

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAW

PROFESSIONALS



Working smarter in Ohio:
*Tom Emmett increased profitability
by increasing productivity*

WALKER TALK

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Independent thinking

After trying it both ways, my father, Max Walker, likes to say, "I'd rather have my own hamburger stand than be part of McDonald's." It's not that there aren't advantages to being associated with a big, stable organization. There are. But there also are distinct advantages to independent businesses.

First of all there is the vision of an entrepreneur that is genius to success — vision often missing or stifled in large organizations. Several years ago a large equipment manufacturer approached us about making a version of the Walker mower with their name on it (private labeling). They informed me that the new machine would have to have a *steering wheel* because their market research shows "*steering levers*" would never be widely accepted. We marveled at their research and blindness to the fact that we were selling lots of steering lever machines, and customers were delighted with the steering lever type controls. A clear difference in vision and an opportunity for us.

There is the old temptation to make your company grow and get quicker results by joining forces or merging with a larger organization. Unfortunately, these collective efforts are inevitably accompanied by giving up control. When you lose control of your company you have lost everything. My father sold out in 1969 and we know the feeling of losing control, losing the product, losing the company and ultimately losing everything except your faith in God and your family.

Walker is determined to stay independent. There have been offers to sell out, merge, private label, etc., but our experience says stay independent. Grow slow, grow strong and stay independent and keep the vision. We would encourage many of our customers who are independent businesses to do the same.

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Bob Walker
Bob Walker
President

Being productive in Ohio



Experience pays off for Tom Emmett

Owners of successful lawn and landscape maintenance companies have at least one common bond. They will tell you there is no shortcut to the top. Tom Emmett, owner of Tom Emmett Landscape Company, Richfield, Ohio, will tell you he's tried some shortcuts during his brief, yet successful career. In each and every instance, the shortcut served to ultimately slow his growth rather than accelerate it. In his own words, "You have to hit every rung of the ladder.

To miss one is to start all over again."

Tom received a degree in horticulture 12 years ago. After spending a couple of months working as an intern for an area contractor, he launched his own business using the family farm as headquarters. He took advantage of the farm's equipment and his own education and experience to do design-build work and to mow.

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It seemed so natural, Tom remembers. A lot of hard work and time paid off and within seven or eight years, his business was approaching the \$1 million mark in sales. He had two big design-build crews, several maintenance crews and his company was serving a broad base of customers, from small residences to large commercial establishments.

"But we grew too fast," Tom recalls. "And we had grown in far too many directions." In the process, he notes, he began to lose sight of profitability and the fact that in the landscaping/lawn maintenance business, profitability is directly proportional to the number of man-hours billed. "Don't let anyone tell you different," he relates. "In a service business you're selling labor. If a firm has too many employees and isn't focused on getting the jobs done as efficiently as possible, then productivity and billing will go the wrong way."

It went the wrong way for Tom five years ago. Cash flow wasn't making ends meet, so he decided to go back and catch some of the rungs he previously missed. He pared back on employee rolls, took a tighter focus on his business — concentrated on developing his commercial maintenance cus-



Tom Emmett found success by going back to the basics, by investing in those areas that will add to the bottom line.

tomers — looked hard at nonessential expenses like operating new trucks when used ones would do, and he worked to make employees as productive as possible. As a member of the Ohio Landscape Contractors Association, Tom had lots of experience upon which to draw. He was a good listener, and it didn't take long for his new direction to start paying off.

Making lemonade

Tom caught an unlikely break in the spring of 1989 when one of his large

maintenance trailers was involved in a "hit and run" accident. Two intermediate walk mowers and a large ZTR on the trailer were ruined. Needing some equipment immediately, Tom rented a couple of Walker mowers from a rental store in Archbold, Ohio. He doesn't remember exactly what the units cost him per day, but the \$50 figure sticks in his mind.

"I wasn't particularly happy with my

"Profitability is directly proportional to the number of man-hours billed."

intermediates and larger ZTR mowers," he tells. "We were tracking our production costs closely at the time, and I was looking forward to trying out a different piece of equipment. It didn't take long to find out that on small properties we were cutting our man-hours by a third with the new riders."

In the fall of '89, Tom purchased two 16-hp Walker mowers. He eliminated using his intermediates totally. That winter he purchased three more Walkers and put the rest of his mowing equipment up for sale. He ultimately replaced 10 mowers with five Walkers.

Talk about productivity! This specially equipped Walker doubles as a sprayer and spreader.





Emmett's crews team up to round up leaves on this large property.

The decision to go with the Walker line was based almost totally on productivity. Although the new mowers cost considerably more than the intermediates, their productivity far outweighed their costs. As he points out, "I didn't look at the sticker price, I looked instead at what I would be paying per month, maybe \$116/month plus financing, which was 100 percent deductible. The life expectancy of a Walker was a full five years, compared to three for the intermediates I was using, and the new riders were nearly doubling productivity. I was able to take on more mowing accounts and perform more extra billable services by switching to the Walker mowers."

Tom noted there were some additional side benefits, too. Employee moral increased, employees stayed with him longer, and the quality of his mowing job improved.

