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Combination machines like the Rapid M with the Gravely Car Pusher can pay off if you have the market for the services.

# ORDER THE COMBO PLATTER

Multipurpose equipment can be a worthwhile investment for many reasons, not the least of which is service flexibility. **BY CURT HARLER**

THE COMBINATION PLATE at a Chinese restaurant or fish house is usually the best deal. You get a meal that offers several tasty treats. Combination equipment works much in the same way: For one price you get a product offering at least a couple of functions.

“For the typical landscape professional, a machine built to handle a variety of attachments is going to deliver a better return on investment

than a single-purpose machine,” says Roger Gifford, Cub Cadet Yanmar’s compact product manager, adding it gives a landscaper the ability to adapt to the challenges of each job.

“It also provides flexibility in terms of the types of jobs a landscaper can take on, which is important for capitalizing on a continually changing market,” Gifford says.

“By investing in multi-purpose equipment, you save money by lowering your initial investment, buying one piece of equipment versus multiple machines,” says Tim Mercer, value stream director of turf products and Auburn operations for Ariens in Auburn, NE.

Dan Paschke, product manager for John Deere’s compact utility tractor line, agrees, saying it comes down to capital and what you have available to do the job.

## Will it pay to go big?

Paschke says the smaller company with a couple of guys on the road is likely to benefit from a combination



A combination machine is ideal for the occasional call for stump removal. When the job is done, reattach the bucket.



machine. Those few workers will get to a jobsite and have to do everything. One machine with several functions will let them accomplish that goal.

"A compact utility tractor with a loader on front and backhoe on back will do the same jobs as a miniexcavator and skid steer," Paschke says. "It's not as efficient, but it will do the job for less money."

If your business is in the fortunate position of taking on new, larger contracts, you're likely pondering whether it will pay to step up to a compact tractor versus adding attachments to a commercial mower. This depends on the scope of the business.

"If your business is primarily cutting and maintenance, you're better to stick with a well-built commercial mower," Gifford advises. "But if you want to pursue new opportunities and growth by expanding your capabilities, you need one piece of equipment you can bill out to more avenues, like a versatile compact tractor and attachments."

As with any significant business decision, purchasing a compact and attachments should involve a thorough financial analysis.

In a shop, multipurpose equipment typically takes up less floor space than several single purpose machines, Mercer says.

"You have less maintenance, parts and upkeep for multiuse equipment," he says.

In addition, multiuse equipment is easier to upgrade. You buy it as you can afford the outlay or your business opportunities grow. Plus, it gives you the opportunity to capitalize on multiple-season use for increased revenue. For example, Gravely's Rapid M two-wheel tractor with attachments includes a 30-in. deck, a 32-in. snow blower, a 44-in. brush, a 48-in. blade and a new car pusher.

"The various attachments allow it to be used in all seasons," Mercer says. "And, trade-in value is typically higher for equipment with accessories."

## KEEP YOUR SEAT TO KEEP IT SAFE

With attachments coming on and off regularly, operator safety is always a concern to effective operation.

"The key to safety is putting yourself in the safest place possible when changing attachments," says Dan Paschke, product manager for John Deere's compact utility tractor line. "In most cases, that means in the driver's seat and not between the tractor and mower or loader."

Most manufacturers have systems that allow the operator to connect a mower, loader or backhoe from the seat. John Deere's iMatch AutoHitch combination is one such coupling system that allows landscapers to attach rear-mounted, power take-off driven implements without getting out of the seat. The patent-pending system requires no tools to attach implements after initial installation is complete. — CH

**Landscapers are well advised to purchase combination products as a package from their dealer.**



## Room to grow

As your company expands, you're likely to need a dedicated machine for the job. First, you have to find the right compact tractor and attachments to fit your capabilities and the opportunities in your market, Gifford says.

"Then weigh the additional revenue those capabilities will bring in against the cost of the equipment," he says.

Include all operating costs — to transport and maintain the equipment, to name just two — in addition to the purchase price.

If it looks as though a compact tractor is in your future, be sure you get a happy marriage of tractor and attachments.

"The compact tractor and attachments should come with a comprehensive list of specifications," Gifford says. "Review these carefully and make sure they match in terms of capabilities."

Gifford advises landscapers to purchase combination products as a package. By buying the attachments from the same dealer, you're likely to get the most affordable pricing and a simpler (and perhaps more attractive) financing package.

"Do your homework and talk with your dealer to determine what attach-

ments make the most sense for your business, then purchase them together with your compact tractor," he says. "This will make it easier to budget, because once you purchase and finance the tractor, you can't go back and add attachments to your finance package."

Dedicated machines typically require larger trucks or trailers to transport, Paschke says. Get to a certain size, and the state may require a different license for moving heavy equipment.

"It isn't just about the cost of the machine ... it's the total cost of ownership," he says.

