

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS FOR YEARS TO

Give a boy boots,
or teach
him to mow

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WALKER TALK

My Dad

After the passing of my Dad in September, there were lots of handwritten notes in the cards received, face-to-face visits, and also many phone calls and e-mails. It warmed my heart to know that Dad had touched so many lives in a positive way, and that the stories told and remembered showed how one life, well-lived, can make a difference.

I had the privilege of being inside our family and watching my Dad live and work, "up close and personal". I thought it would be a tribute to my Dad to get personal and tell you about the kind of man my Dad was. First of all, he was the same person at home, at work and at church. He was the "real deal" in every setting.

My Dad would answer to the name of "Christian", but most importantly, he was a Christ-follower and a Believer. He knew the Bible, had a lot of Scripture memorized, and did his best to follow the great principles taught by Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible. He had a Bible verse memorized to quote for almost every occasion.

My Dad was honest. In all my growing up years, and years of working together, I never heard my Dad tell a lie and I never saw him cheat anyone in his dealings with other people.

My Dad had courage and was a risk taker. Imagine the courage it took being a farmer in Kansas in the 50s and deciding to start a manufacturing company. His college education was interrupted by WWII and he had no formal training in business, engineering or manufacturing—all disciplines that are necessary for designing a product and setting up a manufacturing operation. Also, there was little money, which made a big challenge for him to "poor boy" his way into business. My Dad liked to say that he went to the "School of Hard Knocks" with a degree in T&E—trial and error.

My Dad was generous. He was a giver and not a taker. He modeled the spirit of generosity very well for all of us in the family.

My Dad was committed to his family, to his work and to the Lord. He was diligent in his work and would never give up on doing what he thought he was supposed to be doing until it was finished. A favorite Bible verse speaks to this: "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He (the Lord) is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day." — II Timothy 1:12.

My Dad was not perfect. I saw him make mistakes, I saw him apologize, I saw him change his mind, and I saw him work to make amends.

My Dad loved people—all kinds of people. He did an especially good job of loving my Mother for 68 years.

I think you can see why my family and I count ourselves blessed to have had a dad like My Dad. **WT**



Bob Walker

Bob Walker, President

Give a boy boots, or teach him to mow

The old saying about giving a man a fish holds meaning for the Ackerman family in Wichita, Kansas. When 10-year-old son, Michael, asked his mom for an expensive pair of boots, she suggested he could mow the neighbors' lawns to help pay for them. Acquiring his first customer, Michael was hooked, knowing exactly what he wanted to do the rest of his life. Today Mom and Dad work with Michael at Michael's Complete Lawn Care, Inc.

After winning the bid for an HOA, Mike quit his job at Cessna to work full time with his son.



One of five Walker Mowers does some late-season cleanup.



A full-service landscape management company, Michael's Complete Lawn Care employs 40-plus people and mows approximately 1,000 acres of turf a week. In addition to mowing lawns and offering landscape design and installation, fertilization, weed control and irrigation maintenance, the company will do just about anything for its HOA, commercial, municipal and large-homeowner customers.

"We've done some plumbing, installed ceilings, and even removed graffiti," says Michael, who is company president at

out up to a 50-mile radius to service customers.

WISH LIST

The entrepreneur says he was different from other mowing youngsters. "I set up my neighbors on a schedule and they came to depend on me," Michael recalls. "Within a year, I had 15 yards to mow and eventually was getting customers further out than I could easily bike to, dragging a mower. So dad would take me around on weekends to mow those accounts."

At the time, Michael was getting around \$15 a yard. By age 14, he had enough money saved up to purchase a used Walker Mower with a 36-inch GHS deck for \$1,800. "I used to drool over seeing the mower in *Walker Talk* magazine," says Michael. "The dealer where I bought my Snapper push mowers, Maximum Outdoor Equipment & Service, also sold Walker Mowers and I would see the magazine there."

"The mower dramatically increased the amount of work we could do," Michael continues. "A year later, Dad and I won several bids for homeowner associations and commercial accounts."

"We're trying out three-man crews on our residential accounts, but the jury is still out on their efficiency compared to a two-man crew."

the ripe old age of 27. His dad, Mike, is vice president and manages the company's service shop and irrigation division. His mom, Connie, is chief financial officer. Company headquarters is not too far from downtown Wichita and within easy driving distance of most accounts, although Michael says crews will reach

We purchased a new 42-inch Walker Mower and with financing were able to outfit our company. Dad quit his job to work full time and Mom eventually quit her bookkeeping job to come on board, as well."

End of story? Not really. The young company incorporated in 2002 and rented a small facility prior to moving into its current location that features 15,000 square feet of shop space and a 7,500 square-foot lot. "It should be reversed," Michael relates, lamenting about the lack of outdoor space. "We have so much



equipment and it gets crowded with our trucks and trailers. Over the years, we added around 1,500 square feet of office space for our new managers and expanded office staff.”

To handle its long list of customers, Michael’s Complete Lawn Care has eight mowing crews, a couple of installation crews, two landscape maintenance crews, two irrigation and landscape lighting crews, and two chemical crews. It operates five 26-hp Walker Mowers with 48-inch GHS decks, seven Grasshopper mowers and three John Deere 997 zero-turn

mowers with 60- and 72-inch side-discharge decks. A John Deere 5083 Tractor with a 10-foot rotary mower tackles large municipal ditches and road sides.