Moving up

Today, Tom is moving up the ladder steadily and carefully. He has four mowing crews, two shrub and bed crews and one installation crew. His pickup trucks aren't new, but they are clean. And he owns 10 Walkers; nine go out with crews, one stays back for backup. He has specially equipped one of the nine Walkers as a sprayer and fertilizer applicator. The attachment, which includes a Herd spreader and

Cagle sprayer, has been so successful Tom currently sells the setup to area contractors. And, he's looking to expand that part of his business.

Not to say he's losing focus. His landscaping/maintenance customer base is still comprised of commercial, industrial and condominium properties. And he's still caring for the first property he contracted in 1980. Maintenance accounts receive anywhere from 27 to 32 mowings per year. Employees stay busy in the winter going

A hit-and-run accident took one crew completely out of commission.

out an average of 20 times to remove snow.

Once again, Tom is approaching the \$1 million mark. But he's confident this time he will be able to sustain it. He's working just as hard, but a little smarter, too. As an example, last year he instituted a weekend crew, comprised of employees who want to work only on the weekends. The move kept his equipment busy, kept his overtime down and allowed him to bill more hours.

He has also installed a time clock. If employees punch in on time every day

of the week, they receive an \$8 bonus for the day — which translates into \$40 per week for punctual workers. "I can't stress it enough," Tom points out. "Profitability is directly related to productivity. There is no productivity if employees aren't working."

Tom is also setting up a bond line to make his firm eligible for larger government contracts, and he's hired a consultant to help him keep costs down, e.g., finding ways to lower his workers' comp charges. Tom also employs a full-time mechanic who is well worth his money just by virtue of keeping downtime to a minimum.

"Take the ladder one step at a time," Tom reemphasizes. "That's the best piece of advice I should have taken, and it's the best piece I can give to people starting out in this business." With one footnote, he adds. "Remember, this is a service business and you don't make money when employees and equipment are not being used to the best of their ability." Miss that rung, and the rest will be out of reach, as well.

Walker user tip

Tom learned from experience that money is well spent on equipment that makes money. It shouldn't be used to buy new trucks and other equipment that doesn't help to increase productivity. Other tips:

- If you don't use it on a regular basis, rent it.
- Always look to buy better, more productive equipment.
- Establish a line of credit at your bank.
- Encourage employees to be more productive. Establish a bonus system that works for you.
- Stay focused.
- Learn to provide a myriad of services to regular customers.

*Three ways to define
the lever-steer advantage*

The economics of mowing with a zero-turn riding mower

The zero-turn commercial riding mower was introduced in the late 1960s, early 1970s. Over the last 25 years, these highly maneuverable machines have been gaining market share as evidenced by the number of manufacturers producing them today and the large number of machines operating on properties. In fact, the OPEI (Outdoor Power Equipment Institute) reports that almost half of the commercial riding mowers sold during 1993 were transmission steer (lever steering) zero-turn type machines.

The question is why is this type of mower becoming so popular? The answer is really a matter of economics, which for commercial operators

can be defined in three ways: increased productivity, better use of labor and quality of cut.

Increasing productivity

Operators routinely claim doubling the amount of mowing output after changing from midsize walk-behinds or conventional steering wheel riders to zero-turn riding mowers. Of course, the production gain depends on the type of areas being mowed, but generally landscaped turf with combinations of small and open turf areas is "typically" where zero-turn riding mowers have an advantage. Production gains are the direct result of increased maneuverability:



- Ability to quickly maneuver, with very little lost motion, means the mower spends more time "in the grass."

- Ability to maneuver in tight areas, which reduces travel time.

BUYER'S CHECKLIST

Sixteen factors to use in selecting the right riding mower:

- ✓ Purchase cost
- ✓ Operating cost
- ✓ Production (job time)
- ✓ Proven reliability (minimum downtime)
- ✓ Quality of mowing job
- ✓ Maintenance requirement (easy to work on and availability of spare parts and technical support)
- ✓ Operator comfort and safety (retaining employees)
- ✓ Operator training required
- ✓ Size of work (does machine fit work area)
- ✓ Ability to handle terrain
- ✓ Ability to trim
- ✓ Transport to job (fit on truck or trailer)
- ✓ Operating versatility (ability to do big and little jobs, catch grass, vacuum leaves, mulch)
- ✓ Equipment projects good image of your company (acceptance by your customers to use this equipment on their property)
- ✓ Stability and longevity of equipment manufacturer and distributor/dealer (product support and continuing development of product improvements)
- ✓ Resale value (equipment life)

● Ability to maneuver easily, which facilitates trimming and covering irregular-shaped areas.

Saving labor

Increasing productivity gives zero-turn operators two options: Reduce their labor force or maintain it and grow their businesses. Either way, labor savings easily offset the higher purchase price of a zero-turn rider and the investment to train workers to operate a "lever steering" machine (a common objection of "steering wheel" proponents). Some zero-turn owners claim it is actually easier to teach proper operation of a lever-steering rider than a midsize walk-behind.

Saving labor has another meaning, too. The zero-turn rider has literally altered the face of the lawn maintenance industry. Companies operating zero-turn mowers don't have nearly the turnover in employees, have an easier job attracting employees and can choose from a broader selection of employees (they are not limited to selecting workers who are athletic types). Not to mention the fact that saving labor becomes increasingly important as the workday nears an end. Even workers who are physically fit, tire and lose productivity as the hours and lawns go by.