To get a good estimate, Mercer suggests giving your equipment an hourly rate and dividing that by your total investment. Hourly rate can be figured by dividing all fixed costs (lease or loan payment plus insurance and depreciation) and variable costs (labor, maintenance, fuel) by the hours of use.

"If there's a labor savings, you can compare an old piece of equipment to the new for quicker payback," Mercer says.

## The match game

The simplest way to assure that mix-and-match attachments are properly sized to the drive unit is to buy from



## COMBO MACHINES

the same manufacturer. Many short-line companies produce equipment purpose-designed for landscaping operations that are worth the money. If short-line equipment is in your future, it's important to work with a dealer you know and trust to match the equipment to the drive unit.

"It used to be there was a clean split between compacts and utility tractors at 40 hp," Paschke says, citing how compact tractors used a Cat 1 hitch and utilities had a Cat 2 hitch as an example. "There are utility tractors

**"A MACHINE BUILT TO HANDLE A VARIETY OF ATTACHMENTS IS GOING TO DELIVER A BETTER RETURN ON INVESTMENT THAN A SINGLE-PURPOSE MACHINE."**

— ROGER GIFFORD, CUB CADET YANMAR

down in the 30- to 40-hp range and compacts up around 60 hp. That makes it vital to determine the linkage, the geometry of the hitch and the right hitch ball size for every attachment. Don't just go on tractor type."

Paschke says a landscaper using a box scraper to grade a yard easily could hit a sidewalk or paved driveway.

"If you have too small a box blade behind too big a tractor, something is going to break," he says.

While manufacturers will have spot-on recommendations for their own brand equipment, look at the dealer in each case.

"You want a dealer with a full line of machine forms and attachments," Paschke says. "As your business grows and you're ready to expand to dedicated machines, you'll be able to trade up with the same dealership, someone who knows your business and will make serving you a priority."

## DON'T OVERBUY

There's no reason to buy equipment or attachments your business can't use.

Tim Mercer, value stream director of turf products and Auburn operations for Ariens, says you should ask the following questions:

- ▶ Does your business have the ability to profit from the purchase of additional attachments?
- ▶ Does the manufacturer recommend and/or sell the attachments for the equipment?
- ▶ How long does it take to change attachments?
- ▶ What tools are needed for changeover?
- ▶ What are the warranty, parts and service associated with the equipment and attachments?

Try all the attachments to make sure they perform to your expectations using the same standards you look for in a single-purpose machine for its intended purpose, he adds.

## WHO'S IN YOUR CORNER?



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## BEST PRACTICES

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# Improve your bottom line

**A**mong the many challenges this and other industries face this year is trying to improve bottom-line results. Not only are we challenged by lower prices for our work, but retaining accounts has become a growing issue in many markets because customers are demanding reduced costs. It's not uncommon to have clients ask their vendors for cost concessions.

Some opportunities exist to reduce costs. Here are some ideas:

▶ **Revisit your benefit plans.** Survey your competitors to see what benefits they're providing. Many probably have reduced benefits and your benefit plans may be excessive in this economy. You want to achieve a balance. You still want to retain employees, but many companies have cut benefits at the field level because the employees don't value them. We've all lost people for a competitor's 25 cents more an hour, for example, so the amount of take-home pay may have more value than time off for these employees, for example.

▶ **Reduce the dumb taxes.** Dumb taxes are the costs you incur that customers shouldn't be expected to pay. You absorb the cost yourself or try to pass it on to the customer as part of your overhead. One obvious example might be in your uniform expenses.

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There's a balance to be achieved. You still want to retain employees, but **many companies have cut benefits at the field level** because the employees don't value them.

Are you providing your middle management team costly logo wear, for example? The costs easily can get out of hand.

Personal use of company vehicles is another area where dumb taxes reside. Many companies have reduced this cost exposure because when several employees live a long way from the company office, the cost of this benefit to become disproportional and unacceptable.

Here's another expense that doesn't seem that important, but it adds up. I've been in the offices of many contractors who bring food into meetings, often way more than needed. While this is a nice perk, is it a cost you want to pass on to clients?

▶ **Renegotiate with your vendors.** Your clients are asking you for cost concessions, so why not look to your vendors for help? Consider approaching your landlord and asking him or her for a decrease, perhaps in exchange for extending your lease. Why not ask uniform suppliers for concessions?

Many of you consistently pay your vendors on time while your competitors don't. Ask for larger on-time discounts. Shop your cell-phone services and look to lower those costs. If you get a lower price, your provider will match usually.

Finally, examine your office phone bills. You may find you're being charged for lines you no longer have or for things that you don't need, such as line maintenance and call forwarding, as examples.

