

# KEEPING THE WHEELS TURNING

Two successful companies share their differing approaches to truck/equipment maintenance and repair.

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**W**HEN RICK KIER turned 16 and was finally old enough to get his driver's license, he took the money he had saved from a paper route and mowing neighbors' lawns and invested it in a new Chevrolet pickup. Because the region of New York State where Kier lives typically gets 100 inches or more of snow dumped on it annually, he also bought a snowplow for the truck. That was in 1978.

By the time Kier graduated from Jamevilles-Dewitt High School, he was the hustling owner/operator of Rick Kier Summer and Winter Services, with a fleet of three pickup trucks and several classmates as employees.

So began Kier's career in landscaping and snow management that, during his career as a landscape professional, has seen him purchase 64 trucks over the years. As the founder and owner of 23-year-old Pro Scapes, based in Jamesville, NY, Kier's fleet now consists of 30 trucks, including the three new models purchased last year.

In 2009 Kier also added to his equipment fleet four additional payloaders, three backhoes and a 100-hp farm tractor — all being maintained and repaired in a new four-bay maintenance building at Pro Scapes' headquarters on a rolling, scenic former dairy farm in Jamesville, just outside of Syracuse. The new maintenance shop replaces a building half its size that was no longer adequate to handle the company's vehicle/equipment maintenance and repair needs.

"Trucks and equipment are a huge part of our operation," says Kier, who for many years did or helped out with most of his company's vehicle and equipment maintenance and repairs.

"We have a lot of people, employees and customers, that depend on our equipment. If we don't have the equipment or it's not performing satisfactorily, then our people aren't working and our customers aren't getting the service we've promised them."

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## » WHEELER LANDSCAPING

- » FOUNDED: 1976
- » NUMBER OF TRUCKS: 23
- » HEADQUARTERS: Chagrin Falls, OH
- » WEBSITE: [wheelerlandscaping.com](http://wheelerlandscaping.com)

This past year, Wheeler Landscaping modernized its logo, which it proudly displays on its secure, enclosed equipment trailers.



## » PRO SCAPES

- » INCORPORATED: 1988
- » NUMBER OF TRUCKS: 30
- » HEADQUARTERS: Jamesville, NY
- » WEBSITE: [proscapes.com](http://proscapes.com)

This past fall, to help get its maintenance shop in order prior to another busy snow season, Pro Scapes' founder and owner Rick Kier sought the help of fleet management consultant John Dolce.

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## Outside consultant

Recognizing the importance of safe, dependable trucks and other equipment, and planning for Pro Scapes to continue growing, Kier this past fall enlisted the aid of fleet management consultant John Dolce to help put systems in place that ensure the company's truck and equipment maintenance and repair program will continue to meet its needs.

Even though the new maintenance shop is larger, cleaner and better organized, the company's continued growth had put a strain on its ability to keep trucks and other equipment properly maintained and serviced. And, on occasion, this strain caused "finger pointing" among the crews or between the crews and the shop, Kier realized.

This isn't unusual, Dolce explained to Kier. The consultant described the stress being put on the maintenance shop as part of the "growing pains" of a successful operation.

One of the solutions, Dolce suggested, was more employee training on proper vehicle and equipment use. Kier agreed.

"One of the reasons we've been so successful is because we're committed to training. The next step for us is to implement a structured program for our vehicles and every piece of equipment," Kier says. "I'm not going to slow down. I'm going to continue growing this company and buying more trucks and equipment. But what I have to do is lower our overall costs for vehicle and equipment utilization, maintenance and repair."

Dolce, who has been a fleet consultant for almost 40 years and has written three books on the subject, looks at truck repairs and maintenance strictly by the numbers.

"Words have different meanings. They can be misunderstood. Numbers can't," says Dolce. "In building your service fleet and related fleet management and maintenance programs, develop systems to keep your field crews in close communication with your fleet and equipment maintenance person or people. But manage it with numbers — just like you do the rest of your business."