Quality counts

A common myth in the industry is that riding mowers (including zero-turn and steering wheel riders) don't offer the quality of cut other mowers do, specifically midsize walk mowers. The truth is, many zero-turn riders do at least as good of a job if not better than their "walking" counterparts. Here's why: Out-front zero-turn riders, equipped with floating, vacuum decks, not only trim as well as intermediates, they leave behind a manicured look that is unmatched. They also give operators the ability to easily mow alternating stripe patterns.

Zero-turn riders have long been considered the sole domain of users who want to increase productivity. In part, that is true. But in reality, they are also fast becoming the domain of users everywhere who want to increase their bottom line.

Attitude, philosophy and organization

How to get and keep workers

When it's all said and done, people are still the most important resource a company has. A company's ownership or management approach and attitudes toward employees will show in hundreds of different ways, and is largely responsible for its ability to attract and retain employees.

Here's a management checkup for getting and keeping workers.

1. Understand independence of employees.

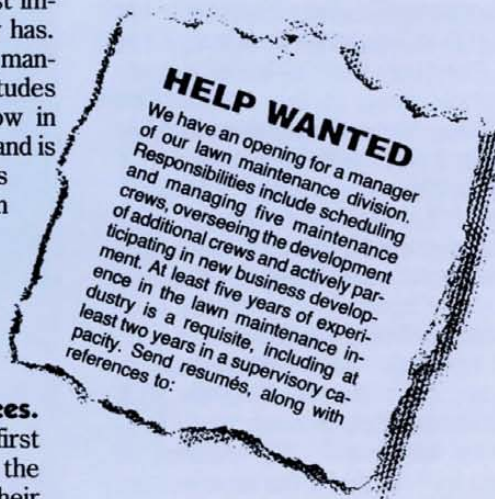
Realize that employees are first and foremost working for the benefit of themselves and their families. Employees should be given the freedom to seek the best opportunity for themselves inside or outside the company. Successful companies provide incentives and reasons to belong to the company. Know that employees who feel they are working at their best opportunity build strong companies.

2. Provide a safe, healthy work environment.

The sweat factor is "out." Encourage employees to work smart instead of hard. Workers enjoy finding ways to make their work easier and to make them more productive. Be obsessed with finding better ways to get the job done.

3. Individual pay incentives and personal challenge.

Incentives are still among the best ways to motivate top per-



formance, as are programs built on profit sharing and personal responsibility.

4. Provide opportunities for employee growth.

Although training, education and job responsibilities can't be forced, some employees want to grow, others are satisfied with the status quo.

5. Instill pride in workmanship.

Employees will gain satisfaction producing above-average results.

6. Involve workers in decision making.

Encourage employees to make suggestions to improve the company.

D & R offers customers "complete care"

Lawn maintenance is more than a profession; it's an art form for this late-blooming contractor

Roland Wenig is a late bloomer in the lawn maintenance business. He hung his shingle when he was 42 years old. Ten years later, he has no regrets about his career choice.

"I was born and raised on a dairy farm in Iowa," tells Roland, owner of D & R Groundskeeping, Rockford, Illinois. "I enjoy working outside, and I enjoy working for myself." The latter, however, was not totally his decision. A factory layoff and a generally poor economic climate left him little choice.

Today, the economic climate in Rockford has improved slightly. But jobs are still hard to come by. Roland knows that just by the number of "mowers" out there, the term he uses to describe people who get into the lawn maintenance business only to leave after finding the road too tough and too demanding.

"I'm not an egotist," explains Roland, "but I'm proud of what we've accomplished over the years. When I

When Roland first started to use his mulching deck, even attentive upscale customers didn't realize he wasn't bagging.

started, we had a snowmobile trailer, a van, couple of walk-behind mowers and a handful of accounts." Today, his clients range from several Rockford banks, a dentist's office, lawyer's office, architect, a restaurant, a condominium complex and 20 plus "executive homes." He does it all with his two Walker mowers, one 16-hp and one 20-hp model; two 21-inch walk-behinds; a complement of hand-held power equipment; and a part-time



Roland takes pride in his customers' landscapes. That's one reason why he has a growing customer waiting list.

employee or two, depending on the time of year. His wife worked full time in the business until three years ago.

During the start-up years, Roland took landscaping courses at two area colleges to learn his profession. He has since become an accomplished landscaper who prides himself with being able to supply customers with unique-looking landscapes. He is also a certified applicator and repairs customer irrigation systems.

He attributes his success to two things: his drive to provide quality care and his decision five years ago to buy his first Walker. They both go hand in hand, he notes.

Complete care

D & R Groundskeeping provides "complete" care. The owner prefers that to the term "full service."

D & R strives to keep landscapes and lawns in natural balance by supplying timely help. Roland doesn't fertil-

ize for fertilizing sake. "After all," he notes, "lawns in our area need only three applications a year, four if the customer has a sprinkler system." He uses granular fertilizers and only applies herbicides when it is needed. "No point in bathing the entire yard with chemicals when only a part of the yard might be in need of some control," he points out.

Roland's pragmatic approach to lawn care led him to a Walker trade show booth better than five years ago. He liked what he saw but couldn't justify the costs. "The dealer kept on bugging me about the mower, and I kept on telling him it was too expensive," remembers Roland. "Then one day the dealer just left a Walker mower at my place and told me he would pick it up a week later. When he called he said, 'There's no point in coming over, right. You've decided to keep the machine.' And he was right."

