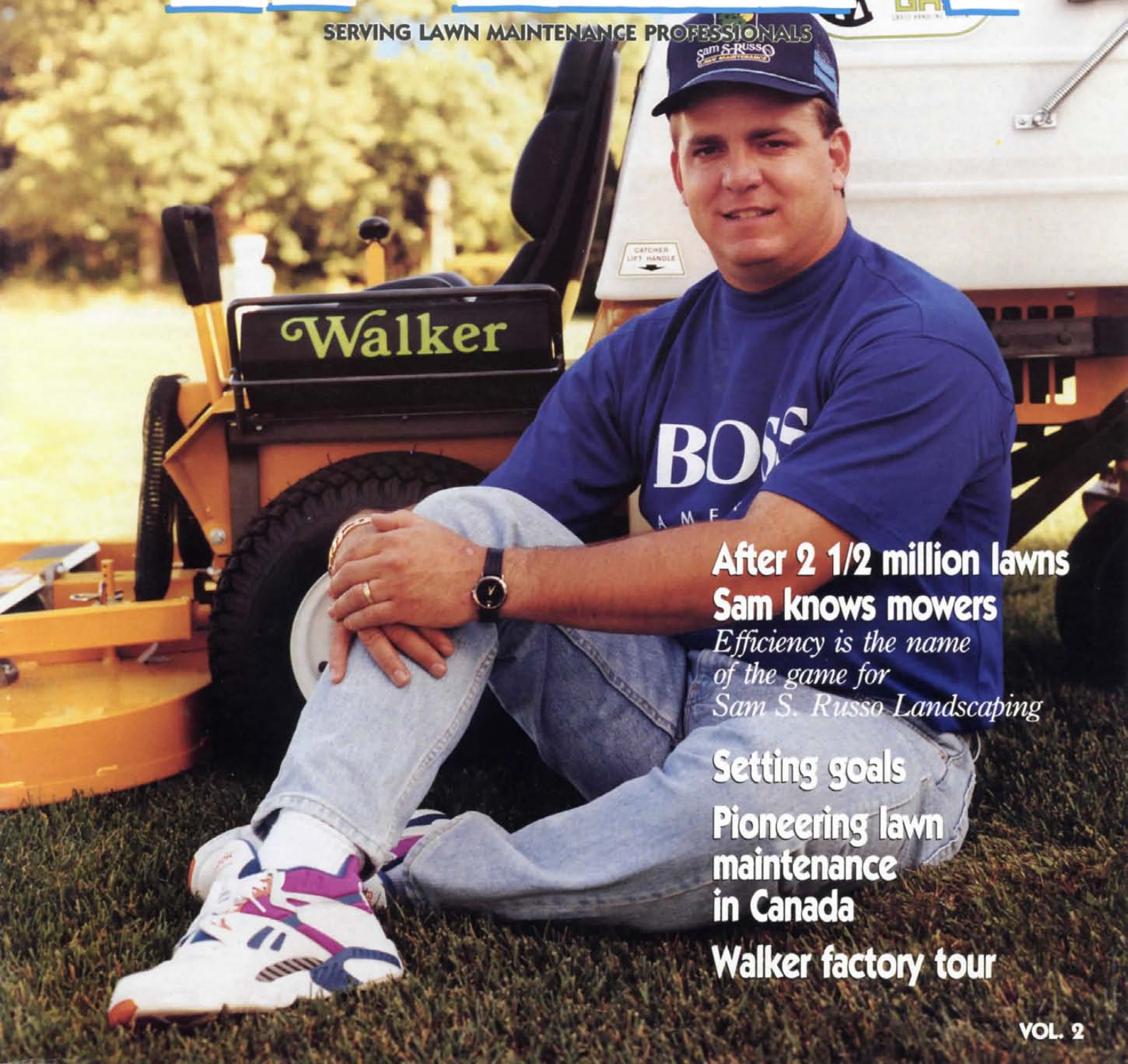


WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS



**After 2 1/2 million lawns
Sam knows mowers**

*Efficiency is the name
of the game for
Sam S. Russo Landscaping*

Setting goals

**Pioneering lawn
maintenance
in Canada**

Walker factory tour

WALKER TALK

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Keeping our circulatory system healthy

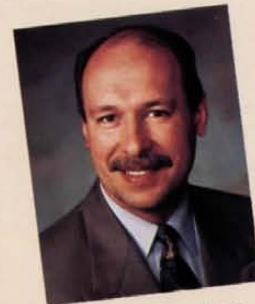
By some estimates, we've grown too slowly. "After all," critics and supporters both would say, "You have a niche so why not take advantage of it." Or, by proverb, "Make hay while the sun shines." Our answer to them is, we want to stay healthy and continue to grow. We want to ensure that our heart — our manufacturing system and our product — stays strong, and the only way to do that is to take care of our circulatory system — our distributors and dealers and their customers, the end users.

I like to think of Walker distributors, dealers and customers as our "veins and arteries," the manufacturer's circulatory system. If the manufacturer does things that are destructive to the circulatory system, it will ultimately be destructive to the heart. Conversely, if our distributors, dealers and customers are flourishing, healthy and have vitality, the heart, our manufacturing system, will be strong and healthy.

The first Walker mower prototype was built in 1977. The first production run was three years later. Throughout the '80s and early '90s, business grew at a pace that sometimes was throttled by our resources. But we were determined to keep control and not expand too quickly. We carefully chose our distributors (it took eight years to cover the United States with distribution) and, in turn, distributors looked long and hard for the right dealers. Together, we have worked hard to get and keep customers.

