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It's more than a purchase, it's a **PARTNERSHIP**

As much as the features and price of a utility vehicle should weigh in on your purchasing decision, the dealer is just as important. Commercial accounts require a dealer that is equipped to deliver commercial-quality service and support throughout the life of the vehicle, not just at the time of sale.

With 13 locations throughout Pennsylvania, Best Line Equipment has been providing equipment rental, sales and service to commercial accounts since 1985. The company's mantra is simple, "Treating customers as business partners fosters a strong relationship."

Best Line Equipment's COO Michael Getz suggests you ask yourself three simple questions before signing on the dotted line.

Will they come to me?

Whether you work for a landscape company or a facility that uses utility vehicles for grounds maintenance, chances are you do not have time to spend visiting multiple dealerships.

"Dealers that are set up to sell and service to commercial accounts understand the demands and time constraints of a jobsite," Getz says. "It is our responsibility to demonstrate how a piece of equipment can benefit their operation, which is a lot harder to do at the dealership."

You would not buy a car before taking it for a test drive, and the same idea should apply to a work utility vehicle. There is no better place to test ride a utility vehicle than at the location it will be used most and by the people who will operate it. Jobsite demoing helps to ensure the vehicle is capable of handling workers' day-to-day tasks.



Do they understand this is how I do my job, not how I have fun?

Utility vehicles are great for recreation, but on the jobsite they are a partner that can significantly impact an operation's bottom line.

"While a recreation user may be slightly inconvenienced by being without their utility vehicle for a couple of days, a work user's livelihood will be impacted if the vehicle is out of commission," Getz says.

Best Line Equipment's manufacturer-certified technicians provide on-site service assistance, so should there be any issues, the user can get back to work as soon as possible. The company also offers planned service agreements, tune-up packages and scheduled safety inspections to help customers get the most from their equipment.

How can their vehicle provide me with the biggest ROI?

Getting the most for one's budget is a must for any company. Those dealers who have a commitment to the commercial customer will carry products that can help execute

several applications and provide the opportunity for improved productivity.

At its authorized Polaris® dealer locations, Best Line Equipment offers customers a utility vehicle that can haul up to 1,250 pounds of cargo in the pallet-sized rear cargo box, tow up to one ton, and also complete six diverse tasks through a front-end power take-off (PTO) system.

The Polaris® BRUTUS® HDPTO supports three PTO-powered front attachments—an angle broom, a snow blower and a finishing mower—that are driven directly from its 24-horsepower diesel engine. Additionally, users can operate three hydraulically-powered front attachments—a snow blade, adjustable width pallet forks and a materials bucket—for ultimate productivity.

"With the BRUTUS HDPTO, we can help customers create significant efficiencies in their equipment fleet," Getz says. "Instead of buying a utility vehicle to haul cargo, a snow blower for the winter and a mower for the summer, customers can use one vehicle with multiple attachments to execute several tasks."

The answers to these three simple questions should help indicate whether or not you have found a partner you can rely on long after the ink dries on the dotted line.

Polaris® has more than 375 commercial dealers across North America ready to help you succeed on the jobsite. To request a demo from an authorized Polaris® BRUTUS® dealer near you, visit Polaris.com/BRUTUS.

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When to add

Knowing who to hire and when can be a challenge for landscape business owners. Can you justify a bookkeeper? How about another technician or crew? Or should you bring on a full-time salesperson? And which comes first?

We turned to three consultants and one industry executive for tips and answers.

Q Why is it so hard for lawn care and landscape firms to know when to add an employee in any capacity?

Tim Smith, LandOpt (TS): In the Green Industry, we're growing at 8 percent to 10 percent per year, where others in the service industry grow at 1 percent to 2 percent per year. Since we're growing at this rate, we get away with very informal business practices. If others would get as informal as we are, they would be out of business.

Jason Cupp, consultant (JC): Honestly, a lot of companies don't operate from a budget. That's one of most shocking things I see as I look under hoods of companies of all sizes. So, they don't know if they can afford to add someone because they don't know the ROI.

J. Paul Lamarche, JPL Consulting (JPL): Actually, what's difficult is the relationship between adding another cost and being unsure of increasing sales. In today's economy, having a

lean overhead is paramount to being competitive. Adding another employee can always be done if one realizes that the increase in sales or productivity will warrant the expense. **BY MARISA PALMIERI**

A classic example is a mid-size firm looking to hire a supervisor for the crews. A very common rule of thumb is the ratio of one supervisor for every five crews.

Q What are the most difficult hires to know when to make?

Ken Thomas, Envisor Consulting (KT): When companies start out there are a couple of key hires made first: admin and operations. This nucleus of a three-person team (owner, admin person and operations person) typically can handle around \$1.5 million in a maintenance business to \$2.5 million in a design/build business. After the start-up stages it becomes harder to determine how to build the team.