“We use the Grasshopper and John Deere mowers on our large commercial and municipal properties,” Michael explains. “The Walker Mowers with their grass-handling and striping capability are perfect for our residential and HOA properties. Nothing handles leaves better. Plus, our customers really like the perfect cut.”

Crews haul equipment on a variety of trailers ranging from 16 to 27 feet in length. Cages in front corral handheld equipment. “We’re trying out three-man crews on our residential accounts, but the jury is still out on their efficiency compared to a two-man crew,” Michael adds. “A typical commercial account requires sending out a four-man crew. Some municipal work will require even larger crews.”

The company runs 10-plus snowplow trucks in the winter, along with two side-walk crews; it leases two skid-steer loaders with KAGE box blades. It recently outfitted the John Deere tractor with a 10-foot KAGE box blade system, which, Michael notes, should increase efficiency by 100% on several large shopping centers. “We take snow management very seriously, and our customers have come to really appreciate the worry-free service.”

STILL THE PERSONAL TOUCH

When asked about his son’s success, Mike gives the following accounting: “He’s aggressive and proactive today, just like he was when he was 10 years old. Back then, he got a lot of no’s at first from neighbors, but that one yes kept him going. He also understood at an early age the importance of providing good, consistent service. If we damage something, which does happen, we fix it in a hurry, and he strives to give the personal touch. Providing excellent service is all about building relationships with your customers.”

Brett Prater, Vice President of

Operations, adds, “We still try to give each customer the same level of customer service we did when we were both mowing after school.”


Michael admits that the bigger his company gets, the more difficult it is to provide that personalized service. Their management structure is helping by streamlining areas of responsibility. In addition to Prater, the company now has a general manager, Joe Patterson; a dedicated chemical manager, John Lewis; an irrigation service manager, Rob Gritz; and a mowing operations manager, Aaron Slone. “We all feel like a small family with the same common goal,” adds Michael.

CHALLENGING TIMES

Driving around town, Mike notes that Wichita hasn’t been immune to the economic malaise. The HOA market has been especially tough as foreclosures have forced associations to look for the lowest bidder. “That market has become especially cutthroat,” adds Michael. “At one point, we serviced nine HOAs in town; that figure has dropped to three. We’ve supplemented by targeting more commercial and municipal properties and tightening our residential routes.”

Finding and retaining employees is a challenge for any landscape contractor, although Prater notes the company experienced good success this past year advertising for employees on Craig’s List. Offering 14 full-time employees health and dental insurance, along with vision benefits and paid time off, helps keep them on board.

The challenges, though, don’t faze Michael, in large part because he’s doing what he’s always wanted to do. Connie laughs when she remembers how much those boots were going to cost. “They were \$150 boots,” she exclaims, “and he was only going to grow out of them within six months. We told him that if he could bring in \$75 mowing lawns, we would make up the difference.” It was a compromise the entire family could eventually live with. **WT**



Custom-designed trailer has plenty of room for leaves and equipment.

On Display in Ocean County

A well-maintained landscape lends more than dollar value to a property. In Ocean County, New Jersey, for example, beautiful shade trees, attractive gardens and manicured turf create an inviting environment for both county office workers and visitors. Nowhere is that more evident than in the county seat of Toms River.



Seven of the county's 12 Walker Mowers pictured here share responsibility for mowing 36 acres of irrigated and 40 to 50 acres of non-irrigated turf.



Mowers outfitted with 42-inch GHS decks are ideally suited for handling fast-growing grass in the spring and leaves in the fall.

“A visitor recently asked me, ‘What campus is this?’” relates George Stryker, referring to the county’s downtown office complex. The inquiry added to the pride this retiring grounds supervisor holds for his department’s work. After all, it’s no small feat to install and maintain landscapes in one of the state’s largest and highest-profile counties—one that stretches for 638 square miles and extends 20 miles north and south of Toms River.

“I believe the public appreciates our efforts,” says Stryker. “We’re constantly planting and pruning trees, installing seasonal color, and policing the grounds. All together, our 10 groundskeepers also mow and maintain 36 acres of irrigated turf and 40 to 50 acres of non-irrigated turf.” The Ocean County Building and Grounds department provides all landscaping services in-house, excluding Integrated Pest Management (IPM) services and irrigation repair, which it subcontracts out.

Despite the department’s green focus, its duties don’t end with the growing season. The grounds crew is also responsible for keeping properties snow- and ice-free, including clearing snow off five miles of sidewalks. The grounds supervisor also oversees the operation of emergency

generators that provide standby electrical power to many of the county’s 38 buildings.

LONG TENURE

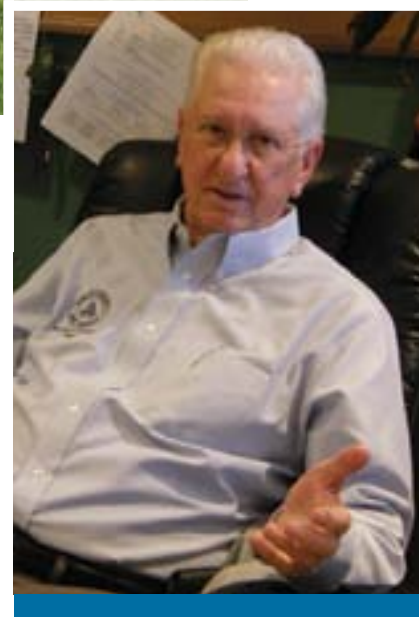
Stryker began working for the county in 1993, starting out as a groundskeeper. “I’m turning 70 and it’s time to spend more time with my wife, Barbara, and a few more days a week with an old fishing buddy,” he relates. “Barbara will likely introduce me to the operation of a vacuum cleaner and a few other household tools, but I’ll plead ignorance.”

