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MOWERS:

the right way to buy

By SHARON CONNERS

In today's lawn mower marketplace, it pays for a contractor to be smart and know what kind of equipment he needs to get the job done. LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT recently spoke with several manufacturers about how they advise their customers to find the right mowing equipment; the importance of depreciation when pricing work, and the need for proper maintenance. Here's what they had to say.

Deere Z Trak zero-turning unit offers better traction.



Match property to mower

Brian Masterson, marketing manager of The Toro Co., Bloomington, MN says selecting a mower is not based on any one single job site.

"It's based on the portfolio of jobs that contractors have. In the landscape contractor marketplace say that their company's purpose is to handle primarily residential property the question then becomes, for the residential properties, what type of lots do they do. If they're doing more of the smaller, entry-type houses, they have to take into consideration the front and rear yards and how to get around landscape structures, trees, and obstacles, which may lead to landscapers needing smaller scale landscape equipment—mid-size mowers with 32- or 36-inch decks.

"If the business focuses more on a high-end or commercial property, there's a different application in and of itself where they may be cutting acres of land at a time. They may be looking for larger decks with higher horsepower and larger deck sizes and different bagging capacity opportunity vs. recycling. All of those will play into configuration of the unit," adds Masterson.

"What we do" says Masterson, "is provide a full-range of equipment that ranges from the small, entry level landscape contractor from 12 ½ horsepower and 36 front decks all the way up to out front midmount zero radius turn with 60- and 62-inch decks and then on our commercial side there's the big Groundmasters."

He says choosing the correct mower to get the job done depends on the dealer. "The first thing they have to find out is what their customer is looking for—are they residential or are they commercial?

How many crews do they run? A huge factor for a landscape contractor is their trailer. How much room do they have in their trailer?

"The landscape contractors need as much education as possible from their dealers of the feature and benefits of the products. The dealer needs to work with the landscape contractor to ensure that they get the best piece of equipment to match their needs. . . What we do to support that is extensive training with our distributor sales force out in the field with our dealers," states Masterson.

The company offers help for contractors to mow smarter. "We have some slide rule type charts that roughly tell how many acres per hour, but that's the general way. The specific way depends on the location. A lot of it depends on the landscape structure and what's on the lot and that comes from years of experience. We give a lot of general information, but then a lot of it goes on those specific site locations," says Masterson.

Pricing smart

A contractor needs to take into account several things when pricing an account. "In

terms of any piece of equipment, there's several elements that make up their cash flow. First of all there is the out of pocket expense for the equipment. They may get a bank loan, we offer financing programs, they may pay cash. That investment has to be depreciated over what you would consider the life of the equipment.

Depreciation also depends on what area of the country you are in. If you are in the southern areas, you're running your units nine to twelve months a year vs. if you're in the northern climate you may be only running it six to nine months per year. That plays into depreciation. The other thing that plays into depreciation is that you get what you pay for. If you want to buy an inexpensive piece of equipment you need to make sure that you incorporate into your cost structure, your maintenance cost. Also your down time. How much time are you going to lose every time that piece of equipment's down," says Masterson.

Masterson says a good maintenance schedule is important. "A lot of that comes down to the basics such as every morning does your crew chief check the oil and check the gasoline, do they check the blades, do they check the air filters, do they grease the fittings at the proper timing and are the tires at the proper air pressure? All of those play into making sure that your equipment is properly maintained. Also, manufactur-

ers in their operator manuals recommend at certain times during a product's life to have preventive maintenance done on a product."

Know your needs

Peter Whurr, Director of Marketing, Ransomes America, Lincoln, NE says, "The user needs to understand what he

wants to do with the (mower). It depends very much on the application. For example, if you've got a wide open area to cut, you're not going to look at buying a 48-inch right on rotary. If you've got that big wide open area, you're going to want to cover it in the

best possible time and get the best performance out of the product and the best return on your investment. You're probably looking at buying a wing rotary or something like that that would get over the area and have productivity as being the major importance."

Whurr says many end users are too busy looking at cost when they purchase a product.

"In reality," says Whurr, "if they spend a little bit more and then take the width of cut of that product and consider the productivity of that, the return on investment may be better with a higher priced product with better productivity than the low cost product that had

less productivity," says Whurr.

"Our distribution is there to meet with the customer and help guide them through the network of decision-making. . . I guess there's a perception out there that the salesman just wants to sell whatever he's got available. When in reality a high-quality distributor or

dealer will recommend the right product for use and application," says Whurr.

"Say we said the life of a product would be seven years. You could then work out the cost over that seven year period. Your depreciation could be over that seven year period. You could actually work

it out cost per acre, take into account that depreciation so you could actually work out how much an acre of grass would cost you to cut and maintain," says Whurr.