Yes, we could have grown faster, but we didn't. Walker Manufacturing is only as healthy as our circulatory system allows it to be. To run too fast, to tax the system, will ultimately do more harm than good. That's no way to run a business, nor is it any way to say "thank you" to all of our customers for years of loyal support.

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Bob Walker
Bob Walker
President

After 2 1/2 million lawns Sam knows mowers

Not many people start careers the way New Jersey-native Sam Russo did in 1982 when a serious motorcycle accident left him temporarily disabled. Therapy consisted of walking behind a friend's lawn mower. Two and one-half million lawns later, he still hasn't looked back.

But Sam doesn't do many things the usual way. In addition to running an exceptionally successful landscaping business, a recent venture into selling outdoor power equipment has taken off as has an even more recent trek

into operating an outdoor power equipment distributorship. If that isn't enough to keep him busy, consider the fact he drives a race car professionally nearly every weekend during the summer, and still finds time to enjoy his wife, Suzanne, and their four children. This man has energy.

Talking with Sam is an experience in itself. He claims he never really excelled in school, and that sports and other extracurricular activities never caught his fancy. Those early days behind his buddy's push mower must

have been impressionable, however, because Sam knows mowing. He knows that a crew of four employees with four Walkers can mow on average a lawn a minute. He knows that by using one Walker mower instead of a deck (intermediate walk mower) he can increase his production per mower twofold. Two Walker mowers can do the work of four deck units and he saves on two employees' salaries to boot. Oh yeah, Sam knows how to be

(Continued on page 4)

Profile:

*Sam S. Russo Landscaping
Bayville, New Jersey
Sam Russo, owner*

- In business since 1982
- Eight crews, four Walker mowers each
- 14 retirement communities, total 12,500 lawns

- 80 employees
- \$4 million in annual sales

Business philosophy:

Do one thing until you get it right. Then continue to do it right before you try to diversify.

Operating a successful lawn maintenance business has given Sam Russo an opportunity to pursue other activities. Racing automobiles is not that different from owning your own business, he says. The name of the game is learning how to compete successfully.



(Continued from page 3)

competitive on and off the racetrack.

A year after the accident, Sam opened his own lawn maintenance business. With one employee and two deck mowers, he grew his business to 125 accounts. "I quickly 'maxed' out with a deck mower so I looked for an alternative," he relates. The hunt took him to a Walker dealer nearly 100 miles away.

A few of his customers balked at the sight of the new mower. They thought Sam should be earning his keep by walking and they didn't really trust a machine that moved so fast. In fact, 10 percent of his customer base left because of the new mower. But Sam made up the difference in a hurry. By the end of the year he had bumped up his mowing base to 180 private homes and 16 small businesses.

His business took off like a rocket. In 1984, Sam signed his first retire-

You can buy a mower and hire people, but you can't buy your reputation.

ment community contract. That client alone added 798 lawns to the mowing schedule. From 1985 to '87, he picked up more retirement communities and by the end of '87 crews were mowing 11,000 retirement homes. Sam had found his niche and the machine to mow it. In the meantime, he gradually turned away from the private home and small business market.

Today, Sam S. Russo Landscaping maintains 14 retirement communities for a total of 12,500 lawns. In addition to mowing, crews fertilize, edge, install and remove trees and shrubs, and plant flower beds. In the winter, the Walkers are fitted with snowblowers. Sam also heads up a custom landscaping crew, which he oversees himself.

Eight maintenance crews do the brunt of the work. Each crew is equipped with four Walker mowers.

Efficiency is the name of the game



When Sam Russo couldn't find a Walker dealer nearby, he opened his own power equipment dealership in Bayville. Sam senior and mother Joan both work in the business.

for crews. Once the mowers are driven off their enclosed trailers, they are not loaded back on until the job is finished or the workday ends, whichever comes first. Operators simply start at one end of the community and head toward the other, mowing lawns as they progress.

"Some days we get such a good rhythm going, crews don't stop for lunch," Sam tells. "Once the rhythm is broken, it's difficult to recapture it." Instead, crew members will break an hour or two after the noon hour, with literally acres of mowed lawns lying in their wake.

The regimen puts equipment to the supreme test. Even by commercial mowing standards, Russo crews mow a lot of lawn. In fact, Sam prides himself as being one of Walker's East Coast testing grounds. With his help, company head engineer Dean Walker has instituted 30 or more design changes in the original mower. Today, Sam says the 16-hp mower is "bullet-proof." As a testimonial his crews today operate more than 30 of them. Ninety percent of the units are equipped with a 42-inch deck.

Ignorance is far from bliss

Sam attributes his success to three things. The Walker mower and the company's willingness to work with him on changes, persistence bolstered

by more than a little luck, and the fact his competition was slow to learn the value of using a Walker.

"My competitors looked at the Walker mower and told me they could buy two deck mowers for the price of one Walker. They were right. But I told them I could do twice the work they could, with only one mower and one employee."

The competition's reluctance to try the new Walkers gave Russo a competitive advantage, the ability to mow lawns for less while producing a quality cut. And he's still mowing lawns for less, he explains. "Basically, I'm cutting lawns today for the same price I did in 1982."

But Sam is not in the business of keeping fellow landscapers in the dark forever, especially since becoming a Walker dealer in 1985. At the time he needed a dealer close by to service his mowers and to supply parts. When he couldn't find one, he was awarded his own dealership. Between 1985 and 1988, he sold 20 and 30 units a year. When area dealers suddenly became interested in Walkers, Sam says his Walker distributor Bob Oestreich, owner of Precision Works on Long Island, stuck by him. In 1989, Sam purchased an exiting power equipment dealership, ACE Power Equipment,

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Maintenance crews find easy way out at Leisure Village

James Ritter, community manager for Leisure Village West in Manchester, New Jersey, was not an easy sell for ACE Power Equipment owner Sam Russo. With 2,700 retirement homes to mow, Russo knew a Walker mower would cut costs and time while cutting grass. But Ritter, a one-time groundskeeper, reported to a board of trustees. To convince them to replace their entire fleet of out-front riders would be difficult.