He can plead all he wants, but she knows that reliability should be her husband’s middle name. In fact, Stryker can only remember once in the last 18 years when he didn’t make it to work, and that occurred last year. “It snowed so much that I couldn’t open any door in the house,” he recalls. “I finally was able to remove a window in one of the doors and scrape the snow away, only to get stuck halfway down the drive.”

What Stryker needed was what he didn’t have that morning, one of his department’s 12 Walker Mowers, outfitted with a snowblower and a cab. “We have a snowblower, blade and broom attachment for each of 10 mowers,” he explains, “along with a few other attachments including the Perfaerator and dethatcher.”

YEAR-ROUND VERSATILITY

Walker dealer Brian Lonergan, owner of Ace Outdoor Power Equipment in nearby Bayville, introduced the grounds department to Walker Mowers 15 years ago. Today, the department operates with four 23-hp and eight 20-hp models. The oldest is 10 years old, the newest is two,



“Our department performs 85 percent of the maintenance on the machines, and we keep an inventory of belts and other repair items on hand.”

– George Stryker



George Stryker and supervisor Joseph LaManna take advantage of the Walker Mower's year-round versatility.

and three are diesel-powered.

"One of the features we like about the mower is that it does so many things for us," explains supervisor of grounds Joseph LaManna, who started working for the county a year after the first Walker Mower made its appearance. "Right now it is fall cleanup time, and soon the Walkers will be readied for snow. During the growing season, crews employ 42-inch GHS decks when the grass is growing at its peak and then switch to 42-inch mulching

decks during hot, slower growing summer months."

"They're easy to maintain, too," adds Stryker. "Our department performs 85 percent of the maintenance on the machines, and we keep an inventory of belts and other repair items on hand." But most of all, he appreciates the quality of cut the mowers deliver. "We mow a lot of high-profile areas such as the courthouse and library," he emphasizes. "No other machine leaves the cut a Walker does. We know; we've tried many brands."

Two Kubota zero-turn mowers for wide-area mowing, RedMax backpack blowers, Tanaka edgers, and Stihl chainsaws and trimmers round out the bulk of the county's lawn maintenance equipment. All the equipment is on a maintenance schedule, and the mowers are thoroughly cleaned and blades changed weekly. "Again, it's important for the county's image to keep equipment maintained and looking good," Stryker notes.

Loneragan says other people notice, especially some of his customers. "Over the years, several contractor customers have actually waited for the county to trade in its mowers so they could buy them. They see them around town and know how well they've been maintained." As he points out, it pays to keep equipment in top running order to optimize performance, minimize downtime, and increase resale value.

SUMMER HEAT

Being on the Jersey Shore has its advantages and disadvantages. Ocean County has become a retirement center, and summers see the area's population jump from 600,000 to well over a million. That's good news for local businesses, but for longtime residents it makes getting around town a little more arduous.

Summers can be very hot and humid, too. To beat the heat, mowing crews work from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and they're allowed to wear shorts. They mow three days a week, and spend the other two installing color, weeding beds, pruning trees and performing other landscape maintenance services.

"When I first started working, this area over here was completely barren," says Stryker, pointing to a park-like setting with several mature trees. A Walker Mower in the background is picking up leaves that have just begun to fall. "It is amazing how quickly time flies," he reflects. "I've totally enjoyed my time here, but now it's time to pass the baton." And create subject matter for a few more fishing stories, he might add. **WT**

Timing Was Right for Big Sky Couple



Six years ago, Chuck Knuppel and Lisa Engle worked highway construction, but both wanted to be their own boss. So they quit and started a lawn maintenance company. Since then, their revenue stream has doubled annually, and neither has any regret about their decision.

“We left construction just at the right time,” says Lisa. “The market totally dried up. Still, we had some work to do to generate any income in our new venture. That first year we started with zero customers and ended the year with six, maybe seven residential properties. The next year we landed a big 28-acre estate and we’ve been doing well ever since.”

In fact, Get On It Lawn Care & Snowplowing, located in Columbia Falls, Montana, now provides lawn maintenance services to 20 commercial and HOA customers, most of which

Lisa and Chuck left construction six years ago to be their own boss.

are located in nearby Kalispell. The company operates five crews during the summer months, and gears-up to seven during the long Montana winters. It's

“That first year we started with zero customers and ended the year with six, maybe seven residential properties. The next year we landed a big 28-acre estate and we’ve been doing well ever since.”

during these months, when the area gets upwards of 100 inches of snow, that the company's Walker Mowers get

a second-season workout.

“Our snow removal lineup includes Chevy pickups with V-plows, and our Walker Mowers with several attachments,” Chuck explains. “We have two of every attachment, including blades, brooms, blowers and cabs. If you’ve experienced a Montana winter, you can understand why the cabs are important, and why we run gas instead of diesel engines. When the temperatures are consistently in the minus range for several weeks, gas engines just start better.”