As far as pricing a job with depreciation as a factor, Whurr says, "If (contractors) know for example, it's going to cost them \$4 per acre then if you want to be able to make money off that than obviously you've got to be able to charge more than the \$4. Your \$4 would include that depreciation for that acre as much as it would cover the cost of servicing the product."

Whurr says preventive maintenance is probably the most critical aspect of using



Whurr: regular maintenance gives longer equipment life.

MOWERS

the product other than correct operation.

"If you carry out preventive maintenance, although initially it looks as though it will be more expensive, in the long run it will be less expensive due to the fact that you're actually changing oil, you're lubricating parts of that product and doing regular checks on it. So you're stopping the major wear and tear on the product and give you a much longer life."

The company provides a preventive maintenance schedule in every operation instruction book to every product they supply to the customer. It's also on a decal that is underneath the hood. Even if the book was missing, there is no excuse to not follow proper maintenance.

Quality cut or rough around edges?

Jeff Alfaro, marketing manager, of **Excel Industries Inc.**, Hesston, KS, says, "The first thing you have to do is look at application. Is it something that requires a fine quality cut. Is it a highly maintained turf. Are there any slopes or right of ways associated with it, a lot trimming capabilities or a lot of wide open areas? Are you looking at rough cut application perhaps with highways that may require a different type of machine than someone mowing a residential area where there's an upper price limit on the housing? You're not going to want to use the same piece of equipment there. With golf courses you have the dual challenge of

finding something that can cut wide areas of grass yet still be able to trim around the various trees, the clubhouse, etc.

Alfaro says that choosing the correct mower is partially the salesman's responsibility. "The salesman should ask the question up front to make sure that the end user gets what he wants. After all if he buys a mower that doesn't fit his application he's not going to come back to you a second time," says Alfaro.

He stressed the importance of maintenance, "Maintenance saves money on all equipment because obviously a well-maintained piece of equipment will last you longer in the product life. . . Our past two product introductions in '96 and '97 have eliminated any daily maintenance and in most cases have also eliminated some weekly maintenance as well. We have one product that other than sharpening blades and doing oil changes there's no maintenance other than on a seasonal basis."

Buyer need not beware

Steve Yolitz, vice president of strategic product planning for the **Jacobsen Division of Textron, Inc.**, Racine, WI, says experience is the key when selecting the correct mower, "The greatest risk is when a customer is not quite sure of their applications or they're just entering the business or they may not know exactly what they need."

The company offers suggestions to help the contractor mow smarter, "In the opera-

tor's manuals for let's say our golf mowing equipment we indicate what some desired mowing patterns are. We offer an operator's video on all our machine riding machinery as to how best operate the equipment and achieve maximum productivity. We do provide information on productivity so they can determine how many acres per day in an eight-hour day a piece of machinery should be able to de-



Yolitz: total cost includes depreciation and maintenance.

liver," states Yolitz.

"Depreciation is an operating expense that needs to be accounted for," adds Yolitz.

"Depreciation can be affected by the level of service and maintenance that is provided. The operating conditions of the equipment will have an

impact on the life of the equipment. If you're mowing for profit you need to understand what your total cost of operation is, which includes depreciation and maintenance of your



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MOWERS



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equipment.”

Sam Catoe, controller for Jacobsen, says pricing a job depends on a number of factors. “After their (tax) advisor tells them how they should be depreciating it, they would take that annual cost and that along with the other expenses whether that would be other people working for them, supplies, fuel and other tools and just make sure they price their jobs so that it covers their expenses and makes a profit for them. Depreciation would just be an element of their annual expense to do that business.”

“Maintenance can prevent premature failure of or wear out of key components. In summary, it can prevent downtime and major repair expenses,” says Yolitz.

Catoe adds, “We’ve started a program offering a full-service maintenance contract to golf courses where we come in and perform the maintenance on the machines because we know based on what we’ve seen over the years that proper

maintenance does add to the life and quality of the unit. The manual that comes with the product identifies, as the manual that comes with a car would, that shows what normal maintenance would be and that has proven to extend the life of the unit.”

Yolitz says all of their equipment in the operator’s manual and sometimes in decal form offer a maintenance chart.

Qualify the customer

Fred Goode, national sales manager, **Bunton Division of Jacobsen**, Louisville, KY, says, “You have to qualify the customer—for instance is he a commercial or a low-end consumer type? That’s where most of our dealers start. Our best approach is to ascertain through a commercial standpoint what is required for durability and reliability.”

