

Be serious about snow business

by TERRY McIVER / Managing Editor



John Allin of the Allin Companies, Erie, Pa. is serious about snow plowing. He runs a 60-truck operation composed of his own trucks and his subcontractors' equipment.

He has eliminated most of his snow competition by hiring them to work for him in the winter!

Allin knows the competition is going to be there, primarily from other seasonal businesses.

"Snowplowing is not exclusive to the landscaping business," he says. "It's seasonal, and companies that work during the summer also put the trucks they have to work during the winter."

Landscapers who offer snow removal face competition from a variety of sources including:

- roofing contractors,
- excavation contractors,
- masonry companies, and
- virtually any service business with pick-up trucks.

Allin has made the competition work...for him!

He has more than 45 subcontractors, 20 of whom are

self-employed in seasonal work for other businesses. "We also use three pieces of equipment from a local excavation contractor," he explains.

"That kind of competition is out there," says Allin, when talking of some of the unforeseen surprises that occur during a season. "It's just a different type of competition.

"Excavation people have the capital already invested in the equipment, and need to figure out how to use it for plowing.

"Snow plowing is an industry in and of itself. We're a 60-truck operation going against one- or two-truck operations. We have a decided advantage."

Allin has 12 residential accounts, most of whom are owners of commercial sites he plows. In the commercial market, says Allin, you have to have things businesses demand:

- 1) liability insurance
- 2) dependability: you

show up.

Allin and his crews see 18-inch snowfalls on a regular basis, which is why he calls it "a major business.

"If you're not making money by plowing snow, you're doing it wrong," insists Allin. "Approach snow plowing as a business, not as another add-on service."

Allin is serious about the need snow removal professionals have for useful information, which is why he and others who are heavily involved in plowing have formed the Snow and Ice Management Association.

Parks, too

Mike Trigg, superintendent of parks for the Waukegan, Ill. parks district, deals with "the A to Z of snow removal."

His fleet of four vehicles and miscellaneous retrofits handle the wet stuff on pathways, sidewalks, around buildings and recreational facilities, including the grounds

TIP #2:

Be dependable. Customers don't want excuses, they want action. And keep the promises you make in your contract.

around an outdoor ice rink, seven days a week.

"A lot of the time those operations are open till 10 or midnight," says Trigg, which adds to scheduling challenges.

"We also share snow removal for Park Place, a community senior center."

Trigg stocks up on de-icers in November. Thanksgiving is the deadline. Everything is

ready to go by then.

"We have a two-yard spreader unit on trucks. We set up an agreement with the city that we load at public work site. That eliminates pallets. We reimburse the city at the end of the season. We ended up buying them a semi load of rock salt. I didn't use that much, but it was a cooperative agreement."

Trigg says four tons of salt is an average winter's supply. He also uses de-icer on walkways.

"Truck maintenance increases in the winter," admits Trigg. "We have to maintain the transmissions. Trucks are up to 10 years old, so we have mechanics do a detailed inspection, and frequent fluid changes."

Plow damage to pathways is always a concern, and reducing damage requires care while plowing.

Major accounts

Phil Cavotta of Cavotta Landscaping, Cleveland, Ohio, keeps a snow crew on his major account (the 180-acre Cleveland Clinic) around the clock.

"It's a massive undertaking," admits Cavotta, as he counts down the duties it involves.

"We've got driveways. We've got 1.6 million sq. ft. of surface lots that all have to be salted and plowed. We've got 400,000 sq. ft. of garage roofs that we have to plow with a special rubber-edged blade because of the expansion joints on the roofs. And on those roofs, we can only use sand and gravel—no salt."

Because the crew is on-site 24 hours a day, when the snow gets heavy, Cavotta sets up rest areas with coffee and cots where crew members can take



Cavotta: snow removal 'a demanding service.'

breaks on an alternate basis.

Equipment includes:

- 2 five-ton trucks with 10-foot road plows;
- two one-ton dump trucks with plows;
- one-ton pickups with plows;
- two-yard front-end loaders that do the heavy work;
- all equipped with salt spreaders.

Cavotta begins a two-week assessment of his snow removal equipment in August. For the most advanced warning of coming snow storms, he subscribes to a satellite weather service.

"Snow removal jobs are longer hours, and require more attention," says Cavotta. "It's a very demanding service, because you're always fighting the elements. I'd much rather landscape than plow snow."

CHECK LIST: CAN YOU HANDLE IT?

Green industry consultant Ed Wandtke of Wandtke & Associates, Columbus, Ohio, says snow removal can be profitable if you:

- ▶ know the customers' requirements and expectations;
- ▶ know the level of service you are able to provide;
- ▶ know how much work will have to be sub-contracted.

"I often see green industry companies making promises to customers that they cannot keep," says Wandtke. "These companies have over-extended themselves, and could lose those valuable customers."

Here's Wandtke's list of questions you have to answer:

- 1) What snow removal equipment do I have?
- 2) How many qualified operators do I have access to?
- 3) What timeline do my customers demand for snow removal?
- 4) What type of back-up equipment does my company have for major storms?
- 5) Considering typical snow conditions, to what geographical area should I provide these services?
- 6) How much money is needed to make snow plowing a profitable business?