"I thought the mower was a toy when I first saw it," tells Ritter. "The maintenance department asked me to watch the demonstration, but I just walked away."

But Russo's persistence and experience in mowing retirement communities paid off. Four years ago, Leisure Village West manager of maintenance services Jo Schultz received his first Walker. Nine more soon followed, and the rest can be told in hard figures.

Before Walker, Schultz's mowing group employed 31 people. The figure included 15 who operated out-front riders and 16 others who operated hand mowers and hand-held equipment. Now, with 10 Walkers, the mowing and trimming contingent has been reduced by 13. Five no longer mow with out-front riders, and eight others who either used a hand mower or trimmer have been redirected to provide other landscape services.

No pain . . . and gain

The new 16-hp Walkers quickly outperformed their larger and more powerful predecessors, points out Schultz. Before, it took the entire maintenance crew nine days to complete a mowing cycle. Now it takes five, maybe six days to do the same



Community manager James Ritter thought the Walker was a toy.

with the Walkers. Downtime is also reduced and he says he no longer has to order a case of drive belts to carry them through a mowing season.

Each Walker mower cuts 35 acres a week. They are light enough so they don't tear up the turf, Schultz adds, yet low enough to the ground so they don't tip on the hills. Crews collect grass only twice a year, once in the spring for the first cut and once in the fall to remove leaves. The rest of the time, the Walkers mulch. "When we started mulching," notes Ed Jans, assistant grounds manager, "residents asked us what we did with the grass. They really couldn't tell we were putting it back on the ground."

Russo is not at all surprised by how the Walkers have performed at Leisure Village. Still, it took several visits four years ago and a demonstration or two to really convince Ritter to sell the trustees on the units. The turning point, according to Ritter, was the year warranty on the mower and the three-year warranty on the hydraulic

Profile:

*Leisure Village West
Manchester, New Jersey
James Ritter,
community manager*

- 20-year-old retirement community located on 850 acres; cut 400 acres
- 2,700 retirement homes
- 10 Walker mowers
- PGMs Honor Award (1991)

Business philosophy:

"Keeping costs down while maintaining quality is the trend for the '90s, especially in a retirement community."

drive. "With a warranty like that, combined with Sam's convincing arguments, we really weren't taking a chance," he notes.

Four years after the first Walker made its Leisure Village rounds, Ritter wrote to Russo thanking him for his advice and assistance in helping elevate the award-winning community's maintenance practices and adding to its overall well-groomed appearance. And to Bob Walker, he writes, "This new mower was smaller in both engine size and mower deck than the mowers we were currently using, but because of the increased visibility and maneuverability, the association was able to increase productivity by 50 percent."

Ritter was happy because, as he related to Bob Walker, "Keeping costs down while maintaining quality is the trend for the '90s, especially in a retirement community." The same can be said for anyone in the lawn maintenance business.

(Continued from page 4)

and become a full-line dealer. He more recently purchased a new location right on one of the main highways in Bayville. Last year, his power equipment business did \$2.5 million in gross sales. A nice complement to his \$4 million landscaping operation. Just last year, he also became a distributor of Dixie Chopper and Howard Price mowers.

Timely tips

Sam found his landscaping niche, and he encourages all of his 170 ACE landscaper customers to do the same.



Sam often wonders how many Walkers he can fit into his race car hauler.

"Do one thing until you get it right," he advises his customers. "Then continue to do it right before you try to diversify."

As one would guess, Sam's wealth of experience makes him a "hot item" for landscapers who want more than a little advice. And he's willing to share.

For landscapers just starting out, Sam says developing a good reputation should take top priority.

"When you first start out, you can buy the right mower and hire the right people, but you can't buy a reputation. It's so important to treat customers right, right from the very start.

"As you develop and grow, it will become necessary to spend more time doing administrative tasks. One of the most depressing things that happened to me was when I had to go behind a desk full time." But it's necessary, he adds. Owners have to spend their time in the most productive way possible. And he tells that sitting behind a desk can be as challenging and rewarding as

operating a mower.

Sam says he's learning every day to be a better administrator. As an example, he recently helped develop a company newsletter and a new computer printout — called a complaint ratio list — to help him keep an eye on employee performance. The list also doubles as a handy sales tool. If a trustee or community manager questions a crew's performance, all Sam has to do is show him the ratio. More than likely the ratio of complaints for one weekly visit will fall far below 1 percent. Can't argue with that, especially when every homeowner in a retirement community is considered a customer.

Other hints

There are two ways to make money, Sam points out. Landscapers can increase profits by developing new business or by finding more efficiencies at home. One recent internal change at Sam S. Russo Landscaping, for example, saved the company \$60,000 annually. The change was simple. Crews opted to use a mulching deck where feasible. The move alone reduced the company's daily grass clipping consumption from 500 cubic yards to 350. Tipping fee savings were substantial.

Sam also advises landscapers to pay close attention to details when buying new equipment. He knows that a Walker isn't for everyone — after all, he's a dealer for other brand names, as well. The key, however, is to find the product that fits the application.

He explains that he test drives every new piece of equipment his company buys. "I can't give Walker all of the credit for our company's suc-

cess over the years, but I will say that if we weren't using Walkers, we wouldn't be mowing over 12,000 lawns like we now are."