Goode says depreciation depends on “their utilization and the life of that unit. That’s somewhat of a personal question for each

one of the commercial cutters.”

Orville McDonner, engineering manager for the Bunton Division, says “A lot of the bigger commercial cutters pay closer attention to the maintenance than they do necessarily to the depreciation. The depreciation is just a known that’s a fact in any business that’s just not relevant to lawn and garden. It’s the amount of maintenance and service

required for a particular machine. If they take “x” number of dollars for a product and say they’re going to get two seasons out of it, the machine costs me so much. I’m going to mow so many acres this is what it’s going to cost per acre. Then the variable they have to plug in there is what kind of maintenance and repair parts do they have to add to the machine.

The dollar amount they spend on service and main-

taining the product is actually a bigger issue than depreciation.”

Goode says the company has observed more contractors leasing equipment. He believes that they’re looking at it from a business perspective. They’re turning in the equipment before it gets into higher maintenance.

“It’s all preventive maintenance. It ensures the proper

conditions that offer extended life either with lubrication or just in general looking for things that can cause down time prematurely.

Today, hydraulic oil is something that is becoming more paramount because of the longer use of the

oil,” says Goode.

McDonner says, “If they’re doing the routine maintenance where



Goode: leasing gains popularity among contractors.



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MOWERS

they're reviewing the belt drives, the pulleys and things that wear, it will save money if they change the part before it totally fails. For instance if there's a belt on the product that's starting to wear and they notice during their routine maintenance that that belt is starting to fray and it's going to fail in "x" number of hours, the cutter would get that belt off of there. If he left that belt on there and it failed, it could end up on an idler pulley system or belt drive system at the engine level and a belt that's worth a few dollars could end up costing hundreds of dollars in parts if they let it go to failure."



Jacobsen Turfcut Outfront Rotary Mower popular on big properties.

"You're seeing a change in technology of components that are used on units. Now, you have hydrostatic walk-behind units. Preventive maintenance of those kinds of things—hydraulic filters and oil changes—can reduce a significant cost. . . Before, if you let a belt deteriorate

for whatever reason, (cost) was not as great. Now, if you neglect some of these service intervals you're exposing yourself to a much higher replacement part cost sooner than you should expect that," says Goode.

Big mistake to 'buy cheap'

Ned Swanson, assistant manager of product planning for American Honda Motor Co., Power Equipment Div., Duluth, GA explained, "We like to match the best quality of cut to the customer. If it's homeowner type mowing then we recommend a smaller size mower deck because the smaller size mower deck the better cut the customer will receive. But, if it's large open mowing then we would of course recommend a wider mower that does a nice job. In other words if you use a 21-inch lawn mower on your front

Many factors

"There's a number of factors that need to be taken into account (when choosing a mower)," says Steve Yolitz, vice president of strategic product planning of Jacobsen Division of Textron Inc., Racine, WI.

- ▶ The type of grass to be cut
- ▶ the desired height of cut;
- ▶ the contour of the grass surface;
- ▶ moisture conditions;
- ▶ whether you need to catch the grass;
- ▶ what productivity you are looking for;
- ▶ how many acres per hour or in a day are you looking to cut.
- ▶ What is the skill level of your operators and service technicians?
- ▶ What are the transport requirements for the machines?
- ▶ Do you have to go on and off trailers frequently or is it going to be dedicated to a job site?"

yard, you'll get a lot better quality cut than if you used a 48-inch wide area commercial-type mower."

Swanson says end-users often make the mistake of buying cheap, "It's dollar driven where they try to buy a machine for less money that really isn't applicable to the type of job that they're trying to do. This would be more for new people getting into the business or companies that are not well financed that can't afford more expensive equipment."

Swanson says, "It's the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. If you take care of your ma-



Honda Commercial 48 is popular with mowing professionals.

