DESIGN/BUILD

Getting attached

For one business owner, a small investment in attachments pays off big.

By BETH GERACI

It's no secret that finding innovative ways to grow your business has become increasingly important in recent years. And some landscape business owners, such as Carl Williams, general manager at Lawn Sense in Monroeville, Pa., are finding compact equipment attachments to be a direct and inexpensive path to diversifying.

"Using attachments has allowed me to not give my competition the opportunity to service my accounts," Williams says. "It allows me to offer additional services and retain customers. I don't want my competition to get their foot in the door."

Williams, whose business is 70 percent commercial and 30 percent residential, has expanded his business and saved money largely through two attachments—Bobcat's Brushcat mower and Box Blade plow.

Brushcat mowing jobs have generated for Williams $20,000 to $30,000 a year, he estimates. The mower attaches directly to a skid steer or track loader. Williams' team uses it to cut grass that hasn't been maintained for several months, such as undeveloped parcels that need to be maintained just annually or semi-annually.

"It's for builders that may want to maintain their lots just to keep them walkable, that's been the niche for that piece of equipment," says Williams.

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Carl Williams uses equipment attachments strategically.

PHOTO: TWO RIVERS MARKETING

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By filling that niche, Lawn Sense has been able to retain customers who otherwise would have sought service from its competitors. "It's allowed me to offer that same service to a few more customers that I maybe would have turned away in the past because I would have had to rent that piece of equipment," Williams says. "It's opened up a new market for me."

Williams also has turned to Bobcat's Box Blade plow, a snow pusher, to save money—and a substantial amount of it. "I can buy one of those for a few thousand dollars and put it on my skid loader," Williams says, adding that snow constitutes about 15 percent of his business. "The snow pusher allows me to not have to purchase an additional pickup truck to service that account," he says. "If I wanted to put a plow on a pickup truck, I'm into $8,000 to $10,0000 for that pickup truck, just so it can plow snow."

Williams' decision to invest in attachments was a strategic one he came to early in the 12 years he's owned his business. "Ever since I started, I've been benchmarking what we do, how long a task takes, what the cost associated with each task is," he says. "That's why those pushers make sense on a skid-steer instead of having a pickup truck that sits there all winter. You have to keep your costs as tight as you possibly can."

Some winters, Mother Nature doesn't bring as much snow as others. With that in mind, Williams reasons, a truck is a big investment that doesn't provide as strong a return as a $3,000 snow pusher.

All of Williams' attachment purchases "have been money well spent," he says. "To me, if I couldn't work those situations with my customers, I don't think I'd be in business today."

WHEN TO RENT, WHEN TO BUY

While rental remains a strong alternative to ownership, an improving economy is convincing contractors to buy compact equipment again. Rental and acquisition strategies each offer unique benefits for different stages in an operation's life cycle, and both are demonstrating positive trends.

The final decision boils down to being able to complete your work in the most efficient and affordable manner possible. As you weigh your options, it's important to evaluate the following considerations:

Job site conditions – Are your typical project tasks, terrain or space constraints changing enough to require a different type or size of machine than you currently operate?

Project frequency – How often will a machine be used? Will the length of your contracts and the volume of work generate revenue to support a short-term payment schedule or long-term investment?

Attachment versatility – Do your attachments provide flexibility, compatibility and accessibility for multiple job sites? Attachment utilization of 50 to 75 percent usually justifies a permanent fleet addition.

Capital resources – Rental payments can be tax deductible, but are there greater tax incentives for purchasing? If you're repeatedly renting a machine, but cash is tight, does a rent-to-purchase option agreement (RPO) pencil out?

The decision to buy or rent entirely depends on your company's situation, so take the time necessary to fully evaluate what is best for your operation.

Source: Bobcat

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

MAINTENANCE

Protecting equipment

Pro Care Horticultural Services minimizes equipment loss with a financial incentive.

By CASEY PAYTON

Lowell Rolsky has a plan to limit equipment maintenance costs.

PHOTO: PRO CARE HORTICULTURAL SERVICES

There's no doubt that landscape equipment experiences a lot of wear and tear and many pieces break down over time. But improper maintenance and carelessness can lead to earlier breakdowns, loss or even theft. Lowell Rolsky, president of Pro Care Horticultural Services in Carmel, Ind., recently implemented a new tactic that aims to minimize equipment problems. By deducting from the bonuses he offers employees at the end of the year, he believes he may be able to reduce the amount of lost, stolen or damaged equipment the company deals with annually.

