

A *SHIFT* IN THE FLEET

Trucks represent growth, expansion of business and the pride owners have in their companies. But the economy, like many other aspects of business, has started to change the way the industry purchases new vehicles.

BY **DAN JACOBS**
MANAGING EDITOR

YOU CAN ALMOST hear the pride in landscape business owners' voices when they start talking about their trucks. There is no equipment (with the possible exception of a mower) that embodies everything about the Green Industry the way a truck does — rugged, earthy, powerful.

These days, there's one other adjective to add to that list: older.

With a down economy affecting business, some owners are focused more on maintaining and extending the life of their existing truck and trailer fleets. "We're not buying as many trucks," says Maurice Dowell, president of Dowco Enterprises, Chesterfield, MO. "We're doing more maintenance on our existing vehicles. We've stretched them out."

According to *Landscape Management* research, 46% of contractors purchased new or used trucks this year and 43% plan to purchase them next year.

Industry trucks have certainly advanced. Years ago, contractors had fewer models from which to choose, explains Bob Johnson, director of fleet relations for the National Truck Education Association (NTEA).

"You ended up with more truck than you needed or a truck that was overloaded," he says. "Landscape trucks, historically, were the most overloaded trucks because they would get a 1-ton truck and use it for everything."

The good news is there are more classes of truck, and that gives contractors more options.

"With the emphasis on fuel econ-
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Tom Heaviland prefers a clean and uniform looking fleet.

PHOTO COURTESY: HEAVILAND ENTERPRISES

TRUCKS & TRAILERS

Dowco is phasing out some trailers in favor of box trucks.



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omy, people are taking a much closer look at what their real requirements are and trying to downsize wherever they can,” Johnson says. “The big danger, however, is if you don’t do your homework properly, and end up with less of

a truck than what you need, what you save in fuel economy you’re going to more than spend in maintenance.”

New vs. used

Whether it’s having crews spend time on nearby jobs or driver training, contractors

have always worked to limit the wear and tear put on their vehicles.

“Because our routing is fairly dense, we don’t put a lot of miles on them,” says Tom Heaviland, president of Heaviland Enterprises, Vista, CA. “I like to see our typical truck life at about seven years.”

Limiting yearly miles will lengthen a truck’s usability, but no matter how much life is added, there comes a day when the cost of repair and maintenance outweighs the return on the investment. When that day will arrive is often difficult to gauge — and it’s one reason why Heaviland has outsourced his fleet management.

Many business owners think they’re saving money by continually repairing used vehicles, but that may not always be the case, says Ned Maniscaloco, a spokesman for Enterprise Fleet Management in St. Louis. Controlling costs for any business is essential, he adds, and a fleet can be one of the company’s larger expenses.

PHOTO COURTESY: DOWCO ENTERPRISES



SPRINTER

“We’re pretty confident that we can get the best return,” Maniscaloco says.

Of course, when the maintenance is minimal, the return is clear.

“Three years ago, we took some of our older vehicles and we painted them,” Dowell says. “We spent \$1,500, and we got another three years out of them. When you look at your return on investment, that’s really huge.”

Dowell isn’t the only contractor holding off on picking up new equipment. Dowell and Heaviland say they prefer to purchase new trucks as opposed to acquiring less-expensive used vehicles. That’s also Barry Morton Sr.’s preferred way to get new equipment, but he’s not above buying used when the right deal comes along.

“We have not bought any new trucks this year,” says Morton, president and CEO of Morton’s Landscape Development, Columbia Station, OH. But while leafing through an equipment trader

FOR CONTRACTORS, WATCHING TRUCK COMMERCIALS IS LIKE BEING HUNGRY AT THE DINNER BUFFET:

EVERYTHING LOOKS GOOD, AND THEY KEEP BRINGING OUT SOMETHING BETTER.

magazine, Morton ran across an ad for a 12-ton trailer. The company was in need — and when he ran the numbers, Morton’s decision became easy.

“A new trailer with air brakes is about \$20,000,” Morton says. “For the used one I bought, a 2008, I paid \$4,500. My two mechanics spent a week on it.”

There’s nothing wrong with buying used, Morton says, but it requires time and research. Morton estimates that with the two mechanics’ labor, a week’s down time, a paint job, new tires and a new rim, he put another \$3,000 into the trailer. In other words, he saved \$12,500

by purchasing a used vehicle.