According to Roland, two things

sold him on a Walker, the unit's bagging system and its maneuverability. There's no comparison between how a Walker bags and how other mowers on the market bag, notes Roland. Even in very tough, wet conditions, the Walker won't plug. As far as maneuverability is concerned, Roland says he was a little scared when he first got on the machine. "It was fast, real fast. But I got used to it in a hurry," he remarks. To be sure. The first Walker cut down on hand mower use by 60 to 70 percent. Since then, D & R does three times the number of accounts it used to in the same amount of mowing time. As Roland puts it, he can mow a lawn in 20 minutes now, where it took him an hour before with two walk-behind mowers.

"If it weren't for the Walkers, I wouldn't be where I am today. I enjoy what I'm doing, I don't advertise, I have plenty of work and I don't owe a penny on anything."

Mulching dilemma

The Walker bagging system alone saves D & R on employee and machine hours. Before his first Walker, Roland says he used to make two trips to pick up leaves, one trip with a Billy Goat vacuum; the second with a mower. Now he makes just one trip with the Walker and saves his Billy Goat for cleaning up beds. The leaves and clippings are simply loaded into a truck and dumped on a five-acre parcel he owns. Although a farmer this year asked to have exclusive rights on the leaves.

Indeed, bagging is — or was — a way of life in Rockford. Dumping fees that have soared to \$40 a ton make finding alternative ways of dealing with debris a necessity. Not all area lawn maintenance operators have access to private landfills. Yet even Roland appreciates the time

saved by not having to remove clippings. That is difficult, he says, when the prevailing philosophy is, "You don't catch it, you don't mow it." The philosophy is especially prevalent in the "executive" homeowner market where D & R is firmly entrenched.

Understanding the value of leaving clippings behind and being practical about saving time and money, last year Roland innocently pulled the proverbial wool over his customers' eyes. He simply replaced a bagging deck with his mulching deck and mowed on. As he relates, customers never knew the difference. "They were getting a beautiful cut and manicured look, along

with the additional nutrients provided by the clippings. I was saving time."

But mulching isn't for everyone. In fact, last year the Midwest suffered through so many rainy days that bagging lawns was the norm. Still, Roland pulled up to each property with three deck options: bagging, mulching and side discharge. He says he makes an assessment about the grass, then changes the deck to suit the conditions. "I've changed decks in less than three minutes," he tells. "Normally, it takes around four minutes."

Neat niche

A lot of landscapers and lawn maintenance professionals around the country would like to operate the way D & R does. Roland has a loyal customer base. His largest bank customer First Federal has five properties and has been with D & R since the beginning. A couple of "executive homes" have been with D & R from the start, too. One lady, notes Roland, has asked him to move one perennial bed at least 20 times over the last 10 years. He doesn't do any advertising, not even the Yellow Pages. And there's no sign on his truck.

There's no question that D & R could handle more accounts by adding a mower or two and hiring a couple of key employees. As Roland relates, the equipment isn't the problem. Finding key employees is. Still, he plans to grow his current business slowly and quietly.

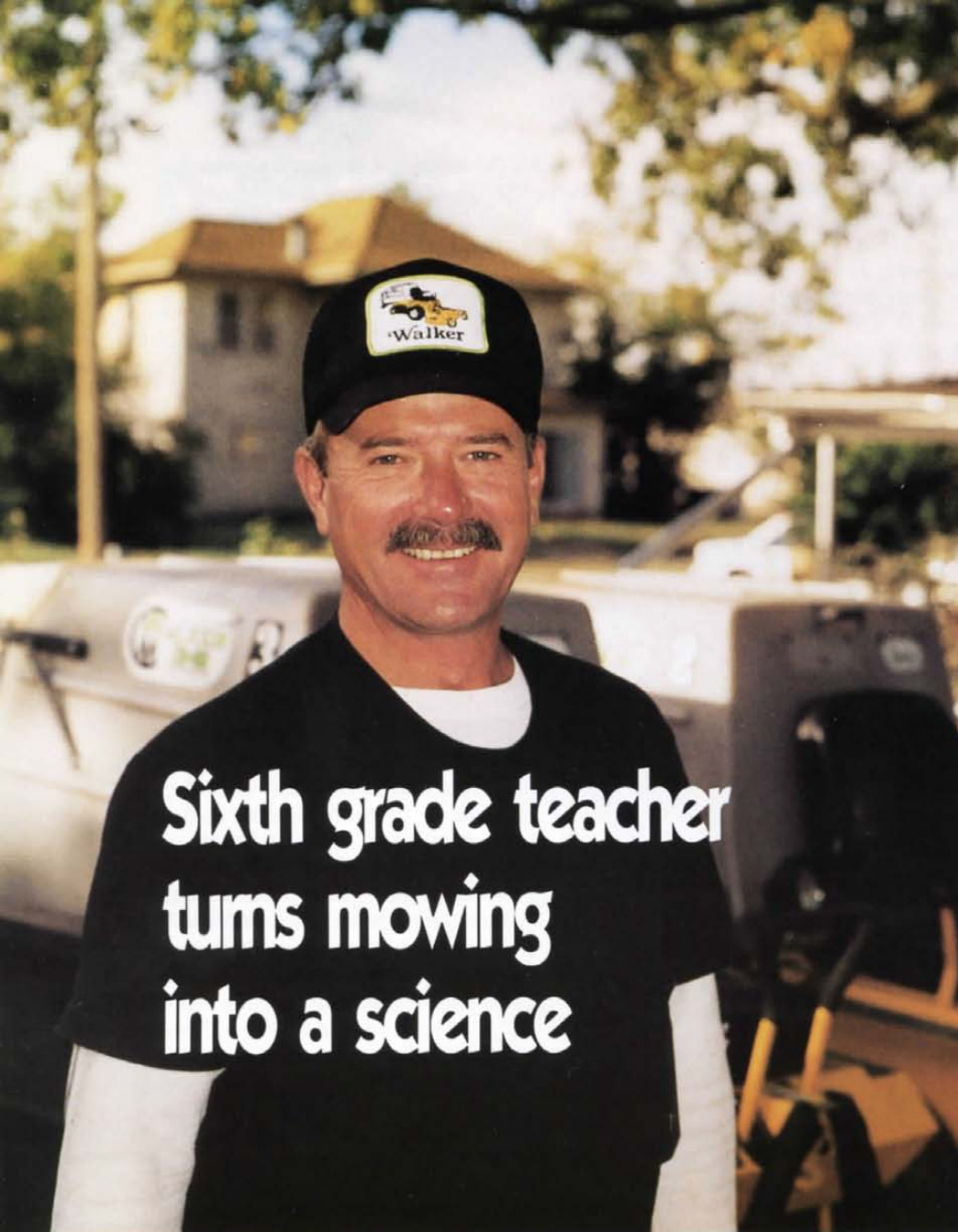
Look for his business to double if not triple five years from now. These aren't Roland's words, and they may not even be his thoughts. But some things in life are worth pursuing, with controlled vigor. Roland has found his niche . . . and so will more customers who know quality when they see it.