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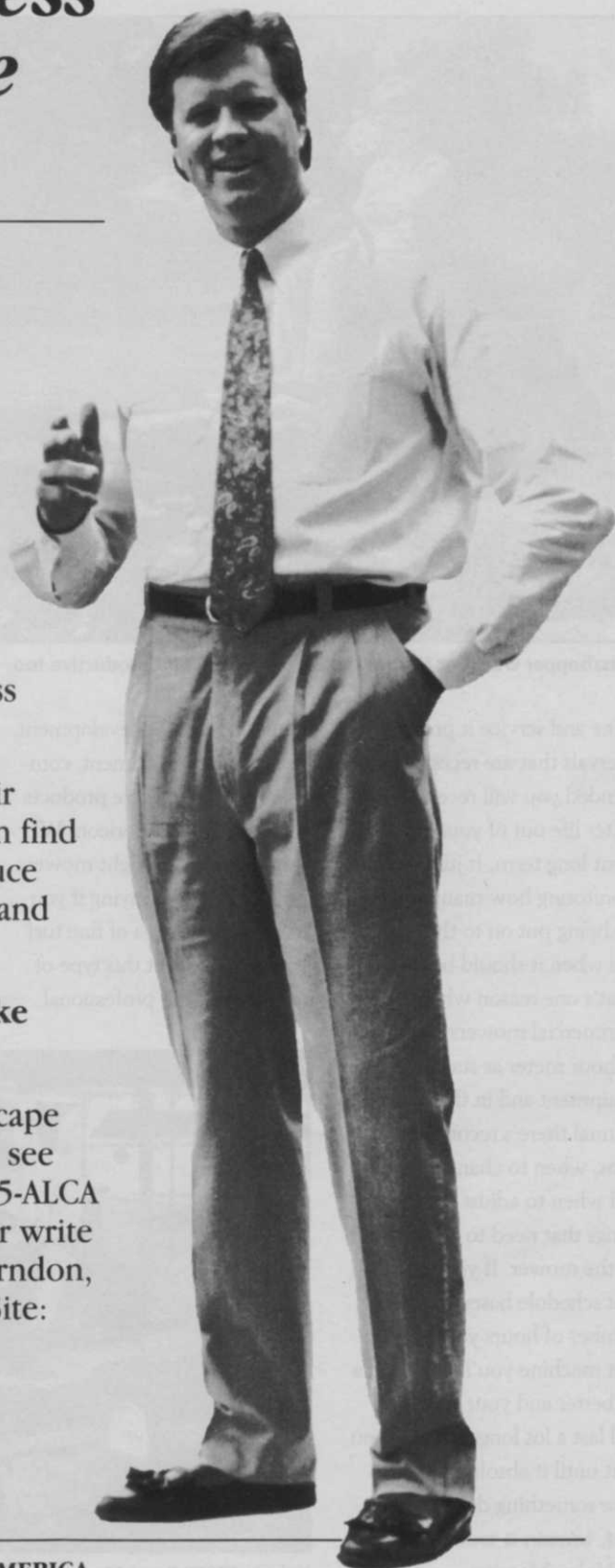
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MOWERS



Grasshopper Outfront Mower is easy to operate and productive too.

chine and service it properly at intervals that are recommended you will receive much better life out of your equipment long term. It just requires monitoring how many hours are being put on to the unit and when it should be serviced. That's one reason why on our commercial mowers we have an hour meter as standard equipment and in the owner's manual there's recommendations, when to change the oil and when to adjust all the things that need to be adjusted on the mower. If you follow that schedule based on the number of hours you have on that machine you'll get along a lot better and your machine will last a lot longer than if you wait until it absolutely has to have something done to it."

Turf, terrain & trees

Nolan Meggers, product

manager, market development, golf and turf equipment, commercial grounds care products for John Deere, Horicon, WI says, "Buying the right mower isn't as simple as saying if you have so much area of fine turf you should select this type of mower. In both professional

in the shortest time. Proper mower selection comes into play here as does well-considered allocation of mowing units and crew members," stated Meggers.

"Any turf care professional must always consider depreciation. The value of a machine

landscape and golf course applications among the multiple other factors to consider are the varieties of turf to be mowed, the type of terrain, and the number of trees and kinds of landscape areas on the properties or courses. The more obstacles on the property the greater the need for maneuverability.

"Two major factors must be balanced: providing a quality cut that meets or exceeds the expectations of the property owners/users and covering the area

depreciates with every hour of use. It's a cost of operation that needs to be considered when preparing the budget for the golf course and which must be covered in the pricing to landscape maintenance accounts," according to Meggers.

"The dollar amount of the depreciation depends on the value of the unit. The turf professional also should work closely with the service technician to be aware of the repair and upkeep costs for each machine and be able to determine when the cost of repair and maintenance becomes greater than the value of the equipment being repaired. If an older machine needs a major overhaul at a cost of "x" dollars and book blue of that piece is less than that amount, it's probably time for replacement. The turfgrass professional must weigh all the options, taking budgetary factors into consideration. When repair is not feasible and a new unit is needed, outright purchase and lease options should be considered," says Meggers.

Preventive maintenance info is in the operators' manual for each machine, with a chart outlining the procedures recommended at specific use hours.

Once a contractor finds a mower many other issues must be taken into consideration to maintain longevity of the equipment. "Number 1" on that list is maintenance. It's the case of, a little preventive maintenance is just what the manufacturer ordered.



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