Dolce points out there comes a time when the costs of maintaining and repairing vehicles and equipment, and the risk of related downtime and lost production, far outweigh the machines' value to a company.

Unless a company meticulously tracks each truck's and each piece of equipment's expenses, also considering factors such as depreciation and trade-in value, it might hang onto vehicles and production equipment much too long.

This, and misused trucks and equipment, result in unexpected breakdowns and costly repairs, which can be a huge drain on a shop manager's time and resources, and can trigger disruptions in production and lost revenues.

Dolce says shop managers and lead mechanics — even the most talented and organized — can only do so much.

Many feel like they're being asked to "do a 12-hour job in an 8-hour day" because systems, based on numbers that track every aspect of a truck's (or piece of equipment's) usage, maintenance and repair history are not in place.

## Mirror check

To help determine where the inefficiencies resided in the system Pro Scapes used to maintain and repair its vehicle fleet, owner Kier allowed Dolce to spend a day in private, separate, face-to-face meetings at the company headquarters with its two

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**// I BUILT THIS BUSINESS BASED ON MY ATTENTION TO DETAIL, AND I BROUGHT IN PEOPLE THAT HAVE THE SAME ATTENTION TO DETAIL."**

**— Rick Kiers, Pro Scapes**

Pro Scapes' distinctive red service delivery fleet, a common sight in central New York, flanks Rick Kier and his management team.



## COVER STORY

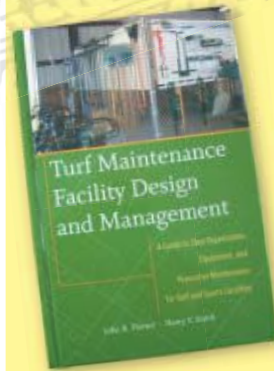
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full-time and two part-time mechanics and also the firm's account managers.

Dolce reminded each employee he wasn't there to judge or criticize. He asked them to speak frankly about their jobs, and about any problems or frustrations they experienced with their vehicles or equipment. The meetings generally lasted 20 to 25 minutes each. The employees spoke frankly after some initial hesitation.

During the course of the interviews it became apparent Pro Scapes had

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This book focuses on proper shop setup and management and is not an equipment repair "how-to."

## SHOP MANAGEMENT — BY THE BOOK

Every landscape or grounds maintenance shop manager should keep a copy of the book "Turf Maintenance Facility Design and Management," as a reference.

The book offers practical information relating to the art and science of setting up and running an efficient vehicle and equipment maintenance and repair facility.

It focuses on efficient shop management rather than attempting to be a vehicle or equipment maintenance and repair manual. That's what makes it so valuable.

Its 10 chapters cover almost every aspect of designing and the processes involved in running a shop that keep landscape and grounds vehicles and equipment safe and in full production. Discover **do's** and **don'ts** for:

- The role of the turf equipment manager;
- Maintenance facility and shop design;
- Preventive maintenance;
- Selecting tools and equipment for the shop;
- Training equipment operators;
- Filling the turf equipment manager position; and
- Safety regulations and regulatory agencies.

The book is co-authored by John R. Piersol and Harry V. Smith. Piersol is Director of Golf/Landscape/Forestry for Lake City (FL) Community College. Smith, a professor at the same college and now retired, for many years wrote the popular "In the Shop" column in *Landscape Management* magazine. The book, published in September 2008, can be ordered online from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) or Wiley, its publisher. — RH



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## COVER STORY

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work to do with maintaining and repairing its fleet. Much of that work focuses on a greater attention paid to pre- and post-trip reporting, recordkeeping and better communication between the field crews (through their supervisors) to the mechanics. This last point was a frustration voiced by almost every employee.

On the second day of Dolce's visit, he shared his findings with Kier and offered suggestions focusing on the all-important numbers side of maintenance/repair and also with its operational and personnel sides.

"I built this business based on my attention to detail, and I've brought people in that have the same attention to detail," Kier says.