While not all areas of the country are as competitive as they are in New Jersey, mowing as efficiently as possible is the key no matter where you are. As Sam soon discovered, a competitive advantage can be leveraged very quickly into new, profitable work.

Loftier goals

Sam S. Russo Landscaping has all of the business it can currently handle. The fact each of the company's 14 clients is on a three- or five-year contract makes the future look bright. Expansion won't happen right away, Sam notes, since to get any bigger would

"I'm cutting lawns today for the same price I did in 1982."

require some restructuring, including possibly adding another management layer.

With his equipment business going strong and his new distributorship getting up to speed, Sam is looking ahead. One of his immediate challenges is to improve the quality of life for his 80 employees. A pension plan, 401K and profit sharing are among programs he's considering. As he explains, to be successful in the long term, companies have to be willing to reward those who helped them get there. Many of Russo's employees, at ACE and in the landscaping division, have been with Sam for years. It's time to pay them back, he notes.

The word "retirement" is a strange one indeed coming from a man in his early '30s. Yet Sam utters it, saying with a smile he would like to semiretire in two years. What does that mean? It means simply he wants to cut his work week down to 40 hours, to have more time to spend with his family and to play — to race cars. Believe it or not, retiring to 40 hours will also give him time to do one of the things his still enjoys most, to drive a Walker.

A new look at setting goals

Being the biggest isn't always the best

Ever sit around and chat with fellow lawn maintenance owners and operators? Sure you have. Do you remember some of the hot topics? If the discussion turned to, "Where do you want to be five years from now?" long-kept secret goals probably came running out of the closet. "I want to be a million dollar operation. I want to employ 80 people. I want to be the biggest landscaper in the area. I want to graduate to sitting behind a desk. I want, I want, I want ..."

The truth is, over time, all any landscaper or lawn maintenance professional should ever want is to be more profitable than he or she was the year before. Period! Because profitability is the only real goal worth a plug nickel when you're in business for yourself. It's nice to talk about volume, reputation, new equipment, acres of lawn mowed, etc. But when all is said and done, if you don't make a profit, all other goals are meaningless — since you'll soon be out of business, anyway.

Defining the problem

In a similar way, manufacturers are finding terms such as efficiencies, volume, inventory and throughput are nice to throw around at monthly meetings, but if they don't have a dollar sign attached, they offer little substance to a discussion. If new robots, higher production figures, higher inventories and more product out the door don't add to the bottom line — then the factory, any factory, isn't making money. The same can be said for anyone selling products, or selling services as is the case of people in the lawn maintenance business.

Part of the answer to setting reasonable goals, goals that translate



into profitability, rests with terms used to define your operation. Imagine a typical discussion with a group of friends. The term volume would probably come up often, either in respect to the number of clients, number of yards mowed or number of acres cut. But by itself, volume means little unless it can be tied directly to an economic indicator of your business.

Begin to think of volume as a way of generating money through sales and less as a way of describing how much lawn you mow. Try to put a gross dollar figure on every lawn you mow.

The same holds true for your equipment lineup. It's easy to get caught up thinking how great it is to have one of the largest inventories of lawn mowers and trucks in the county. But if you begin thinking about inventory as the money you spend generating income, then the high number is suddenly less glamorous. The more you spend, here, the less you have later. And later is what counts.

And don't forget employees. You're probably already very much aware that employee cost is one of your biggest operating expenses. In fact, by most estimates, the costs associated with hiring, training and paying employees (benefits included) eats up one-third of a lawn maintenance company's sales volume.

With this in mind, try taking the thought process one step further and think of your employees as what you spend to keep your inventory (mowers) running, and producing sales.

Putting it together

If the goal of your business is to produce profit, every business activity

should be analyzed as it relates to producing profit. When analyzing your business activity, it is helpful to think in terms of three measurements of your business: 1) Sales, income from the sale of goods and services; 2) Inventory, goods and equipment used to produce sales and 3) Expenses, costs associated with turning or using inventory to produce sales.

In a simplified way, every business activity should be viewed in terms of its effects on these three measurements. It is obvious to produce profit, business activity should be directed toward *increasing* sales while *decreasing* inventory and expense.

Let's see how this works. You are planning to buy a new mower. This is an increase in inventory. So to produce a profit the purchase should increase sales more than expenses. If a new mower reduces expenses (labor and maintenance) while producing sales, it is increasing profit. In another example, when you hire a new employee, you increase expense. If the new employee doesn't increase sales (directly or indirectly), then profits are decreased — simple ideas that often are overlooked in growing and operating a business.

Your long-term goal should be to improve net profit. That might not necessarily mean mowing more lawns, or buying more equipment or having more employees. It might mean doing less more efficiently, or, better yet, doing more, more efficiently. The key, no matter where your business takes you, is to make sure inventories (your equipment) and employees (your largest operating expense) are kept in line. To say your long-term goal is to get bigger is really not saying much at all. But to say your long-term goal is to be more profitable says a lot more.

A visit to the Walker factory



When Bob Walker describes the company's new facility in Fort Collins, one word rings loud and clear. That word is "balance."

"The best-run factories in the world are those that run smoothly, without bottlenecks," he tells. "We strive to create a rhythm at our factory, sort of like a drummer setting a cadence to which everyone works."

When Bob walked through the plant on this day, the factory drummer was setting a cadence of 16 mowers. When

"Small companies like ours have to produce an exceptionally high quality product to compete."

