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5 STEPS TO A GREENER FLEET



Regardless of your operation's fleet size or budget constraints, there's always something that can be done to make your vehicles more sustainable and efficient.

BY HEATHER TAYLOR

The soaring price of fuel has pushed some landscape companies to seek budget-driven practices and alternative fuels. For other business owners, the motivation to become more efficient comes from the need to project an environmentally friendly image in the community. Some contractors just want to adopt more earth-minded business practices.

The reasons might be different, but every business can use the same solutions to achieve its goals, and they all involve transforming the vehicle fleet to become more sustainable. Here are five steps fleet managers can take to create a greener, more efficient and less expensive fleet.

1 Fuel a transformation. Switching the fleet to vehicles that are fueled by something other than gasoline might seem like one of the most obvious ways to go green. There's good reason: Electric and hybrid vehicles produce as much as 100 percent fewer carbon dioxide emissions than comparable gasoline-powered vehicles, according to Amy Blaine, director of strategic consulting and sustainability at Donlen, a fleet management corporation. Propane and natural gas-powered vehicles emit 10 percent to 25 percent less carbon dioxide than gas-fueled vehicles. While diesel fuel might produce more emissions, it gets better mileage than gasoline, so it's more efficient that way.

The cost of the alternative fuels depends on availability and other factors, but often they're cheaper than gasoline, Blaine adds. Local Clean Cities Coalition offices, run by the U.S. Department of Energy, can offer more information and local contacts to help companies locate nearby alternative fuel sources. Visit cleancities.energy.gov for details.

Perceptions about oddly designed hybrids or electric cars are no longer valid, Blaine says, explaining that most alternative-fueled vehicles today look extremely similar—if not identical—to their gasoline-fueled counterparts.

"If you haven't considered alternative fuel vehicles in a while, it might be time to investigate the options again," she says.

If a jump to a more fuel-efficient fleet is too expensive because of initial acquisition costs, start by replacing one or two vehicles. Gradual integration also can provide a chance to track just how much of a difference the switch to alternative fuels makes.

Still not sold on alternative fuels? Many automotive manufacturers have improved the mileage of their gasoline-powered models significantly in the past couple of years. Just switching to a newer model gas-powered vehicle could lead to big fuel and budget savings.

2 Don't underestimate upkeep. Small steps can go a long way toward enhancing performance and reducing emissions. The simple practice of maintaining the proper air pressure in a vehicle's tires can increase gas mileage by more than 3 percent, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Likewise, seemingly insignificant repairs shouldn't be overlooked. Fixing a faulty oxygen sensor, for example, can improve vehicle mileage by as much as 40 percent, Blaine says.

Sometimes it makes more sense to replace a vehicle rather than fix it, and doing so can be more environmentally friendly than people think, Blaine says. She explains that when an older model is traded in for a newer, more efficient one, the next owner of the old vehicle usually is a driver who is upgrading from an even older, less efficient vehicle. So everyone involved is then driving a more efficient vehicle than he or she was before. Plus, Blaine adds, even at the end of its life, much of a vehicle's parts can be recycled.

Also, when updating fleets, managers should consider switching to a smaller vehicle if possible—for example, employees without production duties may switch from a truck to an SUV or from an SUV to a sedan, Blaine suggests.

Fleet managers can determine the optimal time to replace vehicles by figuring out when total costs would be minimized and by looking at the maintenance profile of each vehicle. When the vehicle is replaced, choose a cost-effective replacement that meets the organization's other goals and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

3 Change up your oil. Along with regular oil changes for each vehicle, the type of oil that's used can make a difference when it comes to vehicle efficiency and environmental impact. Newer processes in oil refinement have made it possible for recycled motor oil to hit the market.

Recycled oil is used motor oil that has been re-refined using the same process that is used to refine crude oil. The recycled oil has been shown to perform in engines just as well as first-run oil, with very little price difference, according to Thom Smith, vice president of branded lubricant technology at Valvoline.

He says reused oil reduces environmental impact because it requires less energy, reduces crude oil demand and produces fewer pollutants. For a fleet of 1,000 vehicles that undergoes four oil changes per year, switching to reused oil reduces crude oil demand by 12,000 gallons, cuts down on greenhouse gases by 13,000 pounds and reduces other pollutants by 143 pounds.

Whether it's reused or not, the quality of oil still counts, Smith says.

"If you have poor-quality used oil, you don't get same level of performance as you would with high-quality used oil," he says.

4 Track effectiveness with telematics. Knowing a fleet's (and drivers') specific fuel-wasting tendencies is the key to improving the fleet's environmental footprint. Telematics are increasingly used to track a number of fuel use metrics. Telematics is a type of technology that generally involves placing a device in each vehicle in the fleet. The device sends data to a software program that can usually be viewed via the Internet.

