

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS FOR YEARS TO COME

Flowers are her calling card

- No is not in their vocabulary
- Dun-Rite the first time
- A quick study in Virginia
- Common sense marketing



WALKER TALK

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PEOPLE TOGETHER AND DIVERSE

In a world where there are barriers and walls that divide people, it is encouraging to see times when the "walls are torn down" and people are brought together. Sometimes even a machine, a company and a shared interest brings people together. I have enjoyed watching the example set by Harley-Davidson where the simple act of owning a Harley breaks down barriers. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, blue collar or white collar, long hair or no hair, black or white, tall or short, man or woman, if you drive a Harley you are "in" the Harley family.

On a much smaller scale, we have been pleased to see the Walker Mower bring people together.



It has been exciting to see the camaraderie of Walker owners when they get together. Quite a few times I have witnessed contractor "competitors" who compete with each other in the local market, at a dealership or local landscape event having a good time together, laughing and swapping stories,

with this in common; they are Walker owners.

And yet while bringing people together, there is a tremendous variety among Walker owners... all kinds of people, and their uniqueness is to be enjoyed and celebrated. In thinking of the people and companies we have featured in previous issues of Walker Talk, it is fair criticism to suggest more variety in our stories. From time to time I have had a note or call saying why don't you do a Walker Talk story about somebody like me?

Starting with this issue, we want to do a better job in showing the variety of Walker owners and operators. While a primary focus in earlier issues was geographic diversity, upcoming issues will try to show the interesting and wonderful group that are Walker Mower users. We will try to tell the stories of small business and big business; young people and old people; men in business and women in business; able-bodied people and physically limited people; private owners and corporate owners; full timer and dual careerer; all interwoven with the rich individuality that God has created in each of us.

Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President

Flowers

are her calling card!



Bloomin' Flowers and Grass owner Flo Olson started out installing flowers. Now she has six Walkers that help put an exclamation point on her mowing, too.



Last year, Flo Olson tallied up the number of lawn maintenance contractors working in and around the resort community of Kalispell, Montana. By her best reckoning, there were 50 contractors. She added another 30 to her list this year, for a total of at least 80 companies, big and small, all competing for a piece of the mowing/maintenance market. Even though the owner of Bloomin' Flowers and Grass Inc. (B.F.G.) in nearby Somers operates six Walker Mowers, having a Walker isn't a competitive advantage anymore, she laments, noting that, "It must be a status symbol in Flathead County because there is a Walker being towed behind almost every pickup."

So how does B.F.G., a company that has been in business eight years, compete? For starters, the owner provides a service that few other area companies can; as the company name implies, no one puts the "bloom" on a property like Flo does. "Yes, that's really how I got started," says Olson, referring to her natural ability to design and install flower beds. Combine that service with a commitment to deliver quality and a keen sense for what makes a property look nice and you have the ingredients for a successful operation.

MORE WITH LESS

Olson and key employee Jawana Green maintain 30 prime commercial properties and large estates. In addition to installing flowers, the team mows, prunes and applies fertilizer and weed control. During the busy planting season,

the company calls on retired friends and former employees for help. In between, though, it's "lean and mean" and full speed ahead. There's no time for the gym, but lifting power shears, fertilizer bags and mower decks play a role in keeping them fit.

"We always work very hard, but manage to have fun, too," says Olson. "If I had to single out one of our strengths, it would be that we are extremely organized and efficient." In fact, she and Green have each property's routine down to a science and can almost read one another's mind. "Scary thought," says the affable Olson. Seriously, though, the duo gets as much work done as companies with more employees. It wasn't always that

"If we have a gender competitive advantage at all, it comes from having an eye for detail and being easier on equipment."

way. There was a time when B.F.G. employed eight people and serviced all different type properties. Specializing in estates and commercial properties has sharpened its competitive edge by lowering fuel consumption and reducing drive time. Fewer employees mean less repairs, less training, and higher profit margins.

When asked to describe some of her efficiencies, Olson smiles and says, "You want me to give away my trade secrets."

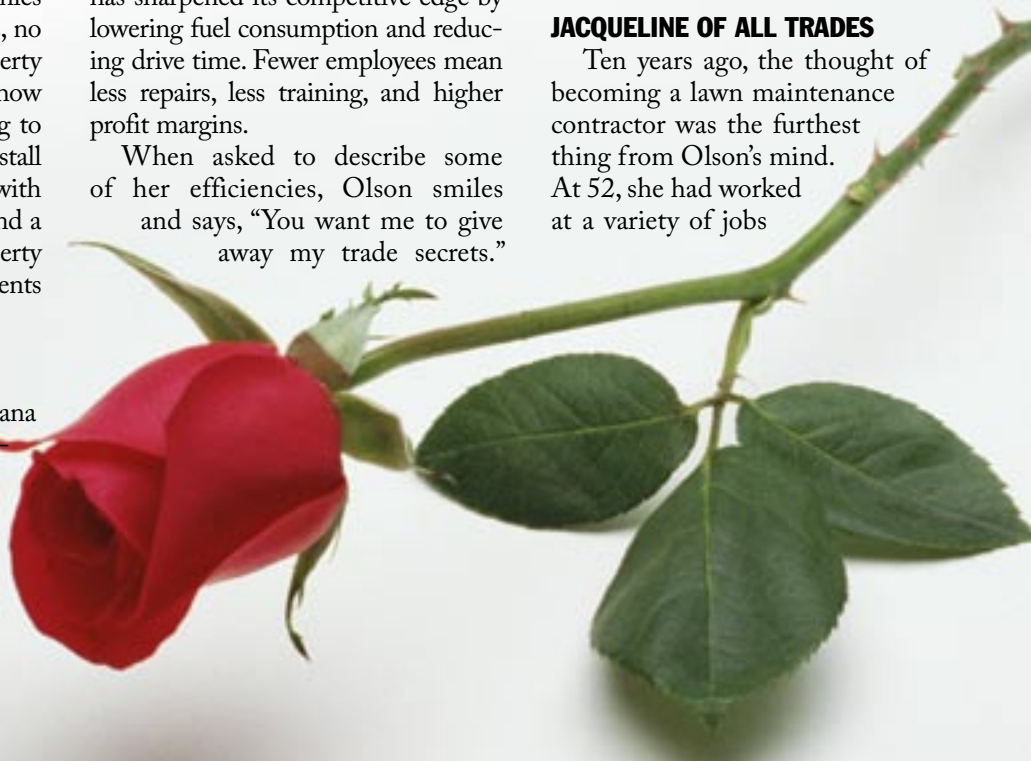
Then, she talks about cleaning flower beds with string trimmers, spraying Roundup around trees, and taking a few if any breaks during the day. Having lots of good equipment is important, she emphasizes, noting that when it comes down to investing in equipment or people, equipment gets the nod.