— Bob Walker

employees arrived at work in the morning, they knew precisely how many mowers they would produce by day's end, 16, no more, no less. Welders weld up enough frames for 16 mowers, the paint shop paints for 16, and 16 mowers are assembled and tested.

"You can't do that without balance," Bob adds.



Head engineer Dean Walker spends most of his time in an R & D facility adjacent to the factory floor. He develops and personally tests all new designs and modifications.

Level manufacturing

From the ground up, the Walker plant was designed to produce a quality product with the care and precision required for a high-performance mower. That is hard to do when production facilities go through busy seasons, slowdowns and layoffs.

Walker employees, instead, work consistently all year long. During the off-season, finished mowers are stored to await shipment months later; during the busy season, mowers sometimes go directly from the line to the delivery truck.

The process is referred to as level manufacturing and it allows Walker to keep a highly qualified and trained staff working year-round. Balance and level

The new Walker factory/headquarters in Fort Collins features 76,000 square feet of floor space. The factory has the capacity to produce 20 Walker mowers daily.

manufacturing work hand-in-hand in an environment that is nearly as unique as the product it produces.

"Small companies like ours have to produce an exceptionally high-quality product to compete," explains Bob. "From designing prototypes to getting the finished product out the door, each machine has to literally be handcrafted to perform at the highest level. It all begins and ends at the factory level, starting with the design process."

A walk through

The Walker factory has 60,000 square feet of floor space and 16,000 square feet of office space, including living quarters upstairs for company patriarch Max.

Before he enters the factory floor, Bob stops to review a collage of photos that tell in pictures the Walker story. He points to the first Walker, a 1977 vintage machine that has a surprising resemblance to those that come off the line today. A 1980 photo shows the first Walker manufactured with the company's own mowing deck. "We found we couldn't make the mowing system we wanted without making the

deck, too," explains Bob.

The factory proper has none of the noise, heat and smoke characteristic of other less-modern facilities. And there is plenty of light for everyone, with 50 candlepower spread over every inch of the floor.

Stop No. 1 is the fabrication area. Walker manufactures as many of its own parts as possible. Since the company is small, however, it cannot justify a separate machine for each part. Instead, the factory employs a batch process in which employees make enough of one part to last six, maybe 12 months of production. Then they move on to another part.

"Batching parts allows us to run the machine tools a high percentage of time, instead of working them only four to six hours a week," Bob explains. "This saves us money, too, which can be spent more effectively elsewhere."

As he strolls through the fabrication area, he points out a new programmable hydraulic press and a plasma cutter for cutting heavy metal. An employee starts up the new press and magically, effortlessly bends a flat piece of metal into a lower frame for a mower.



One assembly line builds all five Walker models. Thanks to parts compatibility, switching to another model is fast and easy.



It takes nine man-hours to weld up a Walker. The lower frame alone has more than 100 individual welds.



Walker mowers are painted in the traditional way. An overhead track, however, points to an impending changeover to a power paint system.

The welding area is by far the busiest place in the plant. Here, 13 welders hand weld the lower and upper mower frames. "There's some craftsmanship going on here," Bob relates. "Robots would be hard pressed to produce such a nice bead." The lower frame alone contains about 100 individual welds.

Three of these specialized and highly trained workers weld the seven different mower decks available on a Walker. The largest is a 54-inch deck. Bob figures it takes a total of nine man-hours to completely weld a Walker. That's a lot of welding.

Putting it all together

In the first assembly area, the axles, gearbox, belt tightener, among other key ingredients, are installed into the lower frame. The partially assembled unit is then placed on a cart and rolled to the paint room. Walker mowers are still hand washed and painted, but an overhead track is an indication of things to come, a changeover to a powder coating system and baking oven. The upper frame, mower deck and spare parts also take turns visiting

one of two booths in this area.

The decks are the first to be assembled after painting. The main assembly line follows. Approximately 1,000 individual parts go into a Walker. "Sure, you could make a Walker with fewer parts," Bob muses. "It just wouldn't be the same machine."

Six employees operate the main assembly line. They are responsible for a wide array of tasks, from installing the transmission and gearboxes to dropping in one of five engines — a 11-hp Briggs & Stratton, a 16-hp or 20-hp V-Twin Kohler, and a gasoline or diesel Kubota. The same line and employees assemble all five Walker models. One model is run for several days at a time, then the line is changed over for another one. Switching between models isn't time consuming since the models incorporate many of the same parts.

Once the main components are bolted in, the lower and upper frame are joined and the cables and wires connected to the control panel. At this juncture, the Walker mower is nearly complete. Each unit is started and tested before leaving the line to be fitted with either a grass catcher or utility box. Once completely assembled, the mower is started again and put through an extensive operating and safety checklist.

"With level manufacturing, storage space is a premium," Bob relates upon concluding the tour. "Currently, the factory has enough space to store close to 700 mowers. But if we crank up to 20 units a day, it won't be long before we run out of space." Worse things can happen, he notes with a smile.



A 50 candlepower lighting system and a spotless work environment provide the perfect backdrop for the finished product.

How to zero in on a moving target

Frank Carson works to stay one step ahead of the fast-paced Sacramento lawn maintenance market

To be content in lawn maintenance today is to be putting your bid in for early retirement. Because as unique as the lawn maintenance business is, it has one thing in common with all other ventures. Change is inevitable, change is constant.

Being on the cutting edge of change has helped Frank Carson develop his business into one of the largest lawn maintenance/landscape companies in

"If you're not flexible enough to change when change is needed, you will be passed by."

the Sacramento area. Although Frank is tight-lipped about exactly how big his company is, Carson Landscape Industries has 90 employees and maintains 120 commercial sites. Crews have a high profile in and around Sacramento, and Frank himself enjoys a reputation as a truly successful self-made businessman.

