

On top north of the border

G.C. Duke Equipment Ltd. remains king of Canadian turf equipment distributors by keeping abreast of the newest maintenance equipment. Its reward? \$15 million in annual sales.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Salesman Dick Raycroft eases into the cushioned saddle of the tractor as the huge Dutch-built Verti-Drain aerifier, driving 16-inch spikes into the hardpan of sunbaked parkland, bucks and heaves behind him.

Thirty years of demonstrations like this make G.C. Duke Equipment Ltd. the largest distributor of turf equipment in Canada.

"We sell by demonstration," says Duke sales manager Jim Tanner. "The customer has to see what any piece of machinery can do under his conditions."

Big doings

This month, G.C. Duke Equipment expects to attract 2,000 visitors to its Lawn-O-Rama, a day of equipment

demonstrations and displays wrapped around a fish fry at its five-acre Burlington, Ontario, headquarters. Lawn-O-Rama occurs every other year. Off-years are devoted to six weeks of customer service schools. "Hands on" is Duke Equipment's way of doing business.

The payoff is sales of \$15 million (and growing) annually.



Sales boss Jim Tanner shows off Duke's newest offerings in front of the company's headquarters.

"Our range of equipment includes everything from a \$15 string trimmer to an airport runway snow blower at \$300,000 or a Snorkle, a piece of fire fighting equipment, at \$400,000," says vice-president Richard Duke.

Richard is the son of company co-founder G.C. Duke, who at 80 is still a vigorous force in the business and well known in the Canadian turf industry. The elder Duke started as a commissioned salesman (the garage behind his home was his office), worked that into a dealership and eventually a distributorship.

Gravely was the first manufacturer he represented. He later sold that business to Studebaker.

Company expanding

Today Duke Equipment represents dozens of different manufacturers.

The airport runway equipment is new for the Ontario-based company. It could be profitable. To reflect the addition of heavier equipment several years ago, the company name was changed from Duke Lawn Equipment. "The name was getting us into trouble with some of our bids," Richard Duke recalls.

Turf, however, remains the backbone of the company and accounts for about 80 percent of sales. Says Duke, a big man with a ruddy complexion and 25 years in the business, "Our strength really comes from the golf course and parks industries."

The growth of the business had employees pumping inventory and sales figures into a new IBM 36 computer at the Burlington headquarters from last December to mid-summer. An attractive, young keyboard operator complains with a smile, "If they wouldn't keep adding data, we would be done by now." Duke Equipment has outgrown the capabilities of two previous computer systems.

The company headquartered in Lake Ontario-hugging Burlington (a city of about 100,000 an easy drive up from Niagara Falls) maintains an office in Montreal, direct lines to nearby Toronto, and sells to all of eastern Canada with dealers extending to the Maritimes.

It's a mobile and aggressive sales force that drives Duke Equipment.

Parked outside of Richard Duke's office window is muscular green ¾-ton pickup with sparkling chrome wheels, one of a fleet of 12 that cruises the long but narrow band of the Canadian turf industry. Geography defines



Dick Raycroft, seated, conducts on-site demonstration for an interested on-looker.

Duke's territory. The 12 salesmen are divided between municipal and dealer/landscape accounts in Ontario and Quebec, concentrating on that 80-mile wide strip containing most of Canada's population.

Selling turf equipment in Canada poses special problems.

"All our salesmen are commissioned and pay their own expenses," Richard Duke says. "We supply the salesmen with the basic trucks and they fix them up with all the options." All 12 trucks are powered by propane, offering a substantial savings in transportation cost.

Two tractor-trailer "traveling billboards" complement the company's road show at field days and demonstrations.

Selling turf equipment in Canada poses special problems.

The American dollar (as of press time) is worth \$1.38 Canadian, and most imported turf equipment is subject to duties of 11 percent plus a 10 percent federal sales tax.

Says Duke: "For mowers and equipment up here, the American list price is the dealer's cost. It's a problem, and it isn't. Everybody up here is faced with the same situation."

Marketers often say that selling to

Canada is selling just 1/10th of what you'd move in the States. Not true, says Duke. Professional mowing takes on more significance than the so-called 10-to-1 ratio would suggest.

Reel mowing popular

Says Duke, "I think there's a lot more reel cutting done here in parks and by landscapers. Reel mowing takes a lot less horsepower per inch of cut, and the maintenance of reel mowers has come down dramatically in the last couple of years."

He adds, "One of the biggest changes we've seen is when reel mowers went hydraulic. We were one of the first to jump on hydraulic mowing." Duke Equipment is the largest distributor of Ransomes reel mowing equipment in North America.

The sophistication of the Canadian turf market is also reflected in the growing importance of such practices as clipping removal and fairway mowing as short as 3/8th an inch. "The golfer is becoming far more demanding, and industrial customers are displaying more pride. They're becoming better corporate citizens," Duke says. "There is something new coming all the time."

When it does, Duke equipment will be there.

"We expect our salesmen to have demonstration equipment with them at all times," says sales director Tanner. "If a manufacturer comes out with a new product, they'll take that too."

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