The owner isn't exaggerating. B.F.G. purchased two new trucks this spring, and Olson and Green are the only full-time Walker operators for six machines. The mower excess is easy to explain, since the company purchased them when it was growing and doesn't want to give any up. The extra mowers mean Bloomin' Flo always has a spare on hand and can take on added work at a moment's notice. Instead of changing decks, she also has the luxury of simply changing mowers.

The company has one 25-hp, two 20-hp, and three 26-hp Walkers, with several deck types. The 42-inch GHS decks shoulder most of the mowing responsibilities, and wider decks are for field mowing and planting flowers. Planting flowers? "That's right," says Olson. "Mowers equipped with big decks are ideal for hauling 600 flats to installation sites, and the hoppers are also great for hauling the fertilizer when spreading."

JACQUELINE OF ALL TRADES

Ten years ago, the thought of becoming a lawn maintenance contractor was the furthest thing from Olson's mind. At 52, she had worked at a variety of jobs



and thought it may be time to retire. “I’ve always liked to work but regardless of type I would soon get bored,” says Olson. An employment agent who knew of Flo’s extensive gardens at home sent her to TLC, Neil Deering’s Co. (Walker Talk No. 8) as a flowerbed person. Once there, she discovered the work she truly loved. After working a year with TLC, she was hired as head of grounds for an area corporation. Caught in a company-wide layoff, she then did what came naturally — started installing flower beds on her own. “Now, I’m never bored with my job,” says Bloomin’ Flo. “It calls for such a wide range of skills.”

Everything fell into place rather quickly. After a flower installation customer asked Bloomin’ Flo to do some mowing, she drove directly to the local Walker dealer. “I never even considered another mower,” Olson explains, “So scared, I was literally shaking when I went to the bank to borrow \$10,000 — thinking I’d tackle getting my husband’s signature later. The banker said I could, and should, get a line of credit on my own. Now I just phone and tell them how much I want.”

With the new service, the company’s name was changed from Bloomin’ Flowers to Bloomin’ Flowers and Grass, Inc.; her sister Ardell Casey set up and maintained the books (a responsibility that Flo has since taken over); and husband Ray provided the technical expertise. He built the trailers and truck dump boxes and has even adapted three Walkers for spraying weed control and spreading fertilizer.

Olson’s business grew. During her second year, she added \$25,000 to her revenue stream, and the new company kept growing at that pace. Today, her sales are nearing the \$200,000 mark. B.F.G. could be bigger since Olson turns down work almost daily. Instead, the owner prefers to keep

the business at a manageable level so she can do the work instead of having to manage people.

Bloomin’ Flo’s reputation for providing landscape maintenance now rivals her reputation with flowers. Colorful, well-maintained properties are her primary marketing tools, along with neat and clean equipment and a professional demeanor. The company is involved with industry groups, and Olson stays current with training, licenses and insurance.



Flo with key employee Jawana Green maintain 30 prime properties.

Being a certified turf grass professional and licensed applicator helps to position the owner as an operator of a quality, full-service company.

Does being a woman with a mostly female crew in a profession dominated by men give her a competitive advantage? “I don’t think so,” says Olson, thoughtfully. “If we have a gender competitive advantage at all, it comes from having an eye for detail and being a bit easier on equipment.”

BEHIND THE SCENES

Olson is proud of what she does. “There is great satisfaction at the end of the day seeing what we’ve accomplished with the Walker Mowers. Even after an exceptionally tough day, I love to come home, eat, climb on a Walker, and mow my own lawn.

It’s my biggest stress releaser.”

She says she is fortunate and grateful to have reliable employees to call whenever she needs help, and credits most of her success to 7-year employee Green. Jawana is my ‘right arm and left brain,’ ” Olson emphasizes. Bloomin’ Flo also would be remiss to leave her husband Ray out of the mix. “Ray works for the county, but in his spare time — when not flying in his biplane — he is our head mechanic, too,” says Olson. “He keeps our equipment

in top running form and helps us if we get into a work crunch.”

What does the future hold for Bloomin’ Flo? Retirement isn’t in the picture, yet, and it may never be there, says Olson, who enjoys working too much to stop now. She notes, though, that property values and taxes are sky high, and if the right offer came through, who knows, they may just sell their home.

That would be a tough proposition, though. The Olsons live on beautiful Flathead Lake and their 3-acre property includes a spacious workshop for Ray and a cottage that doubles as an office for Flo. Any offer would have to be good enough to at least allow the couple to replicate their current situation. In the meantime, it’s more bloomin’ and mowin’ for Flo Olson. **WT**

‘NO’ is not in our vocabulary!



Earthworks General Manager Chris Lee with foreman Angel Perez

Mark Chaffin, owner of Earthworks, Inc., in Lillian, Texas, admits to being a rather low-profile individual who runs a low-profile company. He shies away from the spotlight and his company does very little advertising. In fact, until two years ago, the Earthworks' name wasn't even on the sides of its trucks. This may not seem all that unusual until you learn that Earthworks, in business since 1979, employs 200 people, has more than 200 commercial clients, owns 52 trucks, and operates 33 Walker Mowers.