One of the most important things an owner needs to do is determine what his or her strengths are. Too many times owners try to replicate themselves, but they should be leveraging their strengths and hiring their weaknesses.

TS: Often you have an owner who's starting out at \$200,000 or so, and they're doing everything—sales, drawings, payroll. One of the first team members they hire is a bookkeeper/office assistant. Finally, they hand over the keys to the kingdom from a business perspective. But often this hire has not been formally recruited; their skills have not been verified. It's not uncommon to hear of office managers who end up stealing. An exhausted owner puts all the responsibility into their lap and the office manager, who has no ownership, risk, passion or vision, takes control of the business.

Take your time in identifying the first office manager you put in place, making sure there are checks and balances and the owner maintains business responsibility.

Also, I don't think it's necessary to put bookkeeping into that role. Outsource it and here's why: A professional bookkeeping service keeps a discipline and separation of church and state. You don't have to be concerned if your books are being done properly and they'll hold you accountable for check requests, etc.

Q Do you have any good rules of thumb to share?

TS: Your sales costs for an organization should be roughly 10 percent of your revenue, including salary and marketing. If we're at \$700,000 in revenue, I want to see \$70,000 going toward proactive sales. Even at a \$200,000 company, someone should be fulfilling the role of a proactive salesperson.

For design, the first full-time employee dedicated to the role of designer should be when an organization hits \$3 million or above. Prior to that, align your services with a subcontracted designer. In our world design is a service we provide. The sales professional is the one taking the prospect through the process. When the time is right, they introduce the designer.

JC: On the construction side, if the schedule got to five to six weeks out (when I ran a design/build business), we'd

add a crew. We always wanted to be two to four weeks out. I have (consulting) clients with a six-to-eight-week backlog and I'm encouraging them to look at whether they can afford to add a crew. In today's day and age, if you can't deliver on a job within four to six weeks, clients might go elsewhere.

JPL: A benchmark for a good office administrator is 3 percent of net sales. I've been in companies where two people worked full time to cover \$500,000 in sales and other offices where one person could manage a company twice the size. It's all about competence, direction of management and systems.

KT: In commercial maintenance, the need for crew foremen is pretty predictable based on volume. Based on your market and your market segment,

each crew will be able to produce a historical average volume of work each year. An average volume level per crew may be \$180,000 to \$220,000, depending on job size and crew size. So for every \$200,000 of new work sold you'll need a new foreman.

One of the key positions in maintenance is the account manager position. This hire can be directly tied to a volume range or number of clients. These metrics vary in different parts of the country.

A general rule in first-tier landscape markets on the East Coast is that an account manager can handle between \$800,000 and \$1.2 million, depending on the average job size and market density. Based on our sales pipeline and growth goals, we should be prospecting for our next account manager when we are close to these ranges. **LMM**

» WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section of **Landscape Management.net** for role and salary benchmarks from LandOpt for a \$1 million company.

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4/16	Denice Shuty , Consultant, <i>ArchiBusiness Marketing</i>	Facebook and Twitter are a Waste of Time	QUALI-PRO
4/23	John Massaro , Vendor, <i>Customized Business Software</i>	Why Doesn't Anybody Listen?	QUALI-PRO
4/30	Laura DePrado , Contractor, <i>Final Touch Plantscaping LLC</i>	Horticultural Therapy Defined	QUALI-PRO
5/7	Jan Johnsen , Contractor, <i>Johnsen Landscaping & Pools</i>	Serenity in the Garden	
5/14	Mike Caprio , Vendor/ Contractor, <i>Lawn Doctor</i>	Create a Preventive Maintenance Program	

ABOUT THE HOST

Jody Shilan, MLA is an award-winning landscape designer and former landscape design/build contractor, who has sold tens of millions of dollars of design and installation work throughout his career. He now uses his 35+ years of experience to coach other landscape contractors how to easily and dramatically increase their sales by following his unique landscape design/build sales process. He does this through public speaking, private consulting, group workshops and his "exclusive" members-only website www.FromDesign2Build.com.



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Aerial photos snapped by a drone help one Michigan landscape firm communicate its best work.

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Up in the air

A Michigan landscape company uses drones to capture aerial images of large-scale projects.

By EMILY SCHAPPACHER

It was a conundrum that long plagued Tom VerHage, owner of Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Katerberg VerHage Landscaping: How can we get complete, quality photographs of our large-scale projects? The helicopters the company used in the past were cost prohibitive, so VerHage was on the lookout for a cheaper, convenient way to photograph his company's largest projects like university campuses, parks, stadiums and some residences. About three years ago, VerHage finally found an efficient and affordable way to get the shots he wanted with a new-age device called an unmanned aerial system (UAS)—aka a drone.