Walker owner tip:

Strive to provide complete care, advises Roland Wenig. This 10-year mowing veteran works to keep lawns and landscapes in natural balance. He doesn't overfertilize, and he employs only spot chemical treatment for weeds, as needed. A one-time factory worker, Roland gained his hort knowledge by attending two area colleges part time.

Like many Walker mowers, D & R Groundskeeping owns three decks to match mower to mowing conditions.





Sixth grade teacher turns mowing into a science

*Year-round billing puts this
part-timer in the rider's seat*

Not many lawn pros can gross better than \$25,000 in their spare time. But that's what Dennis Sloan, owner of Sloan Landscape Maintenance, Ardmore, Oklahoma, did last year. This sixth grade science teacher did it with two Walker mowers, 20 residential accounts and virtually no help. Sounds like a lot of work for a part-time job? It is, notes Sloan, but

not nearly as much as it used to be.

Dennis started mowing lawns in 1982. A brief hiatus from teaching and a stint in the oil fields shortened by the oil bust left him with no employment. When a friend suggested he mow lawns, Dennis took him up on it, charging \$10 per lawn.

The heart of his lineup in the spring of '82 included a two-cycle 21-inch

Dennis Sloan has no desire to go back to the "good old days," when he charged \$10 per lawn for mowing and had an annual gross of \$2,000.

walk-behind, an inexpensive line trimmer and a few additional pieces of equipment which put his initial investment at \$800. By season's end he had grossed \$2,000. "It just wasn't worth the effort," he tells. When a teaching position opened up he grabbed it and said good-bye to mowing. Or so he thought.

When the following spring rolled around, Dennis had no intention of mowing lawns. But what he intended didn't coincide with what an older customer in town wanted. She just wouldn't take no for an answer. That

"I got tired of walking and carrying the bagger."

one lawn led to another, and Sloan Landscape Maintenance was up and running, again.

Dennis Sloan is not a typical part-timer. Sure, he wants to make additional income. But he also wants to build a business that can support him after he retires from teaching. The fact he was nearly always running short-handed and was constantly under a time crunch made growing a business difficult. He had all he could do to maintain his current properties, mowing evenings and weekends.

He wasn't long identifying the problem. The small walk-behinds just didn't "cut it" mowing lawns. Two years after hanging his shingle, Dennis noticed a competitor with a 36-inch intermediate mower. He bought his first intermediate that year and purchased a second one the following season. "The difference was like night and day," he notes.

"I thought the new intermediate was the answer. But after a few years I got tired of walking and carrying the bagger. So I started to look at riders." And look he did. In 1990, his search took him to Dallas, Oklahoma City and Tulsa. But it wasn't until he saw an ad

for a Walker mower in a trade magazine that he had a line on his first rider.

"A Stillwater, Oklahoma, distributor demonstrated the mower," he relates. "I drove it, I made it buck and I told him I'd buy a machine." Unfortunately, Dennis neglected to mention the purchase to his wife, who heard about it a few days later. The proud owner made a hasty call to the distributor to cancel the order, but the mower was already on its way. As the story goes, he didn't have the heart to make the delivery person drive back to Stillwater with the mower.

