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Demo that mower first



Mowing managers say that price is important, but not as important as durability, serviceability and dealer support

BY DAVID WALKER JR.

Some of the considerations that contractors take into account when purchasing new lawn mowing equipment include price and quality of cut. But, there are others, and to find out what they are, we asked the pros who operate mowers, the mechanics who service them and the owners and key managers who buy them.

Several clear-cut trends emerged in the course of our not-so-scientific investigation. They include: the significance of properly 'demo-ing' equipment and the consolidation of vendors and employee retention.

Try before you buy

For Dave Bradford, a horticulturist with Landscape Services, Birmingham, AL, getting a chance to demo a piece of equipment is one of the most crucial steps he takes before making any purchasing decisions.

"I attend several regional and national trade shows every year. At the shows I like to try equipment first-hand," says Bradford. Once he finds a piece suitable to his needs, he proceeds carefully. "We're a 45-year-old company and we want to feel comfortable about anything we purchase. Our taking on new equipment is

more of an evolution than a revolution. We call and talk to other people who used the equipment to get their opinions."

Once Bradford and his associates reach a mutual comfort level on a mowing unit, they take one more precautionary step. "After demo-ing it, we'll buy just one or two. If they perform well for a length of time, then we'll buy more," says Bradford.



Dixie Chopper

Mitch Rolsky, vice president of operations and business development, Stano Landscaping, Milwaukee, WI, searches for new technology that will give his company an edge.

"I'm constantly going to trade shows and watching what our competition is doing," says Rolsky. Just like Bradford, Rolsky moves with prudence once he finds a unit he likes. "We used to watch a mower for about an

hour. Now we keep it for a week and have a lot of different people test it."

Gary Schwartzkopf, director of internal operations, Buckeye Landscape Services, Columbus, OH, says he has reps calling him all the time who want to demonstrate mowing equipment. After years of being in the industry, he can usually 'size up' a mower in a matter of moments.

"Sometimes I can look at a piece of equipment for five minutes and tell it's not worth it. When I find something that's good, I'll take it over to our mechanics and give it a good going-over. From there, we'll take it out to a site and have the crew leaders operate it in the field for a day," says Schwartzkopf.

Just what do the crew chiefs look for? "I'd say the three most important factors are safety, quality mowing and ease of operation. With the high turnover in our industry, you need to use equipment that's easy to learn. I look at all these things before considering price," says Schwartzkopf.

Chris Hayes, vice president of operations, Groundmasters, Cincinnati, OH, has several foreman test mowing equipment and operate units in multiple locations before making any purchasing choices.

"We operate the equipment on different terrain to see how it performs on hills versus flat areas. We try to run equipment for at least a week. Plus, our mechanics want to know about things like belts, grease fittings and parts availability," says Hayes.

What are Hayes' top priorities? "Operator comfort and quality of cut are important factors," he says. However, of all the purchasing caveats that Hayes has established, there's one that stands head and shoulders above the rest: "Any equipment that we buy must have been in existence for at least one year. A year gives you a chance to see if any bugs still need to be worked out."

Bill Parker, vice president of maintenance, Moore Landscapes, Glenview, IL, sees two other crucial reasons for a thorough 'hands-on' evaluation of mowing equipment before placing any order. First, says Parker, "If your foremen don't like a piece of equipment, they won't use it. I always make sure they test it first to make sure they are comfortable with it."

Second, in addition to having his mechanic inspect

Keep it or trade it?

Landscaping professionals might argue about which type or brand of lawn mowing unit is the best, but regardless of their selection they all agree on one thing: without a quality maintenance program, every mower is destined to underperform and eventually break down. What are contractors doing to avoid costly equipment failures?

Joe Loyet, president of Loyet Landscape & Maintenance, St. Louis, MO, believes part of the equation is knowing when to retire your equipment. Says Loyet, "After three years, a mower is tired so we trade it in. It's very cost effective and it saves us downtime. And saved downtime means a lot."

During 36 months of use, Loyet ensures his equipment stays in top running condition by installing something very special: "pride." In case you're wondering, it's not the mowing gear that receives this unique attachment, it's his staff.

"Every man on a crew is issued his 'own' lawn mower, string trimmer and backpack blower. All they have to do is check the oil every day. If your mower breaks, it is fixed that night and you're given a back-up. By assigning mowers, they take pride in their equipment," says Loyet.

Loyet also uses this approach on larger riding units. "The big riders are only ridden by crew leaders. And when you go on vacation, no one rides your mower," says Loyet.