"We always felt we couldn't do our larger projects justice with just on-the-ground shots," VerHage says. "We used a helicopter in the past and it was very expensive. It didn't make sense. The drones are a great way to do it. It works wonderfully."

Katerberg VerHage works with a company called Hovercams, also based in Grand Rapids, to take low-altitude aerial images of the \$8.4-million company's largest projects using a remote-controlled UAS. With this device, Hovercams is able to provide photos of projects from up to 200 feet in the air. The technology also allows the drone to zoom in on specific details from above, such as a water feature, pool or patio.



Most recently, Katerberg VerHage built rock walls on three sides of the artificial turf football field at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Allendale, Mich., as well as the stadium on the school's practice fields. The drone captured the finished project with high-resolution images of the entire field.

"The photos give us a great view from 100 to 200 feet in the air or right down into specific target areas," VerHage says. "The higher you go, you get a view of the whole project."

VerHage says his company uses the aerial shots mostly as a marketing tool for its 90-percent commercial clientele. But because the company does not pass along a fee to clients for the photos, he says it's selective over which projects are worthy of the Hovercams treatment. Costs range from \$150 to \$200 for 10 to 15 photos per session, VerHage says.

Katerberg VerHage used drone photography to capture its project at GVSU.

Hovercams' remote-controlled drone can photograph projects from up to 200 feet in the air.



PHOTOS: KATERBERG VERHAGE

“The money goes a long way in getting these pictures taken,” he says. “It gives you a good bang for your dollar.”
 VerHage adds clients seem to enjoy the imagery, too, and many of them end up framing and displaying the photos throughout their buildings.

“Customers are very impressed with the service,” VerHage says. “It works really well for them and they like to keep the photos as part of their history.”

Another benefit to the drone photography service, VerHage says, is capturing the images is simple. A Katerberg VerHage project manager meets a representative from the photography firm at the project site. After explaining the types of shots and details they are looking for, the rep—who VerHage says has an “architect’s eye”—operates the drone while taking the photos. The whole process takes less than an hour. Sometimes a project requires two sessions if Katerberg VerHage wants before-and-after shots.

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.

The Ticker: DESIGN/BUILD

EP Henry resumes its HeroScaping program in 2014 and broke ground on a new project in Doylestown, Pa.: The Bucks County Global War on Terror Memorial. Since formalizing in 2012, the HeroScaping program has donated more than \$325,000 toward military-related projects and organizations.

Proven Winners added the Kentucky’s Governor’s Mansion as a Signature Garden location, making it the sixth locale to join the list. Garden designer **John Carloftis** is heading the grounds renovation.



With April being **National Landscape Architecture Month (NLAM)**, the **American Society of Landscape Architects** encourages professionals to take to the theme “Career Discovery” by increasing awareness and exposure to the landscape architecture profession. Visit buff.ly/1k0nT2S for a listing of celebratory events in accordance with NLAM.

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Hands-on approach

A Texas irrigation company makes water conservation its top priority. *By EMILY SCHAPPACHER*

The drought that hit Texas in 2006 was a wake-up call for Patty Sipe, co-owner of Heads Up Sprinkler Co. in Plano.

It was time to look at some aspects of her irrigation business differently. That drought and the ones that have ensued almost every year since have been catalysts for the company to rethink everything through the lens of conservationists and teachers versus a mere service provider, says Sipe.

“It was at that point we started to recognize water waste a lot more preva-

lently,” Sipe says. “We have always been water conscious, but the 2006 drought and the ones that have followed really helped raise the public awareness with respect to water.”

The \$500,000 company, co-owned by Caryn Walz who founded it 18 years ago, primarily services residential clients, offering irrigation system repair and long-term care services. It also provides irrigation system auditing services for commercial properties—a service it introduced in response to tightened water-use restrictions. Sipe expects this service to

expand in the coming years. That growth isn’t necessarily the goal for Heads Up Sprinkler, though, Sipe says. The goal is to save as much water as possible while educating clients about why it’s so critical.

“There are 7,000 licensed irrigation techs in North Texas—many of them are just trying to make a dollar and don’t care about water conservation,” she says. “For us, it’s not about making money, it’s about saving water.”

And save water it has. In 2012, Heads Up Sprinkler won the City of Plano’s Environmental Star of Excellence award for saving an estimated 1.2 million gallons of water that year by repairing broken or inefficient irrigation systems and teaching homeowners how to properly manage them. The company continues to save hundreds of thousands of gallons of water each year by providing leak repairs, hydrozoning



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