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BY **ELIZABETH LEXAU**

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Photo courtesy: Grasshopper and Toro

Do you remember when you purchased your first piece of power equipment? Maybe you were still a teenager, and you bought a walk-behind mower that you stored in your dad's garage. Maybe it was the first riding mower you bought when you decided to go into business for yourself, after putting in a few years working for another company. Whatever it was, the decision was probably not a difficult one. You knew what you needed and you knew exactly how much money you had to spend.

As business grows, however, decisions about equipment become much more complex. Not having the right equipment can mean losing jobs to the competition. Spending too much on the wrong equipment can put you into a financial hole that's nearly impossible to get out of.

We all know that power equipment can help a business succeed, but how do you define a well-stocked business? Is it a company that owns at least one of everything so they're prepared for every job? Does the one with the most toys win? Or is it the one that never stretches its finances by purchasing equipment that seems too expensive?

As is often the case, the answer is somewhere in the middle. When it comes to power equipment, more is not always better. On the other hand, the fear of spending too much money on equipment can be just as bad. The key to making smart equipment decisions is in understanding productivity.

“Many contractors have a shop that contains a hodge-podge of equipment –some of it seldom used,” says Ken Kirby, preferred customer representative for Grasshopper Mower, based in Moundridge, Kansas. “There’s a tendency in this industry to look at what someone else is doing and say, ‘What equipment do they have? I gotta have it too.’ But good decisions need to be based on the needs of your own company, and on what you need to get out of your machine.”

Manufacturers are trying to educate clients on this important issue. They are also continually producing new machines designed to do more with less labor, less equipment, and fewer headaches.

Smart Contractors – Smart Equipment

Smart equipment decisions can make or break a company. Ironically, one of the trickiest times to invest in new power equipment is when business is booming and all signs seem to be pointing to success. At times like these, contractors can make some serious mistakes. Some might rush out to buy a variety of new equipment to make sure they’re prepared for the demand. Others are so busy managing the logistics of day-to-day operations that they don’t take the time to see how new equipment can help. Still others purchase equipment based only on cost without evaluating how their investment will really impact their company.

Contractors often rule out equipment if they feel it requires too much of an initial investment. But in doing so, many miss out on a golden opportunity to dramatically increase their productivity, which can more than make up for their investment.

“When evaluating costs, you also have to examine the productivity,” says Kirby. “Aerators are a good case in point. A typical aerator may cost \$3,200- \$6,000 and may get a half acre per hour of productivity with a man walking behind. We have an aerator attachment for our front-mount mower that sells for \$4,000, however, it can do two acres per hour. If a company needs to accomplish two acres per hour, they could do this with four walk-behinds and four people or they could use one of our machines with an attachment and only one person,” explains Kirby.

“With a wide array of attachments for our front-mount ZTR mowers, we’re making a major push to educate customers on productivity issues,” says Kirby. “A lot of equipment decisions are made by trial and error. We’re trying to help people remove some of the error.”

In consultation with successful contractors, like Jody O’Donnell of LMI Landscapes, Dallas, Texas, Grasshopper has been reaching out to customers to help them analyze their current operation and the productivity they’re getting out of their equipment. “We’re working hard to educate our customers on the total cost of equipment over a lifetime and total production they get from that equipment,” says Kirby. “We’re trying to help them streamline their business, to make them more competitive, more productive, and more profitable.”

“When we talk with contractors, we draw up scenarios that are realistic for them,” says Kirby. “We look at what they currently own, what they need to accomplish, how many dealers they work with, how many payments they have, how many engines they need to service, how much labor they need, and how many acres per hour they can get with their equipment.”

Looking at the actual equipment hours and labor it takes to accomplish their goal is an eye-opening experience for some contractors. “When we show them what the same scenario would be like with our equipment, they quickly see that what they’re currently doing with several machines and several people will now only take one of our machines, with one person operating it,” says Kirby.

Speed, Versatility, and Ease

There are several factors that play into increased productivity, and contractors should consider each one in relation to the needs of their company. One factor is simply how fast a well-designed machine can do the job. This was the motivation that led landscape contractor Steve Hrkal to develop the new EZ-Set. The EZ-Set is a multi-use placing tool which installs large pieces of stone, modular block, boulders, pipe, timbers, and the other heavy landscaping objects that typically slow down a job and eat up manpower.