"We've been in business for 42 years and trying to fight this problem for a long time," says Rolsky, who employs between 65 and 80 people during peak seasons and retains 30 to 35 full-timers. "Over the years we've tried a lot of approaches and nothing really worked. The fact is money is what motivates most people, and while we can't take wages away, we found that deducting from the employee's bonus is quite effective."

At the end of the year, supervisors and foremen are eligible for a bonus of $50 for every year they've been with the company. That's in addition to a $50 bonus that employees get any time their name is mentioned by a customer. But Rolsky has found that deducting money from that "end-of-year" bonus is most effective considering it's a time when the holidays are on employees' minds and they're hoping to make some extra cash.

"We look at the equipment issues on a case-by-case basis," Rolsky says. "We certainly aren't out to penalize our employees for equipment that breaks down for normal wear and tear. But if it becomes obvious that equipment was stolen because a truck was left unlocked or that the equipment was mistreated, that's negligence, and we hold the employee accountable for that with a bonus deduction."

In determining how much to deduct, Rolsky says he looks at the deductible for that piece of equipment and determine a value based on that. "For instance, if it's a $300 blower that gets lost, we will ask for a third of that by taking it from the bonus," he says. "That can add up if the employee is careless, but the fact is, someone who is regularly careless shouldn't be with the company anyhow. So the second benefit of this program is that it focuses our attention on employees who are perhaps not suited to remain with the company."

While the deduction program has only been in place about two years, Rolsky believes it's working. "We haven't quantified whether this is saving us a lot of money yet, but what I do know is that employees have become more aware that we're serious about them taking good care of the equipment," Rolsky says. "For a long time I think they thought it was just talk. But now that they're seeing consequences, I believe we'll start seeing change."

Rolsky adds that he's already observed positive changes. Workers, for instance, are remembering to lock their trucks, and leaders are doing a better job of looking at their trucks before they leave job sites. "It's helping our employees to pay attention to the bigger picture," Rolsky says.

The end-of-year bonuses are easy to budget for since they're based on how long employees have been with the company, he says. As the end of the year approaches, he knows what he should set aside and says he'd be happy to continue to pay out the full amount and see a decrease in his equipment loss percentage.

But Rolsky doesn't want his employees to expect the bonus no matter what. "I think another good thing this has done is show our employees that a bonus is never guaranteed and it's not just a free handout," Rolsky says. "I feel our employees are becoming more aware that a bonus is not a guaranteed entity but is something that is based on your actions."

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscaping industry.

IRRIGATION

Smart communication

A look inside a successful Smart Irrigation Month marketing campaign.

By ERIC HORVATH

The Toro Co. is the manufacturer winner of the 2012 Smart Marketing Contest. We spoke with Mike Baron, Toro's national specifications manager, to learn more about how to successfully communicate the tenets of Smart Irrigation Month.

Q: Toro's 2012 Smart Irrigation Month efforts included reaching out to diverse audiences, including contractors. Describe Toro's approach to promoting Smart Irrigation Month to them.

Mike Baron: While contractors are not monolithic by any stretch of the imagination, they do share something in common: they have direct contact with property owners, property managers and their irrigation systems. In a real sense, contractors are the gatekeepers for both innovative technology and evolving best practices.

Mike Baron

Q: So while contractors are an important piece, it is incumbent on the industry as a whole to participate in Smart Irrigation Month promotion?

Baron: Contractors are a strategic constituency for promoting Smart Irrigation Month because of their unique relationships with property owners and managers. But a singular focus on only contractors would be much less effective than a coordinated effort. That being said, it's important to remember that contractors influence distributors because that's where they buy their products. There is a synergy that multiplies effectiveness and speeds market adoption when a manufacturer communicates effectively with both the selling distributor and the buying contractor.

Q: Toro has won the Smart Marketing Contest manufacturer category twice. Do you have any advice for how other manufacturers and contractors can put together similarly successful campaigns?

Baron: Any manufacturer, regardless of size, should ask itself, "How important is the future availability of water to my business?" If water availability is important, then the next question is, "How has that fact been integrated into strategic planning?" Take that information and then think about the primary message being communicated by the IA through the Smart Irrigation Month initiative.

Leverage that message, and what the IA is doing, in ways that help achieve the goals in the strategic plan that are affected by future water availability. The key piece of advice: Don't force it! Make promoting Smart Irrigation Month complementary to and reinforcing of your strategic plan, marketing and sales efforts.

For contractors, the recommendation is to use the same concepts as stated for manufacturers, but adapt it to what's cost effective—especially if you're participating for the first time. Start small, easy and cost effective. During July, you will start to see opportunities for enhancements appear as if by magic. Keep a file and jot down notes. That file will serve you well for next year. And of course, take advantage of the many graphics offered online by the Irrigation Association. Their support gets better every year.