Creative financing

There is one thing that Dennis has in common with other lawn maintenance professionals around the country. Poor cash flow in the off-season. Although teaching takes the pressure off, this entrepreneur still needed to find a way for his fledgling business to pay for his first Walker . . . and his second one the following year.

The answer he devised was fairly simple: Sign customers up to yearly lawn programs. Out of his 20 accounts today, 13 are on a yearly billing schedule. Sloan pro-rates the accounts just like gas utility companies do, so monthly payments are equal for the year. An average customer, for example, might be charged \$30 for each mowing maintenance visit. Thirty visits would total about \$900 for the year. Dennis simply divides the figure by 12 and bills the customer monthly.

Walker owner tip

By signing customers up to yearly maintenance contracts and billing them year-round, contractors can even out cash flow. The move makes it easier to budget for new equipment and to make those monthly payments, even during slow months. The one drawback? Extra cash flow is needed to meet increased direct expenses incurred during the busy season. Dennis Sloan solves that by picking up some "special" projects, and keeping a fair number of customers on eight-month contracts.

Scheduling the mowing, scalping/dethatching, weed control, fertilization and leaf removal, a 7,000-square-foot lawn can generate \$100 to \$125 per month for 12 months. "Two customers and I can make a \$230 monthly payment year-round," he relates.

Signing up customers for the year has one drawback for this Oklahoma native. Direct expenses are higher during the busy season, and he could use the additional income he deferred. The difference is made up by doing some extra work, e.g., dethatching and some seasonal mowing accounts.

His new Walkers, he adds, afford him the time.

When preparation and opportunity meet

Johnny Rutherford said, "Luck is when preparation and opportunity meet." Dennis subscribes to this definition of luck. Being a science teacher, he has never been a true believer in luck. As he puts it, most people think luck is the result of pure chance. "When competitors see my new Walker mowers, they may think: 'How did you get so lucky?' The truth is, if you want something, you have to be prepared to work hard for it, and take advantage of the opportunities."

It used to take Sloan 20 hours to "scalp back" and dethatch a 7,000-square-foot property, including bagging the thatch in plastic bags and scalping with reel mowers. Now, using two Walkers, it takes only four hours. On regular mowings, one Walker cuts his mowing time in half. "When people see a Walker they see the light," Sloan remarks. To be sure, seeing is believing for Sloan. There's a picture of a dump trailer above his workbench. No, he doesn't need to be reminded he wants one for his business. He just thinks it makes sense to keep your dreams in focus. After all, science teachers have dreams, too. They also have a way of turning them into reality.



When Dennis was looking for a rider to replace his two 36-inch intermediate walk-behinds, he wanted a mower that would be maneuverable, compact enough to squeeze through tight spaces and versatile enough for big jobs. From left to right his Walker zips around 200 trees on one property, squeezes through a gate on another and even handles the biggest jobs with ease.

WALKER NEWS

Walker distributors celebrate 10th anniversary

At the annual Walker distributor meeting held in Estes Park, Colorado, September 24, eight Walker distributors received 10-year anniversary plaques. Members of this group are pioneers of the 1982 Walker national marketing program. When the plaques were presented, company president Bob Walker told the distributors, "In an industry where some manufacturers change distributors and dealers like changing clothes, it is especially satisfying and a strength of our marketing organization to have long-term distributor relationships."



Left to right: Bob Walker, Jerry Hall, SunShine Distributing Company, CA; Dwight Sandlin, Dwight's Lawn & Garden Equipment, AL; Arlin Geigley, A & G Turf Equipment, AZ; Jerry Piesik, Jerry's Small Engine Supply, WI; Bob Oestreich, Precision Work Inc., NY; Avan DeVries, Walker Mower of Denver, CO; Charles Esfeld, Great Bend Honda, KS; and Dean Walker. Not pictured is Ken Kurtzer, Kurtzer Grain & Landscaping, CO.



Walker wear available

Quality hats, sweatshirts, coats and shirts are among "wearables" available from Walker Manufacturing. To place an order or to request more information, just fill out the card in this issue.



New Products

62-inch side-discharge deck, available spring '94, offers large area mowing. Fits either Walker Model MD or MT tractors.



Original operator soft-cab has been redesigned to fit Model MD or MT, as well as earlier models. The new cab features a hinged door, glass windshield and headlights. An electric windshield wiper is standard equipment.



