commercial), is a showy advertisement for his services, Bizon feels.

Also, he makes no secret he's eyeing the contracts from the other associations at Charbonneau, quite a plum considering the size and the variety of maintenance tasks in this community which was begun in the early 1960s.

"When we take a job we agree to provide all the maintenance from the front door to the property line. That includes the parking lot, the sidewalks, just about everything," Bizon says.

Charbonneau is his type of account. It has class, just the image he

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wants Bizon Maintenance to project.

His employees (there are 10 in addition to younger brother Phillip and himself) are fully uniformed with green pants and brown shirts, his company trucks are gloss white Chevy pickups with matching trailers, and his mowing equipment gets a thorough washing at the end of each work day.



Charbonneau Greens Town Homes association chairman Robert Martin, Phil Bizon and Steve Bizon.

Even his literature gets that extra touch because when he submits a bid he wants the first impression to count. The bid cover is glossy and displays his company logo in three colors.

"When we do something, we want to do it first class," Bizon stresses. "I don't mind spending an extra dollar, because sometimes it can make something look a thousand times better. That's the way we want to look and the way we operate."

So far the Charbonneau Greens Town Homes association, through its chairman Robert Martin, is responsive to Bizon's suggestions without dealing him *carte blanche*.

"Steve is doing a marvelous job," Martin says, "otherwise we'd be having a lot of meetings. We seldom have a board meeting now."

But, when it comes to approving all of Bizon's projects...?

"He tries to get a little bit extra all the time, but we're a small association and we can't always give him what he wants," Martin adds.

Even so, the condo board (pleased because it doesn't have all those stuffy meetings) and Bizon interact amicably.

Strictly business

Bizon feels the main reason is that he treats condominium maintenance much like he treats his commercial accounts.

"We insist we deal strictly with one person and not with an entire board. In the past a lot of people didn't like dealing with condominiums because there are so many different personalities to deal with. If we have to listen to everybody pretty soon our workers are listening to complaints rather than getting their work done. It's always better to have one person to deal with and that way that person can speak for the whole group."

Bizon realizes he has to bend a little, too, when dealing with a condominium board and he does by providing a written monthly report to Martin who then can make copies for board members. Bizon also makes himself available for meetings with the board.

But, it's been his company's aggressiveness in jazzing up the condo grounds that got the relationship off to a good start.

Shortly after earning the contract, Bizon initiated improvements to the lawn irrigation system. Water from the Willamette River is used in keeping lawns lush and green, but in the summer the water often carries debris

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—Steve Bizon

which clogs lines and sprinkler heads. Bizon Maintenance installed filters in both the in-coming mains then put in 1,000 new Toro 570 pop-up sprinkler heads with built in filters.

Bizon also decided to use only reel mowers on the Charbonneau property, Toro Triplex mowers which he ingeniously converted from riding to walk behinds for more maneuverability. He made the conversion by removing the mower seats and installing handlebars. Bizon says reel mowers give the grounds a neater look and also help reduce thatch build up.

With more reliable irrigation and mowing schedules the Charbonneau grounds quickly showed improvement.

The agreement between the board and Bizon stipulates the grounds are to be mowed 38 times, fertilized six times, and sprayed for broadleaf weed

control two times annually.

Self-starter

Bizon launched other projects to make noticeable improvements and earn valuable points with the board.

He started an extensive pruning project, then attacked the two traffic islands that had been allowed to grow shabby, tearing out much of the old planting and replacing it with pink and red geraniums, white azaleas, and red rhododendrons.

The colorful flower beds are a calling card for Bizon who goes into almost every job with the idea of doing something special and doing it quickly. Soon after landing the maintenance contract for O'Mark Industries in Portland, Bizon's company planted 3,000 bulbs which, when they flowered the following spring, made a sparkling display.

Bizon isn't afraid to begin tasks that may not show results for several months or even a year because he insists on a two-year contract from all his accounts.

"I'll do more for my customer this year knowing that I'll have that same customer again next year," he says. To provide his company with a winter cash flow and also as a convenience to his customers, billing is divided into 24 equal payments.

After only five years in business it's perhaps a bit early to be burdening Bizon Maintenance with the stamp of "success," but the company is visible and aggressive. And it is growing.

This is due in large part to the moxie of its owner who quit a job building components for nuclear plants to start his own business.

Bashfulness isn't one of his vices. "I felt no job could pay me what I was worth," he says candidly.

With an initial investment of \$5,000 he bought a Chevy pickup, three push mowers (two Snappers and one Tru-Cut reel mower), an edger, and a backpack blower.

He was in business.

His first accounts were residential, but it didn't take Bizon long to start pushing for the commercial accounts and the pieces started falling into place. He left the residential market altogether and now brother Phillip, 24, helps share the business load.

"People didn't take good maintenance seriously a few years ago. They thought landscape first and maintenance second. Maybe it's because nobody ever showed them what good service is," Bizon says.

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