▶ **Fine-tune your shop management.** Many owners and managers aren't well versed on shop management. The shop is inundated by salespeople offering "deals" that might look good to the shop manager because of some perk that's included. They get comfortable with the vendor, but over time, the good deal isn't so good. Turn an objective eye to evaluating the vendor relationships to ensure you're not overspending in this area.

There are many opportunities for you to save money for your business. They may not all be pleasant, but these are somewhat unprecedented economic times.

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## Tools for online marketing research

I am sorry to say doing more with less is back in fashion. It's amazing how things come and go and then come back around again — although for smart business owners, this one has been rule No. 1 for as long as I can remember.

Still, using the right technology means you don't need to go without. Let's take a look at four free online tools to polish your Web site and marketing efforts.

Increasing sales through your Web site relies on one key metric — Web traffic. Just as in traditional marketing venues, exposing more customers to the sales pitch online is directly related to more sales.

Boosting Web traffic can be broken down into two areas:

1. Inbound links to your Web site.
2. Content, such as text, pictures and video.

Growing the number of links and quality of your content are closely related.

**Customizing content** | <http://google.com/trends>  
<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>

As of now, Google is the only search engine that matters. It's the market leader. If you're not on the first page of its search results, then you're, for all practical purposes, invisible. The key is to get listed with the right search terms.

Google provides two great tools to help you understand which search terms are most popular and how they compare with one another in terms of search volume. Google Trends can help you com-

pare search topics to determine the most sought-after content, while the Google AdWords keyword tool makes it easier to narrow topics into the best search terms people are using.

Use these tools to find the topics to write about and the right words and phrases to describe your business, products and services. The right combination of words will work in your favor to ensure people find your company when they search. Better search results translate to increased traffic and inbound links from those visiting your Web site who find your new and interesting content.

**Optimizing feedback** | <http://www.google.com/alerts>  
<http://search.twitter.com>

Hopefully, your customers are talking about you. Google Alerts is a great service that harnesses the power of Google's vast Internet indexing engine to notify you when it finds Web pages with your specific search terms. Try setting up alerts for your company, competitors and links to your Web site.

The smart business owner will use this service to find and reward positive comments — and also quickly reverse negative attitudes through special discounts and quality customer service. The key is to engage in the online discussions you find in a personal and authentic manner.

Twitter is going mainstream as an online form of conversation. Use its search feature to augment your Google alerts to ensure you're seeing as many conversations about your company as you can.

I also find Twitter to be a great source for human-recommended (vetted) links to quality content in the areas my company services. I use that content to help my customers find the information they're looking for through content and links from my own Web sites.

Whether your goal is to increase Web-site sales or better understand your customers, you can't beat these free tools. The secret is to jump right in and get started. A little research can pay huge dividends in the long run.

Just as in traditional marketing venues, exposing more customers to the **sales pitch online** is directly **related to more sales.**





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#### Ancillary Service Line Processes For Success

- Maximizing Service Line Profitability
- Pay For Performance
- Become A Subject Matter Expert

#### Equipment And Fleet Management

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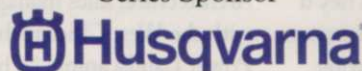
Participants will be given an over view of processes used successfully to manage important functions that contribute to overall company success and profitability. Break out sessions will foster an exchange of ideas and experience in confronting these issues.



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# THE MOUNTAIN WEST COMES HOME TO CHICAGO

Even though they couldn't spend their entire lives on vacation, one couple found a way to bring a bit of vacation back home with them.

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS MANAGING EDITOR

**I**F THE MOUNTAIN won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain, or so goes the saying. Well, one couple, with the help of Grant & Power Landscaping, has done both.

The longtime Grant & Power clients regularly retreat to a vacation home in the beautiful and verdant mountains of Colorado, but the couple wanted to bring a little bit of that back to their North Chicago neighborhood. They'd already planted scores of quaking aspens but wanted a trickling stream flowing past their remodeled A-frame home leading to a pond and sitting areas.

Enter Grant & Power.

A large, once relatively bare lot was transformed into a Colorado mountain-style property with the addition of evergreens, quaking aspens, a variety of flowers and shrubs, and the longer than 50-ft. stream that drops about 10 ft. as it meanders its way past the home.

"It's amazing; it doesn't look like the same house," says Jan-Gerrit Bouwman, senior vice president of Landscape Architecture, sales manager and partner with the West Chicago-based Grant & Power Landscaping. "This project was pure synergy. Several of our company people were involved to create

what it is, and the clients were heavily involved."

## Challenging logistics

It wasn't all smooth sailing, however. There were obstacles along the way, including buried utility lines that made placing and digging a pond challenging. And because the couple wanted a stream to run right next to their home, the company had to take extra care when installing the boulders to prevent damage. Carting the tons of heavy granite, aqua blue and Wisconsin boulders about 200 ft. from the road to build the stream, was challenging.

