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TRUCKS & TRAILERS

Dowco is phasing out some trailers in favor of box trucks.



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omy, people are taking a much closer look at what their real requirements are and trying to downsize wherever they can,” Johnson says. “The big danger, however, is if you don’t do your homework properly, and end up with less of

a truck than what you need, what you save in fuel economy you’re going to more than spend in maintenance.”

New vs. used

Whether it’s having crews spend time on nearby jobs or driver training, contractors

have always worked to limit the wear and tear put on their vehicles.

“Because our routing is fairly dense, we don’t put a lot of miles on them,” says Tom Heaviland, president of Heaviland Enterprises, Vista, CA. “I like to see our typical truck life at about seven years.”

Limiting yearly miles will lengthen a truck’s usability, but no matter how much life is added, there comes a day when the cost of repair and maintenance outweighs the return on the investment. When that day will arrive is often difficult to gauge — and it’s one reason why Heaviland has outsourced his fleet management.

Many business owners think they’re saving money by continually repairing used vehicles, but that may not always be the case, says Ned Maniscaloco, a spokesman for Enterprise Fleet Management in St. Louis. Controlling costs for any business is essential, he adds, and a fleet can be one of the company’s larger expenses.

PHOTO COURTESY: DOWCO ENTERPRISES



SPRINTER

“We’re pretty confident that we can get the best return,” Maniscaloco says.

Of course, when the maintenance is minimal, the return is clear.

“Three years ago, we took some of our older vehicles and we painted them,” Dowell says. “We spent \$1,500, and we got another three years out of them. When you look at your return on investment, that’s really huge.”

Dowell isn’t the only contractor holding off on picking up new equipment. Dowell and Heaviland say they prefer to purchase new trucks as opposed to acquiring less-expensive used vehicles. That’s also Barry Morton Sr.’s preferred way to get new equipment, but he’s not above buying used when the right deal comes along.

“We have not bought any new trucks this year,” says Morton, president and CEO of Morton’s Landscape Development, Columbia Station, OH. But while leafing through an equipment trader

FOR CONTRACTORS, WATCHING TRUCK COMMERCIALS IS LIKE BEING HUNGRY AT THE DINNER BUFFET:

EVERYTHING LOOKS GOOD, AND THEY KEEP BRINGING OUT SOMETHING BETTER.

magazine, Morton ran across an ad for a 12-ton trailer. The company was in need — and when he ran the numbers, Morton’s decision became easy.

“A new trailer with air brakes is about \$20,000,” Morton says. “For the used one I bought, a 2008, I paid \$4,500. My two mechanics spent a week on it.”

There’s nothing wrong with buying used, Morton says, but it requires time and research. Morton estimates that with the two mechanics’ labor, a week’s down time, a paint job, new tires and a new rim, he put another \$3,000 into the trailer. In other words, he saved \$12,500

by purchasing a used vehicle.

“Do your homework,” he advises. “Just make sure you’re not buying someone else’s junk.”

Heaviland agrees. “You must weigh the cost of buying something new with buying something used that you may have problems with and spend money repairing,” he says. “You can eat up a new monthly payment and have a good-looking vehicle with low repairs and warranties on it. As long as you can track and justify it, then buying used is fine.”

New types of vehicles

While the buying of new equipment has slowed, when they do decide to sign on the dotted line, contractors are carefully considering the types of vehicles their employees need.

“The days of everybody driving a big Ford F-150 are long gone for us,” Heaviland says.

Fleets are changing in other ways,

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*Based on a comparison of the Automotive News classification of full-size commercial vans.



TRUCKS & TRAILERS



Temperate weather means Heaviland's trucks, like this F-250 used by irrigation technicians, don't need air conditioning.

too. Pickup trucks, still the stalwart of maintenance crews, have seen a competitor making headway: box trucks.

Dowell is growing increasingly enamored with the box type of vehicle. He recalls seeing his first industry box truck when he attended the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) Renewal & Remembrance at Arlington National Cemetery a few years ago.