When asked how his company grew to be so successful with a minimal marketing effort, Chaffin replies, "Quality and never saying no. Our sites do the advertising for us, and our motto is to never say no to a customer. We will do virtually anything clients ask as long as it pertains to the outside of their facility." Among services Earthworks' crews provide are maintenance, installation and tree work; they install and repair irrigation systems, and offer hydro-seeding and lawn care services — mostly within the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex area. Company headquarters is located about 30 miles southwest of Dallas; a satellite location was recently completed near DFW airport.

STEADY GROWTH....THEN LIFT OFF

Chaffin started his company after leaving the restaurant business. His first mowing account was an apartment complex, and to this day similar properties are the mainstay of his operation. From the very beginning, he practiced his "never say no" motto and delivered on special requests. Take down a sign? "Not a problem," he would tell customers. If the task was something his crews

couldn't perform, he would subcontract out the service. As the company grew, though, Chaffin brought additional services in-house. Twelve years ago, wife and business partner Mana received her irrigator's license, giving the company control over the maintenance and installation of irrigation systems. To control the quality of plant material – Earthworks installs 40,000 flats of annual color – the company operates nine greenhouses on its 12-acre property.

The company eventually peaked at between 30 and 35 employees, just the right size for a hands-on owner who was a stickler for quality. To sustain growth, though, the owner knew that something had to change. He had to start delegating more responsibility and broaden the scope of properties his crews were maintaining.

Answering the call, son and now general manager Chris Lee came on board seven years ago. "Chris came in and really made a difference," says Chaffin. "He started to assume control of the day-to-day operation, and we began to take a new look at the type of properties we maintained. Until then, we had focused primarily on high-end properties, the intent being to keep them looking great. If we wanted to grow, though, we had to expand our niche to include lower-end properties, with the same intent – to make them look great." Mana agrees, adding that expanding the niche offered a new and different challenge. "Instead of working hard to sustain a property's high-quality level, we now faced the challenge of giving 'lesser' properties a face lift. Still, it was something Mark enjoyed doing. He wanted properties to look their very best, for the clients' sake and to please himself."

The strategy worked. What was once steady but slow growth changed dramatically, and within the last six years Earthworks has more than



Earthworks' crews operate 33 Walker mowers. Nearly every one of them is equipped with a 48-inch GHS deck and powered by a 20-hp Kohler engine. The company has tried other brands, but says nothing compares to the quality of cut and ease of maintenance the Walker delivers.

doubled in size. In addition to a bigger market and being able to delegate responsibility, the owner attributes growth to establishing systems that continue to ensure a quality product. His formula involves having the right people in the right place, a program that responds quickly to customer requests, and, of course, having the right equipment to get the job done.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

Earthworks purchased its first Walker in 1986 after Chaffin had seen the mower at a Dallas landscaping show. "I was impressed with the size of the machine, its weight, and its design," he remembers. "I knew immediately it would be perfect for our application. End of story." Chaffin says he couldn't find a Walker dealer in the Dallas area so he purchased his first Walker Mower from a dealer in Colorado Springs. Since then, though, Dallas-area Walker dealers

have supplied Earthworks with three to four mowers every year. To date, the company has 33 Walkers and according to head shop technician Frank Maxey, nearly every one of them is equipped with a 48-inch GHS deck and powered by a 20-hp Kohler engine.

"When you find something that works, you stick with it," says Maxey. "We've tried other brands, but nothing compares to the quality of cut the Walker delivers and they are also easy to maintain." Lee agrees, adding, "Our guys like the way they maneuver, they are easy to operate, and they are durable. In fact, we have a couple of units that are 15 years old." He goes on to explain that on average a Walker will get 35 hours a week of use during the growing season, slightly less during the winter months.

"The mowers have never disappointed me," says Chaffin. "Our clients look at our work and tell us



Left to right: Head technician Frank Maxey with owner Mark Chaffin, Mark's wife Mana, and son Chris.

that something about the way their properties look sets us apart from the competition. That something is the crisp, clean look the grass has after being mowed by a Walker." As important as they are to the operation, though, the Walkers are only part of the company's quality story. Even more important are the people who operate them and whose responsibility the properties ultimately are.

"I think a big part of our success has so do with how we treat employees," Lee emphasizes. "We don't have favorites, here. We treat every employee equally, just like we would want to be treated." He goes on to say that more than half of the companies 200 employees are H2B workers, many of whom have been coming back to Earthworks for six or seven years.

Training is key, too. The company prefers to operate specialized crews because, as Chaffin notes, "It's better to be 'superior' at doing one thing rather than being 'good' at doing several."

Again, he defers to how important quality is to his operation. To control quality, two accounts managers and two field supervisors walk every property at least once every two weeks. Earthworks also employs a training supervisor whose job it is to train new crew members and to actually work on site with a crew that may not be performing up to expectations.

"I think a big part of our success has so do with how we treat employees. We treat every employee equally, just like we would want to be treated."

Even then, Chaffin emphasizes that quality can never be taken for granted. "Every employee in the company has authority to fill out a 'Red Alert' form that identifies a problem, large or small, with any property we work on. Once the form is filled out, the problem is corrected within 24 hours."

The company is also vigilant about safety. All drivers are required to attend a defensive driving class and trucks are thoroughly checked every afternoon when they return from the field. (Company technicians work from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.) "When you have more than 20 mowing crews and an equal number of other specialty crews, that's a lot of checking," Lee admits. "But having that many trucks on the road results in a lot of exposure." Since it is located right in the middle of Earthworks' service area, the new satellite location will cut down on some of this exposure and travel time, as well as fuel costs, he adds, noting that most, if not all, the maintenance crews will work out of the DFW office.