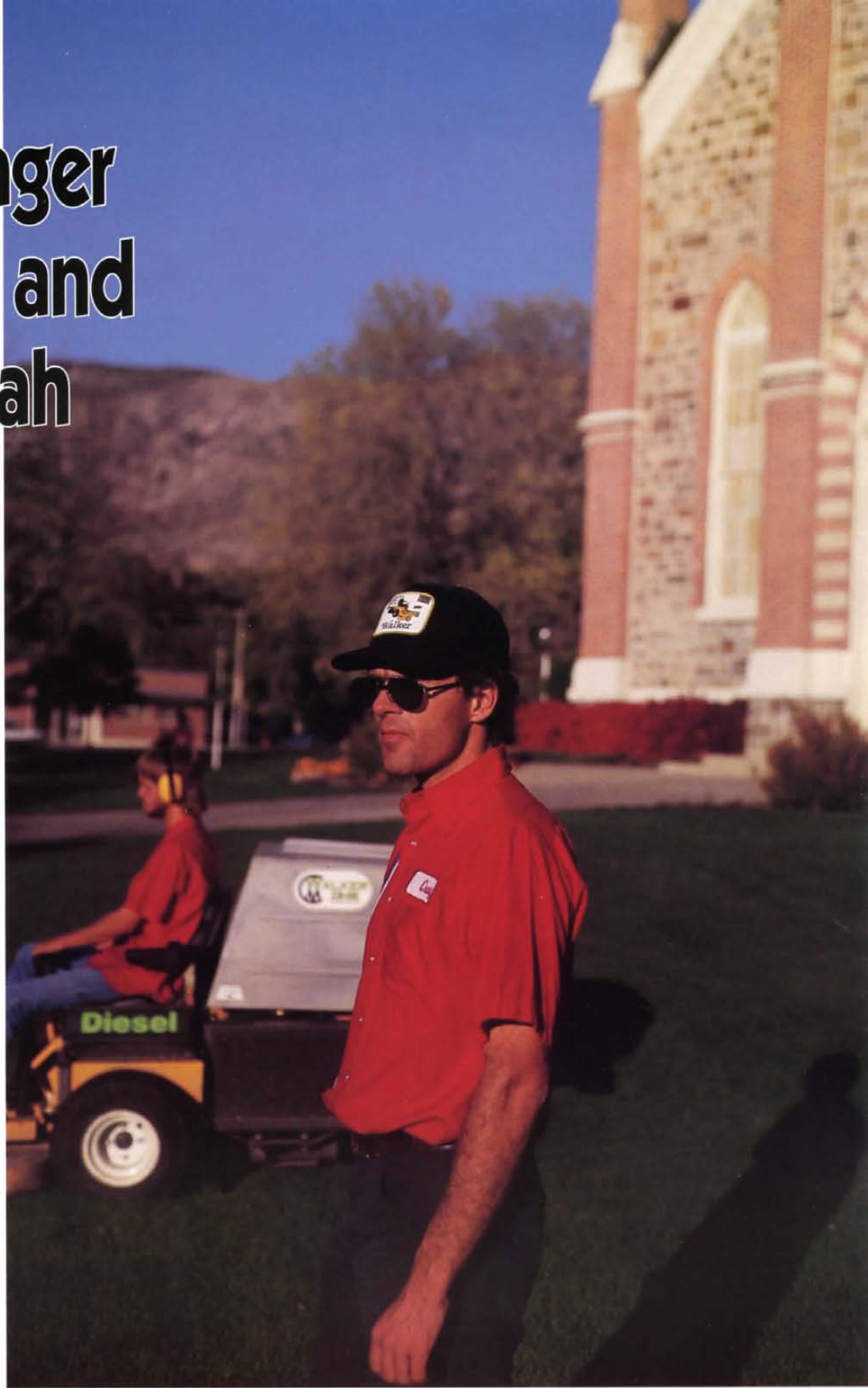
Mowin' Ranger rides again and again in Utah

New riders provide impetus for growth . . . and profit

There's more to mowing lawns than meets the eye. If you don't think so, just sit down for a day and talk with the Corbetts, Craig and Natalie. Owners of Mowin' Ranger, Tremonton, Utah, this husband and wife team has been mowing lawns since the early '80s. Like so many lawn maintenance companies, where they are today and where they came from is as different as night and day. The Corbetts, however, are unique in terms of how they made the trip.

To put it in perspective, Mowin' Ranger today is a full-service mowing/maintenance company. As Craig remarks, in a town the size of Tremonton, with a population of 3,500, mowing companies have to do more than mow. Mowin' Ranger crews travel in a 45-mile radius to maintain more than 400 fertilizer accounts, 75 lawn mowing accounts, 30 shrub and tree accounts and over 300 what the Corbetts refer to as miscellaneous accounts, those that require aerating and renovation services, even weed chopping. The Corbetts accomplish this with two mowing crews, two miscellaneous crews, two fertilizer crews, one tree trimming crew and, during

(Continued on page 14)



(Continued from page 13)

the busy season, two full-time employees and 13 part-timers.

Craig and Natalie also recently purchased a 90-acre tract of land just outside the city limits. Plans call for the development of a composting site, among other things, including an apple orchard and possibly an RV park — not to mention a new home for the Corbetts and their three children.

Ten years earlier

The Corbetts' story begins in 1981 when Craig was laid off from a construction job. He went to work at a local factory and supplemented his income by mowing lawns. Craig's dad owned a lawn mower repair shop and sold him an old walk-behind. Mowin' Ranger was off and walking, literally and figuratively.

"We were pretty destitute then," tells Craig. "When our first customer paid us \$10 to mow her lawn, I took the money and bought a gas can and filled it with gas."

But Craig and Natalie "plugged away," with Craig working at the factory and Natalie helping to run the business and raising a family. They eventually built their customer rolls up to 35 lawns a week, using four 21-inch walk-behind mowers. During the busy season, they employed three, maybe four high school students, with even more coming on board as the number of lawns grew.

Hard work, however, was not enough. After their two youngest children were diagnosed with a rare syndrome, medical bills mounted . . . and the Corbetts needed to make more money. As Craig tells it today, they've learned one thing from their years of experience and from necessity, how to make money. "We were walking ourselves out of business," he explained. "We just couldn't cover enough ground to meet expenses and to pay



Craig says he's never seen anything that even comes close to a Walker when it comes to collecting leaves.

our medical bills. In fact, we were told to go bankrupt, but that wasn't an option."