On Jan. 1, Pro Scapes implemented a new reporting and tracking system to document the reports from the crews and also the performed service work. "The system tracks the cost to repair each piece of equipment as well as the annual cost of doing so," Kier adds.

### Different route

Wheeler Landscaping of Chagrin Falls, OH, has decided to try something new. This spring, Wheeler will be going a *continued on page 30*

## 10 COMMON FLEET CONCERNS

John Dolce is a fleet management consultant with nearly 40 years of experience helping companies set up truck and equipment management, maintenance and repair systems. Dolce — author of "Fleet Management," "Vehicle Specification and Procurement," and "Analytical Fleet Maintenance Management" — says the following are the 10 most-common areas of concern he has observed in the more than 150 clients he has helped:

1. Written policies are needed for conformity;
2. There's a need for work standards and productivity measures;
3. Fleet size often is too large;
4. Management practices need improvement;
5. There's a clear need to improve communication at every level;
6. Vehicle purchase procedures need upgrading;
7. Work scheduling needs to be qualified on time, miles and fuel use;
8. Mechanics, non-mechanics and foremen need training on new technology;
9. Better balance is required for in-house and vendor maintenance activity; and
10. Cost control systems, whether manual or automated, need to be implemented and applied to vehicle maintenance management. — RH

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Wheeler counts on vendors for vehicle and equipment maintenance and major repairs, but experienced personnel handle minor fixes.

**THE KEY TO MAKING THIS WORK IS FINDING GO-TO VENDORS, AND BUILDING THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS."**

— Rich Kerens, Wheeler

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different route with its truck and equipment maintenance and repair program. It's partnering with local vendors and depending on their help and expertise for service and major equipment repairs.

"We are relying a lot more on local vendors now, and they want our business," says Rick Kerens, Wheeler's Landscape Construction Project Manager.

Kerens handles installation crews during the growing season and all snow operations in the winter.

"Putting this into action was a little bit scary at first," Kerens says. "To even consider this new process, it required trust with the vendors to be able to turn over our 23 trucks and equipment and know that the repairs will be done in a timely fashion, repaired properly and at a fair price."

Like most companies, Wheeler Landscaping does its truck preventative maintenance (PM) strictly by the numbers. Every truck gets a full PM including oil changes and lubrication every 3,000 miles.

"Our supervisors and crew leaders log the mileage of their trucks when they do their pre-trips," Kerens says. "When it's time to do an oil change

we call the dealerships where we purchased the trucks. They pick it up and take it to their facilities. They change the oil and inspect all of the basic components for wear and damage. When finished, they return the trucks to us."

Kerens says the vendor keeps a complete maintenance record for each vehicle and has been very good about informing him if it finds any unusual wear, damage or any indication

of operator misuse of the truck.

"We used to do everything in-house and we found it very cumbersome tracking when maintenance and repair were being done to trucks," he says.

### PM partners

Kerens equates the process to the nursery stock Wheeler Landscaping used to carry at its site but no longer does.

"We used to spend a lot of time and money caring for it, but now we let the local nurseries do that. They have the expertise to do it better, and it's more convenient and cost effective for us. We look to our truck vendors the same way."

The company will do minor fixes on its trucks inhouse — those that can easily be done through its 25-point pre-trip vehicle inspections. Everything else is done by the vendor.

"The key to making this work is finding go-to vendors and building the right relationships," Kerens says. "That vendor has to understand what we're trying to achieve as a company and that, in the end, we're both on the same team. There are great vendors out there that will become your right hand and really come through because they care about your business. This results in a win-win for both."

Kerens says the vendor must realize Wheeler Landscaping's need to keep its trucks safe and operable.

"Every supervisor we hire, every crew leader we hire, every employee we hire is needed to be on the jobs working safely, efficiently and producing billable hours for the company. If we have a problem with a truck, we can't make money with it," he says.

Wheeler has made similar arrangements with its snowplow and other equipment vendors. **LM**

WEB EXTRA

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