Lenny Zeglin, a shop foreman at Pennink Arrimour, Huntingdon, PA, could have his hands full servicing 50 walk-behind units every day. Fortunately, Zeglin says, his company takes a team approach to caring for equipment that pays big dividends. "The crew leaders show all the guys on the crew how to change oil, change filters and sharpen blades. What they can't fix they just tag and I make sure to look at it. We have some Kawasaki engines that have been running for 10 years. The key to longevity is good maintenance."



Yazoo/Kees Cutter
Hydro

and evaluate mowers for performance specs, he goes one step further. "Our small-engine mechanic reviews all the parts to see which will wear out the fastest and need to be replaced. He'll then call our distributor to see if the distributor stocks these parts."

One for all?

As a former John Deere dealer, Tom Brown knows the vital role a distributor can play in a contractor's success. Brown, a divisional manager for Thornton Ground-

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scare, Cincinnati, believes that streamlining or consolidating vendors today is paramount to profitability.

"We have a basic shop that handles things like changing oil, fixing tires and sharpening blades, but for everything else we have to send it out to a dealer. Obviously, fast turnaround is important. A dealer needs to stock the right parts," says Brown. To facilitate this process, Brown offers this advice: "Don't bring oddball pieces together. Try to stay consistent with the equipment you are using."

Bill Sandford, a shop foreman at Habersham Gar-



dens, Atlanta, GA, asks this question before buying a mower: "Who has the parts?" He says he's able to stock some parts but must rely heavily on his dealer for the majority of them. As such, Sandford reached this conclu-

sion: "We're endeavoring to standardize our equipment and go with one vendor. We believe by doing this we'll get better service. Hopefully, we won't be seen as just a number but a real customer."

Make it easy on your people

Mowing contractors recognize that even the most user-friendly mower benefits by having a seasoned professional walking behind or riding atop it. How are landscaping firms holding on to a transient workforce in a year that saw the lowest unemployment rates posted since the early 1960s?

Kirk Talgo, a regional manager with the Morrel Group, Atlanta, GA, says: "When we get a good person, we do everything we can to keep him." Because a large portion of his labor pool is made up of Hispanics, Talgo stresses the importance of understanding the cultural differences between the United States and its Latin American neighbors.

"Many workers we have come from Mexico and do a great job for us. But often they get homesick and want to return to Mexico to visit their families. We give them a three-month leave of absence and they can still come back and receive their full benefits. We also try to give them holidays off that are part of their culture but not ours."

Mitch Rolsky is accounting for another demographic shift in the American labor pool: maturation. Because of this shift, he says you need to be cognizant of aging workers. "The workforce is getting older as a whole," says Rolsky. "We need to be constantly searching for new technology that will compensate for that. I'm always looking for ways to be more efficient and effective."

Whether a worker is 25 or 55, there are two issues Tom Brown strongly considers before purchasing any mowing equipment: operator safety and operator fatigue. He's invoking several changes to address these concerns which he believes will create a more loyal crew.

Says Brown, "We are trying to reduce the number of walk-behind units we have and replace them with stand-ons to reduce worker fatigue." And despite the fact he has never experienced a trailer accident, Brown is taking a proactive stance to stop one from occurring.

"I haven't had a trailer accident, but I've heard of plenty and I want to prevent them." Brown's company is investing in custom-made trucks where "you don't have anything dragging behind and there's no break-away problems to worry about," he says.

One-stop shopping

Stano Landscaping's Mitch Rolsky is also trying to consolidate his suppliers. His consolidation efforts have two important prerequisites. "Our goal is to develop a relationship with a vendor. However, we are looking for a supplier with a broad base of equipment. I'm also hesitant to deal with smaller entities. I'm afraid they might be gone one morning. We're trying to stay with a major player or one in the second tier," says Rolsky.

Dave Bradford realizes another benefit of reducing vendors: recognition. "We like to work with people who know us. We have suppliers who actually order ahead of time for us because they can anticipate our needs from past experiences."

What Bradford labels 'recognition,' Gary Schwartzkopf sees as 'persistence.'

"Switching over manufacturers is a real investment. The more manufacturers you deal with means the more parts you have to inventory and keep track of. Our distributor has persistence. They've been around a long time and we've been dealing with the same person, and that simplifies things," says Schwartzkopf.

Chris Hayes emphasizes that not only is it easier to stock mower parts when you have fewer makes and models, it also simplifies employee training. Says Hayes, "We use one line only and that makes it a lot easier to train people." Because Groundmasters has invested so heavily with one distributor/manufacturer, Hayes says they've reaped another benefit. "When any of our mowers under warranty break down, our distributor supplies us with units on loan. They actually deliver them right to us."

