

Fleet maintenance from the pros

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

Landscape companies can't deliver services without motorized equipment like trucks, mowers, backhoes, and sprayers. The efficient use of these tools allow a landscape company to generate production which, in turn, produces revenues.

Considered from different perspective, production equipment (let's include service delivery vehicles too) is often a landscape company's largest capital investment.

Does a grounds care operation need any better reasons to keep its motorized equipment maintained and repaired?

Michael Rorie, Groundmasters, Inc., Cincinnati, says fledgling landscape companies usually can't afford a lot of hardware. "But once you get to a certain size you start to collect trucks and other equipment." He says that business owners must then make a choice—



Michael Rorie doesn't want to worry about equipment failures.

whether to buy another truck and extra equipment for back-ups, or to invest in a maintenance facility and mechanics to extend the working life and keep present equipment in serviceable condition.

"Equipment is what we use every day. I, as the president of our company, don't want to spend a lot of my time worrying about equipment," says Rorie. He says

most owners' or managers' time is better served focusing on sales and production.

A support role

Rorie and several other landscape professionals and equipment experts discussed fleet and equipment maintenance at the ALCA Conference this past November in Charlotte. This report was compiled from their comments.

First and foremost, a maintenance facility's purpose is to support production. A maintenance shop's "customers" are the company's supervisors and production employees, say the panelists.

"We recognize the shop as

an integral part of a successful team," says Steve Glennon, regional manager for Cagwin and Dorward, a successful San Francisco Bay area landscaper. "It's essential that our mechanics are flexible and that they

have a strong sense of commitment to the organization and to the other employees."

"Our job is to get the equipment out onto the job, working and making money," adds Ken Railey, fleet and safety manager for the Ruppert Landscape Company, Ashton, Md. "When the trucks and equipment perform well, they (production people) are happy. If the trucks and equipment don't perform well, they get frustrated and customer service



Steve Glennon says some tasks performed in-house, some are contracted.

Tips for a productive shop

Ron Turley is a former fleet and safety director at United Parcel Service (UPS). He was responsible for 48,000 vehicles. Today he operates Turley Transportation Consultants, Dewey, Ariz. He consults with government and private industry, including lawn/landscape firms, regarding efficient fleet and maintenance shop operation.

Turley says that managers can only control four things: time, material, space and tools. The best managers know how to blend all four into an efficient system.

For a smooth running maintenance shop, Turley suggests:

- ▶ Develop a good preventive maintenance plan. This is always at the top of his list.
- ▶ Get good people and train them.
- ▶ Make employees realize that you expect 6.9 hours of effort for every 8-hour day.
- ▶ Strive to keep vehicle and equipment availability as high as possible.
- ▶ Standardize as much as possible—equipment, including vehicles, and parts. Items like tires, lights, belts, and filters.
- ▶ Allow 1 ½ service bays per mechanic.
- ▶ Provide employees with enough tools and parts to do their jobs without waiting or searching.

—RH



Mark H. Neidich says a maintenance shop needs "a system".

suffers."

To do this efficiently, says Mark H. Neidich, owner of Fleet Consultants, Cincinnati, each company must develop "a system" for performing tasks such as preventive maintenance and repairs.

Workable system

Many maintenance shops operate under systems that prioritize maintenance tasks and the order of repairs. For instance, work on large equipment may take precedence over smaller equipment. Or, the system may spell out which equipment gets immediate repair, and which must wait.

Many maintenance shops also use computer programs, while others use simple checklists to monitor the status of equipment and parts inventories, and to keep track of maintenance and repair. Some post large bulletin boards where all equip-

ment is listed and its maintenance and/or repair status immediately viewable by anyone in the shop.

Apart from its obvious purpose of keeping production equipment working at job sites, the system must also foster cooperation between the repair shop and operations.

Monitor your system

Any such system must be regularly monitored, emphasizes Neidich. This includes providing proper shop personnel training, the proper tools and parts, and vendor support. A workable system allows a shop to function efficiently. It also allows a company to keep up with its growth.



Multiple locations create new equipment issues, says Ken Railey of Ruppert Landscape.

For example, Ruppert Landscape now has eight locations supporting 13 branches. To meet equipment needs at its eight locations, says

"Our job is to get the equipment out onto the job, working, and making money"--Ken Railey

Railey, it employs two administrative people, 25 repair/maintenance technicians, plus several mobile painters. Shop managers at each Ruppert location regularly report to Railey who joined Ruppert Landscape in 1982 as its first mechanic.

Cagwin and Dorward uses a slightly different system. Its corporate office is in Novato, Calif., with branch offices in San Jose and the East Bay area. It runs 8 satellite operations from these branches.

C&D's Glennon says that each of the three main offices have shop facilities, but the company also maintains a mobile repair capability. His company's shop personnel concentrate on equipment repairs



Everything starts with preventive maintenance, says Ron Turley.

and on manufacturing any speciality equipment the production crews need. An outside contractor visits the branch locations to regularly service the vehicles.

"There has to be somebody responsible at each location, and

there have to be standards," stresses consultant Ron Turley, former fleet manager for huge UPS.

"You have to enforce the standards of your company, and that includes the fact that the equipment is, in fact, important, and that you will take care of it," adds Glennon. □

Vendors can help out

Build win/win relationships with vehicle and equipment dealers to take some of the pressure off your landscape maintenance/repair shop.

Your loyalty as a customer to a particular dealer or distributor is valuable to that vendor, and many are willing to negotiate once they've established a strong relationship with a client.

The best time to negotiate is when you're hashing out a major equipment purchase. The larger the purchase, the more power you have to negotiate.

Have you considered asking for extended warranties on certain pieces of equipment? Special considerations and/or prices for parts? Better, faster service? The ability to return unused, boxed replacement parts for refunds? But it's almost impossible to build this type of value into a purchase if you're always shopping for the cheapest price.

"The problem with most people when they buy, they go out looking for deals. You should buy like you try to sell; you sell quality," said Ron Kujawa, Kujawa Enterprises, at the ALCA conference in Charlotte this past November.

"You want to buy right, and you don't want to overpay," added Michael Rorie, president of Groundmasters, Inc., Cincinnati. "But paying fair market value is no crime."

—RH