

SNOW+ICE

GUIDE

Snow and ice contractors are adding specialty services and equipment like agricultural tractors to improve residential snow profits.



On the home front

Three snow contractors put a new twist on winter's residential market. **BY DAN JACOBS**

WHEN WINTER'S ICY tendrils snake their way through the northern part of the country, many contractors put the mowers away and attach plows to the fronts of their trucks. But today they're doing so on the heels of a couple seasons where snowfall was erratic and unpredictable.

In the face of such uncertainty, contractors can't confidently rely on the residential market to earn their winter keep, and many of them have come to

prefer the steadier, long-term income generated by commercial accounts.

Nonetheless, snow contractors have found several ways to differentiate themselves and make money from their residential services. Here's a look at how three contractors are doing just that.

Short-term accounts

Madison, Wis.-based Barnes Inc. provides both commercial and residential service during the long Wisconsin winters. And while the bulk of the winter income is derived from the commercial accounts,

Barnes is growing its residential base, often with the clients dropped by competitors leaving this part of the market.

"It's a balancing game," says Chris Schultz, quality control coordinator and sidewalk snow removal division manager for Barnes.

"When you transition to residential, you have to do that in a timely fashion," he says. "Getting to your residential accounts as soon as you can after your commercial accounts is the challenge."



BARNES INC.'S
CHRIS SCHULTZ

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Barnes is large enough and flexible enough to offer traditional snow services along with vacation and emergency services. Many customers are content to take care of their own

driveways—until a big snow comes along. Nobody wants to shovel a 15-in. snowfall, Schultz says.

“Because we are so big, we’re able to take on customers for a short period of time,” he says.



Providing short-term snow removal services is a gateway to full-time customers for Barnes Inc.

Even when the snows don’t pile up quite that high, many customers call on Barnes to provide services while they’re away for the holidays or on a business trip. They hire Barnes to take care of their properties during those times.

“We’re very flexible like that,” Schultz says. “Whenever our customers are gone and need snow removal services, we’re there for them. It’s a nice service to be able to offer for people because it’s one less thing they have to worry about. One less thing customers want to do is come home to three fines because their snow removal wasn’t done. It’s one phone call. It’s peace of mind for them.”

It’s all about delivering on a need. “We’ve been doing that forever,” Schultz says. “It’s one of our selling points. We’ll pick up full-time customers from that because they’re so happy with our service that we’re able to fit them in for a week or two. They don’t want to continue to do their own snow removal, so they’ll hire us out for the rest of the season. It’s a nice service for our customers because we’re able to take the work on and not lack any quality or service.”

Concierge service

The unpredictable nature of winter weather often brings late night and sometimes very long hours.

When he first entered the Green Industry, Aaron Smith worked in snow removal for a large landscaping company in Minnesota.

“I could be gone for 80 hours straight and not see anybody, not sleep and barely eat,” says Smith, general manager/
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PHOTO: BARNES INC.

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sales manager for Essex, Vt.-based S&D Landscapes. "It was fun for the first two events. After that it got kind of old."

It was old for his new bride, too, and Smith promised when he started work-

ing in the family business he wouldn't work those hours again. Yet the allure of winter income proved too strong.

Not wanting to break his promise to his wife, Smith had to find a way to bring in the income without working

those long hours. Smith's solution was to offer a highly personal, higher-margin concierge snow removal service.

"We use walk-behind snow blowers," Smith says. "We service some of our summer clients and a few who are not. The minimum charge is \$45 for a single width or a very short double-width driveway from 3 in. to 6 in. of snow. More than 6 in. is \$65. In the case of continuous snow, we're trying to be there every 4 in."

The route is small and Smith uses only two workers. And the service includes more than just clearing snow from a driveway.

"If your car is in the driveway, the car will get brushed off," Smith says. "It does not get scraped for ice for liability reasons. We hand shovel around all the cars so there is no snow underneath the car. We snow blow the front walks and city walks."

Because S&D only provides the concierge snow removal to a few customers, the service can be customized, such as clearing a client's back deck by request.

"The beauty of it is, it was an afterthought," Smith says. "Because our budget is set up to recover in the summer, this boils down to extra operating capital and keeping guys busy."

Smith acknowledges it's been difficult to manage expectations. Two years ago there wasn't that much snow, and customers were thrilled with the service. Last year, when the snow was much heavier, some customers found themselves with a \$500 monthly bill.

That said, Smith has some very devoted followers.

"We looked at doing something else, expanding in a different direction, and we got some push back when we suggested we would drop the service," Smith says.

Tractor-based approach

Chris Marino, owner of Xtreme Snow Pros of Mahwah, N.J., visited a Montreal, Canada-based colleague to learn about the approach contractors there

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take to snow management.

"They do residential snow a whole different way than we do in the U.S.," Marino says. "By studying their business model I realized how efficiently they were doing things."