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Bunton BZT-3310 features wide wheel base

mower from Textron Turf Care and Specialty Products has a 31-hp Briggs & Stratton Diahatsu liquid-cooled gas engine, a 72-in. cutting deck with electric lift and adjustment system to control cutting height and a wide wheel base for stability. Call 888/922-TURF or Circle No. 203

Wide-cutting swath

Textron Turf Care and Specialty Products' new Jacobsen HR-4600 Turbo™ mower has a 44-hp Kubota turbo diesel engine for up to 7.5 mph operation and a 92-inch cutting width. Three hydraulically driven rotary decks use twin blades. Available in two-wheel or four-wheel drive, it also has a high-back suspension seat, easy-to-reach controls and single pedal control. Contact C-Graphic, Inc. at 888/922-TURF or Circle No. 204

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Exmark's LazerZ™ HP comes with a 52-inch deck and either a Kohler Command™ Pro or a Kawasaki engine. It can reach speeds of up to 9.5 mph. Ultra high blade-tip speed, high-lift blades and flow-control baffles allow cutting in any conditions. Floating Trivantage deck allows an operator to mulch, bag or discharge. Contact Exmark Mfg. at 402/223-6300; www.exmark.com or Circle No. 205

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stainless blades slice a 16-in. path and use cushion of air beneath the deck. Contact Eastman Industries at 800/760-1680; www.hovermower.com or Circle No. 206

MTD's new rider

MTD's mid-mount zero-turn rider (MMZ) is the first sit-down professional mower in the MTD Pro line. Powered by a 25-hp Kohler OHV V-twin engine, it has a 60-



MTD mid-mount's weight is in rear for traction

in. floating deck, operator seat adjustment and 10-gal. fuel capacity. Nearly 75% of the weight is in the rear for better traction. Visit www.mtdpro.com or Circle No. 207

Rear-mounted catcher

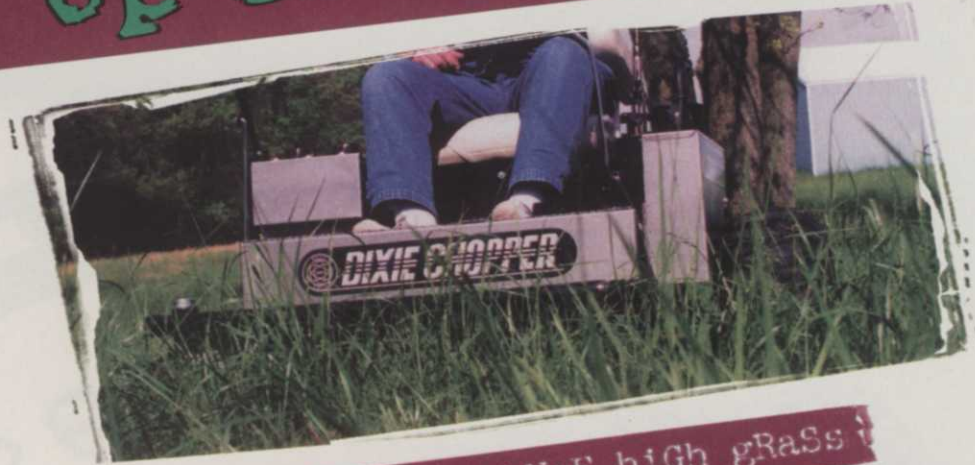
The new ShortCut™ Bac-Vac™ mounts directly behind the driver and doesn't hinder the zero-turn maneuverability of the ShortCut mower, says Excel Industries. It features three safeguards against plugging: sight glass, fabric feel and overflow. The catcher mounts on the 48-in. rear-discharge mulching deck with an adjustable blower. Contact Excel at 800/395-4757; www.excelhustler.com or Circle No. 208

Better ground clearance

The Kutter Hydro midsize mower from Yazoo/Kees has higher rear decks for better ground and curb clearance, a hydraulic drive transmission system and speeds up to 6.8 mph. Adjustable deck is 10-gauge steel with reinforced 7-gauge side skirts, in widths of 36 and 48 in. Contact Yazoo/Kees at 800/723-9496 or Circle No. 209

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New mower in Articulator line

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Maneuverability and productivity

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Deere M-Series mowers have antiscalp wheels

quiries, P.O. Box 12217, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709 or Circle No. 211

Clean, simplified design

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