When asked what is in store for Earthworks, Chaffin says simply, "More growth. In fact, our plan is to double in size over the next five years." The new facility is an important part of this strategy, he emphasizes, as is having trained and loyal employees, systems and processes in place, and the right equipment. The cornerstone of this growth, though, is still delivering a quality product and having a "never say no mentality." **WT**



BOB T'S

Tech Talk

‘Winter Hibernation’

You're probably thinking "why an article about winter storage in July?" Because the next issue of Walker Talk comes out in January. That's too late and if you're an eternal procrastinator – spring is not far away. The purpose here is to stimulate some thought about the positive economics of winter preparation come spring and hopefully the procrastinators will see the light. After a long and sometimes grueling spring, summer and fall most cutters are ready for some well-deserved rest and relaxation. Before taking off on that tropical vacation consider spending some time preparing your ever faithful and hard-working Walker Mower for hibernation. You wouldn't take off on vacation in your dirty work clothes, so let's not allow our mowers to sleep with grass under the deck, debris in the engine cooling fins or clippings in the catcher box. If you're quite comfortable doing this sort of maintenance, then proceed. If you're not, then make an appointment with your local dealer and get this done before vacation.

To start let's give "Ol Faithful" a much deserved bath. A garden hose and gentle flow of water will be much more appreciated than a stinging blast at 1,000 psi (or more) from the high-pressure washer. Seriously, have you given much thought to where that pressurized water can go? It will find its way around and into bearings, seals and through the rubber seals on electrical plugs and electronic components. Besides removing caked-on dirt and grass that blast of water will remove decals and paint. Always try to avoid water directly contacting electrical components and plugs.

Tech Tip – If your mower is equipped with a control panel and ECU (electronic control unit) cover them with a plastic bag before washing. Once it's washed, blow it off with compressed air so water doesn't stand in crevasses beckoning rust and corrosion to start forming.

Tech Tip – Grease and oil all the lubrication points to purge any moisture that may have found its way into bearings and pivot points. If your Walker is equipped with an air-cooled engine, it should be removed, the shrouds taken off and the cooling fins thoroughly cleaned. Keeping the engine cool gives life to an air-cooled engine. While you have the shrouds off, examine the wiring carefully for nicks and frayed areas and repair. Check all connections for corrosion and clean as needed. Before setting that nice clean engine back into the chassis, unplug all the electrical plugs, clean each one and reapply a light coat of dielectric grease before plugging back together. **Tech Tip** – If this is a Kohler EFI engine, Do Not apply dielectric grease to the ECU plug. While the engine is out, it would be a great time to check for wear in any pivot points and bearings such as idler pulleys.

I'm not trying to increase your local dealer's parts business when I say – replace all of the belts and pulleys if you have put 500 or more hours on since the last time they were replaced. This is cheap insurance compared to lost mowing time and employee wages. After reinstalling the engine, it's time to change all the vital fluids and filters – coolant, oils, gear grease, air and oil filters. Check all the tire air pressures. Take a close look at those tires. Maybe it's time for some treads, especially if you mow a lot of slopes and hillsides. Pull the deck off the tractor. Check of the U-joint tube and shaft for wear of the splines and bearings. Sharpen and balance the blades.

We're just about ready to tuck "Baby" in for the winter, but before you do, run the mower for a few minutes and check out all the operations. Let's make sure every thing is functioning correctly. Pay close attention to the safety circuits. And now it's time for a good snooze. Sleep well old friend and we'll see you in the spring. **WT**

Name an industry other than farming where the cost of doing business is going up while the dollar-value of the product is going down? The answer, of course, is landscape maintenance, and just like good farmers, successful landscape maintenance contractors have to carry a sharp pencil, produce an excellent product, and be as efficient as possible on the job. Enter the Stott brothers. The name of their company is Dun-Rite, located in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and brothers Mark and Kevin aren't bashful about making the point that its "dun-rite, the first time." It's a story they've been

successfully telling customers since 1989, and it doesn't get old. In fact, it gives the brothers a competitive advantage at a time when too many lawn maintenance contractors are generating revenue by turning over as many properties as they can in a day.

"It's not speed that makes us money," says Mark. "Instead, it's being as efficient as we can on jobs and making sure the end product is absolutely perfect." The combination, he adds, is hard to beat.

The brothers are efficient. All their 30-plus mowing accounts are within a two-mile radius. They mow three days a week, and their last account on Thursday is only a half

mile from where they deposit their grass clippings. The brothers don't send three workers to fill up a truck with gas, and all equipment is fueled and ready to go in the morning. "Nothing irritates me more than to find one of our employees walking back to the truck to refuel less than an hour after we arrived at our first mowing site," says Kevin.

They have the right equipment for the job, too. In addition to three Walker Mowers, the brothers devised a loader system that effortlessly deposits clippings into their dump truck. The emphasis is on the word "effortlessly." "This is a tough business and this is tough work,"

Doing it Rite the first



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Installations & Maintenance

Stott brothers
Kevin and Mark
refuse to trade off
quality for speed.





A truck loader system devised by the Stotts saves time and money handling clippings.

time in Massachusetts

adds Kevin. "Anything anyone can do to make it less labor intensive is good for employees and good for the bottom line, too. You have to have the right equipment or you're just not able to compete in this market. You cannot manually handle grass clippings and leaves and expect to be profitable"

The Stotts are efficient off the job, too. Their new 30' x 60' Morton building shop has radiant floor heat, a lift for their Walkers and plenty of light — all in a perfectly clean and orderly environment. Kevin's work bench is even neat and clean, too.

Every tool has a home and is home when not in use. What may seem like "overkill" — having four like-size wrenches on every peg, only makes perfect sense to Kevin. "If two people, even three need the same wrench, there's one on the peg for them. If they cannot find one there, there's one here in my toolbox.