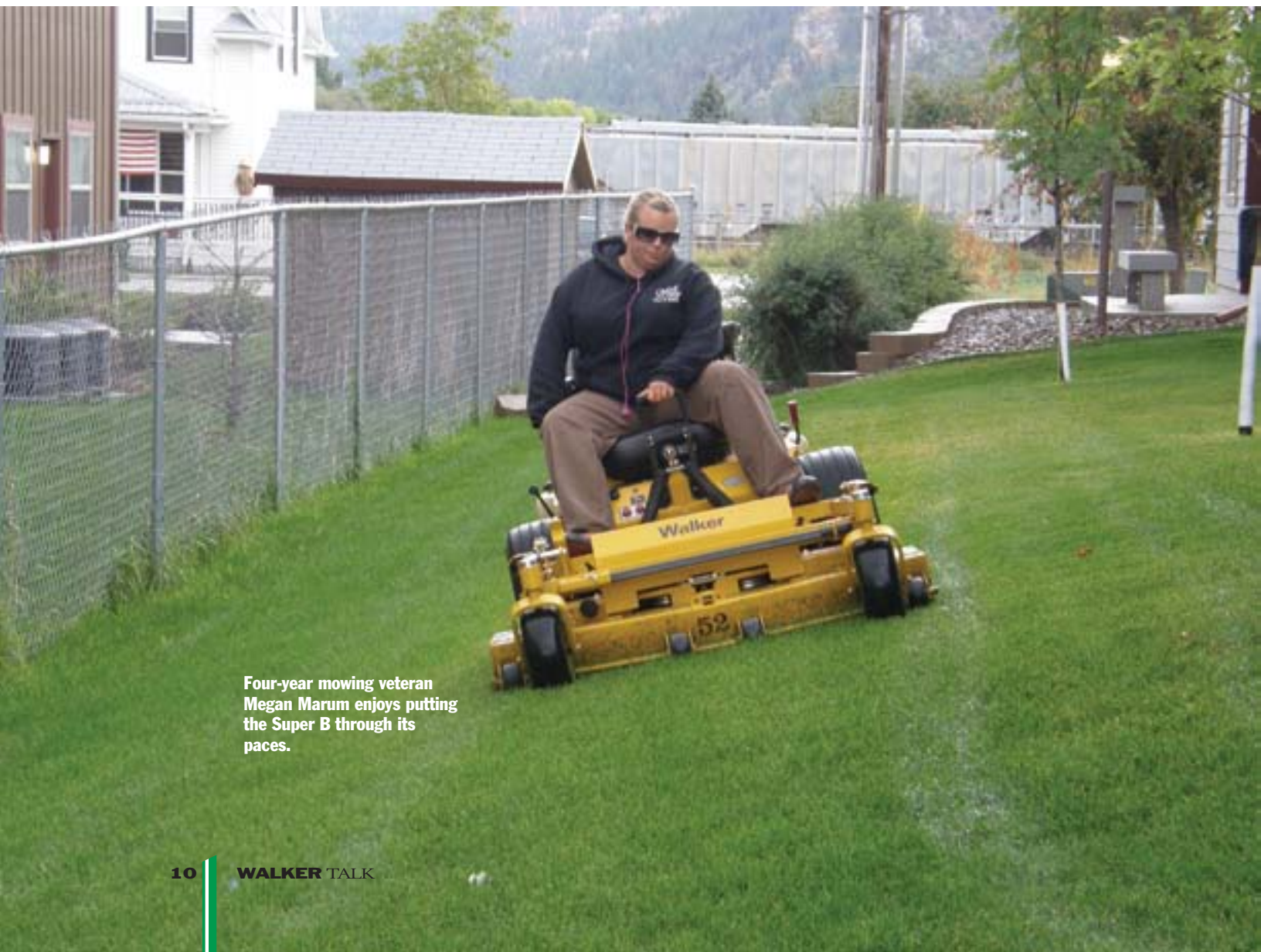
Get On It runs five Walker Mowers outfitted with three 48-inch GHS decks, one 52-inch rear-discharge/mulching deck, and one 62-inch side-discharge deck. In the winter, the mowers are used primarily to clear sidewalks. The blower attachments replace the blade and broom when

snowfall reaches the 4-inch mark, adds Chuck. Even though the winters are long and arduous, they can also be profitable.

FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

The couple says they work in a close-knit community and have rarely, if ever advertised. They let their work, and word of mouth, do the advertising for them. Their formula for success reads like this: Treat properties like they're your own, take time to talk with clients, be detail-oriented (they employ a “weed pulling” girl who visits every site), and offer full landscape maintenance. The company doesn't provide weed control or repair sprinklers per se, but instead subs it out to an area contractor with whom it has established a good relationship.

Lisa and Chuck also attribute part



Four-year mowing veteran Megan Marum enjoys putting the Super B through its paces.



**Lisa and Chuck with
mower operators
Megan Marum and
Jarred Degele.**

instead run them as long as we can before trading them in or selling them to another contractor or homeowner. A used Walker Mower, one that we put between 500 and 1,000 hours on in a year, will still last a lifetime for a homeowner."

LONG SEASON

If Lisa and Chuck have one regret about the mowing and snow removal business, it would be how long the seasons last. Spring cleanup begins the first week in April, and two weeks later crews are mowing lawns and continue mowing through October. There's a small window for leaf cleanup before the five months of winter set in. Most clients are on a two-year contract, which includes approximately 26 cuttings, snow removal, and three fertilizer applications a year.

"We have one commercial client who wants his lawn mowed twice a week," relates Chuck. "Another has 13 acres that takes us 2.5 to 3 hours to mow with three Walker Mowers."