"We came back and replicated that with some modifications," Dowell says. "Every year, we've gotten more creative with these box trucks. Now, we've got it down to a science."

There are a number of advantages to box trucks, he notes. "Box trucks are the wave of the future — trucks in which you can get all of your equipment inside," Dowell says. "They're more

secure and give you a rolling billboard. It's a vehicle that you don't need a separate license for to drag a trailer that's going to require wires and lights. Half of my guys can't back up a trailer. It provides security from the elements. There are so many reasons to have a box truck."

The NTEA's Johnson agrees.

"It would not surprise me to see that trend grow, especially as equipment becomes more expensive and people are looking to extend the longevity of their equipment," he says.

Dowell admits, however, that box trucks tend to be one-use tools.

"You're definitely not going to plow snow with it," he says, chuckling. But, he points out, "It makes a good storage area when you're cleaning your warehouse in the middle of winter."

Must-haves vs. nice-to-haves

For contractors, watching truck commercials is like being hungry at the

PHOTOS COURTESY: HEAVILAND ENTERPRISES (LEFT); DOWCO ENTERPRISES

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Box trucks provide a rolling billboard and help protect equipment from the elements.

dinner buffet: Everything looks good, and they keep bringing out something better. Today, vehicles come with iPod docking stations, satellite radios and a host of other features. Most dealers have their specifications, but it's not always easy to limit the options.

"Do I spec out CD players and plugins for iPods? Definitely not," Dowell says. "Almost every truck comes with power windows. We don't spec that. They've all got tilt and cruise. They practically all come that way."

In his temperate climate, Heaviland's employees don't need air conditioning.

"We're in southern California, and it rarely gets extremely hot here," he explains. "It's just an AM/FM radio and bench seats. We get exactly what we want on it, and we buy it at a good price."

The look of a truck is just as important to contractors as its versatility is.

"Image is half of your business," Johnson says. "You don't want to go out and do a lousy job landscaping the yard. At the same time, you don't want your trucks looking like they're going to collapse in the driveway or go down the road with the fender flapping."

As vehicles become more sophisticated, maintenance challenges increase.

"They are becoming more fuel-efficient, more productive," Johnson says. "At the same time, they are drastically reducing the ability of owners to work on their own vehicles."

Purchasing solutions

Whether buying new or used, contractors are definitely keeping a closer eye on their cash flow.

When it's time to purchase a new vehicle, Dowell and Heaviland hand off that task. Heaviland uses Enterprise Fleet Management.

"We got out of the vehicle business," Heaviland says. "They're the professionals. When we go to sell a truck, we turn it back to Enterprise. They sell it, and those proceeds are applied to the purchase of another truck or to pay the loan of an existing vehicle. There's a tax advantage there. I'm not paying on the gain on the sale of an asset."




Dowell uses an agent as well. "His prices have been consistently good, better than what I had been able to negotiate," he says. "Plus, it takes me out of the negotiating process. I don't need to be going in beating up on people. He does all the work. His prices are good. I would recommend that everyone have an individual like that." LM

A pair of red-handled Corona wire cutters is shown against a red background. The tool has a built-in sprinkler adjuster on the top handle. The brand name 'CORONA' is visible on the handle. The tool is positioned diagonally, with the blades pointing upwards and to the right.

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BEHIND THE

bulbs

The strategies, trends and challenges of today's holiday lighting business.

BY CHRIS CROWELL

HERE'S THE SCENARIO: Your landscape business is in the Northeast. Winter is approaching. How do you maintain your business until spring? Snow plowing and removal is one solution, but what if it doesn't snow?

Then the light bulb turns on — or light bulb strands, actually. Hundreds of them. Holiday lighting could be the answer.

Snow might not fall every year, but roof-line lights will go up, and it could be an opportunity for landscape contractors, in any region of the country, to make an extra buck or keep a business running during a slow period.

Even in a down economy, people want to celebrate the holiday season.

"We don't anticipate losing customers this year, but they may have restricted their budgets," says Bob Craig, president of Lighting & Landscape Co., Niceville, FL. "I think customers realize the necessity for holiday lighting, especially commercial entities, but they may scale it back, they may do something different."

