

A Distributor and Much More

Reinders Brothers of Elm Grove, Wisconsin, has roots dating to the 1860s. More than 100 years later, the company's services are still expanding to meet the needs of its varied clientele.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

When Bob Reinders talks about his business, he can't help smiling.

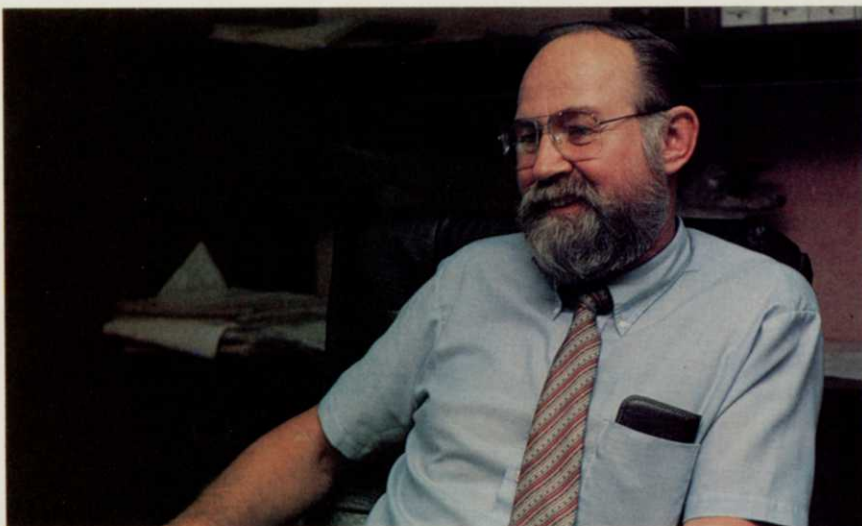
Yeah, he has the problems most turf equipment distributors have—customers with cash flow problems, problems with manufacturers, hot and cold sales and weather seasons. But company secretary Reinders, who operates Reinders Brothers Inc. of Elm Grove, WI, along with brother Richard (vice-president) and 80-year-old father Roland (president), takes the bad with the good. And the last 30 years have been mostly good for the Toro distributor.

The reasons? An ever-increasing list of services ranging from turf equipment and supplies to irrigation equipment and supplies, to consumer power equipment, to wild bird feed, to salt products, to retail garden supplies. Reinders Brothers, once Elm Grove's general merchandise store, continues as a sort of general supplier for those in the turf and irrigation business.

An aggressive company

Bob Reinders is an avid hunter and fisherman. His suburban Milwaukee office is lined with his conquests, including a tremendous muskie landed in a Wisconsin lake. A big man given to staccato speech and hand gestures, Reinders enjoys the public relations work involved in promoting a multi-million dollar operation. Far from pretentious—yet quick to point out his company's strength—he is quietly aggressive.

And so is his company. He and Ed Devinger, manager of the turf division, realize that the company's success (\$11 million in sales in 1984) is due partly to that aggressive stance. Devinger, a friendly man with a booming



Bob Reinders has seen his company grow from 20 employees when he started 30 years ago to today's total of 125. He's predicting continuous growth for the future.

voice, has been with the company since 1971. Before that he was a golf course superintendent in Iowa and then a five-year man in fertilizer sales. They agree that you can't relax and spend your time tallying profits if you want to make it.

"Yeah, we're aggressive," says Devinger. "You have to be to survive. It's survival of the fittest in this business." Adds Reinders: "I think our competitors would tell you that we're aggressive. We're hungry and I think we see some of our competition not being as hungry as they once were."

In the Reinders' turf division, six outside salesmen comb the eastern 2/3 of Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. They're young, experienced in turf, and more than order-takers. They want to survive.

"Our sales people have a genuine

interest in the customer," says Devinger, lighting a Newport. "Sometimes it's awfully difficult to convey that to the customer. The point I always try to make to them is that there's no way that getting their business today is going to make us rich. We have to get it tomorrow, then the next day, and the next day."

Devinger doesn't get out on the road much but handles much of the inside turf sales.

"We've got to do what's right by you and if we can't come back with a smile on our face and on the customer's then we don't want the business. No one order is that important," says Devinger.

Complementing divisions

When sales orders in Reinders' turf division slow down, sales orders in

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the irrigation division increase.

This summer has been particularly dry in Wisconsin. "There's been a drought," says Devinger. "I mean there is no grass to cut. But the irrigation division is absolutely knee-deep in work. When it happens the other way—it's raining and the grass is growing—we're selling equipment and the irrigation division's phone

"...we're aggressive...we're hungry and I think we see some of our competition not being as hungry as they once were." — Reinders

isn't ringing. There's a great complement there," he adds.

Reinders Brothers occupies 10 acres of land in the sleepy town of Elm Grove (population: 6,735), a 20-minute drive from downtown Milwaukee. Irrigation equipment occupies a good chunk of the land. There's room for expansion and if the irrigation division continues to grow, it will occupy even more space.

Bob Reinders doesn't mind. With brother Richard directing the division, irrigation has turned into big business for Reinders Brothers. The company, offering full lines of both Toro and Rain Bird irrigation equipment, covers the same territory with its irrigation division as it does with turf.

"We'll take a job from A to Z," says Reinders. "We consult with contractors for installation purposes, we'll design an irrigation system for a golf course or condominium or you name it. We'll do it for the contractor, we'll do it as a consultant, we'll general the job if it has to be—the big jobs that run a couple hundred thousand dollars."

Reinders also functions as a manufacturer within its irrigation division. They build pumping plants and wholesale to other distributors.

The Turf Conference

Yet another service Reinders provides the customer is its Turf Conference, held every other year in neighboring Waukesha. In 1985, over

1,400 attended the March conference. It's not a cheap undertaking—cash outlays totalled almost \$20,000 this year excluding labor.

After all attendee and exhibitors' fees are collected, it still registers red figures. But Reinders will continue to sponsor the event, with its well-known speakers and top-of-the-line equipment displays.

It's a standing joke among Reinders employees that the show is a hassle because of the work involved, but Devinger and Reinders know the service it performs.

"We know it's worthwhile," says Devinger. "We realize it has definite benefits. It's a lot of work, but it's worth it."

Reinders Brothers also hosts a series of one-day educational seminars each year throughout Michigan and Wisconsin. This year's events, held July 29-Aug. 9, took place in rural areas like Escanaba, MI; Franklin, WI; Bristol, WI; and Beaver Dam, WI.

Stick Cities, yes, but Reinders aims at serving all his customers no matter where their locations.

Still growing

Bob Reinders has seen "continuous growth" in each of the 30 years he's been with the company. Sales figures topped the million dollar mark in 1969 and grew to \$9 million 10 years later.

Today's annual sales figures of \$11 million indicate the company has sprouted nicely from its roots as a grist mill run by Reinders' relatives in the 1860s.

Three expansions, the most recent just completed, have increased building space to 100,000 square feet. A good chunk of Elm Grove is occupied by Reinders Brothers. Reinders gives most of the credit for his success to his customers.

"We feel we get our business from the quality of the people out there. They know their equipment, their chemicals, they know their business," says Reinders. "They're sharp, they're educated. That's one of the reasons we're successful."

Reinders cites a steady service organization as a second reason for his company's success. And finally, the product.

"We have good products to sell. We think we have the best—be it Cushman, Ryan, Toro, or Rain Bird. Plus our allied lines are super. Any allied line that comes out we normally can get hold of," he says.

Adds Devinger: "We set the pace. The competition looks to us." **WT&T**