The solution appeared in a *Flower & Garden* magazine ad. Craig sent away for a free video. Halfway through the video he knew he wanted the mower. The machine happened to be a Walker. He bought a demo model sight unseen

"The Walker mower taught us how to make money mowing."

for around \$5,000, and saved enough that first season in labor and gas to pay for the new unit.

"It was taking us four and one-half days and five to seven employees to do

our mowing," tells Craig. "After I purchased the rider, we dropped two employees and accomplished the same amount of mowing in two and one-half days."

The rest is history, sort of . . . Craig truly believes the new mower saved his business. If nothing else, he notes, "It taught us how to make money mowing."

Employee costs went down and productivity went up, giving Mowin' Ranger the time and money to expand. In 1989, two years after purchasing their first rider, Craig branched out into the fertilizer application business. Natalie, who was working with the mowing crews at the time, found that employees now had extra time on jobs to do the little things that count, such as providing additional grooming services. "Crews really started to make us money," she tells.

Not ones to be greedy, Craig and Natalie began to share their profits with employees. They even set up a special bonus program, charting the time it takes to do maintenance accounts. When employees beat the charted time, they earn an extra 50 cents an hour.

To borrow a well-worn cliché, the Corbetts learned that time was indeed

Walker owner tip

Saving time is making money. The Corbetts encourage their employees to be more productive by giving them a 50-cent/hour bonus for beating the "charted" time on a job. One job complaint, however, wipes out the bonus.

money. People started to say their crews looked like Indy pit crews, they worked so fast.

One Walker led to another, until today Mowin' Ranger crews employ four models, including their original 11-hp model, two-16-hp models and their newest addition, the Model D.

Two crews go out with two Walkers each. Crews use a 54-inch side-discharge deck for wide areas; a 42-inch collection deck and a 42-inch mulching deck are used primarily on residential accounts. To ensure no time is wasted, crews carry an extra deck to match mowing conditions or application and an extra set of blades comes along too. "We strive to change blades every four hours," tells Craig. "Sharp blades really make the difference between a lawn that looks good and one that looks great."

Craig makes sure all crew members know how to sharpen their own blades. The ritual is done after crews come in from the day's work. "Employees generally work faster at night," he says with a slight grin. And it saves time in the morning so crews can get up and running. In fact, they figure that evening sharpening saves up to one hour per crew.

Saving time is really the key to this business, tells Craig. His new riders help do just that in areas other than mowing, too. Take leaf collection as an



example. Craig says he has never seen a mower or a vacuum for that matter that does the job his riders do. During the leaf season, the mower operator dumps the leaves into a tarp. A tag team of two employees literally runs the leaves to the dump truck. "After going through the blades and the vacuum, the leaves are really ground

Crews change mower blades every four hours to make sure lawns receive the optimum cut every time.

up," tells Craig. "I've never seen anything that even comes close to the Walkers for leaf collection."

Right of passage

Craig and Natalie both know the value of a good employee. A couple of families in the area have been supplying Mowin' Ranger employees from nearly the first year they went into business. It's almost like a right of passage, jokes Natalie. Family members work for the Corbetts before they move on with their lives.

But in all seriousness, these two business owners take their employees very seriously. After all, they are the company's on-the-road ambassadors.

"We try to teach our employees more than the fundamentals of mowing and the importance of doing a quality job," adds Craig. "We try to instill



New 90-acre tract of land has Craig thinking beyond its immediate composting possibilities.

values. We want them to feel good about what they're doing so they have a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day."

Employees are all treated equally, too, he adds. "They're treated the same way we want our best customers treated."

The end result has been some incredible growth. In addition to the recently extended city contract that includes 10 acres of parks, seven acres of cemeteries and one and one-half acres of city center and the library complex, Mowin' Ranger last year did all of the area's LDS church properties.

The company's customer mix today is 70 percent commercial/30 percent residential. Expansion over the years has allowed Natalie to be more selective about properties they take on. Forty-five miles is a long way to go for work, and it only makes sense if there are enough properties in the area to make the drive worth while, she relates. In the meantime, Craig has taken on the Walker line as a dealer. Last year, he sold 10 new units and two used ones. He has plenty of room for even more expansion, now, in the new "digs" he rents from his dad.

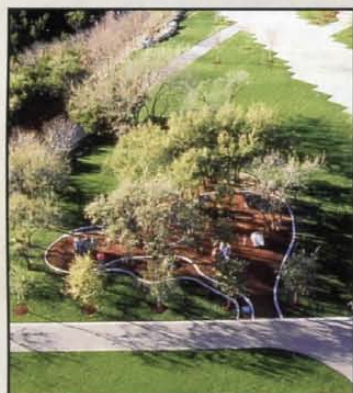
To say that Mowin' Ranger is riding its way to success is a stretch of reality. The Corbetts put faith, family and hard work high on their list of factors that have contributed to their economic and spiritual well-being over the years. But the new riders played an important role, too. As Craig said, they taught them how to mow and how to make money.



Employee training is key to Mowin' Ranger's success. Here, Craig discusses strategy with Chris Jensen.

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