There's no question, the young entrepreneurs are working just as hard now, if not harder, than they were on construction, but the trade-off by being their own boss is worth the added effort, they emphasize. "It takes good, hard work to be a success in any line of work," says Chuck, who also credits his father for helping them get a start. "He helped finance some of our first equipment purchases, and that's a break we needed. I think one of the biggest challenges today for any new contractor is to find a lender."

The next biggest challenge is to put that money to work for you. These owners have definitely made their investment in equipment and people pay off for them. **WT**

of their success to Walker Mowers and Kalispell dealer Penco Power Products. "The machines will do the job for you," says Chuck, referring to his Walker lineup. "No other mowers on the market will do the job they do." Lisa quickly adds how important it has been to work

as it is to our customers."

Get On It's first Walker Mower was a 1987 16-hp model with a 42-inch GHS deck, and just this spring it purchased two more from Penco, a Super B with a 52-inch deck and a 26-hp Walker Mower with a 48-inch GHS deck.

"It takes good, hard work to be a success in any line of work ... I think one of the biggest challenges today for any new contractor is to find a lender."

with someone who knows the business like Penco owner, Vaughn Penrod, does. "He understands how important it is to match machine to application and how valuable service is to his customers just

"The new Super B is amazing," says Chuck. "It's very fast, and like our other Walker Mowers, it is virtually trouble-free. Unlike some contractors, we don't rotate them out every two or three years, but

CUSTOMER RETENTION:

The new gold standard

Never before has it been more important to retain your current customers. It has always been costly to replace customers. There's lost revenue to consider, along with the costs associated with finding new customers. Then there's the disappearance of efficiencies that crews may have realized while maintaining the now wayward property, not to mention the fact that current customers also provide an excellent opportunity to sell more services.

Today, though, there's another incentive. The market is extremely competitive, and finding new customers requires additional legwork and expense. So how do landscape professionals retain those all-important customers? Certainly, it begins with providing exemplary quality and service. But being good at what you do may not always be enough, especially when competitors are hungry and looking for any opening to lure accounts away.

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

"Staying in constant communication with our customers is very important," relates Angela Cenzalli, assistant director of landscaping for E.J. Jaxtimer's landscape division in Cape Cod, Massachusetts (*Walker Talk* 36). "Truly listening to their needs and not just doing everything our way or what works best for us is critical to building a relationship and retaining customers."

Cal Kearns, owner of C&D Landscape Company in Dayton, Oregon, (*Walker Talk* 35) agrees. "We encourage all our employees to establish personal contact and relationships with the clients they serve. Getting to know our clients on a personal basis allows us to better understand their landscape preferences and needs."

Another way to ensure you're delivering what your customers want is to ask, says Phil Harwood, CLP, president and CEO of Pro-Motion Consulting. "Routinely surveying customers can help determine what your company is doing right and what it's



doing wrong.” One of the most important questions on the survey, he adds, is: How likely are you to refer my company to a friend? “Receiving a high ‘net promoter score’ indicates a very satisfied customer. Conversely, a low score means you have some work to do.”

Foothills Landscape Maintenance (FLM) in Windsor, Colorado, (*Walker Talk* 35) employs a variety of resources to stay in front of clients. Explains owner Nate Caldwell, CLT, “We use Facebook and Twitter for sending information blasts and landscaping tips. The latter we post once a month. Our company is also on LinkedIn and we have a website, both of which generate feedback and hits, so they do have an impact.”

FLM also mails and emails monthly newsletters that include landscaping tips and other news of interest to its clients.

For the last several years, Landcare Landscaping in Tampa, Florida, has held “informational” lunches for clients where attendees participate in a question and answer forum. “The main thing is to stay in front of clients whether you host a formal gathering or just drop by the office with coffee and donuts,” notes company vice president Jerry Roque.

This fall, Landcare Landscaping also held its first client appreciation golf outing at one of the golf course communities it maintains. “We invited both current and prospective clients to a breakfast, lunch and 18 holes of golf,” Roque tells. “The event included a putting, long drive, closest to the pin and chipping contest, along with trophies for winning golfers and door prizes. This is the first one we’ve ever done and if it works out well, we will do it again next year.”

ADDING VALUE

Harwood uses the argument that if delivering value is critical to customer retention, delivering even more value will increase the odds a customer will stay

with you. As he points out, one very big value-added incentive today is finding ways to save your customers money. Another is offering to provide additional services. In this issue of *Walker Talk*, for example, Michael’s Complete Lawn Care has worked on plumbing, installed ceilings, and, yes, even removed graffiti.

In the same article, company vice president Mike Ackerman emphasizes how important fixing mistakes is to retain-

EMPOWER EMPLOYEES

Unless you are a one- or two-person company, it’s virtually impossible to be on every site, every day—not to say that’s all bad. In fact, industry experts have long touted how important it is for owners to spend less time in the field and more time strategizing. With both scenarios, however, the company owner is spending less time in person building that all important relationship.

“We encourage all our employees to establish personal contact and relationships with the clients they serve. Getting to know our clients on a personal basis allows us to better understand their landscape preferences and needs.”

— Cal Kearns, owner of C&D Landscape Company in Dayton, Oregon


ing customers. Indeed, responding in a timely manner to a mistake or customer complaint demonstrates responsiveness and a willingness to keep a customer satisfied—important attributes for any service-oriented company.