"It's practical," says Kevin, referring to his tool alignment and tool bench. Practical also describes Dun-Rite's attraction to Walker Mowers. "I saw a Walker for the first time 12 years ago and thought it would be ideal for our properties," Kevin

recalls. "We purchased our first one in 1993 and then followed up with a new one each of the next two years. Today, we operate three 25-hp models, two liquid cooled and all with 48-inch GHS decks."

Kevin says the company has stuck with the mowers because they do a great job and, unlike other brands, when there is an update, it can be retrofitted to older models. He walks around a unit on the lift and points to four or five areas where recent improvements have been made. "Come on," he says. "What other manufacturer would think far enough

ahead – or back – to make changes that improve nearly every model that was ever made.”

QUALITY FIRST

The brothers were raised in the nursery business and their father did a little lawn maintenance on the side. When they were young, they cut their proverbial teeth riding a Wheel Horse mower and walking behind a 21-inch mower. After graduating from high school, Kevin and Mark each started their own landscape maintenance businesses. A few years later, in 1989, they joined forces under the name of Mark's company, Dun-Rite.

From the beginning, the company offered full-service maintenance. Mowing was an integral part of the operation and the Walkers played a key role maintaining 100 properties. Over the years, though, the business has evolved. Mark explains, “Instead of mowing 100 residential accounts, we now mow 32 that are a mix of commercial and residential customers. Prices were being driven down so bad that we decided to focus on other areas. Part of our problem is that we are fussy, and you cannot compete on price when quality is your first priority.”

He continues, “So now we do a little bit of everything for customers we have had for years. We sell planting projects, shrub work and brick work. We lay sod, put down mulch, install retaining walls and walkways and offer complete design, installation and maintenance. We mow three days a week and do landscaping projects the other two days.”

Mark says they continue to offer a mowing service because it is “recession proof.” Besides that, he adds, both he and Kevin like to mow. They charge between \$40 and \$45/hr for mowing with their Walkers, the minimum charge for any job is \$65. Dun-Rite doesn't mow, blow and go, though. When the mowing crew leaves a property, flower beds have been weeded, and driveways and walkways are clean. Their fastidiousness complements the job the Walker does, helping to make their properties stand out among the rest.

“Our customers appreciate the work we do and we appreciate them,” Mark emphasizes. “We have had some for nearly 15 years and there's not a bad one among them, not one.”

WINTER BLISS

New England winters can be long and tiresome, and not every landscape contractor welcomes the season with open arms. Even Dun-Rite closes down on December 15th, but the Stott brothers don't pack for a vacation. Instead they power up their other business, a snow plowing and sanding operation. Working together, Mark and Kevin can make

just as much money sanding parking lots and plowing snow for a few months as they can maintaining properties for eight months. Their overhead is minimal and not many competitors are keen about getting up 3 o'clock every morning to spread sand. It doesn't bother these two men, though. They simply enjoy the work, and working together is something they've done since they can remember.

“Ideally, we would like to focus even more on our winter time operation and possibly cut back on our landscap-



“What other manufacturer would think far enough ahead to make changes that improve nearly every model ever made,” says Kevin Stott.

ing business,” Kevin relates. Mark agrees, adding, “In this business, it's not how much you do or how fast you do it that counts. It's being efficient, doing the job right, and having great customers. I think we're where we need to be in all areas and now we just have to stay focused and continue to grow profitably.”

Being profitable is the key, the Stotts emphasize. As they point out, what many property owners don't understand is that landscapes, all landscapes, grow over time. Trees get bigger and shrubs get taller, and to keep properties looking nice requires more, not less effort over time. Doing more for less has never made sense and getting the job done faster isn't the answer to profitability. The answer is to find customers who appreciate good work and then doing it right the first time. **WT**



Young entrepreneur is a quick study

Driving down the road, 20-year-old Jason Fawcett cradles two cell phones. In between calls he talks about his life as an owner of a very successful lawn maintenance company and full-time fire fighter.

"My fiancé Heather and I figured it out the other day," says Fawcett, president of Elizabeth River Lawn & Landscapes, Inc., in Suffolk, Virginia. "Between working at the fire station and managing my company, I work more than 200 hours every two weeks. It doesn't bother me though. I

enjoy working hard and I'm building a future."

That's an understatement. Fawcett has been mowing lawns and driving trucks since he can remember. Throughout high school mowing 40 lawns a week and fighting fires as a volunteer fire fighter were standard fare. After graduating, he trained to be a professional fire fighter and, later, joined the Federal Fire service near Williamsburg, a 40-minute commute, and began working a staggered 24-hour on, 24-hour off schedule.

"My schedule is kind of tough to

Jason Fawcett, president of Elizabeth River Lawn & Landscapes, Inc., recently added water features to his service offering.

figure out," Fawcett admits. "It goes like this. I work 24 hours on, 24 hours off for four days and then get three days off. The rotation repeats itself and then I get four days off, and it repeats itself again and I get five days off. Then it starts over." When he's not at the station or en route, he's living with his parents, building a home and office/shop for his business, and mowing and maintaining 190 accounts.

Suffolk mowing/maintenance crews: Left to right: Jason, Elliott Erbe, David Hartung (sitting) and Jon Coffey

"I think I could maintain twice, maybe three times the number of accounts," Fawcett reflects. "The thing is, you cannot skimp on quality and be successful. I learned about customer satisfaction growing up when I worked at my grandfather's auto and truck body shop and towing business. If you're willing to work hard and keep customers satisfied, then you can and will be successful."

Fawcett started his maintenance company in 1999 while still in high school. "That was the first year I filed tax returns," he recalls. That year, he reported \$35,000 in revenue. Last year, the figure jumped to \$300,000 and he projects to do \$400,000 in mowing and maintenance this year.