Telematics can record and report data including vehicle location, miles traveled and time spent speeding and idling, according to Chris Ransom, director of product management at Networkfleet, a telematics manufacturer.

To properly track and improve fuel-wasting behavior, Ransom recommends beginning by completing what's known as baselining: announce an official start date for the tracking devices to all employees, but place the devices in all the vehicles about a month before the start date and turn them on. That will give managers a good picture of normal vehicle use because the drivers don't yet know they're being tracked. It also will give management a good idea of areas to improve.

Ransom's clients, which include companies and municipi-

palities, have seen significant efficiency-boosting results using telematics. One organization reduced its instances of speeding from 2,000 per week to 100 per week, while another cut down on the average number of miles driven. Drivers were less likely to make unnecessary stops when the telematics system was being used. All of these improvements led to a decrease in fuel use.

Another one of his clients reduced the fleet's idling events drastically from more than 15 times per week to five times per week. This change alone can have a sizable impact on a vehicle's gas mileage, Ransom says.

"Even a little can make a difference," he says.

Assuming gas costs \$3.50 per gallon, and telematics improves efficiency by 10 percent, the resulting fuel savings is \$380 per vehicle per year, Blaine says.

To successfully integrate a telematics program, managers should be clear about the objectives for becoming

more efficient and how employees are expected to contribute to the goals, Ransom says. After all, tracking devices are only as effective as those using them.

"It it's not being utilized, it's worthless," he says.

5 Sustain employee buy-in. Being upfront and open about the company's fleet goals is the best tactic to encourage employee adoption, Ransom says.

He recommends regularly sharing the fleet improvement program's results to make employees feel a part of the effort. For example, share when instances of idling are decreasing, along with the amount of fuel it saves each month. The employees will realize the contributions they're making, he adds.

"Whatever the pitch is, you're going to find buy-in across the business," he says.

In addition, incentivize the top performers to boost participation.

"At least when it comes to telematics, the carrot is much more effective than the stick," Ransom says, adding, "We've got customers that give out gift cards for the employee with lowest idling numbers each month or the fewest speeding instances. Once you create that kind of competition and pride, then you're in good shape. You've gotten the most out of your system."

Taylor is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

Knowing a fleet's specific fuel-wasting tendencies is the key to improving its environmental footprint.

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When offering options, less is more

Q We spend too much time on concepts and revisions before we go to contract and get a deposit. How can we reduce our design time so that we can make a small profit on our drawings and shorten our sales cycle without compromising the quality of our work?

—Lenny Hartwell, New Traditions Landscaping, Fredericksburg, Va.

A First, check out my June column (goo.gl/E9uW7), where I discuss how to save time by creating an unbiddable master plan.

Believe it or not, one of the best things that you can do for yourself and your clients is to limit the amount of choices they have when it comes to their landscape designs. I know this sounds counterintuitive, but hear me out.

In landscape architecture school I was taught to provide clients with three concept plans so I could involve them in the design process, exploring different ideas and options. This process still makes sense on larger scale projects, but in the fast-paced world of landscape design/build you need to take charge of the design process quickly, keep your clients focused and reduce the amount of choices they have, not increase them.

Before you start throwing your T-squares or laptops at me, let me explain. As much as we all would like to give our clients hundreds of ideas to help them make decisions, the reality is that the more options you give someone, the harder it is for him or her to make a choice. Giving multiple options is especially unproductive in landscape design/build because our process needs momentum to succeed. Anything that slows it down, or causes the client to think too much, opens the door not just to competition, but to frustration and lack of confidence that can easily turn a motivated client into a canceled project.

When I first started in the business I always gave my clients three concepts to choose from. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and theoretic-

ally, it made sense. The problem was that clients wouldn't just pick A, B or C; invariably they would pick ideas from each plan requiring me to go back to the drawing board and come up with plan D. This would be OK if it stopped here. Unfortunately it didn't. A few weeks later I would return with plan D. After this presentation the client began to realize what I already knew—it was a bad design. Since I opened the door to “client input,” the homeowner now struggled choosing from four concepts. So after reviewing plans A, B, C and D, I would return a few weeks later with concept plans E, F, G and H. (I actually had a client that made me do so many revisions that we made it through the entire alphabet!) Oddly enough, after weeks and months of going through these revisions, what typically happens is that the clients return to your original design because they realize it's truly the best layout. Unfortunately, you have wasted so much time, the project can't start for several months, and both you and your clients have lost their initial excitement and enthusiasm.

Here's what you need to do. Take a cue from the movie “Nothing in Common” starring Tom Hanks and Jackie Gleason. Hanks' character worked for a high-powered advertising agency. In one scene he was making a pitch to potentially his biggest client, the president of a major airline. After a wonderful presentation the client looked at him, paused and said, “Do you have any other ideas?” Without missing a beat he responded, “Yes we do, but this is our best one and we're going with it.”