Don’t underestimate how important appearance is to perceived value, notes E.J. Jaxtimer’s Cenzalli. “Crew professionalism, personal cleanliness, and attire (wearing a uniform, being well-groomed with no visible piercings or rabid tattoos), and operating clean and well-maintained equipment and vehicles are all part of the package that assures trust and safety with the client.”

Certainly, another part of the appearance dynamic is maintaining a high profile within your community. As Landcare Landscaping’s Roque points out, volunteering and performing community service projects have a win-win component. It is good for the community where you work and live and keeps your company logo in front of customers and prospects alike.

The answer is to empower employees to take over the job. It starts with having a stable, well-trained workforce. As Cenzalli mentions, “Customers want to recognize our staff from week to week, feel comfortable with them, and truly know they care about their needs.” The word “care” is extremely important, adds Kearns. “Our philosophy is to have our employees treat every property they serve as if it were their own, just as if they were paying for the service.”

This requires having employees buy into your company mission statement, and truly understanding how important it is for their future and that of the company to keep customers satisfied.

It’s quality first, followed closely by practicing good communication skills, adding value where you can, and empowering employees to carry your message that will help retain what has become one of your most valuable assets: your current customers. 

Quick Tips

- 1. Maintain constant communication with clients to make sure you’re delivering exactly what they want.**
- 2. Encourage employees to establish personal contact with clients.**
- 3. Educate your clients via Facebook, Twitter, your website and company newsletter.**
- 4. Consider some fun events such as golf outings as a way to say “thank you.”**

It's science but not rocket science for Pennsylvania Brothers

It helps that they look like the boys next door for brothers, Tobin and Dana George, to give their customers that personal touch. Yet, with 500 lawns to mow a week, that's not easy.



After earning their teaching degrees, Tobin (standing) taught for five years while Dana kept the mowing business going.

“One of our strengths is having a long-lasting relationship with customers and giving them the attention and level of service they would expect from a company many times smaller,” explains Dana, who manages the mowing part of Tobin D. George Lawn Care in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. “To ensure quality, we also simplify our operation as much as possible so everyone is on the same page.”

This again is not easy to accomplish with more than 40 employees offering three services: mowing, landscape installation and fertilizing. Dana’s brother and company founder, Tobin, heads up the landscaping divisions while younger brother, Brett, manages fertilization.

SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

Their startup story has a familiar ring as Tobin, with Dana’s help, mowed lawns while going to high school. It takes an unusual turn, though, and both brothers went on to college to become science teachers, all the while keeping the mowing business alive. After getting their degrees, Tobin taught for five years while Dana mowed and continued to grow the business.

“It eventually came to a point where

lawn mowing passed up teaching, so I decided to quit and go into lawn care full time,” says Tobin. “That was in 1997. Thinking back, I mowed my first lawn in 1986 and within two years had 25 mowing customers. We incorporated in 1992.”

Not coincidentally, the brothers have a scientific approach to business. They focus on slow, steady growth at a rate of

and one Bobcat excavator, another indication of how the owners look to simplify their operation by doing business with only a handful of vendors and brands.

Crews not only operate the same equipment, they operate the same way. For example, two crew members mow while the other trims around the yard and edges the walks. Before the mower opera-

“One of our strengths is having a long-lasting relationship with customers and giving them the attention and level of service they would expect from a company many times smaller.”

about 10 percent per year, stick to their clients like glue, focus on the residential market they know best, and, once again, simplify moving parts.

Dana explains as he watches a couple of trucks roll out of the lot. “All mowing crews are equipped the same way. They have at least one Walker GHS Mower, a Walker model Super B or B, and a complement of Stihl hand-held equipment.”

The company has all Ford trucks and operates four Bobcat skid-steer loaders

tors finish up and load their machines, the trimmer operator picks up a blower to apply the finishing touches.

The brothers are very hands-on. They have a truck and trailer and rotate through jobs with different crews—Dana with the maintenance crews and Tobin with the landscaping crews. This approach allows them to keep an eye on quality and stay in touch with customers.

“This business is all about relationships,” Tobin re-emphasizes. “We’re out

Ford Trucks and Walker Mowers highlight the equipment lineup.



there with the guys five days a week, and they know there's nothing we would ask them to do that we wouldn't do. Also, if a crew has a new member, having us accessible is good for training. We've found that it takes three weeks to properly train an employee."

On Saturdays, Dana and Tobin travel together around the country, visiting customers, selling jobs, and sharing ideas about the business. As they explain, this is the one chance they have during the week to actually compare notes.

GROWTH INSTRUMENT

Landscape installation brings in approximately 50 percent of Tobin Lawn Care's annual revenue while fertilizing accounts for another 20 percent. Mowing and maintenance bring in the rest.

"We purchased a used Walker in 1992 from Fletcher's Sales and Service right here in Greensburg," says Dana. "A year later, we bought our first Model MT, and then started to add on from there."

Today they operate 18 Walker Mowers—three Model B's with 42-inch mulching decks, four Super B's with

Wet leaves are no match for these Walker Mower operators.



Office manager Jamie combines work with being a stay-at-home mom.

60-inch side-discharge decks, and 11 Model MT's with 48-inch GHS decks. Each has its place. "The B's with wide tires have taken the place of mid-size walk-behind mowers, and they're lighter than their GHS counterparts, so they're less likely to mark up the turf on hills,"

adds Dana. "All our GHS machines have 26-hp EFI engines that can mow all day on a tank of gas."