There have been at least three turning points in the evolution of Carson Landscape Industries. The first was the day Frank hung his shingle. The second came four years later when he changed gears to service a growing commercial/renovation market. The third is a more recent change of direction to accommodate a new construction market.



The ups and downs in the Sacramento market have forced Frank Carson to put even more emphasis than ever before on quality and cost control.

Frank entered the lawn maintenance business in 1975 after attempts to gain a foothold selling real estate had failed. His start was modest. He bought a mower and edger, and with one pull of a starter recoil was in business with two residential accounts. Four years later, the number had mushroomed to 100 residential accounts.

Renovate or perish

In 1980, Frank took his brother, Larry, in as a partner, and together they assembled an aggressive plan

that by 1985 grew the business to 80 employees.

The plan had two main elements, Frank remembers. "We wanted to get away from residential accounts because at our size it was difficult to maintain them profitably. We also noticed that installation contractors just weren't interested in renovation or maintenance. So our plan focused on renovating and maintaining commercial accounts."

Over the five-year period from 1980 to 1985, Carson Landscape renovated more than 50 apartment and 25 medi-

cal complexes in Sacramento. Maintenance contracts naturally followed.

The fit was perfect. Carson didn't do installations. Installers didn't do renovation/maintenance. And, more importantly, the building market was at a standstill.

Bottom dropped out

Change was imminent, however. Competitors began beating down Carson customers' doors. Unfortunately for competition, their timing was as bad as Carson's had been good a few

Profile:

*Carson Landscape Industries
Sacramento, California
Frank Carson, owner*

- In business since 1975
- 90 employees
- 120 commercial sites
- Nine Walker mowers

Business philosophy:

Have the vision and flexibility to change when change is required.

years earlier. New tax regulations in '86 and '87 removed any tax incentive to renovate. Carson, too, witnessed a substantial decline in the renovation business.

"We were forced to do two things," remarks Frank. "We had to become even more quality minded if we were to retain old customers, and we had to change our focus to do more installations."

They did both very successfully.

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Truck-a-haulic

This slick looking rig is one of eight found in Frank Carson's truck fleet. Comprised of an Isuzu cab and chassis and customized bed, each vehicle represents a tremendous upgrade from the "olden" days in 1991. Back then pickups and trailers were getting 8 to 10 mpg, with each taking up a 35-foot-long chunk of space in the warehouse. The Isuzu trucks get 22 mpg and the entire package takes up only 27 feet.

The trucks are parts of Frank's overall philosophy to upgrade and save money wherever possible. They represent a step-up over the pickup/trailer arrangement, they're easier to



Casey McQuiddy shows how side compartments are designed for refueling and storage.



handle, and they save on fuel, repairs and downtime. Plus they're handy. The bed can carry up to four Walker mowers; the club compartment has room for five employees. And there's a wide array of compartments to make transport and servicing easy.

Note the vertical compartments for brooms, shovels and rakes, and the side compartments for portable powered products and repair parts. A fuel storage compartment carries

two-cycle fuel containers and accesses a 50-gallon fuel tank beneath the bed for refueling riding mowers. No mess, no spilling. Just fast, easy and secure transportation.

Frank leases the vehicles. He says he's getting out of the business of owning vehicles. "When you own your vehicle you maintain them, and that gets real expensive." Under the lease arrangements all he is responsible for is tires, belts and oil and, of course, fuel.



(Continued from page 11)

During the transition period — when competition was high and demand for maintenance and renovation was low — Carson retained close to 80 percent of its older customers. And a new installation division took advantage of a building boom. In fact, between 1989 and '91, Carson's crews installed 500 new front yards for developers of single-family homes. Not bad for a company that a few years earlier had given up on the residential market and had no plans for the installation market.

"We were still renovating properties, but on a select basis only," Frank notes. "Unfortunately, we weren't doing the selecting."

Learning experience

The roller coaster ride during the '80s taught Frank a lesson about the lawn maintenance business. First and foremost, he says, "If you're not flexible enough to change when change is needed, you will be passed by." Carson learned to adapt, to the extent the company today is positioned as a full-service company ready and waiting to serve all aspects of the lawn maintenance/landscape market.

A fluctuating market also forced Frank to look for more ways to keep

A job is a means to an end. It's not a goal in itself.

costs down. At times, he relates, that meant buying new equipment when buying anything was difficult.

That attitude led him to Walker Manufacturing in the spring of 1989 when Carson Landscape Industries purchased its first Walker mower. Frank says they were looking for a more maneuverable rider that would save on labor costs and give them an excellent cut. Today, they have nine Walkers and each gives them 42 inches of "excellent cut." The mowers not only cut down on labor costs, they reduce maintenance costs, too, notes



The crew scheduling board has crew assignments in "living color."

Carson vice president of transportation and service Casey McQuiddy. "We look for each Walker to give us at least 2,000 hours of service out of their 16-hp Kohler engines. We re-power and look for 2,000 hours more.

"We haven't had a major problem with a unit, and normal repairs are facilitated by excellent parts availability."

Two years after its first Walker, Carson started to revamp its truck fleet. "All of our trucks and trailers were 10 to 14 years old," Frank relates. "We had to buy new ones or find another approach to hauling around equipment." The company opted for Isuzu trucks and chassis and custom-made beds. The end result was a more efficient transportation and storage operation (see sidebar).

The Walker mowers and the new trucks were all part of a philosophy to reduce costs by becoming more efficient. That same philosophy spilled into other areas of the company, as well. Carson, for example, employs a computerized maintenance program that keeps tabs on how much money the company is spending on equipment and repairs. Broken down by individual units, the program spots problem machines and/or problem crews.