Sheer brilliance!

So, Lenny, that's exactly what I want you to do on your next project. Although you may have developed several different concepts, only present your favorite one.

Instead of leaving the meeting frustrated with a month's full of revisions to do, you'll leave with a signed contract and your client's confidence.

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.



BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@wilson-oyler.com.

Get a price bump

Commercial maintenance retention rates have declined for most companies over the past few years with many customers testing the waters in hopes of getting a lower price.

Contractors also have been more aggressive in going after each others' contracts, creating an environment that's been unsettling for most companies.

This situation has left many contractors conflicted about bringing up contract renewals, fearing it might trigger the client to put the work out to bid. Some contractors have been able to hold their own; a few companies are reporting that they are able to get some small price increases.

Price increases are always necessary to recapture increased costs of doing business. Contractors have been hesitant to ask for increases, hoping to find ways to cut costs instead. After years of cost cutting, there is no more. It's more important than ever to have good job costing with accurate costs to know what margin each job earns.

Should you increase high-margin jobs? Yes. But you should be willing to back off if you face resistance. Low-margin jobs should be increased as much as the client is willing to pay. Take into consideration the whole picture. Do you get much enhancement work? If so, it may be worth keeping a lower margin contract.

Each fall and early winter property managers prepare budgets for their properties. Get involved in your clients' budget processes. It's an ideal time to see what they're thinking for the upcoming budget year. Property managers realize contractors have not had increases—neither have they. This just might be the year when they become less resistant to price increases. After all, property managers need good service providers.

Call or visit your customer to discuss proposed price increases before putting them into writing. This is critical. If you just send a letter advising of the increase, as some companies do, your customer could put the job out to bid without even telling you.

The key to long-term success lies in demonstrating partnership value to the customer and building on a foundation of trust. These are six tried and true best practices that will build affinity and trust and pay off on the bottom line:

- 1 Stay close to your customer and do good work.** As the owner of the business you have the most leverage in securing the renewal and getting the increase. If you delegate, remember that employees may not have the same vested interest as you in getting the increase and may back down to get the renewal.
- 2 Understand and be sensitive to your customers' businesses.** If their businesses are hurting, you may have to forgo the increases. You can reduce services to retain the same margin, or sometimes it's best to delay the increase until better times. At least if you defer the increase, it's on the table for next year.
- 3 Make sure you're in a strong position at renewal time.** Be diligent in checking the client's property in the months prior to renewal. You can't afford to have a customer service glitch at renewal time.
- 4 Do some reconnaissance.** Try to determine if your client's other service providers have been able to renew and get increases and how much. If you see changes in other service providers, that should be a warning that it may not be business as usual.
- 5 Get involved in the customers' budget processes.** If you're close to your customers you should be able to find out when they budget for the coming year. Give them a budget number for your increase, as well as a budget for enhancements. They usually have budget guidelines and can tell you if they'll be asked to cut costs in tough times. You need to know this.
- 6 Build your case around specific data.** When asking for an increase, do not just ask for an inflationary increase. Be specific in citing which of your costs have increased. This year, most companies have had increases in liability, health and workers' compensation insurance. The customers see these increases, too, and will be able to identify with them.

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Arborjet

Arborjet has partnered with Richter 10.2 Video to create a custom, two-minute promotional video about tree trunk injection treatment. Once the video is customized with the business logo, contact information and tree pests treated, the video

does all the work. The custom video provides a great visual explanation that can be used to educate existing and prospective customers about the benefits of saving trees with Arborjet's trunk injection technology. Arborjet is making the video available to service providers for \$150 upfront. Once the provider shares the video via social media, on the web or by email, Arborjet is offsetting the costs by sending the service provider 300 Arborplugs (a \$150 value) for free. Arborjet.com/customvideo

Growth Products Ltd.

New BioNutrients 8-0-9 is a 100 percent organic bio-stimulant and soil conditioner. The dry concentrate is packaged in 8-oz. packs. Fully soluble in water, it is a "no-mess, no-measure" way to build turf and soil health. BioNutrients can be used in a wide variety of turf applications to revitalize soils and neutralize soil salts, to promote faster rooting and deeper turf roots, and to improve turf color and make turf better able to withstand environmental and disease stresses. These improvements derive from the dry soluble's high concentration of natural L-amino acids, humic acids, kelp extracts and other carbon-rich molecules that sustain the powerful microbial growth unleashed by BioNutrients' proprietary mix of wild yeast and four species of beneficial rhizosphere Bacillus: *B. subtilis*, *B. licheniformis*, *B. amylolique* and *B. pumilis*. GrowthProducts.com

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Agrium

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Rockwell Labs

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RockwellLabs.com

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