"The Walker Mower has been instrumental in growing our maintenance business," Dana continues. "They're small and maneuverable, which makes them ideal for the residential developments we mow. We're very familiar with the machines, too, something very important to our equipment manager, Sean Noschese, who along with production manager, Andrew Ferrieni, and landscape sales manager, Phil Mann, is a long-time employee. In fact, all three were Tobin's students."

Mowing, though, doesn't generate all the maintenance revenue. The company equips all 21 trucks with snowplows, 17 of which also sport salt spreaders. The contingent takes care of 700 driveways and 95 commercial properties within a 10-mile radius of Greensburg.

When asked if they would like to get even bigger, faster, the brothers hesitate. The 10-percent growth rate is manageable and they enjoy a close working relationship with family members, something that could be compromised if they grow too big, too fast. Tobin's wife, Jamie, is the office manager. The brothers' mother, Mary Jane, handles HR responsibilities.

Upon further reflection, both Tobin and Dana admit they have room for expansion on their five-acre property and the market could support faster growth. "When it comes right down to it, the availability of employees is our limiting agent," says Tobin. "We also want to maintain that 'boys next door' image and retain the close relationship we have with customers."

Excessive growth would likely jeopardize both strategies and stress a very successful scientific formula. **WT**





Stay Connected to Your Dealer

Lately I've been contemplating the role of the dealer and what it might mean to you as a Walker Mower owner. I'm thinking beyond the obvious answer of an outlet to purchase a mower and parts. (As a side note, the only place to get genuine Walker parts is from your authorized Walker Dealer. Aftermarket parts houses may advertise "genuine", but the Walker factory does not ship parts to any aftermarket company.)

I know that many of you reading this article are hands-on folks; you take pride in your ability to perform your own maintenance. Personally, I am with you. I enjoy the fulfillment that comes from a job well-done and a finely maintained piece of equipment. Walker Manufacturing and your local dealer want the same thing you do. That is why we have chosen to deliver our product to the end-user through dealers—and not mass market and box stores.

You may be saying to yourself, "Where is Bruce going with this?" Let me share my thoughts with you:

YOUR DEALER IS YOUR LIFELINE

As you are reading this article, you are probably beginning to think about spring, and most likely you are getting ready to pull your Walker out of storage and brush the dust off of it. Now would be a good time to touch base with your local dealer. It is time to catch up on things and find out what has been happening; find out what changes and/or updates may have occurred over the winter.

Many Walker owners have already experienced the fact that the factory is continuously making improvements and updates for earlier models. Your local dealer is the direct line of communication to the factory. If anything needs to be addressed with your Walker, your dealer is the one to let you know.

Walker Manufacturing uses a very effective tool to communicate service-related information to our dealers, and in turn to you. Dealers have access to our dealer service website, which is the same site we use at the factory. Thus, your dealer has the same resources to answer your questions as we do at the factory.

So stop by your local dealer with the serial number of your mower (if he doesn't already have it), and ask him to enter it into the serial number search on the service site. You will be amazed at the information about your Walker that is there. There will be facts about the build of your Walker, warranty history and bulletins that affect your specific model.

Speaking of bulletins, there are three types:

Service bulletins are issued to communicate service-related information such as changes in maintenance procedures or service intervals.

Advisory Bulletins are used to advise of changes or updates that relate to a specific model.

Recall Bulletins are meant to notify the customer of safety-related updates and changes. Recall Bulletins are sent from the factory to all registered

Walker owners by mail, but these can be misdirected because people move or purchase mowers as second owners. These bulletins are safety-related, have no end date, and are required to be addressed as soon as possible, even if you are not the original owner. Recall-related repairs are covered under our warranty policy and will be performed at no cost to you or your dealer.

Let me finish with a short illustration. Recently we received a call here at the factory from a customer who was looking for a parts manual for his Walker. Standard practice is to ask for the serial number of the unit to ensure that we provide the correct information. When the serial number was entered into the dealer service website, we found the information about the manual, and at the same time found that a Recall Bulletin had been issued a few years back that the customer was unaware of. We encouraged him to see his dealer right away and have it taken care of. Needless to say, he was very grateful. Had this Walker owner stayed more closely connected to his dealer, he would have been made aware of the bulletin sooner.

Dealers have a very important role to play in taking care of Walker customers—even the hands-on, do-it-yourself customer. We recommend that Walker owners stay connected to their dealer to receive all of the benefits being offered. Many of these benefits do not cost anything, but add real value to your machine and your experience with your Walker. **WT**

Walker Founder Dies At 88

Wesley Max Walker, founder of Walker Manufacturing Company, passed from this life to his heavenly home on September 19, 2011. Max, and wife Margaret, started the manufacturing company in 1957 on the family farm in Fowler, Kansas. The first product was a gasoline-powered golf car called the Walker Executive. In the late 60s the company was sold and moved to Casper, Wyoming. In 1974 the company located in Fort Collins, Colorado, where it operates today.

Without a formal education in engi-

neering and machine design, Max was a gifted machine designer. His pursuit of this interest became a lifetime of designing and building his ideas. He was joined in the business by his two sons, Bob and Dean, in 1975. The development of the Walker Mower, beginning in 1977, was a collaborative effort of Max and his sons.

Max was a member of the Church of the Nazarene in Loveland, Colorado. He was a musician, played the string bass, and enjoyed singing and leading hymns and Gospel songs in church services.



