

Picking the right dealer as a business partner

When you need new equipment, chemicals or seed, do you shop for the best price, or the best deal?

■ Your equipment/seed/chemical dealer should be a partner in your business, experts say. What is good for your business is good for his. What is bad for your business is bad for his.

Nowhere else in the country is a landscaper more of a "partner" to his dealer than at KEI Enterprises in Cudahy, Wis. Rich Wilbert is KEI's landscape division supervisor and Rick Rollo is director of KEI's commercial equipment dealership. They talked, together, about their relationship during the Associated Landscape Contractors of America annual conference last November.

Here are the points, in descending order of importance, most landscapers admit they sell their services:

- 1) on quality that the customer establishes;
- 2) on performance;
- 3) on reliability;
- 4) on availability; and
- 5) on price.

Here are the points, in descending

order, most landscapers buy their equipment, according to Rollo:

- 1) on price;
- 2) on availability;
- 3) on reliability;
- 4) on performance; and
- 5) on quality.

Note anything unusual with the two above lists? "Eighty to ninety percent of all the people I deal with buy exactly the *opposite* of the way they sell," observes Rollo. "This needs to be reversed. You need to buy the way you sell."

For instance, "you should demand your partner train your people," Rollo continues. "Make him aware of that right away—that's part of the partnership. We, as a distributor, feel that if we get a fair price for a machine, we have a responsibility to the customer."

Rollo and Wilbert cite eight keys to picking the proper dealer:

● **Who and what is available?** This includes the types of equipment and the people you want to deal with. Go talk to a few to see if you can build a relationship.

● **Are replacement parts and service a part of the deal?** "Ask your salesman at your time of purchase for one of its parts. If they don't have it, you may be out of luck when your equipment breaks down," Wilbert suggests.

● **What programs are available?** What



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Wilbert: Out of luck when equipment breaks down?

kind of financing, tax-free or tax-supported rebates, leases, national and regional programs? "There are some imaginative manufacturers out there," notes Rollo.

● **Is back-up equipment available?** What will the dealer do for you? What warranties will be in effect, both pre- and post-breakdown?

● **What about demonstrations?** "Can you take it to your site and operate it where you will be using it?" Rollo asks. "At that time, you can easily involve your operators. If an operator doesn't buy into the program, he'll do anything he can to destroy the equipment."

● **Does the dealer have references?** "Dealers will tell you their machines can do a lot of things," Wilbert observes. "You need someone who can tell you if the equipment can be used in a situation similar to yours."

● **What's the warranty?** Length and type are good indications of how much confidence a manufacturer has in a piece of equipment. "If this person's your partner, he'll go to bat for you on warranties," says Rollo.

● **Does the salesperson inspire trust, knowledge and understanding?** "He must understand your business and your applications," Wilbert says.

Manufacturers are just beginning to offer their dealer/distributors more assistance in customer relations, the pair notes. For instance, Rollo will ship or air-freight a part that he doesn't keep in stock as an added service to his valued customers.

Finally, remember that your dealer is in the business of making a profit. And if he or she can make a fair profit on the equipment or chemicals or seed being sold to you, he can afford to offer the service that goes with it.

—Jerry Roche

Maintenance prolongs mower life

■ If you want your lawn mowers to last, treat their engines with the same respect you show your car's engine, says a Penn State University machinery specialist.

Read the owner's manuals and follow the directions for maintenance, says James Garthe, instructor in agricultural and biological engineering. Pay strict attention to the viscosity and quality of oil used in the engine.

"The wrong oil shortens your engine's life by causing overheating and excessive wear on valve guides, seals and main bearings," he says. "Use high quality engine oils containing additives that buffer corrosive acids generated during fuel combustion."

Keeping the air filter clean also extends your mower's life.

"If the air filter is dirty, minute particles of silicon can eventually get into the internal moving parts," Garthe says. "A dirty air filter also keeps air from getting to the engine and affects the air/fuel ratio that governs combustion. The engine has to work harder, wasting energy and fouling the spark plug with deposits."

Other hints:

● Check spark plugs regularly. Carefully scrape deposits from the plug with a pocket knife or wire brush.

● Change oil while it's still warm to drain suspended contaminants.

● If you keep your mowers in a damp location, consider coating them with a silicon spray to keep moisture out and discourage rust. Covering with a plastic tarp also keeps moisture—and rodents—out.