TWO CREWS

Elizabeth River Lawn & Landscape has 10 full-time employees and runs two maintenance crews. One crew maintains a mix of commercial and high-end residential accounts in and around the Suffolk area. The other maintains 40 hotels in nearby Virginia Beach. Each crew is armed with a GHS Walker Mower and Shindaiwa hand-held equipment. In addition, the company owns a Kubota ZD zero-turn rider, a Toro Z-Master, a couple of Toro mid-size walk-behinds and a Kubota L-3400 front-end loader.

Fawcett explains, "We offer full-service maintenance. Crews prune, weed, apply weed control and fertilizer, and install seasonal color. In fact, last winter we planted 18,000 flowers and this spring we did another 23,000." Approximately one-third of his properties are what he calls "Walker" accounts – where customers want that manicured look and clippings collected.



"Scott agreed to demonstrate the mower for my most difficult customer to please, my grandmother ... She said it was the 'best it ever looked,' so I purchased the mower with the money I saved mowing lawns."

"I saw my first Walker on a competitor's trailer six years ago," Fawcett recalls. "I asked him 'what's so good about this machine?' After he told me, I called up Scott Dodson, manager of Walker dealer Turf & Garden. Scott agreed to demonstrate the mower for my most difficult customer to please, my grandmother. I cut half the lawn, turned on her irrigation system for 15 minutes and then cut the other half. She said it was the 'best it ever looked,' so I purchased the mower with the money I saved mowing lawns. My first Walker was a 26-hp unit with a 48-inch GHS deck. Just this spring, I purchased my second one, a 20-hp machine, again with a 48-inch GHS deck."

HELPING HAND

At first blush, one wonders how this young man achieved so much in such a short time. He admits to being more than a little stressed out at times, but who isn't, he asks. Fawcett has incredible drive and he has a vision. Beyond that, he also has some

good help from family and employees. His two foremen David Hartung and Jason Oldfield are experienced and reliable, and Fawcett has known

"We're in business not just to mow lawns and install plant material. We're in business to help customers do something that they may neither have the time nor expertise to do."

them and most of the crew members for several years. His father Roger, a retired fire fighter, helps him with the financial side of the business.

"Jason has built this business so rapidly in such a short period of time that he really has no time for doing the necessary accounting and other book work," says Roger. "I have stepped in to help, with payroll, billing and just keeping a pulse on financials. Jason's company is profitable, but it will become even more profitable as he gains experience."

Jason's grandfather Morris Finks comes up often in discussions, too. "I consider my grandfather to be my mentor," says Fawcett. "Like my father, he has an incredible work ethic and I spent most of my early years tagging along behind him at his shop. I think everyone needs someone to look up to and to help show the way."

A NOTE OF CAUTION

Then, there's his mother Candy who has been working for her father, Jason's grandfather, for more than 30 years. "I worry about Jason because I think he is working too hard," says Candy. "I just hope he stays with the fire department for his 20 years so he doesn't have to continue to work hard. The lawn business is hard work."

Fawcett understands where his mother is coming from, and he agrees that staying with the fire department would be the wise thing to do. But he also plans to stay with the lawn maintenance business, too. As he puts it, he enjoys working hard, but also wants to have something to show for it when the day is done. A reputable company is that "something." Furthermore, he adds, there's more synergy between being a lawn maintenance contractor and being a fire fighter than one may think.

"Oh sure, it's kind of exciting riding in a fire truck with all the lights and whistles. But the thing I like most about being a part of the department is helping people. When you can rescue someone from a burning building or otherwise help people who need help, that's pretty gratifying. I feel similarly about the landscaping business. We're in business not just to mow lawns and install plant material. We're in business to help customers do something that they may neither have the time nor expertise to do."

Helping people – whether they are in distress or frustrated by their landscape – along with continuing to grow his already growing maintenance, is part of Fawcett's plan. The tagline on his trucks reads, "Planting the way for the Future." It could read Planning, too, because this owner plans to lend a helping hand in Suffolk for years to come. **WT**



Jason with father Ray, who says Jason's business will be even more profitable as he gains experience.



Common Sense Marketing

When it comes to selling your wares, you don't need a degree in marketing from a top 10 university, nor do you need an extravagant marketing plan. Oh, sure, degrees and plans are nice, but they don't necessarily generate business. What does increase sales is a good dose of common sense. Walker users have pointed that out in issues of Walker Talk over the years, in many different ways.

"Our trucks, our employees and our customers do our advertising for us," said one Walker operator several years ago. "It always comes back to word of mouth." Another Walker user added, "You couldn't beat it when we started in business, and it is still our most effective marketing tool." Adds another, "The only form of advertisement we have ever used is our work and the satisfied customers who spread the word to neighbors and friends."

There are other common-sense marketing strategies that work, too, depending on the market and the desired end result. Networking,

always important, can be accomplished through formalized networking groups or informal gatherings. One Walker user, for example, still networks extensively by playing hockey with clients and suppliers. Networking

is also important for commercial maintenance contractors whose contacts "come and go." Said one veteran operator, "The key is to not only identify and build a relationship with the person in charge of grounds maintenance, but to network and get to know other people. The process helps provide a smooth transition if and when the prime contact either leaves or changes positions with the company."

An effective plan doesn't require an advanced degree or a ton of money. Define your customers and reach them where they are.

GET BY GIVING

Volunteering your service on community projects, communicating routinely with customers and making yourself available

to them, and following up quickly on complaints all fall into the general category of good marketing sense.

THE 'OBVIOUS' PAYS OFF

"I know it sounds too simple, but the most important marketing move any company can make, large or small, is to do great work," says Marty Grunder, founder and president of Grunder Landscaping Co. in Miamisburg, Ohio. "Great work sells. Conversely, the most sophisticated marketing tools in the world cannot overcome poor work or otherwise bad service."