Operations are efficiently run, too. A glance at the operations board tells part of that story. The board "legends" crew makeup. Trucks are yellow and Walkers are blue. A black dot means a crew is equipped with a phone. A red dot means radio. Green means beeper. The board also includes the license number of each vehicle and the name of the driver.

There's no question where crew members belong in the morning since 3" x 5" cards spell that out in living color.

Over the years, Frank has developed a healthy respect for his employees and his industry. He talks admiringly of all of his employees and his brother, Larry, who recently decided to leave Carson in pursuit of another career.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without the help of our employees who really made the business grow," Frank emphasizes. He makes special mention of Kathy Pipis, vice president of administration; accounting clerk Julie Kinder; Fred Hawkins, vice president of the maintenance department and additional services; Nancy Garcia, personnel and development; and John Carson, vice president of the construction department.

Frank wants to ensure all of his employees have job security. Hence the reason to pursue one additional goal with vigor, to raise the image of the industry. It annoys him to no end to see contractors whose only goal is to get the job. "The job, any job is a means to an end. It's not a goal in itself," Frank notes. "To get a job for job sake depresses prices, lowers the image of contractors and all in all hurts the industry."

It's not easy, he admits, since getting the job was top priority when he launched his own career. Yet he learned that to stay in business meant looking beyond the job. Among other things, it meant having the vision and flexibility to change when change is required.

WALKER NEWS

Customer service/warranty administrator joins Walker team

Last August, Bob Tomasek (pronounced toe-mass-ek) joined Walker Manufacturing with responsibility in areas of customer service and warranty administration. Tomasek's previous ex-



Bob Tomasek

perience as a power equipment dealer in central Nebraska and working with two agricultural equipment manufacturing companies in purchasing and management will help him provide service to Walker customers and dealers.

This new position will ensure that customer service questions and warranty claims will continue to be handled in a timely manner. While Tomasek will be the primary contact for customer service, both Bob and Dean Walker remain available to assist as needed.

Deck and power dump among new products for '94

Looking for more mowing capacity? A new 62-inch side discharge mower deck might be just the ticket. This big, rugged deck, coupled with the Walker Model MD or MT, will offer large area mowing performance with a compact midsize tractor.

The new deck is designed specifical-

ly for mowing "rough areas." It features additional blade clearance between the deck housing and belt-drive cutting blades instead of gear-driven ones used on all other Walker "turf mowing" decks. Belt drive will handle more abuse when mowing in unimproved areas with lots of rocks and debris.

A new optional power dump for the grass catcher is available on the MD and MT model Walkers. Activated by using a panel toggle switch, this new feature will speed the dumping cycle and reduce operator fatigue. The power dump may be ordered as a factory-installed option or as a retrofit kit. (It will fit early Model MD/MT Walkers.)

15,000th Walker built

On April 7, 1993, the 15,000th Walker mower rolled off the line at the Fort Collins plant. The Walker factory celebrated this "milestone" by having a pizza party.

After a slow start in 1980 when only a handful of units were produced (almost hand built), yearly production has grown steadily ever since. Number 15,000 was a Walker Model MDG with a 21-hp Kubota engine. It was delivered to the Walker distributor in Georgia, Lawn Equipment Enterprises.

French distributor and dealers visit factory

A delegation of 14 visitors from France toured the Walker factory on June 14. The president of the Bara Prover Company, Mr. Jean Micolod (seated) and three members of his staff represented the Walker distributorship. The others present represented power equipment dealers from various parts of France. Besides looking at the factory, new products and product improvements were discussed.

On a worldwide basis, the mar-



ket in France has ranked third in sales volume, behind NY/NJ and Florida. Walker mowers have been sold in France since 1987.

Pioneering lawn maintenance In Canada

"I felt the ground begin to tremble and I realized too late that an ocean-going ship had caught me off guard. By the time I looked around it was right next to me. I could have reached out and touched it. It really gave me a fright." So recounts Francie Keeler about one of her recent experiences working in the family business Dandy Lawn. Eight years ago, she and husband Roy were operating a turkey farm near Quebec City. Mowing grass and ocean-going ships were the furthest things from their mind. Maintaining top billing, instead, was a newly imposed government quota system on turkey farmers.

A couple hundred miles to the south, Roy's father Winston "Wink" was retiring from teaching. Looking for a way to stay active, he thought the lawn maintenance business had potential. He introduced Roy to the idea — and a business was born.

Roy and his wife, Francie, sold the farm and moved back to Lancaster (on the New York, Canada border) and started pounding doors. That was in 1986. As Wink remembers, his son had no pattern to follow. "We were really pioneering a new industry. Canada is a little ways behind the States when it comes to landscaping."

Wink, working in the business more as a consultant than an employee, and his son struggled through the first full season. By the end of 1986, Dandy Lawn had 35 commercial and residential accounts. A good start but not enough to support a family. A year later, Roy added a new out-front rider and was able to grow more accounts. Equipment downtime and a tough labor market, however, quickly put a cap on further growth. Roy needed a shot in the arm and Wink found it.

An avid reader, Wink saw the Walker mower advertised in *Organic*

Profile:

*Dandy Lawn
Lancaster, Ontario
Roy and Dick Keeler*

- In business since 1986
- 250 residential and commercial accounts
- Eight employees
- Seven Walker mowers
- Mow approximately 300 acres per week

Business philosophy:

In a tough labor market, hiring family members and using Walkers really pay dividends.