Horvath is communications manager for the Irrigation Association.

LAWN/TREE CARE

It's bed time

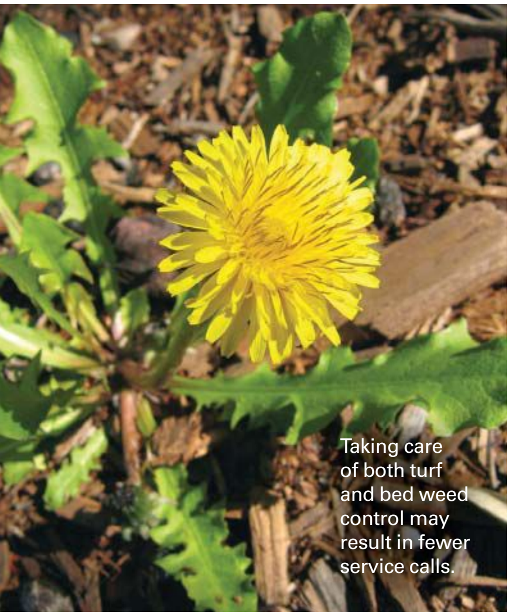
Landscape bed weed control is an attractive service opportunity, says one LCO.

By MARISA PALMIERI

Lawn care companies that haven't yet embraced the business opportunity of landscape bed weed control should rethink their decision not to provide this service. So says Phil Fogarty, owner of Crowley's/Weed Man of Euclid, Ohio, which has a 90 percent renewal rate for bed weed control program.

There are a few reasons why he called this service area a "tremendous opportunity" for lawn care operators (LCOs) during a webinar *Landscape Management* hosted in April, sponsored by Valent Professional Products. These include the advantages of serving a niche, offering high-quality services and customer satisfaction.

In Fogarty's area, other lawn care companies don't market weed control in both turf and landscape beds, so it's an advantage for Weed Man to offer both.



Taking care of both turf and bed weed control may result in fewer service calls.

"There aren't other lawn care companies customers can call to get both services done at the same time," he says.

Quality control is one of the biggest advantages to taking care of both services.

"The customers we're doing lawn care and bed weed control for, we have fewer service calls on both sides because we have control over both," Fogarty says, explaining there's less movement of the weeds between the beds and the turf. "We've become irreplaceable for these customers."

SELLING IT

When it comes to adding this service, Fogarty recommends selling the bed weed control as recurring service that's part of a program.

Due to preemergent herbicide application costs and the labor that may be required on the first visit for this service, an LCO is going to spend more money on the front end than later in the year.

"You want to prevent the customer from taking just one application," he says. For example, his company's bed weed control program typically includes four visits per year at an annual rate of about $400 for a 1,500 sq ft to 2,000 sq ft lawn. Fogarty emphasizes that prices vary.

The best time to add new bed weed control clients is in the summer.

"It's easy in June and July when you see people with big weed problems and can tell they haven't gotten ahead of it," he says. "A well placed phone call or flier in the door can work very well."

Phil Fogarty

To market to existing clients, Fogarty suggests using any potential customer touch points to promote the service. "Just giving someone a bill is wasting a great sales opportunity," he says. "That contact with the customer is a natural opportunity to remind them of other things you do."

Setting expectations upfront with customers is very important.

"There's going to be a weed from time to time," Fogarty says, adding his company instructs customers to alert the office for a free service call when that happens. Why? Some weeds like nutsedge get worse when customers pull them versus letting a technician treat them with glyphosate.

UP AND RUNNING

Staffing is crucial when it comes to adding bed weed control, Fogarty says, noting the knowledge base and techniques are different from treating lawns. Having a technician with ornamental plant knowledge is vital because some perennial plants may be easily confused with weeds.

"You can't send your average guy out there," he says. "You need someone with knowledge and experience."

For example, spraying bed weeds is different from spraying weeds in turf—applicators must take care not to overpressurize sprayers or glyphosate may come in contact with trees, shrubs, perennials or annuals, he says. Another tip is to train applicators to put themselves between what they're spraying and what plants they don't want to be exposed to a control product, to act as a shield.

Similarly, Fogarty recommends keeping a separate route, truck and equipment for bed weed control due to the possibility of mixing up products or other risks.

"You don't want someone walking across a lawn without changing their shoes and you don't want backpack sprayers, hoses and tanks going back and forth," he says. "Our equipment is sequestered." LM

PHOTO: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.