As companies mature, owners have a tendency to either forget or otherwise lose sight of simple marketing strategies that were successful for them in the beginning, adds Grunder, who is also a well-known Green Industry consultant with more than 21 years of real-life marketing under his belt. "For example, no matter how great a job you're doing, never underestimate how important it is to look like you know what you're doing. Clean equipment and uniformed employees will convey a professional image and signage on all four sides of your truck and trailer will tell people who you are."

He continues, "Knocking on doors may seem old fashioned, especially in today's high tech world, but cold calling is still effective. Among messages it sends to prospective customers, it tells them that you want their business and that you are very approachable. Using 'door hangers' can be effective, too, especially when the doors are in close proximity to the 'good work' you're doing."

GOIN' HUNTING

When talking common-sense marketing, this contractor likes to use the old deer hunting analogy. "If you're looking for deer, you don't put up a tree stand in the middle of a city." The same holds true when you are

IS YOUR MESSAGE WELL GROUNDED?

Your overall marketing message is comprised of many smaller messages that you send customers. How many of the following do you send?

1. Good work, including good communication and follow-up.
2. Professional image, including uniforms and clean equipment and trucks.
3. Signage all the way around your trailers.
4. A person instead of a machine answering your phone.
5. Well-informed crews and approachable owners and managers.
6. Targeted newsletters, door hangers and cold calls.
7. Community, other volunteer projects.
8. Always networking.

looking for customers, he adds. "It is more cost-effective and you will have more success if you target your customers. Using a mass medium such as the Yellow Pages works to a degree, but it also tells prospects that you are 'everyone's landscape contractor,' and that is a label that most operators do not want.

"Take a look at your customers and find out what they have in common. More than likely, they share certain characteristics, including income, property type, age and so forth. This is your market and that's where you should be spending your marketing time, effort and dollars. If you send out newsletters, target your market and customize its contents to the reader. Again, it may be obvious, but make sure anything you send out has your name, address and phone

number in plain view. When marketing your services, the last thing you want to play is hard to get."

BACK TO BASICS

According to Grunder, who started his business when he was 16 years old and has since grown it into a \$4 million company, it's not the fancy software and catchy phrases that sell. It's the basics. "You may need a presence on the Internet, but spending a lot of money developing a Web page and then expecting it to deliver results may be unreasonable.

"Use common sense. What do you expect from suppliers? How do you want to be treated by automobile dealers? If your expectations are higher than what you are delivering to your own customers, then you have some basic marketing work to do." Seemingly little things such as having a person answer the phone means a lot to customers, he notes. How frustrating is it to call someone and then be asked by a digital voice to peruse a company menu? "If you cannot afford a full-time receptionist, have phone calls routed to someone else in the company, or to your cell phone," Grunder advises.

Marketing and effective communicating go hand-in-hand. In a Walker Talk story several years ago, a contractor told how he made it easy for customers to identify the crew foreman. The foreman simply wore a white cap instead of a blue one like the other crew members. If a property manager or other customers had a question, they wouldn't have to search around for the person in charge. Simple? Yes, but effective. Again, it all comes down to common sense. You can and probably should spend upwards of 3, 4, or 5 percent of your gross revenue on advertising and other marketing efforts, but spend the money wisely. Your money and your marketing message will go further when it is grounded in common sense. **WT**



MB MODEL IS LEADING GROWTH

Walker Mower factory shipments have experienced a 25% increase in the last 12 months, and in its first year of production, most of this growth can be traced to the new MB model. While other Walker models sold about the same number as the previous year, the MB delivered a whole new increment of growth, taking a 22% share of the total factory shipments.

The market acceptance of the MB while maintaining sales of the other models confirms new customers are being attracted. It was the design goal of the MB to appeal to a bigger share of the “prosumer” homeowners and it seems to be working. Owner registration data for the MB shows 75% are being sold to private homeowners which is almost opposite of the historical sales pattern of the other models where 30% go to homeowners and 70% to commercial/professional use.

Walker reports that customers are giving the MB model high marks for its compact size, agile handling, user friendly servicing (tilt-up deck) and value pricing.

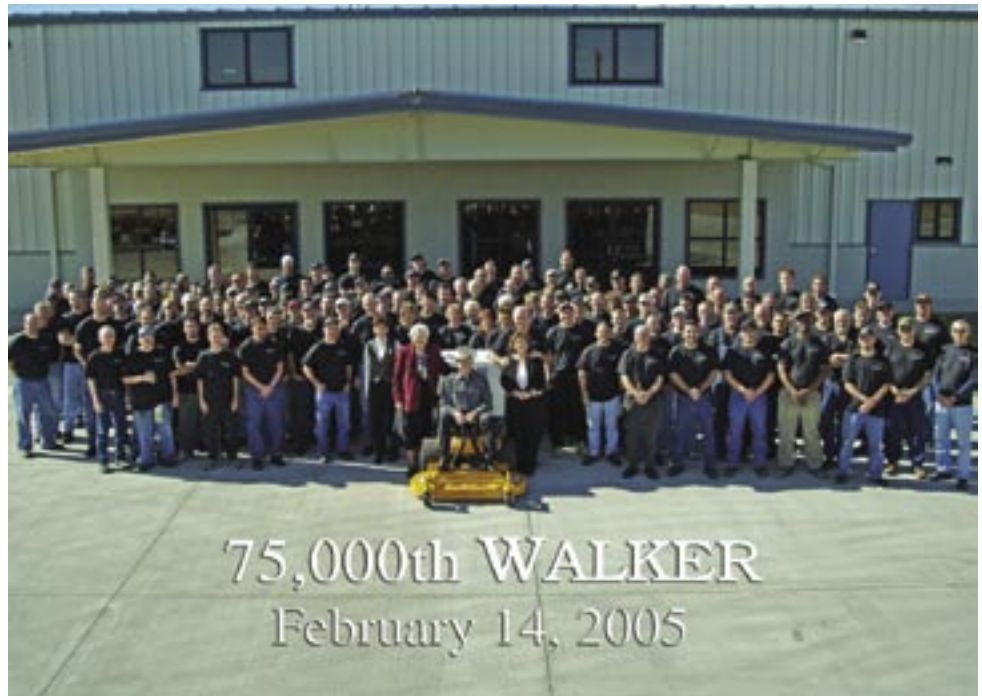
LONG-TIME EMPLOYEES ARE FACTORY HALLMARK