Gardening magazine. His first call to Fort Collins was a disappointment. He could buy a Walker, but the company had no distribution in Canada. Service and parts would have to be trusted to long distance. A second call a year later put him in touch with new Walker distributor P.E. Schneider Ltd. in Lakeside, Ontario. "Percy gave us a demo," recalls Roy, "and he never put the mower back on his trailer."

The new Walker purchase in 1988 marked a milestone in the young company's history. Dandy Lawn said adieu to the old rider — although it still uses it in an emergency — and the company welcomed Roy's brother Dick.

The combination was just what the doctor ordered. Roy had a degree in general agriculture and Dick a diploma with a major in horticulture. They knew turf and they knew how to maintain it. With a new Walker, they had a machine that could put in a full day's work, day after day. And it seemed the perfect fit for their customers — owners of small family homes, apartment



(Left to right) Wink, Roy and Dick Keeler share more than a family bond. Wink taught agriculture. Roy has a degree in general agriculture and Dick has a diploma, with a major in horticulture.

complexes, even cemeteries. The Walker moved in and around obstacles and over mounds with dexterity, without leaving behind scalp marks. A low profile allowed the mower to work the hills without tipping.

Dandy Lawn grew and so did its relationship with Walker. The company purchased another 16-hp, gear-drive Walker in 1989, two in 1990, and one each, every year since. Today, Dandy Lawn personnel operate seven Walkers, including the one they purchased the first year. And the original unit has more than 2,200 hours on it.

Dandy Lawn has 250 residential and commercial accounts. Four crews mow upward of about 300 acres a week, from small, 2,000-square-foot areas to 23-acre jobs. Except for 10 small properties and a couple of spa-



Dick teamed up with Roy the same year Dandy Lawn purchased its first Walker mower. No one knows how many hours Dick has logged since then; the mower has more than 2,200 hours.

cious, hilly projects, the Walkers do nearly all of the mowing, with more than a little help from the Keeler family.

In fact, the Keeler name rings prominent throughout the entire organization. In addition to Roy, Dick, Wink and Francie, who does the estimating and plantings, Roy's three offspring — Cory, Leigh and Lori — and Dick's two — Denise and Tawyna — can be found on any given day operating a Walker or holding a string trimmer. Non-Keelers Sue McDonald, Thornton Westley, Chris Page and Al Lalonde round out the crew.

Natural obstacles

Dandy Lawn is headquartered in Lancaster, Ontario, very close to the Ontario/Quebec border. Lancaster is approximately 60 miles west of Montreal and 280 miles east of Toronto. The company has clients in a 20-mile radius from the city, which frequently takes crews across the border into Quebec. Wink claims the media overstates the rivalry between the two provinces, yet governing laws make doing business in both a challenge. For example, Dandy Lawn is licensed to spray weeds in Ontario, but not in Quebec. And trucks are frequently stopped crossing the border to ensure they have the proper permits.

Just like environs everywhere, other challenges prevail. This spring, Mother Nature forgot to turn off the faucet. Sixty- and 70-hour, six-day weeks were hardly enough to keep crews on schedule. Late spring also

brought out "shad" flies that inhabit the river country around the St. Lawrence Seaway. They don't bite, but they sure fill up the air with their long bodies and wings.

Then there are man-made obstacles like the ship Francie encountered. Several Dandy Lawn accounts have

Spring rain put Dandy Lawn crews behind, but here, Sue McDonald deftly breezes through a trim job. Several properties border the St. Lawrence Seaway, which was forced to close to let the water through.



property that borders the St. Lawrence Seaway. Ocean-going vessels are a common site and less startling when you see them coming. The tracks of a fast-moving train that connects Montreal and Toronto cross one of Dandy Lawn's properties. "If you don't see it coming, the blast of the horn will take a year off your life," relates Dick.

Growth patterns

Roy and Dick looked to grow slowly, returning profits to the business to sustain the growth. In eight short years, they have compiled an inventory worth about \$200,000. In addition to the Walkers, the lineup includes a Kubota out-front mower, a couple of Lawn-Boy hand mowers, a full complement of trimmers, edgers and sprayers, plus a fleet of pickups and trailers. The Walkers are their biggest investment by far, however. Each has

two decks, a side discharge and a bagging deck. Two crews with four Walkers bag, the other crews side discharge. Decks are changed when crews pitch in to help each other. "It only takes a couple of minutes to switch decks," Dick points out. He figures each Walker accounts for 30 properties a week.

Growth has slowed, despite the brothers' uncanny ability to maintain clients. In fact, with a hint of fatherly pride, Wink claims Dandy Lawn has yet to lose an account due to poor work practices. Yet there's a limit to how big a company can get and still find good employees to run the equipment.

Over the years, the company has targeted private homes as its growth area, getting away from large commercial and municipal properties. The latter, which are referred to as tenders, are just too competitive, notes Wink. Dandy Lawn is competing with smaller contractors who may not pro-

vide their employees with some of the social benefits. To stay competitive, Dandy Lawn relies on quality work and high volume. The company signs yearly contracts and bills seven times a year from May 1 to November 1. Eighty-five percent of the customers pay by the 15th of each month, Wink relates.

Unlike many contractors, Dandy Lawn doesn't remove snow in the winter. Time is well-spent keeping equipment in good repair, notes Roy.

Dandy Lawn faces the same challenge all pioneers over the centuries have faced, increasing competition. The first to use Walkers in the area, they are now seeing competitors with the units. The nice thing — while a Walker can make you more competitive, it doesn't do the job by itself. And few operators have the wherewithal and togetherness to do it as efficiently and effectively as the Keelers.

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