“Do your homework,” he advises. “Just make sure you’re not buying someone else’s junk.”

Heaviland agrees. “You must weigh the cost of buying something new with buying something used that you may have problems with and spend money repairing,” he says. “You can eat up a new monthly payment and have a good-looking vehicle with low repairs and warranties on it. As long as you can track and justify it, then buying used is fine.”

New types of vehicles

While the buying of new equipment has slowed, when they do decide to sign on the dotted line, contractors are carefully considering the types of vehicles their employees need.

“The days of everybody driving a big Ford F-150 are long gone for us,” Heaviland says.

Fleets are changing in other ways,

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*Based on a comparison of the Automotive News classification of full-size commercial vans.



TRUCKS & TRAILERS



Temperate weather means Heaviland's trucks, like this F-250 used by irrigation technicians, don't need air conditioning.

too. Pickup trucks, still the stalwart of maintenance crews, have seen a competitor making headway: box trucks.

Dowell is growing increasingly enamored with the box type of vehicle. He recalls seeing his first industry box truck when he attended the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) Renewal & Remembrance at Arlington National Cemetery a few years ago.

"We came back and replicated that with some modifications," Dowell says. "Every year, we've gotten more creative with these box trucks. Now, we've got it down to a science."

There are a number of advantages to box trucks, he notes. "Box trucks are the wave of the future — trucks in which you can get all of your equipment inside," Dowell says. "They're more

secure and give you a rolling billboard. It's a vehicle that you don't need a separate license for to drag a trailer that's going to require wires and lights. Half of my guys can't back up a trailer. It provides security from the elements. There are so many reasons to have a box truck."

The NTEA's Johnson agrees.

"It would not surprise me to see that trend grow, especially as equipment becomes more expensive and people are looking to extend the longevity of their equipment," he says.

Dowell admits, however, that box trucks tend to be one-use tools.

"You're definitely not going to plow snow with it," he says, chuckling. But, he points out, "It makes a good storage area when you're cleaning your warehouse in the middle of winter."

Must-haves vs. nice-to-haves

For contractors, watching truck commercials is like being hungry at the

PHOTOS COURTESY: HEAVILAND ENTERPRISES (LEFT); DOWCO ENTERPRISES

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Box trucks provide a rolling billboard and help protect equipment from the elements.

dinner buffet: Everything looks good, and they keep bringing out something better. Today, vehicles come with iPod docking stations, satellite radios and a host of other features. Most dealers have their specifications, but it's not always easy to limit the options.

"Do I spec out CD players and plugins for iPods? Definitely not," Dowell says. "Almost every truck comes with power windows. We don't spec that. They've all got tilt and cruise. They practically all come that way."

In his temperate climate, Heaviland's employees don't need air conditioning.

"We're in southern California, and it rarely gets extremely hot here," he explains. "It's just an AM/FM radio and bench seats. We get exactly what we want on it, and we buy it at a good price."

The look of a truck is just as important to contractors as its versatility is.

"Image is half of your business," Johnson says. "You don't want to go out and do a lousy job landscaping the yard. At the same time, you don't want your trucks looking like they're going to collapse in the driveway or go down the road with the fender flapping."

As vehicles become more sophisticated, maintenance challenges increase.

"They are becoming more fuel-efficient, more productive," Johnson says. "At the same time, they are drastically reducing the ability of owners to work on their own vehicles."

Purchasing solutions

Whether buying new or used, contractors are definitely keeping a closer eye on their cash flow.

When it's time to purchase a new vehicle, Dowell and Heaviland hand off that task. Heaviland uses Enterprise Fleet Management.

"We got out of the vehicle business," Heaviland says. "They're the professionals. When we go to sell a truck, we turn it back to Enterprise. They sell it, and those proceeds are applied to the purchase of another truck or to pay the loan of an existing vehicle. There's a tax advantage there. I'm not paying on the gain on the sale of an asset."



Dowell uses an agent as well. "His prices have been consistently good, better than what I had been able to negotiate," he says. "Plus, it takes me out of the negotiating process. I don't need to be going in beating up on people. He does all the work. His prices are good. I would recommend that everyone have an individual like that." LM


A pair of red-handled Corona wire cutters is shown against a red background. The tool has a built-in sprinkler adjuster on the top handle. The brand name 'CORONA' is visible on the handle. The tool is positioned diagonally, with the blades pointing upwards and to the right.

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