Looking at the Walker factory employment records tells an interesting story. Both low turnover and high tenure stand out in comparison the national statistics supplied by the U.S. Department of Labor/Bureau of Statistics. Recent national rates show voluntary turnover is 20% and average tenure is four years of service while the Walker factory has 5% turnover and an average tenure of eight years. With 156 employees currently at the factory, this tenure multiplies to 1,248 combined years of experience in producing Walker Mowers.

Walker believes its policies of level manufacturing, family-friendliness and providing a good working environment are responsible for the stability in employment. The factory operation is organized around “level” manufac-

turing which means steady, year-round production of mowers and not using any seasonal or temporary workers. Walker talks about “family friendly” policies that, among other things, is not using shift work and arranging work hours so that families can spend time together.

Do factory employment policies affect customers? Walker thinks so. They see a ripple effect that benefits both the employees and end-customers. As Bob Walker puts it, “Long-time employees produce a higher quality, more consistent product with more creativity, more dedication, more problem solving and less retraining than factories where employees tend to be temporary. We believe our customers can tell the difference in our product and our service.”



WALKER 75,000TH CELEBRATION

On February 14th, 2005, the Walker factory celebrated producing the 75,000th Walker Mower, also coinciding with the 25th year since the beginning of production in 1980. Walker employees and their families marked the occasion with a barbeque lunch, Dixieland music by the Queen City Jazz Band and a group photo. Max Walker, company founder (he is 82 now), drove the 75,000th machine out of the assembly building and posed with employees for the photo.



MW STRUT KIT BOOSTS HILLSIDE HANDLING

A new configuration has been developed for the Model MW to improve handling and increase traction when working on slopes. The optional kit (P/N 9360) installs a solid connection (strut) between the tractor and deck and replaces the tail wheel on the tractor with a retractable kickstand. This allows the operator to push down on the handlebar to transfer weight to the drive wheels and makes the MW handle more like a conventional walk-behind. The deck tilt-up function is maintained by using the retractable kickstand.

The strut kit is offered as an option while the factory standard configuration will continue to be the stand-alone tractor with a tail wheel. It is thought that most operators, operating on relatively flat areas will prefer the tail wheel-equipped tractor or the optional SA9500 retractable sulky.



MODEL MTL31 IN PRODUCTION

Production of the new Model MTL31 was started in March 2005; the most powerful Walker Mower ever. The 31-hp Kohler Aegis Engine is a state-of-the-art design combining a water-cooled engine and Bosch® fuel injection technology. Operators will enjoy this engine package with easy starting, consistent running tem-

peratures, fuel economy and lots of pulling power when using the larger mowing decks. Also, top speed of this model is increased to 7 MPH. A change in transmission gearing and adding steering lever dampeners provides the higher speed while maintaining good control response.

BREAK-AWAY BLADE KIT OPTION



Break-away mower blades are being offered for use in mowing applications with lots of ground contact and debris. This design minimizes blade damage and impact and shock loading on the deck and drive train. Kits available for DSD42, 48, 56 and 74 decks.

MB SPREAD AXLE KIT

Dealers or customers may install a bolt-on kit to replace the standard single tail wheel on the Model MB with a two wheel wide axle configuration.

Advantages are tail wheels tracking within the drive wheel track and a little smoother ride. Down side is the bigger rear dimension causes loss of maneuverability when working in tight areas.

BEDSHAPER® ATTACHMENT

The BedShaper® attachment for the Walker Mower is now available from Walker dealers by an exclusive marketing

agreement with Schiller-Pfeiffer, Southampton, PA (manufacturers of Little Wonder and BedShaper® product lines).

Please send to:
P.O. Box 47
Fort Atkinson, WI 53538-0047

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The following poem was written and performed by cowboy poet Baxter Black at the Walker Mowers Family Reunion (August 2000). Since that date, we have met and heard stories about a number of "silent partners" who support their loved ones who use Walker Mowers. Whether they provide a service in the business or emotional support at home, we salute the "silent partner" who often times is not heard, might be a little unappreciated, but is always faithful.

THE SILENT PARTNER

Baxter Black
August 2000

Her name's on the note at the Valley Bank, boys,
Though she might have questioned the loan
She signed her John Henry 'neath yours on the line,
And she will 'til the kids are all grown.

Nobody's counted the pickups she's pulled
Still wearin' her nighty 'cause it never starts
Kept track of the grass stains or grease on the towels
And dirty clothes pockets of lawn mower parts.

Or the number of prayers for the man in her bed
God only knows, 'cause He's keepin' track.
She's buildin' up interest somewhere down the line
To use in a trade on his first cardiac.

She puts up with calls she knows he should take
Regarding a sprinkler, a lawn or a limb
And questions they desperately need answers for
When no one knows the answers but him.

She patiently listens to excuses he makes
For bein' so late gettin' home
The help had all gone to their family and friends
So he finished the job all alone.

She offers opinions that seldom sink in
'Til time, oft as not, proves she was right.
But it's dang hard to figger how she could have known
See, you're not the only one that worries at night.

She's old as the mountains and young as the spring
Timeless in labor and wisdom and love.
Of all of God's creatures a man gets to share
The wife of a lawn mower man was sent from above.

So lay there tonight when you go to bed.
Remember your pardner, she's tried and she's true.
You're lucky my man to have such a friend,
Take care of her, 'cause she takes care of you.

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