The customer

Every location is different, and the success of a holiday lights service depends on the built-in client base. The mix between commercial, municipal and residential clients sets the stage, often more than the economy.

The economy plays a role in holiday lighting, but John Trimble, national sales director for Brite Ideas, says the type of customer most ideally targeted by this service should always be in the market in some way.

"It's not recession-proof, but the majority of people who want their places decorated and have the income are looking for high quality products," Trimble says.

"We have seen some commercial accounts go away, and we see some others arise," says Brandon Stephens, director of marketing for Christmas Decor. "A lot of those guys look at it as marketing when they decorate. It's no secret businesses cut back on marketing in a recession, but others come on board as a competitive advantage."

The can be said for residential

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ADD-ON BIZ

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customers. Homeowners with smaller budgets might skip this year, while the larger accounts stay committed.

“We tend to deal with high, upper-middle class individuals with high levels of disposable income,” Trimble says.

Eric Lint, operations manager for Outdoor Environments in Minnesota,

recommends locking in accounts when they are spending on other services. “If you’re smart about selling it, you can take the lighting project and wrap it into the turf and have that for the whole year and it’s budgeted,” he says.

The best example is a large-scale landscape job, one that might include a pond and the installation of accent

lights in the yard. That client should be asked about adding a holiday lighting service for the winter to complement the big investment they’re already making. “The initial cost doesn’t seem as much when you’re doing a \$800,000 backyard install,” Lint says.

The sell

Holiday lights can be a tricky sell, especially because they should be sold in June or July, a time of year when people are thinking baseball and barbecue, not presents and pine trees. A key to the sell, according to Scott Heese, president of Holiday Bright Lights, Omaha, NE, is using photos to show the client the possibilities.

One strategy implemented by Holiday Bright Lights is to use software to show clients how their house will look with a great lighting design package.

“It’s really cool to think of your own home being decorated with Christmas lights,” he says. So either the landscape company or the customer photographs the house, and using the software, the contractor can spice up the photo with a variety of decorative elements.

Heese recommends supplementing this service with a direct mail campaign that offers 10% off to customers who send in a photo. They get a slight discount; the contractor gets a better sales opportunity. It’s also good to show the customer good, better and best scenarios, Heese says.

During the face-to-face part of the sale, unlike a traditional residential landscape job, it is important to have both husband and wife in on the conversation. And, if possible, throw in storage, Lint says. Customers like to save the extra room, and it’s a bonus to the contractor.

“Don’t charge for storage. We want to store it because we want them to come back and have us put their lights up the following year,” Lint says.

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ADD-ON BIZ

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He says 70% to 80% of his customers request the storage, especially for garland and wreaths.

Another good way to sell the service is to let the lights speak for themselves. Put signs in the yards of certain jobs. Show customers photos to illustrate unique qualities your service may have as an extra incentive. Outdoor Environments has a signature light-wrapping style that makes it stand out among other designs. "It's a selling point," he says. "They can't get that look from everyone else."

Craig says a big key in the contract is maintenance. Set up an agreeable system for making sure the display looks as it should from setup in October or November to take down in January or February. Lighting & Landscape has a dedicated 24-hour maintenance routine that covers all customers every day. "We drive and look at the lights

A company that can offer a unique lighting technique can really make a customer's property stand out.

every night," Craig says. "We make sure all the lights at commercial properties especially are working properly. We have a continuous coverage of customer lights and greenery and everything, if they wish us to do that — they pay us to do that. Some want a 48-hour or 72-hour response."

The challenges

Shifting from the business of yard maintenance into one of electrical work and design clearly has its challenges.



The big dilemma of putting "mowers and plowers up on a roof when its cold and icy out" was too much for Joel Grant, president of Maple Leaf Landscape. He has scaled back his lighting service. "It's too dangerous," he says.

But the challenges have to be stacked against the possibility of employees filing for unemployment for a few months or possibly moving and not returning in

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