That method involves putting a 92-in. inverse snow blower on the back of an agricultural tractor. Instead of taking 15 minutes or more to plow a driveway, the new setup can clear a driveway in just a couple minutes. The method is so efficient, Canadian contractors can charge less than Americans and still make more money.

In addition to the ability to clear a driveway quickly, the snow blower offers another advantage over plowing.

State law forbids leaving any snow in the street. The snow blower allows Xtreme's employees to direct where the snow goes.

There are some challenges to the business model. In Canada, customers are more willing to sign season-long contracts.

"The U.S. market doesn't think about snow the way Canadian market does," Marino says. "In the Canadian market, snow is a part of their life. Where I'm stumbling is with

the idea of getting people to think about snow in September. I don't want them signing up in December, I want them signing up earlier on so it's all routed correctly."

Marino is still tweaking the model to make it work for his company. He plans to add another tractor next season to expand the service. When it comes to making money in winter, it's simply a matter of considering all the options.

"Open your eyes to new ideas," Marino says. "There are other ways of doing things out there that break the mold of the traditional way. In today's market, which is so competitive, you have to invest in efficiency in order to remain competitive." **LMI**

Xtreme Snow Pros crews clear residential driveways with a 92-in. inverse snow blower mounted on an agricultural tractor.



**XTREME SNOW PRO'S
CHRIS MARINO**

Jacobs is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

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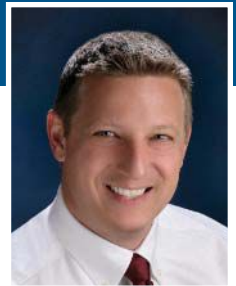
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BY PHIL HARWOOD

Off-season analysis

SUCCESSFUL SNOW AND ice management professionals have learned the spring and summer months are the best time to address many important aspects of their snow businesses. While others refuse to think about the snow season in the off-season, these pros are proactively improving their snow processes, researching innovative technologies and making major decisions affecting profitability.

The best place to start with off-season planning is with an analysis of what happened last winter. Most likely, you had successes and failures. Some things went very well and others didn't. Many companies repeat their mistakes simply because they never take the time to analyze their operations and take corrective action. I suggest you take some time to understand what

MANY COMPANIES REPEAT THEIR MISTAKES SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY NEVER TAKE THE TIME TO ANALYZE THEIR OPERATIONS AND TAKE CORRECTIVE ACTION.

you need to do to improve your snow business before you dive into planning for the upcoming winter.

Define & document

Since this analytical process is an annual event, I recommend establishing a defined and documented process for it. Who needs to be involved? What information do you want at your disposal? Where is this information and who will retrieve it? When will the analysis take place? Will this be done in one meeting or spread out over multiple meetings? Who will take notes and where will these notes be stored?

There are a number of factors to consider when analyzing last winter's snow business. As you consider each factor, make note of anything that needs to be addressed before next winter. I recommend rating each factor using a defined rating system, along with capturing any specific positive or negative comments regarding that factor.

Here's a partial list of factors to consider:

- > Weather data and trends
- > Contract portfolio
- > Sales process and results
- > Customer satisfaction
- > Contract management
- > Invoicing
- > Subcontractor performance
- > Operational controls and procedures
- > Mobilization speed
- > Routing
- > Snow watch procedures
- > Mobilization decisions
- > Equipment performance, usage, maintenance and repair
- > Material purchasing and storage
- > Accidents
- > Risk management processes
- > Staffing and training

- > Employee turnover and performance
- > Administrative functions
- > Unused capacity

This analysis is best done at the tail end of winter to ensure important issues aren't forgotten. However, it's not too late. If you didn't complete this analysis yet, now is the time to get it done.

Next, you should begin planning for the upcoming snow season. Start with an understanding of the long-term vision of the company. Clarifying this vision will provide you with a road map and greatly assist you with establishing sales goals for everyone with sales accountability. What type of growth is desired in terms of your service mix, geographical mix, customer mix and contract type mix?

Aside from establishing sales goals, planning may encompass any of the items listed above or anything else that will better position you for success. One area of particular interest to me is the use of innovative technology. Incorporating new technology into your snow business requires steps to ensure the technology is effectively leveraged. That's why off-season planning is so critical. Waiting until fall to think about the upcoming snow season will effectively preclude you from making significant improvements in your snow business.

With an established and documented process for your off-season analysis and planning, your snow business is more likely to be healthy, profitable and sustainable. You may even discover that snow and ice management is the most profitable service you provide.

I hope you're having a great off-season. **LMI**

Harwood is president and CEO of Pro-Motion Consulting. Reach him at phil@mypmcteam.com.



Multi-position winged snow plow

Western's Prodigy Multi-Position Winged Snow Plow automatically positions its patented mechanical wings for plowing efficiency, whether in straight-ahead scoop mode or when angled for windrowing. The plow is available for truck and skid-steer loader applications. The UltraMount 2 mounting system features a one-piece frame design for strength and durability.