He was a private pilot. He liked to wear western clothes, and wore his cowboy boots and Stetson hat. He is survived by his wife, Margaret; sons, Bob (Barbara) Walker and Dean (Suzanne) Walker; daughters Ruth (David) Saunders and Nina (John) Rattle; 13 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren.

EMPLOYEES CELEBRATE 35 YEARS AT WALKER

One longtime Walker employee has reached, and another is close to the 35-year anniversary mark. The employee with the longest record is Stanley Hicks (left) with an anniversary date of August 2011. Bill Hoffman is close behind in June 2012.

Earlier, Stanley was a painter for Walker, but most of his work has been on the assembly line of the Walker Mower. He takes a lot of pride in being the person that puts the engine into the chassis of the mower—most of the 100,000-plus mower engines have been assembled into the machines by Stanley. Now in his 70s, Stanley still has a strong work ethic and sets a pace that younger employees are hard pressed to keep up with.

Bill Hoffman has worked in a variety of jobs—in production, material receiving, inventory control and most recently in warranty administration, and has been the company chaplain since 2007.



FACTORY PURCHASES NEW SOFTWARE

There is a major improvement and updating project underway at the Walker factory. A new manufacturing software operating system, JD Edwards Enterprise One, is being installed and implemented.

Starting in January, it is estimated that the project to install, configure, transfer historical data, and train for operation will take nine months with a planned “go live” date of October 1.

The new system promises to deliver more information, more quickly—with powerful tools to manage all of the operations “under the roof” at Walker. Ultimately, this investment in up-to-date software will help keep Walker competitive in the manufacturing business.

‘MOUNT’ WALKER CONSTRUCTED

Adjacent to the factory, Walker has started construction of an outdoor testing and training facility.

A visible component constructed in late 2011 is “Mount Walker”, a four-sided pyramid of dirt with four precision-graded slopes of 15, 18, 22 and 25 degrees which will be used for testing and training Walker Mower operation on slopes. The slopes will have a turfgrass surface and will be irrigated to maintain growth similar to that found in landscaped properties.

An additional part of the facility is a sound test-

ing pad and stake test for checking structural integrity of the mower deck with sudden stoppage of the cutting blades.

Further development of the facility will include a test track with mowing obstacles and landscape features that are commonly found in real mowing applications. The facility will primarily be used to train distributor and dealer personnel on how to operate and demonstrate a Walker Mower.



MORE OWNERS CHOOSE FUEL-INJECTION MODEL

For the first time since introduction of the Model MT26 with a fuel-injection engine, Walker 2011 sales statistics show that this model has become more popular than the MT23 equipped with a carburetor engine.

Walker pioneered the use of fuel-injection engines in the industry in 1998, and now, Walker believes customers are choosing the fuel-injection technology in increasing numbers because it has been proven over the last 13 years, and because the fuel savings and performance gains make economic sense in a time of rising fuel costs.

Fuel savings are reported to be 25% to 30%, and easy starting and quick power response to load are benefits that owners have noted along with dependable, reliable operation. And of course, there is the benefit of being more “green” to the environment with reduced exhaust emissions.

As with the automotive industry in earlier years, the industry trends suggest that in a few years, fuel-injection engines will have replaced carburetor engines in a high percentage of all commercial riding mowers on the market.



DEAN WALKER RECOGNIZED BY ALMA MATER

On November 4, 2011, Dean Walker was named “Alumnus of the Year” by Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, Idaho. Dr. David Alexander, President of NNU, presented the award. Dean graduated in 1975 with a BA in business.

INTRODUCING MODEL MBS29

A new version of the Super B is being introduced using a Kohler 29-hp engine with Delphi Electronic Fuel Injection. This higher-horsepower version offers lots of power with great fuel economy, and the Delphi EFI package reduces the cost of upgrading to fuel injection by 50% over previous EFI models.

It becomes an irresistible package of value pricing to move to fuel injection—more power, less cost and significant savings in fuel. The engine also comes with a three-year, unlimited-hour commercial warranty.



HEIGHT ADJUSTER OPTION FOR DSD56

An optional single-lever cutting height adjuster kit is now available for the DSD56 deck. The 56” deck height adjuster is similar in design to those being offered for other Walker decks over the past several years.

MODEL MS RE-POWERED

The Model MS is being offered with a new 14-hp Subaru-Robin engine, replacing the Kawasaki engine used in earlier units. The Subaru engine drops right into the Model MS chassis with a few small modifications.

Two additional upgrades to this new version include using a larger drive pulley on the engine to speed up both ground travel and cutting blades/GHS blower, and using a 10” GHS blower in place of the 9” blower on previous MS units.

There are plans to make an engine upgrade kit available for earlier models that are needing to replace the Kawasaki engine.



DT40A DETHATCHER ADDS GAUGE WHEELS

The DT40A Dethatcher design now features gauge wheels and a hinged frame that allow the dethatcher to more closely follow the terrain, allowing uniform tine engagement and decreasing tine breakage. At the same time, the dethatcher is doing a better job of combing the turf.



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He trusted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He believed and lived by the Bible. He believed in hard work and creativity. He loved and supported his family. He was a faithful churchman. He loved Gospel music.

He was willing to take risks as an entrepreneur; he knew if you did not try, nothing would happen.

Wesley Max Walker
January 25, 1923 - September 19, 2011



Eulogy written by Pastor Jim Lynch, September 21, 2011