“I’ve been a landscape contractor for eighteen years,” says Hrkal, whose company is based in Wayzata, Minnesota. “I once had a project where we installed 100 granite steps that were each 48” long by 18” deep and 7” tall. Each one was 550-600 pounds. It was taking our crews approximately an hour to install each one correctly, from the delivery site to final placement. I went to my supplier and asked if there was a tool that could help. There wasn’t. So I invented the EZ-Set.”



Photo courtesy: Brown Mfg

When Hrkal’s crew used his new invention, they were able to accurately place each step in about seven minutes. It worked so well for them that Hrkal decided to market it to others. It has since taken off. One Denver-based customer purchased a single unit, used it for two hours, and then called the company to order more to be rush-delivered to his site.

Grady Williford, sales manager for Brown Manufacturing based in Ozark, Alabama, tells a similar story for the genesis of the trencher they manufacture. “It started off as a mini-trencher,” says Williford. The company saw a need for power equipment that could eliminate the time-consuming, backbreaking work of digging beds. “We came up with bed maker blades for putting in mulch beds,” says Williford. “With this piece of equipment, we can do in fifteen to twenty minutes what it takes six to eight man hours to accomplish with shovels. We call it the Bededger, but it’s the same machine you can use to put in your sprinkler system.”

This kind of versatility is another one of the factors that contribute to a significant increase in productivity. Manufacturers recognize the fact that power equipment must serve a number of roles to earn its place in the contractor’s shop. They are responding with equipment that can do a number of different jobs with one power unit and one person. Multi-function trenchers, mowers, and compact utility loaders are just a few examples.

Compact utility loaders, mini-loaders, and compact tractors are multi-tools that many landscape contractors wouldn’t leave home without. With multiple attachments designed for quick changes, these machines can morph from trencher to backhoe to snowplow to stump-grinder and just about everything else the landscape contractor needs.

One of the hallmarks of this type of equipment is its small size and maneuverability.

“The Dingo Compact Utility Loader allows a contractor to get into small spaces with limited turf damage,” says Neil Borenstein, senior marketing manager for Toro, based in Bloomington, Minnesota. “It reduces labor costs significantly. It also reduces costs for things that go along with labor, such as worker’s compensation costs and training costs. It simply helps the operation become more efficient.”

Another advantage of multi-use power equipment is that it helps reduce seasonal down-time for the contractor. When you can use one machine for mowing, turf renovation, and snow removal, it quickly becomes a year-round revenue generator.

Even relatively specialized equipment emphasizes versatility for today's contractor. Trenchers, for example, are not just for digging and defining beds. A variety of interchangeable rotors allow them to be used to lay wire, grind stumps, prune roots, and even prepare beds for concrete curbing.

As an experienced contractor himself, Hrkal understood the need for multi-purpose equipment when he designed the EZ-Set. "I knew if I could make it multi-use, if contractors could use it in the field every day, it would be a lot more appealing," says Hrkal. He designed the EZ-Set with quick-detach lifting plates that can go from lifting blocks to boulders to pipe and timbers and even bands of pavers. Hrkal's company is continually designing new components for other lifting applications based on customer demand.

Overall productivity is about more than speed and versatility in the field. It also has to do with creating ease and simplicity off the field as well. For example, when you use one machine to do many jobs, you are also cutting down on the number of dealers you need to contact, the number of engines you need to service, and the number of payments you need to make. These all increase productive time too.

When choosing equipment, contractors should consider how easy a new machine will be to service and repair, to find replacement parts for, and to rent attachments for. "Remember, you may only need to buy two or three attachments to start with," says Borenstein. "You can always rent more if you run into a project where you need another attachment. Make sure that the attachments for the equipment you're considering are widely available for rental. The best thing to do is talk with a rental company before you buy to find out what they have available."

He also emphasizes the importance of the dealer-contractor relationship when it comes to increasing productivity and making wise equipment decisions. "It's important to work with someone who isn't just interested in selling equipment, but who's interested in improving your whole operation. You really want to form a kind of partnership."

Take the time to look carefully at your company. Are you spinning your wheels by wasting money on labor that could be better spent on something else? Could you expand your clientele by stretching your labor hours further? A smart investment in new power equipment could take your company from a stagnant under-performer to a streamlined operation that's moving full steam ahead.



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