Western Products // WesternPlows.com



Steel beam/fabric buildings

Legacy offers fabric buildings with structural steel beams instead of open web trusses. This new engineering concept is designed to provide a cost-effective, long-lasting solution for salt and sand storage facilities. Tall peaks provide space for tipping trucks to maneuver inside, while heavy-duty beams support conveyors for efficient transition of materials.

Legacy Building Solutions // LegacyBuildingSolutions.com

Roof deicing system

The RoofHeat STEP roof deicing system uses an exclusive polymer blend that heats when electricity passes through it. This thin, flexible heating element has the ability to self-regulate its electrical consumption, making it energy-efficient. Because of its ability to accept AC or DC current, solar and wind power can also be directly integrated to the system.

Warmzone // WarmZone.com



Skid-steer line

Skid-steer snow blowers are offered for a wide variety of flow rates, starting as low as 15 gpm. Seven models are available in 72- to 84-in. widths. Features include a universal coupler, a single motor design and an electric spout rotator. Adjustable skid shoes, reinforced body braces and shear bolt protection are standard.

Loftness // Loftness.com

Skid-steer plows

Blizzard now offers both the Speedwing multi-position winged-blade and HD Series straight blades for skid-steer loader applications. Speedwing clears an 8 ft., 7 in. swath in straight-ahead scoop position and a 7 ft., 10 in. swath when angled for windrowing. The HD Series is available in 7.5-, 8-, 8.5- and 9-ft. blade widths.

Blizzard Snowplows // BlizzardPlows.com



Dual-stage snow thrower

The 1830EXLT is a dual-stage snow thrower with a heavy-duty auger to feed snow into the housing; a high-speed impeller to discharge the snow; heated handles; power steering and a standard LED headlight for greater visibility in unfavorable conditions. A heavy-duty hydrostatic transmission provides power to the track drive system to tackle snowdrifts.

Husqvarna // Husqvarna.com

Utility vehicle plow

The Nordic Auto Plow attaches to any vehicle and allows users to plow up to 8 in. of snow from driveways. Weighing less than 50 lbs., it is readily moved into position and attached to the vehicle in minutes. Its rugged, ABS plastic rounded blade is designed to glide over uneven surfaces and prevent damage to driveways.

Nordic Auto Plow LLC // NordicAutoPlow.com





V plow

The Fisher XV2 V-plow features a new flared blade design. The blades now rise from a 31-in. center height up to 39 in. at the outer edge on the 9.5-ft. models. Stainless steel blades are available in 7.5-, 8.5- and 9.5-in. widths; the two widest blades are also available in 14-gauge steel with Fisher's Storm Guard powdercoat finish.

Fisher Snowplows // FisherPlows.com

Bulk spreader

The SnowEx SP-1875 Bulk Pro Spreader offers a two-stage auger system, independent spinner/auger controller, low-maintenance direct drive system and other exclusive features. Spread width is infinitely variable from 5 to 30 ft. The pivot mount requires no drill holes in the truck bed and allows the spreader to swing away, providing full tailgate or rear door access.

SnowEx // SnowExProducts.com



Hydro snow thrower

The new Hydro Pro Sno-Thro features Ariens' first hydrostatic transmission in a snow thrower, allowing for infinitely variable speed selection. The series features four hydrostatic drive models, including the Hydro Pro 28, 32 and 36 (pictured), and the Hydro Pro Track 28. They are cold-start capable, requiring little to no warm-up time.

Ariens Co. // Ariens.com

Training videos

To address the standards of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), LS Training has released five new training videos for landscape contractors on snow and landscape equipment operation, safety procedures and ways to reduce liability. Developed in cooperation with the Snow & Ice Management Association, the 30-minute videos are available online with an annual subscription.

LS Training // LSTraining.com



Truck-mounted spreader

Built to carry 6 cu. yds. of material, the SHPE6000 spreader features the largest poly hopper in the SaltDogg line. An in-cab console features independent controls for the auger, spinner and vibrator. The series is completely self-contained and mounts on utility vehicles, pickups, dump trucks and platform trucks.

Buyers Products // BuyersProducts.com



Snow blower for compact tractors

The new 600CT features the industry's first concentric-axis design: The 18-in., four-blade impeller rotates the same direction as the auger to effectively direct snow into the discharge chute. Its 74-in. cutting width and 28-in. cutting height is designed for tall drifts and snow piles.

Sheyenne Tooling and Manufacturing // SheyenneMfg.com



Mower-mounted snow thrower

The DriftBuster features a 180-degree rotating discharge spout. With the exclusive QuikConverter implement system, any Grasshopper FrontMount zero-turn mower can go from mowing to snow throwing quickly without tools. An optional electric lift and electric spout rotation with steering lever-mounted joystick control are available.

Grasshopper // ThrowMoreSnow.com

Salt or sand storage

The Dura-Box provides snow removal professionals with a cost-effective, secure salt or sand storage bin. Features include industrial strength, a molded-in lid stop, a reinforced lid, an inner stackable design and a sloped lid for added water resistance.

OutdoorBoxes.com // OutdoorBoxes.com